

## **Cambodia Chapter**

### **Poverty reduction in Cambodia: Policies and priority measures**

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Key Words: Poverty, Rural, urban, Income, Inequality, Employment, Education

#### ***I. Introduction***

The Cambodian economy has experienced two decades of strong growth, averaging 7-8% per year and ranking among the top 10 fastest growing economies in the world (Cambodia, 2018). The economy has transitioned from being almost entirely dependent on traditional agriculture to having a broad base that is attractive for new and high value-added industries. GDP per capita (in current US dollars) has risen from US\$267 in 1991 to US\$2,430 in 2023. This growth has been driven primarily by tourism, manufacturing exports, real estate, and construction. After achieving lower-middle-income status in 2015, the country has set a goal of becoming an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income country by 2050.

Strong economic performance has contributed significantly to poverty reduction: poverty incidence fell from 47% in 1994 to 16% in 2022 (ADB, 2011; UNDP, 2023). Despite significant reduction in poverty over the past three decades, a large proportion of the population remains “near poor” and remains at high risk of falling back into poverty following a shock (ADB, 2011). World Bank (2022) and ADB (2011) showed that rural people face higher poverty compare to those living in urban areas. The 2019/2020 socio-economic survey indicated poverty rates vary by area of residence, with 4.2 percent considered poor in Phnom Penh, 12.6 percent in other urban areas, and 22.8 percent in rural areas ( Cambodia, 2022). Since poverty rates are higher in rural areas, the government is focusing on improving rural livelihoods through boosting agricultural production, investing in climate change adaptation, and improving access to land for the landless and extremely poor.

The dimensions of poverty in Cambodia can also be reflected through low human capital derived mainly from low education quality and poor healthcare services. According to the World Bank (2022), education quality remains the problem for the country to upskilling while undernutrition remains a public health concern. Moreover, the country is highly

vulnerable to natural disasters, with frequent floods and droughts negatively impacting agricultural production and rural infrastructure. These climate-related disasters could undo years of development gains and push people, especially in rural areas, into poverty. This poses a challenge to achieving SDG 1, which is to eradicate extreme poverty for all by 2030. While promoting economic growth and improving living standards of the people are central to the government's development agenda, Cambodia has also adopted various policies and implemented key measures aimed at reducing poverty. To provide an in-depth understanding on poverty reduction in Cambodia, this paper is structured in three parts. Part 1 presents the government's policies on poverty reduction, Part 2 presents main measures that Cambodia has implemented in terms of poverty reduction, part 3 explain the country's status of employment, and part 4 present conclusion.

## ***II. Policies on poverty reduction***

The Royal Government of Cambodia has enacted a number of policies for socio-economic development and poverty reduction. The first policy which was formulated after the formation of the coalition government in 1991 was the National Programme to Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia (NPRD) which was adopted in 1994 as the first full-fledged, comprehensive national development program (Cambodia, 2019). Based on the NPRD, the first Socioeconomic Development Plan (SEDP I) 1996-2000 was formulated in 1996 as the first five-year national development plan which focused on macroeconomic stability, social development, and poverty reduction. As SEDP I was nearing its end, second Socioeconomic Development Plan (SEDP II) for the period 2001-2005 was prepared and determined various development targets to be reached by 2005. The focus remained more or less the same as in SEDP I which focused mainly on economic growth and poverty reduction (Cambodia, 2006).

In 2002, the National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003–2005 was adopted. The adoption of the National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003–2005 was based mainly on the SEDPII 2001–2005. The National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003–2005 was the first national strategic framework that established visions, objectives and actionable measures to tackle poverty in Cambodia (Cambodia, 2002).

In 2006, Cambodia's National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2006-2010 was adopted. The NSDP replaces previous medium-term strategies (the second Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP-II) 2001-2005 and the National Poverty Reduction Strategy

(NPRS 2003-2005) (World Bank, 2006). Subsequently, Cambodia adopted NSDP Update 2009-2013, National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2014-2018, and National Strategic Development Plan 2019-2023. These plans aimed to achieve both political and socio-economic development of Cambodia.

Based on various development plans and national development strategies as mentioned above, the Royal Government of Cambodia had developed 04 phases of Rectangular Strategies between 2004 and 2023. The Rectangular Strategies selected key elements from the Cambodia Socio-Economic Development Program 2001-2005 (SEDP2), the Cambodia National Poverty Reduction Strategy 2003-2005 (NPRS), and the various policies, strategies, plans and other important reform programs (Cambodia, 2004). Each of the four phases of the rectangular strategies was set out as supporting tools to implement political platforms of the of the Royal Government in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> legislature of the National Assembly respectively from 2003 to 2023 with the objective of promoting economic growth, generating employment, ensuring social equity, and protecting the nation's natural resources.

Lastly in 2023, Cambodia adopted Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I. Building extensively on the achievements of the Four-Phase Rectangular Strategy and looking ahead to the next 25 years, Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I is the main strategic framework that will guide development in Cambodia over the next five-year of the current government mandate. Pentagonal strategy-phase I has five strategic objectives: 1) Ensuring the economic growth, 2) Creating more jobs, 3) Achieving the poverty reduction, 4) Continuing to strengthen capacity, governance, and improving the quality of public institutions, and 5) Ensuring sustainable socio-economic development (Cambodia, 2023).

### ***III. Priority poverty reduction measures***

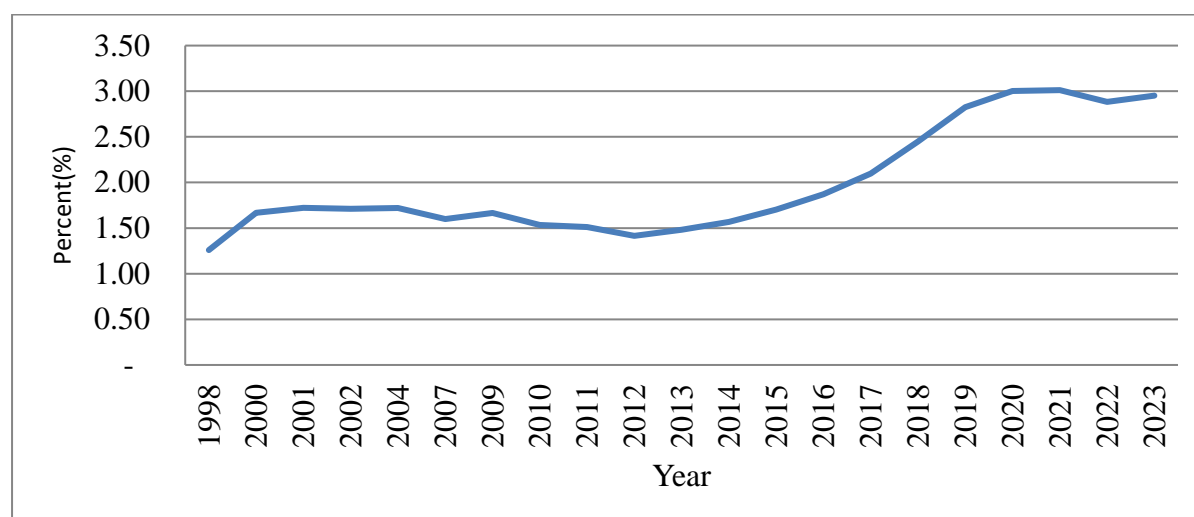
#### **1. Human capital development**

##### ***Improving access to education***

Education is a key factor for poverty reduction. It helps people gain skills and knowledge needed to find employment, improve their quality of life, and break cycles of poverty. As stated in Pentagonal Strategy Phase I, Cambodian's government prioritizes education and human capital development in order to transform Cambodia into a high-income country by 2050 (Cambodia, 2023).

In recent years, education expenditure has gone up from 1.26 percent in 1998 to 2.95 percent of GDP in 2023 ( figure 01below). Khmer Time (2024) showed that in 2013, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports received only about \$273 million, while by 2023, the Royal Government has invested up to \$820 million in education.

Figure 01: Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)



Source: World Bank (2024)

Further to government effort in improving education sector, some development partners such as ADB and World Bank have been strongly active in supporting education in Cambodia. In October 2024, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved an \$80 million loan for a project namely the Secondary Education for Human Capital Competitiveness Project. The project aims to expand the number of inclusive climate-resilient school facilities—including an additional 400 classrooms—to address classroom overcrowding and expand access to quality upper secondary education (ADB, 2024). Additionally, the World Bank, in May 2024, approved additional \$79.5 million to expand activities that are improving access to quality education across Cambodia. The funding will be used to scale up the Cambodia General Education Improvement Project, which was approved in January 2022 with initial financing of \$69.25 million (World Bank, 2024).

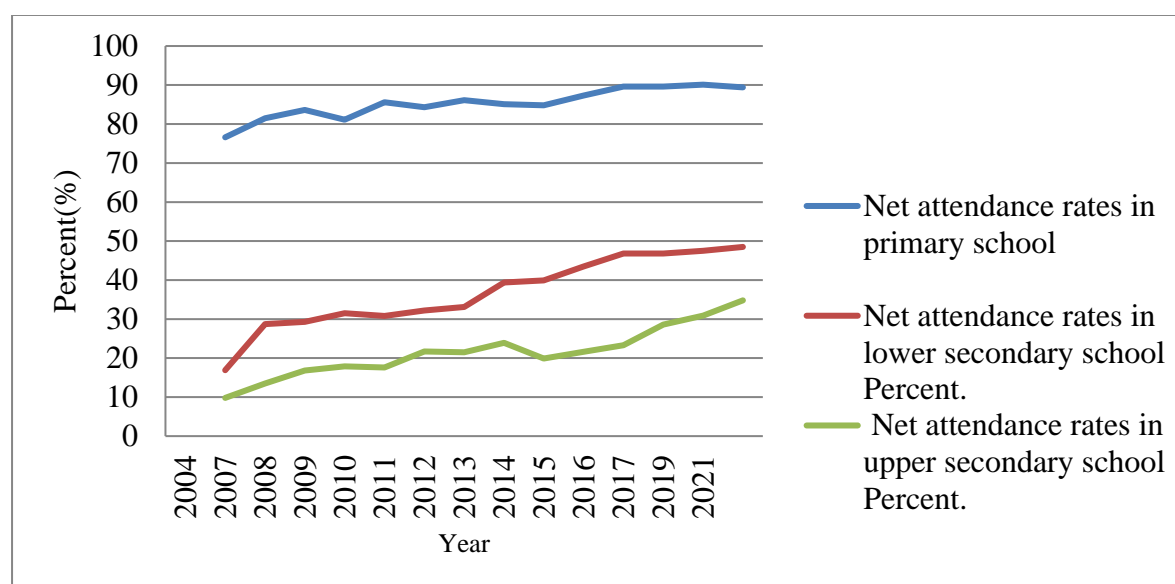
As a result of increasing national budget and development partners’ supports on education, over the last few decades, there has been considerable expansion in terms of educational infrastructure. The number of kindergarten and general education schools increased from 14,852 in the 2013-2014 academic year to 18,830 in the 2022-2023 academic year. Likewise,

the number of education staff increased from 112,704 in 2013 to 125,597 in 2022. In higher education, institutional expansion has also been a major development. The number of HEIs has increased more than tenfold, from around 10 to 132 and student enrollment has also skyrocketed, from approximately 10,000 in the 1990s to approximately 200,000 in the academic year 2021-2022 (K. Heng, K. Sol, S. Kaing, & S. Em, 2023)

