Climate Disinformation in Cambodia:
Undermining Indigenous Peoples' Agency

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Climate Disinformation in Cambodia: Undermining Indigenous Peoples' Agency

Asia Centre

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PREFACE

Asia Centre is pleased to present the report *Climate Disinformation in Cambodia: Undermining Indigenous Peoples' Agency*, produced in partnership with International Media Support (IMS). This publication is part of a broader series assessing the impact of climate disinformation on Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The series comprises one baseline study for each country and a regional report.

It unpacks the information disorder to identify the specific forms of climate disinformation and their corresponding impact on IPs' agency to protect their natural environment. The report provides targeted recommendations for a range of stakeholders, including the international community, INGOs, governments, local civil society organisations, IPs, the media and technology companies.

Climate disinformation is an increasingly pressing issue in the Asia-Pacific, emerging alongside the broader rise of disinformation that is taking place both online and offline. In the case of climate disinformation, both digital and offline channels spread false environmental narratives whose intent is to deceive the public, distort climate discourse, and weaken inclusive and effective responses to climate change and deforestation. Disinformation, deforestation, and IPs' rights have each been individually studied at national and international levels, however the impact of climate disinformation on IPs' ability to respond to deforestation remains under-researched. This forms the rationale for this project.

The dissemination of climate disinformation is particularly concerning for IPs, who often reside in forested areas most affected by these crises and are therefore disproportionately exposed to the environmental, social, and political threats they pose. This is where this series makes a meaningful contribution. It examines how climate disinformation circulates – both online through mass and social media and offline – through community-level interactions. It assesses both the direct consequences, such as exclusion from climate discourse, forced displacement, harassment, and criminalisation, and the broader contextual factors that enable such outcomes. In doing so, the series enhances understanding of how climate disinformation undermines Indigenous communities' ability to respond to climate change and deforestation.

Asia Centre hopes that this report – and the others in the series – will, through the lens of climate disinformation, offer the international community, national governments, and local stakeholders a range of ideas on how to protect the environment and, in doing so, help secure the rights and livelihoods of Indigenous communities.

Sincerely,

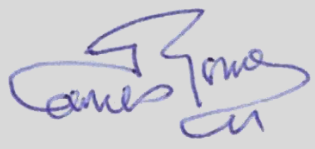

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cambodia is increasingly affected by climate change. Additionally, it also faces deforestation issues. These issues disproportionately affect Indigenous Peoples (IPs), who make up around 3% of the population (IWGIA, n.d.) and rely on ancestral lands and forests for their livelihoods and cultural identity.

The digitalisation of the media in the mid-2010s led to a corresponding rise in online disinformation enabling the rapid spread of climate disinformation and adding complexity to the climate crisis. Alongside this, offline climate disinformation, shared through direct interactions and distributed materials in local, often forested, communities, continues to reinforce misleading narratives.

Extensive research on climate change and deforestation, disinformation, and Indigenous communities individually, has been undertaken. However, the intersection of climate disinformation and its impact on IPs remains insufficiently explored.

This report addresses this gap by showing how climate disinformation undermines IPs' agency in Cambodia. Specifically, IPs' ability to amplify their voices, articulate the challenges their communities face and identify effective solutions to address climate change and deforestation.

To support this argument, the report makes three key contributions: it identifies the main forms of climate disinformation in Cambodia, examines their specific impact on Indigenous communities, and offers policy recommendations for a range of national and international actors.

First, four distinct forms of climate disinformation are identified:

- First, state-aligned one-sided climate discourses, disseminated by government-aligned media and some conservation groups, portraying state-led climate action positively while omitting critical environmental and social issues.
- Second, false climate solutions, such as REDD+ and hydropower projects, are promoted as effective responses but often obscure their harmful impacts, particularly on Indigenous Peoples.
- Third, corporate greenwashing involves companies like Think BioTech and LCMD making exaggerated claims of sustainability to mask deforestation-linked practices.
- Fourth, denial of deforestation narratives, spread by government authorities via state-aligned conservation organisations and media outlets to dismiss evidence of forest loss, especially within protected areas.

Second, the report shows that climate disinformation impact IPs in four ways:

1. First, while limited connectivity appears as a shield protecting IPs from online false narratives, it also reduces their ability to share credible climate information through digital platforms, voice their concerns regarding climate change and deforestation and increases their vulnerability to offline climate disinformation.

2. Second, climate disinformation in Cambodia is used to portray state-led initiatives like protected areas and hydropower dams as beneficial climate solutions. These narratives often obscure the social and ecological harm they cause, legitimising the dispossession of IPs and excluding them from environmental decision-making.

3. Third, state and commune-level authorities use offline intimidation as a tactic to pressure IP communities in climate-related dialogue. Authorities intimidate them into adopting government-aligned climate disinformation and rejecting information from independent sources, often under the tacit threat of legal or extra-legal challenges.
4. Fourth, climate disinformation is used to legitimise the criminalisation of IPs. Official and media narratives falsely portray IPs as environmental threats. This distortion enables legal actions against Indigenous environmental defenders under the guise of environmental protection, ultimately reinforcing land dispossession and intimidating dissent.

Third, this report outlines a set of recommendations for key stakeholders to start addressing climate disinformation and its impacts on IPs in Cambodia.

1. UN bodies should prioritise combating the human rights impact of climate disinformation, particularly on Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia, by integrating this issue into Special Rapporteurs' mandates and ensure Cambodia's compliance with relevant international treaties.
2. The relevant ministries of the Government of Cambodia should cooperate with INGOs and local CSOs to incorporate climate disinformation into its national strategy plans and jointly, and actively monitor and report cases affecting IP communities.
3. INGOs should strengthen collaboration with local CSOs and IP communities to map, document and co-design responses to climate disinformation, providing sustained support for IP capacity-building, and facilitating movement building among key stakeholders.
4. CSOs should identify, document and report climate disinformation cases affecting IPs to partners. Concurrently, they must seek INGO collaboration to expand legal aid and advocacy for IPs, and deliver culturally appropriate training to help IP communities recognise disinformation and develop counter-narratives.
5. The media sector should enhance Indigenous coverage, in particular information about climate change and deforestation and provide translation into Indigenous languages for better information accessibility.
6. Technology companies should implement stricter policies to combat climate disinformation and invest in rural Internet connectivity and community-based programmes to enhance digital literacy of IP communities.
7. Indigenous communities should identify, document, and report climate disinformation, collaborating with independent media to disseminate accurate information. They should also conduct culturally appropriate capacity-building and digital literacy training for their communities, and foster transparent communication channels to improve the flow of accurate climate information.

These recommendations seek to support more inclusive and evidence-informed climate governance. They call for multi-stakeholder engagement to respond to the urgent need to reimagine climate governance grounded in justice, diversity and full recognition of Indigenous self-determination. Adopting these recommendations is essential for all relevant stakeholders positioned to address disinformation through a climate justice lens. Doing so will not only help mitigate the spread and impact of disinformation but also protect the rights, knowledge and livelihoods of IPs.

ABBREVIATIONS

CSO	Civil Society Organisation
ELC	Economic Land Concession
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FPIC	Free, Prior and Informed Consent
(I)CLT	(Indigenous) Communal Land Titling
(I)NGO	(International) Non-Governmental Organisation
IP	Indigenous Peoples
KII	Key Informant Interview
LCMD	Late Cheng Mining Development
LS2	Lower Sesan II Hydropower Dam
LS3	Lower Sesan III Hydropower Dam
MoE	Ministry of Environment
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PLCN	Prey Lang Community Network
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation In Developing Countries
UN	United Nations
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
WA	Wildlife Alliance

1. Introduction

Climate disinformation is increasingly prevalent in Cambodia and undermining the agency of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) to act against its ramifications. This report examines these dynamics to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of climate disinformation, which is essential for assessing its impact and identifying effective solutions to address the issue. This chapter begins by providing context on the situation of IPs, the threats posed by climate change and deforestation, the digitalisation of the media and rise of disinformation in Cambodia.

1.1. Methodology

The research for this report consisted of three phases: desk research, field research and review. First, desk research was conducted between March and May 2025 to examine the state of IPs, climate change, media landscape and climate disinformation in Cambodia. The research helped with definitions and themes, frame the study's scope and identify knowledge gaps. It drew on a range of primary and secondary sources in Khmer and English, including international and national legal frameworks, several national development strategy plans, reports by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSO) as well as media reports in both languages.

Second, during the field research phase,[1] the Asia Centre team conducted 10 online key informant interviews (KIIs) between June and July 2025 to address knowledge gaps identified in the first phase. All respondents were Khmer speakers and included representatives from Indigenous communities and Indigenous CSOs as well as professionals from the media and academic sectors (see Annex I for respondent profiles). An online focus group discussion (FGD), also with Khmer speakers, was also held on 15 July 2025 with organisations and individuals working alongside IPs (profile of respondents in Annex 2) to validate preliminary findings and inform policy recommendations.

Third, following desk research and interviews a first draft was sent by the Asia Centre to IMS for an initial review on 5 July 2025. Following the feedback received on 14 July 2025, Asia Centre revised the draft and sent it to IMS on 28 July 2025 for a further review. Following the national convening on 8 August 2025, Asia Centre convened a national meeting of stakeholders to present and validate the key findings. Thereafter, the Centre incorporated feedback from the convening and additional IMS comments received on 13 August 2025 and finalised the report for publication on 15 August 2025.

Key Terms

False information can be understood through three interrelated concepts: **Misinformation**, **Disinformation**, and **Malinformation**. The key difference between them lies in the **intent to deceive**.

Misinformation involves the sharing of false or misleading content without the intent to deceive; those sharing it may genuinely believe the information to be true (UNDP, 2022).

Disinformation, in contrast, refers to false information that is intentionally created and spread to mislead or manipulate audiences (Ibid.).

Malinformation, while based on real information, is shared with harmful intent to expose private data or through deliberately manipulating context in order to distort facts to undermine individuals or groups (Ibid.).

1 During the field research phase, Asia Centre spoke with Khmer speakers who were able to provide information and perspectives accessed from Khmer language media and the IP community.

Climate disinformation is disinformation and/or malinformation spread to intentionally distort the target audience(s)' understanding about climate, environment, climate change and actions undertaken affecting environment (whether positive or negative) for political, financial, or ideological gain by those with vested interests in denying its reality or impacts (UNDP, 2025).

1.2. Background

This section examines two key elements that shape the impact of climate disinformation on IPs in Cambodia. First, it provides an overview of IP communities, including their demographic distribution, geographical concentration, livelihoods and the land disputes affecting their ancestral territories. Second, it highlights how climate change and deforestation threaten their livelihoods since IPs inhabit the country's most forested and ecologically vulnerable regions.

1.2.1. Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia

As of 2023, Cambodia's population was approximately 17 million (US State Department, 2023)[2], with IPs making up an estimated 3% of the total population (IWGIA, n.d.). The government officially recognises 24 IP groups,[3] including the six largest: Buong, Tompoun, Jarai, Kreung, Kui and Prao (CIPO, 2024). These communities occupy around 25% of Cambodia's territory (IFAD, 2023), across 16 of 25 provinces, particularly in the forested and mountainous northeast – Ratanakiri, Mondulkiri and Kratie (Open Development Cambodia, 2023).

