

Cambodia's Successful COVID-19 Response: A Showcase of a Whole-of-Society Approach

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From public health policy measures to non-pharmaceutical interventions and vaccination rollout campaigns, Cambodia has stood out from the crowd, including its neighboring countries, and has become one of the most successful cases in the region in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Since May 15 2022, Cambodia reported no new infections and zero active cases for more than 50 consecutive days until a few cases of the new variant were recently reported. In the current circumstance, socio-economic activities in the country have returned to a new normalcy, with mandatory mask being lifted, although certain precautionary measures remain in place. These tremendous achievements are accredited to the efforts of the Cambodian government, development partners, private sector, and Cambodian people for working collaboratively to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Heng & Ang, 2020). The participation of individuals, private sector, civil society, the international community, and other spheres of the society beyond the public sector is regarded as a whole-of-society approach. These actors' interactions can shape public policies, influence policy implementation, and determine the level of success and failure of COVID-19 responses. This article aims to discuss how Cambodia can relatively successfully combat COVID-19 by looking at the issue through a multi-dimensional lens of a whole-of-society approach.

Measures Taken by the Cambodian Government

Since first detected in late December 2019, COVID-19 has become a global pandemic that presents enormous challenges to both the public health and socio-economic system in the entire world. Given the high probability of being seriously affected by COVID-19, Cambodia, as a developing country with limited resources, has surprised the international community by effectively and skillfully controlling the pandemic. Despite initially downplaying the severity of the virus, the Cambodian government took pre-emptive measures to contain the pandemic. Policy interventions related to public health were collaboratively consulted with relevant international organizations with expertise in public health emergencies, particularly the World Health Organization (WHO). The government had also immediately undertaken a series of public health policies and measures which turned out to be effective. These include effective surveillance, intensive contact tracing, extensive health screening at border checkpoints, mandatory mask wearing, and compulsory self-isolation and quarantine (Heng, 2020a). The Cambodian Ministry of Health had also convened regular press conferences with daily information sharing on its official social media platforms.

Alongside the health policy measures, non-pharmaceutical interventions were initially executed and gradually expanded to all sectors of society, whether in educational, religious, and traditional

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events, manufacturing activities, as well as tourism and entertainment industries. All education institutions at all levels, both public and private, were ordered to close until the pandemic was under control. However, the government was then criticized for the fact that the school closures were too long, which could affect the whole education system and future workforce. Mass gatherings, including religious events, Khmer New Year celebrations, wedding ceremonies, and other grand meetings were all cancelled or prohibited. Entertainment venues such as casinos, KTV, nightclubs, and bars, together with all tourist attraction sites, were ordered by local authorities to temporarily shut down to contain the spread of COVID-19 (Heng, 2020a).

To ensure policy coherence and implementation across ministries and agencies, a rigorous government structure was formulated with a whole-of-government approach, a prerequisite for the successful implementation of a whole-of-society approach. The national COVID-19 committee was established and directed by the Prime Minister himself while its standing committee was chaired by one of the Deputy Prime Ministers. The inter-ministerial committee, a national-level one, was led by the Health Minister while municipal-provincial COVID-19 committees were created for the sub-national level. Apart from regular briefings hosted by the Ministry of Health, the Prime Minister also appeared to release short interventions on every special occasion, including encouraging the public to remain vigilant, accelerating vaccination campaigns, and launching relevant social protection schemes. The committee on COVID-19 vaccination and vaccine procurement were instituted while a number of sub-committees were also established to uphold a separate and clear-cut division of tasks (WHO, 2020). Meanwhile, the State of Emergency Law was promulgated in April 2020, and the Law on Measures to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 and other Dangerous Infectious Diseases was adopted by the National Assembly in March 2021. However, these moves were publicly criticized by human rights groups for restricting human rights

and freedom, and depriving them of their privacy (Heng, 2020b, 2020c).

