

Ponlok Chomnes II:
Data and dialogue for development in
Cambodia

Learning Brief

Learning Event : *How research, dialogue, and engagement
worked together along the policy influence pathway*

2 July 2026 · Phnom Penh



Outline

About the Learning Event

The Midterm Review points to progress

There is not just one pathway to policy reform

Four Policy Journeys: Cases from PCII Partners

Cross-Cutting Insights by Entry Point

Way Forward



About the Learning Event

The event. Held on 2 July 2026 in Phnom Penh with support from the Australian Government, bringing together 43 participants (20 women, 1 persons with disabilities) at manager and director level from across the Ponlok Chomnes partnership.

The question. How have research, dialogue, and stakeholder engagement worked together along the policy influence pathway?

Why now. The Midterm Review found that PCII's policy influence is often indirect and incremental, contributing to enabling conditions more than immediate policy change. This event traced how influence actually happened in real cases.

The format. Four partner cases traced their policy journeys step by step. Participants then mapped their own journeys in groups organised by policy entry point, and drew out what the journeys have in common.



The Midterm Review points to progress

110

policy dialogue and
engagement events

7,478+

participants across
those dialogues

62+

publications in
diverse formats

On track. The MTR found PCII on track toward its objectives. PCII is not only about specific policies; it improves how evidence enters the policy space.

Growing capacity. Partners show improved ability to frame evidence, navigate sensitivities, and adapt messages for different audiences.

Where influence is strongest. Effectiveness is strongest at subnational and sectoral levels, where partners engage concrete policy and implementation challenges.

The finding behind this event. Policy influence is often indirect and incremental, with PCII contributing to enabling conditions for change.



There is not just one pathway to policy reform

Global research (ODI) suggests reform rarely follows a straight line. Six pathways from the literature:

1. Large leaps

Significant changes in policy and institutions become possible under the right conditions.

2. Policy windows

An opportunity emerges when advocates connect two more components of the policy process (problem – policy solution – stakeholders align).

3. Key stakeholders

Working directly with those who make or influence decisions.

4. Coalition theory

Change through coordinated activities among individuals with the same policy agenda.

5. Messaging and frameworks

Acceptance of policy reform depends on how options are framed/presented.

6. Community organizing

Collective action among community members drive policy change to address problems affecting their lives.

Source: Overseas Development Institute, A guide to monitoring and evaluating policy influence (2011).



The question for the day: which pathways show up in PCII partners own experience?

CDPO National	Key stakeholders + coalition building	Worked inside the ministry with a multi-stakeholder alliance
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CPS Provincial	Policy window	Government opened the door; problem, solution, and stakeholders aligned in one room
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Future Forum National	Messaging + public opinion	Public visibility brought government into the conversation
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MVi Commune	Community organizing	Collective voice changed how a commune plans and spends
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- The four cases of PCII partners echo the global research: there is no single pathway.
- Their own cases moved in four different ways.
- Learn the cases in details in the next slides



Four Policy Journeys: Cases from PCII Partners

Each case traced the same journey: the policy problem, what PCII supported, the turning point, what changed



Case 1: From Buses to Trains: Navigating the Policy Influence Pathway for Disability-Inclusive Transport in Cambodia

Presented by Dr. Socheata Sann, The Asia Foundation

The policy problem: the invisible gap

The status quo. Disability inclusion was entirely absent from transport master plans. Infrastructure was treated as a purely engineering problem, not a social impact mechanism.

The visibility gap. Decision makers viewed transport through the lens of traffic flow and volume, rather than universal human rights or economic equity.

Who cared before PCII. Advocacy was fragmented. Organisations of persons with disabilities voiced frustrations, but there was limited formal, structured interface connecting grassroots lived experience to ministerial policymaking.



What PCII supported: from a bus pilot to national planning

WHAT WAS DONE

Phase 1 · Disability inclusion in the Phnom Penh bus system

- Developed and tested Cambodia's first set of accessible bus guidelines.
- Delivered the first disability inclusion training for bus drivers, drawing on the practical experiences of persons with disabilities.
- Retrofitted and launched two fully adapted pilot buses, with dedicated wheelchair spaces, LCD information screens, and tactile Braille signage.