Moreover, in 2018, the government has introduced the Policy on Inclusive Education which outlines a comprehensive framework aimed at ensuring equitable access to quality education for all children, particularly those with disabilities (Cambodia, 2018a). Improving access to education particularly primary and secondary education is also strongly emphasized in the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 which was adopted in 2019\_(Cambodia, 2019a). Another policy to promote access to education in Cambodia was Cambodia Secondary Education Blueprint 2030. It's objective is to ensure equal opportunities for all Cambodians to access secondary education ( Cambodia, 2021). In 2019, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports implemented the National Policy on Lifelong learning with support from UNESCO ( Cambodia, 2019b). The policy ensures that all Cambodians have access to learning useful skills and opportunities for education at any age to sustain their living, especially for school dropouts, ethnic minorities, migrant workers, unemployed and marginalized groups.

As a result of government efforts and donors' supports, Cambodia has made great strides in expanding access to education over the last two decades. Net enrolment rates in all general education levels (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary level) increased during the last 20 years. Net enrolment rate for primary education increased from 76.6% in 2004 to 89.4% in 2024 which is at the level comparable to high-income economies ( Figure 02 below).

Figure 02: Net enrollment rate 2004-2021

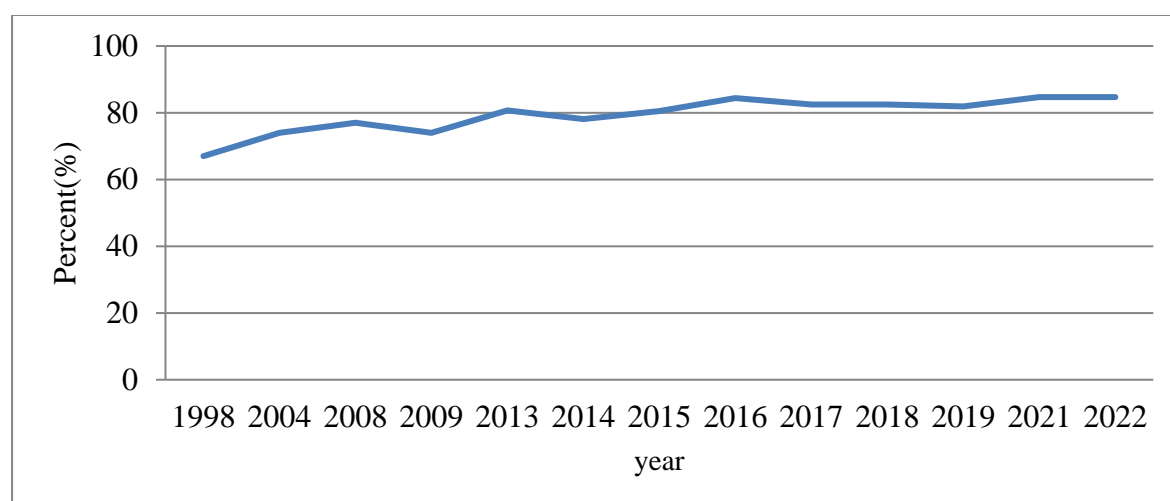


Source: National Institute of Statistics, Accessed on 12 February 2025 from [https://nis.gov.kh/nis/CSES/Data/CSES\\_Table/CSES\\_Education.htm](https://nis.gov.kh/nis/CSES/Data/CSES_Table/CSES_Education.htm)

Although enrolment rates are showing an upward trend, net enrolment rates for secondary and upper secondary education are significantly lower than those for primary education. Many children are not transitioning from primary to secondary education, reflecting high dropout rates linked to poor academic performance and economic pressures. According to UNICEF (2018), the main reason for dropping out of school is poverty. Many older students choose to drop out of school to find jobs to support their families (UNICEF, 2018).

Along with the upward trend in net enrolment rate, the adult literacy rate has also increased significantly. The recent data showing a notable rise in the percentage of adults aged 15 and above. According to ASEC (2023) and World Bank (2024), the literacy rate has jumped from 67% in 1998 to around 84.7% in 2022.

Figure 03: Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)



Sources: World Bank (2024), ASEAN Secretariat (2023)

### ***Skill development***

Tens of thousands of young people join the workforce in Cambodia every year. The labor force participation rate of the working-age population (age 15 and above) increased from 3.42 million in 1991 to 9.74 million in 2023 (World Bank, 2024a).

Although the country is blessed with an ample labor force, the workforce is still characterized by very low levels of education and skills. According to Cambodia (2022), 36.8% of the population aged 15-64 have not completed primary education. Approximately 8% of the workforce has completed high school (grade 12), and only 4.5% have completed tertiary education.

Table 01: Education level of labour force by age group 2021 ( in percent)

Age group	Primary school not completed	Primary school completed	Lower secondary school complete	Upper secondary school completed	Post secondary education	Total
15-19	20.8	47.1	26.0	4.9	1.0	100
20-24	19.6	34.2	20.3	14.6	11.4	100
25-34	27.0	33.1	16.6	10.7	12.5	100
35-44	43.2	31.4	11.5	7.3	6.4	100

45-54	52.4	26.9	10.6	6.0	4.0	100
55-54	70.8	17.2	7.5	2.8	1.4	100
Total (15-64)	36.8	32.0	15.1	8.4	4.5	100
Source: Cambodia (2022)						

In response to the low skilled workforces, the government has taken steps to reform and strengthen the education and training system, including an enhanced role of the private sector in skills development and providing incentives to enterprises to train their own workforces (ADB, 2018). Moreover, the government has adopted a number of policies for skill development such as National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-2025, National Employment Policy 2015-2025, National Policy on Lifelong Learning, Cambodian Digital Economy and Social Policy Framework 2021-2035 and Cambodia Secondary Education Blueprint 2030, to encourage people to obtain good jobs and better living standards (ADB, 2023). Recently, Skills Development Roadmap 2023-2035 was adopted with the aims to develop a highly skilled and productive workforce to meet the needs of the labor market (Cambodia, 2023a).

Aside from policy formulations, the government has also increased budget allocation to TVET in recent year from US\$ 12.82 million in 2017 (UNESCO, 2020) to around US\$ 36 million in 2024 (Khmer Times, 2024). In addition, in 2023, the government announced a national programme to train skills for 1.5 million young people from poor and vulnerable families. This program aims to provide at least one skill to youth from poor and vulnerable families, as well as those from the formal and informal sectors of the economy, so that they can find jobs and /or self-employed (MOEUNG, J., 2024).

Skill development has also been supported by a number of development partners with ADB is a major funder of skills development in Cambodia. In 2023, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved a \$100 million loan to boost skills development. The loan will support the first subprogram of the Skills Sector Development for the Future Economy, which will run from 2023 to 2029, and help transform Cambodia into a technology-driven and knowledge-based industrial economy (ADB, 2023a).



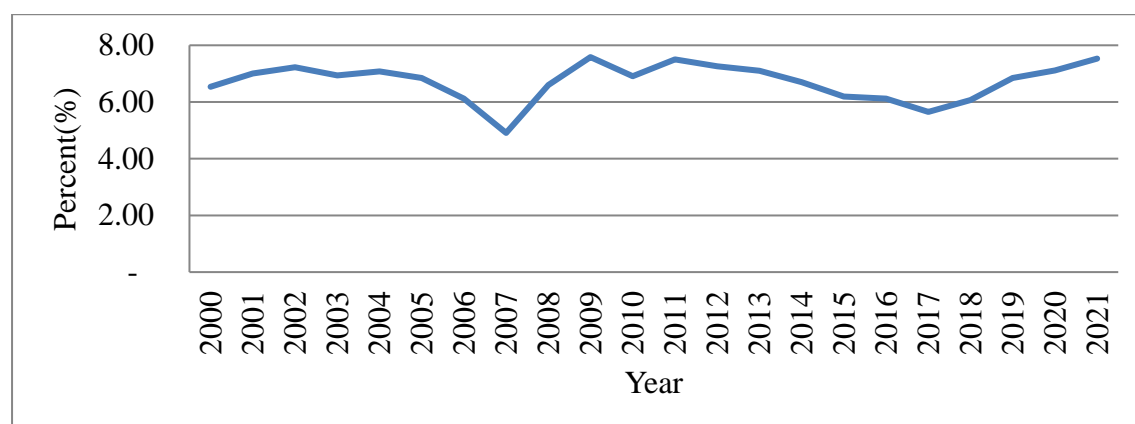
The government also established the Skills Development Fund (SDF) in 2018 to promote demand-driven and sustainable skills development with the objectives of diversifying and increasing value addition in the Cambodian economy as well as creating better and decent jobs for the citizens. The SDF has received funding from the Royal Government of Cambodia and development partners such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and L'Agence Française de Développement (AFD). Since its launch in 2018, the SDF has implemented 100 training projects benefiting 11,309 workers, with US\$5.9 million spent on training projects (Manoj, M., 2023).

### ***Healthcare Development***

Cambodia has made tremendous effort to develop healthcare sector during the last 3 decades. The country's healthcare development has been guided by the three phases of health strategic plans namely Health Strategic Plan 2003-2007 (HSP1), the Second Health Strategic Plan 2008-2015 (HSP2), and of the third Health Strategic Plan 2016-2020 (HSP3). In accordance with the HSP3, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has made efforts to improve access to health care services, develop health infrastructure, ensure a stable supply of health care equipment and materials, and secure sufficient health human resources in terms of quality and quantity (Cambodia, 2016).