As the government acknowledged COVID-19 vaccines as a prominent means to invert the serious pandemic situation and circumvent the underlying social and economic stagnation, a nation-wide vaccination program was launched in early February 2021, which then quickly accelerated, followed by a series of booster shot campaigns, and extended to children from the age of three. Cambodia's vaccination rate has outpaced most of the Southeast Asian countries and many of the world's wealthiest nations (Murg, 2021). The early inoculation campaign was not smoothly supported by the public since the Chinese-made vaccines, namely Sinopharm and Sinovac, were not yet approved by WHO at that time. To build the public trust, the government deployed a prompt response by ordering a mandatory vaccination program for all civil servants. Following a variety of COVID-19 vaccines donated from many development partners and via the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility, especially with the approval of emergency use authorization of COVID-19 vaccines from WHO, the vaccination rollout has been tremendously successful. Various types of COVID-19 vaccines were provided to all Cambodian adults and children from three years old, and the fourth booster shot was also initiated (Bangkok Post, 2022). Vaccines provided through bilateral cooperation and COVAX Facility represented one-third of the total, whereas the other two-thirds were bought from China, using the government budget. This was then perceived by some analysts as an overreliance on Chinese-made vaccines (Hutt, 2021b). Despite the criticism, Cambodia has achieved remarkable success in its vaccination efforts. As of September 2022, a total of 43.1 million doses were given to the Cambodian population of around 16 million people, making the rate of fully vaccinated population at 94.8% (Ministry of Health, 2022).

While containing the pandemic, the Cambodian government also needs to sustain the socio-economic welfare and livelihood of the Cambodian people. COVID-19 has opened a window of

opportunity to accelerate the National Social Protection Policy Framework implementation with due regard to the fast-evolving circumstance. The government has by far activated nine phases of Cash Transfer for Poor and Vulnerable Households within a 10-month period, accounting for USD 683.64 million. By June 2022, approximately 2.7 million people from 687,372 households received cash relief benefits (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2022). Meanwhile, about 5,576 workers from 42 enterprises, particularly in the garment and tourist sectors, which were most affected by the pandemic, received stimulus packages distributed from the government, and the relief funds were rolled out 78 times, ranging from USD 15 to USD 40 based on each individual working contract (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2022).

Contributions from the International Community

From the beginning of the pandemic, development partners have played a central role in facilitating and providing technical and advisory support to the Cambodian government. In particular, WHO, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (US-CDC) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) were all actively engaging in briefings, guiding policy implementation, and strengthening the government's capacity to combat COVID-19. The regular briefings co-hosted by the government and development partners reflect their trusted partnership and long-term relationships that have been built upon for decades. WHO has deployed their officers to provide technical support on risk assessment and epidemiological surveillance to the Health Ministry while continuing to provide technical advice and

engagement with both health and non-health sectors. As the US-CDC works on adjusting the surveillance system, UNICEF continues to support the government in risk communication and community engagement at both the national and sub-national levels. Their role in advisory and technical support has served a critical function to facilitate disease surveillance and risk assessment, especially to inform policy and decision-making (UNICEF Cambodia, 2020).

The successful vaccination campaign should also be accredited to the tremendous support from major development partners in distributing vaccines, which granted the Cambodian government an early access to a large portion of vaccines from both bilateral cooperation and COVAX Facility. More than 12 million doses of vaccines, valued at approximately USD 86 million, were channeled from major bilateral partners. China is the largest donor with 8.3 million doses, valued at USD 58 million, while Australia is the second top donor, providing 2.3 million doses, equivalent to USD 21 million. Japan, the United Kingdom, and Poland contributed 1.7 million doses of AstraZeneca in total, with the value of USD 7.7 million. Of the 20 million doses committed by China, 5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines arrived in Cambodia in late March 2022 as part of its first batch (Khmer Times, 2022). Cambodia is expected to receive a total of over 57 million doses of vaccines from China, half of which is through bilateral donations (Khmer Times, 2022). Additional vaccines were contributed by Hungary (523,100), India (125,000), Italy (1 million), and the United States (2 million). Table 1 provides a summary of COVID-19 vaccines donated to Cambodia through bilateral cooperation and COVAX Facility.

Table 1: COVID-19 Vaccines Under Bilateral Cooperation and COVAX Facility

| Development Partners | Type of Vaccines | Amount of Vaccines | Total Value (USD) |
|------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Bilateral Cooperation | | | |
| Australia | Pfizer-BioNTech | 2.350.530 | 20.916.031 |
| China | Sinovac & Sinopharm | 8.300.000 | 58.100.000 |
| Japan | AstraZeneca | 1.000.000 | 4.490.000 |
| Poland | AstraZeneca | 300.000 | 1.347.000 |
| UK | AstraZeneca | 415.000 | 1.863.530 |
| Total | | 12.365.530 | 86.716.561 |

| COVAX Facility | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| COVAX | AstraZeneca | 324.000 | 1.454.760 |
| | Sinovac | 424.800 | 2.973.600 |
| | Moderna | 188.160 | 1.881.600 |
| Japan | AstraZeneca | 308.000 | 1.382.920 |
| Netherland | AstraZeneca | 290.400 | 1.303.896 |
| Republic of Korea | AstraZeneca | 324.000 | 1.454.760 |
| United States of America | Johnson & Johnson | 1.060.100 | 10.601.000 |
| Total | | 2.919.460 | 21.052.536 |
| Grand Total | | 15.284.990 | 107.769.097 |

