



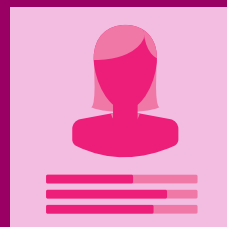
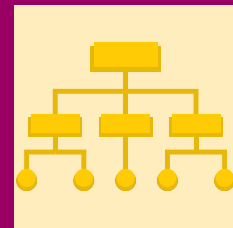
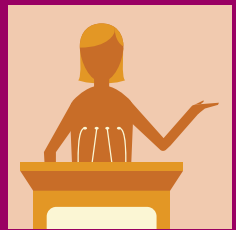
**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



building  
local  
promise.

# Promoting Civic Engagement through WE Act

## A Learning Review



# Executive Summary

The Women Entrepreneurs Act (WE Act) is a five-year project funded by the United States Agency for International Development and implemented by Pact and Freedom House. Implemented from August 2019 through November 2023, WE Act was tasked with **empowering Cambodian women and youth to fully realize their human rights** within an operating environment marked by rapidly declining civic space.

The WE Act team designed and executed a novel strategy for fostering civic engagement and promoting human rights fitted to the Cambodian context. Understanding that it was mandated with bringing “new” actors into civic engagement processes, WE Act combined **economic strengthening** activities targeting women entrepreneurs (i.e. micro and small businesses owners) and **civic strengthening** interventions focused on activities like advocacy and civic education. WE Act supported constituencies to advance their **socioeconomic rights (SERs)**, which were seen as relevant to the lives of young women entrepreneurs (YWEs) and other youth, while less “sensitive” than civil-political rights. As a result, WE Act sought to overcome communities’ and local partners’ fear of participating in advocacy-related processes by promoting engagement on issues around which there were opportunities for constructive dialogue with state and other authorities.

WE Act conducted a learning review aimed at critically examining its distinct strategy for promoting civic engagement. Specifically, the learning review focused on two questions: **How did WE Act support civic engagement within a restricted political environment?** and **What does the WE Act experience hold for future programming in Cambodia and similar contexts?** The learning review aimed at capturing the collective insights and lessons of the WE Act team, i.e. project staff, former staff, and local partners. It was not an evaluation focused on validating assessments and did not include direct consultations with community-level beneficiaries. The learning review, however, complemented other end-of-project assessments, including a project led Outcome Harvesting report and external evaluation.

The learning review identified the following top-line elements of the WE Act “recipe” for fostering civic engagement:

- 1 Lead with economic strengthening.** WE Act adopted an approach of early engagement in economic strengthening activities. This approach tapped into young women’s interest in livelihoods and enterprise development support and enabled the project to build trust with business engagement partners, YWEs, and key government agencies before investing heavily in civic strengthening interventions.
- 2 Carefully frame civic engagement activities.** Sensitive to local partners’ discomfort and outright fear of advocacy-related activities and engagement with authorities, WE Act carefully framed its civic engagement interventions and chose “safe” language to describe its objectives with the aim of maximizing participation in activities aimed at advancing SERs.
- 3 Prioritize rights-focused capacity development.** Because so many project partners – and the YWEs and youth they served – were new to civic engagement, WE Act used SER-related capacity development interventions as a foundation for building their interest, comfort, and confidence to participate in advocacy and other civic processes.
- 4 Use evidence as a basis for civic engagement.** Nearly all civic engagement activities supported by WE Act began with assisting local constituencies to generate data and evidence related to concrete SER issues. Evidence gathering processes built the confidence of local groups to participate in advocacy activities and laid the groundwork for constructive dialogue with state and other authorities.

- 5 Embrace slow coalition building.** WE Act used a slow and steady approach to coalition building, including between civic and business-oriented actors. The project first worked with local partners individually to identify and engage with “their” issues, before fostering collaborations around issues they had in common with other partners.
- 6 Align civic engagement with an understanding of how the government bureaucracy works.** WE Act’s partners drove advocacy activities based on a reading of how to make incremental progress within the hierarchical, consensus-oriented Cambodian government bureaucracy. This included using layered approaches for fostering constructive dialogue and garnering support across multiple levels of targeted ministries, departments, and municipalities.
- 7 Engage private sector institutions.** WE Act partners complemented government-focused advocacy with outreach and engagement of private sector institutions, particularly financial institutions. Business association partners were able to leverage their deep connections with the private sector to achieve concrete outcomes related to expanding access to market-based loans for YWEs.

Consultations with project staff and partners suggest that the WE Act strategy of integrating economic and civic strengthening activities and focusing on key SER issues was a fit for the Cambodian context and may be a match for similar operating environments marked by civic closure. The economic and SER orientation of the project meant that WE Act leveraged the interests of new actors and allowed them to engage on issues around which there was maximum space within a closing context. While focusing on SERs, WE Act was able to support local partners to mobilize and achieve meaningful results on issues central to the marginalization of vulnerable communities.

#### **PRIORITIZING ISSUES THAT DRIVE MARGINALIZATION**

Using the framework of SERs, WE Act was able to support its partners to mobilize youth and YWEs to engage and achieve results on issues central to social, economic, and political marginalization. This included supporting advocacy and action on issues such as:



Access to social protection benefits for informal workers, including street vendors



Access to finance and fair economic policies



Participation of youth in local decision-making

# Introduction



The Women Entrepreneurs Act (WE Act) is a five-year project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by Freedom House and Pact. Funded through the Human Rights Support Mechanism (HRSM), WE Act is aimed at **empowering women and youth to fully realize their human rights** through a combination of economic strengthening and civic engagement interventions targeting young women entrepreneurs (YWEs) and youth leaders.

