
Latest Report on Cambodia

Child Protection System in Cambodia

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I. RATIONALE

The Cambodia's commitment to safeguarding the rights and well-being of children is reflected in the "National Policy on Child Protection System" lays the challenges faced by children such as violence, exploitation, and the impacts of poverty and domestic issues.

The policy sets forth key strategies aimed at enhancing legal frameworks, building human capital, and ensuring effective service delivery in child protection. It emphasizes the needs for a comprehensive child protection system requiring collaborative work with various stakeholders, including government bodies, civil society, and families.

While, the latest General Population Census of Cambodia 2019 shows a decline in the growth rate of the child population, Cambodia is still a young society where children constitute 38.5 percent of the population, which is more than six million, and nearly half (46.6 percent) of the Cambodian population is younger than 24 years old.

Over the past two decades, Cambodia has made good progress and became the lower middle-income country in 2025. While economic growth brought a rise in living standards, about 17.8 percent of Cambodians live below the poverty line. With 81 percent of all jobs considered vulnerable, particularly in the informal labor market, 80 percent of enterprises informal, and most agricultural households relying on subsistence farming. Children are particularly at risk, with almost half (48.7%) of Cambodia's population aged 0-17 years falling within the definition of multidimensionally poor based on the Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS) 2014 data.

Over the past two decades, considerable progress has been made in advancing the well-being of children and families. Nonetheless, substantial efforts are still required to fully uphold children's rights and to guarantee equitable access to opportunities and essential services for all children in Cambodia, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

II. RESPONDING FRAMEWORK

Many children in Cambodia face significant risks, including child labor, domestic violence, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation. While Cambodia is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the government is obligated to protect and promote the rights of children, whereby having a strong protection system can ensure the mechanisms in place include legal, social, and community-based to identify, report and response to prevent the risks and help to enforce the rights of children are met at national and community levels.

Given that Cambodia remains in the high levels of poverty, vulnerability to exploitation, and weak institutional support in some areas, it is very essential for the country to have child protection systems in place for safeguarding the rights, safety, and well-being of children. The systems aim to prevent and respond to all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children.

Developing a Child Protection System (CPS) in Cambodia requires a multi-sectoral approach involving government agencies, NGOs, communities, and international partners.

1. Legal and Policy Framework

To safeguard children's rights and well-being, Cambodia has designed a robust legal and policy framework that encompasses international treaties, national laws, and strategic policies, all aimed to create a safe environment for children to thrive.

International Commitments:

In 1992, Cambodia affirmed its dedication to upholding children's rights by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). By adopting the optional protocols concerning the involvement of children in armed conflict and the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography reinforced the Cambodia's commitment to the protection of children's rights, and well-being.

National Legal Framework:

At the national level, Cambodia has enacted several laws and policies to protect children, include:

- Cambodian Constitution: Protection of children's rights
- Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims (2005): Addresses domestic violence and sets forth measures for victim protection.
- Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (2008): Criminalizes human trafficking and sexual exploitation, with provisions for victim support.

- Labor Law (1997): Prohibits child labour and sets the minimum age for employment.
- Education Law (2007): Mandates free and compulsory education for children.
- Law on Juvenile Justice (2016): Establishes a child-friendly justice system focusing on rehabilitation over punishment.
- Child Protection Policy (MoSVY, 2019)
- National Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children (2017-2021, extended)

2. Institutional Framework

A robust child protection system requires coordination among multiple stakeholders:

- Government Bodies:
 - Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) – Lead agency.
 - Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) – Gender & child rights.
 - Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) – School-based protection.
 - Ministry of Interior (MoI) – Police & anti-trafficking units.
- Local Governance:
 - Commune Councils & Village Chiefs – Community-level monitoring.
 - Social Workers & Local NGOs – Frontline responders.

3. Strategic Policies and Plans

The Royal Government of Cambodia has developed comprehensive policies to guide child protection efforts:

- National Policy on Child Protection System (2019–2029): Outlines a vision for a child protection system that includes prevention, intervention, and response mechanisms, emphasizing the role of various stakeholders in safeguarding children.
- Action Plan for Improving Alternative Care (2023–2027): Aims to reduce institutional care and promote family-based alternatives, with guidelines for reintegration and closure of alternative care facilities.
- Cambodian Child Online Protection Guidelines (2023): Provides directives for the digital technology industry to prevent and respond to online child sexual exploitation and other forms of violence against children.

In 2024, Cambodia launched a comprehensive training curriculum for its social service workforce, focusing on child protection. This initiative aims to equip professionals with the necessary skills to address child violence and exploitation effectively. By enhancing the capacity of social workers and other service providers, Cambodia is taking significant steps towards creating a more robust child

protection system.

III. INSTITUTIONAL AND COMMUNITY-BASED CARE

The two very different approaches to child protection: one rooted in centralized systems like orphanages, and the other focused on local, family-and community-driven solutions, have been applied in Cambodia society.

