



JOINT FACULTIES
OF HUMANITIES
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Resourcefulness in Repression: Mobilising for Rights in Cambodia

A Qualitative Interview Study on the Advocacy Strategies Employed by
Civil Society Organisations in Cambodia

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Thank you to all the interview participants for contributing your expertise and experiences to this study. Your participation was invaluable, and this research would not have been possible without you.

Abstract

This thesis examines the advocacy strategies employed by civil society organisations (CSOs) in Cambodia, focusing on land rights and women's rights within the constraints of a shrinking civic space. The study aims to understand how CSOs mobilise resources and adapt their strategies to address human rights issues in an authoritarian context. Using postcolonial theory, resource mobilisation theory, and the concept of vernacularisation, the research employs a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews with representatives from eight CSOs. The findings reveal that CSOs engage in evidence-based advocacy, grassroots empowerment, legal assistance, and international engagement. Despite facing challenges such as government repression, financial constraints, and gender-specific obstacles, these organisations show resilience and adaptability. The study highlights the importance of both local and international cooperation in sustaining advocacy efforts. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the innovative and resilient strategies used by CSOs to advocate for human rights in a repressive political environment.

Key words: Civil society, Advocacy, Cambodia, Human Rights, Land Rights, Women's Rights, Resource Mobilisation, Postcolonialism, Vernacularisation, Interview Study.

Abstract (Swedish)

Resursrikedom i Repression: Mobilisering för Rättigheter i Kambodja -En Kvalitativ Intervjustudie om Påverkansstrategier hos Civilsamhällesorganisationer i Kambodja

Denna uppsats undersöker de påverkansstrategier som används av civilsamhällesorganisationer (CSO: er) i Kambodja, med fokus på landrättigheter och kvinnors rättigheter, inom ramen för en krympande civilsfär. Studien syftar till att förstå hur CSO: er mobiliserar resurser och anpassar sina strategier för att hantera frågor som rör mänskliga rättigheter i en auktoritär politisk kontext. Kvalitativa semistrukturerade intervjuer med representanter från åtta CSO: er i Kambodja har genomförts och därefter analyserats med hjälp av postkolonial teori, resursmobiliseringsteori och konceptet vernakularisering. Resultaten visar att CSO: erna engagerar sig i evidensbaserat påverkansarbete, stärkande arbete på gräsrotsnivå, juridisk hjälp och engagemang på internationell nivå. Trots utmaningar som repression från staten, ekonomiska hinder och könsspecifika hinder påvisar organisationerna både motståndskraft och anpassningsförmåga. Resultaten från studien belyser vikten av både lokal och internationell samverkan för att upprätthålla påverkansinsatser. Denna uppsats bidrar till en djupare förståelse för de innovativa och motståndskraftiga strategier som används av CSO: er för att förespråka mänskliga rättigheter i en repressiv politisk miljö.

Nyckelord: Civilsamhälle, Påverkansstrategier, Kambodja, Mänskliga rättigheter, Landrättigheter, Kvinnors rättigheter, Resursmobilisering, Postkolonialism, Vernakularisering, Intervjustudie.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ELC	Economic Land Concessions
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESCR	The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LANGO	Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RBC	Responsible Business Conduct
UN	United Nations
UNPGs	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem Formulation, Aim and Research Question

In recent years, the role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in advocating for human rights has gained increased attention. This thesis examines the strategies employed by CSOs in Cambodia as they navigate the complexities of advocating for land rights and women's rights while operating in a shrinking civic space. The significance of this study lies in understanding how these organisations adapt to state repression, economic pressures, and the risks associated with human rights advocacy in an authoritarian context. The historical and political landscape in Cambodia presents unique challenges for CSOs. Following years of colonisation and more recently the Khmer Rouge regime, the country has struggled with authoritarian governance, corruption, and poverty.¹ Despite being nominally democratic, the political climate is rather characterised by repression of dissent, lack of independent media, and judicial manipulation.² The environment poses significant obstacles for CSOs, especially those addressing politically sensitive issues.

This study aims to investigate how civil society organisations in Cambodia are working with resource mobilisation and human rights strategies to address land rights and women's rights. Part of this investigation will also explore how their work and strategies are influenced by the current political environment. To answer these questions, qualitative interviews have been conducted with various actors from different CSOs in Cambodia. The purpose is to contribute to the body of academic knowledge concerning the civil society in Cambodia and how they work with resources and strategies in the current political climate.

The central research questions guiding this study are:

- How do civil society organisations in Cambodia mobilise resources and adapt their human rights advocacy strategies to effectively address land rights and women's rights?
- How is this work influenced by the current political environment for civil society, especially the shrinking civic space?

¹ Transparency International. Our work in Cambodia. *Transparency International*. 2024. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/cambodia> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

² Cambodia Center for Human Rights, ADHOC & Solidarity Center. *Cambodia Fundamental Freedoms Monitor*. April 2024. https://cchrcambodia.org/storage/posts/16171/2023-Fundamental-Freedoms-Monitoring-Report-ENG_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 2024-05-18).

1.2. Definition of Key Terms

The definition of the key terms presented in this section could be debated and understood in various ways. The definitions presented here are partly based on selected dictionaries and on how they have been used by the interview participants, as interpreted by me as the researcher in this thesis.

Advocacy: “speaking or acting on behalf of an individual or group to uphold their rights or explain their point of view.”³

Capacity building: “The process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organisations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world.”⁴

Civil Society: “The set of intermediate associations which are neither the state nor the (extended) family; civil society therefore includes voluntary associations and firms and other corporate bodies.”⁵

Development partner(s): In this thesis, the term refers to foreign government agencies or organisations involved in development cooperation in Cambodia, which work in partnership with CSOs and provide economic support.

Global North: “the group of countries that are in Europe, North America, and the developed parts of Asia.”⁶

Global South: “the group of countries that are in Africa, Latin America, and the developing parts of Asia.”

Grassroots: Grassroots or grassroot movements- commonly used term, usually referring to “a type of movement or campaign that attempts to mobilise individuals to influence an outcome, often of a political nature.”⁷

³ *APA Dictionary*. advocacy. 2018. <https://dictionary.apa.org/advocacy> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

⁴ United Nations: Academic Impact. Capacity-Building. *United Nations*. <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

⁵ *Oxford Reference*. civil society. 2024. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095614189> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary*. Global North. 2024. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/global-north> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

⁷ Bergan, Daniel E. grassroots. *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/grassroots> (Accessed 2024-05-19).

International community: “Countries of the world considered or acting together as a group.”⁸ However, it usually refers especially to the Global North.

Land Grabbing: “The seizing of land by a nation, state, or organisation, especially illegally, underhandedly, or unfairly.”⁹

Livelihood: “A means of supporting one's existence, especially financially or vocationally non-governmental organisation.”¹⁰

Shadow report: Alternative reports written by National Human Rights Institutions and non-state actors, submitted in the context of the UN periodic reporting cycle, to counter or compliment what's been included in the State party's report.¹¹

Stakeholders: “Either an individual, group or organisation that's impacted by the outcome of a project or a business venture. Stakeholders have an interest in the success of the project and can be within or outside the organisation that's sponsoring the project.”¹²

The Western World: A debated expression, referring to countries of the Global North: Often referring to “Europe, North America, and generally any country whose cultural and ethnic origins can be traced to Europe, collectively.”¹³

1.3. Background and Context

1.2.1 Cambodia- a historical overview and the current political climate

This overview aims to provide a brief context for understanding Cambodia's current political climate. Cambodia was under French colonial rule from 1863 to 1953.¹⁴ After World War II, Prince Norodom Sihanouk secured independence in 1953. His increasingly authoritarian regime faced opposition from Democrats and communists, leading to a coup in 1970 where Lon Nol took power, also leading

⁸ *Cambridge Dictionary*. the international community. 2024.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/international-community> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

⁹ *Dictionary.com*. land grab. 2024. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/land-grab> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹⁰ *Dictionary.com*. livelihood. 2024. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/livelihood> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹¹ UN Sustainable Development Group. UN Human Rights Treaty Bodies. *United Nations*. 2024. <https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/strengthening-international-human-rights/un-treaty-bodies> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹² Landau, Peter. What Is a Stakeholder? Definitions, Types & Examples. *Project Manager*. 2022-03-22. <https://www.projectmanager.com/blog/what-is-a-stakeholder> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹³ *Your Dictionary*. Western-world Definition. 2024. <https://www.yourdictionary.com/western-world> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹⁴ Chandler, David P. & Overton, Leonard C. Cambodia. *Britannica*. 2024-04-15. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

Cambodia to get involved in the Indochina war. The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, ruled from 1975 to 1979, causing 1.5 to 2 million deaths and the extermination of much of the professional class.¹⁵ This period left a legacy of trauma among the surviving population, with ongoing psychological, social, and intergenerational impacts. The brutality of this era paved the way for authoritarian leaders like Hun Sen, who remained in power from 1985 until 2023, when his son took over.¹⁶ The legacy of fear and mistrust persists, with civil society organisations and human rights defenders facing threats, harassment, and violence from state authorities, reflecting a broader pattern of repression and impunity traced back to the Khmer Rouge era.¹⁷

Cambodia today is according to the government itself a democratic state, but is often describes as ruled by an authoritarian government, a high level of corruption and a lot of poverty.¹⁸ The elections have been criticised for being fixed, as well as a lack of independent media, political control of the judiciary, and systematic harassment and targeting of critics in the political opposition and civil society.¹⁹ Cambodia ranks as country 158/180 in Transparency Internationals corruption index with a score of 22/100.²⁰ The Cambodia Fundamental Freedoms Monitor 2023, examining the state of freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, showed that the Cambodian people’s ability to exercise their fundamental freedoms was considerably limited.²¹ The CIVICUS Monitor rate the state of civic space in Cambodia as ‘repressed’ and is therefore even added to their watchlist since February 2023 due to a rapid decline.²² For actors in the civil society and human rights defenders (HRDs), they are facing repression in their fundamental rights, especially those working for environmental rights (e.g. land rights) and