As WE Act moves toward the completion of its implementation period, which ends November 30, 2023, the project team conducted a learning review of its civic engagement activities and approaches. Specifically, the learning review posed the following high-level questions:



**How did the WE Act project support civic engagement within a Cambodian context marked by significantly restricted political space? What lessons does WE Act hold for future programming in Cambodia and similar civic contexts?**

The learning review focused on capturing experiences, observations, and lessons of project staff, former staff, and partners (i.e., grantees). The exercise was not an evaluation focused on assessing the end results of the project, but rather aimed at gathering and distilling the collective wisdom and learning of those deeply engaged with the implementation of civic engagement activities.

The reflections of project staff and partners indicate that WE Act advanced a distinct approach to promoting and strengthening the civic engagement of Cambodian partners and communities. This approach was built around combining **civic engagement and economic strengthening interventions** with the aim of finding available space for advocacy and related activities, while bringing “new” actors into civic processes, especially YWEs and their representational associations. Project stakeholders report meaningful and multidimensional civic outcomes – including tangible advocacy successes – many of which can be further validated by the forthcoming endline evaluation. While describing the types of outcomes that emerge from project documentation and consultations with key stakeholders, this report focuses on the practices that project staff and partners credit with enabling those outcomes.

## **A BRIEF NOTE ON METHODOLOGY**

The civic engagement learning review was a reflection exercise conducted primarily through a series of consultations with 23 key project stakeholders, including staff, former staff, and partners. Most consultations took the form of one-on-one semi-structured and open-ended interviews with stakeholders. This approach was used to give stakeholders adequate time to discuss their individual experiences, to create a “safe space” in which stakeholders felt free to share challenges, and to reduce the potential for strong voices to dominate conversations.

While the observations and findings are primarily drawn from stakeholder interviews, the learning review also included consultations with key project documents. This included quarterly and annual reports, the mid-term outcome mapping report, the MEL database, a project-supported literature review, toolkits developed by the project, summaries and descriptions of grantee activities, and analytical reports and documents developed by grantees. In particular, the review of documents was used to provide further detail and to substantiate the many approaches and lessons shared by project stakeholders.

# Origins and Overarching Approach of WE Act

**W**E Act was designed to meaningfully advance the human rights and overall empowerment of young Cambodian women, a constituency underrepresented within prevailing economic and power structures. The theory of change underpinning WE Act was built on the proposition that economic empowerment is conducive of civic empowerment, both of which are required to advance the human rights of young women:



From its inception, WE Act was designed to respond to and navigate a complex operating environment due to rapidly narrowing civic space. Despite Cambodia's longstanding constrained political space, 2017 was a pivotal year in terms of increased pressure on civic actors. The banning of the leading opposition party, the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the arrest of key opposition politicians, and the dissolution of the Cambodia Daily were among the government actions that served as harbingers of a new phase of declining political and media freedoms in the country. These conditions continued through and beyond the 2018 National Assembly Elections and, as many civic activists and observers at the time feared, the operating environment failed to open appreciatively even after the ruling party had firmly consolidated its gains in parliament. Subsequent years saw the imposition of Covid-justified civic and associational restrictions, crack downs on remaining independent media, coercive action against labor organizers, and further arrests targeting the political opposition and human rights activists.<sup>1</sup>

WE Act had the challenge of supporting a diverse range of civic actors, especially young women, to deepen their individual and collective agency at a time of diminishing space for political engagement. The decision of USAID and Pact to focus on young women's empowerment was reflective of a confidential "Closing Space Analysis" completed by Pact and shared with USAID in early 2018, which analyzed spaces where meaningful and safe civic and political engagement could be supported. Among other findings, the analysis proposed that women's empowerment, alongside issues like the environment, economic development, and service delivery offered civic actors room to maneuver and opportunities to constructively engage with public and private sector stakeholders (see text box).

**“ Like economic development and service delivery, women's empowerment – through education, capacity development, and small business support, for example – is not viewed as sensitive, but offers the potential to address human rights. Moreover, women's empowerment activists and activities are not as likely to be repressed through violence or imprisonment.”**

Excerpt from Pact's 2018 Civic Space Analysis

The WE Act theory of change and project strategy that emerged placed emphasis on empowering young women through a combination of economic strengthening and civic engagement interventions. This strategy was influenced

<sup>1</sup> <https://civicus.org/documents/CambodiaCountryBrief.September2022.pdf>

by models such as Naila Kabeer’s Resources, Agency, and Achievements Framework – and crystalized in WE Act’s own Empowerment Index – in that it viewed empowerment as a multidimensional process requiring economic and civic-related assets, skills, networks, and confidence that enable young women to pursue their own goals within both economic and civic spheres.

WE Act operationalized its strategy by applying a **systems strengthening approach** that assumed that various factors and influences enable or hinder young women to grow, thrive, and live the lives they choose. Specifically, the WE Act team used a series of systems analysis and stakeholder engagement methods to map and engage with overlapping **entrepreneurship ecosystems** in Cambodia composed of formal and informal institutions, rules and norms that shape the opportunities of young women to pursue their business aspirations. Practically, WE Act layered a combination of economic strengthening and civic engagement-oriented activities. Objective 1 focused explicitly on **supporting and strengthening YWEs** through a combination of economic-focused capacity development and interventions aimed at facilitating access to finance and other economic services, as well as support for YWEs to understand and exercise their socio-economic rights (SERs) including through civic engagement aimed at positively influencing the policy environment and related economic structures. Objective 2 focused on **increasing constructive civic engagement** by

supporting a broader set of civic actors – both young women and men – to advance advocacy on issues of shared interest, such as business registration, access to finance, social protection, and environment/waste management.

While early in the project WE Act anticipated focusing on small and medium-sized women entrepreneurs, project analysis conducted during the start of Covid confirmed that the most marginalized and vulnerable YWEs were disproportionately represented within informal, micro-businesses. Thus, during Years 2-5, economic and civic strengthening initiatives placed special emphasis on engaging and empowering the smallest scale YWEs.

