What is life like for young Cambodians (15-30 year olds) and how are they participating in civic life?

Research Briefing

June 2021

What is life like for young people in Cambodia?

In our nationally representative survey, respondents were asked which values from a list they felt were most important to their lives. The three that came out top were health, education, and support from parents.

Keeping their family in good health (62% very important) and having an education for themselves or their family (60% very important), are priorities for young people aged 15-30 years old. This is closely followed by having support from parents – 59% said it is very important to them.

Hopes and aspirations for young people revolve around economic security, however life stage has an impact on the challenges and responsibilities they face.

Overall, finding a job is the biggest challenge young people say they are facing. 15-17 year olds, however, are much less likely to say this, with a third of this age group saying they are not facing any challenges.

Challenges around employment

The pandemic has had a widespread impact on Cambodians. Nearly half surveyed raised the impact of COVID-19 on employment as a national issue.

Not having sufficient networks to secure a job is also perceived as a challenge, especially amongst lower socio-economic groups.

Young people report that a lack of money can make following their chosen career path more challenging – preventing them starting or extending a business, attending costly career training courses to improve their skills, or enabling them to continue to higher education.

Challenges around employment

COVID-19

Networks

Finances

Not having sufficient networks to secure a job is also perceived as a challenge, especially amongst lower socio-economic groups.

Young people report that a lack of money can make following their chosen career path more challenging – preventing them starting or extending a business, attending costly career training courses to improve their skills, or enabling them to continue to higher education.

1 These insights are excerpts from a media and information study conducted in December 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, consisting of a nationally representative survey with 1,510 15-30 year old women and men in Cambodia, qualitative in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) semiotics, with follow up online community research. To ensure representation survey data was weighted by age, gender and location using the 2014 population data of National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (NCDD)/ Ministry of Interior (MoI).
Young people have a wide range of interests and hobbies – leisure, self-development, making connections, and creative pursuits – which take place both online and offline.

They pursue some of these interests online, where they spend a lot of their spare time.

- Internet (in particular social media) and smartphone use is high for young Cambodians, whilst traditional media platforms like television and radio are becoming less popular.
- Young Cambodians use the internet for connecting and socialising with others – through social media sites and messaging services – as well as for entertainment and keeping up to date. Different social media platforms serve young Cambodians in different ways; whilst Facebook is used for socialising, and getting information, YouTube and TikTok are more likely to be used for entertainment.

Those from urban areas, older groups (18+), internet users and women are more likely to report feeling knowledgeable about local and national issues affecting young people.

Almost two-thirds (65%) report feeling knowledgeable about local and national issues, however over a quarter (26%) do not – this is especially prevalent amongst those in rural areas, men, younger age groups (15-17s) and non-internet users.

Inspirational figures are key influencers for young people.

- Parents are considered key influencers for young people, their main sources for personal information and their most trusted sources. Many also consider parents and family members as role models for how they live their everyday lives, their values, attitudes and even their career choices.
- Apart from family and friends, young Cambodians tend to look to figures that can inspire them. Some of the most common examples given by young people include:
  - Journalists
    - Pheng Vanak for boldness in voicing opinions about corrupt of cials and exploitation on social media
  - Foreign icons
    - Prime Minister Hun Sen for making a significant contribution to national development
    - Venerable Kou Sopheap and DJ Nana for morality, motivational speeches, and life tips
  - Charitable people
    - Tycoon Try Dana and Tea Vichet for generosity in helping people in need
  - Entertainers
    - Vannda, a famous musician for musical talent, fashion, encouragement and hard work
  - Spiritual icons

Social media is reported as the most popular source for information about local and national issues – it is seen as a convenient place to access information quickly.

41% of young people feel it is difficult to find information around local and national issues that matter to young people like them.

Local issues refer to issues that are happening at a local/community level, whilst national issues refer to broader issues that matter at a country level.
What are young people’s attitudes towards civic participation?

- Young Cambodians show positive attitudes towards civic engagement; 86% agree that young people should be able to voice their opinions (with over 1-in-5 strongly agreeing) and 87% agree that if young people come together to voice their opinions, we can get more done.
- In general, those who are more educated, in more skilled employment, and often slightly older are more likely to have positive attitudes towards expression of opinion, collaboration and the impact of individual action.

Attitudes towards civic participation and engagement in Cambodia (% agree)

- Most agree young people should be able to express their opinions, and this is driven slightly by older youth (18+).
- Young people report feeling more confident expressing their opinions with peers than with elders – and are split in how valued they feel they are by elders. Those who are comfortable expressing their opinion with elders tend to be older (18+), women and those who are more educated, while students are more comfortable expressing their opinions with peers.
- Young Cambodians are also more likely to agree that action can happen when people come together. Qualitative results show that most young people feel they should be engaged in issues and help to solve them as youth are seen as the driving force for change and development.