These lands are central to IPs' livelihoods and identities. Economically, they support rotational farming and the collection of non-timber forest products, with 92.2% of employed IPs over age 15 working in agriculture (CIPO, 2024). Culturally and spiritually, IPs share a profound connection to the land. Their religious practices – such as burial rituals and worship ceremonies – are often rooted in animist traditions that view elements of the natural world as inhabited by spirits. These spirits are seen as guardians of the land, and maintaining harmony with them is vital to the community's well-being (IFAD, 2023).

Cambodia has ratified key international treaties supporting IP rights, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) (ratified in 1980), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1967) (ratified in 1992), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) (ratified in 1983), and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) (ratified in 1992), and has endorsed the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). Despite these commitments, there are ongoing concerns regarding Cambodia's compliance with its international obligations. Recommendations issued during the Universal Periodic Review process across all four cycles have repeatedly focused on Cambodia's restrictions on freedom of expression, intimidation and arrests of environmental defenders, and violations of IP land rights (OHCHR, 2010; UN, 2014; 2019; 2024), particularly in relation to land concessions and forced evictions. Special Rapporteurs on the situation of human rights in Cambodia have also documented persistent issues related to forced evictions as well as slow titling process and rights violations linked to Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) (HRC, 1998; OHCHR, 2004; 2007; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2020). Concerns regarding IP communities persist, highlighting ongoing displacement and rights violations that reflect Cambodia's failure to meet its human rights obligations (Soeung, 2022).

[2] This report references population data from the U.S. Department of State, as it represents the most up-to-date statistics available. The most recent official population censuses conducted by the Royal Government of Cambodia were in 2008 (RGC, 2008) and 2019 (RGC, 2019).

[3] As per the National Report on the Demographic and Socio-Economic Situation of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia (2024), 27 IP groups are identified by name, with 24 officially recognised by the National Policy for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, 22 in the general census, and 19 by community databases. This report adopts the government's official figure.

Nationally, Article 31 of the Constitution (2008) guarantees equal rights to all citizens, including IPs, and prohibits discrimination based on race, origin, or social status. Other laws such as the Land Law (2001) recognise collective land rights for IP communities practising customary agriculture, although these can be overridden by State interests. Directive 01BB (2012) aims to improve ELC governance and support IP land titling. Other laws include the Forestry Law (2002), Protected Areas Law (2008), and the Environmental Protection Law (1996), alongside the Sub-Decree on Environmental Impact Assessment (1999). The Environment and Natural Resources Code (2023) consolidates regulations but lacks explicit protections for IPs (IPMSDL, 2024). Despite these protections, IPs face increasing restrictions under environmental laws and growing threats from climate change and deforestation (EarthRights International, 2024).

In short, while IPs in Cambodia are recognised by international treaties and national laws, there is a gap in its compliance and implementation which reduces their ability to protect their natural environment and maintain their way of life.

1.2.2. Climate Change in Cambodia

Climate change has caused shifts in Cambodia's temperature and precipitation patterns. Since the 1960s, average temperatures have increased by about 0.18°C per decade, with rises of 0.20°C to 0.23°C during the dry season (World Bank, 2021). Under a high-emissions scenario (SSP3-7.0),[4] temperatures are projected to rise by 0.57°C between 2020-2039 and by 1.24°C between 2040-2059 (World Bank, 2024). Rainfall has also become more erratic, with heavier wet seasons and prolonged dry spells, increasing the risk of severe meteorological droughts, which occur with an annual median probability of 4% to 9% (World Bank, 2021; 2023).

These climate shifts disrupt IPs' farming cycles, water access and food security. Droughts lower crop yields, while intense rain leads to flooding and soil degradation, threatening forest-based livelihoods. Unpredictable weather also undermines land-based spiritual and cultural practices, eroding traditional knowledge (OHCHR, 2020). Limited infrastructure, resources, and adaptation support further heighten IPs' vulnerability to extreme weather and ecosystem changes (World Bank, 2021; 2023).

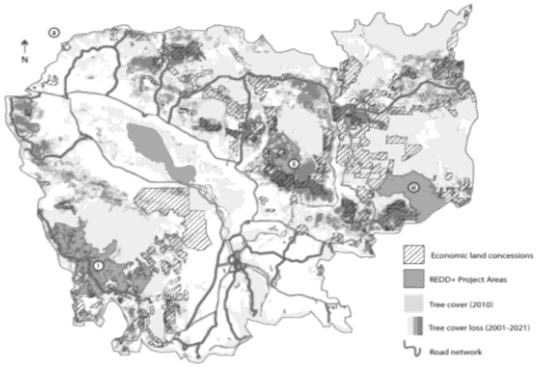
Deforestation intensifies these impacts and is largely driven by economic interests (Pauly et al., 2022). The Land Law (2001), which governs immovable property ownership and the issuance of ELCs – long-term leases allowing land clearance for industrial agriculture (OHCHR, 2015) – has facilitated the allocation of over 2.1 million hectares to more than 297 domestic and international companies. These ELCs account for roughly 40% of national deforestation (Pauly et al., 2022), much of it on land traditionally inhabited and managed by IPs (Soeung, 2022). As shown in Figure 1 below, areas of deforestation closely overlap with those of ELCs.

More specifically, the impact of land concessions and the resulting deforestation is reflected in the tree loss data presented in Table 1.

Data from Table 1 and Figure 1 shows that Cambodia's primary forest cover has declined by one-third over the past two decades, with sharp losses between 2005 and 2010. Although annual tree cover loss has recently stabilised slightly, the overall downward trend continues.

[4] A Shared Socioeconomic Pathway that reflects limited climate policy and a target of 7.0 W/m^2 radiative forcing.

Figure 1: Areas Impacted by Deforestation in 2022



Source: Pauly et al., 2022

Table 1: Tree Cover Loss in Cambodia Between 2002 and 2023[5]

Year	Primary Forest Extent Remaining	Tree Cover Loss in Kha (% of total tree cover)	Tree Cover Loss Due to Deforestation (Kha)
2002	99.6%	54.9 (0.62%)	62.3
2005	97.1%	64.6 (0.73%)	28.4
2010	89.7%	238 (2.7%)	129.0
2015	77.4%	133 (1.5%)	87.2
2020	70%	143 (1.6%)	88.5
2023	66.4%	121 (1.4%)	78.3
2024	65.5%	93.5 (1.1%)	N/A

Source: Global Forest Watch, 2024

Much of this loss stems from commodity-driven deforestation rather than natural causes. As previously noted, IPs' livelihoods depend heavily on land and natural resources; ongoing deforestation undermines their economic survival and disrupts spiritual and cultural practices.

Cambodia has signed up to a number of key international climate agreements and adopted a range of national policies. Yet, its compliance to these agreements remains weak and implementation uneven. At the international level, Cambodia is a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement (ratified in 2017). Its first Intended Nationally Determined Contribution, submitted in 2015, focused largely on climate adaptation but with limited risk mitigation planning (ADB, 2015). The 2020 NDC saw the integration of risk management into national planning (UNFCCC, 2020). The first Biennial Transparency Report, submitted in 2024, identified forestry, energy and agriculture as priority sectors (UNFCCC, 2024). However, challenges remain mainly in the forms of

[5] Data for all three indices is available from 2002, the earliest common year, to 2024, the most recent year. During the desk research, data on Tree Cover Loss Due to Deforestation was available up to May 2025, but has not been accessible since the dataset was last updated.

disjointed adaptation costing, underdeveloped monitoring systems and insufficient climate finance mobilisation (WRI, 2022; Khmer Times, 2024).

At the national level, Cambodia has adopted several frameworks aimed at addressing climate change. These include the National Forest Programme 2010-2029 (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, 2010), which aims to promote sustainable forest management while ensuring that IPs and local communities benefit from forest resources. There are also the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan 2024-2033 (MoE, 2025) focusing on strengthening resilience, the National Strategic Development Plan 2024-2028 (RGC, 2023) that sets out Cambodia's development priorities and the National REDD+[6] Strategy (2017-2026) (MAFF, 2018) which outlines Cambodia's approach to reducing emissions from deforestation. Although Cambodia's national frameworks reflect a policy commitment to tackling climate change and promoting sustainable resource management, their overall effectiveness is frequently constrained by inadequate enforcement (Chaly et al., 2025; FGD01).

Climate change remains a pressing challenge in Cambodia; despite signing up to international agreements and adopting national strategies, the overall impact has been limited, with implementation gaps continuing to undermine meaningful progress.

1.3. Cambodia's Digitalisation and the Rise of Disinformation

This section explores the key drivers behind the emergence of climate disinformation in Cambodia. First, it examines the country's digital transformation, which has led to the digitalisation of the media landscape and fostered conditions that enable the spread of disinformation. Second, it investigates the underlying causes that further fuel the spread of disinformation in Cambodia, ultimately contributing to the circulation of climate disinformation that negatively impacts IP communities in the country.

1.3.1. The Digitalisation of the Media Sector

Since the Internet started becoming widely accessible from the early 2010s, the media landscape in the country has also changed dramatically, with the digitalisation of traditional media outlets and also the widespread use of social media and instant messaging applications.

Languages in Media Landscape

In Cambodia, as the majority of the population speaks Khmer (95.4%) (CIA, 2019), Khmer is the dominant language in the Cambodian media landscape, including mass media and social media.

Major Cambodian Digital Media Outlets[7] and Their Primary Publishing Languages	
Fresh News	Published predominantly in Khmer, with content also available in English.
Khmer Times	Published predominantly in English, with content also available in Khmer.
Koh Santepheap Daily	Publishes in Khmer.
Rasmei Kampuchea	Publishes in Khmer.
The Cambodian Daily	Publishes in Khmer and in English.
The Phnom Penh Post	Publishes predominantly in English, with content also available in Khmer.
Thmey Thmey	Publishes in Khmer.

[6] Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation In Developing Countries

[7] The restrictive freedom in the Cambodian media landscape (Section 1.3.2.) also reflects in the limited independent media in the country (RSF, 2025). Major media outlets in Cambodia have connections with the government either through personal ties or through business ties with key personnel.

Traditional mass media in Khmer[8] especially television and radio, remain the main news source for most Cambodians. In 2019, 74% of urban and 67% of rural residents relied on these platforms (BBC Media Action, 2019). By 2022, television reached 96% of the population and was the primary news source for 57%, with 65% preferring it for environmental news, followed by 35% for radio (Tan, 2022; BBC, 2019). In contrast, the audience of print media has declined, with only 11% of people reading newspapers in 2022, largely due to the growth of digital media (CamboJA News, 2024; OHCHR, 2022).

