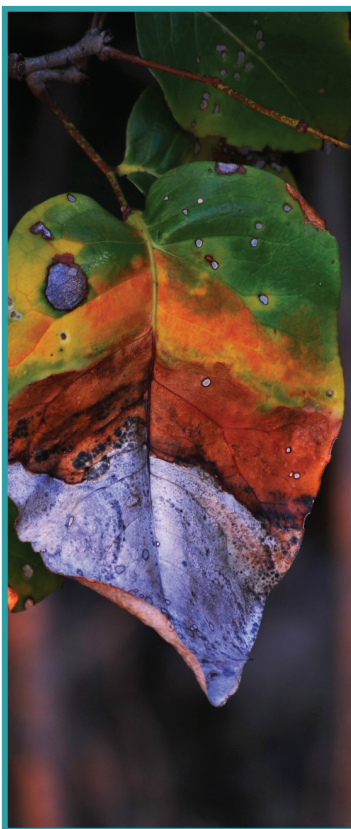


PROFILES OF COURAGE

30 Years of Partnership—Looking Back To Move Forward





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Executive Summary

This year, Cambodia marks the 30th anniversary of its constitution and the first democratic elections. For a country that has traversed an historical path influenced by colonial power and the Khmer Rouge regime, this year marks an important milestone.

In parallel with this significant constitutional milestone, our foundation initiated its activities in the country in 1993 by supporting civic education projects and dialogue with and among development stakeholders. Since then, hbs has established its presence in the country through partnerships with civil society actors and supporting grassroots stakeholders, fostering dialogue, shared learning and collaborative action on critical issues in the context of ecology, sustainable development, democracy, human rights and gender.

The foundation's work on civic education strives to promote critical thinking skills, enabling citizens to analyze information, make informed decisions and challenge patriarchal societal norms. It equips individuals with the necessary skills to engage in constructive dialogue and resolve conflicts peacefully. Civic education promotes tolerance, respect for differing opinions and social cohesion. These skills are essential for maintaining social harmony and preventing the escalation of conflicts that can hinder progress and prosperity, and have become more important than ever in a world marked by geopolitical instabilities, escalating wars, and military conflicts and prevalence of autocratic rule.

The convergence of these milestones offers not only an opportunity for celebration, of great honor and gratitude, it is also a moment to look back, reflect and evaluate on achievements and lessons learned in order to frame our future and a way forward. We wish to do that by portraying 30 remarkable stories from our partners and the communities they work with. These stories are embedded in the main tenets of hbs Cambodia, which build the structure of this magazine: Ecology and Envi-

ronmental Sustainability, Feminism and Social Justice, Democracy and Social Inclusion, and Active Citizenship.

Our ecological and environmental commitment is outlined in the first chapter. It reflects Cambodia's rich natural resources and the importance of sustainable management of these resources and their ecosystems to protect the environment and livelihoods. These stories demonstrate the power of accessible information, documentation and data transparency for communities advocating for their land rights, the recognition of Indigenous people's rights or the preservation of marine ecosystems.

The second chapter highlights the realm of feminism and social justice with stories that illustrate the power of collective action to challenge gender hierarchies and advocate for equality and empowerment. These narratives tell of communities working together to dismantle traditional gender roles and combat gender-based violence, fight the sexual abuse of boys and give a voice to women who experienced sexual abuse by the Khmer Rouge.

The foundations' democratic values are underscored by its adherence to equality, human rights and freedom of expression. Despite Cambodia's constitutional commitment to a pluralistic democracy, these principles have eroded in the country. The stories in the third chapter capture the resilient spirit of Cambodia's civil society by depicting the strategies and approaches of young Cambodians standing up for environmental protection, of Indigenous communities confronting powerful corporations and resisting forced evictions and of LGBTQIA+ people bravely speaking out publicly against discrimination.

The fourth chapter portrays the relevance of informal engagements and networking communities in advancing

solutions driven and managed by the affected people. The stories in this section show how courageous and dedicated Cambodians are taking charge and using people-driven advocacy solutions to create a more inclusive society and engaged citizenry by giving voice to people and communities that are often pushed to the margins.

In presenting these powerful stories, we acknowledge our partners, their courage and achievements with pride and respect.

However, our work is not just about the outcomes; it is also about the journey.

In producing this publication and the reflection process, we worked with our partners to collect and depict amazing stories of a brave citizenry in Cambodia.

Without the unwavering dedication of our valued partners, hbs would not be here. Their commitment is the driving force behind our endeavors, in support of Cambodian development.

As we celebrate the past 30 years, this magazine also serves as a lively reminder of the challenges awaiting us in an ever-changing, globalized and polarized world. We are confident that, through continued collaboration and partnerships, we can face these challenges head-on and support the building of a brighter future for the people of Cambodia.

It is our sincere hope that these potent illustrations will serve as a source of inspiration and motivation for all readers to participate collaboratively in the creation of sustainable futures and to advocate for the good of Cambodia and the world.



hbs Cambodia team





Ecology And Environmental Sustainability

Cambodia's natural landscapes are rich in minerals, oil, gas, forestland and beautiful marine life. Promoting the sustainable management and use of these natural resources, especially at-risk forestland and marine ecosystems, could strongly contribute to the protection of the environment and the welfare of its people, especially Indigenous peoples.

While Cambodia is very vulnerable to the effects of climate change, it is also prone to natural disasters, and any human-related environmental destruction compounds the price paid by its citizens. Weak adaptive capacity, poor infrastructure and limited institutions to deal with the climate crisis exacerbate the country's vulnerabilities.

The Cambodian government has signaled its intention to combat climate change through the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan. Policymakers and stakeholders must collaborate with civil society organizations and local communities to mitigate climate change impacts, promote clean energy and ensure development does not impact the people or environment.

Since the early 2000s, unsustainable land management practices have posed the biggest risk to Cambodia's communities. Economic land concessions were sold to the Cambodian people as a way to boost economic growth and benefit local communities. But in the two decades since concessions were first granted, they have largely caused rapid deforestation and exploitation of natural resources found at these sites. Additionally, local communities have had no agency in how these concessions are implemented and have only led to forced eviction and never-ending land conflict in rural and semi-urban areas. This situation is aggravated when the state deals with Indigenous communities whose identities are strongly connected to traditional lands, spirit forests and shifting cultivation.

These are often very complicated disputes, with land communities and human rights groups in the dark about how development projects are being implemented. Public transparency programs like the extractive

industries project at Open Development Cambodia (ODC) make hard to understand and often inaccessible documents and data easier to comprehend and use by communities. For example, Kuy Indigenous people in Preah Vihear are using environmental impact assessments published by ODC to hold a development project in their community accountable. This ensures the community is better equipped with information and data to advocate for their land tenure security and other rights.

The industrialization of rural land and the granting of economic land concessions have uprooted entire communities and resulted in massive loss of livelihood and traditional lifestyles. Development activity in and around these concessions often fails to care for the citizens that live here, especially those from vulnerable communities who are often pushed to the sidelines and left with little recourse when evicted from their homes. Non-government organizations like Equitable Cambodia are on the frontlines of documenting, advocating and achieving legal recourse for poor, rural communities, who for the last two decades have been evicted from their homes to make way for large agriculture projects and have rarely reaped the benefits of this development activity.

While there are major efforts to campaign for the protection of Cambodia's forests and natural landscapes, conservation groups like Marine Conservation Cambodia say there is little awareness about its marine ecosystems and the dangers facing Cambodia's coasts. Indiscriminate and harmful fishing practices, unbridled coastal development and a lack of cogent policies are putting fishing and coastal communities at serious risk of losing their livelihoods and making them more vulnerable to climate-driven crises.

hbs believes in empowering young people and local communities to be leaders and agents of change in the country. For this, the foundation platforms and supports Indigenous people, land disputants, agricultural communities and civil society groups that support them to realize a more equitable and sustainable Cambodia.



Out At Sea: Protecting Cambodia's Marine Ecosystems

Cambodian environmental activists have long decried the destruction of the country's forests, natural resources and rivers. This activism has seeped into everyday Cambodian conversations where young people are emboldened to advocate against deforestation and its impact on communities.

However, environmental damage to Cambodia's seas is hidden from plain sight and receives far less attention. Destructive fishing techniques, industrial and chemical runoff, and indiscriminate development of the coastline are silently harming Cambodia's seas, marine ecosystems and coastal communities.

tems and coastal communities.

In light of these underwater challenges, organizations like Marine Conservation Cambodia (MCC) are working to reduce marine destruction but also encouraging and providing opportunities for young Cambodians to participate in marine protection.

MCC is working with three young Cambodians at Koh Ach Seh off the coast of Kep province on tackling different aspects of marine conservation and sustainability.

Phion Sopheanie | 30 | University of Pannasastra



Phion Sopheanie, who graduated with a bachelor's degree in environmental science and now works with the marine mammal project at MCC, looks out for the very rare pink dolphin during a survey to determine their numbers in the waters off Kep and Kampot provinces. After Sopheanie visited MCC as a student, she immediately knew she would return to the organization to do her thesis on pink dolphin identification. Through her work, she has gotten very close to local fishing communities, who were keen to help survey for the dolphins. This helped Sopheanie better understand how fishing communities interact with the sea and sea life.



While Sopheanie has been able to get local fishers to assist with identifying pink dolphins, it has been a lot harder to get help for conservation of the dugong, a marine animal that is called water pig in Khmer language. While there was an inclination to release dolphins caught in fishing nets, fishers were more likely to sell captured dugongs in markets, Sopheanie says.



Lor Samphors worked with MCC on a project for the cultivation of sea grapes, a type of seaweed that grows in the Asia-Pacific region. The project builds on Samphors prior experience researching and surveying 45 types of algae. As a student, most of her peers chose to study freshwater bodies and she was one of six to study marine life. "Algae chose me, even before I had heard the word!"



Samphors wanted to cultivate seagrapes, a seaweed with a long spindly stalk and small grape-like nodules. She experimented with the best way to cultivate the seaweed in aquariums on the island and believes the produce can earn farmers up to \$10 a kilogram, which is currently how much Japanese restaurants pay for the seaweed.





Tai Chhen graduated with a major in the study of freshwater bodies but has since pivoted to marine conservation with MCC. Having grown up in a fishing community, Chhen is keenly aware of the significant drop in fish catch and the use of destructive trawling that destroys the seabed, drawing her to marine conservation and sustainability.



To supplement dropping incomes from fishing, Chhen has devised a prototype bamboo structure for sustainable oyster farming. Initial results are encouraging and show that oysters are spawning on ropes hanging from the bamboo poles. The project can provide fishers a sustainable and lucrative opportunity, avoiding more damaging practices such as using trawlers which scrape the ocean floor and valuable seagrass ecosystems.





Chea Lincheat meditates under a tree while sitting on a pile of trash generated at the Wat Domrey Sor in Battambang province.

Saffron Wrapped Activism

Cambodia faces a slew of environmental issues like rampant deforestation in its dense evergreen forests, air and water pollution affecting critical lifelines like the Tonle Sap and Mekong River and dying ecosystems of flora and fauna.

