

ANNEX
Strengthening Knowledge
Ecosystems

15 November 2021

Cambodia Case Study

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peace



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Cover picture:

City light in Rosewood, Phnom Penh, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Sanket Deorukhkar/Unsplash



This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.



1. Introduction to the Knowledge Ecosystems Approach

The research project ‘strengthening knowledge ecosystems’ is part of IDRC’s endeavour to strengthen the contribution of research support in ‘high-risk’ contexts. The jointly designed research foresaw case studies to better understand research in conflict-affected contexts and to inform effective pathways and modalities for supporting research in such settings. The project comprises in-depth case studies on Afghanistan, Laos and South Sudan, which were conducted jointly with locally-based research consultants. Additionally, five shorter-term case studies were conducted in Cambodia, Côte d’Ivoire, El Salvador, Ethiopia and Lebanon, building mainly on desk research as well as key informant interviews.

This study looks at ‘knowledge ecosystems’ as a whole, covering the full process of knowledge production from agenda setting, getting funding, and selecting partners to conducting research (i.e. choice of methodology and research design, data collection and analysis, publication), to doing outreach and policy uptake (see the Synthesis Report for more information on the conceptual background of this study).

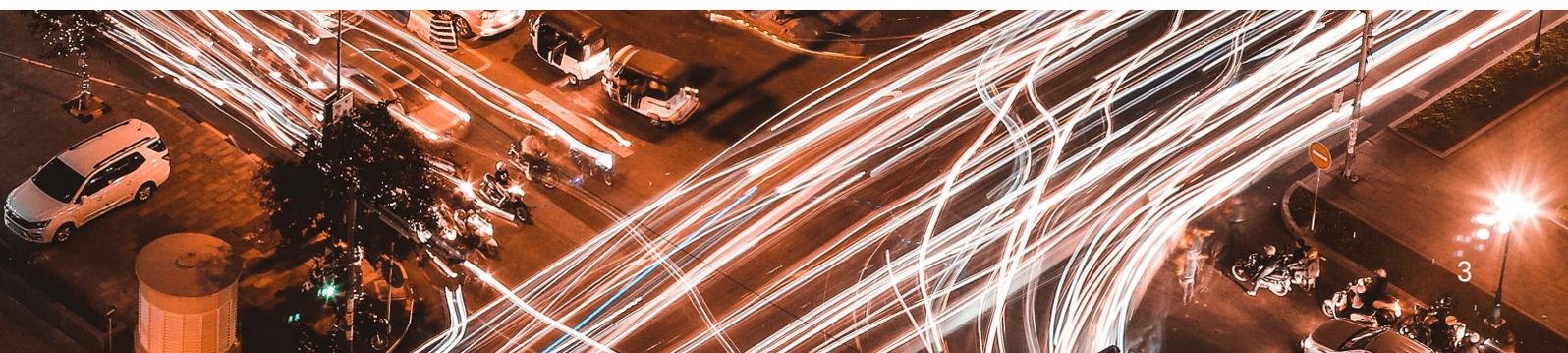
With this research, we aim to understand best practices of knowledge production and policy uptake of research in high-risks contexts. In order to understand knowledge ecosystems, a political economy approach was adopted, by following four ‘threads’ within these systems:

1. Follow the **persons** to understand the biography and professional life of researchers and academics;
2. Follow the **money** to understand the sources, salaries and flow of funds into research activities;
3. Follow the **organisations** (research and higher education institutions, think tanks, NGOs, etc.) to understand the operational logic and degree of influence with regard to research and policy;
4. Follow the **ideas** to understand the pathways and relevance of scientific content towards outreach and policy in the respective context.

This allowed us to assess the research environments and its actors from various angles, all departing from the respective case study contexts. To this end, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed, covering these four tracks (persons, money, organisations, ideas).

The overall research design for the entire “Strengthening Knowledge Ecosystems” project centered on capturing local perspectives and insights from researchers of the ‘Global South’. In this vein, data collection and recommendation generation for this Annex focused almost exclusively on the Cambodian context seen through ‘Cambodian eyes’. For the same reason, this report only includes additional sources or references to a limited extent.

Based on this understanding actionable recommendations to strengthen knowledge ecosystems in different types of high-risk contexts are suggested. Thereby, this research aims to **contribute to improved and relevant research, academic careers and policy uptake**. Thus, we aim to promote resilient, locally-driven research ecosystems, support the research community to conduct conflict sensitive research, and lastly, to improve the opportunities and the security of research partners in the Global South. Overall, this shall valorize research for development outcomes as well as towards democratic governance.





Visualising Characteristics of Knowledge Ecosystems

The knowledge ecosystems assessed in these case studies are all characterised by a low to medium demand of research that is in many cases externally driven. They are characterised by an environment that is not (much) enabling for researchers. In order to visualise these characteristics, we illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of six dimensions of knowledge ecosystems. This helps our understanding of a context and informs our conclusions as to what kind of strengthening measures could be taken by stakeholders and donors to facilitate knowledge production and research, information uptake and evidence-based decision-making in conflict-affected or authoritarian contexts.

The dimensions were developed thinking from a context/researcher's perspective. The case study contexts are situated along these dimensions based on a qualitative assessment (scale: high/strong – low/weak) to give a rough indication of the system's characteristics:

A simple scaling of these dimensions of knowledge ecosystems from 1 (low) to 4 (strong) covers the following ranges, informed by a list of indicators (see Synthesis Report for further information) as well as a context-informed decision by the respective case study researcher(s).