In this context, a defining trait of the media sector in the country in the last two decades has been its digitalisation. Digital outlets increased by over 17% between 2020 and 2021 (Cambodianess, 2022) and by 2024, Cambodia had 1,620 licensed media entities, about 875 of which were online platforms (Phnom Penh Post, 2024; Khmer Times, 2023). This shift is illustrated by major outlets like Rasmei Kampuchea moving fully online in 2020 and The Phnom Penh Post ending its print edition in 2024 (Cambodianess, 2023; ANN, 2024; Kiripost, 2023). The rapid adoption of the Internet (Table 3), social media (Table 4), and instant messaging applications has facilitated this digital transformation. [9]

Table 3: Internet Penetration Index in Cambodia from 2000 to 2023[10]

2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2023
0%	0%	1%	6%	54%	61%

Source: World Bank, 2023

Enabled by the increasing internet penetration and the propagation of digital tools in the country (Standard Insights, 2023), Cambodia has experienced a surge in social media usage, with penetration rates rising from 3% in 2011 to 72.4% by 2025, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Social Media Penetration in Cambodia from 2011 to 2025[11] (% of total population)

Year	Social Media	Facebook	Instagram	TikTok	X	LinkedIn
2011	3%	N/A	N/A	–	N/A	N/A
2017	31%	30.7%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
2022	73.9%	68%	12%	39.2%	1.3%	2.7%
2025	72.4%	72.4%	9.3%	60.3%	3.5%	4.4%

Source: Kemp, 2011; 2017; 2022; 2025

With the popularisation of the Internet and digital tools, instant messaging applications have become widespread in Cambodia. Among these apps, Telegram is the most popular, with over 10 million users, followed by Facebook Messenger (5.5 million), Line (4.5 million), WhatsApp (4.2 million), and Viber (3.5 million) (Kiripost, 2024).

[8] In this report, traditional mass media refers to media channels preceding the Internet era, encompassing print media (newspapers) and broadcast media (television and radio).

[9] The higher social media penetration compared to Internet penetration in Cambodia is due to differences in measurement methods, including multiple accounts per user, shared device usage, and variations in data sources. Additionally, mobile access and subsidised social media platforms contribute to this discrepancy.

[10] Data for 2023 is the most recent one from the World Bank.

[11] Social Media Penetration started to be available from 2011 in Cambodia.

As a result, online platforms have helped some IP communities raise national and international awareness about environmental degradation and land rights (UNESCO, 2024). Campaigns like #ShowMeYourTree, led by the Pulitzer Center, used social media and art exhibitions to spotlight biodiversity loss and deforestation (Khmer Times, 2022; Kiripost, 2023). Youth-led group Mother Nature Cambodia has used investigative videos to expose environmental harm, often in collaboration with IPs, reaching wide audiences online (Mother Nature Cambodia, 2024). Similarly, the Prey Lang App, developed by Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) and partners, enables communities to report illegal logging and monitor forest loss, showing how digital tools can support Indigenous-led environmental advocacy (PLCN, n.d.; Girard, 2020).

At the same time, this opportunity is compounded by the limited infrastructure in rural areas that severely restricts access to online information (CamboJA News, 2023), including already vulnerable communities such as IPs. While 67% of urban residents are online, only 46% of rural populations have Internet access (BBC, 2019), with poor fixed-line coverage compounding the problem (Freedom House, 2024). Inadequate digital literacy education (ASEAN, 2024) leaves many IPs especially vulnerable to disinformation, lacking the media skills, access to reliable sources, and facing marginalisation – including linguistic barriers tied to ethnic identity (Ibid).

Hence, Cambodia's rapid digital transformation presents new opportunities, including increased international investment and the growth of global technology firms, which positively contribute to the country's economic development (Bower Group Asia, 2024). However, it also poses significant challenges for the country, with disinformation emerging as one of the most pressing issues. This is discussed in the following section.

1.3.2. The Rise of Disinformation

In the wake of digitalisation, online disinformation in Cambodia has become a major concern. In the first five months of 2025 alone, 1,339 fake news stories were reported to circulate across the country via digital platforms (Khmer Times, 2025). The government recorded, in just the first half of 2024, 1,701 cases – an increase from 1,519 cases in the same period in 2023. Earlier, between 2021 and 2023, it reported handling over 6,000 cases of misleading information over 3,200 fake news cases in 2023, 3,651 in 2024, and 884 in the first quarter of 2025 (CamboJA News, 2025).

To tackle disinformation, several initiatives have been undertaken by the government officials. For instance, the government launched a "Say No to Fake News" campaign and collaborated with Facebook and TikTok to remove misleading content in 2025 (CamboJA News, 2025). The "Web-Policing" Unit, an interministerial task force was established in 2018 (VOA, 2018); the Fake News Monitoring Committee, set up by the Ministry of Information, in March 2020 (Open Development Cambodia, 2020); and the National Committee for Coordinating Information and Public Opinion, formed in September 2023 (Khmer Times, 2023), tasked with monitoring and controlling the spread of "fake news" (Freedom House, 2024). Together, these bodies monitor the spread of false information across social media, online news outlets and other digital platforms.

Despite these initiatives, however, challenges persist within these monitoring mechanisms, as the government claims to rely on a third party to assess the accuracy of news content (Open Development Cambodia, 2020; FGD01); however, the process lacks transparency, and it remains unclear who decides what qualifies as fake news (FGD01). Moreover, the government's framing of disinformation as a threat to "national security" (Freedom House, 2024) and its emphasis on protecting Cambodia's "national image" (Khmer Times, 2023) as the main goal of such fact-checking efforts raises concerns around the impartiality of its fact-checking.

In terms of independent monitoring mechanisms, several fact checking initiatives emerge in Cambodia such as "Fact Crescendo Cambodia", an independent digital journalism initiative (Fact Crescendo, n.d.). Several independent media outlets are also involved in fact-checking initiatives. CamboJA, for instance, partnered with DW Akademia, co-implemented the project "Crisis Resilience in the Global Pandemic: Fact Checking" to strengthen journalists' capacities for fact checking and information verification (CamboJA News, 2021; DW, 2021). Another notable example is The Cambodia Daily, now operating as a digital outlet primarily in Khmer-language, which engages in fact-checking through investigative journalism (Media Bias Fact Check, 2024). The outlet published numerous articles scrutinising the Cambodian government and society, covering topics such as politics, business, the environment, and culture (TIME, 2017; Media Bias Fact Check, 2024). These initiatives, however, are struggling to be effective, as the recent U.S. aid cuts have further dismantled fact-checking and independent media efforts, worsening an already restricted environment and leaving journalists in an information blackout (CamboJA News, 2025).

Despite these independent fact-checking efforts, limited freedom in the country's media landscape undermines their ability to function effectively. In Cambodia, government officials employ various tactics to further constrain the media landscape, including restrictive legal provisions (U.S. Department of State, 2023) as well as restrictions of the Internet, as addressed by Asia Centre (2021) via its study "Internet Freedoms in Cambodia: A Gateway to Control". Limited media freedom in Cambodia is further compounded by technology-facilitated gender-based violence targeting female journalists, detailed by the Asia Centre's (2025) research publication "Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Cambodia: Impact on the Civic Freedoms of Women Journalists and Human Rights Defenders". Declining press freedom is reflected in international indexes. For instance, in 2025, the country scored 28.18[12] out of 100 and ranked 161st out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2025). In 2024, Cambodia scored 43 out of 100, with 0 being least free and 100 most free, for Freedom on the Net, making the country "partly free" (Freedom House, 2024).

Without effective independent fact-checking and the verification of the information from the media sector, the dissemination of disinformation, especially from pro-regime sources, has grown to be a concerning issue in Cambodia (Ibid.). In part, this concern arises because disinformation is largely known to also come from domestic "Cyber War Rooms" linked to the ruling Cambodian People's Party and foreign actors, using fake accounts and coordinated campaigns to influence public opinion on various political topics (Ibid.).

Overall, the lack of effective disinformation monitoring, combined with the spread of one-sided reporting, sensationalism and misinformation in the local media outlets, has led to widespread public distrust among Cambodians toward their domestic media outlets (IMS, 2025; FDG 01). As noted by a media professional from CamboJA News, fact-checking in Cambodia remains challenging due to limited public access to verified information and news, alongside a general lack of capacity and verification tools among content creators (Phnom Penh Post, 2024). This distrust is further fueled by the tendency of local media outlets to spread false information unknowingly and neglect critical yet sensitive topics, particularly those related to social and political issues (IMS, 2025). This trend is evident in a survey by Cambodian Center for Independent Media (2020), which found that 62.62% of respondents struggle to distinguish fake news from reliable information, while 93.46% believe fake news is eroding public trust in media and journalism in Cambodia.

Offline disinformation and intimidation further exacerbate this problem. During visits to Indigenous villages, officials promote state-led projects while downplaying their social and environmental costs. These visits are often accompanied by threats, arrests or legal charges against environmental defenders and journalists (for example, in Preah Roka and the Cardamoms) deterring communities from speaking

[12] In this index, 0 means an absolute lack of media freedom and 100 means total media freedom.

out (CamboJA News, 2025; Mongabay, 2025). These tactics reinforce government messaging and suppress Indigenous perspectives both online and offline. In this context, offline climate disinformation also poses a significant challenge in Cambodia, particularly for IPs, who predominantly reside in the country's forested regions.

This introductory chapter has shown that digitalisation of the media and rise of disinformation has made climate disinformation an emerging challenge in Cambodia. The next chapter outlines the key forms of climate disinformation - information that deceives the public and postpone meaningful climate action – delayism – (Lamb et al., 2020) or the rejection of information on the existence of climate change and deforestation, also known as denialism (LSE, 2024). These will serve as the foundation for the impact analysis presented in Chapter 3.

2. Forms of Climate Disinformation

Climate disinformation in Cambodia spreads through multiple channels. This chapter identifies four key forms of such disinformation: state-aligned one-sided climate discourses, the promotion of false climate solutions, corporate greenwashing, and the denial of deforestation narratives. These four forms of climate disinformation all have the intent to deceive the recipients. The first three fall under delayism, the strategic use of selective or misleading information to deceive the public and postpone meaningful climate action (Lamb et al., 2020). The fourth – denial of deforestation narratives – is a form of denialism, which rejects the existence of climate change and deforestation, denies their human causes, or casts doubt on their severity and impacts (LSE, 2024).

All three forms of information disorder – mis-, dis- and malinformation – are relevant to the Cambodian context. Disinformation and malinformation are actively used to shape narratives and overwhelm the information environment surrounding climate change with distortions and selective truths. Misinformation, while benign in its intention to deceive, is the base of spreading disinformation and malinformation in Cambodia, particularly in light of the country's varied levels of digital literacy. Many individuals, especially in rural or underserved areas, may unknowingly spread inaccurate content, amplifying falsehoods despite having no intent to deceive (FGD01, FGD02). In this context, the report, in Chapter 2, focuses on disinformation and malinformation – both of which are deliberately crafted to mislead or harm their intended audience. Their defining feature lies in their deceptive intent, which not only distorts facts but also undermines public trust, disrupts informed decision-making and can incite social or political harm.

2.1. State-Aligned One-Sided Climate Discourses

The first form of climate disinformation is state-aligned one-sided climate discourse typically disseminated by government-aligned news outlets and certain forest conservation organisations, which present government-led climate actions in an overwhelmingly positive light (Kiripost, 2024). These one-sided narratives intentionally exclude key information – regarding the negative impact of various state initiatives – and therefore deceives the public and limits their access to balanced climate knowledge. This is what the report has identified in Chapter 1 as malinformation.