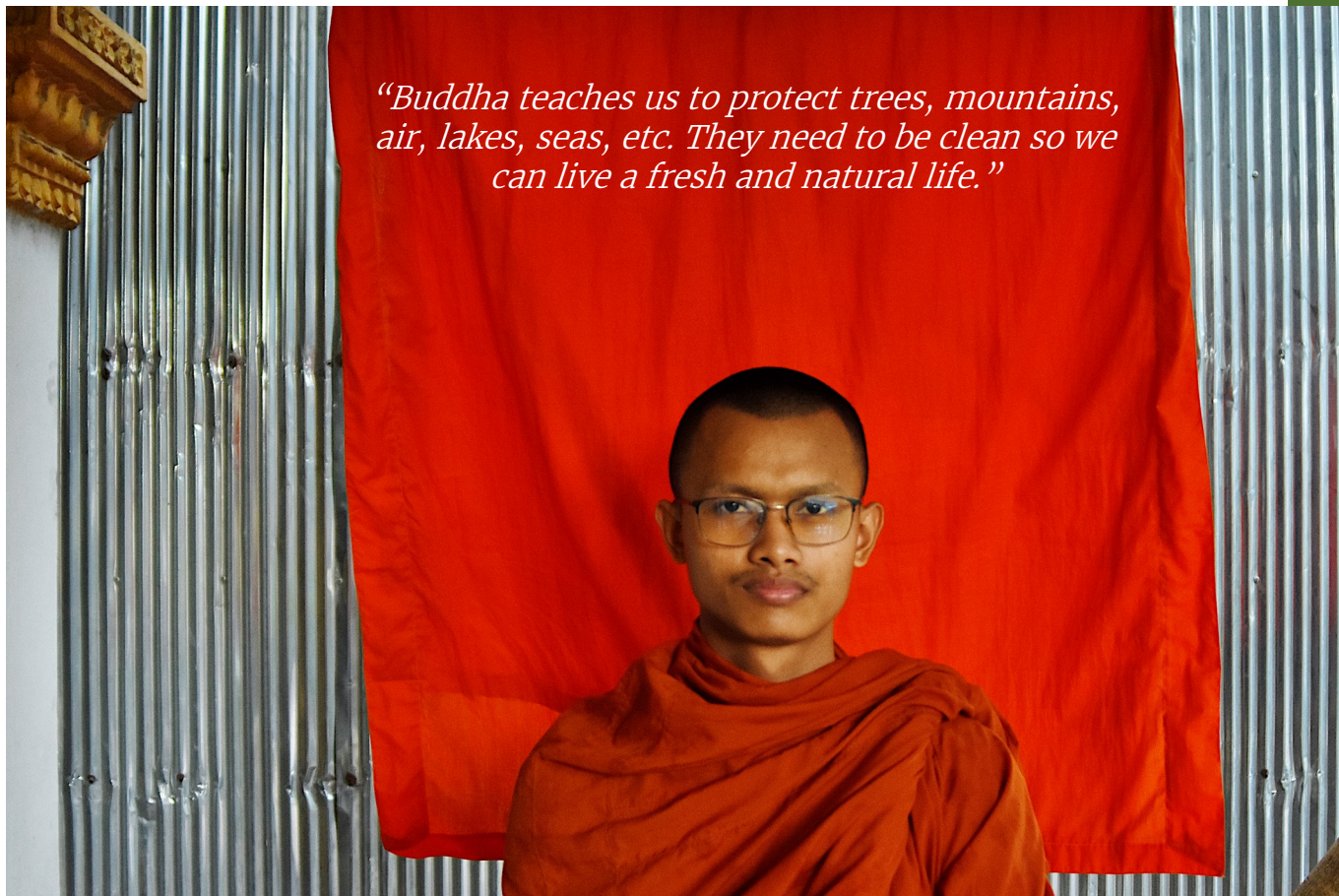
A more urban environmental concern that is directly linked to human consumption is plastic waste. A Cambodian's daily life is synonymous with plastic use — be it buying beef and vegetables at the local market, ordering an iced coffee with condensed milk at a street-side vendor, or the sprouting of urban food delivery services that promise convenience but generate large amounts of plastic waste.

The United Nations Development Program estimates that around 10 million plastic bags are used daily in Phnom Penh alone. This coupled with an almost non-existent formal plastic waste collection, separation and management system, means that plastic waste finds its way into Cambodia's water bodies, agricultural lands and natural landscapes.

Tackling Cambodia's omniscient plastic waste is what drew Chea Lincheat, a young Buddhist monk from Banteay Meanchey province. After joining the monkhood in 2017, Lincheat was drawn to environmental activism a few years later, realizing that it is not easy for young people to enter activism given it is politically charged.

"Most families don't allow their child to do social work because they feel it might go against the government and a lot of environmental activists have been arrested in the past," Lincheat says.

Environmental activism in Cambodia is led by young people, who say they have the most to lose in the current destruction of nature. Groups like Mother Nature, Not1More and Cambodian Youth Network are youth-led and fearless in their demands that Cambodia's forest must not be razed, its natural resources should not be



exploited for the benefit of the political elite or that activists who speak out must be given a voice and not muzzled.

Young activists like Lincheat are now helping other young people to advocate for causes that have driven them to action. Having a religious grounding, Lincheat says Cambodians only have to look to Buddhist principles to push for the protection of the environment. “Buddha teaches us to protect trees, mountains, air, lakes, seas, etc. They need to be clean so we can live a fresh and natural life,” says Lincheat.

The young monk volunteers with the Youth Resource

Development Program (YRDP), a non-government organization where young people can learn about issues affecting them and advocate for these causes with their peers to bring about change. Through his association with YRDP, Lincheat says he has expanded his understanding of plastic use and waste, but also now better understands extractive industries, recycling and deforestation.

As a young person who is eager to advocate for issues, Lincheat is best placed to be a mentor to other budding activists and youth, ensuring that Cambodia’s strong tradition of unrelenting activism endures.

Solar Powered Crunchy Crickets



Gov Huyngim works at AgriHouse cricket-rearing farm as part of the EnergyLab internship.

Gov Huyngim is studying food science at the Institute of Technology of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. She studies chemistry, microbiology, nutrition and food engineering in her classes. But, little did she expect her bachelor's degree would get her an internship where she could use her knowledge of food sciences and combine it with the use of clean energy and sustainable practices to improve farmers' livelihoods.

Huyngim works with a cricket-producing project called AgriHouse which is supported by Energy Lab, an incubator of projects and enterprises that promote the use of clean energy in Cambodia.

The women-led business at AgriHouse has been producing crickets for the past three years, using existing knowledge about the practice combined with newer technologies to optimize yields. The project uses solar energy to control an automated system of sensors, fans and temperature and humidity controls. The reliance on clean energy to improve productivity and sustainability in existing agricultural techniques is very much in line with Energy Lab's principles, says Lundy Chou, CEO of AgriHouse.

"They have a low ecological footprint, promote sustainability and provide income for farmers, fostering economic growth and stability. It's a solution benefiting nutrition, the environment and livelihoods," Chou says.

Widespread consumption of crickets is not far from becoming a reality given their high nutritional value and low carbon footprint in the production processes. The Energy Lab internship is focused on connecting university students with companies working in the clean energy sector to strengthen their technical skills and give young Cambodians a platform to exhibit their innovativeness.

"With this internship, I am focusing on raising crickets and the ingredients we use to feed them. We're giving them soybean milk, corn and additives such as calcium and sometimes other leaves we grow," she says, describing the confluence of her studies as a food science major and the technical requirements of rearing crickets.

Huyngim says she has been very involved in the entire cricket-rearing process during her internship, adding that the process takes around 45 days and is largely a



University student Vom Chanthon interns at Sevea, where she is assessing the impact of solar-powered water pumps that are used by farmers in Kampong Thom province. The internship with Sevea, a consultancy service that supports corporates, organizations and social enterprises, is another example of EnergyLab's commitment to engage young Cambodians to work on sustainable solutions that benefit communities.

hands-off operation that uses kits produced by Agri-House.

Other modern techniques used in the process include an automatic water and ventilation system and sensors that monitor humidity and heat levels to optimize conditions for the crickets.

“With the kind of innovation we do, there's more income for the farmers and is more efficient,” she says. “Using these kinds of technologies, Cambodia can become healthier and increase support for local food systems.”





Students use battery recycle bins at the Santepheap primary school in Phnom Penh.

Battery Low: Safe Disposal To Battery Waste

As awareness about food and plastics waste percolates among Cambodian communities, there is still a lot to be done about electronic and other hazardous waste. A growing consumer economy and the affordability of products has increased the number of appliances and electronics in our homes — made worse by the rapid cycles of updates and new products on offer.

It is not unusual to change a mobile phone or laptop every few years. But these appliances contain components, parts and batteries that if left in the environment can cause severe damage to the soil and water if left untreated. Also, batteries using lithium-ion are non-renewable and mining of the mineral expends a lot of water and energy.

The Ministry of Environment has acknowledged this threat and is working with the private sector to collect battery waste that is normally disposed of with regular trash untreated. This includes installing bins in public spaces to collect waste or old batteries that are shipped overseas to be processed.

Nop Sokhai works in research and policy development within the Department of Green Economy at the Ministry of Environment. He estimates only 10% of all batteries are collected after use — the rest sadly make their way to landfill or water sources and land.

Sokhai was able to sample some information about people's habits by talking to school students in Phnom Penh. The children provided insights into the habits of their families: most people mixed battery waste with regular trash and families did not know what batteries were made of or how it impacted the environment.

"Students can have a good impact by spreading messages and telling their parents when they learn something new, like how to separate waste from general waste and how to deal with toxic waste," Sokhai says.

While the education of students and families was important, Sokhai says it was maybe time to rethink the



Photo Credit: Nop Sokhai/MoE

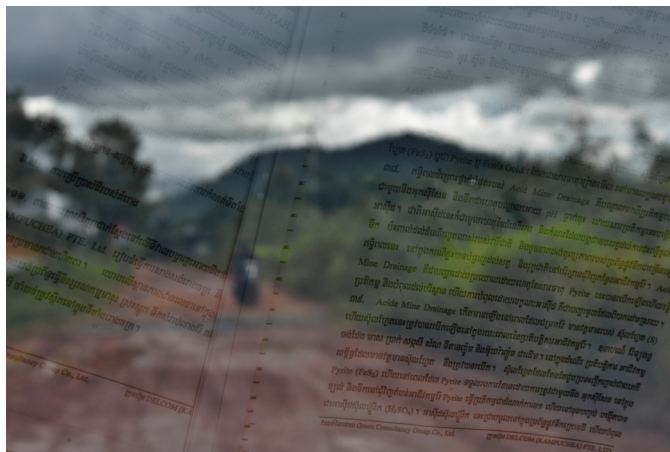
import of low-quality, battery operated electronics. "But even better, shouldn't we ban or increase taxes on products that are cheap but where the battery runs out fast? Or try to focus on rechargeable batteries even though they are expensive? Or further increase awareness of people and collection to avoid potential environmental impacts in the future?"

The key, according to Sokhai, is to create an ecosystem that works on ensuring battery and toxic waste is collected and processed. He points to the products that reduce the use of plastic items and the informal system of waste pickers — which works independent of state policy — who collect recyclable waste.

"We need to provide alternative solutions for people to do better."



Making Documents Accessible: Empowering Indigenous Advocacy



(Above) An environmental impact assessment profile page, above, published by Open Development Cambodia is reflected on the windshield of a car with Phnom Luong mountain in the background in Preah Vihear province.

(Right) Village residents say water flowing from Phnom Luong mountain is polluted with the chemicals used by the company in its mining operations.

Phnom Luong lies in the center of a community of Indigenous majority villages in Preah Vihear province. Kuy people in these villages have had a symbiotic relationship with the mountain and forest surrounding it, using it for agriculture and forestry products.

However, this was until Delcom Kampuchea, a joint venture between Cambodian and Chinese investors, entered the area to mine gold. The mining company was given a concession that included the mountain and surrounding land, sandwiching the communities living there between another economic land concession to the west.

Tuy Cheng, a community representative, says the company severely impacted village residents, affecting their land rights and access to traditional lands in the area.

“A lot of land was occupied by the [company],” says



Cheng. “Our livelihood changed a lot, they don't allow us to go to the mountain to mine for gold as we used to do traditionally.”

The dirt road to Delcom Kampuchea is also littered with artisanal gold mining operations, the drone of generators hangs in the air as muddy waters laced with gold are filtered over large sieves.

But it is Delcom Kampuchea's operations that have primarily affected the quality of water available to Kuy villagers.



Statues in Rovieng commune showing traditional Kuy artisanal gold miners. "It used to be a livelihood option for Kuy people in the past, but only in some places that do not interfere with prey arak [spirit forest]," says Khut Khim from OPKC.

"The company says they have a filtration system but when the local authorities go to check they are not experts so they don't know if it's working or not. And the authorities are not free to go in, so information is not disclosed by the company," says Hin Bunnath, executive director of the Organization for Promotion of Kuy Culture (OPKC).

The non-governmental organization advocates preserving the livelihood and cultures of Indigenous communities, especially the Kuy people. Many indigenous

communities are affected by land concessions given to private companies for agricultural or extractive operations.

A critical resource for advocacy groups like OPKC is the database of environmental impact assessments and project information curated by Open Development Cambodia (ODC).

The NGO works to collate project reports and documents, which are often very hard to access for commu-

nities. The easy-to-use and accessible database is available to the public and advocacy groups.

These documents not only help communities advocate for their rights but also give them critical information about the company's plans for the area and enable them to better negotiate with company representatives and the government for compensation packages.

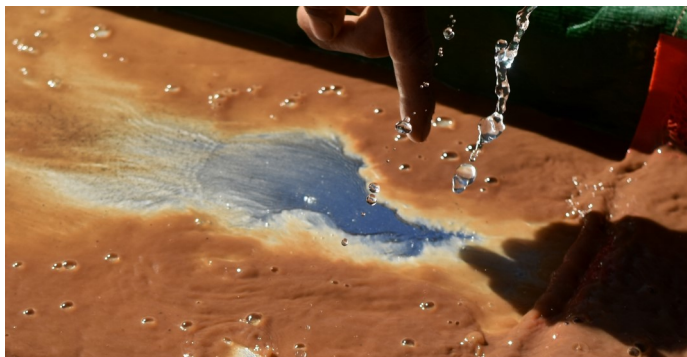
"The project profiles page on public revenues from ex-

tractive industries is very significant because it allows us to access information on the overview, activities, and operation of the extractive industry project in Cambodia to monitor their compliance with the regulations," adds Bunnath.