¹⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Khmer Rouge. *Britannica*. 2024-04-23. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Khmer-Rouge> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹⁶ Chadler, David P & The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. History of Cambodia. *Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia/History> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹⁷ Quackenbush, Casey. 40 Years After the Fall of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia Still Grapples With Pol Pot’s Brutal Legacy. *TIME*. 2019-01-07. <https://time.com/5486460/pol-pot-cambodia-1979/> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹⁸ UI Landguiden. Kambodja. *Utrikespolitiska Institutet*. <https://www.ui.se/landguiden/lander-och-omraden/asien/kambodja/> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch. Cambodia: Events of 2023. *Human Rights Watch*. 2024. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/cambodia> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²⁰ Transparency International. Our work in Cambodia. *Transparency International*. 2024. <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/cambodia> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²¹ Cambodia Center for Human Rights, ADHOC & Solidarity Center. *Cambodia Fundamental Freedoms Monitor*. April 2024. https://cchrcambodia.org/storage/posts/16171/2023-Fundamental-Freedoms-Monitoring-Report-ENG_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²² Monitor: Tracking Civic Space. Cambodia: Ahead of Elections, Civil Society and Journalists Face Threats and Criminalisation while restrictions on the opposition escalate. *Civicus*. 2023-07-03. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/cambodia-ahead-of-elections-civil-society-and-journalists-face-threats-and-criminalisation-while-restrictions-on-the-opposition-escalate/> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

labour rights. Independent journalists and members of opposition parties are also being targeted. There are cases of both activists being detained and even killed.²³ Because of this, UN experts have called on Cambodia to “end all acts of harassments and prosecutions against human rights defenders and civil society activists and allow them to freely exercise their civil and political rights.”²⁴

1.2.2 Land rights and regulations

Land rights in Cambodia are intricately linked to human rights, with land being fundamental to livelihoods and central to various economic, social, and cultural rights. This connection is particularly significant as land often forms a part of people's identities.²⁵ There are many multinational corporations with interests in Cambodia, having an impact on land rights. There is also a prevailing global trend towards increased Due Diligence for companies, marked by consumers increasingly holding businesses accountable for their actions. This applies to not only labour rights, but also land rights. As countries, particularly in the global north, face pressures from climate change, there is a noticeable pivot towards investing in green technology. This shift is largely driven by consumer demands for corporate responsibility in addressing climate issues.²⁶

The green transition is however also leading to issues, not least in countries such as Cambodia. Spokespersons for Indigenous peoples have alarmed that the climate strategies from the west risk the exploitation of Indigenous territories, resources, and people.²⁷ There has also been criticism stating that developed countries are performing “green colonialism”, investing in renewable energy by exploiting natural resources of developing countries at the expense of marginalised communities (often Indigenous peoples). One highlighted example is mineral mining, leading to harm, such as people being forcefully evicted from their lands to make room for mining, deprivation of access to clean land and water and overall impacts on peoples’ health and livelihood.²⁸

²³ Front Line Defenders. #Cambodia. *Front Line Defenders*.

<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/cambodia> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²⁴ OHCHR. Cambodia must end harassment of human rights defenders: UN experts. *United Nations*. 2024-04-19. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/04/cambodia-must-end-harassment-human-rights-defenders-un-experts> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²⁵ OHCHR. OHCHR and land and human rights. *United Nations*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/land> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²⁶ European Commission, Finance: Overview of sustainable finance. *European Commission*. https://finance.ec.europa.eu/sustainable-finance/overview-sustainable-finance_en (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²⁷ Monet, Jenni. ‘Green colonialism’: Indigenous world leaders warn over west’s climate strategy. *The Guardian*. 2023-04-23. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/23/un-indigenous-peoples-forum-climate-strategy-warning> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

²⁸ Oxfam Australia. Mining. *Oxfam Australia*. <https://www.oxfam.org.au/what-we-do/economic-inequality/mining/> (Accessed 2024-05-18).

Land rights are protected under international Human Rights and particularly Business and Human Rights Frameworks. The most authoritative and widely adopted one is the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which encompass regulation but also provide guidance on how business can contribute to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They function as a soft law instrument and encompass internationally recognised human rights as delineated in the UDHR, ICCPR and ICESCR. To adhere to the guiding principles, businesses are required to conduct comprehensive human rights due diligence to identify, prevent, and mitigate adverse human rights impacts associated with their operations, products, or services.²⁹ Other guidelines and principles include the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct.³⁰ Without delving too deeply into the law here, one could conclude that several international frameworks can be useful in promoting land rights within Cambodia. There are also some domestic laws regulating this area. However, as reported by the Justice Freedom Project's 'Rule of Law Index', Cambodia ranks 141st out of 142 countries, with a score of 0.31 out of 1.00, indicating weak adherence to the rule of law.³¹

1.2.3 Equality and gender

There are strong norms within the Cambodian society, restricting what women should do and valuing men higher. This is not only in the norms, but also embedded in some government policies.³² Gender-based violence is an issue as well, where statistics from 2022 showed that one in five women had experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner. Other issues often highlighted is the burden of unpaid care and domestic work as one of the biggest obstacles to gender equality. An under-representation of women in decision-making is another consequence of these inequalities.³³ Women have also taken leadership in land conflicts and forces evictions, and both women land activists and human rights defenders face violence and harassments. Despite their leadership in these areas, it seldom translates into better access to decision making in the long term.³⁴

²⁹ United Nations. *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*. New York; Geneva: United Nations, 2011.

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusiness_hr_en.pdf (Accessed 2024-05-21).

³⁰ OECD. *OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct*. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1787/81f92357-en> (Accessed 2024-05-22).

³¹ World Justice Project. Cambodia. *WJP Rule of Law Index*. <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2023/Cambodia> (Accessed 2024-05-19).

³² UN Cambodia. *Gender Equality Deep-Dive for Cambodia: Common Country Analysis*. 2022. https://cambodia.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Gender%20Deep%20Dive%20-%20CCA%20Cambodia_V6_010322_LQ.pdf (Accessed 2024-05-19). 6.

³³ Ibid., 8.

³⁴ Ibid., 8 f.

1.3. Material and Delimitations

The material used for this study consists of transcripts from eight qualitative semi-structured interviews with representatives from eight different civil society CSOs working on land rights and/or gender issues. The interviews lasted for between 30-45 minutes and were conducted through video calls between April and May 2024. Video calls were chosen because of resource constraints that prevented travel to Cambodia. Additionally, video calls were preferred over phone calls as they provide a more natural interaction, allowing the researcher and the participants to see each other and convey expressions.³⁵

In selecting interview participants, pre-existing knowledge of CSOs in Cambodia working on these issues was relied upon, along with consultations with three individuals experienced in development cooperation and research in Cambodia. This process provided a comprehensive overview of relevant organisations in Cambodia to contact. The criteria for selecting organisations included a focus on land rights and/or gender issues and acknowledgment as CSOs. Other criteria included being independent and not affiliated with the government. After deciding which organisations to reach out to, the network was utilised to contact representatives and send out interview requests. In these requests, an introduction was provided, clearly stating the aim and purpose of the study, as well as how the interviews would be conducted. Positive responses were received from representatives of all eight organisations, with either the Executive Directors or individuals responsible for outreach and advocacy agreeing to participate in the interviews.

1.3.1. Delimitations and limitations

The sample size of this study is comparatively small, with eight individuals interviewed. Geographically, the chosen organisations are primarily based in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Although they also operate in the provinces, the inclusion of organisations specifically working in rural areas would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of civil society in Cambodia. In terms of time, this study was conducted over a relatively short period. The interviews were conducted in English, which may have influenced the interpretation of the results since both the interviewer and participants are native speakers of another language. Demographically, the interviews targeted Executive Directors or other individuals holding high-ranking positions within the organisations, many with a higher education level. It is also important to note that the material this study is based on consists of personal statements made by the interview participants. The

³⁵ Edwards, Rosalind & Holland, Janet. *What is qualitative interviewing?* London: New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2013. E-Book. 47 f.

information gathered is assumed to be correct and accurate, but it is still important to consider that this most likely is information that the interview participants are willing to share, as they are spokespersons for the organisations and used to handle interactions with media, donors, and to represent their organisations.

At the initial stage to this study, the plan was to conduct a case study, where part of the methodology would have been to analyse official public documents by CSOs in Cambodia working with land rights. This, however, proved to be difficult to access, and the study was therefore altered. This can be seen as both an interesting finding that might say something about the state of civil society in Cambodia and as something that possibly limited the study. However, obtaining interviews proved to be more accessible than getting access to official published documents. If a document analysis would have been incorporated in the study, it would probably have been easier to draw conclusions about the strategies being used, rather than relying on testimonials. Here, the previous literature also comes into play, where the findings from this study proved to be both comparable and complementary to previous research.

1.4. Ethical Considerations

1.4.1. Informed consent and safety

Participants were initially contacted via email, which included detailed information about the purpose and objectives of the study. Prior to the interview, a consent form was provided (see appendix III), outlining the expected length of the interview, the voluntary nature of participation and procedures for recording and securely storing the interviews. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Contact information for the researcher and the supervisor was provided as well. The consent process was designed to be thorough, with participants given ample opportunity to review the form and ask questions. They were also informed about how they could access the results of the study to maintain transparency and engagement.

Recognising the sensitivity of human rights and land issues in Cambodia, a comprehensive risk assessment was conducted to ensure the safety of participants and the researcher. This assessment considered physical, legal, psychological, and reputational risks. Consultations with local development cooperation professionals and senior researchers familiar with Cambodian civil society helped in designing the study and in considering safety measures. To mitigate potential risks, the study employed confidentiality protocols, including pseudonymising both participant and organisations names to prevent any adverse consequences from their involvement. Interviews were conducted using communication channels the participants felt safe

with; Microsoft Teams for some and Signal for some. The data will be stored on a password-protected computer for five years. There are no clear guidelines for students at bachelor's level when storing material from interviews. The decision was therefore made to store the material according to standard practise learnt in consultation with researchers.³⁶

The possible effects of the study have been taken into consideration as well. It is important to strive towards an objective approach, and that is a part of it. While the likelihood of discovering groundbreaking findings might be slim, it is important to consider possible outcomes from different findings and how they should and could be handled. Another aspect that's been considered is the possible harm for the interview participants if their participation in the study was to become known and the implications of this. These reflections have been considered when designing the study.