Several respondents (KII02, 03) noted that this kind of climate news coverage often focuses on the positive aspects of government-led initiatives and promotes pro-government narratives. One of them (KII02) explained that "the pro-government media … only spread good [climate] news". These narratives are predominantly affirmative, highlighting state-led mitigation efforts and green initiatives, and portraying Cambodia as committed to addressing climate change in collaboration with the international community. A journalist (KII06) explained:

> *"When the government has a project to do with climate change, [with] planting trees or [with] providing materials to people to face climate change, [the government-aligned actors] try to comment and share (KII06)"*

Khmer Times, for example, is known for its editorial stance favourable to the government (State Media Monitor, 2024). Headlines such as "Cambodia unveils $2 bil plan to tackle climate change" (Khmer Times, 2024), "Cambodia sets new climate change goals with updated strategic plan" (Khmer Times, 2024), and "Cambodia ready to work with the international community to respond to climate change" (Khmer Times, 2024) exemplify this tendency.

(Kampuchea Thmey Daily, 2025)

Cambodia commits to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 54% in response to climate change

The Phnom Penh Post is also alleged to have close ties with the government. Its 2018 acquisition by Malaysian investor Sivakumar S. Ganapathy was widely believed to have been influenced by the Cambodian government, with which the new owner reportedly maintained a close relationship (Inside Story, 2018). Although not uniformly, the outlet's climate reporting often centres on government-led green initiatives, as seen in headlines such as "3,000 saplings planted in Mondulkiri in effort to 'undo deforestation'" (Phnom Penh Post, 2023), "Keo Seima REDD+ project prevents 20 million tonnes of CO2 emissions" (Phnom Penh Post, 2024) and "Cambodia commits to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 54% in response to climate change"[13] (Kampuchea Thmey Daily, 2025).

(Koh Santepheap, 2021)

Cambodia earns over $11 million from carbon sales!

(Koh Santepheap, 2021)

Cambodia is one of the countries implementing the REDD+ programme well

Among Khmer-language media, Koh Santepheap – another outlet known for its pro-government stance (BBC, 2023) – has similarly promoted favourable one-sided coverage of state climate action. This is illustrated by headlines such as "Cambodia earns over $11 million from carbon sales!" (Koh Santepheap, 2021)[14] and "Cambodia is one of the countries implementing the REDD+ programme well" (Koh Santepheap, 2021).[15]

However, these accounts typically omit issues such as deforestation linked to these projects, forced evictions of IPs and land rights violations. They also fail to critically assess these claims and, in most cases, reproduce information sourced directly from government offices without independent verification. This selective storytelling distorts public understanding of the negative impacts of such initiatives, shields officials from scrutiny, and allows exploitative practices to persist under the guise of environmental progress (Wardle, 2020). As one representative of an Indigenous CSO (KII02) noted that:

[13] Translated from its original "កម្ពុជាប្តេជ្ញាចិត្តកាត់បន្ថយការបញ្ចេញឧស្ម័នផ្ទះកញ្ចក់ ៥៤% ឆ្លើយតបការប្រែប្រួលអាកាសធាតុ" in Khmer.

[14] Translated from its original "កម្ពុជាលក់កាបូនបានប្រាក់ជាង ១១ លានដុល្លារ !អ" in Khmer.

[15] Translated from its original " កម្ពុជា គឺជាប្រទេសមួយក្នុងចំណោមប្រទេសកំពុងអនុវត្តកម្មវិធីរេឌបូកបានល្អ" in Khmer.

> *"While the Ministry of Environment mentioned about the campaign to plant one million [trees per] year, they [have] already approved the economic land concession to the company. There is no data to show how many trees are planted by the ministry, either (KII02)."*

Similar messaging appears from pro-government conservation organisations. For example, Wildlife Alliance (WA). WA is an international organisation aiming to protect forests and wildlife in the Southeast Asian tropical belt (Globalgiving, n.d.). It has also cultivated a strong partnership with the Cambodian government, frequently supporting it publicly, particularly when authorities face criticism concerning environmentally related projects. For instance, in November 2024, WA published a rebuttal to France24's investigation questioning the effectiveness of REDD+ projects (which will be further discussed in the next section) in Cambodia (WA, 2024). This response, disseminated through digital platforms such as The Phnom Penh Post (2024),[16] claimed that REDD+ had channelled substantial funds into forest and biodiversity protection and improved the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, including IPs. However, WA provided no evidence to substantiate these claims nor did they mention the negative impacts of the projects (Mongabay, 2025). This raise concerns that the organisation may be contributing to climate disinformation in defence of government-backed initiatives.

These one-sided climate narratives are also disseminated through social media, especially Facebook – Cambodia's most popular platform (Kemp, 2025). The Ministry of Environment (MoE), for instance, actively uses Facebook to promote environmental campaigns such as governmental tree-planting programmes (Phnom Penh Post, 2023) and green initiatives such as "Cambodia Sa'at (beautiful) and Khmer can do" and "Ponlok Baitong (the sprouting of green seedlings)" (Phnom Penh Post, 2024). However, the results of these campaigns are unexplained, and the deleterious effects engendered by the government-led green initiatives are similarly omitted from media discussion.

WA also uses their Facebook page to share information about the REDD+ projects. Between the 1 January and 25 April 2025, WA posted 23 positive updates on the projects out of a total of 132 posts (2025), none of which mentions the concerning consequences of the projects on the environment and IPs. These include the forced evictions of IPs from designated REDD+ projects areas (Mongabay, 2024), land rights violations against IPs (Mongabay, 2025) and implementing the projects without IPs' consent (Ibid.). This creates a skewed public perception of REDD+ projects as wholly beneficial, while concealing their harmful impacts and WA's complicity in rights violations. By omitting these realities, WA shields both the projects and its own role from critical scrutiny and accountability.

One-sided climate discourse is particularly effective in Cambodia because pro-government voices operate in an environment where violations of freedom of expression and restrictions on civic space – outlined in Section 1.3.2 – silence dissent and critical voices. One such factor is the harassment of environmental activists, which may suppress dissenting voices and enable the spread of pro-government climate narratives. The November 2021 arrest of several Mother Nature activists highlights a troubling case in which independent voices are suppressed while false narratives, likely influenced by pro-government actors, misrepresenting events and discrediting environmental efforts proliferate. Within a week of the arrests, a video of a Zoom call was leaked on Facebook via the account "Defeat the Traitor" (កម្ចាត់ជនក្បត់), that offered false claims accusing the activists of plotting against the government and insulting the King (Globe, 2021).

These examples reveal a strategic use of truthful information in a calculated manner through the erasure and omission of inconvenient truths, leading to these narratives becoming malinformation. And by doing

[16] See in the same section,The Phnom Penh Post is considered to be government-friendly after its transition of ownership in 2018.

so, media outlets and conservation organisations turn climate discourse into a tool of political validation.

2.2. False Climate Solutions

Another form of climate disinformation within the broader delayism approach is the promotion of false climate solutions (FOTE, n.d.). Here this construction of false information adopts both the tactics of disinformation and malinformation identified in Chapter 1. On the one hand, state authorities and aligned actors – including some media outlets and conservation organisations – deliberately and falsely present initiatives like REDD+ and hydropower dams as effective climate responses (Khmer Times, 2021; Khmer Times, 2023; Khmer Times, 2025), despite evidence to the contrary showing their limited effectiveness or further ecological damage as a result of these initiatives. This forms disinformation. On the other hand, promotional campaigns of these initiatives and coverage in media also omit their harmful environmental and social impacts – resulting in malinformation.

The first programme, the national REDD+ programme, aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by forest degradation and destruction (CambodiaREDD+, n.d.). It proposes to generate carbon credits by measuring the difference between actual emissions and a baseline scenario that estimates emissions in the absence of the REDD+ intervention (Ecohz, n.d.). In carbon markets, companies that emit less than their cap can sell surplus allowances to those exceeding their limits, providing financial incentives for actors involved in forest conservation (Carbon Credits, n.d.). Recognised by the World Bank as a "global leader" in REDD+ implementation (Phnom Penh Post, 2025), Cambodia has expanded REDD+ initiatives nationwide. Key projects include the Keo Seima REDD+ initiative in Mondulkiri Province, the Southern Cardamom REDD+ project in Koh Kong and Pursat Provinces, and various efforts within the Prey Lang forest.

However, significant concerns remain in the implementation of REDD+ in Cambodia. These include doubts about the credibility of REDD+ assessment systems (Berkeley Public Policy, 2023; The Guardian, 2023), particularly the issue of "overcrediting" or issuing "phantom credits" under the Verified Carbon Standard (Sustaincert, 2023). These inflated credits allow polluters to claim climate action without making real and sustained emission cuts, ultimately undermining the integrity and effectiveness of global climate mitigation efforts. This concern stands in addition to the fact, as described in Section 2.1, that REDD+ projects also often fail to safeguard Indigenous rights due to economic vulnerability and the frequent neglect of land claims (Berkeley Public Policy, 2023), casting doubt on the legitimacy and sustainability of Cambodia's REDD+ efforts. The negative impacts of the national REDD+ programme on the IP communities in Cambodia are examined in Chapter 3.

(Khmer Times, 2024)

(Khmer Times, 2025)

The REDD+ projects are promoted through government-friendly online media outlets such as Khmer Times and the Phnom Penh Post, which falsely spin it as positive narratives regarding the projects' contribution in solving climate change and deforestation. Disinformation are present in news content, in headlines such as "Some 15 million tonnes of REDD+ Carbon Credits to be sold by Cambodia"

(Khmer Times, 2022) and "Lomphat Wildlife Sanctuary Set to Generate Carbon Credits with Major REDD+ Project" (Khmer Times, 2025) focuses on the carbon credits generated by the projects, without attesting or critically examining the validity of such credits. At the same time, they falsely stress the economic benefits they contribute to Cambodia. Other falsely misleading headlines – malinformation – include "Keo Seima REDD+ Project supports forest conservation, community development" (Phnom Penh Post, 2024), "Keo Seima REDD+ Project supports English classes for indigenous kids" (Khmer Times, 2024), "Keo Seima REDD+ Project uplifts locals, protects forests" (Khmer Times, 2024), "REDD+ Keo Seima project empowers Indigenous youth with education" (Khmer Times, 2024), highlight the benefits these projects contribute to IPs and community justice, while omitting the concerns apparent from the implementation of REDD+ projects.

Hydropower dams represent another example of false climate solutions. Often promoted as sources of clean, renewable energy, they are framed as catalysts for economic growth, job creation and climate resilience through flood and drought control (Mekong River Commission, n.d.). This narrative aligns with Cambodia's electrification goals and its ambition to achieve high-income status by 2050 (East Asia Forum, 2018; UN, 2024). The Lower Sesan II (LS2) hydropower dam in Stung Treng province, for instance, is portrayed as a tool for national development and poverty reduction in the northeast, aimed at bolstering the national grid and alleviating local power shortages (Royal Group, n,d,).