### A FRAMEWORK FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The WE Act’s systems strengthening approach is built around a widely accepted entrepreneurship ecosystem framework built around six domains:



Policy and leadership



Entrepreneurship culture



Support structures and organizations



Markets



Access to finance



Human capital and skills

# Understanding WE Act's Civic Outcomes



**WE Act** achieved a range of important outcomes related to the economic strengthening and entrepreneurship components of the project aimed at enhancing the economic empowerment and YWEs. While impact-level indicators will be confirmed through the forthcoming endline survey, project data demonstrates that WE Act extended entrepreneurship training and capacity development to nearly 7,000 YWEs and that those and other activities contributed to the creation of nearly 400 jobs. Leveraging a “guarantee fund” managed by the project, WE Act was able to establish partnerships with banking institutions like Wing and Boost Capital which extended market rate loans valued at more than \$263,000 to 152 YWEs.

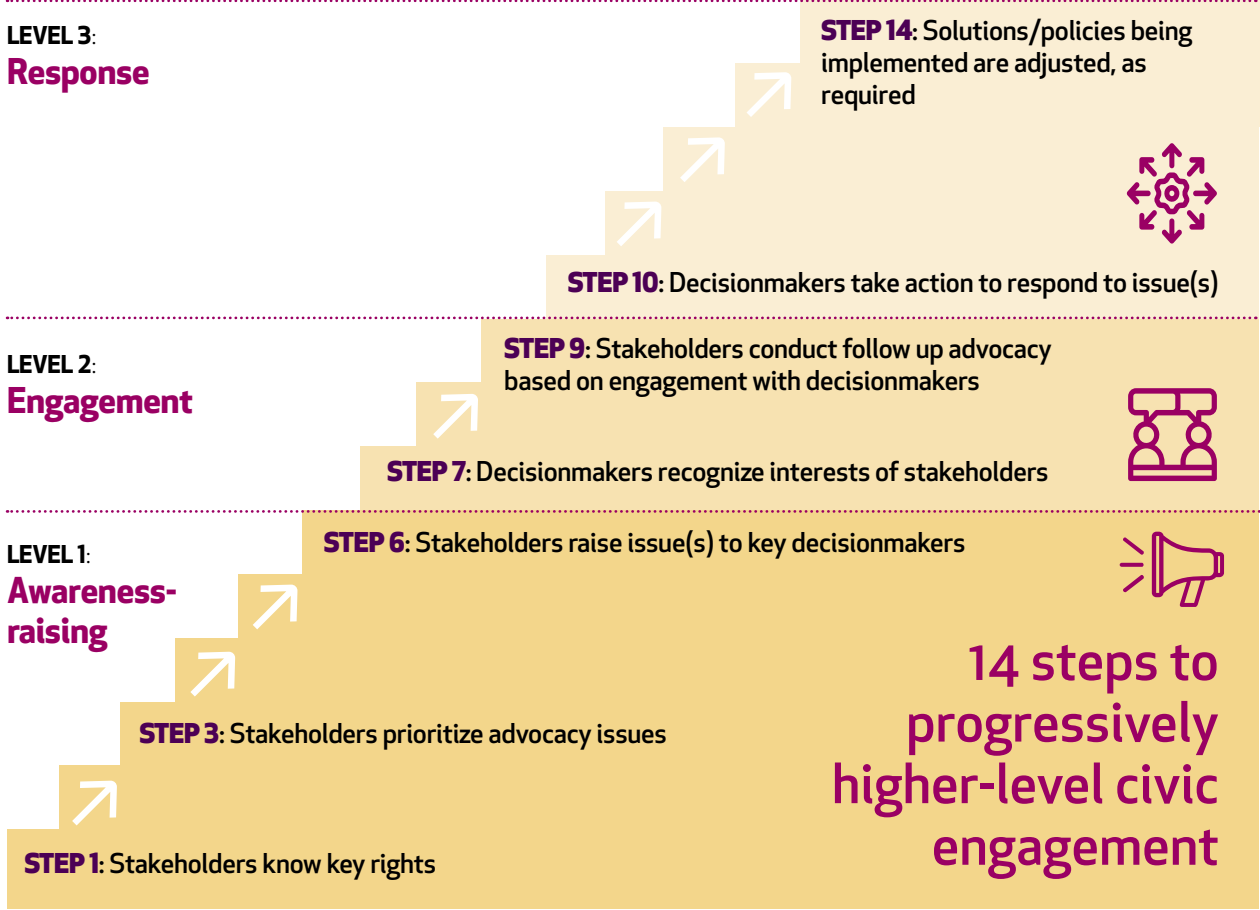
The learning review provided an opportunity to understand how key project staff and partners similarly understood the results of WE Act's civic engagement activities. Project data indicates that civic initiatives supported by the project were broad and diverse. The project reached more than 15,900 individuals with civic education, which focused on increasing awareness of key SERs and broadening the understanding of basic civic and political processes. In total, WE Act has supported more than 30 grantees to carry out more than 990 individual civic engagement activities. These interventions have been diverse, covering a range of topics and issue areas including:

<p><b>Improved solid waste management in schools and markets</b></p>	<p><b>Advancement of “fair taxation” for entrepreneurs</b></p> <p> <b>Enhanced youth participation in local decision making</b></p>	<p><b>Strengthened social protection for informal workers</b></p>	<p><b>Access to “business permit certificates” for women micro-entrepreneurs including street vendors</b></p>
<p><b>Strengthened access to vocational training for people with disabilities</b></p>	<p><b>Promotion of online business registration and permit</b></p>	<p><b>Increased local assistance for youth and women entrepreneurship</b></p> <p></p>	
<p><b>Development of user-friendly forms for copyright registration forms for artists</b></p> <p></p>			

Staff and partners point to multiple types of results for WE Act's civic engagement interventions. First, they explain that WE Act activities contributed to increased SERs and civics-related knowledge and confidence at the individual level. As is described in the following section, SER capacity development – generally integrated with leadership training and civic education – was foundational to WE Act's civic engagement approach. Staff and partners emphasized that this contributed to important knowledge gains and was key to local stakeholders developing the confidence to participate in civic initiatives. These gains helped contribute to the direct participation of more than 28,000 in advocacy and related activities, most of whom had little-to-no prior experience and comfort with civic processes.

