

# Transparency International Cambodia

Balancing advocacy  
and service delivery  
when the space for civil  
society is restricted



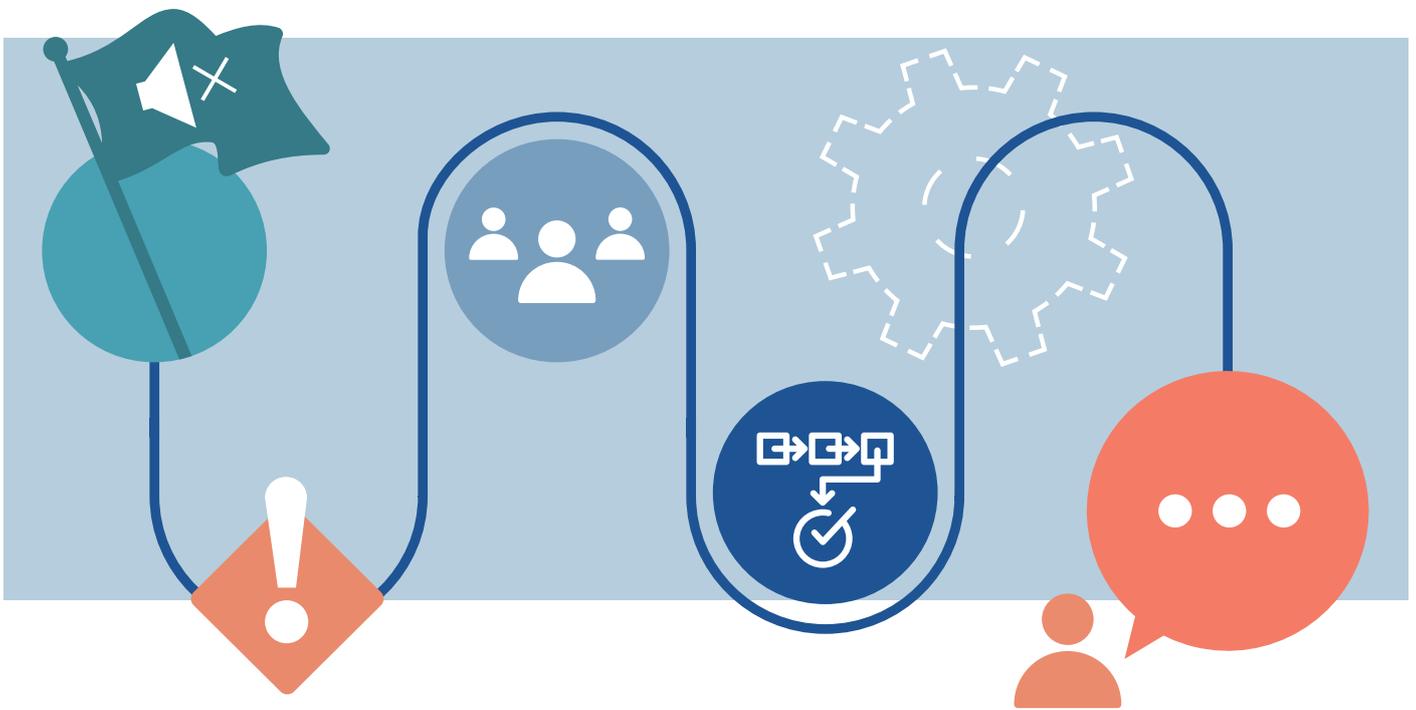
**Transparency International** is a global movement working in over 100 countries to end the injustice of corruption. Country chapters hold the powerful to account for the common good. Through research, advocacy and campaigning, they work to expose the systems and networks that enable corruption to thrive, demanding greater transparency and integrity in all areas of public life. Transparency International Cambodia was founded in 2010 by anti-corruption activists committed to the creation of an accountable and transparent Cambodia.

## Overview

In order to survive and operate in a severely restricted environment, and be resilient to attacks, Transparency International Cambodia (TI Cambodia) has had to adapt its approach. It works with individuals and institutions at all levels, including government, civil society, business, media and the wider public, in pursuit of sustainable economic development and to promote integrity and accountability in the country. By working with all stakeholders and

**balancing advocacy with strengthening of service delivery**, TI Cambodia aims to ensure a **perception of neutrality**. This approach helps to enable its ongoing access in the country whilst strengthening civil society capacity and participation, thereby **keeping the space for civil society functioning**. The International Secretariat provides direct solidarity and support through training, emergency and emotional support.





# Organisation takes action

## Trigger

The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) has ruled the country since 1979, after toppling the Khmer Rouge regime. Although elections have taken place since 1993, the CPP has remained in power.

In the 2013 election, following stronger youth engagement in the political sphere, the CPP almost lost its majority for the first time. Since then, the country has undergone a **rapid democratic decline**. Opposition party members and activists faced threats, assaults and criminal charges, and many fled the country as a result.

