

# The Implications of Closing Civic Space for Sustainable Development in Cambodia

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April 2019

Citation: Schröder, P. and Young, S. (2019) 'The Implications of Closing Civic Space for Sustainable Development in Cambodia', mimeo, IDS



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## Summary

This report on Cambodia is one of a set of four country case studies designed to study the implications of closing civic space for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The case study was commissioned in response to the wave of legal, administrative, political and informal means to restrict civic space and the activities of civil society actors in countries around the world in the past decade. Based on a literature review and conceptual framework developed for the study (see also Hossain *et al* 2018), the report documents changing civic space in Cambodia. The country is characterized by a centralised political system where power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the dominant ruling class. Development policy has prioritized high-growth goals, with documented violations of land, labour and freedom of speech rights in the process. The case study documents the impacts on specific Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) objectives, including no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), decent work (SDG 8), gender and economic equality (SDGs 5 and 10) inclusive communities (SDG 11), life on the land (SDG 15).

The study found that:

- Since the near-defeat of the ruling party in the 2013 elections, which was attributed in part to a partisan or pro-opposition civil society and media, civic space has become narrower and the fit between civil society and the state has become more difficult and more contentious.
- There was evidence of CSOs and related programmes which made contributions to inclusive forms of development, including, but not only, in terms of service delivery
- China's emergence as a development actor in Cambodia appears to be changing the normative environment within which policies on civil society and thinking about its role in the development process are made
- Key areas of recent rights violations related to land grabbing and unsustainable land management, labour rights, particularly in the vital global export sectors, and media freedom, where the scope to report independently on problems of corruption or macroeconomic management has been squeezed
- Impacts of shrinking civic space can be traced through to
  - SDG 2 (Zero hunger): food production and small scale agriculture are likely to be affected, particularly among indigenous and minority populations facing the effects of land grabs and policies supporting agricultural commercialization; there is limited space for civil society actors to influence policy, although various efforts at monitoring are made
  - SDG 5 (Gender (in)equality): the impacts on women's groups of new regulations restricting advocacy work and mobilization are particularly harsh. Curbing Cambodian women's organizations is likely to impact adversely on critical areas where women's development is at stake, including with respect to practices of gender discrimination, boosting women's participation and land title security, and urban women's safety
  - SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth): industrial workers have limited rights, low pay and poor working conditions; however, workers' rights to organize are very limited, and in practice, labour leaders are subject to violence and intimidation. Cambodia remains low in global value chains, using suppression of (mostly women) workers' rights to keep wages low
  - SDG 10 and SDG 11 (Inequalities of income, between rural and urban areas, and within cities and urban communities): economic inequalities are widely understood to have increased, because of the pattern of growth which favours big development projects and dispossesses the less powerful. NGOs have played an important role in supporting inclusive urbanization in a process of rapid real estate development,

- including in highlighting disparities and priorities for action and actively defending citizens' rights, but restrictions on media are deepening rural-urban differences
- SDG 15 (Life on Land): in a context in which the political elite is closely connected to actors with interests in forests and timber, conservation has been adversely affected by restrictions on civil society's ability to monitor or campaign effectively against land grabbing, large-scale agricultural concessions and hydroelectric power dam construction.

The report concludes with some discussion of the implications of these findings for Cambodia. The present study offers important, albeit limited, insights into the impacts of restricted and repressed civil society on key development outcomes, and highlights issues on which further analysis may help to build the developmental case for civic space in Cambodia.

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# 1. Introduction

## Background

This report on Cambodia is one of a set of four country case studies designed to study the implications of closing civic space for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It adopts a theoretical and analytical framework developed in a synthesis report entitled *The Implications of Closing Civic Space for Development* (set out in more detail in Hossain *et al* 2018). The study was commissioned from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) by the ACT Alliance during 2017-18 in response to the wave of legal, administrative, political and informal means to restrict civic space and the activities of civil society actors in countries around the world in the past decade.

It was motivated specifically by the need to assess the implications for development outcomes, as measured by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This reflects the wide body of evidence that civil society has played a significant role in promoting inclusive, equitable and sustainable modes of development in the past, and reasonable concerns that closures of civic space may choke off pathways to the achievement of the SDGs. The study as a whole comprised:

- a review of the literature on closing civic space, and the development of a conceptual and methodological framework for further study
- an application of these frameworks to a desk-based analysis of the potential development implications of closing civic space in 12 selected countries of interest to the ACT Alliance and its wider partnerships
- a subset of country case studies selected from the 12 for more detailed and empirical analysis of development impacts in selected policy domains (land rights, labour rights, social inclusion, gender equality, poverty, hunger, and urban livelihoods) were identified as of potential relevance in four countries: Brazil, Cambodia, Nepal, and Zimbabwe.

## Cambodia country case study

The country cases were selected in part to represent different pathways in the political economy of development. Cambodia represents a political settlement in which in the post-conflict period, political power has been dominated by a single party, which has controlled the political landscape and pushed through major development reforms, including opening up the country to foreign investment, trade and international aid. This has been reflected in relatively rapid, if uneven, improvements in basic economic and human development indicators. In recent years, however, that political dominance has been tested in both commune and national elections in which the opposition won more support than the ruling party expected; this, and the perceived relationship between a free media, comparatively open civil society space, and gains by the opposition, have prompted a crackdown on civic space in the country.

An initial literature review and scoping study identified the two issues of land rights and labour rights as areas of contention in which closing civic space was likely to have the most impacts on development outcomes. Other negative impacts identified include poverty and hunger, economic inequality, rural livelihoods, decent work, and gender equality. To explore these issues further, an IDS researcher with expertise in environmental policy and civil society in Asia and a scholar of Cambodian civil society, social movements, and land rights, worked together to study these issues in more depth. They identified relevant experts and actors in key sectors willing to discuss these issues. The security situation only allowed conducting interviews within the capital of Phnom Penh. Interviews were undertaken with key informants from across civil society, government, and business (where relevant) during March and April 2018. In total 18 interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted in a tense atmosphere and both researchers and interview partners were concerned about security risks. To protect identities of interview partners, no identifying features

are provided in this report. Some of our interviewees informed us that they were being followed and under observation. Some NGOs applied a strict security measure before we entered their offices; mobile phones were not allowed to be brought in. Most communication with informants was conducted through WhatsApp, Skype and email rather than telephone. In addition to collecting first-hand information through the 18 interviews, the researchers collected secondary data from news reports and academic literature and collected and analysed civic space, statistical and development performance data to situate and illuminate the case further. Finally, we had planned a group discussion workshop with ten stakeholders, but only three of them turned up due to the security concerns and the government restrictions on assembly. It was not possible to conduct a stakeholder workshop as intended.

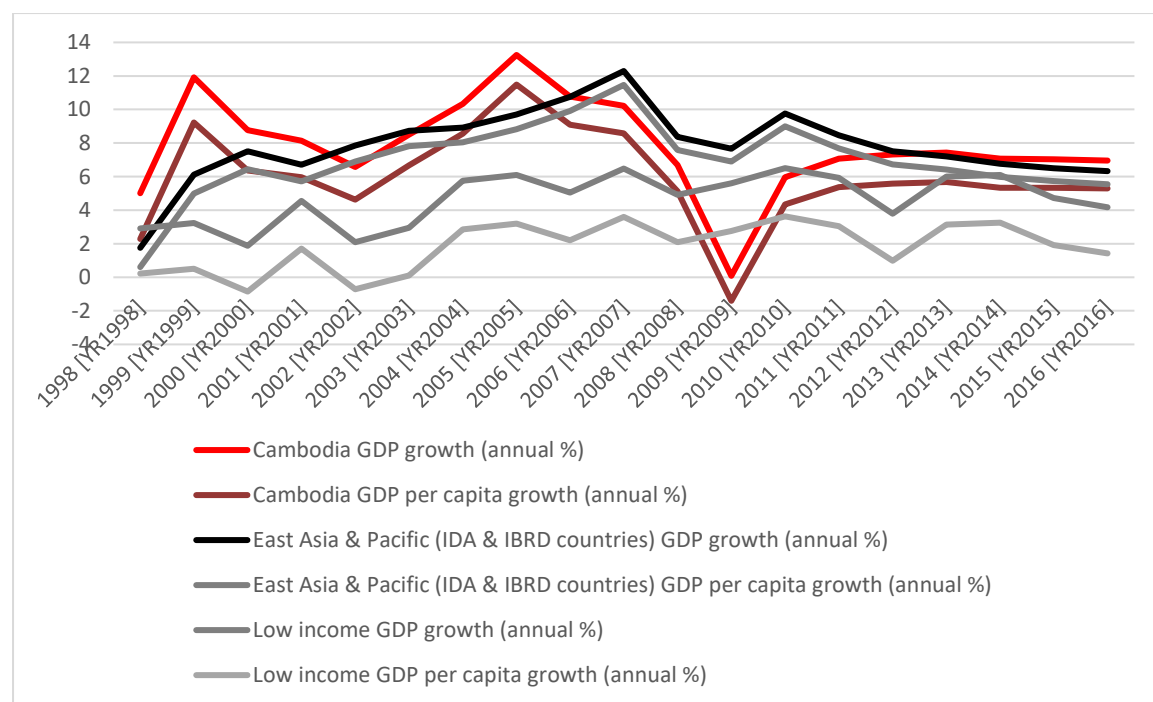
The findings of the case study are set out as follows. Section 2 sets out the challenge of sustainable development in Cambodia, exploring development achievements to date, the role of civil society in development, the political economy of sustainable development, the nature of closing civic space, and the roles of international aid donors and development partners, including China, in shaping civic space and the development process. Section 3 presents the main findings from the interviews and fieldwork, analysing the implications for land rights, labour rights, and the freedom of the media through a closer look at the relevant SDGs which are either already being negatively affected and are likely to be further affected by closing civic space in Cambodia. Section 4 draws together conclusions from the analysis, and discusses some of the implications for analysing and programming to address the potential adverse consequences of restrictions on civil society for the achievement of the SDGs.

## 2. The challenge of sustainable development in Cambodia

### Development performance

Cambodia's development progress since 1990 must be understood in terms of the devastation of the economy, the society and its political institutions through 30 years of internal and international conflict, including in the American/Viet Nam war (Arias-Vazquez et al. 2014). The population halved, cities were depopulated, and displacement meant loss of land and livelihoods for thousands. The rapid reduction of income-poverty and the establishment of public services and private sources of economic growth since the 1990s is remarkable against this backdrop. Growth has averaged 7 per cent over the past decade and a half, and after an unequalizing start, has been contributing to improved income equality since 2007. This is so despite a dramatic halt to economic growth in 2009, as the country suffered from the global economic downturn, and experienced low or negative growth, before recovering promptly in 2010 (see Figure 1). The country 'graduated' from Least Developed Country to Lower-Middle Income status in 2015. Yet while in the past few years, Cambodia has been experiencing higher GDP growth rates than comparable countries in East Asia, per capita GDP growth has been somewhat slower. As Figure 2 shows, per capita income growth has also been slow in Cambodia compared to its neighbouring countries, and far closer to that of other low income countries. Among other factors, this reflects the relatively slower gains in labour productivity, and lower levels of human capital in the country (World Bank 2017).