Staff and partners also emphasize that WE Act facilitated increasingly sophisticated and strategic advocacy and civic engagement that contributed to meaningful real-world results. WE Act used outcome mapping to track partner-led civic engagement interventions on a quarterly basis. This outcome mapping was framed around an **engagement ladder** composed of 14 steps representing progressively higher-level civic engagement. At the base of the ladder are steps oriented around raising citizen awareness of civic issues, while the upper reaches of the ladder include activities aimed at catalyzing responses from power holders to address those issues. These 14 steps are divided into three basic levels: awareness-raising (level 1); engagement (level 2); and response (level 3).

**WE Act engagement ladder**



WE Act outcome mapping data shows that grantees progressed through an average of 8 steps along the engagement ladder. 90% of partners reached at least level 2 of the ladder while nearly half (14 of 30) reached level 3, meaning that they supported communities and constituencies to carry out civic engagement activities that yielded responses from powerholders. Movement toward the higher reaches of the engagement ladder not only suggests that partners and constituencies were driving more sophisticated and impactful civic engagement, but also produced real-world advocacy results. This included, for example, addressing hyperlocal challenges related to street vendor rights or youth political participation, as well as progress towards addressing national issues related to social protection and small and medium enterprise (SME) policies. Specific examples of advocacy outcomes are outlined below:





### Promoting local youth participation

Youth-led advocacy facilitated by the People Centre for Development and Peace (PDP) led to 13 Communes/Sangkats issuing Deikas (i.e. bylaws issued by local councils) expressing support for youth participation in local development and political processes.

For 9 of the Communes it was the first time they had issued Deikas in their 20-year history!

### Protecting access to local markets

The Advocacy and Policy Institute (API), in partnership with the Independent Democracy for Informal Economy Association (IDEA) supported advocacy by local street vendors in Sihanoukville to reclaim access to a beach front in Ou Chherteal, where they had marketed for generations, after Chinese businessmen had occupied the location.

Constructive dialogue between street vendors, local and provincial authorities, and business owners led to renewed access the beach by vendors in exchange for commitments to address hygiene and solid waste-related issues.

### Expanding access to finance

The Cambodian Women Entrepreneurs Association (CWEA) and YEAC supported their members to engage with and lobby private banks, winning the agreement of SME Bank and Canadia Bank to make market rate loans available for their members.



### Strengthening SME access to markets

CWEA engaged numerous ministries, including the Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology, and Innovation (MISTI), the Ministry of Commerce, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs to promote policies aimed at strengthening access to markets for SMEs, including YWEs.

After more than a year of lobbying, CWEA received provisional approval from MISTI to form a Women Entrepreneurs Technical Working Group to address SME policy issues.



### Expanding access to National Social Security Fund (NSSF) benefits for informal workers

The Coalition for Partnership in Democratic Development (CPDD) and API (with IDEA) led 7 other WE Act partners to lobby for extending social protection benefits to informal workers such as street vendors. Joining with other development and civic actors, WE Act partners contributed to a landmark government commitment to pilot the expansion of NSSF healthcare benefits to informal workers. More than 300 (including 198 women) street vendors have signed up for benefits to date and WE Act partners continue to mobilize awareness and support for the registration process.

WE Act project data indicates that 70% of partner-led advocacy activities have been “successful,” meaning that they have contributed to enhanced awareness and responses to the targeted issue. Many of those successes are partial or intermediate in nature, as should be expected when tackling stubborn socioeconomic and civic issues in a slow moving and hierarchical political system that works through consensus. Even the most significant advocacy successes, such as the introduction of the NSSF healthcare benefits pilot, will require sustained engagement to ensure effective implementation. Similarly, mechanisms like the Technical Working Group on SME policy will need to be actively engaged over the medium term to produce desired policy changes. These intermediate advocacy victories, however, are significant in that they demonstrated to partners and stakeholders new to civic engagement processes that incremental reform is feasible around their priority SER issues.

# Key Lessons and Promising Practices: The WE Act Recipe for Supporting Civic Engagement

The WE Act learning review focused on analyzing and drawing lessons from its civic engagement-focused interventions which, as described above, were deliberately integrated with economic strengthening activities. Specifically, the learning review explored how key stakeholders – project staff, former staff, and grantees – understand that they were able to effect civic engagement-related outcomes within the context of closing space. This section describes key lessons and “promising practices” from WE Act, while highlighting some limitations and challenges with approaches adopted by the project.

## 1 Lead with economic strengthening

WE Act sought to integrate economic and civic strengthening interventions through capacity development for YWEs, as well as by linking advocacy-focused activities to the economic activities and goals of the project’s business engagement partners. In so doing, the WE Act team made a deliberate decision to lead with economic strengthening interventions and to make those especially visible over the course of the project. Staff and partners alike emphasized that WE Act put disproportionate investment in the economic strengthening components of the project during Years 1-2. This meant that early grant activities, developed toolkits, trainings, and public events skewed heavily toward economic strengthening versus civic engagement activities. The balance of focus then shifted toward civic engagement interventions during Years 3-5. The trajectory of investment in economic strengthening and civic engagement activities is illustrated in the graph below:

### **BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PARTNERS**

WE Act included 16 “business engagement partners” who focused on meeting and strengthening the business-related needs of YWEs. These partners included membership-based associations and business support organizations such as SHe Investments, CWEA, YEAC and FASMEC.