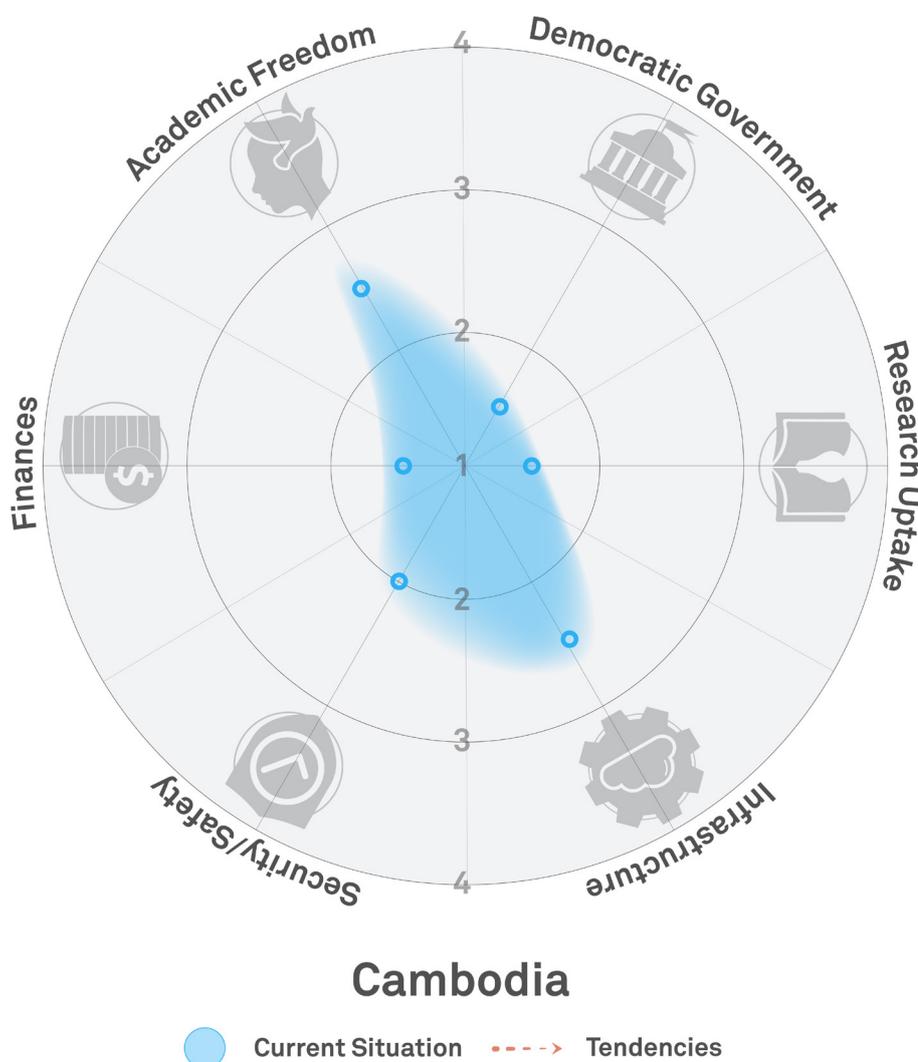
		DIMENSIONS					
							
		Infrastructure that is inductive for research (internet, database, ...)	Safety for researchers is guaranteed vs researchers are particularly prone to risks.	Finances available for research and conducive funding modalities, reliable income for researchers	Good governance of research, academic freedom is guaranteed, independence of research	Type of government: democratic government or weak/authoritarian government	Reliable policy relevance & research uptake (e.g. validation of knowledge, role of local researchers)
SCALING	1	no research infrastructure available	high-risk context for researchers, very difficult to guarantee any safety for researchers	zero research funds available	zero academic freedom	authoritarian or dysfunctional/weak government	zero research uptake
	4	fully-fledged research infrastructure for researchers	safe environment for researchers, even if they work on sensitive topics	fully-funded research programme, long-term financing available for researchers	fully guaranteed independence of research	democratic government	fully-implemented science-policy dialogues, research uptake works for majority of issues



Characteristics of the Cambodian Knowledge Ecosystem

The short case study of Cambodia’s knowledge ecosystem focuses on the social sciences. It draws on a brief literature review on the research to policy process in Cambodia, as well as ten qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with researchers from public and private higher education institutions, research centres and think tanks in Cambodia.

Analysts and respondents describe Cambodia’s knowledge ecosystem as being in transition. Recent positive dynamics include an increasing pool of qualified Cambodian researchers; the establishment of new policy-oriented institutes and think tanks that are shaping a new culture of research; the increasing availability of training and mentoring programs for (under)graduate students; and an increasing appetite amongst policymakers for research and policy evaluation. At the same time, Cambodian researchers in the social sciences continue to face structural challenges in building their research careers, conducting research, and disseminating their research findings for policy uptake. These challenges include a lack of independent quality PhD programs; limited access to academic literature; heavy teaching workloads for faculty members; the lack of adequate and long-term research funding; the dominance of English language; as well as a donor-driven consultancy industry and unequal international research partnerships that both have detrimental effects on research capacities and the ability to independently set long-term research agendas. Opportunities for researchers also remain unequal according to gender and geography. Lastly, the research environment is shaped by the authoritarian context, in which civil and political rights are being severely curtailed. This context influences access to senior faculty positions, as well as the ability to conduct research on sensitive issues and to disseminate critical research findings.



Recommendations for strengthening Cambodia’s knowledge ecosystem in the social sciences include the support of in-country capacity training and quality postgraduate programs; the support of academic publications in Khmer; adequate funding for long-term research; the promotion of genuine and equal international research partnerships in an unequal world of knowledge production; and the support of context-sensitive pathways for policy uptake.



2. Cambodia: Spotlight on Social Science Research & Uptake

2.1 Context

Until today, Cambodia's knowledge ecosystem remains to some extent shaped by the enduring legacies of its colonial past and decades of protracted armed conflict, foreign occupation, and embargo. Whilst the French colonial authorities did not invest significantly in (higher) education, the post-independence era after 1953 saw the establishment of modern universities and the enrolment of students in higher degree programs in Cambodia and abroad. However, these institutions were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979). University faculty, those with higher degrees or international experiences died in higher numbers (Rappleye and Un 2018). Studies suggest that under the Khmer Rouge, up to 75% of teachers, 96% of university students and 67% of all primary and secondary pupils were killed (Ayres 2000). In the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge regime, the focus in higher education was put on teaching, "not just because of the return to normalcy it projected, but because there were literally no more researchers alive" (Rappleye and Un 2018, 262). During the 1980s, the restoration of the higher education infrastructure was shaped by the Soviet Union and Vietnam, resulting in limited capacity for critical inquiry amongst Soviet-trained lecturers (Oleksiyyenko and Ros 2019). Following the UN peacebuilding mission in the early 1990s, the expansion of academic institutions was largely influenced by donors and practices of privatization and marketization.

Today, Cambodia's knowledge ecosystem is still characterized by a lack of capacity for research and a limited research infrastructure. However, it is important not to embrace simplistic conclusions of an alleged lack of a 'research culture' in a country following decades of war and conflict. Cambodian researchers face structural impediments, particularly in the social sciences, that are also the result of a specific political context in which parts of the ruling elite do not value critical research, co-opt researchers into its patronage networks and only use research findings when it contributes to its politics of state building (Eng 2014). The intensification of authoritarian rule since contested 2013 National Assembly elections and the 2017 dissolution of the opposition party has moreover included a repressive crackdown on journalists, human rights defenders, and political commentators as well as severe limitations to the freedom of expression, including in the digital sphere. At the same time, analysts speak of an "academic environment in transition" (Pou et al. 2016), highlighting recent positive and dynamic changes, including e.g. an increasing pool of qualified Cambodian researchers; the establishment of new think tanks and policy-oriented institutes that are shaping a new culture of research; and a growing appetite amongst policymakers for research and policy evaluation.

This short case study focuses on Cambodia's knowledge ecosystem in the social sciences, specifically at higher education institutions and think tanks (not non-governmental organisations). A focus on social sciences is particularly relevant to study the Cambodian knowledge ecosystem, given the increasing number of PhD students in this field, but also given that research in social sciences tends to be subject to higher sensitivities in a challenging political environment. Because of the limited time and resources available, the study is based on a short desk study and a small sample of interviews. It draws on short desk research, consisting of a brief literature review of the existing, rich academic and grey literature that discusses the research-to-policy process in the social sciences in Cambodia, including opportunities and challenges in 1) building a research career, 2) conducting research and 3) promoting the policy uptake of research findings. This study also draws on ten qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted remotely with social science researchers from public and private higher education institutions, research centres and think tanks in Cambodia. Finally, it is informed by the author's own observations and experience of the knowledge production environment in Cambodia.