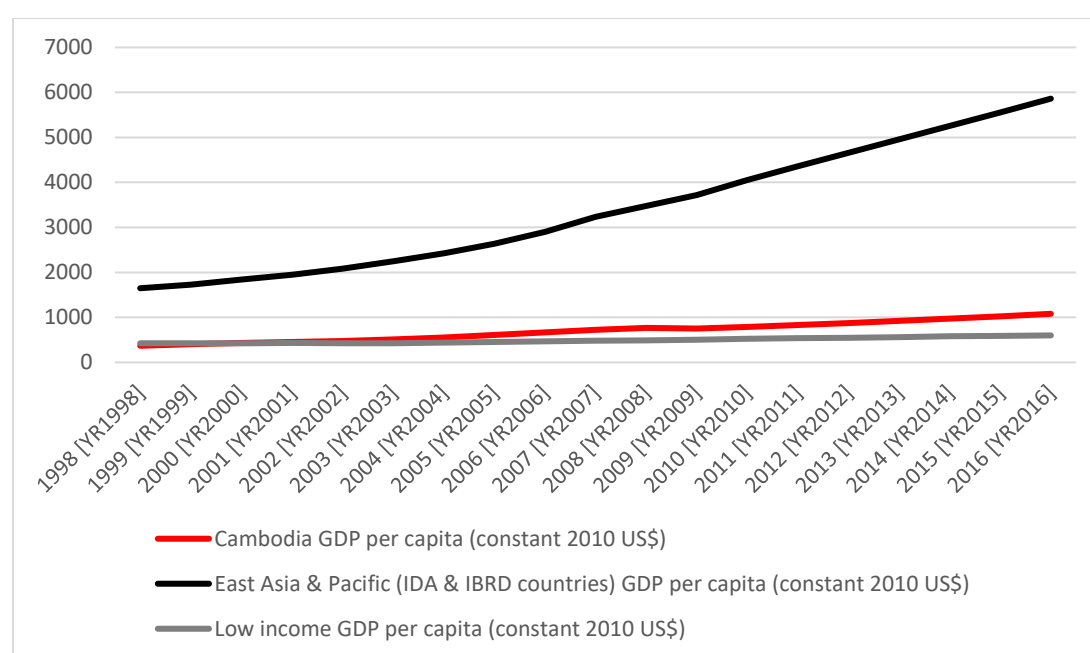
Figure 1 GDP growth and GDP per capita growth



Source: 1 World Development Indicators, accessed April 16th 2018



Figure 2 GDP per capita



Source: 2 World Development Indicators, accessed April 16th 2018

The proportion of the population living below the national poverty line<sup>1</sup> more than halved, from 50 per cent of the population to 13.5 per cent between 2003 and 2014; the pace of poverty reduction has slowed more recently (Arias-Vazquez et al. 2014). Many of those newly non-poor remain close to the poverty line, and vulnerable to dipping back into poverty, depending on movements in wages and costs of living (Arias-Vazquez et al. 2014). Other indicators of development progress include life expectancy, maternal and infant mortality rates, immunization, educational enrolments, and water and sanitation access, which show comparatively rapid gains for Cambodia, but which still leave it lagging behind other comparator countries (IDA and IBRD countries) in the region (see Table 1). It is also notable that the pace of progress appears to have been higher in the 2000s than in the past 5 years, when gains have been somewhat slower in areas such as life expectancy, immunization, and maternal and infant mortality (see dotted trendlines in Annex Figures 3-6).

Table 1 Cambodia and the region, selected human development indicators

	Indicator	2000	2005	2010	2015
Cambodia	Adjusted net enrolment rate, primary (% of primary school age children)	92		93	95
	Immunization, measles (% of children ages 12-23 months)	65	79	89	81
	Improved sanitation facilities (% of population with access)	16	25	34	42
	Improved water source (% of population with access)	42	53	64	76

<sup>1</sup> Cambodia uses an absolute poverty line definition. In 2013, the Ministry of Planning (MOP) introduced new poverty lines of KHR 3,871 (USD 0.98) which is lower than the \$1.25 absolute poverty line set by the World Bank. The revisions to the Cambodian poverty lines include (i) a food poverty line based on 2,200 calories per person per day (up from 2,100); (ii) a non-food component that is estimated separately for Phnom Penh, other urban, and rural areas. The poverty line is calculated based on the Cambodia Socioeconomic Survey (CSES) data, the latest being from CSES 2009. Source: <http://www.thepovertyline.net/cambodia/>

	Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	58	63	66	68
	Vulnerable employment, total (% of total employment)	85	78	70	54
East Asia & Pacific (IDA & IBRD)	Adjusted net enrolment rate, primary (% of primary school age children)	95	95	96	
	Immunization, measles (% of children ages 12-23 months)	83	85	93	92
	Improved sanitation facilities (% of population with access)	58	64	70	75
	Improved water source (% of population with access)	80	85	90	94
	Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	71	72	74	74
	Vulnerable employment, total (% of total employment)	56	49	43	38

Source: 3 World Development Indicators

A recent diagnostic study noted that the conditions that enabled Cambodia's stellar performance in reducing poverty since the 2000s may not continue to generate such rapid progress (World Bank 2017). Among other factors, low educational and health outcomes, including the enduring effects of malnutrition, hamper economic mobility and labour productivity. Among the unmet MDGs were tuberculosis incidence, environmental sustainability and gender equality. Persistently high rates of maternal mortality and the absence of social protection against weather and financial shocks highlight the weakness of public service delivery for the poor masses, particularly in rural areas. Other major concerns included problems of corruption and weak governance, including in relation to the business. Problems of land-grabbing and associated loss of livelihood on a large scale, particularly among indigenous communities, were also noted (World Bank 2017), an issue which is further analysed in this report.

Finally, Cambodia's development performance is strongly impacted by inequality. Income inequality has been declining, and between 2012 and 2015 the Gini coefficient of Cambodia indicated an improvement or equalization of the income distribution, declining from 36.03 to 30.76 (UNDP 2017). Nevertheless, inequality still hampers development performance, as shown through the inequality-adjusted human development index (IHDI). Cambodia's human development index (HDI) for 2015 was 0.563. However, when the value is discounted for inequality, the HDI falls to 0.436, a loss of 22.5 percent due to inequality (UNDP 2016). In terms of gender inequality, Cambodia has a gender inequality index (GII) value of 0.479, ranking it 112 out of 159 countries in the 2015 index. Indicators of gender inequality in Cambodia are among the worst in the East Asia and Pacific region, with only Myanmar and Lao PDR performing worse. For every 100,000 live births, 161 women die from pregnancy related causes compared to 62 in the region; and the adolescent birth rate is 50 births per 1,000 women of ages 15-19, compared to an average of 22 in the East Asia and Pacific region (UNDP 2018). Female participation in the labour market is 75.5 percent compared to 86.7 for men (UNDP 2016).

In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a number of remaining developmental challenges will require increased attention over the next decade, some of which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Selected SDG priority targets and indicators for Cambodia (not exclusive, selected based on data availability)

SDG Target Indicator	Year	Value
2.1.1 Prevalence of undernourishment (%)	2014-2016	15.3
2.2.1 Prevalence of stunting among children under 5 (%)	2014	32.4
3.1.1 Maternal mortality ratio ((per 100,000 live births)	2015	161

3.3.2 Tuberculosis incidence (per 100,000 population)	2016	345
6.1.1 Proportion of population using safe drinking water (%)	2015	24.1
7.1.1 Proportion of population with access to electricity (%)	2016	49.8
11.1.1 Proportion of urban population in slums (%)	2014	55.1

Source: ADB Basic 2018 Statistics

## The role of civil society in sustainable development in Cambodia

Civil society and NGOs have been prominent actors in Cambodia's development process, with the country featuring one of the world's highest concentrations of such organizations since the 1990s. Civil society actors cover a wide range of issues, including service delivery, promoting good governance, conservation, peace-building, and human rights, and are found in each province and in every sector of Cambodia's development. A review of civil society in Cambodia identified five areas in which international NGOs and their national partner NGOs were particularly prominent in development: i) large scale service delivery programmes, often involving multilateral financing; ii) complementing or partnering in local-level service-delivery with Government; iii) community development activities at the village level; iv) capacity building of local NGOs and CSOs; and v) research and analysis for advocacy on development-related issues (Sunderji 2011). However, a significant body of analysis identifies Cambodian civil society as often inadequately linked to grassroots concerns and overly dependent on foreign aid funding, and oriented to external concerns more than local civic capacities and activism (Bandyopadhyay et al 2013; Frewer 2013; Netra *et al* 2015; Norman 2014; Sivhuoch and Sedara 2013).

Aid funding has been crucial: from 1992 to 2011, total aid to Cambodia amounted to USD 12.13 billion. Among several donors, the EU funded about 22 per cent of the total budget and is by far the largest donor to Cambodia (RGC, 2011). More than 9 per cent of the total was funded by and through local and international NGOs, whose numbers increased from a handful in the early 1990s to 3,492 in 2010 (CCC, 2012). Through NGOs, per year aid increased significantly from USD 206.1 million in 2009 to USD 220.4 million in 2010 (RGC, 2011). Most aid goes to around 1,350 NGOs working in several sectors. Although the impacts of these NGOs' activities are difficult to assess, their activities reached and benefited at least between 2.8 to 4.5 million Cambodians over the period (CCC, 2012).

It is arguably the case that NGOs, especially through their service delivery approaches as well as advocacy and legal rights support for marginalised groups, have considerably contributed to achieving national development objectives. Yet, recently, there has been a considerable shift from the latter approaches to an empowerment, advocacy and rights-based approach, empowering grassroots community-based organization (CBOs) to advocate with and even to confront the neo-liberalized development policies of the government (Young, 2016a). This shift in NGO and international development agency agendas has explicitly changed from service delivery-focused approaches to empowering local beneficiaries to ensure long-term and sustainable development in general and to the adoption of rights-based approaches in particular (Young, unpublished).

## The political economy of sustainable development in Cambodia

Development policies and the drivers of closing civic space in Cambodia are jointly shaped by the nature of its political settlement, in which power has till recently been dominated by the 'strongman' regime of Hun Sen. The current political settlement in Cambodia originates in the 1979 overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by the Kampuchea People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP). Hun Sen has ruled Cambodia for three decades, amassing a fortune estimated at USD200 million (Global Witness 2016). The Cambodian political elite has, or is closely connected through marriage or kinship with,

major economic interests in land and natural resources as well as increasingly in labour-intensive export manufacturing sectors. Kelsall and Seng summarise the political settlement in Cambodia as

[A] dominant party system subject, intermittently, to strong competitive challenges; institutions are primarily personalistic, although some islands of rule-governed behaviour can be found ... as a hybrid predatory-developmental dominant regime with a combination of hierarchical and multi-stakeholder governance, it will produce moderately effective developmental outcomes (Kelsall and Heng 2016a, 240).

Since the late 1990s, the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) has governed over a volatile but growing economy with what is widely viewed as a particularly brutal hand (Deth and Bultmann 2016; Adams 2015). Growth rates have been high, but the benefits have been skewed in favour of elite groups (Weinberg 1997), rather than being evenly distributed, and enabled political power to concentrate. Recent rural economic growth, substantially driven by higher rice prices after the global food price crisis of 2008, has driven down poverty in the rural heartlands, amid a wider process of de-agrarianization. The rapid rise in industrial disputes and strikes in the period after 2010 indicates a high degree of dissatisfaction among the important export manufacturing sector workers. In one view, labour is seen by the state as a commodity to serve the political and wealth accumulation interests of ruling elites, but also as a problem to be managed through semi-authoritarian modes of governance aiming to maintain order and stability' (Ward and Mouyly 2016, 261).

The elections of 2013 saw the CPP barely win against the new Cambodian National Rescue Party, which won a surprisingly large number of votes despite reported rigging by the CPP. This apparently reflected a surge of popularity with the vast tech-connected youth population, particularly in urban areas (Mccargo 2014; Osborne 2015). A key event in recent political affairs was the murder of prominent critic of the state, Kem Ley, in 2016; the assassin was apparently apprehended, but state-backed forces are feared to have been behind the death (Freedom House 2017d). The new threat to Hun Sen's political dominance also explains why the opposition leader, Kem Sokha, was arrested and charged with treason in September 2017, ahead of the 2018 general elections. If convicted, Sokha could face a 30-year jail term (ICNL 2017b). In November 2017, the Supreme Court ruled to dissolve the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), removing the only existing electoral threat to Prime Minister Hun Sen. Other political leaders, human rights activities and journalists have been charged or convicted of criminal offences, and are either in exile or are held in detention. In October 2017, Senator Hong Sok Hour of the CNRP was pardoned from the seven-year jail sentence he had been given over a Facebook posting (Thul 2017).

