



SUPPORTING  
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

# **Enabling Environment**

## **Snapshot**

**Cambodia**

**March 2026**

## Context

Period covered by the report: December 2025 – March 2026

Cambodia’s civic space remained constrained during the period of reporting from December 2025 to March 2026. This situation is shaped by one-party control and the consolidation of power under the single ruling party, while the opposition party got dissolved and its leaders faced with lawsuits. Civic space is still tightened in the context of the heightened security narratives around the late 2025 border tensions with Thailand as authorities used national security justifications to restrict expression and assembly, particularly affecting journalists and activists reporting on sensitive political or territorial issues.

Civil society participation in policymaking was minimal. Public consultations were largely symbolic, and independent advocacy - especially around labour rights (e.g., the ongoing NagaWorld dispute), land rights, and environmental protection - was increasingly met with intimidation or criminal charges such as “incitement” or “plotting”.

A critical development for civil society was the sharp contraction in donor funding. Major donors reduced Official Development Assistance (ODA), and the earlier freeze and termination of many USAID programmes in 2025 continued to reverberate through 2026. Health, education, independent media, labour rights, and civil society programmes faced closures, layoffs, or severe down-scaling. The funding squeeze increased competition among CSOs and weakened their independence, as organisations became more cautious about advocacy that might jeopardise registration or access to remaining funding streams. Grassroots and provincial organisations were especially vulnerable, often unable to meet compliance costs under restrictive NGO regulations.

Labour activism (notably around casinos, garment factories, and special economic zones), land rights defence by Indigenous and rural communities, and environmental movements continued—often led by youth and women—despite high personal risk.

The legal environment remained one of the restrictive dimensions of Cambodia’s civic space. Key laws - notably the Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO) - restricted activities deemed “political”. Courts remained politicised; denial of bail, prolonged pre-trial detention, and convictions on incitement charges were common. New ministerial regulations (prakas) affecting media and online content were issued with little consultation, further narrowing legal space for independent journalism.

This restrictive environment was compounded by escalating tensions with Thailand, which culminated in a border conflict during this period. The dispute fuelled nationalist rhetoric and reinforced the government’s security-first narrative, further shrinking space for dissent and civic engagement. These dynamics created an even more challenging backdrop for civil society actors and shaped the overall enabling environment assessment.

## 1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

From December 2025 to March 2026, [mandatory registration remained the central structural limitation on freedom of association in Cambodia](#). Under LANGO, any group engaging in sustained collective activity risks being deemed unlawful if unregistered, even when operating peacefully and for public-interest purposes. International legal standards—reiterated by the UN Human Rights Committee and OHCHR—make clear that [mandatory registration is incompatible with the right to freedom of association](#) when applied to informal groups or used

to suppress dissent. Nevertheless, these standards were not reflected in Cambodian domestic practice during the reporting period.

Freedom of association was therefore not eliminated in law, but functionally constrained in practice, particularly for groups unwilling or unable to register due to political sensitivity or administrative barriers.

Rights to assembly remained constrained as the authority continued to block and refuse the rightful assembly of civil society. [The Phnom Penh administration has rejected a request by civil society organisations and unions that planned to hold the event for Women's Day on 8 March 2026](#), with about 500 participants, at Democracy Park. The authorities had recommended holding the event at their offices or another private location. The refusal came with a warning that if the event continues and "harms security, public order and social stability," the organisers will face legal action.

Restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly in Cambodia constitute violations of both the Cambodian Constitution and international law. In addition, the right by the authority to deny the requests from civil society for demonstrations, protests, and marches, is deemed disproportionate as the local authorities misinterpret the [2009 Law on Peaceful Demonstration](#), treating a "notification" requirement for assemblies as a requirement for "permission," which is illegal.

Press freedom is under attack, as several journalists have been arrested due to their work. [At least six Cambodian journalists have been detained, arrested, or charged with incitement between January and mid-February 2026](#) after reporting on border tensions and suspected online scam compounds, with two still held in pre-trial detention, according to local rights groups. The cases included Luot Sophal, a reporter in Oddar Meanchey province, who was arrested by military police on 13 February 2026, after reporting on 7 February that frontline troops were facing water shortages. Hem Vanna was arrested by Poipet military police on 3 February 2026, after reporting on a suspected online scam compound. A photographer working with Buddhist newspaper BC News in Kandal province was detained by the Ministry of Cults and Religion for nearly six hours on 9 February after he published an article about a religious programme. He was released after his publication deleted the article. Mech Dara, known for his investigative reporting into the online scam industry in Cambodia, was briefly detained by military police in Koh Kong on 11 February after photographing a mass raid in the Dara Sakor area targeting suspected scam compounds. PenhChit Media editor Prom Sophay and Sunday News publisher Seang Bunsong were arrested in Takeo province on 12 February.