2.2. Follow the Actors: Building a Research Career in the Social Sciences in Cambodia

Over the last few years, positive and dynamic developments regarding capacities for research have characterised Cambodia's knowledge sector in the social sciences, although assessments in interviews and the reviewed literature remain mixed.

Increase of qualified researchers trained overseas

An increasing number of Cambodian students received **competitive scholarships for (post-)graduate programs abroad and returned to Cambodia** with new knowledge and research skills. They now form “a pool of professionals, practitioners and entrepreneurs, including those associated with private universities, who are committed to knowledge production in the form of research and analysis and want that research and analysis to inform policy decisions” (Pak et al. 2019, p. ix). Many of the respondents interviewed for this short study also shared how it is their experience of studying abroad, whether at the MA or PhD level, that first set them on the path towards a research career, as it was often in the (post)graduate programs they took abroad that they were first exposed to academic research.¹

However, **access to scholarships abroad is unequal**. Scholarships remain out of reach to those unable to leave their family, spouses and children, to study abroad for longer periods.² Anecdotal evidence suggests that women are at a particular disadvantage when it comes to the ability to pursue PhD degrees abroad, as they are facing the necessities of starting a family life and the traditional expectations towards women in Cambodia's patriarchal society. In the 2017-18 academic year, only 29.86% of the 854 Cambodian students studying abroad on a scholarship (in 11 countries, including Thailand, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Australia, Russia and the EU) were women (MoEYS 2019).

Moreover, Cambodia's knowledge sector still has a **limited absorption capacity** of returnees with degrees from abroad. As Pak et al. (2019) note, it is still unclear to what extent this potential of returning qualified students is being fully harnessed in the knowledge sector. One respondent for instance observed how upon his return, it is the lack of opportunities for research and publishing, and the inability to use his newly acquired research skills to the fullest, which made him quit his long-time job as a lecturer at a public university to join a newly established think tank.³

Lack of quality and independent in-country PhD programs

The significance of a pool of highly qualified researchers trained abroad also reflects the **lack of independent, high-quality PhD programs in the country**, including at private universities.⁴ Whilst there is a growing number of doctoral students enrolled in Cambodia, predominantly **in social sciences**,⁵ only a limited number of universities offer PhD programs (e.g. the National University of Battambang). The Royal Academy of Cambodia has a PhD program, but it is not possible to conduct independent PhD research there on sensitive subjects or issues questioning the political status quo (see section 5.1.3 on this). Some universities have not yet followed upon the permission received to open a PhD program (such as e.g. the Royal University of Law and Economics, which was granted the permission to open a PhD program in law in 2007).⁶ In this regard, researchers trained abroad who have returned to Cambodia play an important role in ongoing efforts to establish quality domestic doctoral training that ensure academic integrity and the production of substantial and original research (Thun 2021).

The paradox shortage of shortage of PhD holders in the context of a 'PhD inflation'

In this context, there is still a **shortage of Cambodian faculty members holding a PhD**. According to a 2019 report of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS), only 1'309 of 16'617 higher education teachers (i.e. 8.10%) are PhD holders, including only 135 women (MoEYS 2019).⁷ 28.26% hold BA degrees and 63.64% hold MA degrees. In 2009 for instance, at one of Cambodia's top public universities,

1 E.g. Interviews with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021 and with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

2 Interviews with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021; and with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

3 E.g. Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021.

4 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021, noting that it will still take a few years for AUPP to develop a PhD program, as it requires a lot of resources.

5 1'349 PhD students (including 78 women only) were enrolled in public and private institutions in Cambodia in the 2017-18 academic year, 96% in social sciences (MoEYS 2019).

6 Interview with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

7 In the History Department of the RUPP for instance, only the dean of the department is so far holding a PhD title.



the Royal University of Phnom Penh, only 4% – i.e. 11 out of nearly 300 faculty members – held a PhD, and this number included several foreigners (Rappleye and Un 2018).

This situation reflects the fact that it is not necessary to hold a PhD to access positions at a higher education institution. Instead of being sought after as a steppingstone for an academic career, PhD titles have increasingly been considered to offer access to “social, moral, political admiration” and to government jobs (Thun 2021). The pursuit of PhD titles also constitutes **a strategy for senior government officials and businesspeople** to compensate lost opportunities in higher education as Khmer Rouge survivors and seek different means to morally justify power and leadership positions (Ibid.). As a result, despite the shortage of teaching staff in higher education institutions with qualified PhDs, a **‘PhD inflation’** has taken place. According to Thun (2021), a loose estimate for current PhD holders in Cambodia is 4’000 to 8’000. This includes government officials (senior ministers, ministers, secretaries of state, members of the Senate and the National Assembly, provincial governors, and government advisors) and businesspeople, many of whom have been awarded a PhD as an honourable title. In this context, a ‘bogus’ foreign university, which claimed to be a Malaysia-based international higher education institution, was uncovered as having acted as a ‘serious diploma mill’ between 2005 and 2011 (Ibid., 45). This PhD inflation reflects the existence of parallel socio-political perceptions and uses of academic degrees that exceed the established epistemic norms within the international academic community (Ibid.).

Limited research opportunities for faculty

Another key challenge for research capacities lies in **heavy teaching workloads**. Even if there is an increasing number of skilled faculty members interested in conducting research, the employment structure in higher education (particularly at public universities) remains **teaching-oriented** (Ros et al. 2020; Pou et al. 2016). Given the low levels of government salaries, there are limited to no opportunities offered to improving one’s financial situation outside of teaching more hours, with part-time employments and hourly-wage payments being normalised in both private and public institutions (Oleksiyenko and Ros 2019). Some faculty members teaching in international programmes may have access to a supplement to their salary.⁸ The situation however leads disadvantaged faculty members to moonlight between several institutions, and to be obliged to work long hours (e.g. 8 hours of teaching, 6 days per week)⁹ to meet their families’ livelihood needs (Ibid.).

This system leaves **extremely limited time for research** and produces “distracted work environments” (Ros et al. 2020, viii). It “takes the concentration away” from those who remain dedicated to research.¹⁰ It further contributes to a sense of “being on your own” amongst lecturers, without governmental or institutional financial and resource support (Pou et al. 2016). In the field of law, a respondent for instance observed a recent trend of qualified lecturers leaving university to join the private sector to access higher salaries.¹¹ Lecturers in these situations face constant social pressure from family or friends who question their profession from a financial perspective and ask why they would not practice as lawyers and earn higher salaries. Provincial institutions particularly face problems of retaining qualified staff members.

