

Roles of CSOs in the Local Democratic Development: A Cambodia Case Study

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Abstract

Since the restoration of democracy through UN-supervised elections in 1993, Cambodia has pursued decentralization and governance reforms aimed at strengthening citizen participation and local democracy. In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs) have played increasingly important role in promoting accountability, civic engagement, and democratic governance at the local level. This study examines the roles of CSOs in advancing local democratic development and explores how they have adapted to Cambodia's changing political and civic environment. The study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on a review of relevant literature, field observations, and semi-structured interviews with 27 key informants, including government officials, commune councillors, CSO representatives, political actors, donors, and community members. Findings identify six major roles performed by CSOs: capacity building and civic education; promotion of human rights and democratic values; monitoring and advocacy; partnership in local governance and development; facilitation of citizen-government engagement; and advancement of women's empowerment and political participation. The research indicates that CSOs have contributed significantly to decentralization reforms, expanded citizen participation and strengthened transparency and accountability in local governance processes. However, their effectiveness is constrained by limited organizational capacity, reliance on external donor funding, weak sectoral coordination, restrictive legal frameworks, insufficient understanding of advocacy functions, and a shrinking civic space. The study concludes that CSOs remain indispensable actors in Cambodia's local democratic development. Sustaining their contribution will require enhanced organizational resilience, evidence-based advocacy, stronger youth engagement, diversified funding sources, and constructive collaboration with government authorities amid an evolving political landscape.

Keywords

Cambodia, civil society organisations, local democracy, democratic development, decentralization, governance, civic engagement.