By December 2025, speech and press freedom in Cambodia had reached one of its lowest points in decades. The most prominent [assessment came from Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\) in its World Press Freedom Index 2025](#), which ranked Cambodia 161st out of 180 countries, a sharp drop from 151st in [2024](#). Cambodia was categorised in the "very serious" category. RSF attributed this deterioration to the near-elimination of independent domestic media, political interference by the Ministry of Information, and the routine use of criminal law—especially incitement provisions of the Criminal Code—against journalists and commentators covering sensitive issues such as corruption, land rights, and politics.

A coalition of Cambodian and international civil society organisations, coordinated through IFEX and the Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR), warned that newly adopted [Prakas on journalistic professionalism and press cards](#) would further restrict an already fragile media environment. These regulations expanded licensing and qualification requirements to individual journalists and content creators and allowed officials wide discretion to deny or revoke press credentials, particularly affecting freelance, independent, and investigative reporters. International groups argued these rules were inconsistent with Cambodia's obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and would deepen self-censorship rather than improve professional standards.

## 2. Supportive legal and regulatory framework

Between December 2025 and March 2026, Cambodia’s legal framework for civil society remained formally stable but substantively restrictive. No major new CSO-related legislation was adopted during this period. However, intensified enforcement, use of additional laws, and political context significantly narrowed civic space.

The legal framework does not fully safeguard CSO independence. Registered CSOs were generally allowed to conduct development, humanitarian, and service-delivery activities during the reporting period, but [advocacy, human rights, labour, and environmental work remained legally vulnerable](#). Authorities retained the power to suspend activities deemed inconsistent with registered objectives or threatening public order, often without clear procedural safeguards. This uncertainty had a chilling effect, leading many CSOs to self-censor or narrowly interpret their mandates to avoid sanctions. Consequently, CSOs’ ability to freely determine and pursue activities of their choosing was significantly curtailed, despite formal legal recognition.

Cambodian law allows CSOs to receive domestic and foreign funding, maintain bank accounts, and enter funding agreements, providing a basic legal foundation for financial sustainability. However, [LANGO and related regulations impose stringent disclosure, reporting, and notification requirements regarding donor funding](#). These obligations—combined with state monitoring of financial flows—created opportunities for indirect control over CSOs, particularly those reliant on international donors. Although funding was not prohibited, regulatory complexity and financial oversight were frequently used as instruments of influence, affecting CSOs’ independence and long-term planning capacity.

## 3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Cambodia’s approaching 2029 [graduation from Least Developed Country](#) (LDC) status, coupled with a 9–17% drop in global Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2025 and severe aid contraction in late 2025/early 2026, has triggered a [drastic shift for Cambodian CSOs](#). Funding is shifting from long-term, grant-based support toward limited, competitive, and technical assistance, forcing local NGOs to restructure, diversify funding, and prioritise sustainability.

In the context of shrinking traditional donor funding and increasing regulatory pressure, civil society organisations (CSOs) in Cambodia have been exploring and, to varying degrees, using alternative sources of funding to sustain their operations. These alternatives do not replace international aid entirely but can help diversify income, reduce dependency, and improve resilience. Six alternatives for funding include philanthropic initiatives, social enterprises, providing paid services such as in the fields of advocacy, monitoring or technical assistance, merging with other CSOs into consortia, and consolidation into major NGOs. These business models are proposed in the [CSO Roadmap 2025-2035](#) developed by a group of CSOs. In addition, an online survey with CSOs on their preferred model of alternatives for funding showed that the majority chose social enterprise as the potential way of being financially resilient.

## 4. Open and responsive state

During December 2025 to March 2026, public access to government information in Cambodia remained limited, fragmented, and largely discretionary, significantly constraining civil

society's ability to engage meaningfully in policy discussions and monitor government actions. Cambodia continued to lack a comprehensive Access to Information Law. While the government acknowledges the need for transparency, stakeholders demand better alignment with international standards regarding broad information access, independent oversight, and stronger protection for whistleblowers. On 29 September 2025, the [Access to Information Working Group of civil society organisations launched a campaign on Facebook to gather public opinions on whether to support or oppose the Access to Information Law](#), aiming to promote accurate public information for citizens. As of 7 October 2025, there have been 149 Facebook accounts participating, and 145 accounts (individuals) have expressed support for the Access to Information Law, with the working group continuing its campaign both on Facebook and in person in 2026.