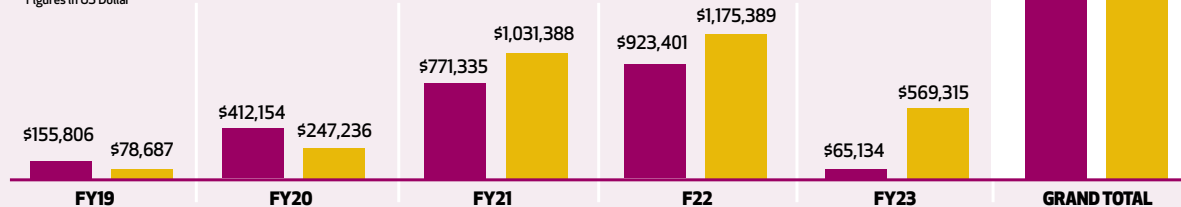
The project included 21 “civic engagement partners” who focused on civic education and fostering civic participation by YWEs and youth. These partners included organizations with long experience fostering advocacy, such as API and CPDD, as well as organizations like BBC Media Action who focused on awareness-raising interventions.

Through its focus on collaboration and coalitions, WE Act fostered joint action between business engagement and civic engagement partners, especially in years 3-5. Notably, by the end of the project nearly all business engagement partners were involved in civic activities and the few that did not engage in the civic space were not retained as partners.

## WE Act sub-awards year over year by objective

- Objective 1 (Economic Strengthening)
- Objective 2 (Civic Strengthening)

Figures in US Dollar



Project stakeholders explained that the tactical decision to lead with economic strengthening interventions had multiple practical impacts. First, WE Act was able to use its early economic strengthening activities targeting YWEs to build an identity and brand as a project focused on nurturing and growing women-owned businesses. This brand was further solidified by regularly hosting public events related to the business and financial needs of YWEs. Through these economic strengthening activities, WE Act developed informal relationships with as many as 15 government ministries and departments. Project stakeholders indicated that the project and its partners benefitted from the genuine perception that it was advancing non-controversial economic development-focused outcomes that aligned with established government priorities. Many of the government agencies with whom the project consulted or engaged with on economic strengthening were the same institutions that partners would target with their later advocacy and civic engagement interventions.

Second, the focus on economic strengthening during the early years of the project allowed WE Act to build strong trust-based relationships with business engagement partners before ramping up its investment in civic-oriented activities. As is indicated below, many YWEs and business engagement partners made clear their deep ambivalence and even discomfort with pursuing advocacy-related activities. The implementation of economic strengthening activities, therefore, allowed the project to begin their engagement with a range of partners on comfortable terrain. In many cases this meant working with business partners and YWEs for a full 18-24 months before conducting civic engagement activities, at which point partners had greater confidence that WE Act was not going to put them at undue risk.

### EARLY EXPERIMENTATION WITH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MODELS

While WE Act focused heavily on economic strengthening during its first two years, it included civic engagement interventions from the beginning. The project supported business engagement partners to engage with public and private sector entities around issues like access to finance, which increased over time. WE Act also supported experimentation around models and methods for civic engagement. This meant funding initiatives such as the following:

- Development of a chatbot through which YWEs could receive answers to key entrepreneurship-related questions (i.e. how to find a mentor, how to register your business, etc.)
- Supporting young women artists to create songs celebrating and encouraging women's empowerment
- Supporting groups like Agile, to raise issues faced by YWEs with disabilities to key ministries
- Working with a young women-led social media platform, WAPATOA, to foster awareness regarding issues faced by YWEs

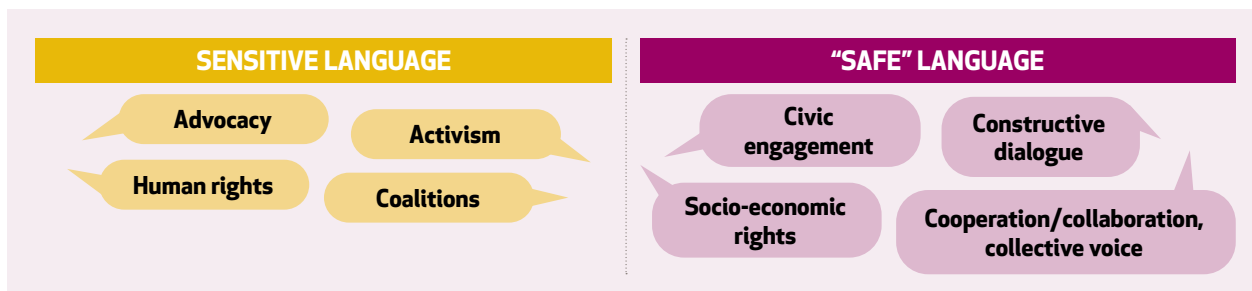
Some of these initiatives were scaled up, including the disability-rights focused engagement led by Agile. Other initiatives were dropped, such as the chatbot which failed to get traction. Others still morphed and influenced the development of new initiatives. For example, WE Act's early collaborations with artists and social media-focused interventions influenced the direction of the Youth Ambassadors program, which contributed to social media campaigns reaching more than xxx,xxx with messages related to SERs.

WE Act staff and partners generally supported the strategic decision to “lead with economic strengthening” by ensuring that there was pronounced focus and public attention given to entrepreneurship focused activity. At the same time, however, multiple staff indicated that the project would have benefitted from ramping up some of the civic engagement interventions sooner. Some staff indicated that it would have been optimal to develop the SER toolkit earlier (the toolkit was completed in Year 2), which would have allowed the project to support partners to roll out some SER-focused capacity development interventions sooner.