1.4.2 Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity and positionality are important aspects to take into considerations for researchers. Reflexivity involves being aware of one's own influence on the research process, requiring an examination of the own positionality, potential biases, and the power dynamics between the researcher and interview participants. This includes acknowledging and reflecting on how one's background, experiences, and social positioning can impact research findings and interpretations.³⁷ Positionality refers to the social and political context that shapes the researcher's identity and perspective, encompassing factors like race, gender, and class that influence the researcher's viewpoint and approach. It is important to recognise positionality, as it affects interactions with interview participants and the overall research process.³⁸

For this study, me as a researcher is a Swedish female student with experience from an internship with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency in Cambodia. Although my current position is as a student researcher, the previous role might influence the power dynamics in the study. Additionally, Sweden's decision to phase out development cooperation in Cambodia could further affect these dynamics as well. As a Swedish individual from the global north, conducting

³⁶ Vetenskapsrådet/Swedish Research Council. Good Research Practise. Stockholm, 2017. ISBN: 978-91-7307-354-7. <https://www.vr.se/english/analysis/reports/our-reports/2017-08-31-good-research-practice.html?sv.target=12.1419f63817f44a724d8f283&sv.12.1419f63817f44a724d8f283.route=/settings> (Accessed 2024-05-21). 27 f.

³⁷ England, Kim V.L. Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research. *Professional Geographer*. Vol 46 no. 1, 1994: 80-90. Doi: 10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00080.x. 81 f.

³⁸ Ibid., 82 f.

interviews with participants in the global south, in a country affected by colonialism, it is essential to maintain a postcolonial perspective. This approach is important to avoid reinforcing colonial stereotypes and remain sensitive to the historical and social contexts that shape the participants' experiences and viewpoints. Recognising and reflecting on these dynamics is crucial to conducting ethical and respectful research.

One finding that will be further elaborated on in the analysis section is the prevalent use of “buzzwords”, particularly those embraced by the international community promoting human rights. This issue is crucial to address in the ethics section, as these terms are frequently used throughout the analysis. International human rights have faced criticism for being Eurocentric, especially from a decolonial point of view.³⁹ By using these “buzzwords” primarily promoted by human rights institutions in the global north, one could see a risk of a neocolonial and Eurocentric human rights narrative being enforced. However, decision taken regarding this is to let the voices of the interview participants be heard, and as part of that not alter the expressions and wordings used by them.

³⁹ Bragato, Fernanda. Human Rights and Eurocentrism: An Analysis from the Decolonial Studies Perspective. *Global Studies Journal*. Vol 5, no. 3. 2013: 49-56. Doi: 10.18848/1835-4432/CGP/v05i03/40854. 50 f.

2. Literature Review

For this literature review, research conducted about Cambodia have been examined, especially focusing on civil society, female human rights defenders, and land rights from the past few years. Key search phrases that were used include: 'Cambodia', 'Civil Society', 'Land Rights', 'Business and Human Rights', 'Female Resistance', 'Advocacy', 'Gender', 'Human Rights', 'CSO', 'Development', and 'Defenders'. Newer articles were prioritised, as the landscape of civil society has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly since the 2018 election.⁴⁰ In the thesis, CSOs are being researched, but some referrals in the literature are specifically to NGOs, since the research mentioned were on NGOs.

2.1 Government Repression on Civil Society

Previous research has addressed the effect of government repression of civil society in Cambodia. Lorch's research argues in 'Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation: Adjusting to Shrinking Space in Cambodia' that CSOs operating in autocratic and autocratising regimes allow themselves to be co-opted by the regime as a strategy to avoid repression, secure their survival, and exert social and political influence.⁴¹ Specifically in Cambodia, it appears that many CSOs adjust to the strategies of repression employed by the Cambodian People's Party (CPP). There are differing views on whether participating in consultations with the regime is a good idea, with some believing it is preferable to being silenced. Aligning themselves with ministry bodies can be seen as a strategy for safety and survival, but it also legitimises these government bodies, which repress CSOs in Cambodia through laws like the Law on Associations and Non-Governmental Organisations (LANGO) and other policies, leading to divisions within civil society.⁴²

Springman et al. has investigated how government repression shapes NGO behaviours. It is common for NGOs in Cambodia to focus on either advocacy or service delivery.⁴³ There appear to be greater concerns about harassment among advocacy NGOs, but the threat of repression also has a strong deterrent effect on service NGOs. The threat of political advocacy is perceived to be so significant that

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch. Cambodia: July 29 Elections Not Genuine. 2018-07-25. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/25/cambodia-july-29-elections-not-genuine-1> (Accessed 2024-05-19).

⁴¹ Lorch, Jasmin. Civil Society Between Repression and Cooptation: Adjusting to Shrinking Space in Cambodia. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*. Vol. 42, no. 3. 2023: 395–420. Doi: 10.1177/18681034231214397. 412 f.

⁴² Ibid., 402 f.

⁴³ Springman, Jeremy, Malesky, Edmund, Right, Lucy, and Wibbels, Erik. Effect of Government Repression on Civil Society: Evidence from Cambodia. *International Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 66, no. 3, 2022: 1–16. Doi: 10.1093/isq/sqac028. 2 f.

government officials in Cambodia also restrict NGOs working on service delivery, to ensure that advocacy doesn't occur under the guise of development. Previous research suggests that common forms of government repression in Cambodia are effective at minimising political advocacy, but this repression likely also results in a reduction in non-state service delivery.⁴⁴

2.2 Civil Society Actors and Human Rights Defenders in Cambodia

In “Responsible Business Conduct in Cambodia – A Textbook”, edited by Mares and Young, it has been examined how Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) address Responsible Business Conduct (RBC), which refers to the practices and behaviours of businesses integrating ethical, social, and environmental considerations.⁴⁵ This shows some indications on what the situation is like for persons within the civil society and for human rights defenders. Civil society actors are protected under various international human rights instruments, such as the ICCPR, which safeguards, among other things, freedom of expression, the right to peaceful assembly, and freedom of association. Additionally, the OECD Guidelines and the UNGPs establish frameworks for states and businesses to protect and respect human rights. Banks can also be held accountable, and Cambodia has implemented some national frameworks as well.⁴⁶ One of the roles of civil society here appears to be as a driver of accountability.⁴⁷

HRDs working on RBC in Cambodia face various risks, including intimidation, sexual harassment, and physical violence, often perpetrated by both the state and businesses. One frequently employed tactic involves using laws and the judicial system to intimidate and silence HRDs.⁴⁸ The activities of Human Rights Defenders are often associated with economic activities and the environmental movement.⁴⁹ One aspect that is particularly highlighted in this context is the issue of Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), one of the most controversial issues between businesses and local residents. ELCs often result in environmental degradation, land

⁴⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁵ Mares, Radu & Sao, Socheata. Introduction to RBC and Human Rights. In *Responsible Business Conduct in Cambodia – A Textbook*. Mares, Radu & Young, Sokphea (ed.). 15-52. Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights, 2024. 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 93 f.

⁴⁷ Aspesi Areias, Sophia and Sok, Pitour. Civil Society and RBC. In *Responsible Business Conduct in Cambodia – A Textbook*, Mares, Radu & Young, Sokphea (ed.). 91-124. Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights, 2024. 97.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 119 f.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 118.

encroachments, and evictions. Among the victims of this practice are Indigenous peoples, farmers, grassroots communities, and environmental activists.⁵⁰

2.3 Land Grabbing and Green Colonialism

In “Indigenous communal land titling, the microfinance industry, and agrarian change in Ratanakiri Province, Northeastern Cambodia”, Baird focuses on issues such as Indigenous land titling and the microfinance industry, examining the effects of the rise of credit and debt in Cambodia. One conclusion drawn from this research is that Indigenous Communal Land Titling is crucial for protecting the land tenure of Indigenous peoples and preventing them from selling their land due to short-term economic needs.⁵¹

The concept of 'green grabbing' is discussed in “Green Territoriality and Resource Extraction in Cambodia”. This term refers to the appropriation of land and resources for supposedly environmental purposes. In Cambodia, it operates through state-led green territorialisation, which gains international legitimacy via funding from donors and mechanisms like REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation)⁵², supported by major INGOs.⁵³ This created ‘green legitimacy’ or ‘greenwashing, masking state exploitation and illicit extraction. International environmental governance in Cambodia can thus both legitimise and conceal state-led exploitation, often alienating Indigenous peoples from forests. ‘Green Territorialisation’ involves repeatedly declaring protected areas, providing extraction opportunities under the guise of conservation, frequently involving international actors.⁵⁴

Resistance against land grabs have been addressed in “Contesting land grabs, negotiating statehood: the politics of international accountability mechanisms and land disputes in rural Cambodia” by Joshi, specifically examining the opportunities and limitations that international accountability mechanisms may present to rural

⁵⁰ Ibid., 119 f.

⁵¹ Baird, Ian G. Indigenous communal land titling, the microfinance industry, and agrarian change in Ratanakiri Province, Northeastern Cambodia. *Journal of Peasant Studies*. Vol. 51, no. 2, 2024: 267-293. Doi: 10.1080/03066150.2023.2221777. 287 f.

⁵² REDD + stands for “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation” and is an international initiative aimed at mitigating climate change by reducing carbon emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, as well as enhancing carbon stocks through sustainable forest management, conservation, and reforestation.

⁵³ *UN Climate Change*. What is REDD +? <https://unfccc.int/topics/land-use/workstreams/redd/what-is-redd>. (Accessed 2024-05-21).