With the focus on increasing public health coverage and quality healthcare, the government budget allocated to the health sector increased considerably in recent years. Health expenditure as percentage of GDP increased from 5.65 percent in 2017 to 7.53 in 2021.

Figure 04: Current health expenditure (% of GDP)



Source: World Bank (2024)

Further to the government effort in advancing health sector, a number of development partners such as ADB, World Bank and WHO have been very active in supporting the development of healthcare sector in Cambodia. In line with the 3 phases of health strategic development plans, the World Bank has supported the Health Equity and Quality Improvement Project (H-EQIP) since 2017 to remove financial barriers to access and increase utilization of health services by the poor and to strengthen a nationwide network of health facilities (Cambodia, 2023b). In moving toward Universal Health Coverage, WHO has supported the Cambodian government on the basis of the Country Cooperation Strategy (2016-2020) while the Asia Development Bank (ADB) has supported the Greater Mekong Sub-region Health Security Project in Cambodia since 2017 through a concessional loan.

As a result of government efforts and support from development partners, Cambodia's health situation has improved significantly over the past few decades. Between 2000 and 2020, the maternal mortality rate decreased from 606 to 218 per 100,000 live births and the under-five mortality rate decreased from 116 in 1991 to 24 per 1,000 live births in 2022.

Figure 05: Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births)

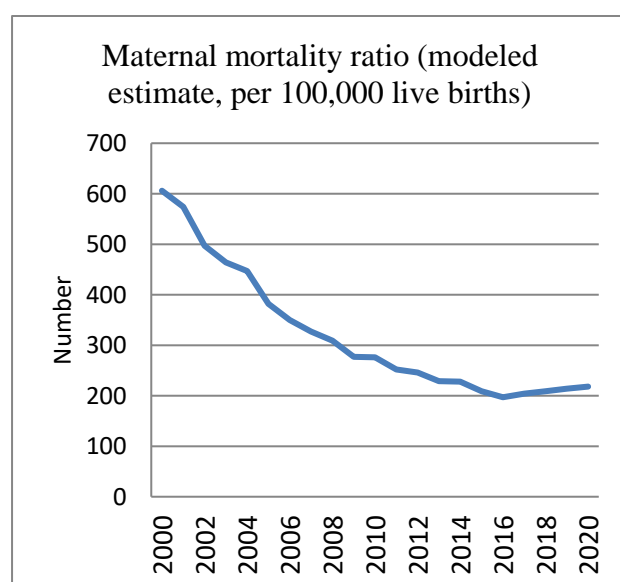
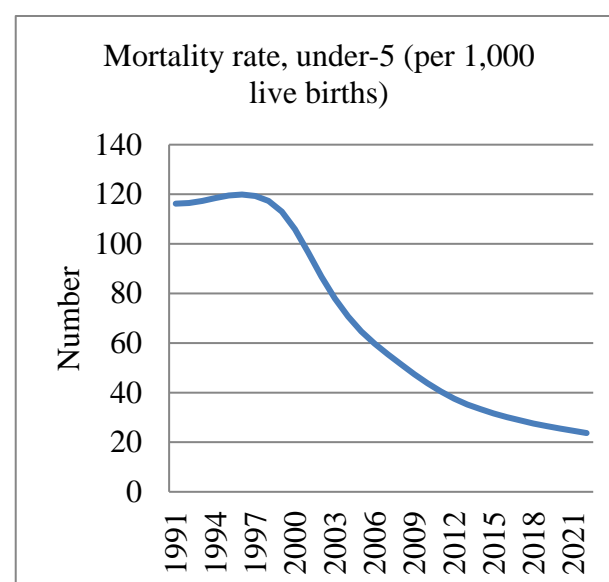


Figure 06: Mortality rate, under-5 (per 1,000 live births)

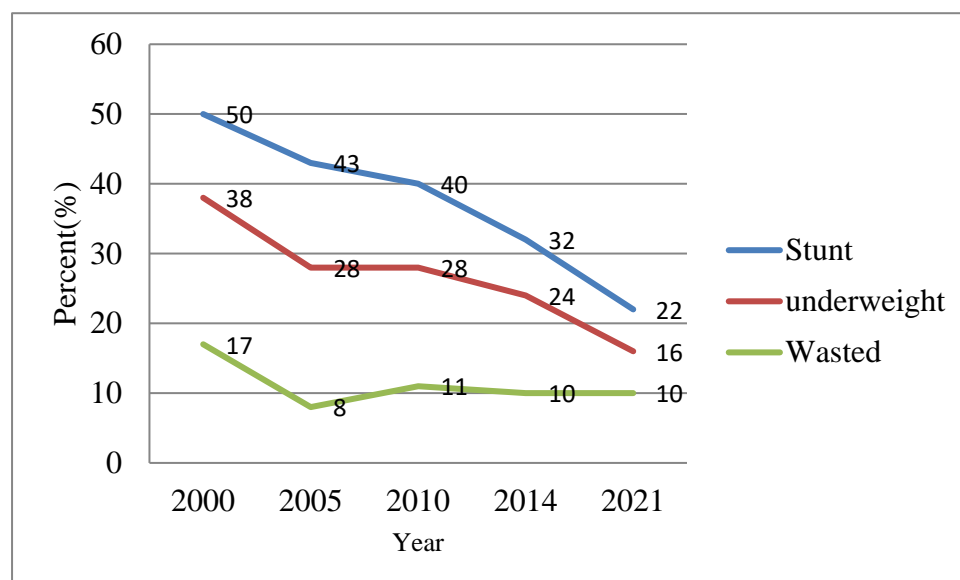


World Bank (2023). Maternal mortality ratio (modeled estimate, per 100,000 live births) – [Cambodia. WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, and UNDESA/Population Division. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2023]. Accessed on 15 February 2025 from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.MMRT?l=null&locations=KH>

Additionally, the government is working to eliminate malnutrition among children for the betterment of human capital. Various measures to eliminate malnutrition include the adoption of Sub-decree No. 133 ANKr, dated 18 November, 2005, on the Marketing of Products for Infant and Young Child Feeding ; Roadmap to Accelerate Nutrition Improvement; Strategic Directions for Food Security and Nutrition 2030; Cash Transfer Program for Pregnant Women and Children Under 2 years of Households Holding ID poor Cards; Use of information technology (IT) to create a food security and nutrition information system; Formation of a Technical Working Group on Food Security and Nutrition; Response to global efforts to implement the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, and the engagement of the Royal Government in regional and global cooperation frameworks such as becoming a member of the global Scaling Up Nutrition Movement and implementation of zero hunger initiative by 2025...etc.

With the government's efforts, child malnutrition declined in Cambodia over 2 decade. The proportion of children with stunted growth due to malnutrition fell from 50% in 2000 to 22% in 2021, and the proportion of underweight children fell from 38% to 16%, but the proportion of wasted children has remained unchanged.

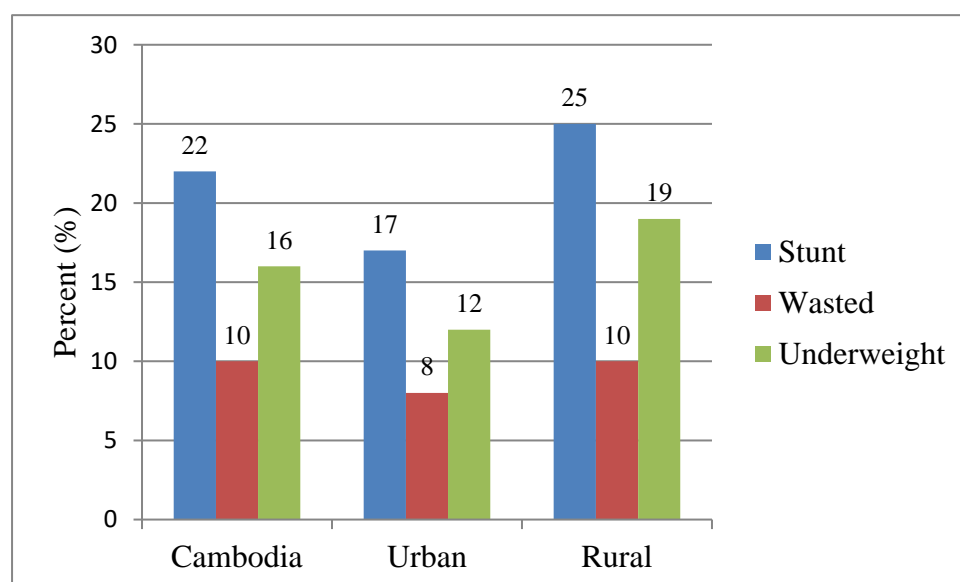
Figure 07: Trend in Nutritional status of children under 5



Source: Cambodia ( 2023c)

Despite improvements in nutrition among children, chronic malnutrition remains severe in rural areas. In 2021, 25%, 19% and 10% of children in rural areas were stunted, underweight and wasted, respectively, compared to 17%, 12% and 8% of children in urban areas.