## 2 Remember, framing and language matters!

Given the focus of WE Act in supporting the empowerment of YWEs, it is important to emphasize that the project was faced with bringing “new” actors and partners into advocacy and civic engagement processes. WE Act supported YWEs who did not think of themselves as being interested in advocacy, human rights, or engaging public agencies and officials. Similarly, while some of the business associations with whom the project partnered engaged with government agencies in limited ways on specific issues relevant to their members, they generally did not conduct sustained and focused advocacy. For example, some associations would publish the results of partner surveys in newspapers but would not use those findings as a basis for targeted outreach and engagement with specific government ministries and departments (see point #5 below). On balance, both business engagement partners and YWEs were uncomfortable and even hostile to the idea of conducting advocacy-related activities.

In designing and scaling up its civic-focused interventions, WE Act determined early that how those activities were framed and described mattered greatly. Key stakeholders, for example, were uncomfortable with thinking of their work as “advocacy.” They were even more uncomfortable with engaging around “human rights.” By contrast, they were more comfortable with the language of “civic engagement” and “constructive dialogue,” as well as with situating their engagement under the umbrella of “socioeconomic rights.”



On the one hand, the choice of language used to describe WE Act’s activities and partner and stakeholder interventions did not substantively alter the strategies and focus of the project. However, it also conveyed the type of relationship partners and stakeholders were comfortable with establishing with government and other powerholders. Repeatedly, these individuals and institutions described a desire to establish respectful and constructive relationships with authorities, seeing those as the most safe and effective means of seeking advocacy-related outcomes. The experience of WE Act is that civic engagement approaches grounded in constructive dialogue are the most effective at maximizing participation from “new” actors that are not already engaged in political processes.

## 3 Prioritize rights-focused capacity development as a foundation for civic engagement activities

Project staff and partners repeatedly emphasized that civic engagement activities began with awareness raising and capacity development interventions focused on SERs. These capacity development interventions took different forms, including direct SER trainings as well as messaging that was integrated into other interventions, including business and economic strengthening activities. Most of these activities were informed or framed around WE Act’s **SER guidelines and SER “Toolkit”** (see text box below).

Project staff and partners described SER capacity development interventions as formative because they conveyed multiple ideas. First, they reinforced the idea that government as a “duty-bearer” has specific responsibilities or duties towards its citizens, while citizens as “rights-holders” have specific rights and privileges owed to them by government. For many YWEs and other youth stakeholders – who typically have limited experience interacting with government as a service provider – this represented a new and alternative way to think about their relationship with government and powerholders. Second, SER-related trainings provided concrete information about specific rights they hold in domains like work and social security, paving the way for specific advocacy and civic engagement activities. Furthermore, resources like the SER guidelines and toolkits provided specific examples of constructive actions they could take to pursue or act on their rights. This information was further reinforced by training modules related to leadership, public speaking, and advocacy, which provided participants concrete means for taking action.

#### SER GUIDELINES AND TOOLKIT

WE Act’s SER guidelines provided basic and practical guidance for YWEs and other key stakeholders to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Using simple language, for example, the guidelines explain:

***“If you are allowed by law to do something, it is your right to be able to do it by working with the responsible ministry.”***

The guidelines specifically discuss and unpack four key categories of SERs:

- The right to education
- The right to work
- The right to social security
- The right to conduct business and engage trade activities

The guidelines and associated capacity development activities provide further directions related to how YWEs can access information about laws and regulations, how they can constructively discuss key issues with government officials, and how they can identify legal counsel.

## 4

### Use evidence as a basis for civic engagement

WE Act partners carried out diverse and varied civic engagement activities related to social security protection, improving business conditions for YWEs, ensuring access to finance from private sector banks, and promoting youth participation in local governance processes for addressing community issues. A common thread connecting these various efforts was the use of evidence and evidence-gathering processes as the point of departure for civic engagement.

WE Act was not prescriptive about how partners and their constituencies gathered evidence, but instead supported grantees to carry out methods aligned with their prior practice and capabilities. Multiple youth-focused organizations supported youth groups to conduct basic action research to identify and understand local issues around which to engage Sangkat and Commune Councils. Other organizations used stakeholder consultation methods to generate evidence. For example, multiple business associations surveyed their members (and/or engaged their members in consultative workshops) to identify and prioritize critical business issues. Still other organizations funded or carried out professional research on key topics, such as a regional study on best practices related to business registration for microenterprises. Regardless of the approach used, however, evidence-gathering processes enabled partners to generate data and information that anchored their engagement with government officials and other officials.

Staff and partners describe multiple effects of beginning civic engagement with evidence generation. By beginning with participation in action research or consultative processes, the first step of civic engagement activities for local actors did not involve government officials or other authorities, but rather was built around “safe” engagements with peers and community members. Local stakeholders, therefore, were able to make sense of evidence and work through priority issues prior to engagement with powerholders. Furthermore, the process of generating even basic

information and evidence was empowering, giving local stakeholders confidence that they had something to offer and bring to engagements with authorities. In effect, evidence gathering seemed to play a legitimizing function within the civic engagement process, making stakeholders feel like (and perceived as) legitimate advocates.

**Evidence to engagement: CWEA and access to finance**



Evidence also provided a basis for constructive dialogue with government officials and other powerholders. None of the WE Act partners adopted a “naming and shaming” or otherwise combative approach to advocacy. Instead, grantees explained that effective approaches required extending good faith to government officials and supporting them to solve problems of shared interest. Using evidence to bring new information to government agencies to inform their actions was key to this process as it allowed local actors to begin their engagement on the basis of collaboration and even mutuality.