Phase 2 · Accessibility guidelines for the Light Rail Transit

- Scaled up from a localised pilot to national level infrastructure planning.
- Expanded the technical design scope to Universal Design for All.

HOW THE DIALOGUE WORKED

Empowerment through lived experience

Rather than speaking for persons with disabilities, they were equipped with technical auditing skills to articulate their own daily realities.

Breaking barriers through direct contact

City bus drivers and ministry technical engineers sat face to face with persons with disabilities to witness navigation challenges firsthand.

The twin-track approach

Targeted infrastructure solutions combined with universal design features that also serve older persons, pregnant women, and families with small children.

Evidence-based coalition cohesion

Alignment across diverse multi-sectoral organisations was held by moving the dialogue away from abstract criticism and anchoring it in localised field data.

The turning point: moving from listening to action

The solution-oriented catalyst. CDPO presented engineering-ready solutions, including dual-height handrails, precise stanchion clearances, and intuitive wayfinding, that solved practical problems for the Ministry's own design teams. The shift came when the ministry saw partners bringing answers to its design problems, not only raising complaints.

Insider advocacy. Rather than treating MPWT as a single block, CDPO mapped and engaged the specific technical departments and desks that would actually carry the work. Knowing which desk owned which decision is what made the engagement land.

Who was in the room. Ministry technical engineers, city bus drivers, and persons with disabilities, in direct contact rather than through intermediaries.



What concretely changed, and what is still ahead

Strategic policy alignment. The accessibility guidelines were anchored within existing government mandates, the responsible departments and teams, and MPWT's own Sectoral Master Plan, so the work added no parallel process.

Tangible milestones achieved. A formal joint working group between MPWT, CDPO and The Asia Foundation is established to institutionalise oversight. The final accessibility guidelines for buses in Phnom Penh are complete, and applied to the current bus system by the City Bus Authority.

The path to formal adoption, still in progress. Transforming the guidelines into an official administrative decree (Prakas) and embedding them directly into procurement and bidding documents for future transit operators.



Reflection

What we would do differently. Engage the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction, City Hall, and private commercial concessionaires much earlier in the timeline, to align fiscal budgets with universal design requirements.

What surprised us. The high level of openness and rapid technical adoption within MPWT, once the business and social case for accessibility was clearly linked.

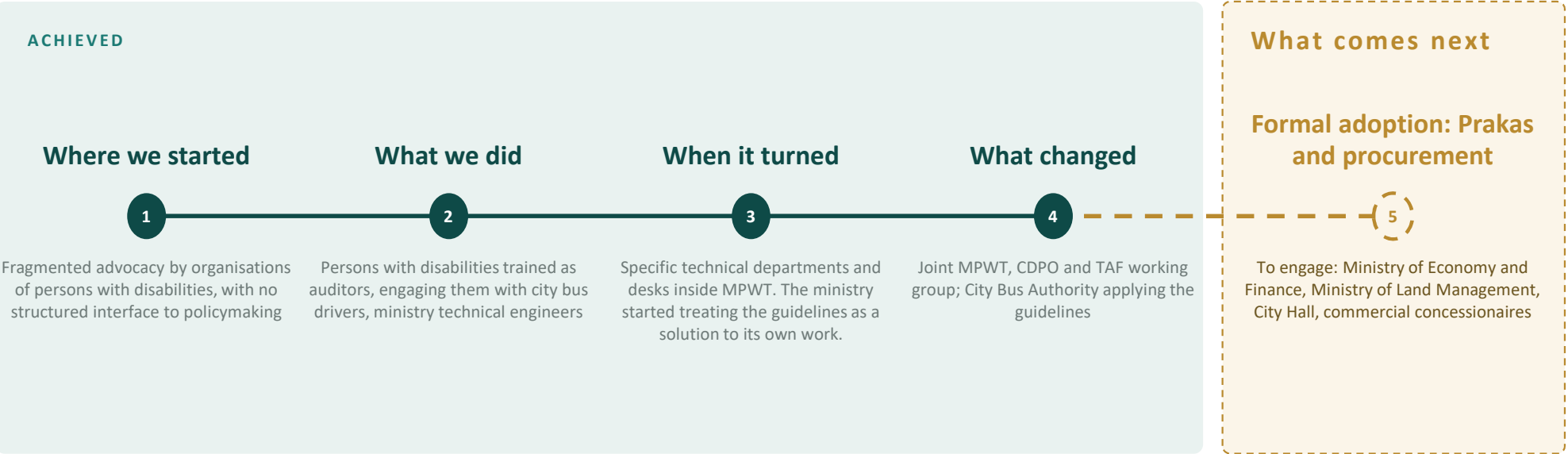
THE CORE TAKEAWAY

- Policy change does not happen by handing over a finished document.
- It happens by co-designing the process so institutions feel a deep sense of authorship.