Figure 08: Nutritional status of children under 5 in 2021/22 by areas

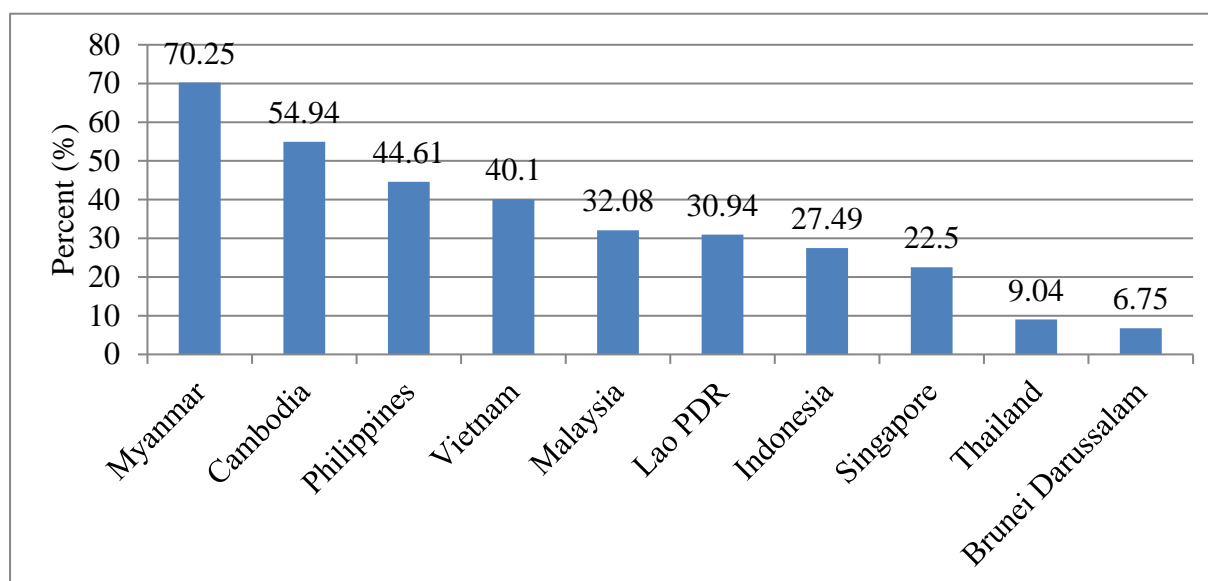


Source: Cambodia (2022)

### ***Elimination of out of pocket expenditure***

Most health care spending in Cambodia comes from the patients themselves. The government's share of total health care expenditure (THE) is around 25%, the lowest amongst CLMV countries. Health expenditures continue to be largely financed through out-of-pocket spending. Cambodia's out-of-pocket spending is at around 55 percent of health expenditure in 2021 (Ziauddin, H., & Nareth, L., 2021). Household income and household savings are the two most common household sources for financing treatment in Cambodia (Henny, A., 2019). High Out-of-pocket payments not only discourage households from seeking care, but can also cause considerable hardship and financial impoverishment, especially among the poor. As indicated by GIZ (2021), large number of Cambodians opting for private healthcare as a result of low trust in public healthcare system along with the limited social health insurance coverage has contributed to the high out of pocket expenditure. In 2009, 76.5 percent of the population opted for private healthcare. By 2021, this number reached 83.4 percent (Rachel, D., 2024). Figure 09 below present out of pocket expenditure for ASEAN's Countries in 2021.

Figure 09: Out-of-pocket expenditure (% of current health expenditure) in 2021



Source: World Bank (2024) [World Health Organization Global Health Expenditure database ( [apps.who.int/nha/database](https://apps.who.int/nha/database) )].

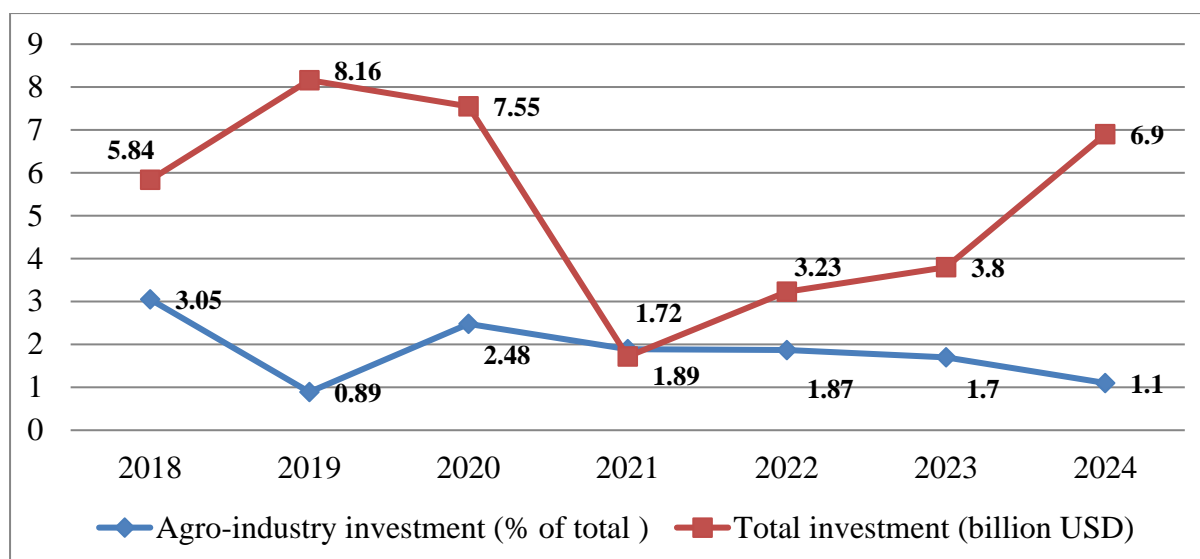
To reduce out-of-pocket healthcare expenditures, the government, in 2024, adopted Roadmap towards Universal Health Coverage in Cambodia 2024-2035. One of the four specific targets of the roadmap is to reduce out-of-pocket health expenditure to at most 35% of the total health expenditure (Cambodia, 2024). In achieving the set target, the government has implemented a number of social security schemes such as the Health Equity Fund, the Social Security Schemes on Healthcare and Occupation Risk, and the Voluntary Social Security Scheme on Healthcare. These social security schemes have been implementing for many years and through these schemes, in 2024, around 7 million people, or around 41 per cent of the Kingdom's population, were covered by public health coverage (Niem, C., 2024)

## 2. Improving rural livelihoods

### The promotion of agro-industry development

Cambodia's agro-processing sector is underdeveloped due to limited investment from the public, as well as the private sector. The share of agro-industry investment in total investment fell from 3.05 percent in 2018 to 1.1 percent in 2024 (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Agro-industry investment in total investment, Cambodia, 2018-2024 (%)



*Source: Plotted using data supplied by the Council for the Development of Cambodia*

The underdeveloped status of agro-industry has hindered upgrading to high value-added export of agricultural products. Cambodia's agro-processing industry is predominantly made up of micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) producing primarily for the domestic market and the majority of these businesses do not follow food safety and internationally certified hygiene protocols (GIZ, 2020).

Given the underdeveloped status of agro-industry in the country, the exports of agriculture products from Cambodia are mostly unprocessed (Piseth, Monyoudom & Tynarath, 2021). Only around 10 percent of Cambodia's harvested crops are processed within the country, while processed agriculture exports contributed only 5 percent of the country's agricultural exports in 2020 (Cambodia, 2022).

Falling prices involving some crops have also undermined rural households' incomes. For example, pumpkins, mangoes, longans, and even rice have suffered drastic fall in prices due to the lack of local processing capacity. Some farmers are better off leaving the products to rot rather than harvesting owing to the financial burden (Cambodianess, 2022a). For instance, in 2022, some farmers in Siem Reap were forced to throw away 30 tons of mangoes from their plantations because of a lack of demand, while farmers in Pailin province abandoned mango and longan harvest.

Hence, Piseth, Monyoudom and Tynarath (2021) argue that promoting investments (both local and foreign) into domestic processing is a critical step to increase agro-food exports and value-added in the agricultural sector. The development of agro-industry will create more jobs, expand market and provide better prices for farmers' crops and thus lead to poverty reduction.

Cambodia is actively promoting agro-industry development through strategic plans, investment incentives, and sector-specific policies aiming to increase the share of processed agricultural exports and create rural employment. In 2015, the country adopted Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025 to diversify industrial base and promote agro-industry development (Cambodia, 2015). The policy aimed to increase share of export of processed agricultural products to 12% in total export volume by 2025 starting from 7.9% in 2013. Furthermore, the government approved Strategic Development Plan for Cambodia Agro-industries 2019-2030. The strategic plan aimed to increase share of export of processed agricultural products to 15% in total export volume by 2030 (Cambodia, 2020).

The government also plans to establish Agri-Food Industrial Parks (AIPs) to boost agricultural production and processing. The Agri-food Industrial Park (AIP) will bring together a cluster of agro-processors in a large space to share common resources such as processing, packing houses, research and development, and a training centre. By sharing resources, logistics and knowledge, agro-processing zones can achieve stronger and sustainable productivity, long-term economic growth, job creation and new export opportunities. According to the feasibility study of AIP conducted by CAPRED, the AIP has the potential to contribute an additional USD5.1 billion to the Cambodian economy by 2045 and employ over 100,000 people every year (CAPRED, 2023).

Besides, Cambodia actively promotes Geographical Indication (GI) products as a strategy to reduce poverty and improve livelihoods by enhancing the value and marketability of local products. Cambodia has registered several products with GI status, including Kampot pepper, Kampong Speu palm sugar, Koh Trung pemolot, Mondulkiri wild honey, Kampot salt and salt flower, Takeo lobster, and Kampot-Kep fish sauce. These GI products help producers achieve higher prices and gain recognition in domestic and international markets. This can lead to increased income for producers, contributing to poverty reduction and improved livelihoods.

### *Improving access to land*

The size of farm land was found to have a positive relationship with poverty and food security for rural households in Cambodia. As around 80% of 16.5 million people live in rural areas depending on agriculture mainly rice production for their livelihoods, owning smaller farm land increases the risk of being poor and food insecure.

In Cambodia, one hectare of land is considered as the threshold to meet the milled rice requirements of a family of five (WFP, 2010). Yet in rural areas, 23 percent are landless (ADB, 2021), 47.1 percent of rural households owns agriculture land that are smaller than 01 hectares (Table 02). Therefore, only around 30 percent of rural households have enough land to produce enough rice to support their households' food consumption needs throughout the year.

Table 02: Households with agricultural land sizes

Agriculture land size	Number of household (in thousands )	Percentage
Less than 10,000 m2	1,080	47.1
10,000 m2 - 19,999 m2	557	24.3
20,000 m2 - 29,999 m2	256	11.2
30,000 m2 - 39,999 m2	137	6.0
40,000 m2 - 49,999 m2	76	3.3
50,000 m2 - 99,999 m2	137	6.0
100,000 m2 – and above	49	2.1
Total	2,293	100
Source: Cambodia (2022)		

According to the World Bank (2019), two-thirds of rural households in Cambodia face seasonal food shortages every year. With this shortage, food expenditure constitutes a significant portion of rural household consumption (Rachel, D., 2024). Poorest households in Cambodia spend more than 56 percent of household income on food while rich households spend about 30 percent of their income. Rich households formed only 10 percent of Cambodia's population (Rachel, D., 2024).



To improve access to land, Cambodia adopted a Land Law in 1992, which specified that ownership could be acquired through succession, contract or by converting “temporary possession” into full ownership. To further strengthen land tenure security, prevent or resolve land disputes, and promote land distribution with equity, the 2001 Land Law was adopted. The Government took a significant step forward in addressing the issues of landlessness and rural poverty in Cambodia through provisions in the 2001 Land Law.