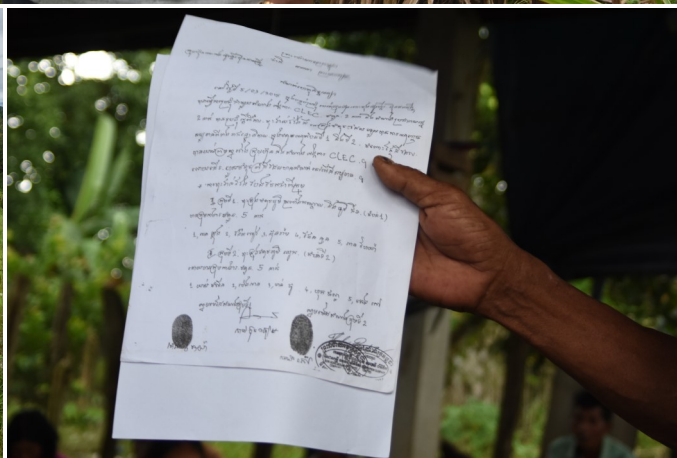
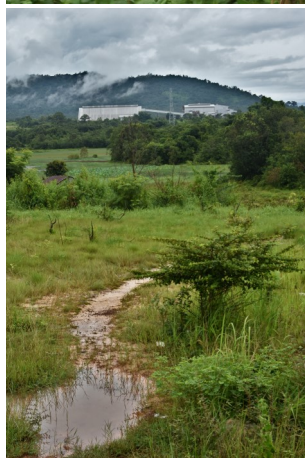
Indigenous people are kept away from discussions and decision-making that affects their communities and livelihoods, making it imperative for projects like ODC's extractive industries page to fill the information gap and enable them to better advocate for their rights.



Workers at a family-owned operation sift through the dirt, discarded by Delcom Kampuchea, for any remaining gold, after being prevented by the company from carrying out more traditional artisanal mining practices in the area.



Tuy Chheng, a community representative, said he had received no answer from government ministries after submitting a petition asking for a resolution to the dispute but has instead been intimidated by local officials.



Community representative Teng Kao stands on his land in Koh Kong province's Sre Ambel district that was returned to him by the company after years of advocating for the community. He is holding photos of his land deed and advocacy trips he went on overseas to lobby for the rights of the sugar community.

A Bittersweet Victory

Teng Kao sits at a stilted house in Koh Kong province's Sre Ambel district. A thunderstorm passes through the village, dousing the area in Monsoon rain. Three police officers sit just outside the meeting room, recording and monitoring the village residents — an unfortunately routine occurrence for the community.

Kao is surrounded by fellow community members listening to him recount their battle against corporations producing or sourcing sugar from Cambodia. The sugarcane companies — two of which are linked to a powerful ruling party senator — have been accused of using state resources to evict the community from their land, destroying their livelihoods and creating economic circumstances that resulted in the use of child labor at the plantation.

The greed for international investment and economic development failed to benefit the Sre Ambel community, with most citizens often left in a more vulnerable position than before the corporation arrived in their commune or village.

"Because of this situation, we lost our livelihood, our children stopped going to school, some of us had to migrate in search of jobs and many fell into debt," Kao says.

But the Sre Ambel community's advocacy and fight for their rights is one of the few success stories in a country riddled with land disputes. After a decades-long effort, the community agreed to a deal with UK-based Tate & Lyle for an undisclosed amount and were, separately, given small parcels of land, far smaller than what they had lost, by one of the local companies accused of human rights violations.

The out-of-court agreement was a landmark deal for the land community, which had only faced opposition from Cambodian courts and law enforcement, which consistently sided with the local companies.



Police officers monitor and record a community meeting where Teng Kao and a representative from Equitable Cambodia discuss their case.



The village residents were not alone in this fight. Equitable Cambodia is a Cambodian land rights non-governmental organization that works with communities to advocate for their rights, but has also successfully used international dispute resolution mechanisms to find justice for communities.

The NGO has worked extensively with land communities in Koh Kong affected by sugarcane plantations and has helped communities in Oddar Meanchey file a similar complaint in Thailand. Equitable Cambodia also advocates against predatory microfinance lending at the International Finance Corporation and achieved an ongoing investigation against major Cambodia-based microlenders.

Back at Koh Kong, Kao has been at the forefront of this legal battle, often facing the risk of violence and retribution from local authorities and the lure of bribes to

turn his back on the community. The roadblocks placed against his and the community's advocacy did not deter the community. In 2016, the community walked around 250 kilometers to Phnom Penh to advocate for their land and rights.

"Our village can be a role model for other communities. It is crucial to build good relationships, to communicate peacefully, and not to fight against local authorities," he says.

While the community has seen small successes in their fight for their land, others in neighboring districts have not been so lucky. In 2023, around a dozen community members also affected by the same sugarcane plantation were detained and are on trial. Their fight continues.



Feminism and Social Justice

Gender equality and women's empowerment in Cambodia — like most places in the world — are lacking and often placed as low priority in policy creation. This has to change and all relevant stakeholders, including the government, non-governmental organizations, private sector and other development partners must ensure that gender equality and feminist concepts are successfully mainstreamed in Cambodian society. hbs takes inspiration from the feminist tradition of the green global movement and strongly believes that feminism is and remains the radical transformation of hierarchical gender relations.

As we look to work for social justice, it is imperative that we understand the power structures, political systems and social norms that create inequality, violence, and discrimination that persists, and arguably still thrives, in our social systems. It is undeniable that patriarchy and gender-based discrimination are at the core of inequality and injustice in society. It is impossible to fight for change without acknowledging this.

Feminism provides a framework to examine how these power structures operate in both public and private spaces. In light of how gender molds our perceptions of the world, our rights and our place in society, it is important to acknowledge that it does more than merely attempt to comprehend and examine power. One of the core values of the empowerment process is the building of collective power from oppressed communities to dismantle the discriminatory structure of existing power. Concerning the promotion of gender equality, women must lead projects to end violence and the abuses perpetrated on the basis of gender and sex.

Gender-based violence is widespread in Cambodian society and directly undermines the socioeconomic and political rights of women and other vulnerable groups. There is enough evidence to prove that domestic violence against women is not only a women's issue; it has negative impacts on the family, community and

society as a whole. Non-governmental groups like Women's Resource Center show how local groups are working with communities and men to confront embedded misogyny and gender-based violence in their homes, while also working to alleviate the negative behavioral effects the patriarchy can have on children.

Understanding child abuse and gender-based violence through a feminist prism and patriarchal hierarchies is critical to dealing with the issue. The sexual abuse of children is rooted in persistent and systemic masculinity and patriarchal values, which if left unaddressed defeat the efforts to achieve gender equality in the country. First Step Cambodia is almost alone in its work with boys who have been sexually abused, by creating awareness of this violence that is normally assumed to be perpetuated only against female persons. Through its activities, the group is working to dismantle gender norms and systemic violence that is harming boys in Cambodia.

Another way to move toward gender equality is more accountability and honesty about the issues. This is true for Cambodia too. Cambodian organizations like Gender and Development Cambodia encourage open conversations about existing gender inequities, gender-based violence and gender roles in the family to not only expose deeply entrenched prejudice but dismantle it.

Decades of civil war affected the functioning of social dynamics in Cambodia. Trauma and fear pass from older to younger generations. The history and the trauma have affected both those who experienced the times of the regime and those who were born later. In particular, sexual and gender-based violence committed under the Khmer Rouge was kept for nearly three decades under silence. Social norms and determined gender roles often prevent victims of this violence from talking about their experiences and suffering. Research from the United States Institute of Peace in 2015 shows that students have a lack of understanding about the Khmer Rouge

regime and some teachers also struggle to teach the history of that period to their students. This is increasingly clear in the efforts of groups like Kdei Karuna who support intergenerational dialogue and documentation of the lives of survivors using oral history formats, which is critical to the process of healing long-standing trauma.

The work of groups, activists and communities to break gender barriers, end violence and nurture a more inclusive Cambodia has the full backing of hbs. This closely ties into hbs's efforts to foster the radical dismantling of patriarchy and hierarchical gender structures, much like the feminist traditions of the green global movement.



Frank Conversations On Good Parenting, Gender-Based Violence

Nai Moeun still remembers how her parents dealt with her as a child. Small transgressions would result in an angry or violent reaction and she would repeatedly be told about so-called mistakes she made. These interactions were normally antagonistic.

These experiences with her parents became embedded in her interactions with her two sons, aged 14 and 7 years old, perpetuating a cycle of violence in the community and its families. “In the past, when my children did not listen to me I used to shout at them and use bad words,” says Moeun, who runs a small grocery store in Siem Reap town.

This was until she joined a workshop organized by Women’s Resource Center (WRC), which discussed family dynamics, positive parenting techniques, gender-based violence, drug use, and other issues families face in Cambodian communities. The NGO uses the learnings from these engagements with communities to advocate for social justice programs and strategies in the country and the region.

The NGO runs half a dozen programs with local communities to prevent and address domestic violence, which is widespread in Cambodian society. Other programs focus on working with schools and teachers to support students on issues like gender inequality and sexual harassment. The organization’s “Coffee Talk” initiative invites men and fathers to meet and discuss their attitude and behavior with their families and learn from the positive experiences of other participants.

Moeun, who was attending a WRC workshop last month in Siem Reap province, says she has recalibrated her behavior with her children and now does not only have a positive and respectful relationship with them, but they are also more inclined to help her or do more household work.



A participant photographed at an anger management workshop conducted by Women’s Resource Center. The organization also uses meditation and yoga to reinforce positive parenting skills.

These change in her home have spurred her to share these learnings with her community. She is eager to share parenting techniques that have helped her, such

as taking a few deep breaths when she gets angry with her children and tries to not react immediately. She discovered that she tended to communicate better and understand her children better when she spoke to them once her anger had subsided.

“If I had kept using aggressive communication with my kids, they would probably do the same when they grow up,” Moeun says. “The lessons made me realize how my actions are wrong and now I have the opportunity to share my knowledge and experiences in taking care of my children.”



Yoem Sreng (woman on the top right) attended a WRC workshop catering to edjai workers on personal hygiene. “Before we did not pay so much attention to hygiene and cleanliness at home. But now we want to improve our health and for our grandchildren to grow well. So, we now clean the water tank, pay more attention to our laundry and wash the bathroom to teach our nine-year-old grandson the importance of hygiene,” Sreng says.

The Unseen Victims Of Sexual Abuse

It is not very hard for misconceptions and myths — such as ideas about child sexual abuse — to spread through a society and are often entrenched into a community's understanding of the issue. This misinformation process is acute when talking about boys who have faced abuse, with little to no discussion on how sexual abuse affects Cambodia's boys.

These myths can take many forms: boys are rarely abused, they can recover faster from the trauma and there is little effect on their honor or reputation in the community. The prevailing consensus on these issues is often incorrect and damaging in Cambodian society and they get supercharged when spread across social media.

Groups like First Step Cambodia are one of the only non-governmental organizations working to support boys who are abused, increase awareness among communities and put in place interventions that can shield boys from abuse.

Vann Sambor is a member of the district training and monitoring training team in Siem Reap province, in northern Cambodia. As a district education officer, she oversees 25 kindergartens in the district with around 625 children.

Having participated in workshops conducted by First Step Cambodia, Sambor says understanding the abuse of boys and how it can affect them is critical for teachers and parents alike.

“In the past, I had never heard of sexual abuse of boys until I attended this workshop. The media often writes and broadcasts issues of sexual abuse of girls, not boys,” she says.

Sambor says the training helped change her perceptions about the sexual abuse of boys and its prevalence and effect on Cambodia's boys.