⁵⁴ Milne, Sarah, Mahanty, Sango & Frewer, Tim. Green Territoriality and Resource Extraction in Cambodia. In *Routledge Handbook of Global Land and Resource Grabbing*, Neef, Andreas et al (ed.) 159-172. Taylor and Francis, 2023. doi:10.4324/9781003080916-15. 163 f.

communities affected by land grabs in Cambodia.⁵⁵ This research has found that international accountability mechanisms have limitations in ensuring long-term accountability from both the state and non-state entities involved in resolving land grabbing issues. Despite efforts to mediate conflicts, the outcomes often involve compromises without guaranteeing sustainable solutions for affected communities. Highlighted are the challenges faced by rural populations in contesting land grabs and the complexities of navigating legal processes in a hybrid governance system. Therefore, it is emphasised that there is a need for more effective mechanisms to address development-induced dispossession and protect the rights of vulnerable communities in Cambodia.⁵⁶

2.4 Female Resistance Against Land Grabbing and the Role of Emotions

Previous research on female resistance to land grabbing highlights the *Chbab Srey*, a code that dictates women should be gentle, shy, and stay within the household. Deviating from these norms can lead to social sanctions, illustrating the deep-rooted patriarchy in Cambodian society.⁵⁷ Gender inequality is evident in land access and control, where women, though a significant part of the labour force, have little influence. Park's "Our Lands Are Our Lives: Gendered Experiences of Resistance to Land Grabbing in Rural Cambodia" notes that more women participate in resisting land grabs compared to other movements. Threatened livelihoods compel women to join the fight, and their involvement is often strategic to minimise confrontations with authorities.⁵⁸ There are also indications that women's protests are more tolerated than men's. However, balancing activism with household responsibilities is challenging for many.⁵⁹ Societal norms strongly influence women, and some have described their activism as "an extension and elevation of their traditional responsibilities as wives and mothers to ensure family harmony and stability."⁶⁰

In "Gendered Repertoires of Contention: Women's Resistance, Authoritarian State Formation, and Land Grabbing in Cambodia", Joshi has highlighted the so-called 'Feminised front lines' in public protests and demonstrations as a common form of

⁵⁵ Joshi, Saba. Contesting land grabs, negotiating statehood: the politics of international accountability mechanisms and land disputes in rural Cambodia. *Third World Quarterly*, 41(9), 1615–1633. 2020. Doi: 10.1080/01436597.2020.1763170. 1626 f.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 1619 f.

⁵⁷ Park, Clara Mi Young. 'Our Lands Are Our Lives': Gendered Experiences of Resistance to Land Grabbing in Rural Cambodia. *Feminist Economics*. Vol 25 nr. 4, 2019: 21–44. doi:10.1080/13545701.2018.1503417. 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 36 f.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

resistance against land grabbing in Cambodia.⁶¹ This aligns well with the contention that such strategies minimise the risk of violent confrontations. Another factor contributing to this phenomenon is the ability of women to demonstrate submissiveness in contrast to men, strategically employing performances of weakness and non-violence. Additionally, a strategy of 'self-sacrifice' is observed in protests, reinforcing the idealised image of women as self-sacrificing for their families and society.⁶² However, Joshi also addresses that contrary evidence suggests that the perceived enhanced role of women in reducing violence during protests may be overrated.⁶³ In “The Dark Underbelly of Land Struggles: The Instrumentalization of Female Activism and Emotional Resistance in Cambodia”, Hennings states that it is commonplace for female activists to receive threats from authorities, and many struggle to balance their roles as activists with being 'good housewives.' Some also argue that the mental risks faced by female activists are often overlooked, and the perceived role of women in reducing violence may be exaggerated.⁶⁴

Research on the role of emotion in resisting land grabbing has highlighted that female activists are encouraged to engage in emotional resistance, as emotions are believed to influence movements for land rights.⁶⁵ However, it is important to note the ambivalence surrounding the use of emotions from a gendered perspective. While emotions can be utilised to influence the public, women are often globally associated with a perceived lack of rational skills, willpower, and judgement. Consequently, they are frequently labelled as unprofessional and overly emotional.⁶⁶

In the context of Cambodia, emotions such as pain and shame seem to play a crucial role in female-led rights protests. They aim to evoke a collective response to the pain felt by communities, particularly in post-war Cambodia, where displaying suffering linked to displacement resonates due to the shared trauma of mass eviction by the Khmer Rouge.⁶⁷ The connection between emotions and land grabs has also been highlighted. In “The Role of Emotions in Resistance Movements against Land and Resource Grabs: New Evidence from Cambodia”, Beban and Hak investigated

⁶¹ Joshi, Sasha. Gendered Repertoires of Contention: Women’s Resistance, Authoritarian State Formation, and Land Grabbing in Cambodia. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. Vol. 24, no. 2, Jan. 2022:198-220–220. DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2022.2053295. 208 f.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 212 f.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁴ Hennings, Anne. The Dark Underbelly of Land Struggles: The Instrumentalization of Female Activism and Emotional Resistance in Cambodia. *Critical Asian Studies*. Vol. 51, no. 1, Mar. 2019, pp. 103–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1547881>. 115.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 105 f.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 109 f.

how emotions both enable and disable land grabs.⁶⁸ The collective trauma from recent history, including war, suffering, and injustice, has been emphasised, along with its contribution to the expression of pain in land activists' protests.⁶⁹ When examining land grabs, they appear to be enabled by coercive actions by state and corporate agents, which produce fear, uncertainty, but also desire, gratitude, and dependence among people whose land is targeted.⁷⁰ Negative emotions such as fear and anger can serve as catalysts for initiating, empowering, and sustaining momentum within the movement. However, anger is only useful when it motivates people, as excessive fear risks paralysing individuals. It's worth mentioning that fear can also inhibit rash actions, which may be dangerous in certain situations. Positive emotions such as respect and love for nature, as well as promoting environmental protection, can sustain movements by motivating people to adhere to their traditions of caring for common resources.⁷¹

2.6 Conclusion and Research Gaps

Previous research on civil society, land rights advocacy, and gender in Cambodia has focused on female participation in land rights movements, the role of emotion in advocacy, government repression of civil society, and the efforts of human rights defenders on RBC, and land grabbing. However, there is a notable gap in examining the advocacy strategies used by CSOs for land rights and women's rights. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining the mobilisation of resources and strategies employed by eight prominent CSOs in Cambodia. By focusing on the strategies used by CSOs to mobilise resources, adapt to state repression, and advocate for land and women's rights, this study offers new insights into the resilience and innovation of civil society in a shrinking civic space.

⁶⁸ Beban, Alice., and Hak, Sochanny. The Role of Emotions in Resistance Movements against Land and Resource Grabs: New Evidence from Cambodia. In *Routledge Handbook of Global Land and Resource Grabbing*. Neef, Andreas, Ngin, Chanrith, Moreda, Tsegaye, and Mollett, Sharlene (ed.). 444-458. London: Routledge, 2023. 444 f.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 446.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 449.

⁷¹ Ibid., 446.

3. Theoretical Framework

For this thesis, a combination of Postcolonial Theory, Resource Mobilisation Theory, and Vernacularisation are being used. The reasoning behind using these theories is that what is being researched is a multileveled issue that needs to be approached from different angles. The research topic relates to power and human rights struggles. Parts of the analysis addresses how human rights are being interpreted 'on the ground', how the CSOs are working practically with these issues, and what it means to work with human rights in a society struggling with repression and remaining postcolonial structures. Due to the different and multifaceted issues faced by the civil society in Cambodia, different theories are necessary for a proper analysis.

3.1 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonialism, as a term, began to be used in the 1990s and represents perspectives critical of or resistant to colonialism or colonial attitudes.⁷² One person who has addressed postcolonialism is Edward Said. With the publication of "Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient" in 1979, he brought together different writers and academics to address how to best shift the dominant ways in which the relations between Western and non-Western people are viewed and valued. Said highlights that modern thought and experience have taught us to be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas.⁷³

Postcolonialism offers a way to see things differently and it assures and claims the rights of all people to the same material and cultural well-being, the same rights, and the same access to impartial justice.⁷⁴ It involves the argument that the global south, for the most part, remains in a situation of subordination to Europe and North America, typically in a position of economic inequality.⁷⁵ Postcolonial theory involves a conceptual reorientation towards the perspectives of knowledge, as well as needs, developed outside the West. The practice of postcolonialism is not simply oriented towards analysis but also towards intervention. It seeks to change the way

⁷² Young, Robert J. C. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. E-book. (Accessed 2024-05-19). Pp 4.

⁷³ Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 2003. 327 f.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 f.

people think, behave, and strive to produce a more just and equitable relation between the different peoples of the world.⁷⁶

For this thesis, it provides postcolonial perspective, which is valuable for examining the colonial legacies of Cambodia and how it continues to influence power dynamics, social structures, and discourses. It can therefore be used to uncover ways in which civil society organisations in Cambodia reclaim Indigenous knowledge, challenge Eurocentric discourses, and assert local agency in the face of ongoing colonial influences. Another advantage of the postcolonial theory is that it can be used as a tool to emphasise the intersectionality of identity markers such as race, ethnicity, gender, and class, and how they intersect with systems of power and oppression.⁷⁷ This is helpful when examining how civil society organisations navigate and address intersecting forms of marginalisation. Furthermore, the postcolonial perspective can be used to underscore the persistence of colonial structures and practises in postcolonial societies, as well as forms of resistance and agency exercised by communities often exposed to marginalisation.⁷⁸ This opens for an analysis exploring how civil society organisations confront and challenge ongoing colonial continuities, such as land dispossession, cultural imperialism, and state repression through their advocacy strategies.

3.2 Resource Mobilisation Theory

The resource mobilisation theory framework can be used to understand how social movements gather and deploy resources to achieve their goals. Developed primarily in the 1970s and 1980s by scholars such as Mayer Zald, John D. McCarthy, and Charles Tilly, this theory provides insights into the organisational aspects of social movements, emphasising the role of resources in shaping movement outcomes. It has a focus on the organisations of social movements, and claims that the success of a particular social movement organisation depends on the effective use of resources such as money, material, work, technical and organisational expertise.⁷⁹

The theory as described by Edwards and McCarthy emphasise the crucial role of resources in social movement mobilisation and highlights that resource availability enhances the likelihood of successful collective action. They discuss various types of resources, including human time and effort, money, moral, cultural, social-organisational, and material resources. Also addressed is the importance of converting individually held resources into collective resources through

⁷⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷⁷ Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd Ed. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015. E-Book. 134 ff.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 151 f.

⁷⁹ Edwards, Bob. Resource Mobilization Theory. In *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. V. 8, pp 3901-3906. John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2007. 3901 f.

coordination and strategic efforts. Also highlighted in this theory is how movements across different contexts have been successful when there is a greater presence of available resources in their environments. The resource mobilisation theory underscores the significance of resources in shaping the outcomes of social movements and the process of mobilisation.⁸⁰ For the analysis of this thesis, the resource mobilisation theory will be useful to analyse how the CSOs describe their experiences with resource mobilisation and challenges. It will be used to look for themes related to acquisition, utilisation, and mobilisation within the organisations.