(Kampuchea Thmey Daily, 2024)

Lower Sesan 2 hydroelectric dam is the largest source of green energy supply

Similar to the REDD+ programmes, government-friendly media outlets employ deliberately false or context-altered positive narratives, highlighting the benefits of these dams and framing them as a climate solution. This is seen with headings such as "Sesan 2 Dam provides solution to people in Stung Treng" (Khmer Times, 2021), "Lower Sesan II Hydropower Plant protects the environment and provides clean energy in Cambodia" (Khmer Times, 2021), "Lower Sesan II hydropower station providing bright future for relocated Stung Treng villagers" (Phnom Penh Post, 2021) and "Lower Sesan 2 hydroelectric dam is the largest source of green energy supply"[17] (Kampuchea Thmey Daily, 2024).

Despite its positive framing, the LS2 project underscores the severe impacts hydropower dams can have on local communities and ecosystems. In 2015, before construction began, a joint complaint to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights raised concerns over violations, reporting that around 5,000 people – mainly Bunong Indigenous Peoples – faced pressure and intimidation to accept resettlement (EarthRights International, 2015a). The project also threatened serious environmental consequences, including a 9.3% decline in fish biomass across the Mekong River Basin and Tonle Sap Lake, heightening food insecurity in Cambodia and neighbouring countries (EarthRights International, 2015b). Additionally, altered water flows have driven ongoing deforestation and severe disruptions to fisheries (The People's Map, 2021).

Similarly, hydropower dam projects in Koh Kong province also illustrate the adverse impact of such developments on Indigenous communities. The province is home to five operational dams – Kirirom I,

[17] Translated from its original "ទំនប់វារីអគ្គិសនីសេសានក្រោម២ ជាប្រភពផ្គត់ផ្គង់ថាមពលបៃតងធំជាងគេ" in Khmer.

Kirirom II, Lower Russei Chrum, Stung Tatai and Upper Tatai – which are often portrayed in the media as drivers of clean energy and regional economic development. Headlines such as "Cambodia's newest hydropower plant project to increase reliable source of clean energy" (Khmer Times, 2023), "$447M hydroelectric project advances regional economy" (Phnom Penh Post, 2023), "China Huadian Lower Stung Russei Chrum Hydro-Electric Project – Illuminating Cambodia's Green Future and Hope for People's Livelihood" (Khmer Times, 2025) and "Lower Sesan 2 Hydropower Station opens to 247 electrical engineering students to visit and learn"[18] (TVK Cambodia, 2025) reflect this false framing.

These biased narratives routinely omit the environmental costs. The Stung Tatai Hydropower Dam caused the permanent loss of 2,249 hectares and the temporary loss of 182 hectares of forest, flooding nearly 3,000 hectares and impacting forest-dependent communities and wildlife (BRI Monitor, 2021). In Thma Bang district, home to the Upper Tatai Dam, around 60,000 deforestation alerts had been recorded since construction began (Pulitzer Center, 2023), highlighting the severe environmental consequences linked to these projects.

This issue is compounded by the limited access many IPs have to comprehensive and reliable information about environment projects such as REDD+. As some respondents (KII06, 07) explained during the interviews, they receive information through direct visits from government officials, which tend to emphasise the benefits while overlooking or omitting potential negative impacts on IP communities and the environment. A journalist (KII06) explained the following during an interview:

> *"Since the Internet infrastructure [has] not [been completed] yet, [IPs] have limited access to the Internet. When it comes to government campaigns, [the government] has money to promote them. [The government officials] go directly to the local people so they can see the government has big projects to build a well, a school, a road or plant a tree (KII06)"*

Ultimately, these narratives, through a mixture of disinformation and malinformation, present REDD+ projects and hydropower dams in Cambodia as not only effective climate solutions, but also serving communal social justice. However, they mask their limited environmental benefits and serious shortcomings. By ignoring flawed carbon crediting, ongoing deforestation and ecological disruption, they promote false solutions that offer political optics rather than real climate impact. At the same time, leaving out the projects' impacts on IPs, including forced evictions and land rights violations, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. This distortion not only misleads the public but also delays the adoption of genuinely effective climate mitigation strategies.

2.3. Greenwashing

Greenwashing is the third and final form of climate disinformation under the delayism approach discussed in this report. It involves deliberately crafted misleading claims that make organisations and their products appear more environmentally friendly than they are while enhancing their public image, and obscuring harmful practices or delay real climate action (NRDC, 2023; UN, n.d.). As defined in Chapter 1, this falls under disinformation where the construction of information has a clear intent to deceive by diverting attention away from harmful practices towards false claims of "green" efforts.

[18] Translated from its original "ស្ថានីយវារីអគ្គិសនីសេសានក្រោម២ បើកឲ្យនិស្សិតជំនាញអគ្គិសនី ២៤៧រូប ចូលទស្សនា និងស្វែងយល់" in Khmer.

(Phnom Penh Post, 2021)

(ThmeyThmey, 2020)

A company invests in planting 30 million trees in Kratie and Stung Treng

In Cambodia, companies like Think BioTech – a logging and lumber company – have presented themselves as a champion of sustainable forestry, environmental conservation and economic development through its plywood distribution operations (The Better Cambodia, 2024). The company claims ambitious reforestation goals, including planting over 100 million trees across 100,000 hectares by 2025, with reports stating that over 15 million trees had been planted by the end of 2023 (Ibid.). The positive image the company projects are manifested in various government-friendly media outlets such as FreshNews (KII02, 10), including "Think BioTech to Plant 30 Million Timbers to Serve Red-Hot Demand in Wood Processing Industry" (FreshNews, 2020), "Forest farms a sustainable econo-enviro dual solution" (Phnom Penh Post, 2021), "Firm to plant 10M eucalyptus trees in Kratie, Stung Treng" (Phnom Penh Post, 2021), "A company invests in planting 30 million trees in Kratie and Stung Treng[19]" (ThmeyThmey, 2020) and "Kratie Tree Plantation Begins Harvesting as Investment Contributes to Environment, Economy, and Job Creation for Community Citizens[20]" (FreshNews, 2025).

However, Think BioTech's crafted "green" shows the deliberate use of disinformation to mask serious accusations of deforestation and environmental violations (Mongabay, 2023). While saying it undertakes afforestation activities, in fact, its operations in these areas have repeatedly been accused of contributing to deforestation and environmental harm (Ibid.). Meanwhile, there is no public information about whether or the extent to which afforestation has been undertaken.

Investigations and satellite imagery have revealed extensive forest loss within the company's ELCs, including areas within the supposedly protected Prey Lang Sanctuary (Mongabay, 2023; Global Initiative, 2021). The imagery also shows that deforestation in Prey Lang has significantly increased after the company's transition of ownership from South Korean to the current Taiwanese owner in 2019 (Global Initiative, 2021). Although specific data is unavailable, satellite imagery reveals the construction of roads associated with Think BioTech's logging operations, as well as deforestation both within and around the Prey Lang Sanctuary (Ibid.). In the same year, both Think BioTech and Angkor Plywood – a company under the same ownership – were implicated in illegal logging activities in Prey Lang, according to reports by the European Union and United States Agency for International Development (Phnom Penh Post, 2019). Although the Ministry of Environment (MoE) launched an investigation, no wrongdoing was officially found, fuelling further scepticism from civil society groups and environmentalists (Global Witness, 2020).

In April 2023, satellite imagery revealed a crudely cut path extending from Think BioTech's 34,000-hectare concession into Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary, running along the protected forest's border in Stung Treng and Kratie provinces (Mongabay, 2023). Checkpoints operated by the company's security were spotted, further indicating the company's management in illegal logging in the area (Ibid.). The allegations of involvement in illegal logging were denied by the company (Ibid.). These discrepancies

[19] Translated from its original "ក្រុមហ៊ុនមួយ វិនិយោគលើការដាំឈើពាណិជ្ជកម្ម នៅក្រចេះ និងស្ទឹងត្រែង" in Khmer.
[20] Translated from its original "ចម្ការឈើដាំខេត្តក្រចេះ ចាប់ផ្តើមប្រមូលផល
ខណៈដែលការវិនិយោគកំពុងរួមចំណែកជួយដល់បរិស្ថាន សេដ្ឋកិច្ច និងបង្កើតការងារជូនពលរដ្ឋក្នុងសហគមន៍" in Khmer.

between the company's green claims and its actual practices suggest a case of greenwashing – using environmental rhetoric to obscure activities that may in fact undermine the very ecosystems the company claims to protect.

(Koh Santepheap, 2024)

A Legacy of Giving: The Philanthropic Journey of Cheng Mining

Another example of the deliberate use of disinformation to greenwash is from the Chinese-owned private gold mining company Late Cheng Mining Development (LCMD). The company brands itself as aiming to improve the well-being of communities, including through its environmental conservation efforts (Cambodianess, 2024). Narratives, exemplified by headings such as "Late Cheng Mining: Empowering Cambodian Communities" (FreshNews, 2024) and "A Legacy of Giving: The Philanthropic Journey of Cheng Mining"[21] (Koh Santepheap, 2024), portray the company as beneficial to local development and supportive of conservation efforts.

However, the company has been consistently accused of illegal gold mining (Mongabay, 2023). In 2020, the company was granted exploratory license across 15,100 hectares inside Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary and an extradition license in September 2022 to extract gold (Ibid.). Yet, allegations suggest that mining operations had already commenced as early as April 2021 – approximately 18 months before the company received its official license (Bruno Manser Fonds, 2023). Aside from the illegal mining, satellite images also showed the severe deforestation around the areas granted to the company (Mongabay, 2023).

These allegations towards Think BioTech and LCMD have demonstrated how disinformation contributes to the greenwashing approach employed by private companies – while emphasising their "green" efforts, they are, in practice, misleading the public by continuing their severe environmental violations.

2.4. Denial of Deforestation Narratives

The fourth form of climate disinformation examined in this chapter concerns the denial of deforestation within protected areas. As of 2023, the Cambodian government had designated approximately 39% of the country's landmass (1.06 million hectares) as protected areas, primarily in the northeast and southwest (CCHR, 2023; Mongabay, 2024). However, despite these designations, this section shows that climate disinformation is deliberately spread to hide the fact that deforestation continues within many of these zones, although authorities have frequently denied it. Here, the tactics adopted fall under disinformation – denying independent verified information or direct voices of victims.

In 2015, several independent scientific assessments identified ELCs – particularly for rubber plantations – as the main driver of large-scale forest loss. At the time, ELCs covered 14% of protected areas, while rubber plantations spanned around 1.1 million hectares, much of it overlapping with designated protected zones (Forest Trends, 2015; Global Witness, 2015; VOA, 2015). In response, the

[21] Translated from its original "កេរដំណែលនៃការផ្តល់ឱ្យ៖ ដំណើរសប្បុរសធម៌របស់ ចុង ឆេង មីន" in Khmer.

Forestry Administration[22] dismissed the findings, claiming the reports were "not comprehensive" (VOA, 2015) and that rubber plantations could still be classified as forest cover – a position criticised by environmentalists for disregarding the ecological damage of rubber monocultures (Mongabay, 2015).