In recent years, higher education institutions have started to offer **compensation and a reward scheme for research** (Pou et al. 2016). Some universities for instance incentivise research with hourly wage increases for publications, provide funding for capacity development, conference travel, fieldwork expenses¹² or paid leave for field research. Such incentives are, however, deemed to constitute “a fraught space” and “a band-aid” that cannot replace the necessary structural improvements (Pou et al. 2016, 86). The use of such opportunities, when available, is also hampered by limited awareness amongst lecturers; a lack of capacity to manage research funds, design and implement research projects; excessively complicated funding procurement forms; and limited English skills (Ibid., see also Rappleye and Un 2019). Lecturers who apply for such research funds may only do so for other purposes than research (e.g. developing course handbooks for teaching, or translating history books).¹³ There is also a **generational dimension** at play, with elder lecturers – or those already operating in Cambodia’s academic system for a long time – being resistant to change or feeling threatened by younger researchers who gained academic experiences abroad.¹⁴ Some faculty members are not interested in research, or policy work, and only want

8 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.

9 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

10 Interviews e.g. with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

11 Interview with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

12 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021. This however does not necessarily come with paid working time for research.

13 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

14 Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021 and interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.



to focus on teaching. Societal perceptions of academics also continue to mainly associate their role in society with teaching younger generations, rather than the task of conducting research (Ros et al. 2020).

Promising trends amongst and for (under)graduate students

There are, however, promising trends in Cambodia's knowledge sector when it comes to the **higher and more qualified number of students pursuing higher education**. The number of enrolled students increased from 10'000 in the early 1990s, to more than 210'000 in 2018 (Thun 2021), including 46.63% women (MoEYS 2019). Several respondents further noticed an increase in both the quality and number of applications received for the mentoring opportunities their institutions offer, as a result of an improvement in higher education and research capacity building within both private and public universities; improved English language skills and increased exposure to internet sources.¹⁵ Respondents also observed a keen interest amongst students to pursue research and widespread perceptions of the positive value of research for Cambodia.¹⁶ This reflects findings from Pou et al.'s (2016) study on social sciences research in Cambodia, which found that one of the defining aspects of the transitional nature of Cambodia's research environment is a gap between, on the one hand, the persisting **perceptions of administrators and ministry officials that research is undervalued** and that students are not interested in research, and, on the other hand, the vibrant research interest of students (and young researchers).

Respondents also identified a positive development in the **increased availability of quality programs** in Cambodia's academic landscape. Examples mentioned included the **academic environment** offered in (post)graduate programs at private universities and the **availability of dual degree BA and MA programs** at public and private universities in the social sciences (e.g. the international law program at the Royal University of Law and Economics in Phnom Penh, which offers students the opportunity to earn degrees from recognised universities in Europe whilst studying in Cambodia).¹⁷ Moreover, several **mentoring and training programs** have been developed in the last decades, which offer students and young graduates exposure to research. For instance, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law offers various training/mentoring programs, including e.g. accompaniment of individual research and publication projects or feedback on proposals to attend international conferences. With its explicit policy-oriented focus, the think tank Future Forum offers a one-year policy training and coaching program for recent graduates and young professionals. It aims to be a springboard for young researchers to become policy analysts, with successful results so far: many of the participants of its programs are hired as junior policy analysts or researchers at government ministries, in international organisations or NGOs, at times even before they finish their mentoring programs.¹⁸ Since 2004, the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap also offers yearly junior resident fellowships for Cambodian undergraduate students and young graduates, and fellowships for Cambodian (post-)doctoral students. With its different formats of open access English-language publications, the Asian Vision Institute offers opportunities for young Cambodian researchers to receive exposure to a publication, peer-review and editing process and gain experience in academic writing.¹⁹ This avenue for academic writing is particularly important in a context where the crackdown on independent press has significantly limited other options (e.g. publishing op-eds). Social media also plays a positive role in encouraging young graduates and students to share their publications online and feel rewarded in the process. In the absence of formal training and mentoring programs, individual faculty members at public universities may also take on the task of mentoring students or younger researchers, providing them with opportunities for research experience and training. However, there are limited institutional incentives for doing this long-term capacity work. It therefore requires an enormous – and exhausting – individual commitment and the willingness to sacrifice one's own time for this.²⁰

In accessing conducive academic environments and research capacity trainings, **inequalities along gender and geography** persist. Women role models are still lacking for the large number of enrolled female students (Pou et al. 2016). Students at universities outside of Phnom Penh have less access to IT equipment and research trainings and have lower English language and IT skills when starting their studies.²¹ Some institutions in Phnom Penh (e.g. the Raoul Wallenberg Institute and the Center for the Study of

15 Interviews with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021; Natharoun Ngo, director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, 06.08.2021; Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.

16 Interviews with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021; and with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

17 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.

18 Interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021. Some are hired even before completion of the program, indicating not only the quality of the program but also the lack of competition and thus the need to further increase capacity-building and training in this field.

19 Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021.

20 Interview with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021.

21 Interview with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021.



Humanitarian Law at RULE) have therefore recently started to expand their research capacity trainings and partnerships with public universities outside of the capital city.

Moreover, **social science research training remains limited** at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Pou et al. 2016). Several respondents raised the persistence of structural problems. This includes the **lack of interactive teaching methods and skills and a focus on memorization rather than critical thinking** in the education system; or the lack of mainstreaming of thesis writing as part of BA programs.²² For students enrolled in the history department of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, for instance, there are still very limited opportunities to focus on research, as the aim of the BA program is to achieve the final exams to become high school teachers. Every year, only a handful of students opt for writing a BA thesis to finalise their degrees, and thereby get exposure to academic writing. Whilst English language skills are not necessarily an issue anymore²³, students in the social sciences, e.g. international relations, often have **difficulties in writing essays and developing an argument** in a structured way.²⁴ The **acceptance of plagiarism by both faculty and students** also constitutes a significant problem. For instance, many of the course handbooks in history developed by faculty members include copy-pasted information without systematic referencing.²⁵ Rather than resulting from purposive cheating, plagiarism is often linked to a lack of understanding of citation conventions and of how to conduct literature reviews; the lack of enforcement of ethical codes related to plagiarism in many institutions; and the absence of a recognised plagiarism software for Khmer texts (see Pou et al. 2016; Thun 2021). Finally, a respondent also observed a mismatch between on the one hand, the high expectations of students coming out of secondary schools in the capital city, with international curricula and good knowledge levels, and on the other hand, the conservative environment of public higher education institutions (and their administrations), which are slow to implement reforms and change old curricula or ways of teaching. Students who are aware that they are not accessing a high-quality academic environment, in international comparison, may also develop a sense of inferiority, which can hinder their self-confidence when competing for, or participating in, university programs abroad.²⁶

Gender

Whilst there is a need for additional research on gender dynamics in Cambodia's knowledge sector, it is clear that a **“powerful gender imbalance” still characterizes Cambodia's research environment** (Pou et al. 2016, 6), as well as government leadership and high-level technical positions (Pak et al. 2019). By comparison, gender imbalance is less pronounced in the NGO sector (Pou et al. 2016). Men (but also holders of international academic degrees) have easier access to professional status and recognition amongst researchers, leading to gender inequality at senior administrative and faculty positions (Ibid, see also Pak et al. 2019). There is also anecdotal evidence of a disadvantage for women in recruitment processes in research organisations or firms, due to “gender stereotypes that inhibit them from pursuing fieldwork, data collection, and limit their ability to network” (Pak et al. 2019, 22). Women indeed face **specific challenges when conducting research**, in particular field research in rural areas, and are reported not to engage as much in research due to competing family commitments (Maxwell et al. 2015), perhaps even more so when working in universities outside of the capital city. In Cambodia's patriarchal society, they face constraints on their abilities for unchaperoned travel for independent fieldwork in rural or isolated areas, and have higher security concerns (see also Pak et al. 2019; Pou et al.).