Source: Royal Government of Cambodia (2022)

The international community has directed their financial resources fully or partly to emergency responses, particularly to support the health sector such as (a) case detection and management; (b) medical supplies and equipment; and (c) preparedness, capacity building, and training. Cambodia received an emergency assistance of about USD 68 million in 2020 and USD 94 million in 2021. In 2020, China was a top donor with USD 28.1 million, followed by Japan (USD 18.7 million) and UN agencies (USD 10 million). In 2021, China remained a leading partner that disbursed USD 30 million, followed by Australia (USD 28.7 million) and the United States (USD 16.6 million).

Development partners have allocated and/or re-designed their assistance in line with the Cambodian government's efforts to accelerate socio-economic recovery. In 2020, the international

community disbursed USD 665 million to promote Cambodia's socio-economic recovery (see Table 2). Major contributions come from the Asian Development Bank (USD 263 million), Japan (USD 234 million), and Korea (USD 52.8 million). Some partners reallocated their resources to COVID-19-related activities while others have mainstreamed essential components to mitigate collateral damage in the affected sectors (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2022). The UN agencies extended their disbursement from USD 27 million in 2020 to USD 33 million in 2021 while the Australian support rose from USD 19 million to more than USD 25 million in the respective years. This financial support has underpinned Cambodia's rapid recovery in the post-pandemic world. Table 2 shows the support for Cambodia's emergency responses to COVID-19 and its socio-economic recovery.

Table 2: Support for Emergency Responses and Socio-Economic Recovery

Support for Emergency Responses (USD)

| Development Partners | 2020 Actual | 2021 Estimated | 2022 Projected |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Australia | 2,693,000 | 28,705,000 | 4,994,000 |
| China | 28,100,000 | 30,000,000 | |
| Czech Republic | 107,000 | - | - |
| GAVI | - | 248,000 | - |
| Ireland | 397,000 | 535,000 | - |
| Japan | 18,721,000 | 1,902,000 | - |
| Switzerland | 272,000 | 926,000 | - |
| UK | 20,000 | 1,952,000 | 21,000 |
| USA | 7,990,000 | 16,602,000 | 11,891,000 |
| UN Agencies | 10,007,000 | 13,262,000 | 9,020,000 |
| Total | 68,307,000 | 94,132,000 | 25,926,000 |

Support for Socio-Economic Recovery (USD)

| Development Partners | 2020 Actual | 2021 Estimated | 2022 Projected |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| ADB | 263,517,000 | 15,178,000 | 1,800,000 |
| Australia | 18,998,000 | 25,289,000 | 21,785,000 |
| EU/EC | 4,326,000 | 10,880,000 | 8,827,000 |
| Germany | 6,518,000 | 16,191,000 | 9,668,000 |
| Japan | 234,017,000 | - | - |
| Republic of Korea | 52,849,000 | 2,731,000 | 1,630,000 |
| USA | 18,521,000 | 20,970,000 | 17,945,000 |
| UN Agencies | 27,460,000 | 33,723,000 | 28,330,000 |
| World Bank | 28,336,000 | 13,450,000 | 10,998,000 |
| Others | 10,878,000 | 8,919,000 | 3,538,000 |
| Total | 665,420,000 | 147,331,000 | 104,521,000 |

Source: Royal Government of Cambodia (2022)

Support from the Public

Cambodia's success in weathering the COVID-19 pandemic can also be explained by tremendous support from the public (Heng & Ang, 2020). Since the beginning, the general public has supported the government with its health policy measures and non-pharmaceutical interventions. For example, people with direct contact or suspicious of being infected have come forward to conduct testing and follow public health protocols. From mandatory mask-wearing to testing, self-isolation and quarantine, average Cambodians have cooperated well with the authorities. Private businesses have also complied with the government's restrictions and restrained their activities with designated scope. The public education campaigns have, moreover, helped facilitate a better understanding of disease transmission and social distancing measures while addressing misinformation and fake news involving the pandemic and vaccination. Although the country experienced a series of lockdowns, which saw individual freedoms being restricted and businesses facing immediate challenges, the Cambodian people remained corporative and vigilant and continued to comply with the government's regulations and COVID-19 containment measures.