After targeting its political rivals, the ruling party then turned its attention to **suppressing other independent voices**, expelling international organisations, shutting down independent media outlets and intimidating civil society leaders including unions, NGOs and informal group members. The government sees civil society as a clear threat, uses restrictive laws to suppress civil society organisations (CSOs), and keeps prominent civil society actors under constant surveillance. It has also bought newspapers in order to publish pro-government media.

In response to the challenging and constrained environment, TI Cambodia has had to develop a **balanced strategy to ensure its survival** whilst still pursuing its mission to tackle corruption.

## Response

TI Cambodia has developed a strategy that involves working with all relevant stakeholders, including citizens, youth, the private sector, CSOs, **and the government**. By working with all stakeholders on an equal footing, the organisation can maintain a **perception of neutrality, protecting it from attacks** by the government and ensuring its survival and ability to operate. Stakeholder approaches include:

- **Citizens and youth**

Through TI Cambodia's 'Citizen and Youth Empowerment Programme', the capacity of people to engage with public services is strengthened. (This is one of the organisation's key programmes, cutting across multiple issues beyond public service delivery, including civic education and engagement, youth and women empowerment, citizen journalism, etc.). To encourage youth engagement with public service provision, TI Cambodia provides various trainings to young people on leadership, democracy and political literacy, governance, civic engagement, citizen journalism and the use of mixed media, equipping them with the skills and knowledge required to engage effectively. It also creates opportunities and platforms for interaction with public service providers. Small grants are disbursed to groups to take action on good governance, transparency and accountability at the community level.

- **Civil society organisations**

TI Cambodia collaborates with other CSOs at the local and international level. It is a member of multiple coalitions, such as a CSO working group focused on the national budget where it engages in information-sharing and collective action. TI Cambodia also coordinates with other international civil society organisations (ICSOs) working on similar issues in the country, to enable joint interventions and synergies, identify gaps and avoid duplicating efforts.

- **Private sector**

TI Cambodia works with business associations and individual companies to build capacity and raise awareness of – and support the integration of – policies and practices that uphold transparency and integrity, as well as raising awareness around issues such as responsible financing, business compliance and money laundering.

- **Media**

TI Cambodia works with multiple media organisations in the country. It has provided grants to support local media organisations as part of its approach to amplify its work, for instance on transparency, national budget and tax issues, public service and youth engagement. The organisation is widely quoted in both local and international media on issues related to transparency and corruption.

- **Public sector and government**

TI Cambodia works with relevant government ministries (for example the Ministry of Interior) on the reform of national systems. They build capacity within departments and supply tools to enable more transparent public service delivery. The organisation has found that there are individuals within these ministries, working at the technical level, who are willing to work with CSOs to improve internal policies, systems and service delivery.

The **research** that TI Cambodia carries out on corruption is **underpinning all of these engagements**. It surveys public opinion on levels of corruption, analyses the integrity of public systems and services such as healthcare and the public budget, and tracks youth participation in civic activities. When new reports are released, TI Cambodia must frame the results as unbiased and scientifically produced, having used indicators that reflect the status of corruption in the country.

Alongside the release of research, they communicate with the ministries they have built relationships with in order to highlight that the results are not aligned with any political agenda, but that they reflect the reality on the ground, a reality that TI Cambodia wants to help the government to improve through ongoing support and engagement.

On the whole, **those working at the technical level** in the government understand their own context and the effects of corruption, so **there is opportunity and space to connect with them** and work on the issue. There are some government departments that are critical of TI Cambodia, particularly the Anti-Corruption Commission which normally rejects their research and accuses the organisation of serving foreign interests, but there are others who are willing to cooperate and partner in projects.



### Different roles for different actors

There are some who question why TI Cambodia would continue to engage with the government. In response, TI Cambodia tries to underline the **long-term nature of their approach**. Their objective is to support all relevant stakeholders in pursuit of more transparent systems. Given that their focus is on improving the policy environment and service provision, TI Cambodia sees the benefit of engaging with willing government departments and officials, in order to **build relationships and leverage opportunities over the long-term**. They try to demonstrate how this approach can sit alongside more hard line approaches that others may use, as part of an **ecology of civil society responses**. They leverage the opportunities of working with the government to **gain access to youth on the ground**, to then strengthen capacity and awareness amongst younger populations on the issue of corruption. In this way, TI Cambodia is taking a long-term approach by encouraging younger generations to be agents and ambassadors of change in the future.

TI Cambodia's approach has been informed by a deep understanding of the context on the ground, and the need to adapt to that context in order to find spaces to operate in. However, the Transparency International Secretariat and other country chapters have shown **support and solidarity** in various ways:

- The Secretariat and other chapters have been instrumental in providing both regular and emergency support via regional workshops, trainings and online meetings.
- The Secretariat has provided financial and technical assistance, for example via **cyber-security training and security and evacuation protocols**.

- The Secretariat also issues **statements of support**, and coordinates solidarity from other institutions for the national chapters when deemed necessary.
- **Emotional support** is maintained through constant contact. The Secretariat's support and solidarity ensures that national chapters **do not feel isolated**. It lends a sense of security and strength, so that the chapter can carry on with its core mission.