The political settlement in Cambodia has faced more competition in the recent past, but the government remains powerful enough to maintain its broadly pro-growth strategy alongside high levels of corruption, particularly in the extractives and natural resource sectors. Foreign direct investment (FDI) into Cambodia has played an important role for the country's development, especially in terms of boosting GDP growth and supporting the government's development agenda. FDI inflows have grown exponentially in the last few years due to sound macroeconomic policies, political stability, regional economic growth and an open investment market. FDI reached USD 1.92 billion in 2016, up from USD 1.7 billion in 2015 (Santander 2017). Especially FDI in the extractive industry is booming. Including projects expected to be approved before the end of the year 2018, FDI in mining and other extractive sectors equals USD 1.3 billion, making it one of the most valuable economic sectors in Cambodia (Vannak, 2018).

The Cambodian government appears to be pursuing development without much reference to good governance. This reflects the personalistic character of the Cambodian state and of policymaking (Kelsall and Heng 2016b; Kelsall and Seiha 2014). Overall, Cambodia is considered to be a political

system with a dominant party that seeks top-down control over the economy and society, with a view to consolidate the interests of its political elite instead of aiming for most inclusive economic development outcomes. In this context, development progress has been uneven:

[A]lthough significant developmental progress is possible in circumscribed areas, especially those with support from multiple stakeholders, outside these channels, provision of development-enhancing public goods and services is likely to be poor (Kelsall and Heng 2016a, 240).

The uneven distribution of services, however, becomes evident in the urban-rural comparison. For example, in terms of provision of drinking water, the proportion of the population using safely managed drinking water services in urban areas is 55 per cent, in rural areas 16 per cent (ADB 2018). Development progress is most likely to occur where it is politically acceptable or even necessary for the elite, and where external support is available. 'Hard-to-reach' groups, including those who are marginalized because of ethnicity, geography or occupation, are unlikely to be able to amplify their demands in such dominant settings. Land and resource (and therefore livelihood) rights of such groups are particularly vulnerable in such settings. The political settlement, and stakeholder involvement, have meant areas of progress where policy reforms went with the political 'grain', for instance in widening education participation in the 1990s and 2000s. In other areas, where, for instance, better quality performance might make more demands on the state to challenge the interests of groups like teachers or doctors or local officials in the interests of strengthening accountability, the impacts of reforms are much more uncertain (Kelsall and Heng 2016b; Kelsall et al. 2016). It is notable that gender relations have proven stubbornly resistant to equity reforms, and Cambodia's overall performance on the MDGs was weakened by its poor performance on gender equality (ADB 2012). This also affects other areas of weak performance, such as infant and maternal mortality, and child nutrition.

### Changing civic space: before and after elections

It is in this context of a political settlement facing competitive pressures from political opposition groups, critical civil society organisations and media actors, that new restrictions on civic space must be situated. Formal civil society in the liberal democratic model has limited roots in Cambodia, where social organization has customarily been dominated by informal pagoda committees, situated in kin and community networks. Contemporary civil society organizations are financed predominantly by aid, leaving them vulnerable to charges of pursuing foreign agendas (Dosch 2012; Norman 2014; Landau 2008). The international influence has been comparatively strong in Cambodian civil society, with recent-past UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, Maina Kiai, noting the role of international human rights defenders in pushing back against the proposed 2013 NGO law, which would have greatly restricted CSO activity (Carothers and Brechenmacher 2014). In 2015, the Cambodian NGO Law (LANGO) was passed in 2015 and has been used as an instrument to restrict CSO activity. According to the Civic Freedom Monitor of the International Center for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL), in Cambodia there are approximately 4,953 registered NGOs and associations, but it is estimated that approximately only 1,350 organizations have remained active (ICNL 2018).

In the past decade, social movements and other forms of resistance, opposing deals on large-scale land acquisition, natural resource extraction and labour wages, have become more prominent in Cambodia. Such movements are often sparked by CSO or NGO support and financial assistance (Young, 2016b). A combination of local resistance with trans-local and trans-national activists has been prominent in some of the many ongoing natural resource-related struggles in the country. In some instances, this civic action has succeeded in slowing or amending the terms of state-sponsored land deals (Young 2016c). There are also signs that the response to resistance to land deals has

shifted away from outright repression towards the use of legal and institutional means to regulate civic action and protest. These changes reflect in part a need to respond to stronger popular demands for legitimacy and accountability (Beban, So, and Un 2017).

Labour rights struggles, particularly in the important export garments sector, have been increasingly prominent, reportedly rising by 225 per cent between 2010 and 2013. This is likely to reflect a) the declining real wages of garments workers under conditions of urban inflation, b) the in principle enabling regulatory framework for labour rights since the constitutional reforms of 1993, but also c) the low level of institutionalization of trades unions. Labour struggles must also be understood as part of transnational political settlements, as states experience external pressures to manage labour either according to bilateral trade standards or international human rights standards, as well as to suppress labour to keep profits high.

The pressures are exercised through both formal and informal means. Reforms to the regulatory framework of employment relations have centred on the inclusion of labour rights provisions in the 1993 Constitution and the passing of the 1997 Labour Law, which incorporated a progressive range of rights and protections for workers. International interests, including international labour rights movements, are reflected in concerns about garment sector labour standards, which provided the foundation for the bilateral US–Cambodia Trade Agreement. The influence of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) is also evident in the tripartite framework of the formal industrial relations systems and its provisions on freedom of association, collective bargaining and arbitration. However, there Cambodia’s formally progressive framework of labour regulation is contradicted by how labour rights are negotiated and realized (or denied) in practice. The extent to which legal protections ensure workers’ rights and allow them to pursue their collective interests is influenced by the political environment, uneven systems of governance, constraints on political activism and sustained intervention by foreign donors (Ward and Mouly 2016, 259). Most recently, labour rights have been impacted by the 2017 Trade Union Law which limits the freedom of association and implicates trade unions’ ability to exercise labour rights in the Cambodian garment sector. The Trade Union Law has been analysed from international and domestic law and is considered a clear violation to the ILO Convention No 87, international laws and consequently the Cambodian Constitution (Ski 2017).

Popular civic and political engagement has also been shaped by new digital space, in particular the rapid uptake of social media in Cambodia. By early 2017, the number of active social media users in Cambodia was estimated between 4.1 and 4.8 million, between 26 and 32 per cent of the population, most on mobile devices, according to various sources. On the one hand, Cambodian politicians have recognized the political utility of reaching people directly through their Facebook newsfeeds (Young & Peou, unpublished) to spread pro-government information. On the other hand, young civic actors and activists rely heavily on social media uptake and hidden tactics to exert influence on public issues using social media in a highly contentious, high-risk political climate to express dissent under state control and surveillance (Lee 2018). Under the new political settlement in Cambodia, the Internet and social media have become a major means as a platform to mobilize communities. Digital civic space is an important new space for civil society, in particular if physical spaces for assembly or protest movements are closed. However, the government acting on online activism and online dissent. In early 2016, a new law increased the government’s authority over the telecommunications industry to include “overbroad surveillance powers”. A pending cybercrime law is also raising concerns about legal limits on what users are allowed to post on the Internet, possibly further restricting digital spaces.

Civic space is closely affected by political space, and here changes have been marked since the 2013 elections, as noted above. The opposition leader was detained under sedition charges in September 2017. There is a strong nationalistic tone to the charge, but civic and political rights of citizens are

more broadly under attack. In its first year of operation, in 2016-17 alone, the Fundamental Freedoms Project documented hundreds of abuses and violations of the freedoms of association, expression and assembly (FFMP 2017). NGOs are permitted to operate within a narrow sphere of mainly service-delivery activities (ICNL 2018). The media, in particular broadcast and the internet, has also become dominated by regime cronies (Jones 2014) but remains subject to extensive legal and extra-legal barriers to freedom of speech. In 2017, dozens of radio stations have been taken off air and newspapers have faced legal and other charges. One of the leading English-language dailies, the Cambodia Daily, faced a back-tax charge which it described as ‘an assault on press freedom thinly disguised as a tax dispute’ (Robinson 2017). By the time of conducting interviews in March 2018, the Cambodia Daily had been closed down and was not reporting any longer. The other remaining independent English-language newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post, was sold in May 2018 to Sivakumar Ganapathy, managing director of Asia PR, a Malaysian PR company with close ties to Prime Minister Hun Sen (Reed 2018).

In addition to these developments, attacks on land rights (affecting some 10,000 families) and labour activists have continued (Human Rights Watch 2015a). Labour rights activists attempt to represent the interests of 700,000 strong workforce (90 per cent women) that power the USD 5bn industry that contributed some 75 per cent of exports in 2013. Labour organization is aggressively restricted - Human Rights Watch uncovered 35 cases of union-busting efforts between 2012 and 2015 (Human Rights Watch 2015a). The intertwining of formal institutional with informal political practices in the balance of power over labour is an important part of understanding how labour rights are constrained or contained.

This empowerment and rights-based agenda taken by NGOs emerged in a more open civil society space compared to the present, in the period preceding the 2013 elections. However, as NGO advocacy became more vocal, and the ruling party lost significant support to the opposition during the 2013 election. When asked about how to distinguish the activities of rights-based and advocacy NGOs from the opposition party agendas, NGOs claim that they are not too extreme or critical of the government. For instance, the opposition party’s activists often refer to their party agenda rather than the general issues faced by the citizens. A key informant said:

It is quite difficult to differentiate works between opposition party and CSOs in Cambodia. However, we can see that political party’s activists want “change”, referring to change of the regime (leaders). So, they show their political inclination. For apolitical NGOs and youth activists, they want to contribute to social and community development through reform. For NGOs, they do not disclose which political parties they support.

More recently, interviewees reported that the implementation of the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) has had a largely negative impact on civil society. According to Gemzell (2017), LANGO has increased the pressure on NGOs to follow corrupt government practices and get drawn into power hierarchies based on patronage and corruption. LANGO has also opened up many new opportunities for authorities to extract resources from NGOs. This is evident in underdeveloped rural areas where aid/ NGO funding constitutes one of very few sources of revenue, with negative impacts on development outcomes such as poverty alleviation and rural livelihood development. LANGO will also increase the pressure on NGOs to allow their projects to be directed by CPP development committees or by CPP-controlled government institutions (Gemzell, 2017).

LANGO came into force in 2015 and NGOs were required to follow the new requirements beginning in 2016, which has been challenging for many, given the lack of clarity of the law. Since 2017, the government has been paying renewed attention to implementation of LANGO through the Ministry of the Interior. Although there is no legal requirement for local government to monitor NGO



activities, local governments due to their lack of understanding of and incorrect interpretation of LANGO are now closely monitoring NGO activities. LANGO also requires political neutrality of NGOs, a clause which can be misused by government to restrict NGO activity on the grounds of political activism. For example, large mobilisation of participants in events is now severely restricted. Through this restriction especially democracy and human rights-related activities are impacted. As an interviewee stated:

*LANGO as such is not bad a legislation, but the interpretation of the law is problematic for NGOs. For example, in practice the letter of informing authorities about project activities has been turned into a permission request which can be denied by the authorities. Furthermore, the reporting requirements problematic and requires additional staff resources. Copy and paste of reports prepared for donors is not possible, and human rights activities cannot be reported to government as reporting issues could be used to close down or restrict NGOs.*

### Western aid donors and civic space

Cambodia has been a recipient of international aid for decades and the Cambodian aid market has become increasingly fragmented and is characterised by the emergence of new donors which has brought, according to Sato et al. (2011), healthy competition and new alternatives for Cambodian recipients. Not only domestic NGOs, but also the international donor community and large international NGOs working in Cambodia are also impacted by the new situation. As a reaction to the crackdown on the political opposition, Sweden announced stopping new aid for Cambodia (except in education and research) and would no longer support a government reform programme. Sweden provided an estimated \$100 million in aid over the last five years and ranked third among individual EU member states, after France and Germany (Thul 2017). Interviewees also mentioned that a number of international donors, in particular organisations from the US, have been accused by the government of supporting the ‘colour revolution’ and have therefore been put on a blacklist. The use of this term is linked to the investigation of CNRP opposition party members for attempting to stage a ‘colour revolution’ in 2017 (Paviour, 2017), a replication of regime change as happened in the middle-east. USAID has been targeted by the government and accused of meddling in Cambodia’s internal political affairs. Some NGOs receiving funds from US had to stop their projects.