In times of crisis, strong public support from civil servants and local business elites was demonstrated via donations to fund Cambodia's COVID-19 response efforts. After the Prime Minister announced the donation of his seven-month salary to COVID-19 National Committee, other government officials followed his lead and pledged to donate their salary (Heng, 2020a). Although this initiative was perceived as kindness, compassion, and the act of a whole-of-society approach, this move was criticized as a part of an underlying patron-client relation in Cambodia. Many grass-root government officials, most of whom depend on salary to support their family while coping with the prevalent challenges unleashed by COVID-19, may be seen under pressure to donate their salary for fear of not being viewed as a staunch supporter of the government (Heng, 2020c).

Meanwhile, major local business tycoons had pledged their donations to support the government's purchase of COVID-19 vaccines and efforts to combat COVID-19. Just a day after the Prime Minister launched a fundraising initiative for purchasing COVID-19 vaccines, the government received more than USD 30 million as patriotic donations from local business magnates (Xinhua, 2020). Despite being seen as one of the crucial engagements of the private sector with the government, this conduct was criticized for upholding powerful entrepreneurs in the politics of business for the connected, but not for the bereft (Hutt, 2021a). However, the government emphasized that the fund-raising initiative well reflects the Cambodian culture of sharing and the spirit of social solidarity from patriotic well-to-do people.

Conclusion

The recent global epidemiological and economic catastrophe posed by COVID-19 presents both significant challenges and a window of opportunity for comprehensive reforms in the health sector and social solidarity in Cambodia. Public concerns were prevalent in the early period of the pandemic due to Cambodia's limited medical, financial, and human resources. WHO warned that COVID-19 would put developing countries with a weak public health system under greater stress. However, there have been opportunities in the crisis as Cambodia has been seen trying to transform challenges into opportunities and mitigate associated risks to the least possible. Previous investments in the health security system have also paid off, enabling a robust response to the public health crisis. Furthermore, collective efforts of the government, development partners, private sector, and the public have reinforced the concept of the whole-of-society approach.

Although prompt measures deployed by the government were considerably successful, some criticisms were raised upon certain policy implementation. Some policies were a too-quick response, which was somehow inconsistent with the international and scientific procedures. One of

the major concerns in the early pandemic was the use of a Chinese-made COVID-19 vaccine, Sinopharm, which was approved for emergency use by the Ministry of Health in early February 2021. The vaccination campaign was initiated since then, followed by the use of Sinovac vaccines in April even though WHO only approved their uses later in May and June 2021, respectively. Without WHO's approval, people were hesitant to get the shot, yet the WHO representative in Cambodia had worked closely with the Ministry of Health to ensure that this critical move did not create any harmful impact on the public health. Similarly, Cambodia was among the earliest countries that provided booster shots before the recommendations of WHO. There was also a question raised around the interval period between vaccine doses, which were thought to be short and less consistent with other countries. This was later adjusted by the MoH to follow the common international practices.

The response efforts toward COVID-19 provide a profound insight into the so-called whole-of-society approach. Such remarkable achievements have mirrored the government's political credentials, coupled with the overwhelming support from the international community and the public. They also present a prime example for implementing any public policies and development projects. First and foremost, rather than using a single-dimension approach, executing any policies or implementing any development projects requires a multi-dimensional assessment from all aspects of the society. In this instance, COVID-19 can be seen beyond a public health emergency. The Cambodian government has looked into the matter from different angles and addressed a package of related things, rather than isolating them. Second, it is not uncommon that policy incoherence and implementation inconsistency happen along the way at any stage. It is vitally important to keep the communication channel open with regular up-to-date information. This can help reduce the misinterpretation of policy instructions and combat the spread of fake news and misinformation. Third, it has been proven that inclusive participation from

all spheres of the society is a critical component to achieve effective implementation of all types of public policies. To have constructive dialogues with development partners and get their buy-in has already been an uneasy task while gaining the unweaving support and steadfast confidence from the public is an all-pervasive challenge. Cambodia's COVID-19 response illustrates that the Cambodian government is capable of doing things, and therefore it had better apply a whole-of-society approach into other policy implementations.

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