From an invisible gap to a formal standard

Pathway Used: Key stakeholders and coalition building





Case 2: Agricultural Product Specialisation by Agroclimatic Conditions in Pursat Province

The policy problem: a province ready to diversify, with no evidence

The problem. Crop production in Pursat faces challenges in optimising productivity and profitability for farmers. Despite potential for diverse agricultural production, there was inadequate understanding of which products possess comparative advantages that could enhance specialisation and economic outcomes.

Who cared before PCII. The province already wanted to diversify agriculture, but there was no analytical basis for deciding what should be promoted and where. That gap created an opening for research to support policy.

The opportunity. Through the PCII network, a senior official at Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), approached CPS to conduct the study. Government asked for the research, rather than being presented with it afterwards.



What PCII supported: research and dialogues designed for policy consideration

What the study set out to do. Identify crops with comparative advantages. Analyse their strengths for specialisation that enhances productivity and profitability for farmers. Evaluate whether infrastructure and logistics services could support specialisation of the targeted crops.

Government engaged throughout. MAFF, the Provincial Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Environment, and Commune Agriculture Officers took part, not only at the end.

What the evidence showed. Twenty crops with strong potential and comparative advantages, including candidates for Geographical Indication. Veal Veng and Phnom Kravanh have the greatest potential for specialisation. Success depends on irrigation, infrastructure and market access, and inclusive development requires disadvantaged groups to be able to reach labour-saving technologies and support services.



The turning point: research entered the dialogues

Where it happened. Findings were presented at the Annual Provincial Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (PDAFF) Meeting in January 2026, with around 80 participants including the senior official of MAFF, the Provincial Deputy Governor, the Deputy Director of General Directorate of Agriculture (GDA), PDAFF, Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources and Environment DANRE and Commune Agriculture Officers.

How MAFF responded. The MAFF senior official recognised the study as a valuable input for the Provincial Agricultural Master Plan, highlighted the importance of Geographical Indication (GI), irrigation and markets, and encouraged further research.

How the province responded. The Provincial Deputy Governor pointed to the study's 20 priority crops as a basis for GI development, shared a successful GI specialisation model he had seen in Japan, and suggested using the study to guide crop specialisation in Pursat.

Why this was the turning point. The discussion shifted from presenting research findings to dialogues on how those findings could shape the province's future agricultural development.



What concretely changed, and what is still ahead

BEFORE

Lack of evidence for crop prioritisation

Limited discussion on agricultural specialisation

Research generates evidence

AFTER

Research identified 20 priority crops with comparative advantages

Findings discussed and considered as input for the provincial agricultural plan

Evidence could support future planning

What this means. The study was recognised as a valuable input to the future development of the Provincial Agricultural Master Plan. The call for further research shows policymakers valuing evidence for planning and decision-making.

Still ahead. Continued collaboration between researchers and government to create further opportunities for policy influence.



Reflection

Research alone is not enough. Policy influence happened because:

- **Relevance** Findings answered a real policy need
- **Early engagement** Key government officials were engaged from the start
- **Right audience** The right decision-makers were in the room, creating the turning point
- **Practical framing** The presentation focused on practical implications, not just findings
- **Open dialogue** Officials had space to question and discuss the evidence