Historically, Cambodia relied heavily on orphanages, often misused as shelters for children from poor families, not necessarily orphans. According to the studies, around 80% of children in these institutions have at least one living parent and long-term institutional care can damage children's emotional, cognitive, and social development.

Institutional care refers to residential care facilities (RCFs) where children live full-time, typically due to poverty, family separation, or abuse. Comparing to other countries in the region, Cambodia still has one of the highest rates of children in residential care.

However, in recent years, the country has been transitioning from reliance on institutions to a more child-centered, community-based approach.

- Government and NGOs are shifting toward family-based care and community protection.
- Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPMs), supported by NGOs, help detect, prevent, and respond to abuse and exploitation locally.

The community-based care model emphasizes supporting children within families and communities, reducing the need for institutionalization. The model includes:

- Kinship care: Relatives taking care of children when parents are unable.
- Foster care: State-supported placement in non-relative families.
- Family-strengthening services: Social services aimed at preventing separation by addressing poverty, health, or abuse.

IV. INSTITUTIONAL REFORM : Moving Towards family-Based Care

Cambodia has recognized the need to transition from institutional care to family-based alternatives. These efforts aim to provide children with a more supportive and stable environment, aligning with international standards and best practices.

In collaboration with organizations like UNICEF, the government, has been working on reforms to close unnecessary residential care institutions and promote reintegration of children into family settings.

1. Prevention Strategies

Preventing child abuse, exploitation, and neglect requires:

- Community Awareness Programs:
 - Educate parents & children on rights, abuse risks, and reporting.
 - Engage religious leaders, schools, and media in awareness campaigns.
- School-Based Interventions:
 - Integrate child protection into school curricula.
 - Train teachers on identifying and reporting abuse.
 - Establish child-friendly schools with reporting mechanisms.
- Economic Support:
 - Reduce child labor & trafficking risks through poverty alleviation programs.

2. Response Mechanisms

A strong reporting and response system is critical:

- Helplines & Reporting Channels:
 - Strengthen Cambodia's National Child Helpline (1288).
 - Promote community-based reporting (e.g., via village committees).
- Case Management:
 - Develop standardized case referral pathways (health, legal, psychosocial).
 - Train social workers on trauma-informed care.
- Shelters & Rehabilitation:
 - Expand safe shelters for abused/ trafficked children.
 - Provide psychosocial support & reintegration programs.

3. Data Management & Monitoring

- Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS+):
 - Digitize case tracking for better coordination.
 - Ensure data privacy and ethical reporting.
- Research & Evaluation:
 - Conduct regular surveys on child protection risks (e.g., violence, online exploitation).
 - Monitor progress using indicators aligned with SDG 16.2 (ending abuse & violence).

4. Partnerships & Funding

- Government and NGO Collaboration:

- Strengthen partnerships with UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision, etc.
- Engage the private sector in funding child protection programs.
- • International Support:
 - Seek technical assistance from ASEAN & UN agencies.
 - Advocate for donor funding (e.g., EU, USAID).

V. CHALLENGES

Cambodia has made commendable strides in reforming its child protection system, focusing on reducing institutional care, enhancing community involvement, and building professional capacity. However, challenges such as limited social work training, cultural barriers to reporting, and the need for comprehensive data systems persist. Addressing these issues requires continued collaboration between government agencies, civil society, and international organizations to create a protective environment for all children.

Significant challenges include:

- Weak law enforcement leads to underreporting of abuse, often due to cultural stigma or lack of trust in authorities.
- Limited social workers contribute to insufficient child-focused services, especially mental health support. The shortage of qualified social workers, with many lacking formal trainings, hinder effective case management and intervention.
- Insufficient funding.
- Coordination gaps between local government, NGOs, and national authorities.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Although, the child protection system is evolving, with a growing emphasis on prevention, family-based care, and professionalizing the workforce, Cambodia's systematic issues like poverty, cultural attitudes, and limited infrastructure continue to affect its reach and impact. To ensure a child in Cambodia is truly protected, more than just laws are needed, it requires empowered communities, well-trained professionals, and sustained political and social commitment.

Efforts are underway to address this issue through training programs for social workers and other stakeholders in health, education, justice, and child protection sectors. These initiatives aim to enhance the capacity of professionals to handle cases related to violence, juvenile crime, and institutional care.

1. Pilot Programs: Start in high-risk settings and provinces (e.g., cross-border provinces for trafficking, urban areas for street children).
2. Capacity Building: Train police, teachers, and local leaders.
3. Public Awareness: Launch nationwide campaigns (TV, radio, social media).
4. Expand social work education: Both government and NGOs work collaboratively to provide trainings to in-service social work professionals and inspire new generation to chose this career.
5. Monitoring & Evaluation: Set up a national child protection database.
6. Advocate for budget allocation: As Cambodia has become a lower middle-income country in 2025, the external funding has gradually cut down. The country should double the efforts to advocate for financial support internally.

References:

MoSVY: Child protection policy, 2019

RGC: National Policy on Child Protection System 2019-2029

UNICEF: Action plan for child protection, 2022

UNICEF: Cambodian child protection guidelines