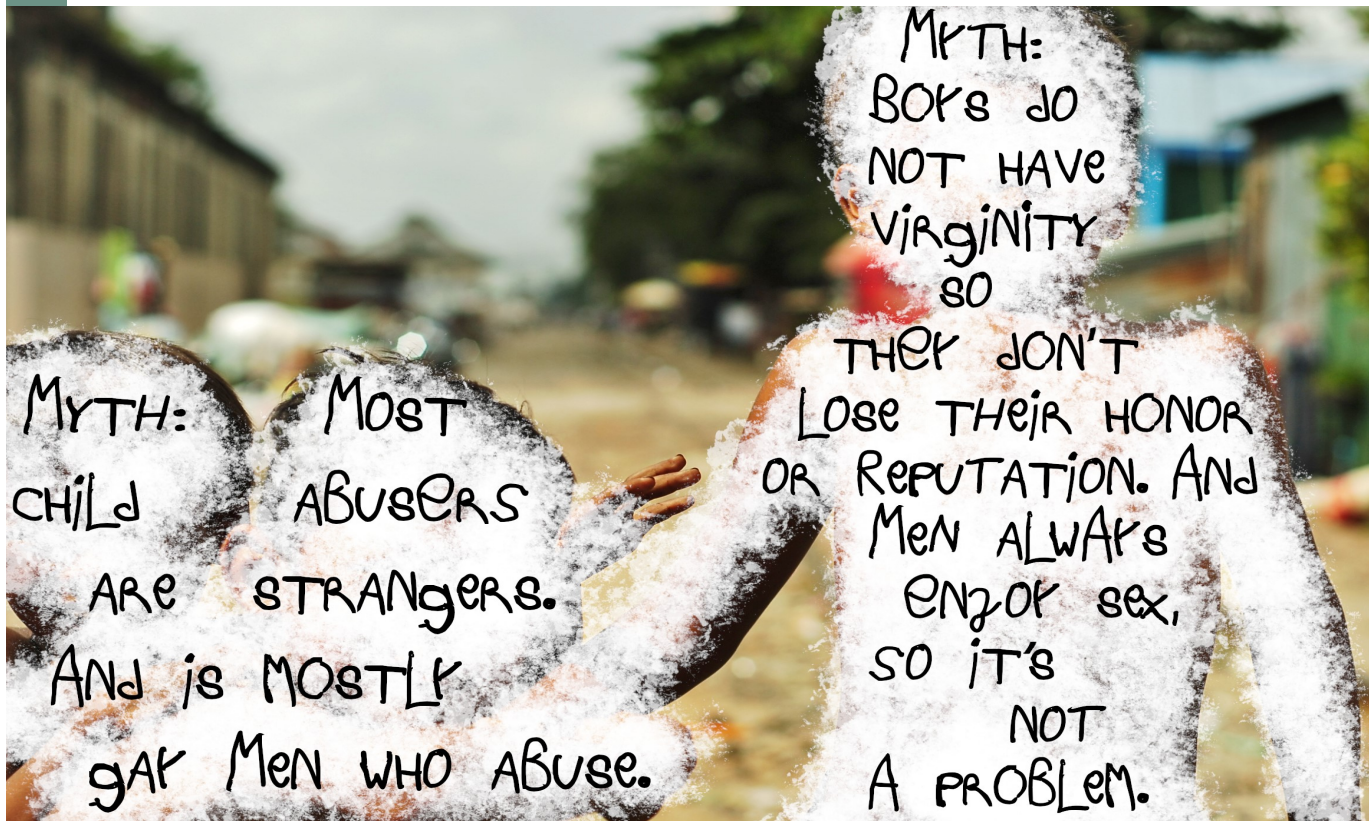
“Often, we think that boys are tough and can't be sex-

ually abused, but this is not true. They can be sexually abused and need support,” Sambor says.

Apart from working on increasing awareness about the abuse of boys, First Step Cambodia also has social workers who work with children by providing counseling and resources to improve their safety and ensure they have a supportive home and community.



Fact: Boys are also victims of child abuse but most boys do not share their experiences. Research in Cambodia shows that 15% of men and boys have experienced sexual abuse at some point in their lives. In 2014, the Cambodian government released a study on violence against children that showed that 5.6% of boys had experienced abuse, while a study in Preah Sihanouk province showed that 33% of boys working on the streets reported experiencing abuse.



Fact: In more than 90% of cases, children know the person who abused them. Research in Cambodia shows that boys are often abused by family members, neighbors, other children, monks, police officers, teachers, pastors and other people the boy trusts. In 98% of cases, boys are abused by heterosexual people.

Fact: Also, when girls are abused, Cambodian culture focuses only on the loss of virginity, and its impact on their reputation or the family's honor, while ignoring the suffering of individuals. While boys are expected to think they need to be strong and defend themselves, they can also feel like they have lost their dignity or manhood after being abused.

Lean In: Conversation About Gender Norms

Misogynistic social norms and gender roles heavily favor men in Cambodia, a sad trend that transcends many parts of the world. These norms can be so entrenched and hard to change that even frank discussions around changing attitudes towards gender equality, gender-based violence and empowerment of marginalized groups can be fraught.

Socheat is a security guard who has previously worked in construction and as a waste picker and motorcycle taxi driver. He decided to join discussions centering around gender roles in the home, violence against women and sexual harassment in 2021. The space exposed Socheat to differing opinions on these issues and even provided training on how to better advocate for a more inclusive and equal community.

A big takeaway for Socheat was the division of labor in the household. Even though he had helped around the house, he never realized how highly gendered work was in his community. This spurred him to initiate change and do more household chores, despite being mocked by his neighbors.

“I want people in my community to have that knowledge and change perception and attitude, especially on sharing household chores in a family,” Socheat says.

The conversations Socheat joined are part of the “Men Dialogue” program run by Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC). The organization works to mainstream gender in policies and laws, pushes for gender equity and facilitates enlightening, and often uncomfortable, conversations like the one Socheat participated in.

GADC also organizes the “Gender Café” program which



Socheat helping with the family chores after realizing the gendered nature of domestic work.

has a similar approach to “Men Dialogue” but is exclusively for women to talk, share and learn about issues like gender roles, masculinity and sexual harassment that are often brushed under the rug. Often people can face ridicule for discussing these issues openly.

The two initiatives have facilitated discussions with workers from the informal sector, teachers, entertainment workers, domestic workers, garment factory employees and others — groups that are often excluded from such discussions or never pushed to participate.



*Un Sreymean has participated as a facilitator at a Gender Café session.
(Photo Credit: Un Sreymean)*

Un Sreymean has participated as a facilitator in Gender Café discussions with factory workers. Apart from feeling confident after talking to participants and hearing their opinions, Sreymean says she now wants to advocate for policies that meet the sexual reproductive health needs of employees.

“Employers or a company must consider having a menstruation leave policy at their workplace,” she says, pointing to one of the takeaways she got from a Gender Café session.



Out Of The Darkness: One Story At A Time

As Cambodia closes in on 50 years since the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, generational trauma persists in many households and the country continues to maneuver the legacy of the mass atrocities committed during the 1970s.

The peace-building process, while often co-opted for political purposes, is still a work in progress in Cambodian communities and villages, according to organiza-



Huth Arth, who joined the project 3 years ago, is photographed with Thoang Kimsreang, 70, a former Khmer Rouge soldier who fought in Phnom Penh. Arth and Kimsreang spoke about the latter's experience during the conflict.

"I felt hurt and it was painful to hear his story, on how someone can force him to work as a soldier, when he didn't want to. He saw painful things and also lost one eye and has pain on one side of the body. In the beginning we were both a little bit tense but slowly he started to open up and talk about things he kept inside for many years," Arth says.



tions like Kdei Karuna. The Cambodian non-governmental organization works closely with ethnic Khmer, Cham and Vietnamese communities in 22 provinces, including Kampong Thom, Kratie, Tboung Khmum and Phnom Penh, to facilitate intergenerational dialogue, documentation and outreach to move towards an inclusive and peaceful Cambodia.

The dialogue process used by Kdei Karuna is based on the concept of oral history research and intergenerational dialogue sessions where teachers, students and community members interact with the *yey* or *ta* — the grandparents or elders — of the village by listening to their stories, which are often previously untold. The dialogue intersects issues of minority discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence, and youth engagement through a storytelling process that encourages conversations and activism.

Ear Lath was in Chi Kreng district, Siem Reap, during the Khmer Rouge regime and lived in a farming cooperative under very harsh conditions. Her parents were accused of being traitors, her brother forcibly recruited to work for the regime and she does not know what happened to her other siblings or family.

Using her family history, Lath interacted with Khmer history teachers and their students as part of oral history sessions in 2022. She spoke freely, often through the emotions that resurfaced, about her life in the 1970s and how she has lived with the experiences of the last 50 years.



Ear Lath stands in her lime field where she met local students to share her stories from the Khmer Rouge period.

Hear what Lath has to say about her experiences after interacting with community members during one of these dialogues:

“I am fine now and feeling okay. I don't often think about how I was forced to relocate or live with a lack of food. But I keep thinking about my mother who I saw being killed in front of me. Sometimes I still have nightmares.”

“I have told my family before [about these experiences] but in not as much detail as I did now during this dialogue. My family wasn't fully convinced and they didn't really want to listen.”

“With these students, I felt more comfortable as they

really wanted to listen to what I haven't shared with my own family. In the end, I feel very relieved.”

“I want to tell the young generation to try their best for this not to happen in the future. It is all on them and these kinds of conversations should continue to happen in our community.”



Democracy And Social Inclusion

Democracy and social inclusion are core principles at hbs. In line with the country's constitution, hbs also supports a pluralistic polity, equality before the law and respects for human rights and freedom of expression for all citizens.

Moreover, these principles encompass the elimination of all forms of discrimination and the possibility for all people, regardless of gender, sexuality, ethnic origin or class, to actively engage in and shape social and communal processes.

In the Cambodian context, the space for civil society participation has been progressively shrinking in a repressive environment. This includes the shutting down of most independent media, silencing of opposition voices and arrest or conviction of environmental activists. Young activists, in particular, have faced the brunt of this repression whenever they try to advocate for a cause, and often face physical or online harassment. Nevertheless, the voices of civil society in Cambodia are resilient.

In particular, Indigenous people, a minority group in Cambodia, are facing significant threats from an encroaching extractive industry. Land concessions, mining operations and deforestation threaten local and sustainable economies, severely affecting Indigenous populations. To make matters worse, Indigenous communities are not allowed to express their voice. Their underrepresentation in decision-making processes and the absence of legal recognition of Indigenous peoples are leading to a rapid deterioration of their communities.

The Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization has been vocal in advocating for the rights of Indigenous communities in the country and ensuring that the rich tapestry of their Indigenous cultures are preserved and promoted.

How little we know about Indigenous communities is evident from the short films produced by Indigenous filmmakers who were trained at the Bophana Center. Indigenous storytellers have a unique perspective to reflect society in their work but are also the best advocates for their communities' loss of traditional lands, language and culture.

In Cambodia, women and LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to experience discrimination and violence. Despite Cambodia's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1992, gender inequalities and discrimination persist. Women who migrate for work, in particular, face significant social challenges related to undocumented migration and upon their return find themselves without guaranteed access to social protection in their home country. This is where organizations like Legal Support for Children and Women support people who have been trafficked and give voice to their experiences and stories.

Similarly, LGBTQIA+ individuals lack sufficient protection against discrimination and violence, legal recognition of gender identity or marriage equality. Family exclusion and discrimination in the labor market and healthcare are commonplace for members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Cambodia. Radio shows like the one hosted by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights provide a platform for frank discussions among families, friends and communities about gender, sexuality, discrimination and harmful norms against LGBTQIA+ individuals.

In the realm of democracy and social inclusion, hbs advocates for an empowerment approach to build autonomy and supports interventions that take diversity and intersectionality into account. This collaboration with a wide array of actors, mainly representing marginalized groups, is key to ensuring the protection of civil and political rights.

The Boulevard Of Broken Dreams

Kruiy Phal sits at a small store on a dusty road right next to a massive condominium development in southern Phnom Penh, selling snacks, groceries and bright colored ice cream popsicles. Village residents stop at her store, buy a pink or purple or bean filled popsicle, not far from the boulevard that dissects the fast-disappearing Boeung Tompun lake.

“Now everything is more expensive. With the rising cost of living, we make less income,” she says sitting outside her store.

Not far from Phal’s store, fisherfolk use worn out wooden boats to fish in the last few patches of remaining lake, surrounded by rapid development that has reached the doorsteps of their village but has created no positive impact for them.

Boeng Tompun is one of Phnom Penh’s last major lakes and extends south to Kandal province. The lake is critical for the city: it is a major rainfall catchment area and a critical source of agricultural and fishing activity for local communities. The lake was estimated to serve as a reservoir for 70% of Phnom Penh’s rain water, with urban poor communities using it as a source of fish and vegetables grown on its once-vast waters.

But, that was until a government directive in 2008 allowed for the filling of 70% of the lake for development of a satellite city, according to Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT). STT is a frontline Cambodia non-governmental organization that works exclusively with urban poor communities, advocates for their land tenure security and documents implementation of state development directives that directly impact families and their livelihoods.

As the lake was filled in, massive malls, gated housing projects and condominiums started to rise around Phal and the Prek Takong community she lives in. The close to 240 people in the community have been at risk of eviction for over a decade, placing them in the tenuous situation of facing landlessness in what has been their home for years.

As with many promises of development, the benefits are often reaped by a few, leaving vulnerable communities with little. The community, which has always lived by the lake, has no access to the city’s water services, no roads, street lighting, or sewage and drainage systems. Until recently, authorities were unperturbed by Monsoon season flooding in the community and it took STT’s incessant interventions to get local officials to construct a dirt road for easy passage within the village.

Even as Prek Takong faces potential eviction, community members like Phal are strong in their desire to stay in their homes and refuse to leave the area. All she wants are documents confirming ownership of the land she lives on and for the lake — with which they share a symbiotic relationship — to remain a part of their lives and their livelihoods.

