



# Unlocking Cambodia's future by **Amplifying Meaningful Child Participation in Decision Making**

**Children and youth are key drivers of Cambodia's development and economic future. However, their meaningful participation in policy making and decisions that impacts them has been limited.**

## What is happening?

In Cambodia, children and youth have increasingly been given access to forums and formal events for participating in government activities, including children's consultations by commune councils and even national level events with members of the legislative assembly. However, many events are ad hoc, one-offs or lack the legitimacy to truly influence decisions that impact them.

Many children and youth are not empowered to express their voice and interests at both local and national levels and have limited access to information about decision-making processes. This is especially the case for children who are most vulnerable – such as children with disabilities, indigenous children, LGBTIQ children, children living in remote areas, and where girls are given less opportunity to meaningfully participate in decision making processes than boys.<sup>i</sup>

The right to be heard and taken seriously in regard to decisions that affect them is a central principle of the UNCRC.

In 2014, the Royal Government of Cambodia, through the Cambodia National Council for Children, developed the national Guideline for Applying Child Participation to ensure improved participation of children (including reinforcing pre-existing initiatives,

such as the child participation and student councils established by the Child Friendly Schools Policy in 2007). However, participation of children and youth remains limited or of low quality, especially where government officials have limited experience in facilitating the engagement of children, especially those who are marginalized.<sup>ii</sup> In a survey of remote communes on and surrounding the Tonle Sap River

Child participation is one of the core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts that children and young people **have the right to freely express their views and participate in all matters affecting them** – within their families, schools, local communities, public services, institutions, government policies and judicial procedures..



It is necessary for good planning, implementation and accountability of all SDG targets.

(Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces) only 11% had participated in local government meetings in the previous year, and only 14% knew who the Commune officers were.<sup>iii</sup>

Lack of government transparency with information to inform decision making, especially information related to public budgets, also limits opportunity for engagement in decision making processes. A 2017 survey of budget information scored Cambodia 20 out of 100, which was substantially lower than the global average of 42. The same survey provided a score of only 4 out of 100 for public participation, again below the global average of 12.<sup>iv</sup>

### What is the impact if not addressed?

As key stakeholders driving Cambodia's development and economic future, the participation of children and youth in decision-making processes – for policy, budgeting, and monitoring – is essential for the thorough realization of child rights. Strong citizen and child participation in decision making can increase effectiveness of local services, increase accountability and mitigate against small-scale corruption, as well as giving government actors the opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of state actors (and credibility of state documents, such as budgets) through more open dialogues and understanding.

Without such opportunities, children and youth will not develop greater budget literacy and familiarity with government services and processes, which can undermine decentralization initiatives and fulfilment of other child rights. Participation and accountability, such as the activities supported through ISAF, must be reinforced through multiple government interactions with children and youth and foster stronger participation in future.

### What are the obstacles to progress?

▶ Regrettably, civil participation in Cambodia is too easily associated with political activities, and so parents discourage their children from joining or volunteering with groups who are active on important social issues, including issues of public decision

making. This is an extension of an issue commonly seen at household level, where children are not invited to participate in decisions that impact or benefit them.<sup>v</sup>

Parents, especially fathers, do not always understand the merits of involving children in decision making, or how to support their children to express ideas and views in family decision making processes. There may be a misconception that children do not have much knowledge or sufficient exposure to important topics in order to meaningfully contribute or participate.

Children sometimes experience discrimination in participation based on gender. A 2018 survey revealed that girls are perceived as not being very good at making decisions and thus have less participation in decision making. While the majority of boys in the focus groups disagreed with this statement, the finding reveals the deep underlying gender differences that exist within society.<sup>vi</sup> Such underlying discrimination can even be adopted, knowingly or unknowingly, by those who facilitate child participation (including employees of NGOs and CBOs) and can result in limited advancement in girls participation. Interviews with local authorities and school directors in the same survey revealed that some agree that traditional methods of teaching do not encourage children to develop or share opinions, including raising questions when something is not "right". This can stifle creativity, leadership and natural capacities for problem solving and addressing local issues.

## What needs to be done?

Amplify meaningful child participation in decision making can “change the game” for child rights in Cambodia by ensuring decisions and policies that impact children avoid implementation challenges and are truly inclusive. To achieve this, the Child Rights Now! coalition recommends that the Royal Government of Cambodia:

1. Further enforce government actors to utilize the **Decision on Guideline for Applying Child Participation**, developed and by the Cambodia National Council for Children in 2014, and expedite the finalization and implementation of the National Action Plan for Children Development.
2. Mandate that all **government strategies and action plans** must include specific actions and indicators on the participation of girls, children with disabilities, and children from ethnic minorities.
3. Provide training and capacity building to government actors at all levels (national, provincial, district and commune) on how to **facilitate engagement of children in decisions and decision-making processes**, including taking mitigating steps against discrimination in existing processes.
4. Collate and publish the different actions and commitments of relevant ministries (especially MoEYS, MoSVY, MoH and MoWA) in Annual Operation Plans and Budgets so that initiatives relating to child participation in decision making can be **better planned, clearly monitored, shared, learned from, and celebrated**.
5. Increase resource allocation within the Ministry of Interior and NCCD to support and **prioritize child participation, especially girls, in sub-national decision-making processes as part of Cambodia’s decentralization processes**, including support for existing children’s and youth clubs, parents’ groups and peer educators who can train others on child rights and meaningful participation.
6. Further **disseminate the Manual on Commune/Sangkat Social Service Implementation** (by Ministry of Interior) and mandate its utilization by local government actors during the Commune Investment Program and Commune Development Plan processes.
7. Strengthen the role of **student councils** in school decision making processes, especially for female students, and ensure recommendations and responses from children are documented for review by decision makers.

## How child rights are the key to future economic growth and development in Cambodia

On child rights, Cambodia has achieved in less than three decades what many nations took a century to achieve. However, sustaining economic growth and achieving the country development targets will require increased productivity and innovation by a skilled, educated and healthy workforce. These workers are today’s children and they continue to experience gaps in the full realization of their rights preventing them to reach their full wellbeing and potential.

For Cambodia to continue its growth and achieve its ambitious plans for 2030, we need to “change the game” for children and address these gaps.

The Child Rights Now! coalition believe that putting children at the center of Cambodia’s development strategy will ensure the dramatic progress on child rights needed to develop the human capital Cambodia requires to meet ambitious growth and development targets, including the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals and becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030.

- 
- i OECD. 2017: Key Issues affecting Youth in Cambodia.
  - ii According to an estimate from Child Rights Now organisations, approximately 500 child clubs are active throughout the country; however, the frequency through which these children can access decision makers remains low, as well as how children with disabilities, children left behind due to migration, indigenous children and LGBTI children and youth are represented.
  - iii Save the Children, 2018: Situation Analysis of Children in Tonle Sap's Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces. p.13.
  - iv International Budget Partnership, 2017: Open Budget Survey 2017. Available at <https://www.internationalbudget.org/open-budget-survey/>.
  - v Save the Children, 2018: Situation Analysis of Children in Tonle Sap's Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces
  - vi Plan International, 2019: Gender Equality in Practice of Child Clubs, Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms and Parents/Caregiver Groups.