(Khmer Times, 2022)

(Khmer Times, 2024)

A similar case emerged in 2021, when the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN)[23] reported widespread deforestation in Stung Treng province within the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary. In response, the MoE, through pro-government outlets like Khmer Times, denied the claims, stating that "large-scale natural resources crimes" no longer occurred and that there was "no such deforestation involving thousands of hectares of land" (Khmer Times, 2022). The MoE maintained that only minor offenses remained. The Ministry's disinformation claims were clearly challenged by the documentary "Cambodia Burning", which showed extensive illegal logging in protected areas such as Beng Per and Prey Lang. Satellite imagery also revealed the loss of around 38,000 hectares, roughly 9% of Prey Lang's forest cover since 2016 (Mongabay, 2021; VOA, 2021).

(Phnom Penh Post, 2022)

As of mid-2025, the use of disinformation to deny deforestation in protected areas remains ongoing. In 2022, Amnesty International's (2022) report "Our Traditions Are Being Destroyed" documented how illegal logging and government repression threaten IPs' rights in Cambodia's protected forests. The analysis showed that at least 6,026 hectares of forest were lost in Prey Lang and 246 hectares in Preah Roka over a 12-month period. In response, the MoE dismissed the allegations as "baseless" and falsely – as will be shown in Chapter 3 – reaffirmed the government's commitment to IP rights, highlighting its model of shared responsibility through Protected Areas Communities (Phnom Penh Post, 2022). A representative from an Indigenous CSO (KII02) noted that:

[22] While the article published by VOA mentioned "Forestry Ministry", there is only a Forestry Administration as a unit under the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

[23] PLCN, created by Kuy people, is a network aiming at protecting the Prey Lang Forest from illegal logging and industrial agriculture (PLCN, n.d.).

> *"Preah Roka is another serious case as well. They post [the information regarding deforestation] on their page. Preah Roka has recorded 314 instances of deforestation, but when the government saw the [news], they denied it and claimed that [deforestation in] Preah Roka was an old case [that no longer recurred] (KII02)."*

In 2024, the government also rejected findings of ongoing deforestation in the Cardamom Mountains and Mekong Lowlands. It dismissed a report by Open Development Cambodia, which, citing Servir SEA data (2023), showed forest cover had declined from 43.21% in 2015 to 39.75% in 2023 (RFI, 2024). Through government-friendly outlet Khmer Times, the MoE claimed this information had previously been released by the government and intentionally falsely insisted that "there is no downside of forest cover in Cambodia" (Khmer Times, 2024). A similar denial followed when the MoE challenged figures from the University of Maryland, whose data revealed approximately 66,000 hectares of forest loss within Cambodian protected areas in 2023 (Mongabay, 2024). These repeated contradictions between scientific evidence and official narratives hinder the dissemination of accurate climate information. A representative from an Indigenous CSO (KII02) explained that,

> *"[IPs] are living in the community, [so] they know what is going on. They also see the transportation [of the trees] after they are cut down. Despite the Ministry's claim that the forest [condition] is still good (KII02)."*

These four forms of climate disinformation (state-aligned one-sided discourses, false solutions, greenwashing and denial of deforestation) illustrate how climate narratives in Cambodia are often shaped by the deliberate sharing of either false information – disinformation – or the selective sharing of true information – malinformation – that privileges state and corporate interests. This is not merely a matter of informational gaps; rather, it reflects broader dynamics in which official messaging obscures the environmental and social consequences of development project, suppresses critical debate and sidelines Indigenous and local community voices. In Chapter 3, this report moved to explain the impacts of such narratives.

3. The Impacts on Indigenous Peoples

Based on the key forms of climate disinformation identified in Chapter 2, this chapter examines its multifaceted impact on IPs' ability to protect their natural environment in Cambodia. Asia Centre has identified four distinct impacts: exclusion from climate discussions, forced displacements from ancestral lands, intimidation and criminalisation of environmental defenders. Jointly, they undermine the IPs' ability to identify and implement effective solutions thereby undermining their agency to address climate change in the country.

3.1. Exclusion From Climate Discussions

The first impact of online climate disinformation among IPs is the limited ability among many of them to engage actively in climate discussions. This section makes two nuances on this point. First, exposure to online disinformation tends to be lower among older individuals and those with limited digital literacy. Second, while this may reduce the negative effects of online disinformation, it also limits the ability of IPs to voice their climate concerns through media platforms.

Interviews with IP community representatives and media professionals (KII04, 05, 06) confirm that many IPs, especially the elderly living in the most remote areas and with low levels of digital literacy, tend to be less exposed to online climate disinformation. This can be attributed to two main factors. First, internet infrastructure in forested regions, where many IPs reside, is significantly weaker than in urban areas such as Phnom Penh (Freedom House, 2023), highlighting a persistent digital divide that disproportionately affects IP communities (CamboJA News, 2023). Rural Internet access remains unstable as private internet service providers often concentrate on urban internet access (LOMA, 2025). In 2017[24], Internet usage was 40% in urban areas and just 30% in rural areas (Internet Society, 2017).

Second, Internet access is still largely restricted to immobile devices like computers, while the use of smartphones with data plans among IPs is still low, further limiting ready access to the Internet. Although specific data on smartphone ownership with data plans in rural areas is unavailable, other experts have shared similar concerns. During a 2023 digital security training in Phnom Penh, staff from the Cambodian Center for Independent Media with expertise in media literacy shared a similar view, noting that many IPs often lack access to digital devices such as smartphones and computers, and face limited internet connectivity due to living in remote communities (CamboJA News, 2023).

A representative from a human rights organisation working alongside IPs (KII04) explained the following on their use of smartphones and internet access:

> *"We see that some of the IPs have smartphones, but a very small number. And also the internet connection is a barrier for IPs as well because IPs do not live in the town, but they live in rural areas. So accessing the internet or technology can be a hardship for them (KII04)."*

Third, the Khmer-language barrier remains a significant issue among IP communities to have access to credible climate information. Literacy rates among IPs remain relatively low (Khmer Times, 2022), as most IPs can understand the Khmer-language for daily conversations but often face difficulties when it comes to reading the language (CamboJA News, 2023). While there have been improvements in IPs' Khmer-language proficiency through enhancing IPs' school attendance rates and language classes

[24] The most recent data identified through desk research dates back to 2017. In addition, it is likely that access to the Internet is more limited in areas where IPs live.

(CamboJA News, 2024), as of 2019, 56.5% of the IPs aged seven and more were able to read and write Khmer (Khmer Times, 2024). This highlights the digital divide within IP communities where younger generations have more access to online information and have better understanding to tackle the issues. A media professional (KII10) explained that:

> *"[The young generation] can access the information. […] For [the young people], they understand [Khmer] language or a little bit of English. They have smartphones, and some of them use computers. […] Now the IPs [have] knowledge so they can [voice out their problems] For example, in Mondulkiri, there are a group of IPs [who] became lawyers so they could fight with the local authority to protect their natural resources (KII10)."*

While the limited exposure of many IPs to online climate disinformation may appear to be a protective factor, it also presents a paradox that warrants closer scrutiny. On one hand, their relative isolation from digital spaces reduces their vulnerability to misleading narratives that proliferate through mass and social media. On the other, as many IPs depend on regular community meetings or word-of-mouth communication to exchange climate-related knowledge (KII02, KII08), the scope of information available is often narrow and shaped by local power dynamics.

This can reinforce existing knowledge gaps or allow offline disinformation, often advanced by state or corporate actors through face-to-face interactions, to go unchallenged. In this way, while limited digital exposure may reduce certain online risks, it leaves IPs unprotected, and at times more vulnerable, to offline manipulation by restricting access to accurate information and critical digital resources. This ultimately hinders IP communities' ability to critically engage with climate discourse and influence policy discussions that affect their lands and livelihoods, as limited access to credible online climate information deprives them of a comprehensive understanding of the climate reality – undermining both their visibility and participation in climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. A journalist (KII06) explained that:

> *"Right now most of the information is on the internet. In Cambodia, IPs live quite far away from the city and the Internet infrastructure has not reached there yet, so when there are issues that the independent media found [regarding] illegal logging or big companies [conducting logging activities] inside the forest, [IPs] do not know because they do not have the Internet to get to the information (KII06)."*

Furthermore, the limited capacity of IPs to share credible climate information through digital platforms weakens their ability to voice their concerns – especially through independent media. Several respondents noted that IP communities are only able to share their challenges when independent media outlets proactively reach out to them (KII01, 02, 06). A representative from an Indigenous CSO explained that:

> *"IPs [are only able to] report information to independent media reporters because these reporters go to the communities to meet [IPs]. […] Since independent media is limited in Cambodia, even fewer independent media go to the IPs and share information [from IPs' perspective] (KII02)."*

Limited media access prevents IPs in Cambodia from sharing their climate perspectives, weakening recognition of their ecological knowledge (KII09). Their sustainable farming practices are often misrepresented as harmful, fueling public misunderstanding and criminalisation, as outlined in Section 3.3.

For example, in mainstream narrative, swidden agriculture, which involves controlled burning and the clearing of small forest patches for temporary cultivation – where the ash replenishes soil nutrients and suppresses weeds – is often conflated with destructive slash-and-burn farming. The Cambodian government has frequently portrayed this form of agriculture as "backward" and has enacted regulations to restrict or prohibit it (ILO, n.d.). Among the Bunong communities in Mondulkiri province, several forms of traditional land use – including swidden farming and subsistence hunting – have been banned and replaced with state-promoted economic crops (Globe, 2019). Yet, scientific research has demonstrated the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of swidden agricultural practices (Ghazoul, 2013). The traditional farming skills of the Kuy community from Kampong Thom, for instance, exemplifies IPs' knowledge in sustainable agriculture (Ly, 2025). As IP communities possess limited ability to counter this disinformation, this misinterpretation undermines IPs' invaluable knowledge in preserving lands and forests, further excluding them from climate mitigation and adaptation discussions.

Another case concerns Indigenous rotational farming practices, which are frequently misinterpreted as overly harmful to the environment by being falsely and deliberately faulted for widespread and industrial forest and crop burning activities as well as being falsely linked to wildfires occurring naturally. While rotational farming has its environmental critics (UNFCCC, 2012), these narratives reinforce false and harmful stereotypes and exclude IPs from climate mitigation and adaptation debates given their limited access to independent media to share Indigenous climate perspectives. A representative from an IP community (KII08) explained that:

> *"There is also information accusing IPs of destroying the forest, but we are actually the protectors. I think [the fake news] significantly affects us because people are generally prone to believing everything they hear. If the government accuses us of wrongdoings, [the public] will discriminate against us (KII08)."*

Although limited internet access, smartphone usage and language barriers may reduce the exposure of IPs in Cambodia to climate disinformation, these same challenges also restrict their ability to express their climate perspectives particularly through digital platforms. As a result, they are often unable to voice their concerns or take part in meaningful climate dialogue, consequently eroding their agency concerning climate issues.