“We can’t really do anything about all this development. We fear being seen as living here illegally and getting evicted.”

“Our dream is to have a land title and we don’t want to move from our homes,” Phal says.



Kruiy Phal walks in her community at Boeung Tompun.

(Right) Children in the community play with a toy excavator — equipment used by the construction companies to fill in the lake.

(Bottom) Ice cream sold at Kruiy Phal's store with a recently constructed condominium in the backdrop.



(Above) A fisher at Boeng Tompun with a massive mall in the backdrop, which was constructed on the filled-in lake.

Filled In And Pushed Out

For the last three years, residents in northern Phnom Penh have seen a steady stream of construction trucks ferrying rubble into the waters of Boeung Tamok lake. After each truckload is dumped into the water and the cloud of dust settles, the lake they have lived next to for decades slowly disappears.

Boeng Tamok, also called Boeung Kobsrov, is the largest natural lake in the city and sits in the northwestern part of the city. The picturesque lake with masses of floating water hyacinth is home to around 300 families who live around it. Like most lake communities, Boeung Tamok supports the community of around 300 families by providing them the opportunity to fish or grow vegetables like morning glory and water mimosa.

The lake is also one of the last drains for rainwater, helping ease flooding during Monsoon season. But, after demarcating the lake's boundaries in 2016, the government has issued more than 70 separate directives giving away the filled-in lake to well-connected individuals, businesspersons and government agencies.

Residents around Boeng Tamok are seeing their lake filled in like a jigsaw puzzle with few pieces left to fit in. This is an experience felt across the city at other lakes filled for development activity: Boeung Tumpun and Boeung Kak.

Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) has meticulously documented the systematic dismantling of the lake by monitoring the around 74 government documents issued since 2018. The NGO also works closely with the community by giving them a platform to advocate for their housing rights.

The community is constantly navigating security concerns that stem from criminal charges filed against community members who have stood up against the destruction of their lakes, lives and livelihoods.



Mothers and grandmothers, usually in the forefront of protests in Cambodia, protecting the bridge that goes from their homes to the filled land in the lake. "We have lived here since 1995 and now we are facing an anonymous complaint in court that we are living illegally here. This is a case where people with power use authorities and the court to threaten poor communities for the benefit of the rich."



A Boeng Tamok residents' home photographed against the rapid construction activity to fill in the lake.

With no clearer way of saying it, community members say they only want to be included in the development of the city. “If they want to develop the area then they should also develop our community too.”

“We feel afraid because of all this development coming closer and closer to our home, and we don't know what will happen tomorrow,” says a community member who remains anonymous over security concerns.

The destruction of Boeng Tamok clearly illustrates the precarious position residents are put in when the state demarcates their land and community for development — often leaving them behind with nothing.



Rhythms Of Resilience: Fighting For Indigenous Identities

The Cambodian state has failed to put in place concrete legal protections for Indigenous groups in the country and instead wiped out their mention in laws and regulations around environmental governance and land management.

Indigenous groups have long warned about the loss of their traditional lands, a lot of which has been lost to deforestation by large corporations managing economic land concessions. To exacerbate their loss, the loss of Cambodia's woodlands affects their ability to do shifting cultivation and deforestation has hindered their cultural practices of maintaining spirit forests.

This is all true for Klan Sarith. She is Jarai and lives in the northeastern province of Ratanakiri, where her community is facing land loss from a Vietnamese rubber plantation and Chinese- and Indian-run mining operations. At the same time, the community has grown to 50 villages of around 53 families each, giving them less space to live.

Increased interaction with the rest of the country is changing their way of life, she says. "We used to pass knowledge from generation to generation but now it is more difficult. Some people don't go to school, some turn to drugs; the modern ways are changing our traditions."

"I would like for Khmer people to recognize us and respect our Jarai culture. The country should recognize Jarai as an official language," she says.

Sarith is speaking at a celebration of Indigenous identity in Kampong Speu, where most of Cambodia's Indigenous communities had congregated to showcase their unique cultures but also debate and discuss Indigenous peoples' rights and culture, preservation of their tradi-



Rubber trees are the most common agricultural product grown at economic land concessions across the country.

tions and their participation in laws and policies. Rhythmic drumming from the Por community fills the air with music.

Despite the dramatic loss of their land and culture, Cambodia's Indigenous people are rarely given a chance to decide on policy that affects them, let alone create legislation that protects their way of life. For this, the non-government organization Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization (CIPO) has been critical in advocating for the communities to ensure their voice is heard in Phnom Penh and the power centers of the country.

CIPO has worked with its allies to create visibility for Indigenous issues and for the government to recognize Indigenous communities, protect their culture and traditions, and ensure their lands are not stolen. The NGO also works to ensure that government data is disaggregated to reflect the demographic and socio-economic status of Indigenous people in Cambodia.

Nearby, Tep Toem is from the Kuy community but speaks fluent Khmer. Toem, who is an elder in her community, only wants rights to their land so that their descendants are not living in uncertainty. She wants the government to listen to groups like CIPO and other allies to ensure they have land tenure security.

“Our dream is for the young generation to have secure land and to maintain the Kuy way of life: that is the preservation of the forest, traditional agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources,” Toem says.



Tep Toem reminisces about her community's peaceful coexistence with the mountains, jungles, wild animals and vegetables they harvested from the forest. Most importantly they had the Prey Ah Rak [forest spirit], which she said was critical to the identity of her ethnic group. As they try to hold on to their culture, Toem says they had to start to speak up and raise their voices to protect their land and way of living.

Debating Issues Out In The Open

Vy Chhailim and Hok Pich sit under a tree at the Institute of Technology of Cambodia in Phnom Penh. The two are sipping drinks near a university cafe, as other students discuss their assignments and homework.

Pich, who is studying food technology, and Chhailim, a student at the Royal University of Law and Economics, are discussing a debate they attended on gender norms and shaming of women. The debate sparked a discussion about issues that most people shy away from, such as the gendered nature of domestic work, LGBTQIA+ issues, sex work and different standards society places on men and women.

The debates give students a space to learn and talk about issues that are rarely discussed at the family dinner table or the local coffee shop.

The debate is an ongoing program from The Cambodian NGO Committee on CEDAW (NGO-CEDAW), which works with a network of local organizations to track the implementation of the UN Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The NGO provides an alternate source of data, information and alternative reports on the status of implementation of the convention by the government.

Chhailim and Pich both feel there have been some improvements in reducing gender disparity, but admit that is limited to major urban parts of the country. They also took away a lot from the discussion on gender identity, sex work and the burden of domestic work. Hear their takeaways from the debate.

Chhailim

“Gender equality is getting better compared to when I was a kid. There are more opportunities to pursue higher education and less restrictions on what women can wear.”



Chhailim and Pich discuss a debate on the topic of gender norms they attended at the Institute of Technology of Cambodia.

Pich

“In the city, the situation is better and a lot still has to be done. Such as how the media still mocks and diminishes women making a living through sex work.

You can see judgmental comments on TikTok, such as putting a coffee cup emoji for women to say they belong

in the kitchen. Or comments where people still talk about how women dress, like if they are wearing a short skirt, etc.”

Chhailim

“I think what has changed the most in the last 30 years is access to education for women, fewer restrictions on their daily life, an increase in access to information such as on social media and more freedom

to choose their partners, more independence, income and opportunities. The young generation should use their education to think outside the box.”

Pich

“It's your time to shine and not be scared; all young people should educate themselves.”



Bormeychan is another student who participated in NGO-CEDAW debates and was photographed near a painting from Battambang born painter Chov Theanly at CamEd School.

“I learned a lot about unpaid care work, not just the actual household chores but its bigger role in society. There is still discrimination in the workplace, with women not being allowed at higher positions due to the prejudice of being more emotional. This is the same with positions of power, where more men are in government ministries.”

“It doesn't work if only women have to make the effort, everyone needs to engage in this discussion and move together, suggest new policies to make Cambodia progress as a whole.”



Students film mini documentaries about Indigenous culture as part of their training at Bophana Center. (Photo Credit: Bophana Center)

Indigenous History In A Bowl Of *Erhaang* Soup

Chan Khamsing's camera follows Boeung Eak into a stream in Ratanakiri province. The 65-year-old Indigenous woman walks through the flooded waters and starts hacking away at a cluster of bamboo, harvesting the tender shoots.

In the next shot, Eak is seen foraging through the various wild grasses growing around her house, picking the leaves of the sponge gourd and other vegetables. All the while, Khamsing's camera silently follows Eak, she allows the narrative to breathe and does not rush it. There is no music, no commentary. All you can hear are the sounds around Eak's home, her occasional comments and the clap of thunder in the distance.

Eak is prepping ingredients to make *erhaang* soup, an Indigenous dish made with wild vegetables, bamboo shoots and a salty sauce that gives the soup its name. The camera then follows Eak into her home, which is constructed with sheets of metal, cloth and bamboo poles, where she says the Khmer Rouge never allowed Indigenous people held in cooperatives to make the soup. They were allowed to make only soup that had to be eaten by all people held at the camp.

"I make this soup to carry on the tradition," Eak says.

Khamsing then follows Eak as she makes the soup, long pauses with no action or talking give viewers an insight into what it is to live her life. All the while, Eak smokes a pipe with tobacco.

The story of the *erhaang* soup is unlikely to make it to the national media or go viral on social media, underscoring the near complete absence of content from Indigenous voices and communities in the mainstream. Like most countries, Cambodia's Indigenous people and their lives are largely absent in the country's contemporary narrative.

But, budding filmmakers like Khamsing, herself from the Indigenous community, are working to document Indigenous lives, language, experiences and culture. She is part of a cohort of around two dozen Indigenous youth from Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri provinces who have been trained in filmmaking at the Bophana Center, with the explicit aim to increase visibility and provoke positive social change in their communities.

The program allows students to observe their communities in search of storylines, using one of two participatory approaches: students and the community jointly identify a story or social issue that needs to be highlighted or the students platform a protagonist to talk about their issues using the lens of the student's camera.

The ongoing program and the nearly three dozen short films produced so far by young Indigenous filmmakers underline that a slice-of-life, 17-minute short movie about the origins of an Indigenous soup can give us deep insights into the lives and history of Cambodia's Indigenous people.



Damned If You Migrate, Damned If You Don't



Chhang Kheang braids her daughter's hair, who has remained in school and is among the top 3 students in her class.

Chhang Kheang first went to Thailand in 2008. The migrant worker who lives in Kampong Cham province moved to the neighboring country to work as an undocumented construction worker, earning around \$5 a day. This was a meager salary but it was just enough to support her family in Cambodia, including a young son and daughter, she had to leave with the child's grandmother.

Kheang was one of close to a million migrant workers

who are in Thailand at any time to work low-paying jobs because the Cambodian economy does not have enough jobs. These workers often move to Thailand without the necessary documentation and are always at risk of deportation or harassment from law enforcement. Being undocumented also means that workers have no access to worker protections, little legal recourse and often employers have no incentive to treat or pay workers fairly.



This photo represents the often seen scenario of young women being trafficked to China for forced marriages.

Cambodians working overseas often find themselves in precarious situations, including being trafficked for work or other exploitations, and have very little support from state agencies on either side of the border – be it in Cambodia, Thailand, China or Malaysia.

This job is often left to civil society groups like Legal Support for Women and Children (LSWC) to provide support to Cambodian workers who have been trafficked or placed in exploitative situations. The NGO also works with the Cambodian government and other local groups to train law enforcement agencies to better protect migrant workers and trafficked persons.

After returning to Cambodia during the Covid-19 pandemic, Kheang lost her mother, her son dropped out of school to work in Phnom Penh, but the family still had very little income.

LSWC helped Kheang's family with food packages during the pandemic and to access government services in Cambodia. Given the emotional burden of her family's situation, the organization also provided Kheang mental health services, an essential requirement for helping returning migrant workers or trafficked individuals.

However, like tens of thousands of families in Cambodia,



Kheang used to be an undocumented construction worker in Thailand.

Kheang's family was indebted. The family had loans worth \$1,500 that have now ballooned to \$5,000 with \$270 a month payments. These payments were crushing for her family and forced them to sell their farmland and use other land documents as collateral to get micro loans.

As her family's economic situation was precarious, her husband had to return to Thailand and is working without the necessary documents. Kheang now tends to animals and relies on the money her husband sends from Thailand.

"I don't have any dreams or plans for the future. I just hope to repay the bank as soon as possible and get back my land documents," she says.

Confronting Prejudice With Honest Conversations

Cheng Sambath sits to the left of Hun Heim and Lim Borin, who is hosting the radio show. The Kampong Cham resident is talking to them about coming out as gay to their parents. He talks about how the experience nearly ended his parent's marriage and ruptured his relationship with his family.

Sambath says he faced discrimination from an early age when people in his village used a pejorative term for him. At the time, he did not mind it. But, he did not like it as he grew older and understood the subtext to the term, Sambath continues.