How are young people currently participating in civic life?

- 29% report having discussed local or national issues with others.
- Participation in traditional forms of civic life – such as raising a concern with elders, attending a meeting, or volunteering in the community, is low.
- Young people are more likely to be expressing views online / social media (43%). These activities tend to be done more by men than women. However, topics like politics remain sensitive and little discussed.

Those who say they expressed their views online and through social media (43%) are more likely to be:

- Higher educated
- Knowledgeable about issues
- Discussing local/ national and personal issues
- Agree it is easy for them to find information
- Confident at expressing their opinion with peers and elders
- Men
- Higher socio-economic groups

Civic participation of young Cambodians in the last year

- Expressed my views online and through social media: 43% Yes, 57% No
- Participated in a group activity with other young people (e.g. sports, social events): 34% Yes, 66% No
- Raised a concern with elders in my community: 33% Yes, 67% No
- Attended a meeting in my local community to discuss community issues: 21% Yes, 79% No
- Took part in any activity or gathering to voice my opinion: 21% Yes, 79% No
- Volunteered in my community to solve issues: 16% Yes, 84% No
- Contacted a local leader to discuss community issues: 13% Yes, 87% No
- Contacted the media like TV, radio, or the newspaper to take part or share my view: 12% Yes, 88% No

- One third (34%) said they had participated in a group activity (sports, social) with other young people in the past year – this is more likely to be reported by young people in urban areas, men and younger age groups.
- 6% are part of any associations, organizations, or networks, such as The National Association of Cambodian Scouts, the Cambodian Red Cross, the Union of Youth Federations in Cambodia and unofficial environmental volunteering groups.
What are young people’s barriers and motivators for civic engagement?

Whilst the majority of young people agree that individual or collaborative action can lead to change, their agreement is influenced by how knowledgeable they feel and how equipped they are with information about relevant issues: over a quarter (26%) of young people report not feeling knowledgeable about local and national issues.

Less conventional forms of civic engagement, such as using digital platforms to express views online, reading and circulating news, or belonging to an online community, are more appealing than traditional civic activities like raising a concern with elders, attending a meeting or volunteering in the community.

Young people only tend to express their opinion online about light-hearted content, like entertainment. They do not talk about sensitive topics or politics for fear of being judged by others.

A lack of time, knowledge and confidence are the main factors preventing young Cambodians from participating in civic life

Barriers to participation also include digital skills, access to information and generation gap

Digital skills tend to be higher among men, those in urban areas and those with greater access to technology. Although the majority (87%) of young Cambodians use social media sites/apps, high use does not necessarily translate to high level skills which could limit their ability to participate or discuss online.

Access to information: Over four in ten (41%) claim they find it difficult to get information about local and national issues that matter to young people like them. This tends to be higher among women (43% compared to 38% of men) and younger age groups (51% 15-17s compared to 40% of 18-24s and 36% of 25-30s). Those who are living in rural areas and with low education levels particularly face challenges to access information and digital media. In turn this may hinder their ability to participate and discuss civic issues.

Generation Gap: Young Cambodians do not all feel comfortable discussing their opinions with elders. This may impact their ability to participate; they are less likely to agree they feel confident raising a concern with elders (84%) than with peers (90%), and feel they are less likely to be included or valued in discussions with elders in their community.

29% say they have discussed local and national issues with others and 71% have not. Barriers to discussion of local/national issues are:

Other key barriers and enablers:

- **Politics** is perceived as a hot issue but is not widely discussed. Young people report that both themselves and their family members are fearful of being connected to any political issues as it may be perceived as taking the side of a party - this causes them to worry about their security.
- Young people and media practitioners feel there is limited information or news on media relating to politics. Moreover, politics is viewed as a complicated topic to understand and engage with, and a lack of trust in related news and limited capacity to identify fact from fake news are further barriers to engagement.
- **Basic needs** are considered more important than participation, especially for those from lower socio-economic groups – livelihood is the priority, restricting time available to participate in activities in local communities.
- **Permission** to participate in civic life from family/parents can also play a role in limiting participation. Parents are more likely to be sensitive to anything about politics or corruption and restrict their children from any related activities.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Information generated from group discussion with parents.
Other key barriers and enablers:

- **Politics** is perceived as a hot issue but is not widely discussed. Young people report that both themselves and their family members are fearful of being connected to any political issues as it may be perceived as taking the side of a party – this causes them to worry about their security.

- Young people and media practitioners feel there is limited information or news on media relating to politics. Moreover, politics is viewed as a complicated topic to understand and engage with, and a lack of trust in related news and limited capacity to identify fact from fake news are further barriers to engagement.

- **Basic needs** are considered more important than participation, especially for those from lower socio-economic groups – livelihood is the priority, restricting time available to participate in activities in local communities.