Between December 2025 and March 2026, CSOs in Cambodia had minimal and largely indirect participation in shaping core legal frameworks governing their work, including the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO), the Taxation Law, and accounting and auditing regulations. No substantive amendments to these laws were formally opened for inclusive public consultation during the period, and legislative and regulatory authority remained concentrated within the executive branch. [The Council for the Development of Cambodia \(CDC\) hosted a Multistakeholder Action Dialogue](#) with development partners and NGOs, focusing on the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation (GPEDC), and highlighted the progress of government efforts in strengthening the effectiveness of development cooperation. In addition, the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development Secretariat (NCDDS) organised a [national consultative workshop to review and gather inputs on the Draft Five-Year Implementation Plan \(Phase II, 2026–2030\)](#) of the National Programme for Sub-National Democratic Development (NP-SNDD). The consultation brought together a broad range of stakeholders, including CSOs engaged in governance, decentralisation, and social accountability, to ensure the plan is practical, inclusive, and responsive to local needs.

In the second national conference organized by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training on 15 December 2025, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance [appreciated](#) the efforts of the Labour Ministry, civil society, and development partners for jointly advancing objectives in line with the Pentagonal Strategy-Phase 1, which places “people” as the first key priority. This statement constitutes a rare acknowledgment of the positive contributions of civil society.

## 5. Supportive public culture and discourses on civil society

[The Cambodian government emphasised civil society as partners](#), but the treatment distinguished between CSOs considered “constructive” partners and those viewed as “political” or destabilising. Official statements and engagements routinely acknowledged CSOs involved in service delivery, humanitarian assistance, health, education, and community development, presenting them as contributors to national development and social stability. In this context, government rhetoric and media narratives valued CSOs primarily as implementers of services rather than as independent actors contributing expertise, critique, and oversight. This framing emphasises compliance, cooperation with state priorities, and political neutrality, reinforcing a narrative in which civil society's legitimacy is tied to alignment with government objectives.

In contrast, [CSOs working on human rights, labour rights, land disputes, environmental protection, governance, and accountability were frequently marginalised in official discourse](#). While not always named directly, these organisations were often implicated through rhetoric about “foreign interference,” “politicisation,” or threats to public order. Such framing weakens

the perceived legitimacy of independent advocacy and constrained pluralistic debate. Overall, government rhetoric during the period was conditionally respectful—inclusive of service-oriented CSOs but dismissive or exclusionary toward watchdog and rights-based civil society actors.

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## 6. Access to a secure digital environment

Cambodia maintained high and growing levels of internet and mobile connectivity, providing CSOs with widespread technical access to digital tools. By late 2025, [internet penetration](#) stood at approximately 67% of the population, and social media use exceeded 75%, making online platforms essential for advocacy, coordination, information dissemination, and engagement with communities. There were no nationwide internet shutdowns ordered by the Cambodian authorities during the reporting period. However, [connectivity in border regions remained fragile](#) due to cross-border disruptions linked to Thai measures targeting cybercrime, which—although imposed by Thailand—affected cross-border communications and indirectly disrupted digital operations for some Cambodian users and organisations.

Cambodia’s digital environment during this period is classified as ‘[Partly Free](#)’, characterised by persistent concerns over obstacles to access and content restriction, and violations of users’ rights. The legal framework—particularly the [Law on Telecommunications](#), criminal code provisions on incitement and disinformation, and [inter-ministerial Prakas No. 170](#)—continued to grant authorities wide powers to monitor online activity and request removal of content. Civil society actors and journalists remained vulnerable to investigation or prosecution for online expression, reinforcing an environment of self-censorship.

## Challenges and opportunities

In the upcoming months, CSOs in Cambodia will face funding uncertainty that could lead to a shortage of funding to implement their activities. This instability is compounded by continued global reductions in official development assistance and the lingering impact of major donor withdrawals in 2024-2025, [particularly the termination of large USAID programmes](#). At the same time, CSOs continue to operate under heightened administrative and legal pressure, particularly through strict enforcement of LANGO, the Law on Taxation, and the Law on Accounting and Auditing. Reporting, bank notification, and donor disclosure requirements remain burdensome and carry real risks if not complied with fully and on time. Beyond technical compliance, vague legal provisions concerning “security, stability, and public order” continue to incentivise self-censorship, especially among organisations working on governance, human rights, labour, land, and environmental issues.

However, opportunities are still open for CSOs that work on social protection, disability inclusion, education quality, climate resilience, and disaster preparedness, as government institutions still rely on CSO technical expertise in programme design, piloting, and implementation in these fields. Another near-term opportunity lies in shifting funding strategies. While traditional Western bilateral donors continue to reduce funding, multilateral banks, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank (WB) remain top donors, with a [\\$763 million ADB investment programme approved in late 2025](#) aimed at water security and urban resilience, and [\\$260 million from WB in 2026 for education, health, and energy projects](#). Under

the government's [Pentagonal Strategy](#), Cambodia is enhancing its focus on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles, aiming for high-income status through sustainable growth and aligned with [the EU ESG grant strategy](#) that embeds sustainability, social responsibility, and governance into funding.

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