International donors have funded Cambodian NGOs to build grassroots capacity among rural community-based organisations and activists, but not political opposition. However, it has been perceived by the government to have contributed to the 2013 national election results, a key event when the government started seeing civil society and political opposition to be linked. The CNRP was the result of a merger between the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party in 2012, both had strong links to civil society. The Government observed this quite closely, now both opposition party and civic space are restricted, also with impacts on international donors. Western donors are increasingly unsure about the current political situation and have no strategy about what to anticipate. Some international NGOs have risk management strategies which includes different scenarios, including worst-case scenarios and how to mitigate their impact. Most international donors and NGOs try to keep out of the immediate political turmoil and keep quiet in order not to jeopardise their MoUs with government organisations and the ongoing work they do.

### China as a development actor in Cambodia

In the new political settlement, Western donors have less influence than they once did since China has emerged as Cambodia’s biggest aid donor and investor. From the perspective of the Cambodian government officials, China is a “good performer” in terms of the overall harmonization efforts led by traditional donors, it performs well in terms of alignment with both recipient country needs and the predictability of aid provisions, and China has quick delivery and low costs, e.g. in road



construction projects (Sato et al. 2011). China's role in terms of aid and loans to Cambodia has gradually surpassed its counterparts: the United States, Japan and European Union (including their member states). According to the Royal Government of Cambodia, from 1992 to 2011, out of the total amount of aid of US\$12.13 billion, China alone contributed 7.1% (RGC, 2011). The grants along with (unconditional) loans are expected to increase in the following years. A recent report by the Council for the Development of Cambodia (2018) suggests that China, as a development partner, contributed 24 percent (US\$347.8 million) in 2014, 25 percent (US\$339.4 million) in 2015, 22 percent (US\$265.3 million) in 2016, and 16.5 percent (US\$223.4 million) in 2017 of the annual development cooperation. These funds were mostly allocated to education and transportation sectors.

As of 2017, the Ministry of Economy and Finance debt report showed that its bilateral debt increased from US\$4.1 billion to US\$4.7 billion, of which 80 per cent was owned by China, with South Korea being the second largest lender, with US\$348 million to Cambodia (Ministry of Economy and Finance 2018). This is indicative of the significance of the Chinese government for Cambodia's economy and politics, and suggests that that Chinese aid and loans are likely to have influenced the shrinking space for civil society in Cambodia. This view was supported by interviewees. For instance, once the mainstream opposition party dissolved in November 2017, the Chinese government congratulated and supported the effort of the Royal Government of Cambodia to ensure stability and expect that the upcoming election will be held smoothly:

*China supports the Cambodian side's efforts to protect political stability and achieve economic development, and believes the Cambodian government can lead the people to deal with domestic and foreign challenges, and will smoothly hold elections next year (China's foreign minister Wang Yi, in a statement in November 2017, following the dissolution of the opposition party (Reuters, 2017)).*

According to interviewees, Chinese aid or grants are managed and administered by Chinese GONGOs, such as the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation, which have emerged and have started cooperating with some Cambodian NGOs and GONGOs. To this end, a new Forum on Civil Society has been established in the Cambodian Council of Ministers where dialogue between and among civil society organisations/NGOs will be taking place. The Forum is designed to provide grants to its membership NGOs. The NGO Forum on Cambodia has recently started engagement with Chinese NGOs working on corporate social responsibility of Chinese companies and other issues. An expert stated:

*The CSOs Alliance Forum has just been established by the Council of Ministers. The Alliance was established to receive funding from China, and then distribute the funds to Cambodian NGOs. To receive the funds, NGOs have to align with the CSOs Alliance. The latter is the GONGO.*

China has been and remains one of the main investors in Cambodia. After the political settlement in 1993 (the first elections organised by the UN after the collapse of Khmer Rouge), China has returned to Cambodia and invested heavily in garment industries, drawn by preferential trade arrangements with the US. From 1994-2006, China invested US\$1.58 billion, compared to S. Korea's US\$1.36 billion. In 2012, China outward investment to Cambodia was US\$1.19 billion (Council for the Development of Cambodia, 2013). While the number of the countries' investing in Cambodia has not been stable, China's investment has gradually increased its flow. The current investments include, but are not limited to, garment factories, infrastructure, real estate, mining, hydroelectric power and agricultural land.

### 3. Changes in civic space and SDG outcomes

The Cambodia country case study focuses on three interlinked aspects which have experienced the most significant impact from the shrinking civic space in Cambodia - issues of land rights and corporate land grabbing, labour rights in the garment sector, and freedom of expression and independent journalism of media organisations. In this section we first highlight key concerns arising from the interaction between political and civic space before looking more closely at the impacts on specific SDGs.

#### Key areas of rights violations

##### Land grabbing and unsustainable land management

As far back as 2007, the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General for human rights in Cambodia was warning of rights violations in the context of economic land concessions (UN 2007). Land in rural Cambodia was granted to private companies as economic land concessions, for the development of agro-industrial plantations. The majority were granted in favour of foreign business interests or prominent political and business figures. The rights violations documented in the report include the 'lack of consultation with local communities, encroachment on land and detrimental impacts on traditional livelihoods, displacement, adverse environmental impacts, employment and labour conditions, violence and intimidation, and lack of effective remedy or recourse for affected communities.' (UN 2007 p. 12). The report also mentions raising concerns about the impacts of economic land concessions on communities and NGOs which have faced restrictions on freedoms of movement and assembly, and pressure from companies and local authorities.

Over the years, large portions of Cambodia's territory (about 2.6 million hectares) were granted to domestic and foreign investors for the purposes of agricultural development, hydropower development, and economic forest concessions. While these land acquisition deals have yielded positive impacts on economic growth and rural employment over the last decade, and are expected to continue over the next decade, land deals for commercial agriculture and other development have also caused adverse impacts on livelihoods of disposed small holder farmers, forest-dependent communities, biodiversity and forests in Cambodia.

In 2012, a report suggested that around 700,000 people had been negatively affected by these concessions (ADHOC, 2014). This has provoked a strong reaction by the affected people in an effort to reclaim their land and other related natural resources. With support of NGO programmes on rights to natural resources and livelihoods, protests aim at the concerned institutions, including the ministries of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, land management, urban planning and construction, the national assembly, and council of ministers, had become a regular occurrence in Phnom Penh and provincial centres prior the measures introduced to close civic space. Social movements and other 'unruly' forms of resistance to large-scale land deals became more prominent in Cambodia; this is in line with a more global focus on the problem of land-grabs in the wake of the food, fuel and financial crises of 2008 (Borras et al. 2011). A combination of local resistance with trans-local and transnational activists has been prominent in some of the many ongoing natural resource-related struggles in the country. In some instances, this civic action has succeeded in slowing or amending the terms of state-sponsored land deals (Young, 2016).

As a result of civic activism drawing attention to the associated human rights violations and negative environmental impacts, the Cambodian government has become more careful about the issue of land-grabbing since 2013, and taken measures to reduce land grabs. While land grabs have still occurred over the past few years, they appear fewer and smaller-scale. Among the leading land

protesters, Tep Vanny and her colleagues who have persistently protested against land expropriation in Boeung Kak Lake, were often arrested and charged on spurious grounds. After the elections 2013, the situation tightened and she and her colleague were arrested and imprisoned again for more than two years, from 2016 to August 2018 (Voun, 2018), only being released after the general election had been held in July 2018. This may be read as a signal that the government is trying to reduce tensions, after the ruling party managed to win a landslide victory in the latest election.

### Labour rights

Readymade garments are the country's single largest export sector, accounting for 70 per cent of total exports, bringing in over USD 6 billion annually in recent years. Labour rights in the textile sector are a major concern for social stability and social justice, and have been a prominent issue for civil society organisations. The widening of civic space of the 1990s and 2000s did not include labour rights, nor were these areas in which aid donors focused their attention (Hughes 2007). Workers' freedom of association and assembly are, however, likely to have an important impact on their wages, working conditions, and safety at work (Oka 2016; Evans 2017). A recent analysis suggested that a 'living wage' for Cambodian garments workers could be more than three times the prevailing minimum wage, and that local labour mobilization would likely concentrate instead on the more realistic achievement of the local minimum wage (Ford and Gillan 2017). Yet while the 1997 Labour Code guarantees freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike (Nuon and Serrano 2010), labour organization has remained proscribed, both formally and informally; working conditions remain poor (Human Rights Watch 2015a).

The majority of factory owners are Chinese and Korean companies, but Japanese and Western companies also operate garments factories in Cambodia. The working conditions in Chinese companies tend to be poor compared to those in other firms; there tend to be fewer protests in companies where working conditions and wages are better, including where factories have buyers for international brands who are required to comply with labour codes of conduct. In September 2014, after negotiations with trade unions, global fashion brands such as Primark, Inditex ('Zara'), H&M, C&A, and Next took action and agreed they would pay a minimum wage of USD 177 per month in their Cambodian supply chains (Bloomer and Sta. Maria 2015). Nevertheless, as reported by Human Rights Watch (2015), many international brands have yet to live up to their responsibilities and address poor supply chain transparency, failing to help local factory owners to correct problems in situations where that is both possible and warranted. Some brands continue to remain non-transparent about their policies and practices, withholding information on issues of concern, including labour conditions. NGOs have been involved in reporting labour rights violations and other issues to the Ministry of Labour and organizing stakeholder forums with workers. However, the Ministry of Labour has only limited ability to respond, and has limited leverage in practice to influence what is happening in the factories.

Before 2016, the unions in Cambodia appeared to enjoy a certain amount of freedom in expressing their concerns over wage and working conditions of workers in various sectors. There are two types of unions, independent and quasi-government unions. The latter are often created to support Government policies and employers. Independent unions, to a certain degree, represent the interests of the workers. As such, the government has two different measures to control the unions. During the drafting of the Trade Union Law, unions consulted with other lawyer associations and NGOs. However, inputs or comments from participants NGOs, associations and other stakeholders were not well incorporated in the law, and some of its provisions contradict ILO conventions which had been ratified by the government.

In 2016, the Trade Union Law was passed by the National Assembly, and has bestowed authority on the Royal Government of Cambodia to enforce the provisions. Although there are some provisions on protections of freedom of associations and unions, the law also restricts unions, especially garment workers in the Phnom Penh area and the neighbouring provinces, from advocating for their rights and improved working conditions. According to the Law, all types of unions, even those at the factory level, often known as on-site or factory-based unions, are required to register officially. This is a difficult and complex task with strict requirements. One of the labour rights activists interviewed for this report asserted that if they did not align with the government policies or factory's owner-based unions, they would not receive registration. More outspoken unions tend to experience repression from the Government. The recent wage rises have encouraged unions and workers to perceive official regulation of labour organizations as business-as-usual in the run-up to the elections in 2018. There is, however, no concerted action undertaken by unions and civil society, as they do not trust each other, to improve working conditions and workers' wage. Interviewees reported that a number of unions have been established and supported by government officials, and support government policies.

### Media freedom

The current political settlement in Cambodia is characterised by attacks on media, journalism and all forms of critical reporting in print media and radio. The most prominent recent development on the Cambodian independent media space has been the closure of The Cambodia Daily newspaper. After 24 years the newspaper was forced to close and cease publication on September 4, 2017. The closing down of The Cambodia Daily is an example of how tax regulation has been misused to silence independent journalism and critical media reporting. The newspaper reported it was facing imminent threats of closure and legal action by the tax department over a disputed \$6.3 million tax bill (The Cambodia Daily, 2017).

With the closure of The Cambodia Daily an important independent media voice was lost. As one interviewee stated:

*The government equates independent media opinions and criticisms with dissent and tries to stamp them out ... the Rule of Law is being used to eliminate dissent and issues around taxation continue to be used to close down critical organisations.*

The reporting of the other remaining independent newspaper, the Phnom Penh Post, has been regarded less of a challenge to the political settlement, compared to the Cambodia Daily. The Post still has some limited influence on public opinion, as no other media organisation and newspaper is writing about issues such as corruption, protests over land grabbing or political reform. The latter were covered by the Post, but became less frequent given a recent threat to the Post pertaining tax issue, similar to the accusations against the Cambodia Daily. In May 2018, the Post was sold to a Malaysia based businessman believed to have strong ties to Hun Sen (Mooney and Baydas 2018); the tax issue appears to no longer be as concern, as the chief of editor was fired when he revealed that the Post had changed owner.