- **Permission** to participate in civic life from family/parents can also play a role in limiting participation. Parents are more likely to be sensitive to anything about politics or corruption and restrict their children from any related activities.

**Key recommendations for communication**

1. **Provide practical and accessible information as well as clear signposting to relevant content around issues of importance to young people**: this will help them to improve their knowledge and confidence and encourage more participation in civic life.

2. **Use a multiplatform approach to widen the reach of the content and information**: social media (particularly Facebook) is a key distribution platform for those who can access the internet whilst TV remains important, particularly for those in rural locations, women, and younger groups (who are more likely to watch it). Offline and outreach activities also serve a clear purpose to reach those with limited access to other platforms and resources.

3. **Build on the actions already being taken among young people**: where they are participating or engaging this is more likely to be online than in person, through light-hearted and entertaining content. Work to improve young people’s knowledge and digital skills, as well as raising awareness of and tackling the spread of misinformation by educating young people to check and verify the information they consume.

4. **Use role models and relatable influencers to highlight success and inspire young people into action**: while attitudes to participation and engagement are positive, action is less common. The findings from the online research show that Cambodian youth like to follow experienced, successful people who can inspire and motivate others, and who are deemed trustworthy.

5. **Align civic participation topics to the daily life and preferences of young people and ensure content is relevant to young people from different backgrounds**: use of relevant topics may encourage people to consume content beyond entertainment, increasing their awareness of the importance of civic participation.

6. **Provide safe spaces and networks to encourage young people to come together, discuss and act**: provide places and opportunities where young people feel comfortable expressing their opinions, and create networks of like-minded people to facilitate collective discussion and action.

7. **Consider elders, parents and figures of authority as a secondary target group**: around half of young people do not believe their opinions are valued by elders, and this presents a barrier to their participation. Communication strategies should also target older groups to challenge social norms and help to encourage and enable participation from younger groups.
How can communication be tailored to young people’s differing needs?

Young Cambodians have significant differences in interests, capacity, attitudes and barriers to civic engagement. For this reason, a segmentation analysis was conducted to split people into 5 segments with distinct media and communication needs, ranging from those who are disengaged and do not feel it is their place to be involved to those who are actively participating in civic life – outline below. Understanding the demographic composition of each segment - gender, sexual orientation, disability, location etc. – helps to define each group communication needs to support civic engagement.

Disengaged: This group are least likely to use the internet or social media, are least likely to be engaging with content online, and report lower digital skills than other segments. They do not feel it is their place to be involved, and, unlike other segments, have less positive attitudes to civic participation. Interventions may need to focus on equipping them with skills and knowledge, and outreach may provide an opportunity to reach them. Communication messaging should resonate with their priorities, such as earning a living, and should be clear and easily understandable.

Disadvantaged: The second largest segment, these young Cambodians lack both opportunity and time. The disadvantages they face - particularly economically - align with their biggest aspirations, values and challenges around the importance of having enough money. Communication needs to be framed in the issues they and their peers are facing, but delivered in a light and entertaining way, highlighting the benefits of being more knowledgeable and discussing issues more.

Unbothered: With positive attitudes toward civic engagement, and comfort discussing issues of personal importance, this group represents potential to become more civically engaged, particularly as they finish their education and start their careers. Content produced for this group should be entertaining and tap into their high levels of media consumption to show how their lives fit into the wider picture, using inspirational influencers as examples. Content should also be as appealing as possible to encourage sharing and discussion with their family and friends.

Motivated: This group are motivated and discussing, but are less likely to be taking further action, owing to a lack of time, a lack of interest - including from those around them - and more cautious behaviour. This segment has higher than average use of the internet and should be clear and easily understandable.

Actively Engaged: This group are already demonstrating their ability to engage, discuss and act. Draw on this group as role models – particularly to help those in the ‘Motivated’ segment be able to act. Their higher levels of skills (leadership, confidence, and knowledge) could make them key role models for other young Cambodians. This is a highly digital literate group who are more likely to be engaging on social media and creating content; providing online content and space to voice their opinions and get involved could further benefit them.

Disengaged: 14% ‘Do not feel it is their place to be involved’
- Female, younger, rural
- Lower socio-economic status
- Lower media usage
- Less positive attitudes to civic life

Disadvantaged: 26% ‘Lacking confidence and opportunities to engage’
- Lower socio-economic status
- Lower media usage
- Lack time and opportunity to discuss or act

Unbothered: 30% ‘Immersed in their own lives, not yet interested in the bigger picture’
- O (18-24)
- Higher socio-economic status
- High media usage

Motivated: 15% ‘Discussing but struggling to engage’
- Older (25-30)
- Higher socio-economic status
- High media usage

Actively Engaged: 14% ‘Freely participating in civic life’
- Older (18-24)
- Higher socio-economic status
- High media usage

This research was prepared thanks to funding from Sida.