"We cannot expect others to be like us because nature is diverse," says Sambath. "How can we expect all humans who are created by nature to be the same?"

As a young man, Sambath moved to Thailand with his family, who worked as migrant workers. While working in the neighboring country can be a harrowing experience for many Cambodian workers, it turned out to be enlightening for Sambath. After years of feeling "different," Sambath says he met more people like him and he started to accept who he is.

A little later in the show, the host calls a listener. It is Sambath's father. The father says it was very difficult to accept that his son was gay but also that he was worried about his future and realized that he had to embrace his son for who he is. "I tried many strategies to change him but then I gave up and understood that this is who he is," says Chheun Chheng.

These are difficult conversations happening in homes across Cambodia. But having the people involved talk about it themselves and delve into the topic of sexuality, acceptance, coming out and support for queer people can help others who find themselves in these situations, where they are either forced to "convert" to a binary identity or ostracized by their families.





The radio show is hosted by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), non-aligned, independent, non-governmental organization that works to promote and protect democracy and respect for human rights – primarily civil and political rights – in Cambodia. The NGO also advocates and informs people about sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, using the radio show to challenge the prevailing norms that target and discriminate against queer people.

While same-sex sexual activity is not prohibited in Cambodia, the state does not recognize same-sex marriages. And while there are no laws actively targeting the LGBTQIA+ community, there are no protections against discrimination or hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

As the radio show winds down, Hun Heim, Sambath's mother, talks about how she came to embrace her son for who he is. She says it was important not to listen to what other people said about her son and to focus on him as a person and his good attitude.

"My son's future should not depend on the people who criticize him," she says. "This is his nature and I cannot change who he is."



Cheng Sambath and his mother Hun Heim on the CCHR radio show discussing Sambath's sexual orientation and experiences with coming out and dealing with discriminatory behavior.



Active Citizenship—Supporting Change From The Ground

The terms NGOs and civil society are sometimes difficult to separate and used interchangeably. Yet, those two concepts have some distinctive characteristics, which have become more marked in the last years.

According to Professor Peter Willetts from City University in London, civil society encompasses all social activity by individuals, groups and movements. In addition, according to the United Nations Development Program, civil society is a broad term attributed to the voluntary association of people or groups with governance and direction coming from citizens or constituency members, without significant government-controlled participation or representation.

However, an increasing trend towards professionalization, institutionalization and bureaucratization of civil society — often referred to as the “NGO-isation” of civil society — has led to a multiplying of NGOs globally and, with that, fundamental structural changes in the way social and political demands are platformed and elaborated. This rise of NGOs, a trend bolstered largely through donor institutional requirements to access funding, triggered an unintentional detachment between formalized non-profit organizations and the social base of its beneficiary communities and related informal networks.

This reshaped not only the paradigm of social action but also its translation into social and political transformation processes. For example, the level of education required to write and manage funding proposals to the satisfaction of funding institutions leads to an apparent split: On the one side, an elite familiar with the governance and management of civil society organizations, and on the other side the grassroots communities that are the ultimate beneficiaries of their programs and projects.

The key role played by NGOs in making society’s demands be heard is beyond question. NGOs are crucial

agents for voicing social demands and stimulating real change, contributing to the social, political and economic affairs of a nation. Nonetheless, nowadays, much of civil society's social transformative energy comes from outside the NGO cosmos, from small, informal grassroots groups, often formed and led by women, young people, and Indigenous people. These uniquely motivated individuals have been able to demonstrate lasting impact. Their efforts and networks enable people to connect and mobilize at the grassroots level, reaching remote and marginalized communities. They organize outside formalized structures, using innovative approaches to facilitate information sharing, organizing events and coordinating collective actions. Active citizens seeking to build alliances and partnerships with like-minded organizations and individuals strengthen their resilience and capability to amplify their voices. By working together, they pool resources, share knowledge and increase their collective strength.

These informal grassroots networks of civil society activists frequently lack the necessary resources to expand their actions and ignite lasting impact. Yet, highly formalized programs and dialogue around crucial developmental issues often lack space for co-creation and active participation of these concerned communities and the public, especially the young generation. Moreover, women lack effective participation, space and voice, their experiences and observations are seldom considered in the early projects’ design and formulation phases.

Recognizing the potential of informal networks and communities; guided by a steadfast commitment to global justice; and driven by a profound sense of duty, hbs designed a program to enhance non-NGO groups and initiatives and uplift these often-overlooked champions of change. In pursuit of its programmatic goals and to strengthen the work of Cambodian civil society more broadly, hbs develops tools and creates spaces for promoting civic dialogue around current challenges

that society faces to realize more just and equitable futures.

Support from hbs, spanning from financial aid, capacity building, and technical assistance, consolidates activists' endeavors. Training workshops equip them with critical skills to navigate complex social and environmental landscapes. Through these programs, the foundation fosters connection and collaboration among a diverse network of activists, harnessing the power of collective action. Furthermore, these in-house projects empower active citizens, give visibility to their actions and contribute to the development of a robust civil society. As such, these initiatives are instrumental in creating platforms for debating and developing

responses to common challenges as well as expressing their views on issues of public interest like sexual and reproductive health and environmental protection.

The foundation recognizes that true change begins at the grassroots level, where the passion and resilience of dedicated individuals converge. By bolstering these informal networks and active citizenship, hbs is not merely supporting a noble cause; it is nurturing the hopes, dreams and aspirations of an entire nation.

Let's Talk About Sexual And Reproductive Health

Talking about sex, pregnancy, abortions or menstrual health is rarely handled well in our homes or society and is often dealt with as an uncomfortable or stigmatized experience that everyone would rather ignore than deal with. In Cambodia, some of these moral and societal norms come from traditional diktats like *chbap srey* which sets out a code of conduct for women and explicitly shames their sexual activity.

Additionally, some governments have failed to make discussions about sexual and reproductive health part of state policy — again shrouding these conversations under a veil of mystery or shame or moral policing.

Clear communication on these issues is critical for young people who are often left to understand sexuality, birth control, contraception or abortions on their own. Close to 40% of Cambodia's population is under the age of 25, with a majority of them in the critical age bracket of 10 to 25 years which is when educational interventions in sexual and reproductive health are effective.

At a time when social media and video streaming are the fastest ways to capture the youth's attention, the Cambodian government and health agencies are using them to increase awareness of health issues affecting young people, but not as much to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Dosslarb is seemingly far ahead in using these mediums to reach young social media users, discussing a variety of issues like talking to your partner about using contraception, menstruation, sexual activity and behaviors.

The group was founded by three young Cambodian women who have studied communications and media management. Bun Saosopheakneth, one of the founders, says it is not a secret that most young people do not know how to deal with consent, unsafe abortions or



An infographic by Dosslab on the safety of using condoms.

sexually transmitted infections, nor do they have anyone to go to for this information.

She says the trio wanted young people to have information that was easy to assimilate and to make existing resources accessible so that people did not feel lost in understanding an issue they were facing.

“We envision a Cambodia where every young person possesses the knowledge and confidence to prioritize their sexual and reproductive health, free from stigma and misinformation,” says Saosopheakneth.

The group also works with other health organizations to deliver clear and accurate information about sexual and reproductive health — the aim being to strip away any shame or stigma attached to conversations that should be open, informative and focused on the health of young people.

Fusing The Traditional With The Contemporary: Projecting Female Strength Through Dance

Classical Khmer dance dates back more than a millenia to royal courts where a performance was believed to be a bridge between the gods and kings — a link between the spiritual and natural worlds.

With the use of fingers curved backward, arched spines, bent knees and a graceful control of the dancer's movements, Khmer classical dance is sacrosanct and most dancers will stay away from altering the revered dance form.

Ny Lai and Khun Sreynoch (Ny&Khun) do not feel the same way and have shown no qualms in challenging the status quo. The two dancers are part of New Cambodian Artists (NCA), a dance company that has fused classic Khmer dance elements with pop culture, contemporary dance and theater to create unique performances.

The duo have not only created their own dance style but are also using it to highlight issues like feminism, gender-based violence and environmental pollution. In "Giant Satrey" the duo use the giant — a common character in traditional dances — as a symbol to portray strong women who are role models for their communities.

"We focused on the power of some of the movements and turned the dance into a regular demonstration of dance skills and female strength ... we are showing the strength of the contemporary Cambodian women," says Khon Sreyneang, the former director of the dance company.

More recently, the duo presented "Sorohn and Snow White," where the performance is filled with deep pain as it starts with a ritual commemorating the bodies of women and the atrocities they have faced. Again, un-



A scene from NCA's "Cinderella Not a Fairy Tale" performance from 2021. (Photo Credit: NCA)

afraid to experiment with form, the dancers use no words during the performance and only use simple props like white chalk powder and red lipstick to convey their story.

The artistic expression of Ny&Khun is an allegory for a young Cambodian generation that wants to use their rich history and culture and meld it with other artistic influences to create new art forms that can be used not only for entertainment but also for advocacy and awareness raising.



A Pride tuk-tuk and participants of the Pride race in front of hbs office.

Sketching A Pride Future

Cambodians from the LGBTQIA+ community face stigmatization and discrimination, and do not have access to the legal protections they are entitled to under universal human rights which are endorsed by the Cambodian government.

Despite this, the community holds one of the most vibrant Pride Month celebrations in the region, celebrating the diversity in the community while continuing to advocate for their rights. Pride Month gives

activists and community members a platform to have meaningful and engaging conversations with their peers and others around sexuality, gender, identity and society.

Cambodia has organized these celebrations since 2003, and now multiple advocacy groups, embassies, NGOs and local communities participate by organizing their own Pride events across the country.

The advocacy is echoed by people outside the community, who are aware of the role they play in making Cambodia more inclusive for its queer communities. Activities during pride are meant to bring together people from within and outside queer communities to have honest discussions, enjoy a meal or drink together or even participate in a fun tuk-tuk scavenger hunt.

In 2023, the hbs office was one of the stops in a tuk-tuk race. Participants were asked to illustrate their ideas of love and queerness through the Pride prism at the hbs office before proceeding to the next stop on the race.

The race includes a diverse group of Phnom Penh residents who come together for a fun event and encourages them to bring out their creative and fun side while still advocating for an important issue. Amid all the fun during Pride celebrations, one thing is clear: The end of discrimination of queer people and society's embrace of them on all fronts is not a remote possibility. It is inevitable.



A collage with paintings of participants of the Pride race 2023.



Installations and exhibits at the 'From Disability to Visibility' exhibition at The Factory in Phnom Penh.

From Disability To Visibility

Art plays a central role in raising awareness of social inequalities and injustices and can be used to advocate for disenfranchised people and communities where power structures suppress dissent or activism.

This is a reality for people living with disabilities in Cambodia. Apart from hollow words of encouragement and empty promises, people with disabilities have no representation in policymaking that addresses their needs or places zero tolerance for discrimination by people in the community.

Keeping this in mind, the “From disability to visibility” exhibition was organized by frequent hbs collaborator Miguel Lopes Jerónimo in collaboration with more than 10 organizations working on the topic and more than 20 artists and creatives, many of whom have disabilities.

“The main goal of this art show is to shine a light on the lives, challenges and dreams of people from various backgrounds and showcase what they are doing every single day to become independent and thrive,” says Jerónimo.

The multimedia exhibition also included discussions on topics such as the differences between the medical and the social models of disability, promoting different NGOs and showcasing what an inclusive event can be: the entrance was wheelchair accessible, the event had a sign language interpreter during talks, catering was provided by organizations that employ people with disabilities, with dance group formed by deaf and wheelchair users providing entertainment for the night.

The exhibition had a wide array of offerings, including illustrations and a brick installation from Chan Phoun, an artist who lost an arm in an accident at a brick factory as a teenager, presented photos and videos from journalist Mech Choulay documenting the lives of a blind couple, or guests could buy jams made by people with intellectual disabilities.



Series of photographs at the exhibition focusing on a football program by ISF Cambodia involving blind teenagers.

The exhibition ties into hbs’s mission to support grassroots initiatives to highlight important parts of Cambodian society and raise awareness among all people. It is not often that topics of disability and how ableism has become a default in society are discussed using the prism of equal representation, visibility and art.



An edjai walks the streets collecting trash without safety equipment and delivering it to the final recycling destination.

Horns And Headlamps: Cleaning Cambodia's Recyclable Trash

It is not an unusual sight to see narrow beams of light scanning the streets around markets every evening in Phnom Penh. The beams of light move from one pile of trash to another, occasionally stopping to see if there is any plastic, aluminum or recyclable waste.