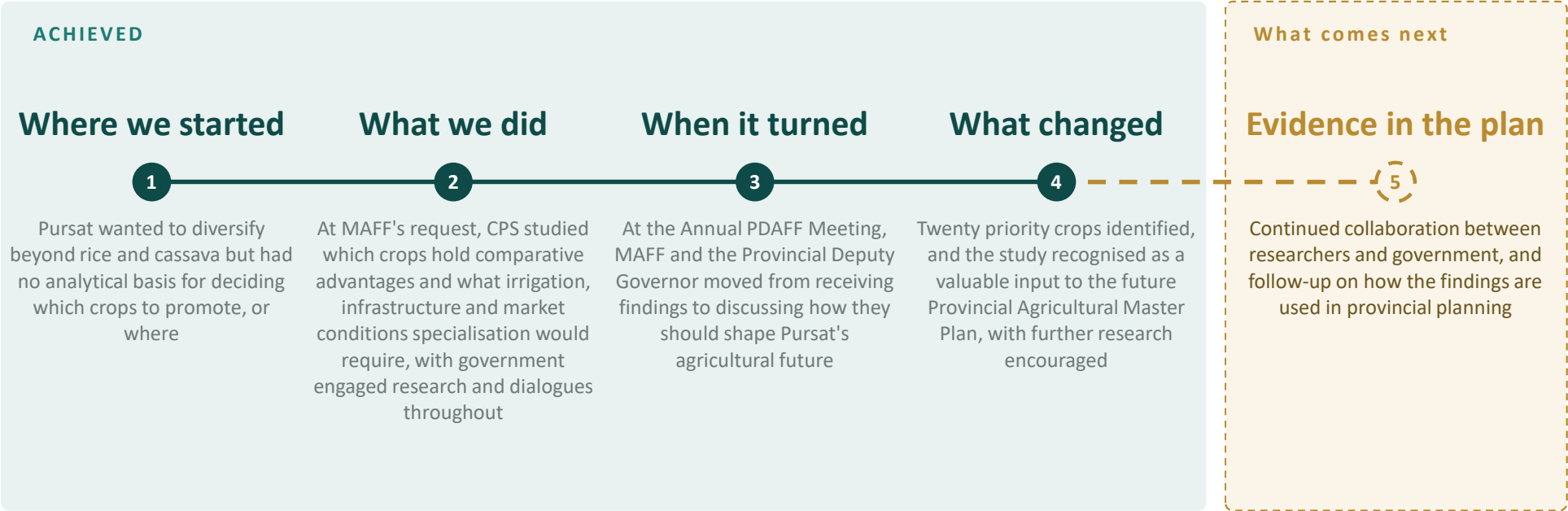
The challenge. Meeting time was short, and senior officials are hard to schedule for further discussion.

Way forward. Build relationships with colleagues working closely with these officials, who CPS can meet for ongoing policy discussion. Continue dialogue with policymakers on the specific policy implications of the research, and follow up on policy progress.



From no analytical basis to evidence in the provincial plan

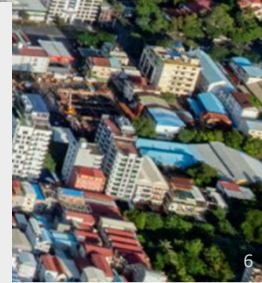
Pathway Used: Policy window





Case 3: Intervention in Public Discourse

Presented by Mr. Aun Chhengpor, Future Forum (FF)



The policy problem: public discourse without a structure



Unorganised public discourse. Policy debate in Cambodia takes place across many scattered spaces, without a shared venue where evidence can be presented, questioned and returned to. Ideas circulate, but they do not accumulate.

What that means for research. Findings reach the people already following policy, and rarely anyone else. Without a route into public conversation, research has no way of reaching either a wider audience or the institutions that could act on it.

Who cared before PCII. Think tanks and researchers were producing policy work, but were competing for attention in a crowded information space with no established channel of their own.

What PCII supported: four ways into public conversation

Future Forum built a set of formats to bring policy ideas into public discourse, recorded and shared in Khmer.

Public Lecture

In-depth treatment of a policy issue by a senior expert

Policy Talk

Researchers present their policy briefs in about an hour

Small Idea Presentation

Short-form presentation of a single idea

Horizon Podcast

Conversation format, published to FF's own channel

Choosing issues that last. Future Forum works on long-term structural questions that will still matter in two or three years, rather than trending topics, so the evidence keeps its value.

The case. The public lecture on Public Administration Reform for Cambodia. A one-hour video, expected to be too long for online audiences, reached over one million views, with more than 90 percent of viewers from outside Future Forum's own followers.