2.3. Follow the Institutions: Conducting Research in the Social Sciences

Diverse research suppliers

Cambodia has seen a significant institutional expansion with an increase from 8 to 125 public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) between 1997 and 2018, including 77 private HEIs and 41 HEIs providing postgraduate courses (Thun 2021; MoEYS 2019). HEIs, however, do not play a leading role as research suppliers. Knowledge producers include a larger group of actors: government research groups, organisations, or units; technical experts from development partners; research institutes and think tanks; UN agencies and (I)NGOs; consultancy firms and individual consultants (Pak et al. 2019). Moreover, foreign scholars have long dominated academic scholarship on Cambodia (Eng 2014).

22 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

23 Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021.

24 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.

25 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

26 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.



A respondent from a newly established think tank, however, noted the emergence of a “new trend”: “a new culture of research”.²⁷ Whilst publications were until now mainly produced by international researchers, Cambodian researchers with a PhD in collaboration with international researchers, or long-established think tanks (e.g. the Cambodian Development Resource Institute or the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace), Cambodian young scholars were now increasingly producing publications, on an increasingly diverse set of topics, and without funding from international organisations. Whilst there had been “a monopoly of knowledge creation and scholarship”, with only “a small circle [of senior and famous scholars] creat[ing] ideas, produc[ing] knowledge”, young people now could also become scholars and play a role in research and policy as they find new platforms to present their ideas in an academic manner.

Inadequate funding

Inadequate funding is the “most obvious and most cited challenge for Cambodia’s research environment” (Pou et al. 2016, 82). Despite positive changes in terms of increasing amounts and avenues for funding, it remains the central challenge for most researchers. Despite a growing number of government-led initiatives, there is still limited government funding for research, which is still heavily reliant on funding from donors and development partners (Pak et al. 2019). Independent think tanks also face problems with accessing sustainable funding sources for their work.

The lack of long-term, core funding has several problematic implications. Researchers are “always running after money”, which limits their capacities to focus on setting their own, long-term research strategy. The director of a research institute noted: “it does not leave room for research agendas to emerge, for us to reflect upon what we, as Cambodian researchers, think the research agenda should be for Cambodia”.²⁸ It also limits their time to rigorously develop research, “rigorously go[ing] through the various steps of research without being rushed into already publishing the research results”.²⁹ The director of another research institute observed how the lack of core funding requires researchers to “go where the money is”, i.e. to work on research projects developed by international partners, or indeed to “overstretch” oneself and “work on projects we sometimes do not want to work on”, so that researchers “cannot just focus on one theme or field of expertise”.³⁰ Other challenges raised during interviews were that the inadequate or insecure funding situation hampers long-term planning in terms of capacity building for early career researchers; and limits the ability to conduct foundational research. It also leads to a high turnover of research staff and significant difficulties in sustaining the long-term commitment of young, talented researchers as they become “tired of run[ning] after projects” and of “trying to secure their livelihoods”.³¹ In their 2016 study, Pou et al. (2016) had also noted that many of the capacity building efforts of institutions had led to loss of staff rather than the expected enhancements.

With regards to the funding situation, a few respondents shared positive experiences of their research institute receiving core funding from international donors, noting that this was crucial in allowing them to develop multi-year institutional research strategies and secure full-time positions for researchers. In this regard, the Center for the Study of Humanitarian Law (CSHL) at the Royal University of Law and Economics (RULE), the only university-based human rights research centre with full-time researchers, was mentioned as a successful example and model of a research centre located in a public university, which received external donor funding (SIDA and the Raoul Wallenberg Institute) and in-kind contributions (office space, utilities) from the university.³² Such a model, however, requires both access to donor funding and recognition from the host university of the value of research.

Beyond the lack of funding, there is also a **lack of capacity in writing funding proposals**, in monitoring available funding avenues and in applying to thematic calls, such as the IDRC’s. Cambodian researchers are at a disadvantage when applying for globally competitive grants, as they do not have the capacity to apply for large and long-term funding – something that could be addressed in providing not only regional funding instruments, but also country-specific funding instruments. This leads to Cambodian researchers having to partner with Western colleagues to apply for funding.

Finally, respondents also observed challenges related to both the **sustainability of accessing funding**

27 Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021..

28 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

29 Ibid.

30 Interview with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

31 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

32 Interview with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021.



from certain donors, and the challenges coming with donors' positionality in the current political context. Respondents expect funding from Western donors (e.g. SIDA) to become increasingly difficult to secure in the future, which leads to significant concerns and uncertainties regarding the sustainability of their work. Moreover, working with, or being affiliated with donors who take position in the current political context and oppose the ruling party's authoritarian grip over power – or donors that are perceived by the ruling party to be critical of its power – can be sensitive for researchers and research institutions. Finally, respondents observed with mixed positions the changing donor landscape and the increasing role of China as a donor for policy-relevant research. Some make use of this funding whilst others remain wary of the requirements of having to work with government authorities when accessing this type of research funding.

Problems related to the donor-driven consultancy industry

In the context of low salaries and limited funding for faculty members and researchers, there is a **brain drain** of qualified Cambodian researchers towards the profitable, donor-driven consultancy industry. This leads to human resources challenges in terms of “recruiting, training, and retaining qualified researchers within an organisation” (Pak et al. 2019, 19), which also affects the NGO sector. This is paradoxical as ministries report not having adequate funds to perform data collection, yet at the same time they have access to donor funding to pay for costly outside consultants. In the long-term, the over-reliance on consultants decreases capacity building; creates a ‘culture of dependency’; but also leads to research outputs that are rarely published and are of a questionable and varying quality³³ (Pou et al. 2016; Netra 2014).

The ambiguities of international partnerships in an unequal world of knowledge production

Many respondents were able to develop and strengthen their research skills through international research partnerships and recognised the capacity building potential of working with more senior researchers – be they international or Cambodian. However, with much of the research produced on Cambodia being conducted primarily by international (Western) scholars – at least until the 1990s and early 2000s –, respondents also emphasised negative effects of international research partnerships. These are linked to structural inequalities and the politics of knowledge production worldwide.