3.3 Vernacularisation (of Rights)

Vernacularisation is a process that refers to the localisation of indigenisation of translational concepts within particular communities. It calls our attention to ways in which transnational concepts and language are deployed, translated, and reworked in the process of dissemination.⁸¹ As a theoretical framework, vernacularisation encapsulates the process of appropriating and locally adapting globally conceived ideas and strategies. The work of Levitt and Merry delves into this, particularly focusing on the intersection of human rights and global feminist movements, where ideas and strategies undergo vernacularisation to align with specific historical and social contexts, thereby fostering shared perceptions regarding human rights and women's status. The observation by Levitt and Merry regarding the spread of women's human rights underscores how these ideas, when they merge with local beliefs, creates new perspectives and dimensions. Notably, framing women's rights within the broader discourse of human rights facilitates easier networking and collaboration with international organisations, fostering a cohesive global advocacy network.⁸²

In practice, vernacularisation is the process of adapting and localising ideas. As women's human rights discourse spreads, it blends with local ideologies while keeping some original aspects. This involves presenting global ideas in ways that resonate with local justice theories, challenging inequalities, and inspiring new perspectives. There are several dilemmas within vernacularisation. The "resonance dilemma" highlights the necessity for human rights discourse to resonate locally while still reflecting universal principles to wield political influence effectively.

⁸⁰ Edwards, Bob and McCarthy, John D. Resources and Social Movement Mobilization. In *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Snow, David A., Soule, Sarah A., and Kriesi, Hanspeter (ed), 116-153. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

⁸¹ Goldstein, Daniel M. Whose Vernacular? Translating Human Rights in Local Contexts. In *Human Rights at the Crossroads*, Goodale, Mark (ed), 110-121. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 111 f.

⁸² Levitt, Peggy, and Sally Merry. Vernacularization on the Ground: Local Uses of Global Women's Rights in Peru, China, India and the United States. *Global Networks*. Vol. 9, no. 4, Oct. 2009. 441–61. Doi: 10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00263.x. 458 f.

Similarly, the “advocacy dilemma” highlights the tension between gaining local support by aligning with existing issues and pushing for more ambitious agendas that may face resistance. Vernacularisation takes on different forms across organisations, spreading human rights as a justice ideology in various communities. However, it risks straying from the original documents and intentions, possibly causing tensions with international standards. Despite its crucial role in social movements, vernacularisation often faces enforcement challenges within state sovereignty.⁸³

Vernacularisation is a relevant theory for this study, due to its focus on language and communication within social contexts. It helps examine how languages and cultural practices are adapted to fit local contexts over time, particularly in the face of globalisation. It is also useful when looking into whether CSOs have adopted a ‘human rights package’ or ‘women’s rights package’ when looking into advocacy strategies. It is also relevant to see if and how the organisations are affected by the so called ‘advocacy dilemma’. Furthermore, this helps to highlight the gendered aspects in the analysis. It is useful for examining how global gender norms are adapted to fit local cultures and social contexts. It helps highlight the roles of local women as key agents in interpreting and reshaping these norms to align with community values and practices.

3.4. The Theories in Practise

The **postcolonial theory** provides the overarching theoretical lens through which to understand the historical context and ongoing influence of colonial legacies on power dynamics, social structures, and discourses in Cambodia. Furthermore, it highlights the sometimes-perceived subordination of the global south to Europe and North America, particularly in terms of economic inequality, which sets the stage for understanding the challenges faced by CSOs in reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and asserting local agency. The **resource mobilisation theory** complements the postcolonial theory by focusing on the practical organisational aspects of CSOs and their strategies for mobilising resources to address the challenges posed by colonial legacies. It also offers insights into how CSOs navigate resource constraints within a postcolonial context and how resource availability influences their ability to advocate for social change and human rights. The **vernacularisation framework** builds upon the insights provided by postcolonial theory and resource mobilisation theory by examining how global concepts, such as human rights, are adapted and localised within specific cultural contexts. It helps to understand how CSOs in Cambodia negotiate the tension

⁸³ *ibid.*

between aligning within global human rights frameworks and addressing local concerns and challenges, particularly in relation to gendered aspects of advocacy.

4. Methodology

The methods used in this study is qualitative semi-structured interviews with key informants from right civil society organisations in Cambodia. A thematic analysis is then being used to analyse the material retrieved from the interviews.

4.1 Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews

This is a qualitative interview study of how civil society organisations in Cambodia working with land rights and gender- two politically sensitive topics are working with advocacy as well as coping in a repressive society. The qualitative study is based on 8 interviews with representatives of Cambodian CSOs. The interviews look place online, via video call on Microsoft Teams and Signal. They were conducted in April-May 2024 and in English.

Qualitative interviewing as a method is a common approach and enables the researcher to get in-depth knowledge. It has been described as a process that unfolds the meaning of peoples' experiences and uncovers their lived world. Through this approach, the researcher can access interviewee's 'interior experiences'.⁸⁴ The interviews conducted in this study are semi-structured. This means that the researcher has a list of questions or series of topics they want to cover, but with a flexibility in how and when the questions are put and how the interviewee can respond.⁸⁵ For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The format allows for more space for the interviewees to answer on their own terms, but at the time provide some structure for comparison across interviewees in a study using the same questions.⁸⁶ To conduct these interviews, an interview template was created. During the interviews, most of the questions were included, depending on how the participants responded. In some interviews, some questions were left out since they already answered them when another question was asked. In some interviews, more follow-up questions were asked to encourage the interview participants to expand on the topics they brought up.

The interviews were conducted online, via Microsoft Teams and Signal. Teams have a function that enables live transcription while the conversation is ongoing, where everyone on the call can get access to it. However, some of the participants felt safer using Signal, which is an end-to-end encrypted application intended for

⁸⁴ Mann, Steve. *The Research Interview: Reflective Practice and Reflexivity in Research Processes*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. E-Book. 48.

⁸⁵ Edwards, Rosalind & Holland, Janet. *What is qualitative interviewing?* London: New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2013. E-Book. 90 f.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

encrypted text messages, audio calls, and video calls.⁸⁷ It is a platform many of the interview participants felt safe using, and that they usually use in their daily work. To record these interviews, a phone in aeroplane mode was used, and then the files were transferred to a password protected computer, where the other files are stored.

Some of the interviews conducted in this study were live transcribed via Microsoft Teams and some were transcribed manually. All the transcripts are checked against the tapes to ensure their accuracy. When it comes to transcribing, the transcripts can be viewed as being open or closed, where the closed transcripts are products of predefined research questions and often therefore lack the details seen in open transcriptions.⁸⁸ The transcriptions for this study are based only on the audio and what's being said. Since the interviews took place via video call and none of the participants or the interviewer are native English speakers, the decision was made to focus on what was being said, rather than incorporating an analysis of how things were said and factors such as body language.

The process, step by step:⁸⁹

1. Sent out an email with a meeting request.
2. Scheduled a meeting.
3. Created a secure folder for secure documents. For pseudonymisation, a document was created with the names and pseudonyms.
4. Designed an interview protocol with 5-10 open-ended questions, inspired by a sample protocol.⁹⁰ See Annex II.
5. Sent out consent forms and links (if applicable). These forms are also stored safely in the secure folder.
6. Conducted one-on-one interviews virtually via Teams or Signal, using the interview protocol and recording devices.
7. Recorded the interviews using Teams or a phone, taking additional notes.
8. Retrieved the transcripts from Teams or transcribed them manually.
9. Listened to the interviews and edited the transcripts where needed.
10. Sent the transcripts to the interview participants who requested them, for approval.

⁸⁷ Signal Support. Is it private? Can I trust it? *Signal*. <https://support.signal.org/hc/en-us/articles/360007320391-Is-it-private-Can-I-trust-it> (Accessed 2024-05-21).

⁸⁸ Jenks, Christopher Joseph. Recording and Transcribing Social Interaction. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, 118-30. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018. 8.

⁸⁹ Cresswell, John W & Poth, Cheryl N. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches*. 5th ed. California: SAGE, 2023. 165 ff.

⁹⁰ Based on sample protocol: Cresswell, John W., and Creswell, J. David. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 6th ed. California: SAGE, 2023. 191.

11. Followed the steps for thematic analysis (4.2).

4.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a widely-used method for analysing qualitative data, and one of the advantages is that it can be used with most theoretical frameworks and therefore address a wide range of research questions.⁹¹ Sample size is for sure debateable, but recommendations from Braun and Clarke indicate that 6-10 interviews are recommended for a Undergraduate or Honours project and 6-15 for a Masters or Professional Doctorate project.⁹² For this study, the material/analysis will be approached inductively. With using inductive coding and theme development, I work bottom up with the data and developing codes and later themes, having what is in the data as a starting point.⁹³ For these interviews, I am both interested in what the participants are saying and what they cannot say. Therefore, latent coding is used to capture implicit meanings which are not explicitly stated. For the whole process, a commonly used form of thematic analysis was being used.⁹⁴

- 1) **Familiarisation with the data:** Reading through the transcripts and the notes from the interviews multiple times. Making some initial causal notes.
- 2) **Generating initial codes:** Identifying relevant data and “tagging” them with related words or phrases. This is being done in digital documents, by highlighting with colour and adding comments/notes, as well as copying text from the primary document into a new one. Creating a list of codes that identify patterning and diversity of relevant meaning(s).
- 3) **Searching for/constructing themes:** Identifying and format themes by first examining codes and after that combine, cluster or collapsing codes together into bigger or more meaningful patterns. Setting “draft” or preliminary themes. Making visual thematic maps. Checking that the themes help answering the research question.
- 4) **Reviewing themes:** From the themes already established; Further shape, clarify or reject themes. Making a quality control, to ensure that the analysis works.
- 5) **Defining and naming themes:** Ensuring clarity, cohesion, precision, and quality of the analysis. Writing theme definitions.

⁹¹ Terry, Gareth, Hayfield, Nikki, Clarke, Victoria and Braun, Virginia. Thematic Analysis. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Willig, Carla & Stainton Rogers, Wendy (ed.). 17-36. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017. 8 f.

⁹² Ibid., 10.

⁹³ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 14-32.

- 6) **Writing up the analysis:** Putting together data, analysis and connections into the actual text that answers the research question. Make sure that the chosen theories are being used.

5. Analysis

In this analysis, referrals are being made to “the organisations”. These are the organisations that the interview participants are part of and spokespersons for.