Protests over land grabbing have not stopped, but due to government restrictions on the right of assembly, the protests have become smaller and less visible, as both people and community-based organisations are scared of government repercussions and crack-downs. The many local newspapers across the countries, including but not limited to Fresh New, Kohsantepheap Daily, Reaksmeay Kampuchea and Thmey Thmey, are either too intimidated to report on sensitive issues or oppose the government. Fresh News has been an active mouth piece of the government. If issues of land grabbing and worker protests are not reported in local news, it also does not make it into national news, and is even less likely to reach the international media. In late 2017 five independent radio

stations were also closed, including Radio Free Asia<sup>2</sup> which used to broadcast on garment workers issues and labour rights. Some of the former radio station, such VoD (Voice of Democracy) and RFA have resorted mainly to online radio and Facebook based broadcasting. The RFA's former journalists were captured alleging of espionage producing news and information to the foreign countries although they were released after the July general elections (Khouth and Soth, 2018). The overall political situation makes journalism difficult: reporters feel intimidated by security forces, and there have been reports that journalists have been imprisoned and attacked by security forces when reporting, for example, on protests of garment workers.

Restriction of media freedom and access to information is also an issue for rural areas. The shutdown of independent radio stations has particularly impacted access to information in rural areas where illiteracy levels are still high; people depend on radio stations for information, and these are now mostly run by the state. According to interviewees, there is limited access to the Internet in rural areas, so social media campaigns do not reach rural populations, and low literacy limits use of smartphones. Since independent radio stations were closed, the mainstream media only reports official stories, and avoids critical reporting. With independent media being shut down, the international media now has a major role in reporting events in the country, independent from official narratives, but they are less accessible to ordinary Cambodians.

The Draft Access to Information Law, a potentially important new law relevant for the future of the media, and a possible mechanism with which to tackle corruption, is expected to be enacted in the second half of 2018, after the national election. This law is expected to impact on how independent media organisations can operate in Cambodia. It will complement the Press Law which only provides limited space for journalists to demand information as a matter of law. During the drafting of the law, CSOs and media organisations were able to join government officials as technical partner and provide inputs to the draft law. The technical working group provided significant amounts of content into the draft law (e.g. Article 20 on confidential information, includes public order, privacy, national economy, security of society, initially only included very vague and general description), so that Article 20 cannot be used as pretext to not disclose information. The Government accepted inputs from civil society and the current draft has been accepted by most of the country's independent media organisations and CSOs. Rights-based organisations in Cambodia have been campaigning for a freedom of information law since the early 2000s and this new draft law can provide possible new space for civil society. If passed and enforced, the proposed legislation means that public officials will be required to release budget documents, spending records, draft laws, meeting minutes and any other type of recorded information to the public upon request, with ostensibly limited exceptions (Chen 2018).

## Impact of shrinking space on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

A key general finding of the case study concerns the government's low commitment to achieving the SDGs. All interviewees expressed their concern about the government's lack of commitment and limited ability to deliver effective implementation of programmes to achieve SDGs. According to Open Development Cambodia (ODC 2018), of the 169 SDG targets only 109 targets are considered relevant by the Cambodian government. Of these only 85 targets (78 per cent) are already being addressed by national strategic planning processes and policies; 17 targets are being only partially addressed and a further 7 are not addressed at all. So far, there are no clear sub-indicators relating to SDG targets defined by the government, and comments from civil society organisations on SDG

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/cambodia>.

implementation have not been well incorporated into government strategy. Although some legislation includes reference to the SDGs and a number of technical working groups have been established, the common perception is that SDGs are not a priority for the government. The Ministry of Planning coordinates the country's SDG work and coordinates all other ministries and stakeholders. One of the main challenges is lack of baseline data and work on meaningful indicators to measure progress towards achieving SDG targets, in which civil society actors, including researchers and think tanks, are generally expected to play an important role. There is a potential contradiction that NGOs are expected to contribute to SDG implementation and planning, yet are restricted in their specific activities due to closing civic space.

## SDG 2: Zero hunger: food production, small scale agriculture

SDG 2 is a goal where a number of conflicting objectives interact – in particular smallholder land rights vs commercial land concessions, rural livelihoods vs modernisation of large-scale agricultural production in the Cambodian contexts. The Cambodian government is increasingly aware of the issue of food security, which has come to the fore as a result of commodity price volatility in the uncertain economic climate. The official development strategy is to ensure food security through large-scale investments in agriculture and giving land concessions to agri-business. However, many small-scale farmers are being left behind in the push towards large-scale agriculture with no market access and lack of ability to organise. Some 64 percent of the population is still employed in agriculture, and 51 percent of the agricultural labour force is female, yet the sector has barely grown in the last decade (Navarro 2016).

This development prioritising large-scale agri-business is in direct conflict with SDG 2 Target 2.3 *'By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment'*. Rural dispossession as a result of large-scale land-grabbing and/or land deals has led to impoverishment and displacement among large marginalized groups, including indigenous and minority communities from resource-rich areas. According to Welthungerhilfe (n.d.), one in every five households in Cambodia no longer has any land of its own from which people could live off its harvests, which counteracts efforts to achieve Target 2.1 *'By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round'*. This situation is predicted to worsen, and small holder farmers will face a land shortage in the coming years. By 2030, the amount of land required to sustain Cambodia's smallholder farmer population will need to increase by anywhere from 10 to 64 per cent of 2015 levels, or 320,600 to 1.96 million hectares (Davies 2016).

According to interviewees, NGOs try to link their activities and projects to targets of SDG 2. As 'land rights' cannot be an official topic for NGO activities in the current political settlement, many NGOs have started working on food security and poverty reduction. This stands in contrast with the trend of NGO participation and contribution to development in the past. After the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, many domestic NGOs were established and international ones came to Cambodia and they employed service delivery approaches in various sectors, including agriculture, rural development, reproductive and public health, sanitation, credit and saving, and sustainable management of forest and other common resources. After 2005, some NGOs adopted rights-based and advocacy approaches to address the influence of neo-liberalisation policies adopted by the state (privatization of common and public resources, of which economic land concession scheme is an example). Many NGOs supported community-based organizations to build their capacity to demand or advocate for their livelihoods or resource rights. Since the 2013 elections, these NGOs have been monitored and harassed as the Government tries to suppress NGO advocacy. Especially since the 2017 elections and



dissolution, many NGOs have kept a much lower profile and the NGOs' approach has softened, appearing to cope with the current political situations. An interview revealed that:

*NGOs have now changed their approach, and (are) adapting to the current political situation. We are not able to do business as usual. We are now playing around our reports or wording. We cannot put the [advocacy, campaign, governance, human rights, democracy, freedom of expression] title [of workshops or reports] as we used to. We changed the terms or words from advocacy to development, or learning forum. This would help cope with the situation and leverage the effectiveness of the NGOs' contribution to development.*

A recent record of NGO fund has revealed that grants for advocacy, governance, human rights, democracy and empowerment has declined. In 2018, CDC report suggests that out of 370 NGOs, 25 large NGOs, which are mainly categorised as service delivery, including rural development, public health, education and agriculture contribute, absorbed 56 percent (US\$118 million) of all funds to NGOs in 2017 (US\$211.3 million). These largest service delivery NGOs include Foundation Children's Hospital Khanth Bopha, World Vision Cambodia, Save the Children International and Plan International (CDC 2018). The large NGOs working on right based approach, advocacy, governance and human rights, such as Action Aid International Cambodia and the Asia Foundation, which were enlisted in 2011 as a largest NGO fund (CDC 2011), are now not among the largest NGOs, according to funds received. USAID which is known as one of the leading agencies providing funds to NGOs working on human rights and democratic issues had its budget cut (BBC, 2018) under the President Trump administration. This suggests that space for advocacy, rights-based approaches, human rights and empowerment has been limited, and service delivery has re-emerged as the primary role of civil society (this also happened in 1993, after the first elections were held).

There is potential to increase farmers' incomes through a shift from lower-value rice paddy cultivation to growing higher-value vegetable crops. Interviewees reported that smallholder farmers' incomes can increase by up to 50 percent from this shift in crop cultivation. NGO activities which increase farmers' incomes directly relate to Target 2.3 *'By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment'*. A number of NGOs are beginning to start programming on improving productivity and providing market access space for smallholders. Capacity building and organising smallholder farmers in agricultural cooperatives can more consistently yield good quality and quantity of crop outcomes, providing food security and livelihoods. The production of organic rice as high-value crop is a major strategy to improve livelihoods.

There is an important role for socially-oriented businesses for achieving better food security and increasing smallholder farmer incomes. Partnering with social enterprises has provided capacity building for smallholder farmers to increase agricultural output and market access. According to interviews with business representatives, so far the changing political settlement and shrinking space of civil society has not negatively impacted on agricultural businesses working with smallholders and cooperatives. Some new challenges have nevertheless emerged. One of the interviewees stated that the restriction on group gatherings poses a new problem as it is hindering recruitment efforts and the work of cooperatives. Furthermore, the government needs to be informed about commercial activities, especially if funding from international organisations which is channelled through Government agencies is concerned. For instance, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) provides funding to social enterprises working in the agricultural sector through the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture. USAID has also provided funding for work with smallholder farmers. While there is at this point no indication that funding for these projects

will stop, project results are likely to be impacted by restrictions in terms of meetings, weakening of the rule of law and low levels of trust.

#### SDG 5: Gender (in)equality: ending gender discrimination, women's participation in community-based organizations, land title issues, safety of women in cities

A number of gender gaps exist in Cambodia, such as the decent wage gap, human capital gap and social protection gap, all of which restrict and hamper progress on development and achieving SDG 5. Considering SDG 5.1 *'End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere'*, NGOs have contributed significantly towards ending discrimination in the past and shrinking civic space limiting NGO work will have negative impact on ending discrimination, potentially even leading to increasing discrimination. NGOs' contribution has been achieved through removing cultural, social, and institutional obstacles by educating the public about gender issues and improving women's capabilities and access to economic opportunities. In terms of gender and health, NGOs also support women to gain access to better health services and to reduce family health expenditure through upgraded health centres and public health services contracted to NGOs, thereby contributing to Target 5.6 *'Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.'*

Regarding Target 5.5 *'Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life'*, much work remains to be done. According the Cambodia Country Gender Analysis for Cambodia (ADB 2012), the country has been off track in the MDG period achieving gender targets relating to political leadership, such as female proportion of ministers or provincial governors. Although the ratio of female civil servants slightly increased from 21 percent in 2011 to 26 percent in 2016 (Khmer Times, 2017), the gender gap remains quite significant.

Target 5.4 *'Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate'* is highly relevant for the Cambodian context. Indicators that focused on formal employment only previously ignored the high proportion of Cambodian women in informal self-employment, largely as a result of their unpaid care work responsibilities. Furthermore, NGOs contributed to women's development in the formal economy in the MDG implementation period, either through cooperation with the government on Women Development Centres, implementing training programmes and provision of information on jobs, and access to credit. Based on the past contributions of NGOs to women's development, expanding the role of NGOs and civil society for women development was explicitly recommended by the joint report of the Cambodian Ministry of Women's Affairs and the UN in 2013 (UNDP 2013).

In contrast to the recommendations by the UN, interviewees reported that women's rights groups are affected as much as any other civil society organization by shrinking space and low respect for human rights and gender by the Cambodian Government. There are large numbers of community-based organizations established by both non-profit organisations and Government institutions, many in relation to agricultural sectors and community development. In the fishery sector, while gender is not specifically mentioned in the law and related sub-decrees, women are encouraged to be part of the management committee of community fisheries; the same is true of community forest committees. Cambodian women tend to be more prominent participants in community-based development work than men, who have often migrated away to do other work or are away from the village cultivating rice. While women's participation in community meetings is numerically impressive, their participation in decision-making remains weak. The women's movement and associated civil society organizations and NGOs have played an important role in promoting women's empowerment and leadership capacities for community development, and restrictions on



organizations working on women's rights will have an adverse effect on women's participation and gender equality over time.