Subsequently, in 2023, Cambodia approved a Sub-Decree on Social Land Concessions. The Sub-Decree provides the basis for distributing state’s unused land to, amongst others, landless and land poor households. The Sub-Decree on Social Land Concessions sets out that the maximum size of concession land granted for family farming purposes is ordinarily two hectares, but may be extended to five hectares based on the characteristics and potential of the land or the type of crop, and labour ( Cambodia, 2023).

Cambodia’s government efforts to improve access to land primarily focus on land titling initiatives, particularly through the above-mentioned Sub-Decree on Social Land Concession (SLC). Projects like the " Land Allocation for Social and Economic Development" (LASED) actively implemented the Sub-Decree, provided land and supporting infrastructure development in rural areas. Building on the success of the first LASED project, LASED II began operations in 2016 ( World Bank, 2019). The project builds schools and health posts which are accessible to both project beneficiaries and to the wider community. Drawing the success from LASED II, the government has asked the World Bank to build on LASED II to cover other provinces under a proposed LASED III project.

### ***Combating climate change***

As indicated earlier, Cambodia is a predominantly rural country that relies heavily on rice as a critical commodity for economic growth and food security. Rice is Cambodia's staple food, principal crop and main source of income for rural households. Yet, rural households are highly vulnerable to climate change because they have high levels of exposure and sensitivity and low levels of adaptive capacity. The vulnerability of the country’s climate change is linked particularly to the very high prevalence of rain-fed (rather than irrigated) systems, which are susceptible to damage from both lack and excess of water.

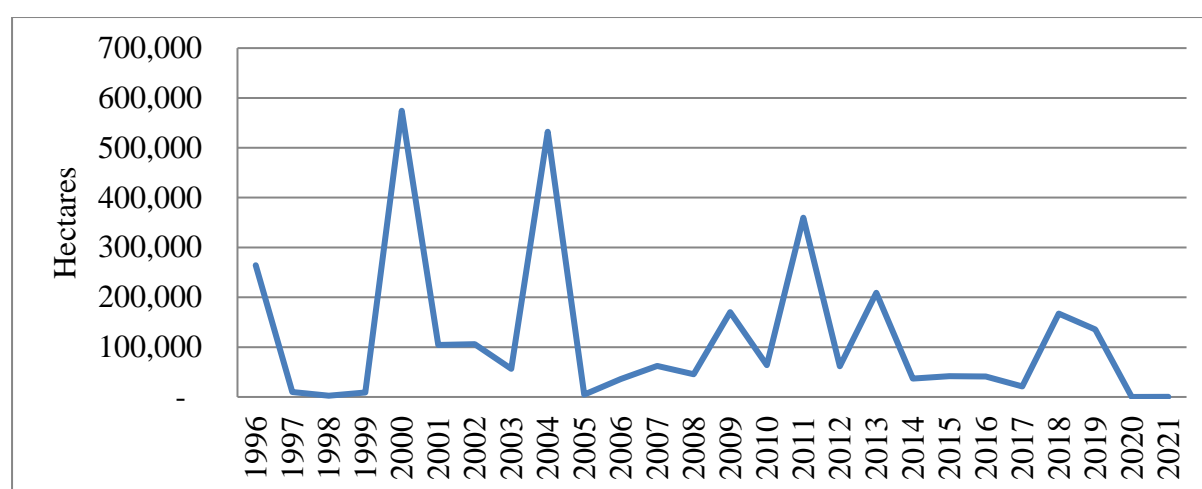
Climate change affects crop production. Li et al. (2017) suggested that Cambodia faces some of the highest net rice yield losses in Southeast Asia due to climate change. As a result, rural

households relying on rain-fed agriculture face decreased food production, income loss and heightened poverty. Climate change is also contributing to indebtedness for many rural households, with many taking on unsustainable debt and turning to microfinance and other unregulated lenders to pay for basic farm inputs (World Vision, 2024).

In addition, World Vision (2024) noted that climate change is hindering development and pushing rural families deeper into poverty. Climate projections suggest that future flood risk and heat stress will worsen in Cambodia. Without proper adaptation and mitigation measures, climate change could cost up to 9% of Cambodia's GDP by 2050 while increasing the poverty rate by up to 6 percentage point (World Bank, 2023a).

The adverse effects of climate change are illustrated in the graph 11 below. Severe drought in 2015-2016 affected more than 2.5 million people. Rice production losses due to the 2019 El Niño-related drought are estimated at \$100 million (World Bank, 2023a). Furthermore, in September 2022, the heaviest rainfall in the last three years caused severe flooding in 14 provinces, affecting approximately 85,000 households.

Figure 11: Rice crop area damaged by droughts and floods (1996-2021)



Source: National Committee for Disaster Management ( NCDM)

To combat climate change, the government in 2013 adopted the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan (CCCSP), which marked an important milestone as it was the first comprehensive national policy document responding to the climate change issues Cambodia is facing. The CCCSP was designed to ensure its strategic cohesion to address a wide range of climate change issues concerning adaptation, GHG mitigation and low-carbon development (Cambodia, 2017).

Moreover, Cambodia Climate Change Financing Framework was adopted in April 2015 to promote a common approach to defining climate financing and to assess its current level and prospects for future financing. There is increasing political commitment to climate change by political leaders in the Cambodian Government which can be seen through yearly increase of climate change financing and focusing on building a climate-resilient society through a national adaptation plan (NAP), integrating adaptation measures into existing policies, and actively participating in global efforts to address climate change, particularly through its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) ( Cambodia, 2017).

Although large amount of climate change financing have been made by external resources, the amounts allocated from domestic resources (national budget) indicated an increased trend. Government's budget for climate change expenditure reached USD 335 million in 2023, a 40% rise from 2022. In 2023, the domestically-financed climate change expenditure represents 48% of the total climate expenditure, while externally financed climate change expenditure shares 52% (Table 03). Domestic financing has continued to increase at a higher rate than external financing, reflecting the commitment and efforts of the government to combat climate change.

Table 03: Source of public climate finance ( In million US\$)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
External resources	199	125	165	237	312	317	329	392	357
Domestic resources	61	75	98	196	225	270	304	239	335
Total	260	200	263	432	537	587	633	631	692

Source: (Cambodia, 2022a, 2024a)

It can also be noted that mitigation expenditure represents only 3% in climate change expenditure in 2023, while adaptation takes a 97% share (Cambodia, 2024a). This is broadly in line with the policy priorities of the government, where adaptation is the main priority. Climate change adaptation expenditure mainly focused on the construction of irrigations and climate-resilient national and rural roads which directly benefit rural people.

### 3. Strengthening Footwear, and Travel Goods (GFT) industry and diversifying investment sectors

The Garment, Footwear, and Travel Goods (GFT) industry has made significant contributions to Cambodia's economic achievements in the past two decades. The number of factories and enterprises producing garments, footwear, and travel goods has continued to grow. The total number of GFT firms expanded from 1,192 in 2020 to 1,579 in 2023. The industry has directly created jobs for more than 925,000 workers in 2024 and has indirectly benefitted 2.5 to 3 million people (TAFTAC, 2024). Female workers accounted for 75.5% of all employees in the sector in 2024.

Additionally, the GFT sector contributed 51.53% of the total exports in 2024 (Manoj, M., 2025). On employment contribution, the GFT sector has accounted for 58% of formal jobs in 2022 (Figure 13). As a proportion of total employment, the number of GFT workers has changed slightly as jobs begin to open in new manufacturing and services subsectors.

Figure 12: Share of GFT in total export

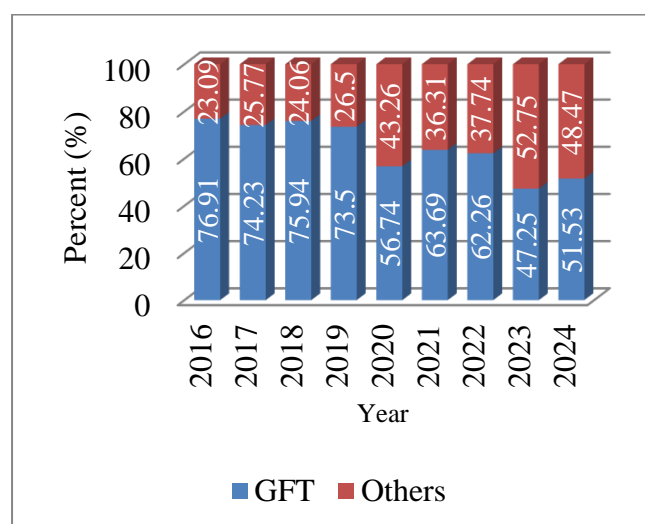
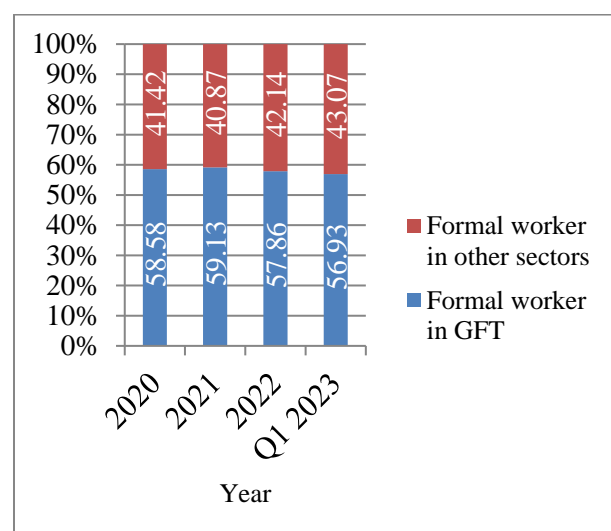


Figure 13: Share of GFT employment in total formal employment



Source: TAFTAC (2024), Manoj, M., (2025)