5.1 Activities and Strategies

5.1.1 Research and evidence building

Most of the organisations use research and knowledge building in their advocacy work, often for “building evidence”. Some adopt an evidence-based type of advocacy, where research becomes a central component. Depending on the organisation, this research is used to influence the government or the international community. Conducting research with the aim of building evidence is seen by some as a safe way to support their advocacy. The use of evidence-based advocacy exemplifies how the organisations strategically leverage their research outputs to influence government policies and international stakeholders. It has also proven to be useful and of interest to international stakeholders, such as INGOS, UN agencies, and development partners. Research can also be used for shadow reports to UN agencies, aiming to influence policy at an international level. The fact that organisations use resources to produce their own data and results could also, in practice, be a part of challenging the dominance of external narratives by former colonial powers and asserting local perspectives. It can also empower organisations to reclaim Indigenous knowledge and emphasize their own experiences and needs, which many organisations are focusing on in their work.

Monitoring and conducting investigations regarding the situation of human rights and land rights are also part of some organisations’ research-oriented work. This is documented and, like the research, distributed to the public in various ways, such as factsheets, briefing notes/papers, or reports. These results can also be used to provide support for affected communities. Similarly, some organisations conduct investigations primarily to document violations of human rights, either to produce reports themselves or through their collaboration partners. The efforts to document human rights violations and produce report also reflects the vernacularisation of rights, as global human rights standards are adapted to the Cambodian context. This can also help ensuring that their advocacy resonates with the local cultures and address local concerns.

5.1.2 Empowerment, awareness, and a grassroots perspective

Almost all the participants in the study spoke about empowerment and awareness-raising, especially at the grassroots level. The term 'grassroots' was mentioned frequently in the interviews, but the scope of the study did not enable further elaboration on what it refers to or entails. The use of other "buzzwords" like 'capacity building', 'empowerment', and 'gender mainstreaming' were also a common theme in the interviews. These terms can be seen as part of the 'human rights package' and 'women's rights package' theorised by Levitt and Merry.⁹⁵ One could argue that these expressions are commonly used by the international community when addressing human rights, and within the process of vernacularisation of rights, it might have been adopted into the local context as a useful phrase.

For the 'grassroots' expression, it can be observed that it is a commonly used word when talking about empowering local communities and using a bottom-up approach to give individuals the tools to advocate for their rights. According to statements made by interview participants, this approach often shows visible improvements and sustainable results. Some organisations describe a bottom-up, 'grassroot'-perspective as their most successful strategy. Furthermore, local voices have historically been marginalised due to colonial structures, and empowering these communities can be a way of deconstructing power dynamics that perpetuate inequality and subordination to Western frameworks. Many affected by human rights and land rights violations also lack financial resources to build capacity independently, making grassroots empowerment, capacity building, and reclaiming of local agency valuable. One participant stated:

As an organisation, we mostly support the communities to... we empower them. So that they can exercise the right where they can demand or talk with the government officials to get what they want.⁹⁶

Awareness-raising, particularly about the law and rights, is also crucial. Many organisations prioritise educating youths on law, rights, and advocacy skills to engage in advocacy from local to international levels. Some refer to this as "educational empowerment," teaching people to realise their rights and advocate for their land and communities. Targeting youth can also indirectly reach and influence their parents. Empowering women and building confidence to challenge norms is a significant goal in many organisations' gender work. Building resilience in the provinces is highlighted as a priority. Many organisations emphasise finding

⁹⁵ Levitt & Merry, *Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women's rights in Peru, China, India and the United States*, 458 ff.

⁹⁶ Interview 1, 2024.

sustainable ways to educate and build knowledge, such as training "teachers" who can continue educating within communities.

Capacity building frequently recurred in the interviews. Some programs aim to simplify the law to make it accessible, helping people understand and engage in legal processes. This facilitates community organising, building solidarity, and mobilising collective action, especially in communities affected by land rights violations. This is also an interesting example of mobilisation of resources, where the CSOs are working to empower communities to engage in advocacy and collective action and thereby overcoming some resource constraints and enhancing their influence. Furthermore, the work on making law understandable and accessible reflects how global human rights concepts can be translated into terms that resonate locally and enabling that they can actually be used in practice. It was also emphasised by many that it is crucial to let local and Indigenous communities speak for themselves.

We will not talk in the name of, for example, Indigenous women, because we are not Indigenous women. But whenever we do research and want to include their perspective and their experience, we have partners that we can talk to, and they will give them the expertise to be sure to include experiences of all women.⁹⁷

Focusing on grassroots empowerment is also driven by democratic reasons, and to focus on sustainable solutions. A movement driven by many people is harder to suppress than one led by a few. As one participant noted:

I think it is about the people, it's not really about CSOs or advocacy work. I think that at the end of the day it will be the people, if the people choose to take the streets.⁹⁸

5.1.3 Service providing and advocacy work

Previous research has distinguished between service-providing NGOs and advocacy NGOs, showing that advocacy NGOs often face more repercussions.⁹⁹ However, many organisations combine advocacy with service-providing work. This dual role of service provision and advocacy can be seen as a strategic way to push for systemic change while simultaneously addressing community needs. However, the advocacy work is by many seen as both demanding and stressful, and

⁹⁷ Interview 3, 2024.

⁹⁸ Interview 8, 2024.

⁹⁹ Springman, *Effect of Government Repression on Civil Society: Evidence from Cambodia*, 2 f.

some are concerned about it jeopardising their status as a service providing organisation. One participant noted:

Advocacy work is kind of intense and consuming, and also risky for those who work with that... It has to be strategic and cautious for every step we are moving.¹⁰⁰

Organisations approach advocacy differently, with some emphasising it through lobbying, statements, reports, dialogue meetings, and information-sharing activities. The perceived value of advocacy also varies:

We do not have the power to pressure the government or relevant institutions, but however we do have the rights to make recommendations, submit open letters or press releases [...] the government dislike this approach of the organisations, they accuse us of having a tendency to the opposition party. [...] But we still keep our role, independently.¹⁰¹

Service-providing activities include education, capacity-building training, network-building events, human rights training, economic support, and legal aid. Many human rights and land rights defenders face mental health issues due to their work, so some organisations offer psychological assistance as a sustainability strategy. Many of these activities seem to be inspired by larger human rights frameworks, but then adapted to be feasible in the local contexts.

One finding connected to the organisations working with both advocacy and service providing is that organisations often face less resistance when providing women's rights services but encounter more opposition when advocating for human rights and land rights. The same organisations might cooperate with the government on women's rights while facing repression in other areas. Some organisations base their advocacy on service delivery, using their service work to connect with people and researchers for interviews. Advocacy efforts vary, with some focusing on individual cases and others on broader issues. This showcases how these two approaches can be balanced and resources leveraged to find a sustainable approach to social change.

5.1.4 Usage of the law and international human rights

With limited space for activism, international and domestic laws become vital tools for CSOs in their advocacy work. One approach is offering legal assistance to victims of human rights or land rights abuses, including advice, counselling, and representation. Many organisations handle complaints on human rights abuses and

¹⁰⁰ Interview 1, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Interview 7, 2024.

land grabbing, often preceded by an investigation to ensure the matter is within their mandate. The effectiveness of using the domestic legal system varies, but there are examples where CSOs have successfully represented individuals and communities in court.

One common advocacy strategy is publishing public statements and sharing them with the international community and media. Many organisations also inform Western embassies in Cambodia about on-the-ground developments and community issues. Some organisations find it easier and more effective to direct their advocacy outside Cambodia, targeting the international community and using international law for claims and statements. This is an example of how resources can be strategically utilised. The organisations are through this work showcasing how a restricted civic space can be navigated to amplify their advocacy efforts through international support and pressure.

This advocacy takes various forms, such as "investment mappings," which track international actors in different projects, demand accountability, and seek remedies like land returns and compensation. One strategy involves using the internet to identify these companies. When an international link is present, existing documentation and collaboration with other organisations make it easier to advocate for change. To engage the private sector, particularly companies, are however presenting challenges. Many organisations find these entities uninterested in dialogue and often implicated in human rights and land rights violations. Western companies limiting their presence in Cambodia leaves space for investments from countries under less pressure to adhere to human rights standards. Engaging in international processes requires knowledge, skill, and strategy due to the economic interests involved. It is typically a slow, effort-intensive process. However, some organisations highlight that international processes can be more effective compared to national frameworks. One interviewee noted:

Advocacy inside the county, engaging with a wiring of actors including the local authority, central government and cooperations... most of the time they are intertwined, you know. So that's noy just less effective, but dangerous.¹⁰²

Organisations using this approach can achieve significant societal impacts and influence international frameworks and practices. Most are in contact with various UN agencies and Special Rapporteurs, providing updates on the situation in Cambodia and contributing to UPRs. International, well-established INGOs also collaborate with many CSOs. These partnerships are described as mutually

¹⁰² Interview 4, 2024.

beneficial, as they help with outreach while minimising risks to the organisations and their affiliates. Some issues are too large for national CSOs to handle alone, requiring larger INGOs. In these cases, local organisations provide context and expertise, facilitating joint advocacy efforts. One reflection here is that this can be seen a valuable partnership for both parts, where the international organisations get assistance on how to navigate the local contexts when working with the universal human rights and how they can be grounded in local realities and contribute to actual change.

Some organisations have concluded that engaging with the international community is overall a successful and less risky advocacy strategy. They perceive that they can contribute to international frameworks and policies through their work and provide reports and research on the situation in Cambodia to INGOs and the UN. Respondents indicated that by engaging on the global level, local CSOs could have an opportunity to amplify local issues globally, address power imbalances, and promote justice and accountability. However, from a postcolonial perspective, this could be viewed as engaging in “the colonial processes as usual” and therefore raises the question of whether this is an effective tactic to address power imbalances.

5.2 Challenges and Risks

5.2.1 A shrinking civil society space, government repression and self-censorship

One of the main challenges facing civil society in Cambodia is the shrinking civic space. This forces many organisations to restrict their speech and actions. Many organisations must be careful when developing advocacy strategies. Openness about these strategies varies; some share information on their websites, while others are more guarded and avoid discussing details even in interviews. The effectiveness of strategies often depends on the specific situation rather than the organisation's focus. Some organisations are more restrained, usually based on their primary advocacy topics. Both those working with the government and those without government cooperation feel the need to censor themselves. Those working with the government feel pressured to align with its views, while those not working with the government fear repercussions for criticism or challenges, affecting both personal safety and organisational security. The organisations are well-acquainted with international human rights and such frameworks, but due to the constrained civic space, they have to modify their approaches to the current situation.