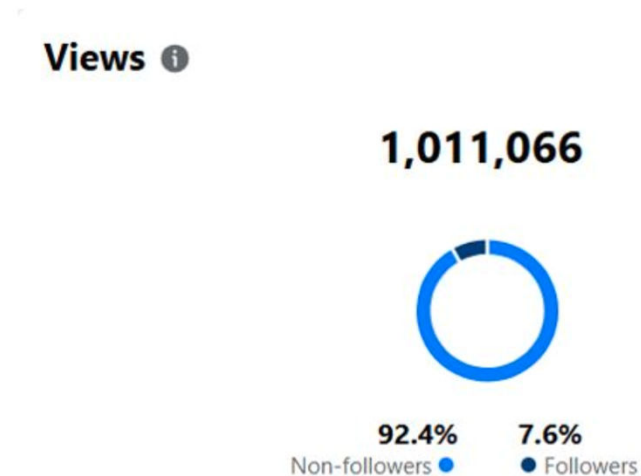


The turning point: Public administration reform video - from audience to invitation

The scale was the surprise. A long-form video on public administration reform was not expected to travel. It reached an audience far beyond the policy community, and most of that audience had no prior connection to Future Forum.

Attention became a channel. The speaker was invited onto a further podcast that reached a wider audience again, and the discussion began drawing formal attention from government rather than remaining a public conversation.

Why this was the turning point. Public interest in the issue gave government institutions a reason to engage with Future Forum's work directly. Visibility, rather than a submission or a meeting request, opened the door.



What concretely changed, and what is still ahead



Government institutions engaged. Following the presentation, two key relevant ministries became interested in reviewing Future Forum's work on public administration reform.

An invitation into government's own forum. created its own series of public events and invited the Future Forum presenter to take part, with the door left open for continuing discussion.

An ongoing relationship. Senior officials have continued to discuss the issue with the presenter and seek his input.

Still ahead. These are open channels rather than policy decisions. The next step is converting sustained access and public attention into specific contributions to reform and scaling the production approach so more partners can use it.

Reflection



What surprised us. That length was not the barrier we assumed. A one-hour video held a large audience, which suggests the constraint is the value of the content rather than the format.

Production does not need a budget. Video can be produced with the equipment already available, including a phone. Future Forum wants to scale this approach and is ready to share it with other partners rather than doing it alone.

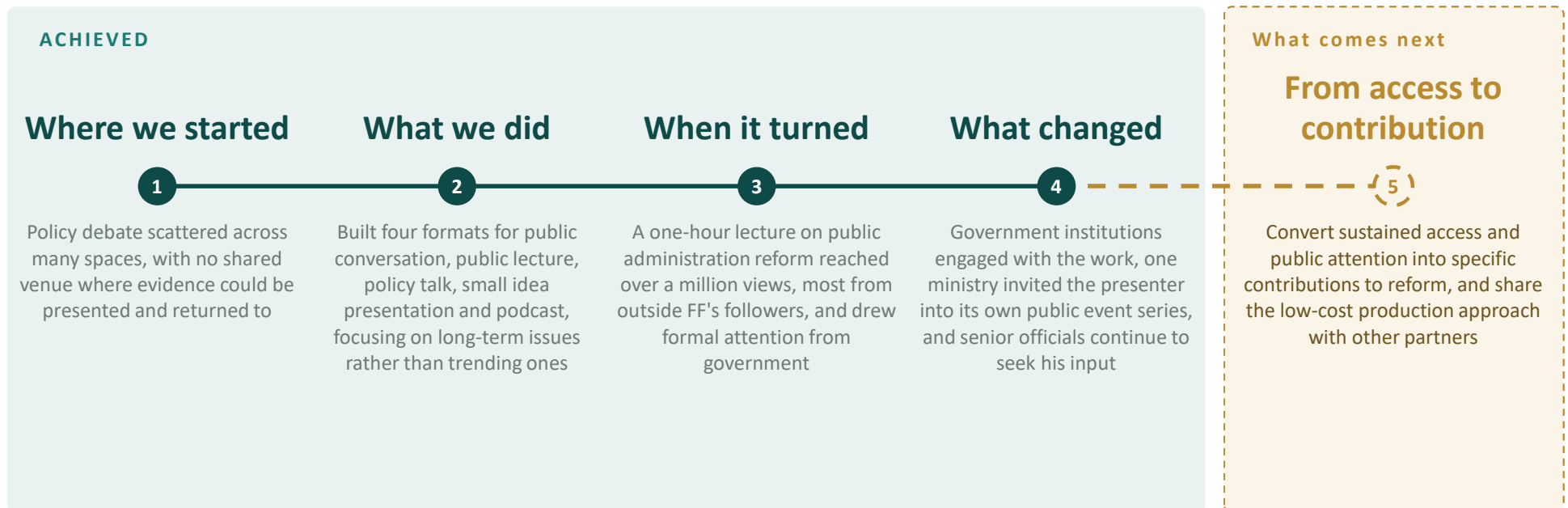
Think about value added. Audiences have endless content to choose from. Policy work has to be clear about what value it adds and why anyone should choose it, in the same way a business would.