## Response in practice

TI Cambodia has undertaken a **project to promote inclusive and accountable public service**. Under this project, they work with the Ministry of Interior on capacity building for relevant officials and public service providers in different regions. The Ministry of Interior manages sub-national authorities and TI Cambodia has **worked with them to train officers** on accountable and gender-responsive public service. These officers have then been deployed to train local service providers.

Simultaneously, TI Cambodia is **strengthening the capacity of selected youth** in those regions, conducting training on citizen journalism, and on how to use data to advocate for accountable and inclusive public services. In addition to strengthening their skills and capacities, they have facilitated the necessary platforms for youth to interact and work with relevant local public service providers on ways to improve

delivery of services. Youth collate issues from their communities, and can then meet and talk with providers about the challenges and potential solutions. Without the framework of the project and the cooperation of the ministry, this type of access and engagement would be very hard to develop.

In partnership with the Ministry of Interior, TI Cambodia has **developed a mobile app that allows citizens to interact with public service providers**, to get information about specific public services, report issues and raise suggestions about solutions. The Ministry has access to this as well, so that they can see the overview of the challenges being raised and the interactions taking place. In this way, TI Cambodia is **building the capacity of 'both sides'** – enabling citizens and civil society to raise demands, and enabling the Ministry to respond to those needs.



# Organisational learnings

## Outcomes

- ✓ In general, the balanced approach that TI Cambodia has taken by engaging with all stakeholders as equals has helped to **secure its reputation as a neutral institution**, mitigating the government's misperception that TI Cambodia is somehow affiliated with the opposition party or linked to foreign interests. Relationship building of this kind enables TI Cambodia to continue its interventions in the country, and to avoid crackdowns or attacks.
- ✓ The project that TI Cambodia has initiated with the Ministry of Interior is still underway, and so it is challenging to draw conclusions about the extent of the impact achieved at this stage. What they have seen, however, is that the project has **expanded narrow civic space**, by enabling youth, particularly those living in rural areas, to engage in more social and civic activities.
- ✓ By partnering with the Ministry of Interior, TI Cambodia is **able to work with relevant authorities at different levels**. Without such a partnership, CSOs normally need permission from national or sub-national authorities in order to implement their programmes. Working without those permissions would most likely result in surveillance and the interruption of activities by authorities.



## CHALLENGES

### Fragility

Anytime TI Cambodia releases new reports or research reflecting the levels of corruption in Cambodia, the country chapter's relationship with the government is jeopardised (given the government's sensitivity to criticism and aversion to accountability). Calculating how far they can go with their advocacy, in order to maintain their neutrality and avoid the risks associated with speaking out, is a constant balancing act. On the other hand, if their relationship with the government becomes too close, they risk becoming trapped and unable to speak out at all. Engagement therefore has to be measured, with a relationship that is not too close, but workable. They manage this by focusing all engagement with ministries on capacity building for transparency, accountability and integrity alone. In that way, the relationships are not so close as to constrain TI Cambodia's programmes, and they can still act in pursuit of their main mission.

### Lack of government capacity

The government ministries and offices are understaffed and under-resourced. This means that they welcome resources and capacity-building from TI Cambodia, however it also means that initiating any joint work requires high levels of negotiation. The lack of capacity makes it difficult for departments to maintain new activities, and they often want more support than TI Cambodia can provide. For example, when introducing the mobile app for public engagement around service delivery, the department in question was concerned about how they would continue to operate and maintain the app, and wanted more technical support from TI Cambodia on this.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Evidence-based advocacy

When employing a balanced approach in order to cement a perception of neutrality, it is vital that advocacy is data-driven or evidence-based. Any statements or positions must be based on research and facts on the ground, rather than on opinion alone. In a space that is so narrow, it's vital that everything is backed up by the research and evidence, so that a policy position that differs from the current practice or that is critical of the current reality is not a position against the government, but rather a position based on the facts. This is constraining for the organisation, as it means they are not able to express perceptions and opinions freely. However, by working with all stakeholders, and not favouring one actor over another, TI Cambodia maintains the legitimacy to be critical.

### Finding the right level

TI Cambodia's work with the government is based on relationships with reform-minded officials and technical staff within ministries and departments rather than with those in top positions. TI Cambodia has built relationships with specific offices and mid-level government staff who understand that corruption is an issue and who want to see reform. More generalised pushback or stigmatisation from, for example the Anti-Corruption Commission, does not tend to damage that engagement.

### Coalitions are a form of protection

TI Cambodia has also found that working in coalition with other CSOs on certain issues ensures that single organisations are not so easily targeted and that together their voices are stronger and louder. This has been an important protective strategy when advocating on critical issues such as corruption and transparency in such a limited space.

Solidarity Playbook

# Transparency International Cambodia

Sarah Pugh and Deborah Doane

November 2020



International  
Civil Society Centre

In partnership with



Sweden

Sverige



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
INTERNATIONAL  
DEMOCRACY PROGRAMME



FORD  
FOUNDATION