3.2. Forced Displacements from Ancestral Lands

In Cambodia, climate disinformation often frames state-led and private-backed initiatives, such as protected areas, REDD+ projects and hydropower dams (see Chapter 2), as beneficial climate solutions. Disseminated through official channels, aligned media and conservation narratives, these portrayals frequently obscure the social and ecological harms they cause. By glossing over forced evictions and land grabs, a conjunction of disinformation and malinformation are used to legitimise the dispossession of IPs and exclude them from environmental decision-making. This not only threatens their livelihoods and cultural heritage but also undermines their role in climate action, particularly in forest monitoring and sustainable stewardship.

One example is the expansion of protected areas, promoted as conservation success stories while systematically obstructing Indigenous land claims. By 2024, 39% of the country's landmass had been designated as protected, overlapping with at least 24 sites tied to Communal Land Titling (CLT) applications. These overlaps create legal uncertainty that delays or derails communal titling.[25] In one

[25] Authorities and local leaders often use the threats of communal tiling plans being delayed or derailed altogether to pressure IP communities into accepting individual land titles, promoting them as quicker and less bureaucratic than communal titling. This pressure is reinforced through malinformation about the supposed benefits of individual ownership. However, having

case, 128 hectares designated for Bunong CLTs in Pu Kong village were absorbed into the Sre Preah Community Protected Area under the Keo Seima REDD+ project, effectively erasing land claims under the guise of environmental protection (Mongabay, 2024).

REDD+ projects, widely touted as climate mitigation mechanisms, further illustrate how misleading portrayals obscure rights violations. The Keo Seima REDD+ initiative, certified by Verra, claims to uphold Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)[26] and customary tenure. Yet field reports indicate that affected communities neither secured new collective titles nor fully consented to land transfers, suggesting a stark gap between international standards and on-the-ground practice (Verra, n.d.; Mongabay, 2024). Similarly, in the Southern Cardamom REDD+ area, the Chorng people have experienced land encroachment, including on farmland and burial grounds, under vague and shifting project boundaries. These narratives of REDD+ as climate "solutions" operate as disinformation when they ignore, downplay or contradict the lived realities of displacement and dispossession, especially when disseminated without transparent scrutiny.

The case of the Lower Sesan II (LS2) hydropower dam offers further evidence of how large-scale infrastructure promoted as clean energy can displace IP communities under misleading claims of development. A 2015 joint complaint to the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Cambodia raised concerns over the forced resettlement of Bunong villagers, many of whom faced intimidation and received minimal compensation, just five hectares and USD 1,000 in some cases (EarthRights, 2015; Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2023; KII02). While government spokespersons framed the project as a national benefit that would uplift local communities (Financial Times, 2021), affected IPs were stripped of their homes, lands and fishing grounds. A respondent from an Indigenous CSO (KII02) reported the following:

> *"Stung Treng Province is the case where I used to work closely with the community. [As an] impact from the hydro project, the villages in this province were flooded. [IPs] were forced to be evicted, and they did not get fair compensation. This has happened since 2016. Some communities [choose not to] receive the compensation because they feel that it is not fair. For example, the villagers received only five hectares and USD 1,000. Some families accepted the compensation, but they only got a house for living without the farm. [For those who do not] want to get compensation, they stated that they did not want to accept the compensation because [they did not want to lose] their homeland and ancestral land (KII02)."*

Despite this precedent, the Lower Srepok 3 dam project in Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri provinces is proceeding, projected to displace over 4,200 families and flood 70,000 hectares (CamboJA News, 2025). Once again, similar to the LS2 project, this project is promoted as a clean energy solution while sidestepping its potential social and ecological costs, once the dam operates, in the same manner as LS2.

In addition, in these cases and others, the principle of FPIC, essential to the legitimacy of climate interventions, is routinely sidelined. Conservation organisations such as Wildlife Alliance have been criticised for reducing FPIC to a procedural and ostentatious box-ticking exercise, often holding meetings without fully informing communities of the scope or consequences of projects (Mongabay, 2025). In some cases, organisations have argued that FPIC was unnecessary because communities

individual land titles ultimately makes it easier for banks and private actors to acquire the land from isolated individuals (Mongabay, 2024).

[26] This refers to the principle that ensures IPs have the right to give or withhold consent to projects or activities that may affect their lands, territories, or resources, guaranteed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the International Labour Organization Convention no. 169.

lacked legal land titles, an argument that not only disregards customary tenure but enables further marginalisation. The result is that IPs like the Chorng in Koh Kong province lose access not just to forests, but to the very basis of their food systems and spiritual practices. As one community representative explained, generationally inherited rotational farming plots were absorbed into the Southern Cardamom REDD+ project with minimal or no consultation (Ibid.).

Crucially, these displacements facilitated by a lack of genuine FPIC also undermine Indigenous knowledge and political participation. Many IP communities live in areas most directly affected by climate change and deforestation and are among the first to observe ecological changes. Yet when disinformation marginalises their knowledge and removes them from their lands, their potential to contribute to evidence-based climate action is lost. As one Indigenous CSO representative (KII02) explained:

> *"For the [Indigenous] communities, they know what is going on [with climate change and deforestation] because they are living there. They know what is changing such as increased [temperature], even though they do not use the terms [of climate change and deforestation] (KII02)."*

Therefore, these examples have shown that the promotion of false climate solutions in Cambodia often masks a parallel agenda of land acquisition, justified through the deliberate use of selective or misleading information about the climate initiatives. When these false narratives obscure harm, bypass FPIC and silence affected communities, they are used to unjustifiably encroach upon the ancestral lands of IPs and exclude IPs from the governance of their lands. As a result, the capacity of IP communities to meaningfully contribute to climate actions is further diminished.

3.3. Intimidation

As noted in Section 1.3.3, offline intimidation is a critical counterpart to online disinformation, and both must be examined to fully understand how disinformation operates. This section of the report delves into the tactics employed by both state and commune-level authorities to instil fear and intimidation among IP communities around climate-related dialogue, particularly in pressuring them to adopt government-aligned climate disinformation and remove claims from independent sources with a tacit threat of legal or extra-legal challenges should they not comply. This undermines their agency in climate change and deforestation mitigation actions.

Intimidation through face-to-face interactions, even without a clear threat, is not a new tactic. Cambodian authorities have used systematically in face-to-face meetings to spread fear, often under the pretext of consultation. In 2019, NGOs such as Sahmakum Teang Tnaut, Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights and Transparency International were summoned by government officials to discuss critical reports, a move described by civil society actors as a form of coercion and intimidation (VOA, 2019). Journalists from Radio Free Asia and Voice of America have also been pressured in closed-door meetings, which Reporters Without Borders condemned as attempts to stifle independent reporting (RSF, 2016).

These tactics extend to IP communities, where government and private actors hold tree-planting events or information sessions promoting projects like REDD+ or dams, while downplaying their negative impacts. Such interactions often exclude meaningful consultation and pressure communities into compliance without genuine FPIC (Mongabay, 2024). Several respondents (KII01, 06, 08, 09) noted that the climate of fear and intimidation is often spread during visits by state and commune-level authorities, as well as private companies involved in government-backed climate initiatives. As a representative from an Indigenous CSO (KII01) explained,

> *"When the [governmental] projects come up, the Ministries [engage with] commune-level authorities and private companies [implementing the projects] to [disseminate] the [positive] information [regarding the projects]. [The commune-level authorities and private companies] do not give any Free, Prior and Informed Consent to IPs to [let them] understand what is going to happen [with the project]. Sometimes [the commune-level authorities and private companies] give fake news to our Indigenous communities because some cannot read Khmer-language (KII01)."*

By attending internal meetings and events within IP communities to discuss climate-related information (KII02), authorities and company representatives often create a climate of fear and intimidation through their mere attendance. These visits are frequently used to pressure community members into cooperating with government agencies. As a representative from an Indigenous CSO (KII02) recounted:

> *"When the events or meetings are about the environment, the [commune-level] authorities will talk about the role of the government in protecting the environment. The authorities encourage the youth to participate in and contribute to forest protections and [call upon the IPs] to engage the commerce-level authorities for future meetings (KII02)."*

The climate of fear created by the presence of commune-level authorities at regular community meetings and public forums – a form of public surveillance – discourages IPs from openly discussing environmental issues (Mongabay, 2025). Commune-level authorities are generally unsupportive of NGOs entering IP communities to engage with local residents and encourage them from sharing their struggles (KII10).

In addition to deterring open discussion, commune-level authorities are also active disseminators of climate disinformation during IP-led climate events. According to a representative from an Indigenous CSO (KII08), authorities frequently accuse IPs of encroaching on forest land, spreading these narratives through direct verbal communication: "when there are meetings within our communities". He added that, "the commune-level authorities attend and deliver speeches saying that IPs are going to the forest and taking the land. [...] During the same meeting, the commune-level authorities banned my community from going to the forests. The accusation is fake" (KII08).

This practice extends beyond public forums to door-to-door visits (ICT News, 2025). The same respondent (KII08) also noted that disinformation is also spread using this tactic, where "the commune-level authorities come to IPs' houses and accuse IPs who monitor the forest of logging and illegally taking the land ownership". These accusations are sometimes reinforced by officials from the Forestry Administration, who accompany commune-level authorities during such visits (KII08).

The atmosphere of intimidation fostered by government presence in Indigenous climate discussions discourages IPs from speaking openly about climate and deforestation issues. Compounded with climate disinformation disseminated by government officials, Indigenous voices are further delegitimised within meaningful climate dialogue.

3.4. Criminalisation of Environmental Defenders

In Cambodia, climate disinformation plays a central role in legitimising the criminalisation of IPs. By promoting state-sanctioned narratives related to the climate, such as protected areas, REDD+ schemes and hydropower dams, as uncritically beneficial, official and media discourse falsely reframes IPs not as forest stewards but as environmental threats. This distortion enables legal actions against

Indigenous environmental defenders under the guise of environmental protection, reinforcing land dispossession and intimidating dissent.

First, climate disinformation reframes Indigenous forest protection efforts as illegal activity. State-aligned narratives routinely depict IP patrols and traditional land practices as environmentally harmful, despite evidence to the contrary. In 2022 alone, approximately 91 court cases were filed against IPs for trespassing in areas which have been illegitimately declared as protected areas without FPIC from the community but also for practising Indigenous farming and living on their ancestral lands, declared a criminal offense (IWGIA, 2023). These legal actions reflect not only systemic land rights violations but also the deployment of disinformation to delegitimise IP-led conservation.

For instance, PLCN, led by the Kuy people, was banned from patrolling the Prey Lang Wildlife Sanctuary in February 2020 (OHCHR, 2021). In a media landscape where protected areas are promoted to be wholly beneficial to the effort against climate change – as discussed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 – state narratives accused PLCN who inhabit these lands of trespassing, engaging in shifting cultivation and unlawfully occupying state-designated lands (IWGIA, 2023). These allegations exemplify how misrepresentations of IP practices help justify restrictions and criminal charges. That same year, Tampuan activists Chhorn Phalla, Kham Masork, Sithan Nhan, Thvae Hok and Lat Branh – monitoring their land for illegal practices such as illegal logging, among others – were charged with clearing state forest land. Despite charges being dismissed, the threat of legal action continues to create fear among activists and discourages their involvement in forest stewardship (CIVICUS, 2023). It is notable that illegal logging surged following their exclusion from the area (Global Initiative, 2021).