These headlamps are switched for cheap plastic horns during the day that are part of the sounds of many Cambodian neighborhoods. The beeping of the horn is a signal for residents to bring out trash that can be recy-

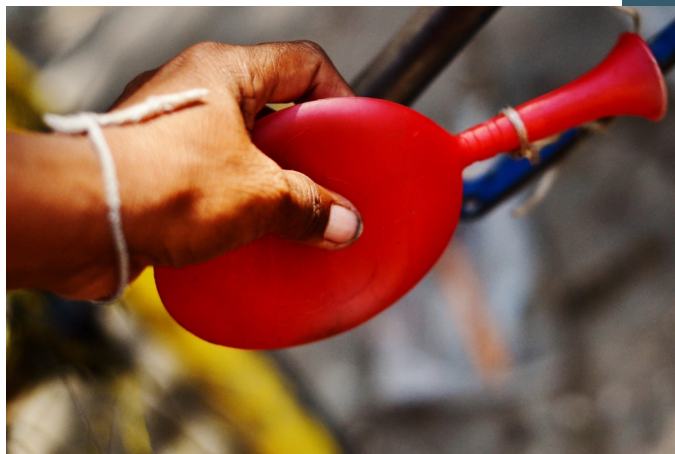
clered and to put it in a motorcycle or hand-drawn cart.

The headlamps and horns are tools used by an informal but extremely critical network of informal workers called *edjai*. They are the unofficial recyclers of Cambodian cities, towns and villages, creating an ad hoc recycling economy in the absence of effective official policies to manage recyclable waste in the country.

According to the Ministry of Environment in 2022, only



(Left) A collection center for aluminum cans. (Right) An example of the plastic horns used by *edjai* to let residents know that they are passing by to collect recyclables.



62% of trash was formally collected, the informal sector cleans up around 8% of garbage and the rest remains uncollected, which is likely burned either in areas with no collection or in rural areas. Almost all of the collected trash is sent to neighboring countries with very few facilities in Cambodia — again official policies have been lacking in encouraging more in-country processing.

Edjai is a vulnerable community of workers who have no social protections or labor rights and survive on small daily earnings which are in no way equal to the labor they perform or the value of the work they do for urban environments. They often earn no more than a few dollars a day, with some people even asking the *edjai* to buy recyclable trash, eating further into their earnings.

Despite performing a critical civic duty, *edjai* face discrimination from the very people whose trash they are cleaning and recycling. They are referred to as dirty or untrustworthy and often lack access to basic state services on account of being a disenfranchised community.

Their work is dangerous. *Edjai* are exposed to potentially toxic and unsafe medical waste, which is rarely stored separately and usually mixed with regular trash

on the streets. They also do this work with no safety equipment or tools and work at hazardous dump sites too.

It is easy to find the fingerprints of an *edjai* on most recycled materials in Cambodia. They are integral to this process. Yet, they cannot make a dignified income that removes them and their families from poverty and economic vulnerability.

hbs wished to spur a deep rethink of the values we place on informal labor and who we value in society. The foundation supported a digital photo reportage project and two exhibitions in Phnom Penh to illustrate the lives of *edjai*, their work and how they are pushed to the margins of society despite their invaluable contributions.



Phina So, who is a popular artist, is photographed reading the anthology of poems she helped edit.

“My Parents Are Women”

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Kamsort Khoeun, a poet, visited children and families living around the Stung Meanchey dump site in Phnom Penh. Interacting with the community gave him a better understanding of the challenges faced by families who relied on picking waste from the dump site.

But it also raised questions about other Cambodian families — families that are not considered traditional. Families that don’t have one mother and one father; or set masculine and feminine roles. Who was talking about families where the power structures at home are reversed or cases where these roles do not exist?

Khoeun knew there was a diversity of experiences in Cambodian households and wanted to showcase them beyond the regular narratives of family life. These questions moved the poet to write a Khmer-language poem called “My Parents are Women” that was later included in the Cambodian Women Poetry project, an anthology of works from 38 people, including women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

“The poems touch on the experiences faced by women, such as the pressure to get married, their human rights, the marginalization of voices, LGBTQIA+ issues, and ideas of self-love, education, injustice and issues like breastfeeding in public,” says So Phina, an artist, poet and the editor of the anthology.

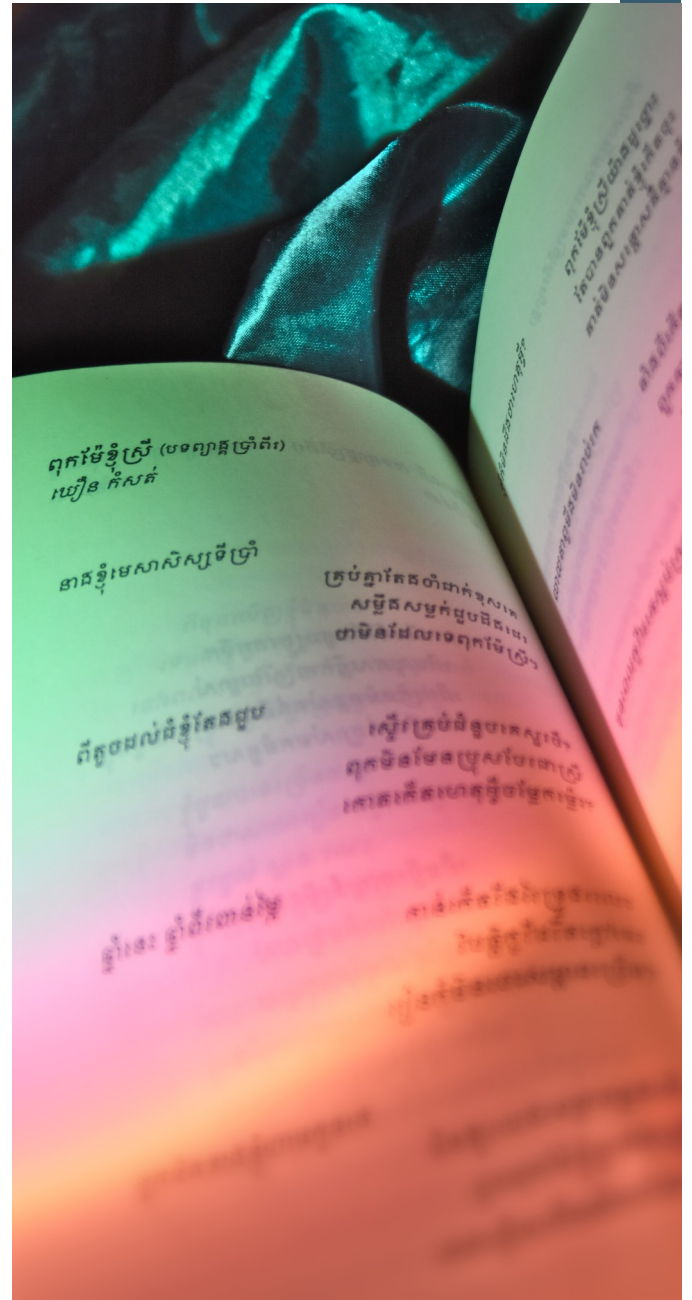
ពុកម៉ែខ្ញុំស្រី

(បទពាក្យប្រាំពីរ)

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អ្នកនិពន្ធ: ឃៀន កំសត់



A photograph of the "My Parents Are Women" poem in the book.

Creating Safe Spaces

Creating safe spaces for queer people is critical in the fight for equality and for them to have a voice. It took a police crackdown at the Stonewall Inn — one of the few bars in New York's Greenwich Village that welcomed the queer community — for members of the community to stand against the violence they faced, demand an end to discrimination and spark the global Pride movement.

Decades later, Thida Chhuon, a Cambodian advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights, is inspired to create a safe space for Battambang's LGBTQIA+ community, where people can inspire, learn and support each other. "What we are working for is social justice and intersectionality by using the arts to empower ourselves and everyone," she says.

Thida founded SafeSpaceBTB as a community initiative focused on events discussing queerness in Cambodia, campaigns to raise awareness about the human rights gap and LGBTQIA+phobia issues and podcasts that platform members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Thida chose Battambang because most of the resources available to advocate for the queer community were in Phnom Penh, whereas "a few crumbs" were given to queer people who lived outside the big cities or in rural areas. Thida has passion and commitment to change this because the realities of queer people in Battambang was not always the same as someone in Phnom Penh or elsewhere in the country.

She has seen improvements in how queer people were treated, involved in the wider social fabric and were able to have a voice. But there was still a lot that needed to be done to change longstanding, and often vitriolic, perceptions and discrimination against the community. This includes people thinking that LGBTQIA+ people are "abnormal" or that same-sex couples should not be allowed to be together.

When Thida was younger, she remembers it being

almost impossible to come out and express your gender identity in a community that only acknowledged a binary existence. And while people and society are slowly moving in the right direction, she says there is a long way to go in Cambodia.

"It doesn't mean everything is fixed now. There is still lots to do. That's what we're working on," Thida says.

Seeing how SafeSpaceBTB has worked with queer artists, musicians and authors, Thida wants Cambodia to reach a place where queer people can be happy and live their lives to the fullest.

"Nothing is better than being yourself and living your life without being ashamed."



SafeSpaceBTB founder Thida Chhuon, seated in the front row, with the rest of the organization's team. (Photo Credit: SafeSpaceBTB)



Photo Credit: SafeSpaceBTB



A dancer from SafeSpaceBTB performs at an exhibition opening and public event at Meta House in Phnom Penh.



Po Sakun is a prominent arts advocate who uses his extensive experience to work as a facilitator with CICADA. Sakun is photographed during a workshop at the hbs office.



Advocating For The Arts

The Cambodian people have seen massive shifts of the pendulum when it comes to their art, architecture and music.

While the Angkorian era is considered the zenith of the Khmer civilization, arts and culture, this artistic

progression sadly reached its nadir when the Khmer Rouge regime singled out professionals and educated people for execution, including musicians, artists and filmmakers.

However, the arts have persevered as a medium for

change and free expression in the country, says Cambodian artist Po Sakun.

Forty years on, Creative Industries of Cambodia Association for Development and Advocacy (CICADA), a registered member-based association, is supporting and empowering the cultural and creative industries sector to have a say in the development of the arts in the country.

A new wave of artists, musicians, designers and filmmakers are making their mark on the domestic and international scene and taking advantage of a growing economy and appetite for finding of the arts.

While some continue to stay within the confines of Cambodian arts and culture, others want to push the boundaries and transform existing art forms to better represent a more contemporary artistic expression.

CICADA believes these artists must be part of a democratic and collaborative process to lobby for better policies and work conditions for members of the cultural and creative industries.

Po Sakun is one of the artists leading this charge. The former contemporary dancer is from the coastal province of Kampot and has worked at arts organizations like Epic Arts and Cambodia Living Arts, performing in multiple mediums, and the occasional music parody video to bring attention to the arts in Cambodia.

Sakun says CICADA has conducted introductory workshops on cultural policy in the country where it was clear artists are unaware of the policies that are in place to assist their work but wanted to be more involved in the development of the sector and the better of people working in the arts, who are often low on the totem pole of investment.

"I see some artists or art projects that are already using art to advocate for issues relevant to Cambodia's situation, such as raising awareness of plastic use, the environment, human rights, education etc.," Sakun says.

Sakun would like to see the public and private sectors cooperate with artists to make their creative works sustainable and inclusive. A thriving art scene in Cambodia bodes well for its citizens because artists are often changemakers and push the boundaries of society's creative and moral limits.



Participants at a CICADA's workshop at the hbs office to discuss advocacy strategies with the government.



Ros Rotanak, popularly known as Chef Nak, cuts fresh vegetables and other ingredients to make delicious samlor korko soup.



Tona buys fresh vegetables from farms in her community to sell to buyers at Phnom Penh's Phsar Damkor.



Reaksmey, known as the 'yellow fingers lady', is a local entrepreneur who started a turmeric supplements business to support her family.



Yay Chamroeun decided to start an organic farm in Kandal to prevent aggravating health issues in her family.

Just One More Bite Of *Korko*

Samlor korko probably exemplifies the best of Cambodian cuisine. The scent from a boiling pot of *korko* wafts daily through most neighborhoods or villages, leaving residents salivating at the prospect of a delicious lunch or dinner.

An aromatic soup laced with the fragrance of turmeric, ginger, lemongrass and garlic. Moringa leaves and green

papaya give the soup a freshness and balance the fish, which is the primary protein for most Cambodians.

The ingredients of the soup and their production provide an insight into the fragility of Cambodia's food systems, nutrition and food security. Cambodia is still a country that imports a majority of its produce from neighboring countries and farmers who produce the

remaining of the vegetables, meat and fruit we eat are limited to single-crop farms where financial yields are low — often lower than the minimum wage.

Back to the *korko*, one of its key ingredients is under severe pressure — the succulent pieces of river fish. Most of Cambodia's fish catch comes from the Mekong and Tonle Sap. Fish catches in the Mekong have seen declines in the last decade, threatening a critical source of protein for Cambodian families.

This in turn affects production of the much loved *prahok*, a fermented and pungent fish paste that is omniscient in Cambodian home recipes. The paste flavors the *korko* giving it a dash of umami that makes you go back for more.