According to Ou Virak, there is today a “**dependence syndrome**” amongst Cambodian researchers, even experienced ones.³⁴ Many Cambodian researchers have been and are being commissioned to conduct only data collection and therefore do not participate in the initial phases of the research process – during which the ‘why questions’ of the research project, the research questions and the research design are discussed and defined by international researchers. Working mainly as fieldwork surveyors can then lead to limited experiences and skills for developing research questions and designing research projects, but also to **flawed perceptions of research**. Cambodian researchers have come to perceive the work of researchers as merely consisting of data collection during the project implementation phase. This hampers experiences in, and understanding for, developing research questions, research design, data analysis and policy recommendations as an inherent part of research. Unequal power dynamics within international and Cambodian research teams are further reinforced due to the predominant use of English in the publication and dissemination phase, which can exclude or marginalise researchers (Pou et al. 2016). Finally, Pak et al. (2020) also observe that quality assurance and external peer review has not been standardized during the writing and publication process, and that rigorous peer review processes are likely only if the research project is part of a cooperation with a university abroad or of a regional project. It is clear from the sum of these observations that research partnerships need to be genuine and equal and avoid the use of Cambodian researchers as simply “data collectors” and “research assistants”.³⁵ Partnerships need to be designed from the start with the explicit aim of building the capacity of Cambodian researchers at all stages of the research process.

Limited access to academic literature and official data

Despite the increased internet exposure in Cambodia, the limited access to academic literature constitutes another structural problem limiting research capacities (Pou et al. 2016).³⁶ This includes restricted access to information database and e-libraries and a lack of funding for subscription to paid acade-

33 See also interview with Natharoun Ngo, director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, 06.08.2021.

34 Interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.

35 Interview with Natharoun Ngo, director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, 06.08.2021; and with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

36 E.g. interviews with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021; Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.



mic journals. Students complain about inadequate physical library resources, including lack of books and computers to scan barcodes of books, slow internet, limited staff to help students or broken computers (Ibid.). A clear discrepancy here is noted between public versus private / elite universities, with private universities having more resources for access to academic literature.

Another limitation is the lack of information available from public institutions as well as the lack of trust in official statistics. This has implications both for data collection and policy uptake. This deficit is linked to a fragmentation of data sets, a lack of up-to-date statistical data, but also authorities' lack of willingness to provide information to researchers and the absence of practices of responsiveness in this regard (Pou et al. 2016; Pak et al. 2020).

The dominance of English as the research language

English remains a dominant research language for various reasons, and Cambodian researchers who want their work to be known internationally also need to publish in English. Many research outputs on Cambodia are produced in English only, as the production of Khmer outputs or Khmer translation **is often either an unfunded or unthought of part of research projects**, and becomes relegated to personal efforts of spending one's own time and dime for Khmer translations.³⁷ This situation also relates to the **problematic absence of quality, peer-reviewed, academic presses for Khmer publications** in the social sciences.³⁸

This has several **problematic implications**. First, researchers often report conducting research in English as a foreign language as a (time-consuming) challenge in their work (Pou et al. 2016). Given the rapid improvements in English language skills amongst younger generations, this mainly affects elder generations of researchers, but also those from institutions located outside of the capital city (Ibid). Second, peers, superiors, and students, but also researched communities, who do not read English will remain unaware of, and never read, Cambodian researchers' English publications and research findings.³⁹ Translating one's research findings into Khmer can thus help to gain respect within one's discipline or institution in Cambodia.⁴⁰ Translation into Khmer of empirical research is also essential to ensure the dissemination and sharing of research findings with the communities researched upon, and to avoid research merely being an extractive exercise.⁴¹ Third, Pou et al. (2016, 87) also raise the question of whether "the cultural and historical elements of Cambodian knowledge production, the values, stories, religious and political processes are devalued or misinterpreted in an English only research environment".

In interviews conducted for this short case study, many respondents nonetheless highlighted the **relevance of English as a research language in Cambodia**. Recently established think tanks chose to prioritise or only produce research outputs in English – including in mentoring or capacity building programs – given their explicit regional / international aspiration; the lack of relevant thematic and methodological literature in Khmer; and the increased English skills of young graduates and students.⁴² Some think tanks also predominantly use English even for policy research outputs aimed for government officials, as government officials are fluent in English or able to use internal translation services. Moreover, a few respondents noted the difficulties and cumbersomeness of using Khmer in academic writing (or at least the higher clarity of language when using English in writing), as Khmer is not yet established as a research language.⁴³

The ability to use English as a research language also provides **access to resources that are critical of Cambodia's established power structures and ruling party** (Pou et al. 2016). At the history department of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, for instance, students who do not read English will only access the limited resources translated from English and Khmer resources. These resources are often without rigorous referencing system and without quality control, mainly cover the period of the Khmer Rouge regime, or rely on the history textbooks published in Khmer in the 1970s that display nationalistic historiographic tendencies.⁴⁴ The publication of English academic articles in non-open access publication outlets that will

37 Interview with Sovachana Pou, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 30.07.2021. Also, personal observations.

38 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

39 Interview with Sovachana Pou, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 30.07.2021 and interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

40 Interview with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

41 Interview with Sovachana Pou, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 30.07.2021.

42 Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021. See also interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.

43 Interviews with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021; and with with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.

44 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.



remain under the radar of government officials also offers access to a degree of academic freedom, or at least a higher sense of security for Cambodian researchers when producing critical outputs.⁴⁵

Academic freedom and the difficult political environment

The challenges researchers face in Cambodia's knowledge sector are "exacerbated by the contemporary political environment of fear and mistrust that discourages open public participation in political processes and hampers productive research" (Pou et al. 2016, p. 12). These challenges are possibly under-reported: in their 2016 study, Pou et al. (2016) observed that respondents did not dare to talk about these problems.

This political context has several implications for the production, dissemination, and policy uptake of knowledge in the social sciences. First, the political situation **prohibits conducting research on politically sensitive topics** and fosters an environment characterised by "the fear of retribution and self-censorship" (Ibid, p. 94). In interviews, respondents observed that any research topic can be or become "politicised" and politically sensitive, although this is particularly the case in social sciences (versus technology or health science),⁴⁶ and within specific sub-disciplines (e.g. law or history⁴⁷, versus economics) (Ibid). Whilst academics greatly aspire to, and need, "freedom of enquiry" in their work, everything can easily become seen in terms of "political tendencies".⁴⁸ This can inhibit researchers and lead to self-censorship. As a result, sensitive research is not conducted and there is more focus on technical, rather than critical in-depth research (Eng 2014). This is even more the case with the increased crackdown on civil society organisations, which had so far been much more likely to conduct research on sensitive issues than higher education institutions (Pou et al. 2016).

Second, **the political context also affects academic teaching**. In the field of history, for instance, lecturers still cannot move beyond nationalistic ways of teaching history.⁴⁹ When neighbouring countries are mentioned, this often comes with nationalistic tropes such as that of portraying Thailand as the country "stealing temples and territory from Cambodia". Another respondent noted how certain aspects of the Khmer Rouge past and Cambodia's history still cannot be taught and touched upon in research and school curricula.⁵⁰ However, this does not mean that it is not possible to put forward differentiated views within the classroom. A respondent explained that it was still possible to e.g. talk about Cambodian politics when teaching international relations, when doing so in an academic and nuanced way, rather than "as an activist", as foreign lecturers would tend to do.⁵¹ Strategies here include presenting different perspectives and examples from other countries in the classroom, rather than overtly criticising the political situation in the country, so as to avoid creating problems for the academic institution or students.