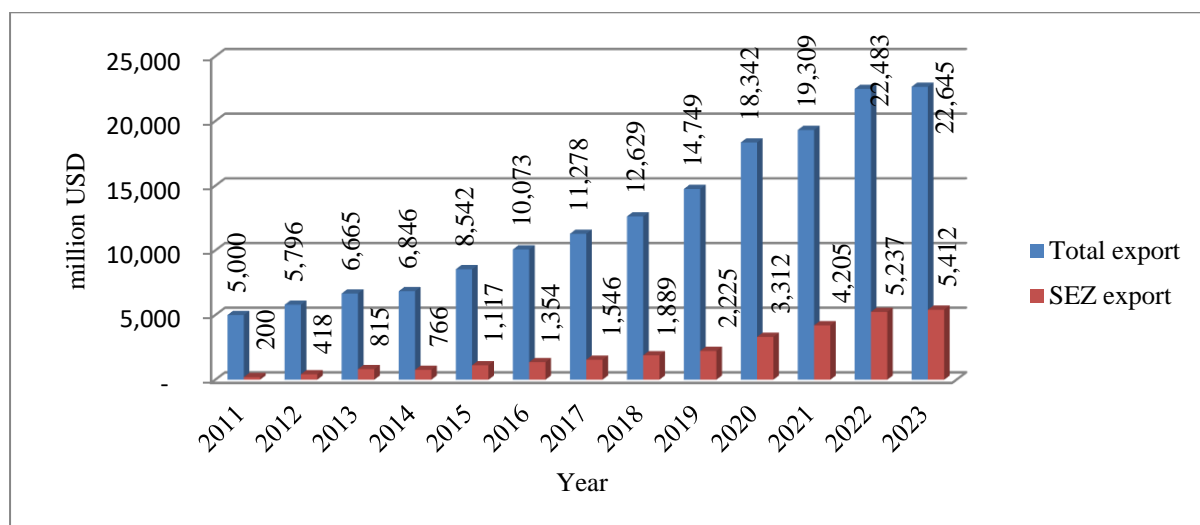
With the importance of GFT industry, Cambodia Garment, Footwear and Travel Goods (GFT) Sector Development Strategy 2022-2027 was adopted on 2023 to serve as an important roadmap to maintain competitiveness and ensure sustained growth of GFT sector in Cambodia (Cambodia, 2022c). Strategic measures under this framework include:

1. Further strengthen human resources to enhance productivity and create career paths for Cambodian workers/employees;
2. Continue to improve working conditions and welfare for workers/employees;
3. Promote the domestic and foreign investment in the industry with high value addition;
4. Attract investment in supporting industry;
5. Promote market diversification for exports of garment, footwear, and travel goods.

The effective implementation of the above five strategic measures is crucial for the sustainability of GFT sector. In addition to strengthening the development of GFT industry, Cambodia is seeking to diversify its industrial base to generate broad-based inclusive growth. Despite garments remain a key export, the sector's share of total exports has shrunk to 51 percent in 2024 from 72 percent in 2016 (AMRO, 2024; Manoj, M., 2025). The adoption of Cambodia Industrial Development Policy 2015-2025 indicated the goal of diversifying investment toward skill-driven sectors and high value-added industry (Cambodia, 2015). Through the Industrial Development Policy, Cambodia planned to increase non-textile manufacturing goods by 15 percent by 2025 and boost the exports of processed agricultural products by 12 percent to achieve sustainable growth and economic diversification. Moreover, the new investment law promulgated in 2021 also aimed to diversify investment to high-tech and value-added sectors through the provision of many kinds of tax incentives ( Cambodia, 2022b).

The government established the Cambodian Special Economic Zones Board (CSEZB) in 2005 to oversee and encourage investment on special economic zone (SEZ) development. The government's objective of establishing the SEZs was to promote diversification of the industrial base, establish economic linkages between urban and rural areas, and promote industrial investment in areas outside Phnom Penh (World Bank, 2012). As of June 2023, there were 24 operational SEZs with 655 investment projects (approximately US\$ 8.1 billion of total investment capital) and created 174,000 jobs ( CDC, 2024). The study conducted by Asian Development Bank indicated that FDIs in SEZs are more diversified and more technology-sophisticated comparing to the ones outside SEZs ( ADB, 2015). Currently, there are industries such as furniture manufacturing, veneer wood, and wood products, automotive and electronic products as well as heavy industries like car-tire factories locate in these zones. At the same time, exports of products from SEZs to the world markets have increased significantly from USD 200 million to US\$ 5.41 billion in 2023 (Firgure14).

Figure 14: SEZ export in total export



Source: CDC (2024). Accessed on March 06, 2025 from <https://cdc.gov.kh/sez-smart-search/>

In addition, the government adopted the Cambodia Automotive and Electronics sectors Development Roadmap which sets out a development pathway towards a long-term vision of developing a vibrant automotive component manufacturing hub and an integrated electronics production hub in Cambodia (Cambodia, 2022d). By developing these sectors the government aims to transform the domestic industry from a labour-intensive to a skill-based industry, and integrate it into regional value chains, in line with the Cambodia Industrial Development Policy 2015-25 (Prakash, J., 2023).

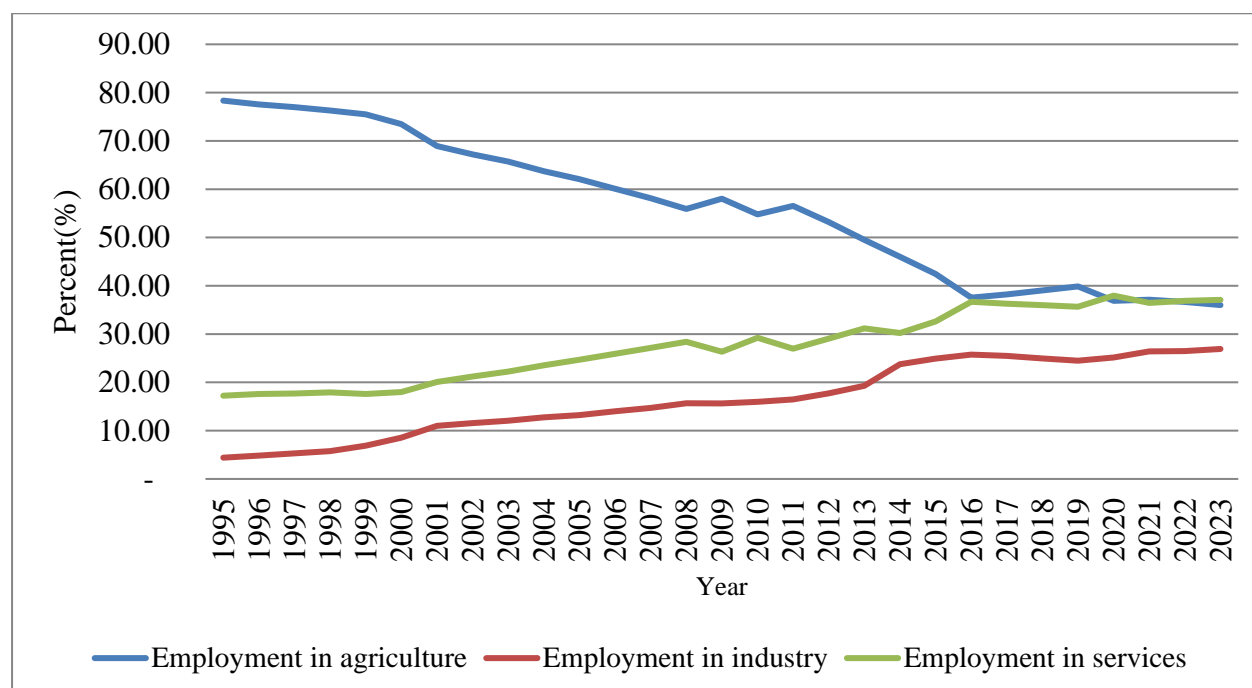
With the government effort to promote industrial base, Cambodia has recently attracted a number of FDIs in electronics and electrical goods. Japan and China are the major sources of investment in this fast-growing sector. Many Asia's top electronic manufacturers such as Minebea, SVI, and Hana and have established their factories in Cambodia mainly in Special Economic Zones, indicating the enormous potential of this sector. As of April 2024, USD 1,042 million committed investment capital was made in electronic sectors (CDC, 2024a).

#### ***IV. Employment and poverty reduction***

Strengthening FDIs in GFT industry and the inflow of investment in other manufacturing sectors supported non-agricultural job creation and poverty reduction in Cambodia. FDIs flowed mainly into country's more productive, non-agricultural sectors—especially the garment, construction, and tourism sectors—creating better jobs with higher wages and

helping move Cambodia from agriculture dependence toward light manufacturing and services. The country saw consequent declines in agriculture's share in employment, and increases in the combined share of industry and services. As workers exited from agriculture, services progressively became the largest employer, while industry became the largest producer and export (World Bank, 2022).

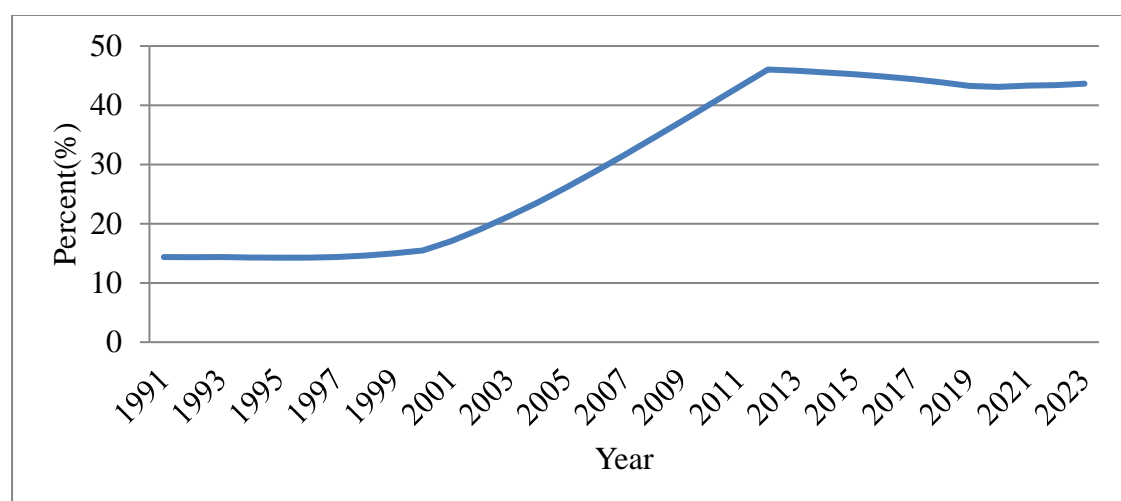
Figure 15: Share of sectoral employments (as percentage of total employment)



Source: World Bank (International Labour Organization. “ILO modelled estimates database” ILOSTAT. Accessed January 07, 2025. [ilostat.ilo.org/data/](https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/)). Accessed on 02 February

The movement of workers from agriculture to better-paying manufacturing and services sectors has led to the growth of wage and salaried employments. Manufacturing (mainly garments) and services attracted low-skilled workers from agriculture, offering higher and faster-growing wages. The share of wage and salaried workers in total employment increased significantly, from 15% in 2000 to 43.6 % in 2023 (Figure 16).

