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Briefing Note

The Effective COVID-19 Policies of Cambodia and Laos: The Whole of Society Approach

Date: 07 September 2023

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Table 1 statistics on the Cambodian and Lao responses to COVID-19 are notable with respect to high recovery and vaccination rates along with low rates of deaths relative to the overall confirmed cases as reported to the World Health Organization (WHO). Given their relatively limited respective public health infrastructures [1] [2], such performances exceeded general expectations from the international community.

An examination into factors explaining their successes can be beneficial in both showcasing good practices and allowing higher visibility into how external supports can be properly channelled into areas of needs to maximize the effectiveness of international support in future crises. This review will highlight the Whole-of-Society Approach, in which government authorities — working across related departments for common or complementary goals — engage with relevant stakeholders inclusive of individuals, families, communities, civil society, academia, media, associations, private sectors, and development partners (states and intergovernmental organisations) to work towards a broader shared objective of social or national significance [3] — in this case combating COVID-19.

1. Cambodia

Apart from the health crisis, COVID-19 also brought to Cambodia socio-economic challenges due to logistic restrictions, business closures, and lower economic demand. The consequences were multi-directional, including decreasing household incomes, higher unemployment, limited access to essential goods and social services, and education challenges including child labour amidst distanced learning. More alarmingly, vulnerable groups of considerable size had their day-to-day livelihood fall short in terms of basic resources—food security and essential health standards [4].

Such a health crisis, with socio-economic consequences impacting diverse groups of the population, could only be effectively combatted through a multi-pronged approach from the whole of society. Fortunately, this was delivered through the Cambodian government's effort and participation from a comprehensive range of the stakeholders across all social sectors — individuals (locals and foreigners), private actors, and civil society—and the international community in both health and non-pharmaceutical areas. The health aspect included strong epidemiological surveillance mechanisms, field training, real-time databases, risk assessment mechanisms, emergency response teams, national public health laboratory capacity, and risk communication platforms [5]. The non-health area involved interventions in and from various sectors—educational, manufacturing, tourism, and media, etc.

1.1. Government Policies

The whole-of-society approach normally stems from a strong whole-of-government approach, which can then be expanded beyond public sectors to other spheres. It takes an initiative of the government to kickstart, through ensuring policy coherence and implementation across relevant ministries/departments and state agencies, and the actions taken by the Cambodian government illustrate that. Particularly, at the governmental level, the national COVID-19 committee and the inter-ministerial committee were

established, respectively led by the Prime Minister and the Health Minister. As part of the whole of government approach, sub-committees were also replicated at the sub-national level and led by provincial governors [6].

In complement, the government introduced a variety of fiscal, monetary, and macro-financial policies. On the fiscal side, social assistance schemes included those laid out in the National Social Protection Policy Framework and were dedicated to poor and vulnerable households, who benefited from several phases of cash transfers. Meanwhile, stimulus packages were launched in the form of wage subsidies and skills training programmes for suspended workers or employees in the country's critical and adversely affected industries — garment-making and tourism. Business sectors also received credit guarantees through the Business Recovery Guarantee Scheme, which provides packages for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors, and tax exemptions for the tourism and aviation sectors [7].

In addition, monetary and macro-financial policies were spearheaded by the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) through measures to reduce interest rates in general, lower the required reserves for banks and financial institutions, and allow loan restructuring for financially vulnerable borrowers in priority sectors — tourism, garment-making, construction, transportation and logistics [7].

1.2. Parliament and Society

Complementing actions taken by the Executive branch, the Cambodian Parliament played a critical legislative role to complete the whole-of-government approach in response to the crisis. For example, in late 2020, the National Assembly of Cambodia adopted the Law on Financial Management for 2021 to maintain macro-economic balance, ensure reserves for essential expenditure, and promote the post-COVID-19 economic recovery. Less than one month later, the law was reviewed and approved by the Senate [8].

Additionally, in early 2021, a state of emergency law — The Law on Preventive Measures Against the Spread of COVID-19 and other Severe and Dangerous Contagious Diseases — was promulgated after adoption by the National Assembly of Cambodia and approval by the Senate. The Law, consisting of six Chapters and eighteen Articles, has served as a legal instrument in combating COVID-19 with precise purpose and scope, involving health measures, imposition of penalties, and liability of competent authorities [9]. This effectively enforced the implementation of a series of public health policies and measures undertaken by the government during the onset of community outbreak, including surveillance and contact tracing, extensive health screening at border checkpoints, obligatory mask wearing, social distancing, mandatory self-isolation and quarantine, and restrictions on travel, gathering, and business operations, among others.