THE CORE TAKEAWAY

Public attention is not the goal, but it can be the entry point. When an issue matters publicly, institutions have a reason to come to the conversation.

From scattered debate to a seat in government's own forum

Pathway Used: Messaging and framing through public opinion





Case 4: Inclusive and Climate-Resilient Investment in Ou Mreah Commune, Stung Treng Province

Presented by Mr. Choun Virak, My Village Organization (MVI)

The policy problem: climate needs outside the budget

The setting. Stung Treng lies in Cambodia's northeast, crossed by four major rivers, the Srepok, Sesan, Sekong and Mekong. Most people there depend on farming, fishing and raising livestock.

Where the budget goes. Most commune budget goes to infrastructure such as roads, culverts and bridges. Vulnerable groups have little place in commune planning and development processes.

Three structural barriers. Budget packages are not yet specific, allocation is limited, and policy arrives late. Implementation of Sub-decree 153 and Circular 007 on the social service and environmental sanitation fund is stuck at commune level.

A budget gap, not a political one. Climate adaptation needs of vulnerable groups are not reflected in commune investment plans. Spending happens, but no one tracks who benefits.



What PCII supported: dialogue built to prompt a response

PCII supported a structured dialogue process. Not research for its own sake, but evidence gathered and designed to prompt a policy response.

Identify the needs. An evidence-based assessment of the priority climate adaptation needs of vulnerable groups, used to inform the commune investment plan.

Consult inclusively. Inclusive consultation between the O'Mreas commune council and the community on the climate activities proposed in the plan.

Bring everyone to one table. Multi-stakeholder policy discussion, with district administration, commune and community meeting to discuss climate adaptation interventions and investment priorities.



The turning point: from consultation to the budget table

Where it shifted. The change came when the documented needs of vulnerable groups were placed next to the commune's own investment plan, in a discussion that included district administration as well as the commune council.

Why that mattered. Until then, needs were raised in consultations but never tested against what the commune was actually planning to fund. Going through them item by item turned a general discussion about climate impacts into a specific conversation about the plan.

From willingness to commitment. Commune authorities moved from acknowledging that vulnerable groups face different risks to committing budget and services in response. Inclusive facilitation, including accessible locations and sound amplification, meant the people affected spoke for themselves.



What concretely changed, and what is still ahead

Budget planned for two new climate activities. The commune administration planned packages for two additional climate-related activities: dissemination of the fisheries law, 250,000 riels, and social assistance for households affected by house fire and by storms, 500,000 riels.

Commitments on access at the commune office. Build a ramp for persons with disabilities. Buy a wheelchair so persons with disabilities can reach services. Buy hearing aids for people with hearing loss.

Still ahead. Continue pressing district administration to allocate budget for vulnerable groups on climate-related needs. Continue following up with the commune on investment planning, and pressing it to fund the needs already submitted in past investment plans.



Reflection

What made it hard. The engagement period was short, which limited sustained follow-up. The priorities of vulnerable groups were not in the commune investment plan to begin with, and commune authorities had few practical examples to work from.

What we would do differently. Engage commune authorities early and stay engaged. Influence over planning and budget allocation comes from regular follow-up, not from a single dialogue.

What worked. Reviewing the needs of vulnerable groups against the commune's existing plan built understanding and ownership. Offering practical, feasible options rather than only problems helped the commune identify what it could actually fund.