There is a bit of self-censorship sometimes where we have to be pragmatic and know where to pick our battles.¹⁰³

This situation is different from ten years ago, when organisations didn't need to self-censor. Now, they spend more time and resources on security and protection measures before and during missions. They also work in less confrontational ways to avoid backlash. As one interview participant stated:

But that doesn't mean that its not needed. It is definitely needed in terms of a human right confrontational approach, which I really still see it as the ecosystem of our advocacy work.¹⁰⁴

CSOs are also often seen as opposition to the government. This portrayal of civil society reflects historical practices of maintaining power through suppression of dissent, underscoring the enduring impact of colonial legacies on contemporary governance.

They consider the human rights organisations as opposition party, they accuse us of inciting the people to challenge or to help oppose the government or something.¹⁰⁵

According to official media outlets in Cambodia, there are over 6000 civil society organisations in Cambodia.¹⁰⁶ However, interview participants shared that only a small number of these are independent, which hinders their ability to work effectively and raise their voices. Also highlighted is a knowledge gap regarding the role of civil society, where a lot of people in Cambodia does not understand its role and tend to 'demonise' CSOs, especially those working with human rights.

While political activists are likely the most targeted, the situation for CSOs is also challenging. Independent civil society organisations in Cambodia face significant retaliation, as explained by interview participants. They encounter both administrative and legal measures. For example, the LANGO law requires complicated administrative processes, and non-compliance can result in fines or imprisonment, as told by interview participants. The government also uses legal tools to intimidate people. Requirements for permission letters to conduct events, along with local authorities copying attendance lists and photographing attendees, make it difficult for many organisations to operate.

¹⁰³ Interview 3, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Interview 8, 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Interview 7, 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Voun, Dara. Cambodia a 'paradise' for CSOs, as tally passes 6,000. *Phnom Penh Post*. 2022-06-21. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/cambodia-paradise-csos-tally-passes-6000> (Accessed 2024-05-22).

5.2.2 Threats, harassments and “weaponising” the law

Many organisations are exposed to harassment from various stakeholders. Some interview participants reported experiencing physical harassment while conducting monitoring work. Although it is difficult to prove who is behind these incidents, there is suspicion that actors with economic interests in land may collaborate with gangs to intimidate human rights defenders. Legal harassment is another challenge for CSOs, where financially powerful actors accuse them of crimes such as public defamation and incitement to commit a felony. Some activists have sought asylum abroad to avoid conviction, which makes others in CSOs more cautious. The usage of intimidation and legal harassments by “powerful actors” to suppress dissent are effective ways to maintain economic and political dominance and are in ways reminiscent of colonial rule. Some organisations believe they face significant attacks and pressure due to their effective work. They are sometimes described as brave in their efforts, but as one participant noted:

[...] it’s our job, it has nothing to do with bravery; It is our job to advocate.¹⁰⁷

Despite the challenges, all organisations remain persistent in advocating for human rights, land rights, and gender rights. As one interview participant stated:

Our activities follow the local law as the international law, which it international mechanisms that the government of Cambodia have ratified. [...] We have registered, so we have the right to implement our activities!¹⁰⁸

This seems to be a strategic choice and management of resources of CSOs, where they leverage legal frameworks to legitimise their activities. By doing this, they are likely to stand a better chance of sustaining their advocacy efforts and ensure resilience against harassments and threats. An interesting finding here is that the law can be used both to repress CSOs, but also by CSOs to advocate for rights. Here, one could say that the organisation is using the process of vernacularisation to translate international law into local context, where it can be used to promote human rights. Some are however sharing a quite bleak outlook regarding the future of civil society, not seeing improving, citing detentions of human rights defenders and civil society actors. However, there is still some hope that the government will eventually open space for civil society to operate without being perceived as a challenge.

¹⁰⁷ Interview 6, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Interview 5, 2024.

5.2.3 Financial and resource constraints

Almost all the organisations experience financial constraints, leaving many of them in uncertain situations, worrying about their ability to continue their work. Internal discussions are ongoing about how to rearrange operations to keep going. Many organisations do not want to rely on outside donors, but mobilising activities, advocacy, and organising events require external support. Time is also a challenge, as many organisations lack the resources to complete all necessary tasks. Many organisations must invest time and effort into risk assessments and security measures, both operationally and for physically securing their offices, to protect themselves and the communities they serve.

We have to conduct regular risk assessments in order to ensure that we're not jeopardise the solution process that communities are working on.¹⁰⁹

While funding is crucial to maintain advocacy work, some participants highlighted that they are also in need of emotional and spiritual support, for example the international community taking them seriously and listening to their needs. It is evident that CSOs working on human rights issues in Cambodia have to depend on international organisations and foreign donors. However, some interviewees noted they occasionally decline funding if they disagree with the proposed projects, lack expertise, or believe the projects could be harmful. Many donors, however, allow organisations to design and execute projects they deem beneficial for their communities.

Some CSOs experience bureaucratic and administrative challenges with international donors and INGOs. They feel donors sometimes request information that could jeopardise the safety of their members without proper explanation. Additionally, the administrative workload can be burdensome, consuming time and resources the organisations may lack. It could be noted that the reliance on international donors could, especially from a postcolonial perspective showcase the neo-colonial dynamics of global north-global south funding relationships, especially with instances of micromanaging and overly bureaucratic systems sometimes hindering the work of local CSOs. However, that the CSOs themselves are a bit selective in their acceptance of funds could demonstrate some kind of assertion of local agency and resistance to external impositions.

Another thing highlighted by many is the importance of a responsible phasing-out when making the decision to end financial aid. This is particularly relevant due to

¹⁰⁹ Interview 1, 2024.

Sweden's decision to phase out development cooperation in Cambodia. A rapid phase-out, seemingly without thorough analysis, can have negative impacts.

It's like... you're building a house, you're spending years and years, and suddenly you just break one foundation, and the house falls apart. It's the same: you build an organisation, strengthen capacity and everything and then the funding goes away and it collapses. That's what's going to happen.¹¹⁰

This is another thing that highlights the ongoing neo-colonial dynamics where the decisions by countries in the Global North significantly affect the capacity and sustainability of CSOs in the Global South. On one hand, this is a dependency that perpetuates a cycle of reliance and vulnerability that could undermine the autonomy of local organisations. However, aspects making the situation more complicated includes the fact that economic interests of the Global North in Cambodia have huge impacts on for examples land rights and people's livelihood, highlighting the question of the responsibility these countries should take for the damage created by their actions and economic interests.

5.2.4 Cooperation with government

Interviewees have differing views on cooperating with governments and directing advocacy towards them. Some organisations have found successful ways to work with the government, particularly on gender-related issues. One interviewee mentioned that they primarily address the state in their advocacy, since they are the focal persons in both implementing and developing policy. Some organisations engage in national dialogues with relevant stakeholders, including government representatives, the international community, donor countries, and the private sector.

It is important to talk, to discuss the solution with them. We are also listening to inputs and suggestions from the local people and them we can pass this on to the government.¹¹¹

However, the private sector is often less keen to participate in these dialogues, frequently not even responding to invitations. Organisations sometimes extend invitations to government agencies, leaving the decision to participate up to them. Some organisations have chosen not to engage with the government at all, claiming the system is broken, and that they cannot expect getting the solution from the right violators. Some organisations have attempted policy advocacy aimed at the government but had to change strategies due to a lack of political will.

¹¹⁰ Interview 4, 2024.

¹¹¹ Interview 5, 2024.

Organisations that have decided not to engage with the government still express a desire for collaboration, recognising it is currently not possible. They believe they have valuable expertise to offer. As one person said:

You know, we are supposed to work together, in an open society [...] but because of this closing of the civic space, the growing of an authoritarian regime... this tend to be a different perception.¹¹²

Advocates within the country are often seen as opposition groups, even when presenting solid evidence to the government. Some organisations participate in government consultations on new strategies, but there have been instances where the final documents included unapproved sections, damaging the already weak trust between CSOs and the government in Cambodia. Additionally, many attempts by CSOs to initiate consultations are denied by the government. When looking into the history of Cambodia, it is however quite clear that the history of distrust and authoritarian control have left legacies, for example a widespread scepticism about the state's willingness to genuinely collaborate and address issues rooted in historical injustices. It is also evident that the CSOs have to be mindful of the resources they do have, and but these where they do believe they can make a difference.

5.4 Gender

5.4.1 Gender as a safe topic?

Many agree that gender and women's rights are less controversial and sensitive issues to work with compared to land rights. According to interview participants, this is the field where independent CSOs are most likely to cooperate with the government. However, some organisations still face resistance. Because gender is seen as a less sensitive issue, many INGOs and donors focus heavily on it, but some believe the efforts are not yielding significant results and are "toothless." While there have been some positive outcomes, the gender imbalance remains significant, indicating a need for a more effective resource allocation to address the root causes of inequality and power dynamics. Regarding the sensitivity of gender issues, some organisations disagree with the notion that gender is less sensitive. They acknowledge that this perception exists because gender issues, like leadership and GBV prevention, are seen as less controversial. However, as one interview participant highlighted, challenging gender balances can still disrupt the current power dynamics.

¹¹² Interview 4, 2024.

When we talk about gender, it's not that it's less sensitive, but it will really touch on a thing that is very sensitive: power dynamics. It's about shifting the power.¹¹³

From a resource mobilisation perspective, working with gender rights could be seen as an effective way of using vernacularisation to incorporate human rights into the agenda by packaging them as gender rights, which tends to be seen as less sensitive. By keeping the focus on 'toothless' efforts related to gender,

5.4.2 Women on the front line out of necessity

According to many interview participants, much of the work CSOs do is aimed at benefiting women, who are often the most affected by declines in rights and land grabs. There is also a trend of many women taking the lead in advocacy. However, it is unclear whether this is by choice or out of necessity, where women's leadership could be seen as a necessary response to ongoing inequalities and structural injustices.

We see a lot of women stepping up, especially when it comes to advocacy towards authority, but that's not really the case; Demand is also involved. Women are much more affected in a society.¹¹⁴

and

Yes, women have had to take the front line now because they're in the factories and the land is passed down the maternal side. And the men are going abroad to get work and so on. So, in that sense, yes, there's empowerment- but it's not because of advocacy or whatever, I mean. It's because of the situation.¹¹⁵

This is an interesting juxtaposition, where on one side there is a lot of focus on female empowerment and gaining agency, but on the other hand, many women being 'forced' to partake in advocacy and activism out of suffering and fear of losing their livelihood.