This parliamentary intervention strongly solidified the whole-of-government approach, which was met with widespread support and cooperation from the Cambodian public. Observably, there was a notable trend among Cambodians to abide by public health protocols, including testing after direct and indirect contacts or suspicion of infection, mask-wearing, and self-quarantine. The private sector also adhered strictly to the government recommendations and mandates, while being creative and responsive to deliver essential services in compliance with health standards to supply basic goods and services during the lockdown.

Meanwhile, professionals in various sectors — whose duties could be performed from distance — maximized their efforts to access and familiarise themselves with technology, which allowed them to sustain key functions of society. Those involved in public awareness and education campaigns — traditional and social media as well as non-governmental organisations and civil society associations — also played a crucial two-pronged role, including combating the pandemic by raising awareness of disease transmission and preventive and responsive measures to amplify the government’s official briefings while helping to share data and fact-based information to minimize social panic.

Remarkably, considerable financial and material donations—from the public, civil servants, and local business leaders — were channelled to the government’s COVID-19 response efforts, which practically supported frontliners and the most vulnerable, assisted vaccination campaigns, and reflected whole-of-society unity amidst the crisis.

1.3. Engagement with the International Community

The efforts of the Cambodian government were significantly enhanced by the international community through their sharing of resources, technical expertise, and advisory support aiming to ensure effective emergency responses. Contributions included medical supplies and equipment, assistance with case detection/management and preparedness, capacity building, and training. Development partners, including from Australia, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States, played key roles in the distribution of vaccines both bilaterally and through the COVAX facility [10].

In the meantime, technical organisations, including the WHO, the U.S. Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (US-CDC), and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), worked closely with the Cambodian Ministry of Health (MOH) in strengthening Cambodian government capacity to combat COVID-19 through their active engagement and in briefings and guidance on policy implementation. Such crucial assistance contributed to the MOH’s update of Cambodia’s existing pandemic response strategy in the National Action Plan: Preparing for and Responding to Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the Kingdom of Cambodia [5].

In addition, the Cambodian government secured a full commitment by the entire United Nations (UN) System in Cambodia—coordinated by the WHO—in COVID-19 preparedness and response through the UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-economic Response to COVID-19, while the broader UN system worked on the plan to handle the secondary impacts of the pandemic [11].

2. Laos

Despite securing one of the lowest recorded infected case numbers in the region, Laos still suffered the impact of COVID-19 in the socio-economic sphere due to the collapse of domestic and regional supply chains, on which Lao household incomes and therefore consumer demand highly depend. Particularly, the hard-earned development growth over the last decade and the progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was at high risk, with pre-existing inequalities widening, food insecurity becoming more critical, and education access highly restricted. These challenges, however, were responded to through the adoption of a holistic policy approach emphasising the principle that no one should be left behind, with priority placed on reaching those furthest behind [12].

Such a policy focus lies within the framework of a whole-of-society approach, consisting of and beginning with a whole-of-Lao government approach from national and sub-national levels in

implementing measures that involved collaboration from various segments of Lao society—high to medium to low-income households, vulnerable businesses, and citizens and foreigners in general. Indispensable to such a holistic approach was the considerable support from the international community.

2.1. Government Policies

Just as how the government was adept in guiding the whole-of society approach in combating COVID-19 in Cambodia, the same can be said of the role of the Lao government. An immediate response by the government was the establishment of the National Taskforce Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control, aiming to provide timely dissemination of reliable information to the public through, for example, the notification on COVID-19 Outbreak Prevention, Control and Response Measures. The scope was mainly within the country's capital of Vientiane, inclusive of government officials, enterprises, international organisations, citizens, and foreigners [13]. In addition, the Prime Minister Order (Order No.06/PM) was issued to establish a series of lockdown measures, including public travel restrictions, border closures, quarantines, and prohibitions on the increase of prices for essential products [14].

In the meantime, the government also introduced fiscal, monetary, and macro-financial policies to alleviate the burdens associated with the implementation of those health and non-health restriction measures, especially those impacting informal and low-income sectors. Fiscal policies include measures to ensure household's affordability resilience against COVID-19, such as the reduction of electricity and water consumption bills, exemptions for tax payments for those with monthly incomes below 5 million KIP (USD 570), exemptions from tariffs and related fees for imported items essential in preventing and combating COVID-19, and extension of general tax payments (land and roads, etc.). Vulnerable businesses, especially microenterprises, also received support covering extension of loan and tax payments [15].