Civic space and the work of NGOs has been crucial to provide more equal rights to economic resources. In the SDG context this is captured by target 5A '*Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.*' As observed over the last decade, women with the support of NGOs have been particularly active in land titling and land ownership issues. Protests have been observed not only in the rural but also in urban areas where women have often been at the forefront of demonstrations. In the urban areas, especially Boeung Kak Lake and Borey Keila communities, women are considered a symbol of peaceful and non-violent protest in demanding and claiming restitution of their land from large-scale development or real estate projects. Although men's names are often written first in the official land title, many more women also now have their names on official land titles. While these types of women's association and grassroots activism have produced fruitful results, the Government has demanded that they register officially according to the LANGO. This is going to dampen activism and spontaneous protests and divide social movements, with negative impacts on achieving gender equality outcomes.

In Cambodian cities, personal safety remains a critical issue for vulnerable groups, in particular women factory workers. While there is a direct link to Target 16.1 '*Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere*', absence of security and increasing violence affects development outcomes across the board, including economic growth. At the country level, the socio-economic survey 2015 suggested that there was no significant difference regarding feeling safety (from crime and domestic violence) between households headed by men and those headed by women (Ministry of Planning 2015). However, the share of women among the victims of violence was high, at 56 per cent comparing to 44 per cent of men. Women are also vulnerable in rural areas as a Phnom Penh informant commented:

*Safety of the children or adult women is an issue in Phnom Penh, and even in the rural areas. In Phnom Penh, most of the workers are on night shifts, and a number of them attend a part-time school and training at night too. They leave home after or around 8pm, and it is very difficult for them because there is no proper street lighting. A lot of crime, such as pickpockets, robbing, raping, and other harassment happened to women at night.*

Interviewees reported that female NGO staff are affected too. Some NGOs working on women safety and women workers have also started taking some precaution measures. However, the level of support such as awareness raising on their safety, violence and harassment prevention to women workers, has been limited.

#### SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

The Target 8.1 '*Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries*' appears to be one of the major objectives of the Cambodian government. Cambodia has enjoyed a rapid, if somewhat volatile, rate of economic growth in the past two decades, largely due to the expansion of the workforce into low-skilled urban wage work in the garments industry and through rising agricultural commodity prices. However, labour productivity gains have been slow, and Cambodia remains trapped towards the bottom of global value chains in commodities and manufactured exports (World Bank 2017).

Without substantial investments in agricultural development and skills and human capital, it is not clear that the pace of growth can be maintained. Furthermore, achieving target 8.2 *‘Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors’* will require changes in the country’s economic development strategy which is creating rising inequality, exclusion, and environmental degradation. The role of civil society actors in advocating and holding Government and the private sector to account for policies of sustainable, inclusive and equitable models of development that ‘leave no one behind’ would be highly relevant in this context. For instance, as described above, NGOs, independent media and lawyers were instrumental in holding the government to account over land grabbing in the past. In a continued closed civic space situation after the August 2018 elections, this will not be possible. While sustainable economic growth is in general endangered by the weakness of Cambodian institutions of governance (Hill and Menon 2013), there are several specific pathways through which restriction on civic space would impact on the nature and pace of economic growth and decent work.

The formal regulatory system for doing business remains a major obstacle to investment and economic growth. The country ranks towards the bottom of countries in the region in terms of indicators such as starting and registering a business, tax payments, and infrastructure (World Bank 2018). Corruption makes it difficult to do business in a legal and transparent way: bribery is rife across all sectors in the economy, to the extent that some multinationals will not invest in Cambodia. This leaves more space for actors for whom corruption is not a concern, a category which includes some Chinese businesses. Companies with international transparency codes of conduct adhering to high international standards and principles cannot bribe, and so find regulatory processes take longer. A summary conclusion from the interviews is that recent developments with respect to civic space do not impact directly on business, unless the company in question speaks out against the government, or becomes involved in political discussions. However, from what we know of the role of the media and other civil society actors in relation to demanding transparency and accountability and combating corruption, restrictions on media freedom and rights-based activism are likely to weaken, rather than to strengthen, efforts to tackle corruption in business regulation. This means that over time, the space in which law-abiding business actors can invest profitably in Cambodia is unlikely to increase as a result, and may shrink further, as they are forced to compete on an uneven playing field with businesses that are not so constrained by anti-corruption rules and procedures.

Second, as diagnostic studies have shown, Cambodia’s continued growth and development depends on moving up global value chains, through higher labour productivity, which in turn demands greater investment in human capital, in particular through improving health, education and nutrition services, and in particular for the poorest people. Civil society has played an important role in complementing and supporting public service delivery in the past. In 2011, civil society organisations claimed approximately 2.8 to 4.5 million Cambodians directly benefited from their activities (CCC 2012). According to Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC)’s 2018 report, NGOs managed to raise funds from around US\$ 231 million (2014) to US\$250 million (2016), which is approximately 16 percent of the total grant aid in 2017. Closing civic space may prevent NGOs from continuing to deliver services in the future as funding, mostly from Western donors, is being restricted. Compared to 2016, NGO funding declined in 2017, raising about US\$ 211.3 million (CDC, 2018). However, CSO action is likely to be limited by the extent to which it ‘goes with the political grain’, rather than challenging or scrutinizing the Government. This is likely to limit the scope for amplifying the voice of marginalized and disempowered groups in the society; silence critics of inequitable or corrupt public services; and reduce competitive pressures on incumbent governments to improve service delivery performance for electoral success. The high-quality public services needed to keep Cambodia on a

sustainable growth path are unlikely to emerge under conditions of closing civic space and media restrictions.

Third, other targets under SDG 8 are also likely to be affected by how closing civic space shapes the environment for economic growth, in particular labour rights in Cambodia's garment sector. Target 8.8 aims to '*Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment*'. It should be noted issues of labour rights are also issues of gender equality in the Cambodian context, as some 85 per cent of garment workers are women (Arias-Vazquez *et al* 2014). In terms of garment workers' rights, the main changes under the new political settlement in the pre-2018 election period, concern wages and freedom of expression. The Government acted on election promises and has taken some action to increase wages of garment workers as reaction to rises in inflation, to cover rising expenses for everyday living and support families. Yet, the annual increase in wage remains low in a context of inflation and high food prices. Even while the Government has raised wages, freedom of expression and workers' rights such as freedom of assembly have become more restricted as a direct result of the new Trade Union Law. Female garment workers receive less support from unions, and unions are pressured by authorities which have restricted protest action. Previously, garment workers could protest and express their dissatisfaction with working conditions. In addition, the limited independent media space is also linked to limited worker rights. An informant claimed:

*Nowadays, the freedom of expression of unions and garment workers is now being restricted. We are not allowed to hold public meeting at the public place, and even the private venue. Even in Facebook, we can just post our face, but not to raise the concerns regarding working conditions and wage. The PM is now getting closer to the unions and garment workers through holding public meeting with the latter. This does not mean it is good, getting closer is the way of suppressing.*

#### SDG 10 and SDG 11: Inequalities of income, between rural and urban areas, and within cities and urban communities

While growth was pro-poor in the first decade of the 2000s, and *relative* income inequalities have actually declined in Cambodia, the *absolute* gap between rich and poor has widened significantly, feeding a strong perception of growing differences between rich and poor (Arias-Vazquez *et al* 2014). As shown above, inequality has impacted Cambodia's development performance, as shown through the inequality-adjusted human development index. Cambodia's human development index (HDI) for 2015 was 0.563, however, when the value is discounted for inequality, the HDI falls to 0.436, a loss of 22.5 percent due to inequality in the distribution of the HDI dimension indices (UNDP 2016). This perception of a growing income gap coupled with the vulnerability of the majority of those who have risen just above the poverty line, highlights the fragility of the social contract governing the distribution of the gains from economic development.

The drivers of rural and urban income growth have differed widely: rural populations gained from rice price rises, increased paddy production, higher rural wages, and non-farm production, seeing rapid reductions in rural poverty between 2004 and 2009. By contrast, urban populations suffered from the rising rice price, and urban wage workers saw a decline in their consumption power. Urban wages have been rising, including in the all-important garments sector, as noted above, but in real terms, have been inadequate to meet rising living costs. Rural-urban income differentials are high, with the latest Cambodia socio-economic survey 2015 showing that rural household monthly incomes averaged 1.3m *riels* (about USD 330), compared to 2.9m (USD 734) in Phnom Penh and 2.3m *riels* (about USD 562) in other urban areas (Ministry of Planning, 2015).

Inequality within cities is also being exacerbated due to fast real estate development. The World Bank estimates that by 2050 36 per cent Cambodia's population will live in urban areas, up from about 21 per cent today; the World Bank also highlights the need for ensuring inclusive urbanization in Cambodian cities as urban inequality threatens sustainability and can lead to social divisions and conflict (World Bank 2017b). This is particularly relevant in the context of SDG Target 11.1 *'By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums.'* Over half the urban population lives in slums, and more inclusive urban development strategies are required. Yet some urban development projects and government funded projects have negatively impacted on communities. For instance, in 2014, about 4,000 people in the Boeung Kak community were coerced into accepting compensation for a fraction of the market value for their homes and land. NGOs played an important role in supporting families and the community to get land right titles in this case.

One of the NGO staff interviewees for this report had worked on sustainable and inclusive urbanisation, including with communities in Phnom Penh resisting forced evictions from infrastructure and real estate development. This work involved public protests and media campaigns. Due to the recent restrictions on civil society, freedom of association and tightened media control, this type of advocacy work is not possible anymore. The closing of civic space is impacting on progress towards SDG Target 11.3 which emphasises the need for participation and integrated planning in urban development *'By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries.'*

#### SDG 15: "Life on Land" – Civic space and forest conservation

The particular issues in Cambodia relating to SDG 15 are the destructive impacts on forest and land resources through land grabbing, large-scale agricultural concessions and hydroelectric power dam construction. The SDG 15 'Life on Land' links to Goal 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), efforts to achieve the SDG Target 15.2 can be seen as a continuation of MDG 7 related activities. Under the MDGs, Cambodia had a specific target of maintaining forest cover of at least 60 per cent by 2015, however, this target was not met. According to data from a number of sources, by 2014 the total forest cover had fallen to 8.7 million hectares, from 13.1 million hectares of total forest in 1973. For the first time in the 41-year period, the percentage of non-forest ground cover (48.4 per cent) was larger than that of forest cover (47.7 per cent) (ODC 2015, Hansen et al. 2013). Now in the SDG implementation period, the deforestation trend continues: in October 2017, new data showed that Cambodian forests were cleared in 2016 at a rate 30 percent higher than in 2015 (Seangly and Baliga 2017). Deforestation in 2016 was worse than 2015, but over the 16 years that deforestation has been measured in Cambodia, 2016's loss of around 200,000 hectares was the fourth-worst year (ODC, 2016). Given this trend, achieving SDG 15 Target 15.2 *'By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally'* will be a major challenge for Cambodia.

There is evidence that forest loss is a direct outcome of large-scale economic land concessions (ELCs) and large-scale agricultural investment which were officially included in the 2001 Land Law of Cambodia. Since then, a large portion of Cambodia's territory (about 2.6 million hectares) were granted to both domestic and foreign investors for the purposes of agricultural development, hydropower development, and economic forest concessions. The results of the interviews conducted confirm other research findings from the academic literature (e.g. Dhialulhaq et al. 2014) which show that

*land grabbing in Cambodia, particularly through economic land concessions (ELCs), is often associated with conflict and thus has serious implications for sustainable land management, including sustainable forest management (Dhialulhaq et al. 2014, p. 205).*

In addition, there are numerous related issues including ambiguous property rights and overlapping claims on land titles, lack of coordination among government agencies, and lack of consultation and impact assessment prior to the decision-making process are the underlying causes of conflict around deforestation.

