

## AVI COMMENTARY

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### **Is Cambodia on the Right Path to Achieving Durable Peace and Sustainable Development?**

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Peacebuilding and development are lengthy processes requiring continuous cultivation. It takes years or decades to attain peace and realise the benefits of peace and development, but peace can be broken in just days. Sustainable development reinforces sustainable peace, and more peaceful and inclusive societies create a favourable environment for sustainable development. Therefore, sustainable peace plays a role as the foundation and, at the same time, the outcome of sustainable development.

The 2030 United Nations (UN) Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aims to support UN members in eliminating poverty, reducing inequalities, increasing inclusive growth, improving educational quality, and dealing with climate change, among other international priorities. The adoption of the SDGs requires all nations to find approaches to working together to reinforce peace and end all forms of conflict. One of the SDGs, Goal 16, focuses on supporting countries in implementing the SDGs from a development and peace perspective and transforming the vision of sustaining peace into reality. Cambodia has made remarkable efforts to meet SDG 16 on peace and sustainable development, which are examined in this article.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, Cambodia experienced a civil war, which bred mistrust, violence, and poverty. In addition, serious deprivation, malnutrition, limited opportunity for education, and the absence of civil rights prevented the nation from achieving development.

However, Prime Minister Hun Sen's Win-Win Policy implemented from 1996 to 1998 managed to end the long-lasting civil war and bring peace and reconciliation to Cambodia for the first time after several centuries of wars and conflicts. Moreover, the Win-Win Policy led to the demolition of the Khmer Rouge's political and military structure and incorporated them into the Cambodian state's social, economic, and political life. Since then, the foundation of peace in Cambodia has been gradually built up and consolidated.

Peace and stability are the foundation underpinning development in Cambodia, making it possible for the country to achieve remarkable economic growth and poverty reduction in the last two decades. Its economy sustained an average growth rate of 7.7% between 1998 and 2019, making it one of the fastest-growing economies globally. Cambodia has experienced

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rapid growth by achieving a lower-middle-income status in 2015 and is striving to attain an upper-middle-income level by 2030 and high-income status by 2050.

Peace does not simply mean the total absence of war or conflict. Johan Galtung defined the so-called “Positive Peace” as an “eradication of the root causes of war, violence, and injustice, and the conscious attempt to build a society that reflects these commitments”. Positive peace assumes the interconnectedness of all life. It is established through world order by supporting international law, complying with multilateral treaties, using international courts for nonviolent resolution of disputes, and participating in international organisations, trade, and communication.

The Cambodian government has worked with UN organisations on the 2030 Agenda under SDG 6 to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. As a result, the Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) have been fully incorporated into the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2019–2023. The CSDGs included three targets of SDG 16, namely 16.3 (promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all), 16.5 (substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms), and 16.9 (by 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration).

In accordance with its national laws and regulations, the Cambodian government has also been working to consolidate peace, political stability, and social order as the foundation of good governance, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Moreover, the government embraces good governance as the cornerstone of its priorities for national development. Accordingly, it implements all significant reforms, including those aimed at combating corruption and improving public administration, legal and judicial systems, the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, public financial management, and decentralisation and de-concentration.

Additionally, the government guarantees the participation of all relevant stakeholders by creating Technical Working Groups (TWGs). The TWGs were formed as coordinating organisations and partnership dialogue mechanisms that bring together government agencies, development partners, and business associations to support national development priorities outlined in the Rectangular Strategy. Furthermore, the government has demonstrated its commitment to encouraging partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs) in all areas of development by holding regular meetings with CSOs to address their requests and concerns.

Despite its tremendous efforts to accomplish SDG 16, the country’s peace, security, and sustainable development still face challenges. Previous decades of violent conflicts have significantly impacted the current society, such as trauma, poverty, and illiteracy, which are concerning issues for Cambodia’s development. Likewise, corruption, inequality, injustice, and poor public services persist to a certain degree although the government has been working hard to address them. They have been identified as the most challenging issues in achieving positive peace and sustainable development in Cambodia.

In conclusion, SDG 16 is committed to promoting a peaceful, inclusive society for sustainable development. Despite the challenges, Cambodia is on the right path to achieving its SDG Goal 16. With Prime Minister Hun Sen's Win-Win Policy, Cambodia could end the decades-long civil war and progressively build up and strengthen the foundation of peace and stability, resulting in impressive economic growth and social development in the last two decades.

Maintaining peace is a necessity for sustainable development in Cambodia. Without peace, development cannot occur. In this regard, we must continuously maintain and strengthen peace's foundation. Furthermore, multistakeholder collaboration is critical for peacebuilding. Collaboration between the government and national and international stakeholders is essential for achieving durable peace and long-term development.

*The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.*