**LIMITED ENGAGEMENT ON POLITICALLY SENSITIVE HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES**

WE Act supported meaningful advocacy around a range of issues that were of critical socioeconomic importance to key constituencies and communities, particularly YWEs but also larger groups of youth. By focusing on issues like access to finance, lack of vocational and technical training, youth political participation, and expanded social protection, WE Act was able to support engagement around key problems that directly drive or exacerbate the marginalization of vulnerable groups, such as female microentrepreneurs and street vendors.

While focusing on a range of SER issues, WE Act did not address other political rights issues that are under threat in Cambodia. These included issues related to civic association, media freedom, elections, land tenure, among others around which there is much less available civic space. These issues were not under the specific remit of WE Act. Even still, the question remains: **Could WE Act have engaged more robustly on more sensitive political rights issues, alongside the comparatively less sensitive SER issues prioritized by the project?**

Consultations with project staff and partners suggest that it would have been challenging for a project like WE Act, which was focused intently on expanding the cadre of YWEs and other youth engaged in civic life, to engage deeply on more sensitive political issues. Staff and partners emphasized repeatedly how uncomfortable individual organizations, constituencies, and individuals were with partaking in advocacy activities. Fostering their participation and leadership around civic engagement processes required building trust and relationships with organizations new to advocacy, carefully framing the civic-oriented activities, and engaging on terrain that was deemed sufficiently “safe.” A decision by WE Act to actively fund and otherwise support advocacy around politically sensitive issues may have compromised the project’s ability to work with business engagement partners. At a minimum the decision to specialize on SER issues, which were directly connected with WE Act’s economic strengthening interventions, made it easier for the project to credibly build the comfort and engagement of a wide range of stakeholders.

## 5

### **Prioritize slow coalition building, including among civic and business-oriented actors**

As noted above, the WE Act project included a combination of business engagement partners including business and professional associations, as well as civic engagement partners who consisted of CSOs more experienced in supporting citizen-driven advocacy and promoting civic empowerment. Much of the higher-level civic engagement work supported by WE Act – i.e. provincial and national-level advocacy that sits above the Commune and Sangkat levels – was driven by collaboratives or coalitions of grantees. Specifically, WE Act supported coalitions within three public policy areas: access to finance, business registration, and social protection.

The WE Act team applied a deliberate and careful approach to promoting coalitions. The project did not rush collaborations but rather worked with partners on an individual basis for an extended period of time (often 18-24 months) before working to foster collaboration. The team found this especially important in a context where many partners were new to civic engagement and cautious about entering into advocacy activities. The project, therefore, focused on developing direct relationships with its partners and supporting them first to serve their individual constituencies. This, for example, included supporting business engagement partners to provide training and other capacity development interventions to their members or constituencies, as well as to support business and civic engagement partners alike to initiate some of the evidence gathering processes described above. As activities evolved, WE Act staff then supported partners to identify areas of common interest which could be the basis for collaboration. The WE Act team also identified organizations that were naturally situated to lead or serve as a “backbone” or primary organizer of joint outreach. For example, YEAC was identified as a leader for engagements around access to finance based on their longstanding engagement on and commitment to the issue, while other organizations like SHe Investments and the CWEA served as contributors or participants within that coalition.

Many of the collaborations brought together organizations with natural affinity and similarities, such as YEAC, SHe Investments, and CWEA on access to finance or API and CPDD on social protection-focused advocacy. However, WE Act took steps to foster connections and collaborations across business engagement and civic engagement focused partners. API, for example, provided advocacy training to all partners, including business engagement grantees. The most extensive collaboration took place around the issue of extending social protection benefits for informal workers, where API and CPDD led advocacy activities with the engagement of up to 9 other partners, including business engagement partners like CWEA and FASMEC. WE Act staff supported in brokering these partnerships by identifying organizations with common interests, regularly convening organizations, fostering joint planning, and gradually transitioning networking activities to coalition leads. Notably, civic partners explained that their collaborations with business engagement partners were especially useful in opening doors with key government actors. As one partner explained, “government tends to prioritize engagement with higher levels of business.”

## 6

### **Ground civic engagement in an understanding of how the bureaucracy works**

Consultation with WE Act staff, former staff, and partners make clear that the civic engagement and advocacy interventions supported under the project were complex and multifaceted. Staff and partners understood that the central issues being addressed through WE Act-supported civic engagement – access to finance, business registration, enabling policies for SMEs, and social protection for marginalized informal workers – cannot be addressed within the Cambodian system through quick fixes, but rather require sustained engagement. According to project staff, this mindset was familiar to civic engagement partners like API and CPDD who have years of experience fostering advocacy efforts but represented a shift for business engagement partners who tended to be carry out more limited and bespoke lobbying or government relations activities (see point #4 above).

Civic engagement and advocacy activities on numerous issues were implemented over extended periods of time, carefully sequenced, and layered to facilitate strategic impact. Importantly, the approaches employed reflected a strategic understanding that deliberative and consensus-based processes that work their way through the

hierarchical Cambodian bureaucracy were most likely to contribute to advocacy results. When describing their approach to advocating for NSSF benefits for informal workers, for example, one partner explained it was necessary to work sequentially and iteratively with government agencies, beginning at the “technical” level (i.e. staff or working level) of counterpart ministries, then at a “policy” level (i.e. leadership level) within single ministries, and finally at an inter-ministerial level to foster buy-in and prompt action on the part of government. Similarly, partners strategically solicited support for action from high level officials to facilitate behavior change at lower or local level. One partner got a Deputy Governor in Sihanoukville to put his weight behind resolving an issue where local vendors were blocked by newly established private businesses and local government from accessing a beach where they had long sold their products. Multiple partners also used “key influencers” to target specific departments, offices and officials. For example, this included cultivating and leveraging relationships with senior officials within the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs to convene key meetings with other officials and departments.