Similar to Cambodia's case, the Bank of Laos PDR intervened through a range of looser monetary and macro-financial policies to reduce interest rates in general, decrease reserve requirements on foreign exchange, postpone debt payment on consumer loans, and allow loan restructuring for borrowers. Both commercial banks and non-bank financial institutions — microfinance institutions, savings and credit unions, leasing companies, and pawnshops — benefited from these policies. In addition, local banks and financial institutions received emergency financial support, which enabled them to sustain loan provisions [7].

2.2. Parliament and Society

Alongside the executive, the legislative branch has also played a substantive role, further complementing the whole-of-government and the whole-of-society synergy. Responding to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the Lao National Assembly's eighth legislature in 2020 put the economic recovery as the main agenda item of its three-week 10th ordinary session. Convening high-level government officials, including the President, Prime Minister, and cabinet members of Laos PDR, the session considered and approved reports on the socio-economic development plan and budget and currency plans in the crisis context [16]. Moreover, after intensive discussion with concerned parties and experts through late 2022, the National Assembly adopted the Law on Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases (No. 28/NA) to complement the existing government measures through its legal effects [17].

Adding to the government-led measures and parliamentary initiatives, the magnitude of public participation from the Lao people and civil society was considerable in combating COVID-19. From all

walks of life — formal and informal sectors, vulnerable households and businesses, and private and public workers — the Lao people were in high synergy with pandemic responses through their adherence to the health and non-health measures and dedication to their professional roles in sustaining the country's economy and key social functions. That was further amplified by support from the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as exemplified by a 12-month project coordinated through the Lao Civil Society Coordination Network bringing together numerous CSOs in the country to assist in responding to COVID-19. The assistance included supplying handwashing stations, supporting vaccination plans, increasing access to fact-based information, and providing prevention support to key venues — schools, health centres, and markets [18].

2.3. Engagement with the International Community

Complementary to these efforts from government, parliament and the public, the international community also played a crucial role in providing material as well as advisory and technical support to concretise the policy implementation and to enhance synergy between stakeholders. Material support included, but are not limited to, the USD 18 million package from the World Bank for the Lao PDR COVID-19 Response Project for preparedness and emergency response activities [19]; health supplies worth over USD 1 million to the Lao Ministry of Health from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Lao PDR through funding from the European Union, Ireland, and Japan [20]; USD 5.6 million from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to address the economic and education impacts of COVID-19, with respective emphasis on women-owned Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and early childhood and primary education [21]; food and nutrition assistance by United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) to an estimated 360,000 returning migrants in COVID-19 quarantine centres, which were placed in strategic locations passed through by a large number of returnees and played a vital role in controlling the spread of infection in the country [22]; and hundreds of thousands of doses of vaccines through the COVAX facility [23].

One remarkable example of technical and advisory support was delivered through the UN Socio-Economic Response Plan (SERP) by the United Nations Country Team in Lao PDR, in strong partnership with the Lao government, other development partners, the country's civil society, and its private sector. The SERP has outlined key strategic response plans to realise the ultimate end of 'leaving no one behind'. They include the macroeconomic response and multilateral collaboration tailored to immediate needs and the country's long-term trajectory; protection of health services during the crisis and preparing the health systems and the public for future outbreaks; extension of the UN commitment to work alongside the diverse populations of Laos PDR, civil society and local authorities using a people-centred approach with a social-cohesive and gender-responsive focus on priority issues such as education, food security, social protection, psychosocial wellbeing and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention [12].

3. Conclusion:

The campaigns to combat COVID-19 in Cambodia and Laos PDR are two success stories that share certain commonalities. First, the two countries exceeded the general expectations, which were set relatively low due to their limited health infrastructure and low (though improving) development index ratings, while their performances can be considered outstanding as demonstrated by relatively low severe health consequences — low deaths, high recovery, and high vaccination rates — along with high socio-economic resilience to the associated economic and social impacts.

Second, their successes were directly linked to the implementation of a whole-of-society approach, involving a strong bond and synergy among the government, parliament, society, and the international community. The Cambodian and Lao efforts were highly holistic in policy design, incorporating collaboration with and considering solutions benefiting various segments of society, who in turn were highly supportive of the government's policy responses. In the process, both countries exercised an active collaborative spirit and efficiency in their openness to and engagement with the international community to access the necessary material, financial, technical, and advisory assistance strategically tailored to meet the emergency needs while contextualized to their internal social and political environments.

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