Third, **access to senior positions in universities is shaped by political affiliation**. Positions are distributed to those who are members of the ruling party, demonstrate loyalty and show commitment to its electoral victory. This is particularly the case in institutions such as the Royal Academy of Cambodia, the country's highest academic body, which falls directly under the Office of the Council of Ministers and offers postgraduate and doctoral programs in the social sciences. Whilst scholars who are not ruling party members and members of opposition parties will not be fired on this basis, they will not necessarily have access to a promotion.⁵²

Fourth, **the political context can affect empirical field research and the quality of data collection**. Staff members of universities (or civil society organisations) can have difficulties to access specific samples; interview staff may not dare or want to ask sensitive questions; and government agencies can withhold information (e.g. on land conflict) from researchers (Pou et al. 2016). Researchers in the field can be asked "a lot of questions" by local authorities (Ibid., 95), and young researchers may face intimidating situations when summoned at district/commune offices, especially during electoral campaign cycles.⁵³

45 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

46 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

47 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.

48 Ibid.

49 Interview with a lecturer at a public university in Phnom Penh, 23.07.2021.

50 Interview with Sovachana Pou, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 30.07.2021.

51 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.

52 Interview with the dean of a private university in Phnom Penh, 30.07.2021.

53 Personal observations.



The political context also affects what Cambodian interviewees may want to share with researchers in interview or survey situations. A respondent explained: “the reality is that people are still living in fear, it has become worse now during the pandemic. Rural interviewees are very suspicious, this is also a product of the Khmer Rouge regime and of experiences of having been taken advantage of. It is also a matter of *baksbat*” [the Cambodian socio-cultural expression of trauma].⁵⁴ Addressing these challenges and ensuring not only ethical but also reliable data collection requires a lot of efforts – and adequate funding – for building trust and relationships with interviewees in rural areas.

Fifth, the political situation also affects the communication, dissemination, and policy uptake of research findings (see also section 5.1.4). Sensitive research results and critical analysis may not be shared publicly, such as e.g. research on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also leads to a “worrying notion that sensitive data cannot be trusted”, because of the difficult “ability of researchers to address controversial and sensitive topics” (Pou et al. 2016, 95). It affects the policy uptake of research findings, which are only used by the ruling party when useful for its political purposes of reinforcing or entertaining its patronage networks (Eng 2014). It may also limit the possibility to engage with government stakeholders, when certain donors no longer allow to pay for compensation / per diems when inviting government officials to join workshops.⁵⁵

Finally, **the political situation affects the perceptions of universities and researchers**. NGO staff members for instance express dissatisfaction with the quality of research produced at universities (Pou et al. 2016). In this difficult political context, the role of a researcher may also not be fully valued socially. A respondent observed: “When you intervene in public forums, it is difficult to speak freely, to speak your mind. This is what you want to do as a researcher, to be able to think critically and freely, but academic freedom is limited. So, when you talk in a public setting, you cannot necessarily go deeply into issues because of this. When people see you, they think ‘oh, is that all that a researcher is about?’”⁵⁶

When reflecting upon the latest developments since the 2017 dissolution of the opposition party and the last national elections in 2018, a few respondents observed that the political situation had always been challenging for Cambodian researchers and that the challenges and limitations they face in their work were not necessarily new.⁵⁷ Another respondent, however, raised concerns of an increased institutional vulnerability in the current Covid-19 context. Researchers working on sensitive issues need to be particularly careful not to negatively draw attention, e.g. through its staff being publicly listed as having contracted Covid-19, so as not to provide excuses for the government to close down their institution. Another respondent also noted that the situation had worsened for researchers since the dissolution of the opposition party: “we need to be even smarter, to be even more careful, we need to make sure that we are always right with what we do and what we say, we have to think ten times harder” than researchers in Western countries.⁵⁸

54 Interview with Sovachana Pou, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 30.07.2021.

55 Interview with a program officer at an international research organization, 28.07.2021.

56 Interview with the director of a research institute at a public university in Phnom Penh, 22.07.2021.

57 See e.g. interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

58 Interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.



2.4. Follow Ideas: Promotion, dissemination, and policy uptake of research findings

A recent study on Cambodia's knowledge sector, commissioned by the Australian Aid and the Asia Foundation, observes **an increase in the “demand and need for data and evidence-based research” amongst policymakers** in the last 3-5 years, even though this increased interest still varies depending on the individuals in management positions (Pak et al. 2019, 10). This includes the need for expert knowledge and survey data to support the formulation of policies, programmes, specific regulatory instruments; evaluative knowledge to provide evidence of the impact of public policies; and data on citizen perceptions. Social media has been playing an important role in suggesting new questions that policymakers need to pay attention to (Ibid). This increased interest was also raised in interviews conducted for this short study. A respondent for instance reported more government appetite for studies, research, publications, and interest for monitoring and evaluating its policies.⁵⁹

However, according to Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, there is **still limited research in the field of public policy and no “real organic debate on policies in Cambodia”**: most of the research focuses on empirical research that “looks at what is” (e.g. ‘how poor are the Cambodian poor’).⁶⁰ This is mainly donor-driven by international organisations and UN agencies. This research is also often produced by “fly-in consultants” who draft at times shallow reports without any proper understanding of the context, and often endlessly repeat the same policy recommendations.⁶¹ There is also a disconnect between on the one hand, the authors of reports – most often external consultants with little ownership over the reports – and on the other hand those who are most passionate about, concerned with and affected by, the implementation of policies and policy change in Cambodia.⁶² Another respondent also observed the reluctance for scholars conducting rigorous academic research – or for established, recognised academic institutions – to produce policy recommendations and engage in policy dialogue, because this is often not part of the training of academic researchers.⁶³

Moreover, **a gap between policymakers and researchers/research institutions persists**. This includes a limited flow of information between policymakers and researchers, in terms of both limited policy uptake of research and a limited availability of governmental data for researchers (Pou et al. 2016). According to Pak et al. (2019, 14), this gap is linked to a lack of trust and limited communication, as well as a “general atmosphere of suspicion that sometimes divides” those inside vs. outside the government. A respondent working at a policy-oriented think tank also observed how “think tanks, NGOs and government are like enemies, not having trust in each other”, although this was changing.⁶⁴ This gap between policymakers and researchers also stems from the absence of agreed processes and protocols for collaboration, e.g. on confidentiality or criteria for finding common grounds in situations of disagreements (Pak et al. 2019).