Although ELCs were suspended in 2012 by a sub-decree, deforestation has not decreased since then and many of the conflicts that resulted from the ELCs have yet to be resolved. The more recent deforestation incidences are caused by illegal logging activities. A report by the International Union of Forest Research Organisations (IUFRO) found that 90 per cent of logging activities in Cambodia are illegal (Kleinschmit et al. 2016), an assessment supported by one of our interviewees:

*Although the government officially has checks and balances in place to ensure no primary forest is being logged, the government lacks expertise and political will for effective forest protection. Moreover, there is too much illegal money floating around to prevent illegal logging.*

International and local NGOs have played important roles for sustainable forest management in Cambodia. First, as watchdogs to document and report on illegal logging activities and the resulting conflicts between local communities and companies: NGOs coordinated national level advocacy on forestry issues has been successful in gaining momentum on shedding light on the problems that concessions were presenting for local communities (CCC, 2010). For instance, the analysis of the NGO Forum on Cambodia (2010) found that the majority of large-scale land and logging conflicts usually involved a dispute between forest-dependent communities and companies with economic land concessions. Furthermore, many NGOs working with local forest-based communities applied rights-based approaches and organised protests against large-scale development projects, thereby protecting forests and forest-based livelihoods. NGOs also act as mediators in conflicts between villagers and logging companies, reducing conflicts and confrontation between different stakeholder groups.

Possibly most importantly, NGOs have played a vital role in setting up community forests as an approach to managing forests and recognising local communities' rights to forest resources. While supported by substantial governmental legislation, most of Cambodia's community forests were initiated and promoted mainly by various national and international NGOs as well as donor agencies to achieve sustainable management of forest resources and support forest-based livelihoods. According to Dhialulhaq et al. (2014) from 1990 to 2004, initially about 150 community forest units were established in 15 provinces. This number gradually increased, by 2012 totalling 227 community forests with formally signed agreements (covering 182 354 ha) and at least 250 were in developmental stages. The CFs are considered vital to forest-dependent communities as a source of timber and non-timber forest products. NGOs working on the development of community forests have contributed directly to Target 15b '*Mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries to advance such management, including for conservation and reforestation.*'

NGOs have also been important actors in implementing national forest protection plans. Numerous partnerships developed over the years Cambodia between national and local authorities and NGOs, aiming to strengthen forest protection. The plans and structures for protected forest areas increasingly involve NGOs for implementation. The area under protection has grown significantly in

recent years, especially in 2016 when the Ministry of the Environment designated 1 million hectares of new protected areas, much of that around the Prey Lang forest area (Eng, 2016).

However, the future of the role of NGOs' in forest protection remains uncertain in the current political settlement. If civil society space becomes further restricted and international aid decreases in the future, local NGOs would be greatly affected, and so would forest protection, with negative effects for SDG 15. Some evidence suggests that if local NGOs are not present on the ground and actively engaged in community forest protection and management, logging activities of rosewood and other luxury hardwoods takes place, often involving indebted local villagers (The Straight Times 2018). As noted above, foreign direct investment in Cambodia's mining sector and extractive industries in 2018 is expected to reach \$1.3 billion (Vannak, 2018) with the goal to further boost economic growth (SDG Target 8.1) and there are obvious goals conflicts with SDG 15. Other recent limitations on civic freedoms including restrictions on freedom of assembly and closing down of independent media has negative impacts on sustainable forest management, with negative outcomes for SDG 15.

## 4. Conclusions and implications

### Key findings and implications

The current situation in Cambodia and the closing of civil society space is one of rapid change, closely linked to the country's changing political settlement since the 2013 elections. The ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) cracked down on the opposition, independent media, arresting key political figures, activists and members of civil society. Despite these measures the main opposition, the Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) made strong gains in the 2017 commune elections, gaining 44 per cent of the popular vote. Since then, a further crackdown on the opposition has also impacted on civil society including NGOs, unions, independent media organizations and community-based organizations, which the Government considers to be aligned with the political opposition. Donors and the international community, with the exception of China, have pledged to withdraw or suspend their funding in protest at the restrictions on civic and political space. In the run-up to Cambodia's general election in July 2018, further restrictions on civic space were observed. At the time of writing shortly after the election, it is not known how civil society space will develop. However, under the current political settlement it does not seem likely that spaces will re-open.

While measures have been discussed among major international players, in particular Western aid donors and the international community, to reinstate the status quo, these have to date yielded no results: Government leaders appear uncommitted to the SDGs, and unconcerned about the threatened loss of international aid in a context in which Chinese aid has supported infrastructure, roads, large-scale agriculture and poverty reduction. Interviewees reported that NGOs have adjusted to cope within the current political settlement and shrinking space, in a general move away from an advocacy and rights-based approach to a more service delivery approach to development cooperation. CSOs advocating for civic freedoms contributed to more equal and sustainable development pathways in the past, especially addressing the needs of vulnerable rural communities, protecting rights of marginalised groups as well as forest protection. An important conclusion from the case study is that Cambodia's reform path is now threatened; although economic development and growth will continue under the political settlement, the pressure on people indicates the government risks social unrest and potential uprisings, if freedoms are restricted further.

As discussed above, the shrinking space of civil society has already had negative impacts on development outcomes and is very likely to have negative outcomes for a number of the human development SDGs, including those relating to food security (SDG 2), gender and inequality (SDG 5 and SDG 10), quality of work and workers' rights (SDG 8). Further negative impacts can also be expected for Life on Land (SDG 15). Economic actors have mostly been unaffected by the recent shrinking of civil society space. However, international investors are becoming cautious, due to potential political instability and increased risk. As interviewees stated, many opportunistic investors especially from China and neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, are moving to Cambodia. As estimated by IMF, economic growth is expected to be as high as in previous years, at about 7 per cent in the current financial year; however, the distribution of the benefits can be expected to be highly unequal.

At first glance, the progress towards the SDGs relating to economic growth (SDG 8) and infrastructure (SDG 9) does not appear to be impacted by the changes in the political situation and shrinking civic space. The IMF has identified investment in infrastructure as the key aspect to sustain stable growth. As a matter of policy, the Cambodian government also encourages investment in agriculture, which accounted for about 27 per cent of GDP in 2016, and diversification of agricultural products, which will support economic growth and achieving targets of SDGs 8 and 9. However, looking more closely, under SDG 8 there are several specific targets such as Target 8.5 *'By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for*



*young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value’ and Target 8.8 ‘Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment’.* In view of the restrictions on labour union activities and other obstructive legislations as described above, it seems unlikely that positive progress on these important targets can be achieved. Thus, negative impacts and trade-offs can be expected for targets of SDG 10 if decent work targets under SDG 8 are not explicitly considered and addressed.

## Gaps and limitations

This study provides insights into the link between closing civic space and development outcomes in Cambodia, however, there are a number of limitations to the research. The study depends on secondary literature sources and a small number of interviews with key informants from Phnom Penh. The security situation meant it was impossible to conduct interviews outside the capital or conduct workshops with a larger group of stakeholders, including government officials and investors. Furthermore, given the resources available, in-depth sector specific research and development of case studies was not possible. To be able to generate more in-depth insights more in-depth work with selected NGOs and CSOs is necessary, and would be of vital importance to understanding regional differences in development. Within the scope of this study it has not been possible to establish clear quantitative evidence about how closing civic space and restrictions on NGO activities has impacted livelihoods. The lack of data to report on specific indicators would require significant statistical work and household surveys to be able to quantify livelihood impacts.

The study was also conducted in a turbulent political period when many informants and those of NGOs were reserved and cautious compared to the time before the 2013 elections. Given time and budget limitation, our interviews were conducted among some selected NGOs based in Phnom Penh. This research should have covered not only those in Phnom Penh, but also in the provinces to collate their different opinions. Voices from the government and its relevant institutions should be consulted and compared. The emphasis of future research should be on donors’ landscape and agendas during the pressing time, and the roles and forms of Chinese aid to Cambodia, and the implications for civil society space also warrant further exploration.

## Implications for policy and practice

The findings of the study show that there is need for a more global political understanding of changing civic spaces. Some of the implications for international donors include the need for new approaches to address the problem of closing civic space. Donors need to recognize changing nature of public space, not all of it is very civic, some of it is becoming virtual, much of it unruly; aid donors have to think carefully about what they support. In particular, human rights-based and advocacy activities are becoming increasingly difficult, but are important to ensure negative impacts of development and investments on vulnerable and marginalised groups. Alternative approaches in which NGOs are involved in, such as social service provision supporting public services or social enterprise development have potential to continue to improve livelihoods. What is less clear at this point, is whether purely service delivery-focused approaches can help to empower marginalized communities to voice their concerns to the government.

In the specific case of Cambodia, the rising of role of China as a global political economy player appears to have strong implication for civil society space in the hybrid-democracy like Cambodia. The financial support of this authoritarian type of regime to the hybrid one does not promote and reinvigorate the recipient’s democracy, freedom of speech and expression, human rights and empowerment of those marginalised communities. This appears to be the case of Cambodia in this study. Responding to the influence of China in Cambodia, and mainland Southeast Asia, the western donors have to design their long-term engagement strategies to educate and to economically



empower the grassroots communities of labour rights, wages, land and natural resources-based economic rights.

Ultimately, civil society has played a significant but contentious role in combating the tendencies of the Cambodian regime to promote rapid economic growth at all costs, often accompanied by non-transparency and corrupt practices, to ameliorate some of the failures of the country's weak institutions and public service delivery. The concern for the achievement of the SDGs is in part that without the demands for accountability generated by an open and vibrant civil society, Cambodia may not succeed in delivering the kinds of public services needed to nourish, education and care for its population and labour force. If the country cannot rise up global value chains, growth rates may well decline, as the labour force reaches its limits. External and internal pressures on the Government continue to push it in a broadly pro-poor direction, but they do so to the extent that these 'go with the [political] grain' of state policy. There are few signs that, faced with new political competition and critique from civil society and the media, the Government has any incentives to establish institutions or practices of accountability; there are therefore few safeguards that policies will seek to pursue development on a basis of equity, inclusiveness and sustainability. This can be seen in the pathways through which civic space closures are beginning to show signs of impact and labour rights, and on the freedom of the media, and through these broad policy domains, to SDGs relating to hunger and food security, inequalities of income and gender, and to forests, as well as to those relevant to growth, jobs, and livelihoods.

These findings support the view that there is a strong developmental case for widening civic space in Cambodia, notwithstanding the strong political incentives for the regime to restrict and control. In addition, there may be particularly robust reasons to view closing civic space as an assault on the economic rights of Cambodian women, whose struggles with issues of land ownership and control as well as labour rights in the export sectors have been championed by civic actors at home and internationally, and who now face being silenced, suppressed, or co-opted by the political regime.