And slowly we see how declines in fish catch has affected the recipe of a quintessential Cambodian soup, threatening its existence and potentially depriving future generations of its deliciousness.

The making of the *korko* soup was the subject of a multimedia project by hbs called *Mhope* to illustrate the role of informal systems that feed into the Cambodian food value chain. *Mhope* explores Cambodia's food systems through a plethora of edible delicacies, and while showcasing the benefits of local production, it also challenges the agro-industrial modes of production that are at the root of environmental destruction and climate change.

The photo series and the activities to disseminate the related stories depicted how local ecosystems can provide sustainable and affordable nourishment for residents, be it effervescent turmeric, soothing moringa or the pungent *prahok*.

Mhope is a wake up call to the impacts of industrialized food systems on our ecosystems and the environment. It is imperative that we preserve Cambodia's culinary traditions, and are mindful of the food we eat, how it is sourced, the impacts of climate change and human activity on food systems and the waste we create in food production.



Siem E sells samlor korko at an affordable price, providing a nutritious meal for residents in Phnom Penh's Boeung Tompun area.



Farmers in Kandal province say wholesalers pressure them to use chemical fertilizers to grow more attractive looking produce.



Impact Hub conducts activities to raise awareness with young people about the COP conference and its impact on environmental policies.
 (Photo Credit: Impact Hub)



A girl climbs a tree in Phnom Chhn in Kampong Thom province.

More Climate Action Now

The United Nations' sustainable development goals (SDGs) unequivocally call for “urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.” Cambodia has committed to implementing the SDGs and has, so far, allocated 1.7% of available resources in 2023 to achieve the climate action goal, according to the United Nations.

This United Nations' clarion call is for everyone to do their part in reducing the destruction of natural resources and the environment, and especially targets young people who have the most to lose from the devastating impacts of climate change.

This objective fits squarely with the youth engagement activities of Phnom Penh-based Impact Hub, which has created a sustainable and innovative ecosystem of startups, entrepreneurship and youth leadership. Impact Hub helps young people advocate for better policies, makes literature on these subjects more accessible to Cambodians and organizes events that bring diverse people together.

Huon Pengsan, who works as a talent activation manager at Impact Hub, resonates with the need for action to combat climate change and founded the Cambodian chapter of Climate Action Week. While it started slowly, mostly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, momentum around the movement has picked up speed and Climate Action Week events were organized with Impact Hub in Siem Reap and Battambang.

“It functions as a platform for a lot of people to come together, share ideas, connect with others and not just worry about the issues at hand,” Pengsan says.

Pengsan feels a lot of advocacy on the environment centers around a few issues, like plastic use and waste disposal, and that young people need to think about the multitude of impacts faced by people from climate change.

“Education-wise we need more content and a proper

implementation plan. As citizens we are not informed about what's in store for us in terms of Cambodia's response to climate change,” Pengsan says.

Ut Chantarapeach, who is a space and sustainable operations officer at Impact Hub, said there was need for increased clarity on how the country was going to deal with climate change.

“I am hoping to see more changes in industries and tourism in the next five years. If there is no clear policy, how can industries comply?” Chantarapeach says.



Aok Sochenda, known online as the ZeroWaste girl, attending one of Impact Hub's workshops. (Photo Credit: Impact Hub)

Destroying Waste Without Destroying The Environment

Cambodia produces more than 10,000 tons of waste every day, totaling more than 4 million tons over a year. A large part of this trash goes uncollected as most provinces do not provide collection services, even though it is the responsibility of local administrations.

This means that most rural and semi-urban Cambodians have only one option to dispose of their waste: burn it. Depending on the content of the waste, burning trash can release harmful toxins, heavy chemicals and volatile organic compounds into the air and surrounding areas, which include agricultural lands.

In place of any administrative action, the burning of waste will continue across large parts of the country. Cambodia Green Will, an environmental advocacy group, acknowledges this reality and wants to make the burning of trash safer.

The group has developed low-cost incinerators that use a double-layered filter to reduce the amount of toxins escaping the mechanism. The incinerations are two cement rectangles stacked together — one being the combustion chamber and an exhaust pipe. The mechanism looks simple and rudimentary but it will dramatically reduce pollution from trash burning.

Nil Rekha, who works at Cambodia Green Will, says the temperatures (around 400°C to 600°C) they generate within the combustion chamber reduce the amount of volatile organic compounds and other emissions. Secondly, the double-layered filter made with coconut husk and an activated carbon filter further reduces emissions from the incineration.

Cambodia Green Will's incinerator plan was the result of a lot of advocacy conducted by the group around environmental issues, including the reduction of plastic and single-use waste, but also from extensive interviews with people worried about open burning.

"We interviewed the principals of schools in rural areas in Siem Reap, Tbong Khmum, Pursat, Kandal and other provinces, to understand the problem and what they need to solve the problem," she says.

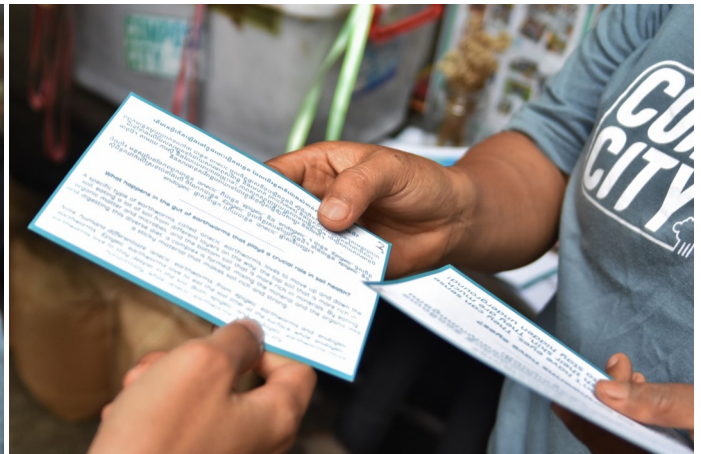
"They do not want to [burn their trash], and yet it is the only solution they have to manage solid waste in the area," Rekha adds.

Rekha says there has been some movement in getting Cambodians, especially younger people, to reduce the waste they produce in a day and actively not use single-use products. It is building on these small steps and through the use of innovative, makeshift solutions like the incinerator, Cambodians can empower themselves to take the lead in protecting the environment in the face of a policy and administrative vacuum.



The Cambodia Green Will team pose with their trash incinerator prototype. (Photo Credit: Cambodia Green Will)





Monorom Tchaw and Samnang Heng from the Compost City team interact with visitors using their educational materials at an event organized by Impact Hub in Phnom Penh.

From Dirt to Earth: Composting Away Our Waste

Phnom Penh has seen rapid development in the last decade. While high-rise buildings and swanky office space are changing the city's skyline, Phnom Penh's civic infrastructure and amenities that service citizens have struggled to keep up.

The Cambodian capital relies on an informal network of residents who help collect recyclable waste from the city's streets. Apart from a few businesses and informal initiatives that turn food waste into animal feed, there are no civic services to address mounting food waste in the city. Most compostable waste is either disposed of or ends up at dump sites littered across the city, like in Stung Meanchey, severely affecting the standard of living of communities residing there and intensifying the release of greenhouse emissions like methane.

Compost City set out to change that in 2019. Started by Tchaw Monorom, Compost City provides people with easy-to-use home composting kits that help residents sustainably dispose of their food waste and provide additional nourishment to their home gardens.

The project has been popular with the city's residents. Compost City has sold around 450 kits with only a small team of four people. However, Monorom wanted her efforts to lead to a more informed discussion about ecological sustainability rather than remain a commercial enterprise selling a product.

"I realized that I really like to discuss, I like to share, I like to hear, I like to host," she says.

She started doing workshops for students, workers and budding gardeners to encourage people to get their hands dirty.

"Are the participants touching the compost? And are they then seeing the mites and collembola?" she adds. "I like to experience something and then I hope to share it with more people."

After the success of the workshops, Monorom wants to transform a small plot of land her family owns into a compost museum and garden-cum-farm grounded in understanding ecological processes and how plants grow into the food we consume. Another initiative she wants to expand is film and documentary screenings on ecological issues, which she started doing in collaboration with hbs earlier this year.

All these efforts funnel into Compost City's goal of having an urban citizenry that is more aware and educated about their interactions with the environment – even if it means getting your hands dirty in some decomposing fruit and vegetables.





A plate of grilled pork and rice, a typical Cambodian breakfast, with pieces of a credit card sprinkled on it to illustrate the presence of microplastics in the food we consume.

A Plate of Grilled Pork, Rice And Pickled Plastic

Aok Sochenda walks through Toul Tom Pong market in Phnom Penh, holding a plate of beloved grilled pork and rice. But this plate of traditional Cambodian breakfast has an additional topping: cut-up pieces of a credit card.

Sochenda is a 26-year-old influencer who runs Zerow where she posts about waste reduction, climate change and sustainable practices everyone can use to reduce their environmental impact.

She walks through the market, talking to vendors and stall owners and asks them about microplastics in the foods we consume. Sochenda informs vendors that we consume a credit card worth of microplastics in our food a week. Research from Australia shows that we consume at least 5 grams of plastic a day, which is similar to the amount of potassium we need for our bodies to function normally.

Sochenda's comments drew bewilderment from vendors and market goers, most saying they were unaware



Aok Sochenda interacts with passersby in Tuol Tom Pong market, offering them pork and rice with plastic.

of microplastics in the food and water we consume.

“What’s that? Plastic?” says one vendor. “No, I wouldn’t eat it. I guess it would not be good for my health.”

The push to create this kind of provocative content grew from Sochenda’s desire to be more aware of her actions and how they affected the environment. But in 2018, there were only a few resources in Cambodia talking about plastic consumption, littering, trash disposal and climate change.

Motivated to reduce her waste consumption, Sochenda started posting about how she found ways to reduce her plastic use, which then fed into conversations about how to reduce littering and disposal of waste.

“At that time no one was talking about plastic consumption here. Nowadays there are more and more projects and we even see corporations mentioning these topics internally,” Sochenda says.

While Cambodia has low carbon emissions per capita, rapid natural resource destruction, lack of adaptive capacity and poor infrastructure are making it even more vulnerable to climate change-triggered natural disas-

ters like flooding, severe tropical storms and drought.

With more than 100,000 followers on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, Sochenda has now expanded her content to include instructional videos on how to make do-it-yourself products, such as eco-friendly hand cream or all-purpose surface cleaner. Besides selling products at the Zero Waste shop she runs, called Zerow Station, Sochenda also recommends products from other businesses, like the composting kits produced at Compost City.

Five years after she started Zerow, Sochenda believes there has been a change in people’s behaviors and some of them are trying to reduce the use of plastic and public littering. But it is still challenging to get people worried about the larger effects of climate change, she says, some of which do not impact everyone equally.

“Climate change is still not as easy to talk about here. People don’t relate to it much. But some people are starting to be more aware of changes to the weather, especially people who work outdoors, like at a market or on the street,” she says.

Thank You to Our Partners

It is through our collective efforts and strong partnership that we have been able to overcome challenges, seize opportunities and realize our shared vision. We are grateful for our partners' willingness to collaborate and share their expertise and resources, which have immensely contributed to the overall quality and impact of our endeavors.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to each and every one of our project partners, their teams and leadership. We share our sincere gratitude and appreciation to the courageous people and communities our programs and projects aim to further.

- Ministry of Environment (MoE)
- Marine Conservation Cambodia (MCC)
- Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)
- EnergyLab
- Open Development Cambodia (ODC)
- Equitable Cambodia (EC)
- Womens Resource Centre (WRC)
- First Step Cambodia (FSC)
- Gender and Development Cambodia (GADC)
- គីរុណា Kdei Karuna
- អង្គការសមាគមធាងត្នោត Sahmakum Teang Tnaut Organization (STT)
- Cambodian Indigeneous Peoples Organization (CIPO)
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- Legal Support for Children Women (LSCW)
- Cambodian Centre Human Rights (CCHR)
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- Impact Hub Phnom Penh
- GreenWill
- CompostCity
- Zerow
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- Miguel Lopes Jerónimo
- Royal University of Phnom Penh, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities

As we move forward, we look forward to continuing our partnership and collaborating on future journeys. Together, we can achieve even greater heights and make a lasting impact in Cambodian society.



Heinrich Böll Foundation

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a publicly funded institute with headquarters in Berlin and 32 overseas offices, we promote green ideas and projects in Germany, as well as in more than 60 countries worldwide. Our work in Asia concentrates on promoting civil society, democratic structures, social participation for all women and men, and global justice. Together with our partners, we work toward conflict prevention, peaceful dispute resolution, and search for resolutions in the fight against environment degradation and the depletion of global resources. To achieve these goals, we rely on disseminating knowledge, creating a deeper understanding between actors in Europe and Asia, and on a global dialogue as a prerequisite for constructive negotiations.

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