The policy uptake of research can be very uneven, and very limited in the case of research produced at universities (Ibid). According to Pak et al. (2019), a limited number of research institutes and think tanks have close, and primarily ad hoc, links to policymaking circles. Limited contact to policymakers however hampers the identification of research gaps that are aligned with the needs of policymakers (Ibid). Those research institutes that have established links with policymakers were able to build upon 1) personal relationships and trust between the directors, boards of directors and/or senior researchers with government stakeholders; and 2) the financial and technical support of development partners in establishing these connections (Ibid). Respondents involved in policy research also noted the importance of building relationships of trust with government officials. Whilst government officials may be reluctant and suspicious at first, the relations can improve once they understand that the researchers and think tanks do not have any bad intentions (to criticize, attack or damage them) but want to contribute to more effective and better-informed policies that are also better received by the population. In some cases, policymakers may become increasingly reliant on think tanks' work to the extent that the small research teams, consulted on an increasing number of policy issues, are at risk of burn-out.⁶⁵

59 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

60 Interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.

61 See also interview with Natharoun Ngo, director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, 06.08.2021.

62 Interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.

63 Interview with Natharoun Ngo, director of the Center for Khmer Studies in Siem Reap, 06.08.2021.

64 Interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021.

65 Ibid.



If researchers find themselves “inside the [policy] loop”, research-based evidence and technical reports can then influence policy decisions (Pak et al. 2019). However, it is difficult to quantify or assess this impact, given the absence of systems to document the uptake and impact of research products on policymaking within policy research organisations (Ibid). This is also linked to the fact that the **strategies for policy advice developed in Cambodia’s political context** must predominantly consist of discrete, non-public “back door” strategies, as respondents explained in interviews. Most of the policy dissemination of research happens “behind closed doors”: this is the “Cambodian way of doing policy uptake”.⁶⁶ This relates to the intolerance for public confrontation and criticism and fundamental needs of ‘saving face’ in Cambodia’s socio-political and cultural context. Respondents explained how they need to find subtle ways of conveying criticism to policymakers, even if they observed that policymakers were interested in their honest input on the weaknesses of their policies, necessary improvements and the criticism of beneficiaries and the general population, when conveyed in private and controlled settings.⁶⁷ This mode of operating can be frustrating for researchers, as they cannot operate as Western researchers and e.g. freely write op-eds to attempt to influence policy processes and cannot publicly share their successes in influencing policy.⁶⁸ It can also be challenging in this context to satisfy demands of international donors for the reporting of successful policy uptakes of research findings, especially when government partners would never confirm publicly that their decisions are based on the advice of research institutes or think tanks.⁶⁹

Some think tanks also proceed in publishing policy pieces and other outputs in attempts to influence policymakers. There, successful strategies to convey critical content include framing the research and language in terms of an offer for solutions, a path forward, a vision for (a more or less distant) future, rather than the mere identification of problems and personalised critique of policymakers; as well as foregrounding the youthful and creative character of their researchers and ideas to avoid confronting the egos of senior policymakers.⁷⁰

According to Pak et al. (2019, 17), however, the dissemination of policy-relevant research in contemporary Cambodia should not only target policymakers for policy uptake, but also consider the “side take”, i.e. sharing findings to other research institutions or think tanks and NGOs, as well as the “down take”, i.e. sharing findings with the general public.

66 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

67 Interview with Sovachana Pou, Senior Research Fellow at the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 30.07.2021 and interview with a senior researcher in a think tank, 06.08.2021.

68 Interview with the female director of a research institute in Phnom Penh, 29.07.2021.

69 Ibid.

70 Interview with Ou Virak, founder and president of Future Forum, 28.07.2021.



2.5. Recommendations for Strengthening the Knowledge Ecosystem in Cambodia

a) Support quality postgraduate programs within Cambodia

- Support the establishment of quality PhD programs.
- Support dual degree postgraduate programs.
- Support PhD and postgraduate mobility programs with universities abroad that offer exposure to international academic environments for researchers with limited capacity to travel abroad for long periods (e.g. due to family commitments).
- Support research capacity building (e.g. trainings on academic writing) at higher education institutions.
- Provide access to relevant research equipment (IT, research software, etc.), including for universities based outside of the capital city.
- Provide access to academic literature, including for universities based outside of the capital city, e.g. through direct funding for subscriptions, affiliations of researchers to partner institutions, or initiatives that aim to alter subscription terms (e.g. allowing universities in the Global North to share their subscriptions with universities in the Global South, or offering free access to universities in the Global South).

b) Support quality publications in Khmer language

- Support the establishment of an academic university press in Cambodia to allow both the publication of works in Khmer and the Khmer translation of relevant works in English.
- Support the establishment and improvement of Cambodian academic journals.
- Ensure that time and resources for quality research outputs in Khmer are planned and budgeted for in research projects, including trainings on writing reports and policy briefs in Khmer.
- Support the dissemination and sharing of research findings in Khmer with researched communities, to avoid research being merely an extractive exercise.

c) Support female researchers and promote gender equality

- Support the development of mentoring programs tailored for early career female researchers.
- Provide funding for the participation of female researchers in international academic conferences and in field research (e.g. funding for childcare options).
- Provide incentives to work towards gender balance in university departments.



d) Provide adequate funding for research

- Develop relations of trust with research institutions to provide long-term core funding to local research centres, allowing research institutes and researchers to organically develop their long-term strategic research plan.
- Provide country-specific funding instruments, rather than only regional or thematic funding instruments.
- Plan a capacity-building component in the funding process: provide comprehensive feedback to applicants whose proposals for specific grants has been rejected, so that researchers can enhance their capacity and success in writing research grant applications.
- Provide funding, and/or support, for increases in salaries and/or monetary incentives for faculty staff members in public HEIs.
- Support teaching releases for researchers, e.g. through funding research sabbaticals for faculty.
- Provide funding for postgraduate research positions at universities.
- Provide funding for rigorous scientific research, rather than only focusing on the policy uptake of research, to ensure that policy-relevant or policy-oriented research is also based on rigorous scientific methods.
- Provide funding for participatory research or community-based research to ensure that research is not merely an extractive exercise.

e) Promote genuine and equal international research partnerships

- Provide funding that is not only focused on the research output or reports, but the entire research process, and that is explicitly designed to build the capacity of Cambodian researchers who are to be involved in all stages of the research process, i.e. from the formulation of research questions to the dissemination of research findings and the development of policy recommendations.

f) Support the policy uptake of research

- Develop relations of trust with researchers and research institutes and integrate flexible criteria for the reporting of policy uptake of research findings that allow for consideration of the local context of policy dissemination.
- Support independent think tanks in their policy work.
- Link researchers with expert NGOs.
- Support not only policy uptake, but also policy “side take” or “down take”, i.e. the dissemination of research findings with other institutions, researchers and (I)NGOs (policy “side take”) and with research participants and the general population (policy “down take”).



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About swisspeace

swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It analyses the causes of violent conflicts and develops strategies for their peaceful transformation. swisspeace aims to contribute to the improvement of conflict prevention and conflict transformation by producing innovative research, shaping discourses on international peace policy, developing and applying new peacebuilding tools and methodologies, supporting and advising other peace actors, as well as by providing and facilitating spaces for analysis, discussion, critical reflection and learning.

swisspeace is an associated Institute of the University of Basel and member of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences. Its most important partners and clients are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, international organizations, think tanks and NGOs.