The actions and strategies of WE Act partners suggest that their advocacy activities were guided by implicit analysis of the political economy as it applies to local and national government. The approaches that unfolded contributed to meaningful if sometimes intermediate outcomes, such as the formation of a technical working group on SME policy<sup>2</sup> or the development or the passage of Deikas indicating support for youth participation in local government. But, the approaches and accomplishments were reflective of an understanding of how change happens within a Cambodian context.

## 7

### **Engage private sector institutions too!**

Government entities were not the only targets of advocacy by WE Act partners. Business engagement partners including CWEA and YEAC directly lobbied banks to address critical gaps in access to finance for YWEs who have little-to-no credit history and lack access to collateral. The partners’ outreach and engagement of financial institutions mirrored their advocacy of government. Specifically, private sector-focused advocacy grew out of consultation processes with their associations’ members, used evidence as a basis for advocacy to financial institutions, and included sustained and constructive dialogue with bank officials. Notably, business engagement partners’ extensive networks with public and private sector officials were helpful in conducting advocacy to banks. By contrast, it likely would have been more challenging for civic engagement partners, who lack substantial relationships with the private sector, to conduct effective advocacy with private sector entities.

Business engagement partners achieved meaningful outcomes through their respective advocacy. For example, CWEA and YEAC won the agreement of SME Bank and Canadia Bank to provide access to collateral-free market rate loans for their members, in effect allowing association membership to serve as a marker of financial viability. The banks’ actions illustrate the potential for engagement with private sector entities to lead to definitive actions in terms of shifts in company policies, in contrast to the slow-moving process and consensus-driven process for achieving public policy reform. CWEA and YEAC’s success, however, was limited to their membership. While the hope is that expanding access to market rate loans for the associations members will provide proof of concept for broader reforms, it does not alone directly address larger issues of access to finance for YWEs.

<sup>2</sup> CWEA’s work winning a provisional request from MISTI to form a technical working group on SME policy illustrates the non-linear nature of advocacy activities. The provisional request was issued by the ministry before national elections in 2023, but CWEA is waiting for the Ministry’s new leadership to confirm its commitment to the working group structure.



# Recommendations



Operating contexts like Cambodia that are marked by closing political space present critical challenges for development projects interested in expanding civic participation and advancing human rights. Consultations with WE Act staff, former staff, and grantees suggest that the project developed an intervention approach that supported “new” actors, principally young women, to reduce their inhibitions to engage in and lead civic and political processes. Furthermore, the project was able to support local grantees and their constituencies to make progress, however incremental, in addressing key SER issues. WE Act did this by deliberately building trust with partners, while focusing on less politically sensitive issue sets that were of importance to local communities but around which there was greater space for constructive engagement with government and other authorities.

Key observations and findings presented above imply recommendations for USAID, Pact, and other implementing partners operating in contexts like Cambodia:



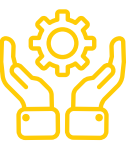
## **Pursue opportunities to integrate civic engagement activities with economic strengthening interventions.**

For WE Act, the integration of economic strengthening and civic engagement activities had a double bonus. It allowed WE Act to establish trust with young women and other key stakeholders by addressing their livelihoods and entrepreneurship priorities, prior to bringing them into advocacy and related activities. It also supported the project in developing a non-controversial public brand and forging constructive relationships with key government agencies which had the effect of building a “safe space” for the civic engagement that would follow.



## **Mobilize new and diverse actors around socioeconomic rights.**

SERs provided a logical and effective umbrella under which to engage constituencies new to advocacy processes around human rights issues. By focusing on SERs, partners, communities, and individuals were able to connect their advocacy to practical issues that made civic engagement feel worth their time, as they related to their core social and economic needs.



## **Build comfort and confidence of partners and stakeholders for civic engagement.**

WE Act took seriously the discomfort that many partners and stakeholders felt about participating in and leading advocacy and related civic activities. Addressing this discomfort required building confidence through multiple means. WE Act adjusted and set a timeline that prioritized establishing trust-based relationships with business engagement partners and not rushing civic-focused activities. The project and its partners also invested heavily in SER-focused capacity development and supporting communities to undertake evidence gathering approaches that augmented their own sense of legitimacy for undertaking civic engagement.



## **Engage private sector institutions.**

Business engagement partners achieved success in lobbying private banks to expand access to market-based loans for their members. These results demonstrated the potential to win decisive, if narrow, actions from private sector entities, in contrast to slower-moving public sector entities. The WE Act experience suggests that member-based business associations, which have extensive relationships with private companies, are well placed to conduct effective outreach and advocacy to the private sector.

A WE Act-style strategy that integrates economic strengthening and civic empowerment approaches while focusing advocacy on advancing SERs is not a fit for all contexts and all projects. In comparatively open contexts, a project may not require investing in economic strengthening as a means of bringing diverse and nascent actors into civic processes; such projects may accomplish more in terms of civic empowerment by focusing all resources on advocacy and related activities. Additionally, while SER issues will often be relevant and important in open contexts, there may be more space for civic actors (including those quite new to civic activism) to engage on overtly “political” topics.

Similarly, some projects operating in closed contexts may not have a mandate to engage “new” actors and may instead focus on strengthening already-mobilized civic actors, such as human rights defenders or CSOs advancing reforms on civil-political rights issues. For such projects, the goal is not to broaden who engages in civic processes, but to provide deep support to committed activists so they can defend and use whatever space they have to affect change within the difficult civic environment. In some cases that may mean engaging in offshore or hybrid operations. For such projects, therefore, a dual approach that includes economic strengthening may be a distraction from its focus on supporting existing activists.

The WE Act strategy of leveraging existing civic space and youth interest in economic strengthening, while building skills and confidence for civic engagement around priority SER issues, offers a means for broadening the base of constituencies participating in civic processes. The decision guide below is aimed at supporting development partners to think through conditions under which such a strategy should and should not be considered.