Another observation is that most leaders of land communities are women. This could be because they rely on land to care for their families, while men leave for work. Some also note a shift in gender roles, with women increasingly taking on leadership roles, especially in social justice work. This can also contribute to human rights standards and gender rights strategies being adapted to effectively address the specific challenges in local contexts. Regarding the motivations behind female

¹¹³ Interview 8, 2024.

¹¹⁴ Interview 4, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Interview 6, 2024.

participation in land rights protests, many points to "self-preservation", since they risk losing their livelihood, family and essentially their life. This is evident for both women and Indigenous peoples. These issues affect their livelihoods, and not being at the forefront is not really a choice.

When it comes to land rights, it's very much at the heart of women's life. And so that's why we can see that there is a big motivation for women to be part of it and also, she wants her lands back. It's her, her life. [...] Its her life and it is also about Indigenous peoples. [...] They have only, you know, two choices, either win or lose, but it's better to get this 50 % chance or to stay at home and doing nothing and get zero chance of getting things back, right?¹¹⁶

5.4.3 Gender-specific challenges and empowerment

Women are expected to handle both household and work responsibilities, which affects their opportunities to engage in mobilisation. Men tend to have more spare time to socialise and build communities. This has led some CSOs to focus on training both women and men to promote shared household work. Most interview participants agree that women face more challenges due to their activism than their male counterparts and when their livelihoods are threatened. The work for women's rights often emphasises empowerment. As one respondent shared.

The work for women's rights strongly emphasises empowerment. As one respondent shared:

We work a lot to build capacity of women and we work even with the women who are at a local authority, and we work with women who are the farmers, and we unlock their leadership potential by providing a lot of training courses.¹¹⁷

Empowerment work aimed at women often focuses on economic empowerment, addressing the link between economic barriers and GBV. Women activists frequently face increased domestic violence, making this a priority for some organisations. Some believe that empowerment can be effective, with some women, particularly in rural areas, feeling empowered as human rights defenders. However, many agree that it is challenging, and women in these roles are often subjected to harassment, violence, and sexual violence, sometimes from the police. There are many signs that women advocating for land rights or female environmental activists are in a particularly vulnerable situation, which also makes it a priority for many to

¹¹⁶ Interview 8, 2024.

¹¹⁷ Interview 2, 2024.

address the structural inequalities they are faced with and support their role in promoting social change and justice.

6. Findings and Discussion

6.1. Findings

This study revealed several key insights into how CSOs in Cambodia mobilise their resources and adapt their advocacy strategies to address land rights and women's rights, influenced by the current political environment and the shrinking civic space. These findings derived from qualitative semi-structured interviews with representatives from eight CSOs, analysed through a thematic analysis using postcolonial theory, resource mobilisation theory, and the theory of vernacularisation.

Regarding resource mobilisation and advocacy strategies, CSOs focus on evidence-based advocacy to support their claims and influence policy. This aligns with resource mobilisation theory, emphasising the importance to tangible resources such as data and research in advocacy efforts. Empowerment of local communities and a bottom-up approach are central to the strategies employed by CSOs, aimed to build local capacity and resilience. Findings also showed service-providing in the form of legal assistance and engagement of international human rights, reflecting the concept of vernacularisation and the adoption of global human rights norms to local contexts, where they are made accessible. Another finding shows that many CSOs integrate the roles of service provision and advocacy, finding it to be an effective way to enhance credibility and effectiveness. From a postcolonial perspective, this could be seen to challenge external narratives often dominated by former colonial powers.

The findings shows that CSOs are facing many challenges and risks, with government repression and self-censorship being one of them. This limits their operational scope and ability to advocate freely. Finance and resource constraints are also challenges, affecting the capacity to implement programs and sustain long-term advocacy efforts. From a postcolonial perspective, one conclusion drawn is that it could be seen as a continuation of economic dependency created by colonial exploitation. Findings also highlight the role of women in advocacy, where they often face unique challenges, but still often are seen on the forefront of resistance, especially for land rights. Much of the work CSOs seems to be doing for women's rights are focusing on empowerment, but findings also shows that many women are partaking in advocacy and activism out of necessity and not necessarily due to empowerment efforts.

6.2. Discussion

The initial plan for this study was to conduct a case study analysing official documents and reports from land rights organisations operating in Cambodia. The goal was to review annual reports to understand the organisations vision, goals, and programs, and gain insights into their operations. However, an early finding revealed that the intended organisations had ceased publishing these documents publicly. One option was then to refocus the study to include other organisations. However, this discovery sparked a new interest in examining how these organisations conduct advocacy in Cambodia's current political climate. While previous research touched on operating under government repression, the question of advocacy strategies remained unanswered. Switching to semi-structured interviews initially seemed risky due to concerns about securing interviews. However, it proved possible to secure interviews. The study was reworked multiple times, and each decision have been thoroughly considered, including the ethical aspects of interviewing individuals from CSOs in a repressive state.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on interviews with spokespersons for organisations means that the findings are based on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Additionally, the scope of the study was limited by the number of organisations and participants involved. A larger sample size and more diverse data sources, such as official documents and broader community perspectives, would offer a more comprehensive understanding. For example, including more diverse interviewees could enrich the findings.

This study confirms some existing research, such as the need for more effective mechanisms to address development-induced dispossession and protect vulnerable communities' rights. This aligns with local CSO strategies addressing these issues. It also highlights the challenges women face in balancing advocacy work with household roles and notes the significant presence of women on the front lines of land rights advocacy. New findings include insights into the mobilisation and advocacy strategies used and the associated challenges and risks. While it would have been beneficial to provide more detailed insights into advocacy strategies, many interview participants were reluctant to delve deeply into this area. Detailed disclosures could risk revealing participants' identities, which could be harmful. The study reaffirms previous research on government repression of civil society, the choices CSOs face regarding government cooperation, and the harassment risks for civil society and human rights workers.

This study is relevant as it examines the advocacy strategies employed by CSOs in Cambodia. Academically, it contributes to understanding civil society dynamics

within authoritarian contexts, integrating theories of postcolonialism, resource mobilisation, and vernacularisation. For policymakers and international development agencies, the findings highlight the importance of supporting CSOs, particularly through funding and capacity-building initiatives. The study also underscores the critical role of women in advocacy, emphasising the need for gender-specific support. Overall, this research informs strategies to enhance the resilience and effectiveness of CSOs in challenging environments.

6.2.1 Further research

One significant point that emerged from the interviews was Sweden's decision to phase out development cooperation in Cambodia and the anticipated negative impacts on CSOs. This is compounded by the overall declining interest from countries in the Global North in supporting Cambodia. Further research could explore this issue in depth, considering aspects such as the moral responsibilities of Western countries in light of colonial legacies and the influence of multinational corporations from the West on livelihoods and rights in Cambodia. Another thing highlighted in interviews was the perception of women as more strategic and detailed in their activism and advocacy work. While previous research has addressed female resistance against land grabbing and the role of emotions in protesting, it would be valuable to investigate gender-related differences in advocacy work further.

Expanding this study to include additional data, such as documents, official statements, and more interviews within civil society, would likely provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture, facilitating more definitive conclusions. Another approach could be a comparative study of different types of CSOs in Cambodia. It would also be interesting to study how CSOs work in practice versus strategies mentioned in public statements.

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Appendix I – Respondent table

No.	Date of interview	Gender	Role of Respondent
1	2024-04-23	M	Executive director
2	2024-04-24	F	Executive director
3	2024-04-24	F	Manager for research and campaign
4	2024-04-25	M	Executive director
5	2024-04-26	M	Coordinator for resource, mobilisation, and advocacy
6	2024-05-02	F	Outreach Director
7	2024-05-15	F	Executive Director
8	2024-05-15	M	Project Coordinator

Appendix II – Interview guide

Date:

Time:

Place:

Interviewee:

Opening question:

Tell me about the organisation and what you do, in your own words. → How many people are there in the organisation + what is your role?

Content questions:

1. I would like to know how you work for human rights/land rights/women's rights. Could you provide some examples of the most recent time you advocated for human rights/land rights/women's rights? (What was it about and how did you do it?)

2. What strategies do you use in your advocacy work?

Which are the most/least successful?

3. Who do you address? - The claims + duty bearers

4. Are there other areas where you hope to or wish you could engage in advocacy?

5. Tell me about some challenges you've been facing lately and how you dealt with them

6. Tell me about the last time gender issues were important in your advocacy work, and what that looked like. Also: Gender division within the organisation?

7. Differences in how you can address men VS women?

Follow up: Are women and men being treated differently (as part of an organisation working with this)?

8. Any success stories and why do you think it was a success?

9. Is there something else you would like to share that we haven't addressed but you think is important to mention?

Appendix III - Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

Research project title: Civil Society Organisations in Cambodia.

Research investigator: Ella Fasting

The interview will take *30-45 minutes*. We do not anticipate any specific risks associated with this study. However, your statements, except those which you wish to have removed or omitted, will be published in the thesis and therefore publicly accessible through the Lund University website. You may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw completely from the project at any time.

Thank you for your interest in this study. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from Swedish institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. If there is something you do not understand about this document or have any questions about the project, you may ask before signing.

This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying **information sheet** and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- The interview will be recorded, and a transcript will be produced. The data will be safely stored for 5 years, in line with the guidelines of the university.
- The transcript of the interview will be analysed by Ella Fasting as research investigator.
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to yourself, Ella Fasting, and academic colleagues and researchers with whom she might collaborate as part of the research process.
- For any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets, care will be taken to ensure that you will not be identified.
- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval.

By signing this form, I agree that:

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time.
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.
3. I have read the information sheet and I understand that the data will be safely stored for 5 years.
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure that I am not identified.
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any questions I may have in the future.

Printed Name

Participants Signature

Date

Researchers Signature

Date

Contact Information

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please contact:

Ella Fasting

Tel: +46702121170

E-mail: el6336fa-s@student.lu.se or ella.fasting@rwi.lu.se

You can also contact Ella Fasting's supervisor:

Sarah Pritchett

E-mail: sarah.pritchett@mrs.lu.se