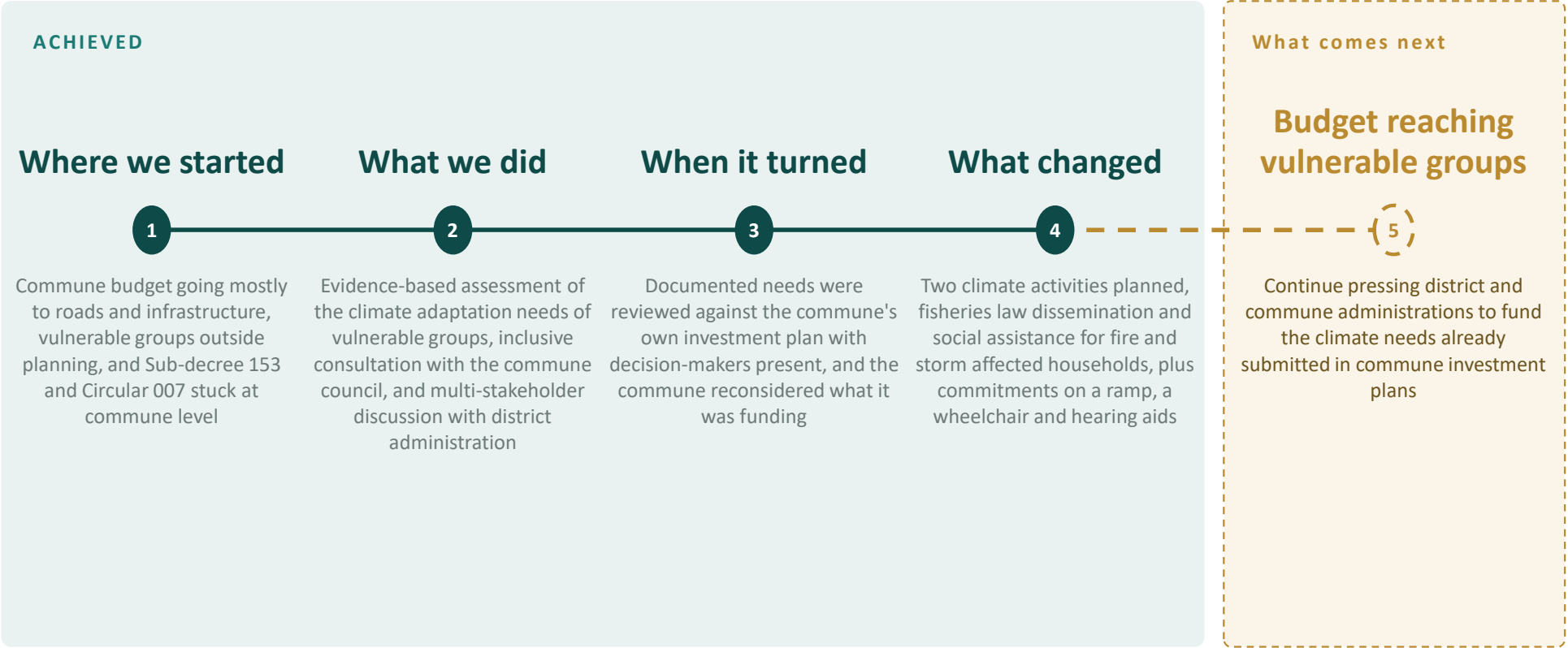
THE CORE TAKEAWAY

Inclusive planning is not about inviting people to a meeting. It works when their needs are carried into the plan and the budget that follows.



Getting vulnerable groups into the commune budget

Pathway Used: Community organizing



Only four cases? What about the others?

Group Insights by Entry Point

- *The four cases showed four different pathways to policy influence. They were only four examples among many experiences in the room.*
- *The rest of the morning shifted from the case studies to participants' own experiences. Instead of grouping them by which case they matched, participants grouped their work by where it enters the policy process.*

Four entry points

Research and policy meet at different moments. Four framed the discussion.

1 Policy needs are known, but data gaps exist

The problem is recognised, but there is not enough evidence to say what the solution should be.

2 Research and evidence are clear

The findings exist. The question is how to get them used.

3 Policy implementation is stuck

The policy is in place but is not working, or is not reaching people.

4 Policy evaluation

The work is already running, and the question is whether it is doing what it was meant to do.