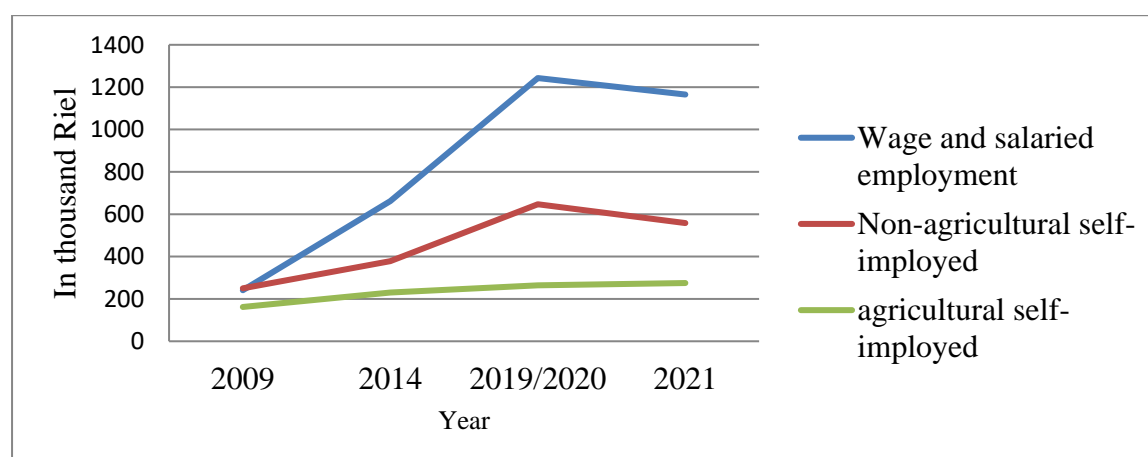
Figure 16: Wage and salaried employment, total (% of total employment)



Source: World Bank (2025)[ International Labour Organization. “ILO modelled estimates database” ILOSTAT. [ilostat.ilo.org/data](http://ilostat.ilo.org/data)].

As trend of wage and salaried employment was on the rise, the income growth from this employment also went up remarkably from 2009 to 2021 (Figure 17). The increase of income from wage and salaried employment not only contributed to poverty reduction but also helped to distribute growth and income to broader segments of the population as majority of wage and salaried workers are from rural and poor families (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, large number of wage and salaried jobs paid at least the minimum wage and offered a range monetary and non-monetary benefits. The minimum wages which apply to garment, footwear and travel goods (GFT) industries, increased remarkably from US\$50 in 2009 to US\$ 200 in 2023 ( ILO, 2016; TAFTAC, 2023).

Figure 17: Growth in income from wage and salaried employment

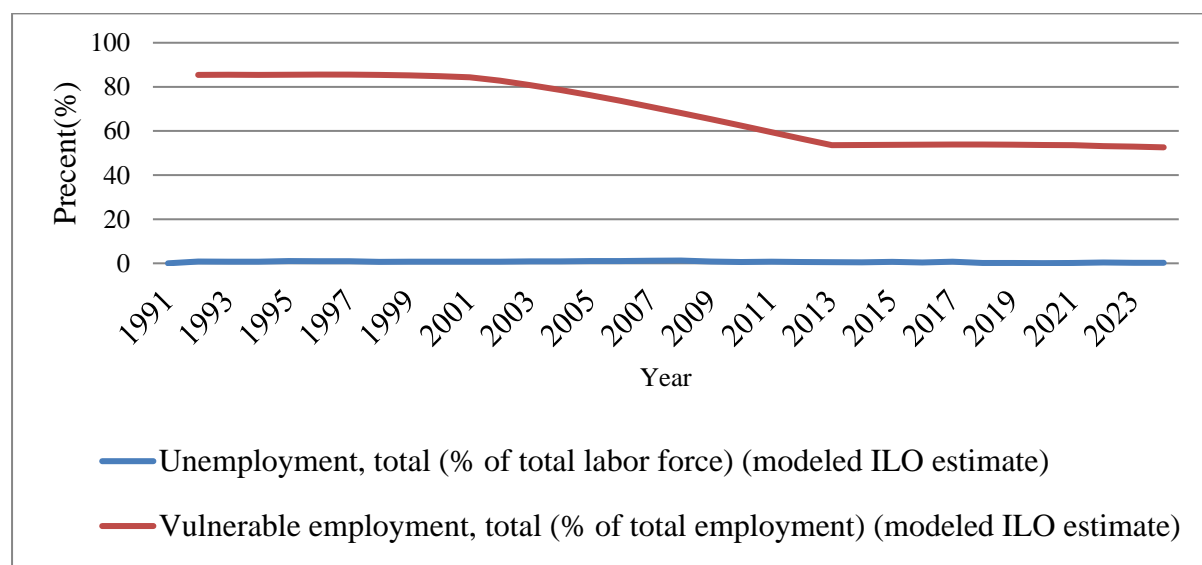


Source: Cambodia (2022)



Cambodia has the lowest unemployment rate among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states (World Bank, 2025). The country's unemployment rate in 2023 was 0.2%. Despite the low unemployment rate, 53% of employed people were in vulnerable jobs (see figure 18 below).

Figure 18: Vulnerable employment and unemployment rate 1991-2023



Source: World Bank (2025) “ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST)”

Many employed adults are in vulnerable jobs, such as self-employed or unpaid family workers (ADB, 2013). The majority of vulnerable jobs are in rural areas. Of the total 16.5 million people, about 80% live in rural areas and depend mainly on rice production for their livelihood (World Bank, 2022), making these workers vulnerable as they tend to have inadequate incomes, lack social security, occupational safety and health standards, and regular wages. Moreover, vulnerable rural workers are adversely affected by climate change, which on one hand poses a major challenge to rural poverty reduction and on the other hand may push them further into poverty.

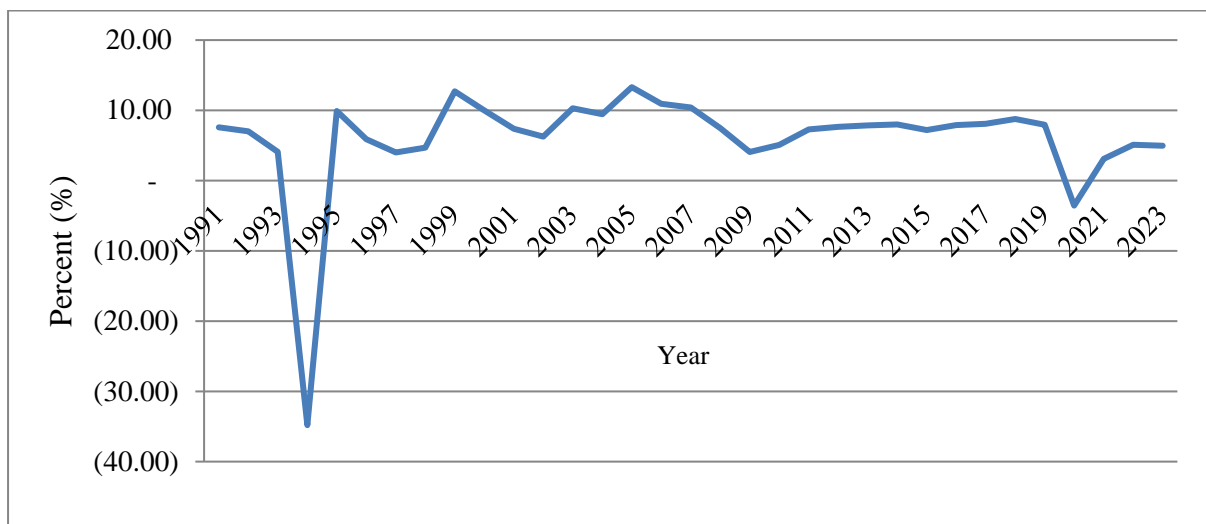
## V. *Economic growth and poverty reduction*

### i. *GDP Growth and income inequality*

With the measures and efforts made by the government to promote economic growth, Cambodia has achieved remarkable progress in its development. GDP growth averaged 6

percent over the period 1991-2023 (Figure 19). Despite the growth rate has declined in recent year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government forecasts an economic growth rate of approximately 6.3% for 2025 (Nhean, C., 2025). Table below indicates GDP growth of Cambodia from 1991 to 2023.

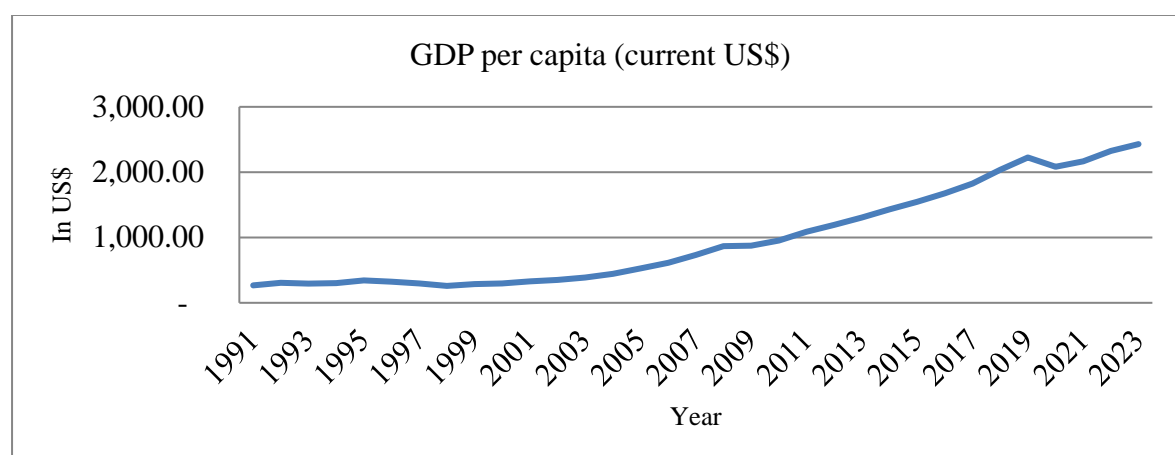
Figure 19: GDP growth (annual %)



*Source: (World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files),  
World Bank*

Along with GDP growth, Cambodia's GDP per capita has been steadily increasing over the past few decades, primarily driven by sectors like garment manufacturing, tourism, and construction. GDP per capita (current US\$) increased from USD 267 in 1991 to 2,430 in 2023 as indicated in figure 20.