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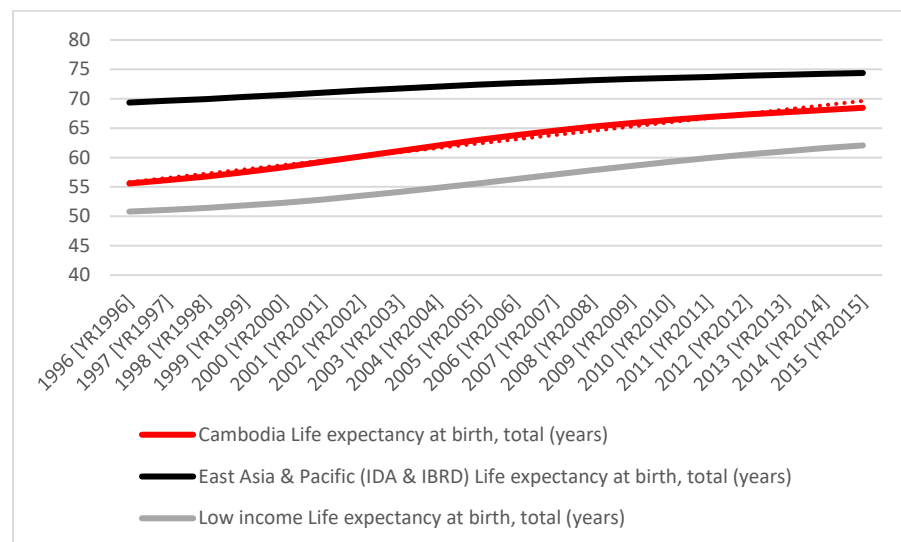
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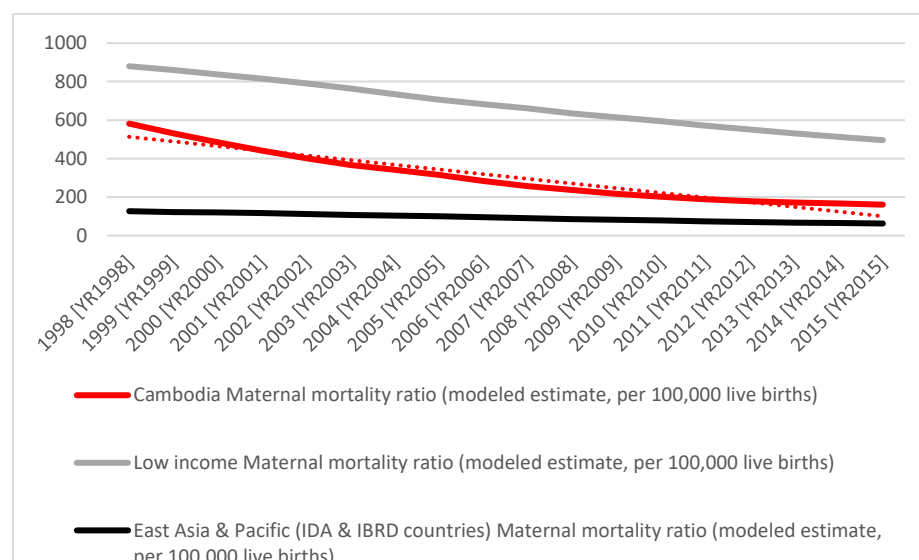
## Annex

Figure 3 Life expectancy



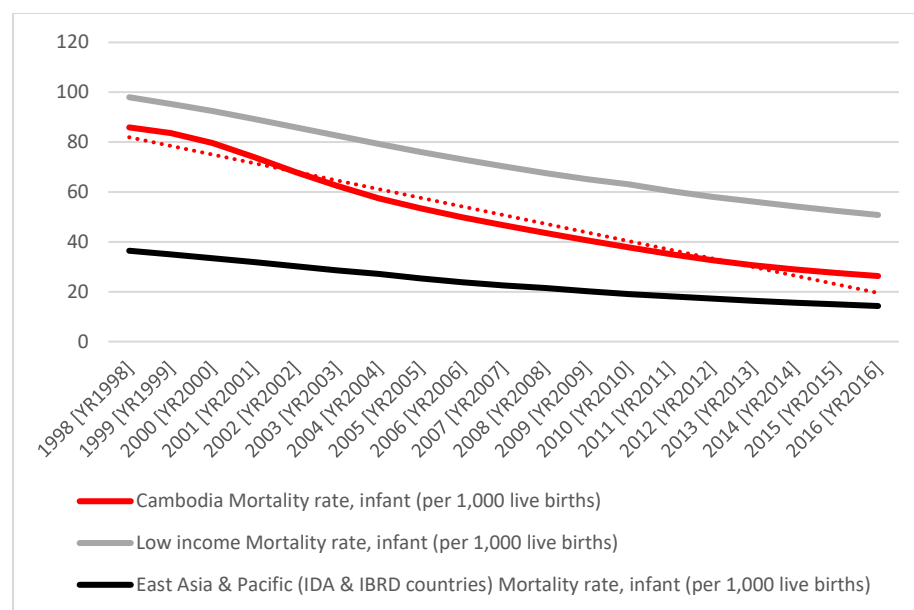
Source: 4 World Development Indicators

Figure 4 Maternal mortality



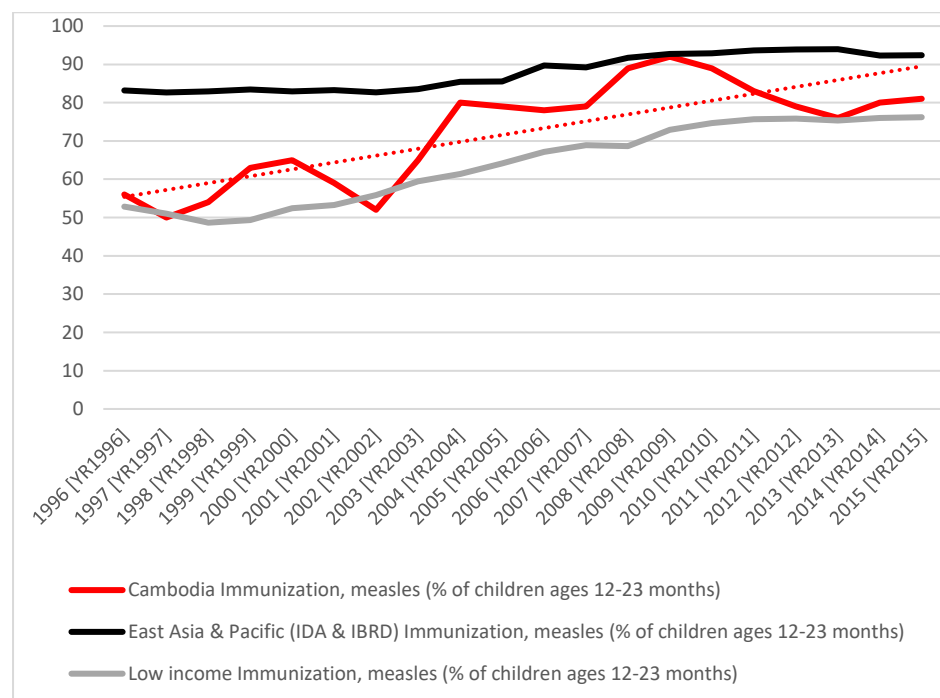
Source: 5 World Development Indicators

Figure 5 Infant mortality



Source: 6 World Development Indicators

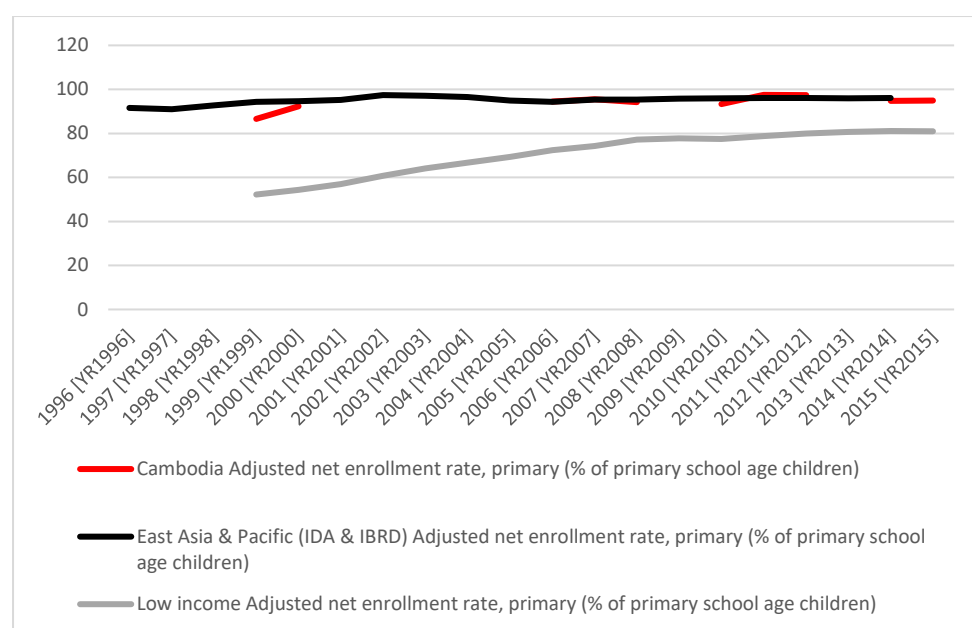
Figure 6 Immunization



Source: 7 World Development Indicators

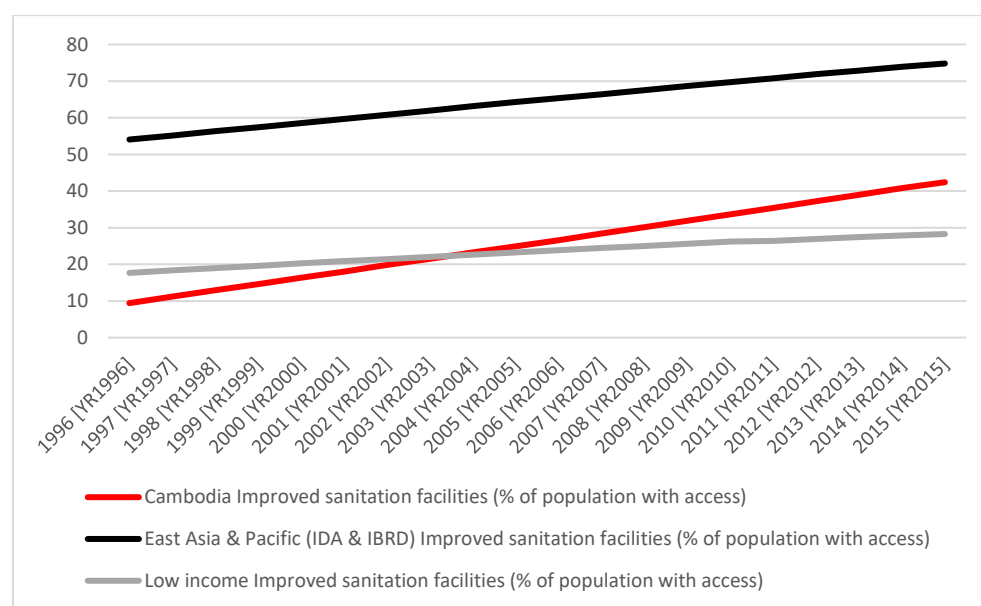


Figure 7 Primary net enrolment rates



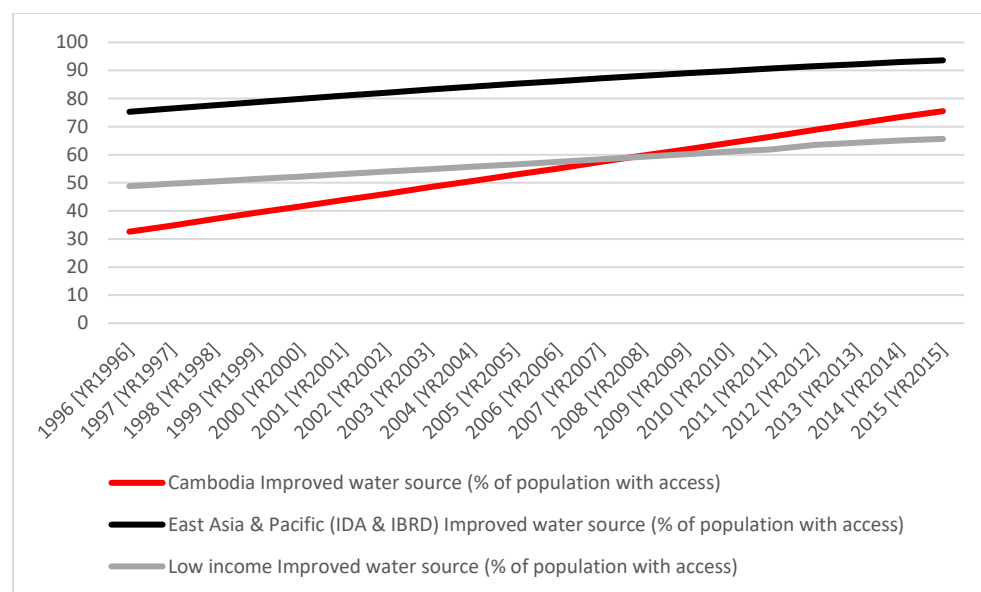
Source: 8 World Development Indicators

Figure 8 Improved sanitation facilities



Source: 9 World Development Indicators

Figure 9 Improved water source



Source: 10 World Development Indicators