ENTRY POINT 1

When the problem is known but the evidence is missing

The group discussion under this entry point began with the question of how to get input into a policy that is already being drafted, when you understand the problem but the evidence behind your position is thin.

To work through it, participants brought up their experience with the draft Land Law. The draft covers land registration, and it also affects LGBTQIA+ people, who cannot register a marriage and can lose their home when a partner dies.

- That experience showed the opening does not appear on its own. The draft was not opened for review **until partners asked for one and called for inputs.**
- It also showed that **getting into the same room matters more than the submission.** In a joint meeting, ministry officials could say what they accepted, what needed clarifying and what needed more evidence, which a written submission alone rarely produces.
- The lesson the group drew was about precision. **Inputs have to be specific enough** to be written into law, down to the wording, because the wrong keyword changes how a provision is read.



ENTRY POINT 2

When the evidence is clear but not yet used

This group started from the opposite position: the findings already exist, so how do you get them used?

Drawing on their own experience of research that went nowhere and research that landed, participants worked back from what made the difference.

- Most of it happened before the research did. **Whoever is meant to use the evidence has to be involved from the start**, or they will not accept it at the end.
- **The topic also has to match what government is already working on**, because evidence outside current priorities finds no buyer, however good it is.
- **Findings have to reflect the situation here.** Research grounded in Cambodia carries weight that international practice applied from outside does not. Trust decides the rest: government needs to see the research as partly its own, offered as a contribution rather than a critique from outside.
- **On getting a hearing, the group favoured official channels, closed-door meetings and short written notes** carrying two or three recommendations tied to a specific policy. And where an organisation has strong findings but no way in, they suggested working through a partner who already has that access.



ENTRY POINT 3

When the policy exists but implementation is stuck

This group asked what to do when a policy is in place but nothing is moving.

Participants drew on cases where implementation had stalled, and the approaches that had shifted things were mostly about changing who sees what.

- **Exposure visits came up first.** Taking officials to see conditions for themselves shifts a discussion in a way that reports do not.
- Participants also **looked for leverage in commitments** government has already made publicly, including through international platforms such as UN processes.
- Creative formats came up as a way of reopening a conversation. **Art can make policy discussion more inclusive** and restart something that has stalled.
- The group was clear that **government ownership is necessary** but not sufficient. Where government leads, implementation still needs budget, an action plan and clear monitoring, or commitment never becomes delivery.



ENTRY POINT 4

When the question is whether it is working



This group asked how you know whether work already running is doing what you intended.

Participants worked through NUBB's goal of becoming an entrepreneurial university, a case where evaluation was used to steer the institution rather than to report on it.

- The university aligned its annual planning with its strategy, reviewed progress every six months, and built its curriculum around the skills industry said it needed.
- What that changed first was internal. Budget, staff time and teaching capacity were pointed at the goal before any external funding was sought. It then made the case outward: an industry cooperation centre now runs technology transfer with donors and the private sector, and the university has asked ministries to support an institute for innovation and entrepreneurship.
- The lesson the group drew is that evaluation done well is not reporting. It is how an institution works out, and then shows others, where investment should go.

Key takeaways

Some points came up in more than one group, and across the four cases. Those are the ones worth carrying forward.

- 1 Engage government from the start, not at the end
- 2 Bring solutions, not just problems
- 3 Anchor findings in existing government plans and mandates
- 4 Find the technical working groups and desks inside ministries
- 5 Messaging of findings is key
- 6 Credibility and trust of the research institution matters
- 7 Collaborate with CSOs to bring one consolidated voice

FROM THE FLOOR

Participants also raised three wider challenges facing everyone in the room: breaking the silos between ministries, where each treats its own sector as the top priority; the quality of the researchers and teachers behind the evidence; and designing inclusivity into technology from the start rather than adding it later. The first is visible in the cases, where influence depended on getting departments and levels of government aligned.



What this means for PCII's remaining period

1

Position, then act. Strategy is not knowing everything. It is knowing where you stand: your entry point, your relationships, your moment.

2

Reuse before you produce. Existing research can be repackaged and re-timed for new openings. Not every effort needs a new study.

3

Apply what we tested. PCII has tested capacity, technology, communication and dialogue as influence tools. The remaining period is for using them deliberately, and following up on the journeys started this year.





Thank you