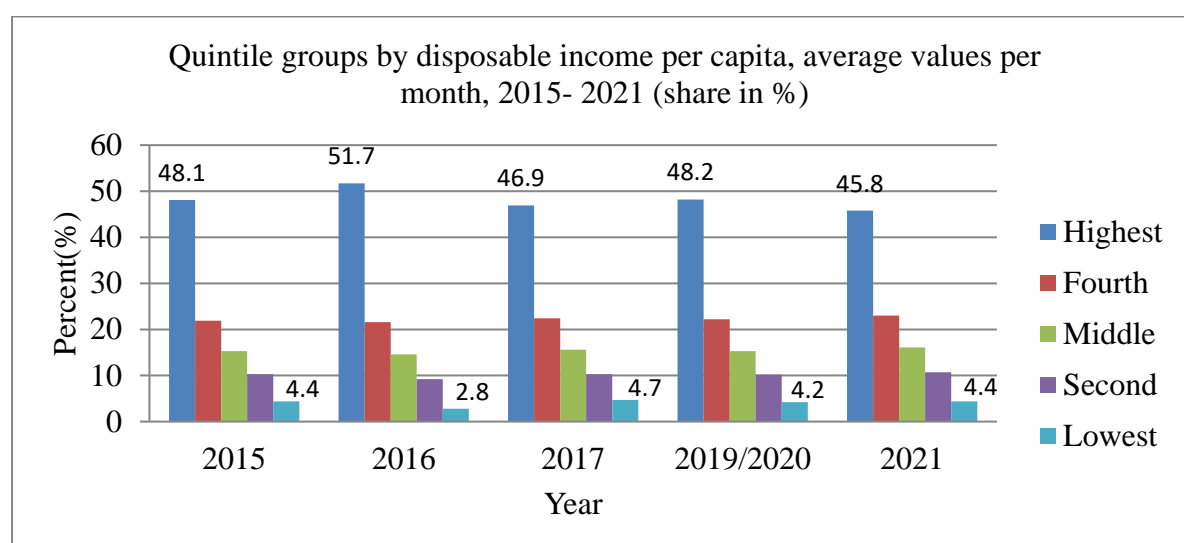
Figure 20: GDP per capita (current US\$)



Source: (World Bank national accounts data, and OECD National Accounts data files),  
World Bank

Despite the increase in per capita income, disposable income is unevenly distributed in Cambodia. Figure 21 shows the population divided in five equally large groups (quintiles) by income. The 20 percent with the highest disposable income (quintile 5) have more than 49 percent of the total income. In 2021, the households in quintile 5 have a disposable income per capita that is about 10 times larger than the 20 percent of the households with the lowest income.

Figure 21: Quintile groups by disposable income per capita, average values per month, 2015-2021 (share in %)

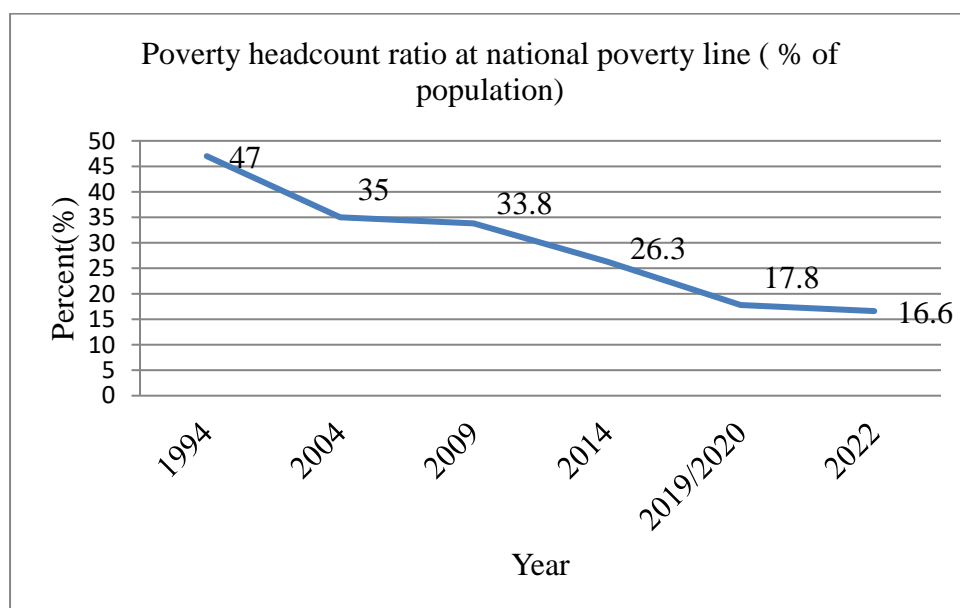


Source: Cambodia (2022)

## ii. Progress in Poverty Reduction

Cambodia has made strong progress in poverty reduction. The percentage of Cambodians living under the national poverty line fell from 47 percent in 1994 to 17.8 percent in 2019 and further decreased to 16.6% in 2022 (ADB, 2011; World Bank, 2022; UNDP, 2023). Currently poverty rates based on international poverty lines are not available for Cambodia. The RGC recently redefined the poverty lines for Cambodia using the 2019/20 CSES and cost-of-basic need and common basket approaches. The national poverty line is KHR 10,951 (or 2.7 US\$) per person, per day; considering cost-of-living differences between locations, this translates to KHR 10,951 in Phnom Penh, KHR 9,571 (2.3 US\$) in other urban areas, and KHR 8,908 (2.2 USD) in rural areas (World Bank, 2022).

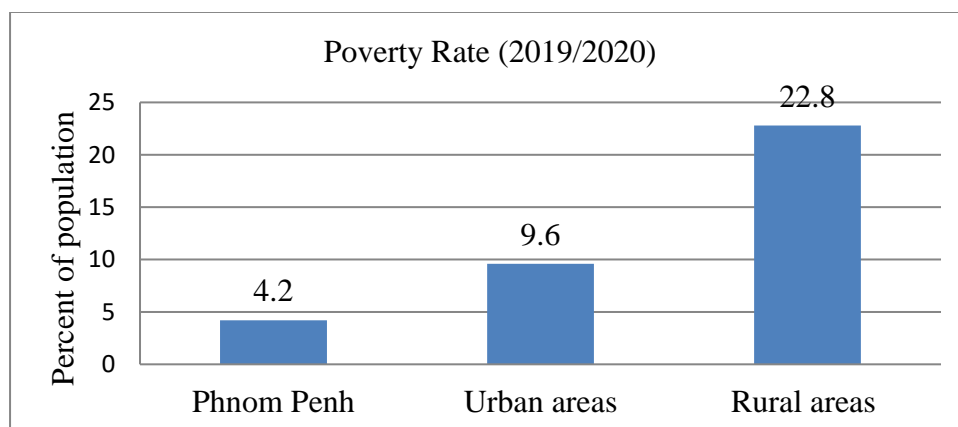
Figure 22: Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty line ( % of population)



Sources: ADB (2011), World Bank (2022), UNDP (2023)

Despite significant achievement on poverty reduction, nearly 1 in 6 Cambodians live in poverty (Figure 22 above). In addition, poverty is highest in rural areas and lowest in Phnom Penh. The poverty headcount in rural areas (22.8 percent) which is twice the poverty headcount in urban areas (9.6 percent). Phnom Penh has the lowest poverty rate at 4.2 percent.

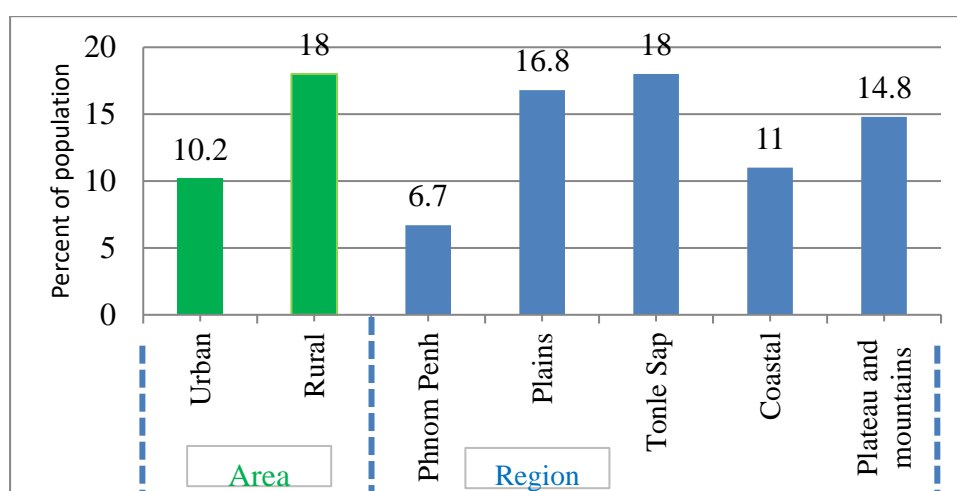
Figure 23: Poverty Rate by geographical areas (2019/2020)



Source: Cambodia (2020)

Moreover, World Bank (2022) indicated that about 15 percent of Cambodians who are considered near-poor are non-poor with marginal incomes above the poverty line in 2019/20. Majority of the near-poor resided in rural areas. About 18 percent of rural residents have daily per capita consumption between the poverty line and 1.25 times the poverty line, compared to 10 percent of urban residents ( World Bank, 2022). The near-poor remain in an insecure position and thus vulnerable to falling under the poverty line when there are global challenges, such as the pandemic or other negative shocks.

Figure 25: Share of near-poor (2019/2020)



Source: World Bank (2022)

## **VI. Conclusion**

Cambodia has experienced rapid economic growth, creating better employment and income opportunities for the poor and contributing to poverty reduction. Investment and trade have spurred a shift from agriculture to higher value-added activities in manufacturing and services, creating better-paying jobs, and also helping to distribute growth to rural areas.

While notable progress has been made on poverty reduction, rural people still face higher poverty rate caused by the increase of climate change and small agriculture landownership. There is a strong need to address low education attainment of the work force in order to boost economic growth and improve individual earning potential which will finally lead to poverty reduction. Additionally, greater investment in climate change adaption is extremely important to alleviate poverty particularly for rural people.

The investment in human capital focusing on skill development, healthcare improvement, and eliminating dropout rates especially for lower secondary and upper secondary education, is extremely crucial for national development and poverty reduction. Given Cambodia's high poverty rates in rural areas, any effective poverty reduction policies must prioritize rural development and address the specific needs of the rural population.

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