Climate disinformation, particularly in the form of the denial of deforestation claims (Section 2.4), is also used to discredit IP documentation of environmental harm. In May 2025, the Kuy community publicly released evidence of 334 forest crimes in Preah Roka Wildlife Sanctuary over just three days, many of which being illegal logging (Kuy Indigenous Community of Prameru Village, 2025; Kiripost, 2025; CamboJA News, 2025). Authorities responded not by investigating the illegal logging, but by accusing the community of violating protected area laws and "spreading fake news intended to incite and disrupt social order for the political gain of individuals living abroad" (Ibid.), a criminal offense. These accusations of fake news against IP communities serving as a basis for and threat of legal action, themselves are disinformation tactics by deliberately, using false information, undermining the credibility of IPs and deterring grassroots monitoring.

As one Indigenous CSO representative (KII02) explained, "when the community spreads accurate information about logging, they are often accused in the court system". Another (KII03) described how he was accused by authorities of incitement and surveilled by using malinformation to reframe his activities to mobilise his community to raise environmental concerns as an incitement to crime. Although his case was dismissed at both provincial and Supreme Court levels, it reflects how legal systems can be mobilised through disinformation-fuelled accusations to target IP leaders:

> *"I was accused of gathering the [IP] communities to go against [the government], and this gathering was also accused of [overlooking] the respect for IP communities. I was then accused of inciting the [IP] communities to cut the trees in Ratanakiri. The provincial prosecutor accused me and put me under surveillance. Later on, the provincial court dropped my case, but [the provincial prosecutor] who filed the case against me raised the case to the supreme court. However, the supreme court made the same decision as the provincial court (KII03)."*

Second, false climate solutions such as REDD+ also contribute to criminalisation, especially when IPs continue traditional practices in areas designated as protected. In 2024, Chorng farmer Pork Nget was arrested using disinformation about him clearing forest land to claim ownership, despite planting rice

on ancestral farmland he had used since 2013, land later absorbed into the Cardamom REDD+ project area (CamboJA News, 2024). There was no official boundary demarcation at the time of his arrest, yet the framing of REDD+ as an indisputable climate solution lent credibility to the charge. As one respondent (KII09) explained,

> *"The REDD+ projects impact IPs in Koh Kong, [where] community members were arrested. I got the information that the community were farming rice on their farms, and [IPs] were arrested for the farming activities. The community was farming on the lands under the REDD+ project, but the community has had the farmlands for a long time (KII09)."*

Similar dynamics were reported in the Lower Sesan II (LS2) hydropower project. After Bunong villagers resisted relocation, authorities increased surveillance and filed cases against four individuals (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2023). These legal reprisals were accompanied by official narratives positioning the dam as necessary climate infrastructure, thus using the disinformation of environmental progress to justify displacement and silence opposition.

Third, climate disinformation distorts and discredits traditional Indigenous agriculture, often framing it as destructive. In Koh Kong, the Chorng community reported that the conservation group WA executed the banning of swidden farming within the REDD+ project areas (Mongabay, 2024; CamboJA News, 2025).[27] One CSO representative (KII01) recalled a local farmer being wrongly accused of deforestation based on satellite images alone, noting that WA said the farmer cut down all the trees.

These claims were accompanied by coercive practices, including the alleged destruction of crops and burning of rice fields, actions that not only undermine livelihoods but also suppress customary land use (Mongabay, 2024). They also include acts of intimidation, as discussed in Section 3.3. Discrediting Indigenous agriculture in this way contributes to broader disinformation strategies that erase IPs' knowledge about their ancestral lands and reframe sustainable practices as illegal.

In sum, climate disinformation plays a critical role in enabling the criminalisation of IPs in Cambodia. By misrepresenting Indigenous practices, delegitimising forest monitoring and promoting false climate solutions, disinformation constructs a narrative that recasts IPs as obstacles to environmental progress rather than allies. This framing justifies legal repression, fosters exclusion from climate dialogue, and weakens Indigenous agency in environmental governance.

All in all, this chapter has examined the impacts of climate disinformation on IPs in Cambodia. The four impacts identified in this chapter (exclusion from climate discussions, forced displacements from ancestral lands, intimidation and criminalisation of environmental defenders) result in the deprivation of Indigenous voices and contribution within meaningful climate dialogue. The following chapter outlines a series of recommendations designated to various stakeholders to address these impacts on IPs.

[27] Despite lacking the legal authority to evict local communities or prohibit farming, evidence from desk research and key informant interviews indicates Wildlife Alliance's involvement in these violations.

4. Recommendations

This chapter presents a set of actionable recommendations to address the rise of climate disinformation and its disproportionate impact on IPs in Cambodia. Grounded in the findings of this report, these recommendations aim to support more inclusive and evidence-informed climate governance. They are directed at key stakeholders, including the United Nations, international and national NGOs, the Cambodian government at national and subnational levels, civil society organisations, media actors, technology companies and IP communities, who play critical roles in countering disinformation, protecting IP rights, and ensuring IPs' meaningful participation in climate action.

The United Nations and International Human Rights Mechanisms should:

- Integrate climate disinformation into human rights monitoring by explicitly including it in the mandates of the UN Special Rapporteurs on the rights of IPs and on the situation of human rights in Cambodia.
- Increase visits to Cambodia by Special Rapporteurs on the rights of IPs and the situation of human rights, with explicit mandates to assess the impact of climate disinformation on IPs.
- Convene regional consultations on climate disinformation and Indigenous rights, bringing together UN bodies, Indigenous representatives, and civil society actors to identify cross-border patterns, share best practices, and inform global human rights standards with context-specific insights.
- Through rigorous questions and correspondence, the relevant UN agencies should seek timely reporting and compliance to international treaties and agreements signed by Cambodia.

The Relevant Ministries of the Government of Cambodia should:

- Incorporate actions to address climate disinformation into existing national development and environmental frameworks, including the Climate Change Strategic Plan and legal instruments.
- Create an inter-ministerial and CSO-inclusive body (multi-stakeholder task force) to analyse and respond to disinformation affecting IPs and the environment.
- Enforce the right to FPIC for all climate-related projects, especially in REDD+ and hydropower dams projects, protected areas, and infrastructure developments.
- Integrate and mainstream traditional ecological knowledge in policy formulation to ensure that climate strategies are locally grounded, culturally appropriate, and inclusive of Indigenous perspectives.
- Increase transparency around the filing of court cases and legal procedures, with a specific focus on those targeting IPs.
- Prioritise prosecuting those responsible for illegal logging, with penalties that deter violations and transparent enforcement to build public trust.
- Ensure the safety of IPs and journalists reporting on deforestation by providing legal protections, rapid response mechanisms, and secure channels to report threats or attacks.

INGOs should:

- Submit joint stakeholder reports to UN mechanisms, highlighting how climate disinformation enables land dispossession and criminalisation of IPs.
- Strengthen its collaboration with local CSOs and IP groups to map the disinformation landscape, document its sources and impacts, and co-design community-informed responses.

- Provide sustained financial and technical support for initiatives that build IP capacity to counter climate disinformation, including monitoring efforts and information-sharing networks.
- Support and contribute to movement building by facilitating safe convenings, cross-community dialogue, and alliance formation among IPs, environmental defenders, and civil society actors.

Civil Society Organisations should:

- Identify, document and report climate disinformation cases affecting IPs (and other actors) and share findings with national and international partners such as INGOs.
- Seek collaborations from INGOs to expand legal aid and advocacy support for IPs facing prosecution linked to environmental or land-related activism.
- Deliver culturally appropriate training to help IP communities recognise disinformation and develop counter-narratives.
- Collaborate with media to ensure Indigenous perspectives are central to climate narratives and solutions coverage, emphasising their resilience, agency, and diverse experiences

The Media Sector should:

- Proactively investigate and expose cases of climate disinformation affecting Indigenous Peoples and other vulnerable communities. Collaborate with civil society and international partners to amplify findings and ensure wider awareness and accountability.
- Partner with INGOs, legal aid groups, and Indigenous rights organisations to offer legal support to IPs facing harassment, prosecution, or criminalisation related to environmental or land rights activism. Media coverage should also spotlight such cases to build public pressure and solidarity.
- Increase regular and in-depth reporting on climate change and deforestation in Indigenous territories. Employ Indigenous journalists or work directly with IP communities to ensure accurate and community-centered storytelling.
- Translate climate and environmental reporting into local Indigenous languages to make critical information accessible and inclusive, especially for those in forested and rural areas with limited access to mainstream media.
- Resist pressure from state and corporate actors that promote one-sided climate narratives. Uphold ethical journalism standards by critically assessing government and corporate climate claims, particularly around REDD+ projects, hydropower, and protected areas.
- Support the development and dissemination of information through community radio, grassroots bulletins, and other accessible media formats, especially where digital access is low but offline disinformation is prevalent.
- Highlight and amplify traditional ecological knowledge and community-led climate solutions, presenting Indigenous voices as authoritative sources and emphasising their resilience, agency, and diverse experiences, rather than portraying them solely as subjects of coverage.
- Ensure the content published should be designed to inform, challenge, or mobilise its audience regarding climate information.
- Create tailored content that addresses different stakeholder groups with context-specific messaging – raise awareness among the general public, empower Indigenous communities with rights-based information, and hold authorities accountable by highlighting inconsistencies and impacts of climate disinformation. Each audience should receive content designed to inform, challenge, or mobilise them appropriately.
- Develop content that not only explains the facts but also prepares audiences to recognise the tactics and storylines commonly used to mislead them about climate and Indigenous issues. By showing how these tactics work in real life, communities become more resilient when they encounter them again.

- Increase presence on platforms organically used in Cambodia, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, alongside traditional outlets to maximise reach and engagement.
- International media are encouraged to investigate and report on deforestation in Cambodia and its impact on IPs, where safety concerns limit in-depth local coverage. Work with trusted local partners to ensure accuracy and protect sources, and use global platforms to amplify these stories and promote accountability.
- Constructive journalism should emphasise accuracy, nuance, and clarity to counter misinformation and polarisation.

Technology Companies should:

- Enforce stricter moderation policies against climate disinformation, including false claims promoting harmful environmental projects.
- Strengthen content governance and transparency to address climate disinformation, particularly narratives promoting harmful or extractive environmental projects.
- Proactively adjust algorithms to reduce amplification of harmful climate disinformation and surface credible, diverse sources - including Indigenous-led media and community information channels.
- Invest in connectivity initiatives in rural and Indigenous areas to enable access to diverse and credible information sources.
- Provide subsidised digital tools and training for Indigenous communities on digital safety, content verification, and effective ways to share their perspectives and knowledge, strengthening their presence and influence in online climate discussions.
- Develop clear, consistent policies with stakeholder input and ensure they are applied fairly across languages and contexts.
- Publish regular transparency reports detailing detection, removal, and enforcement actions against climate disinformation, broken down by language and type of narrative.

Indigenous Communities should:

- Identify, document and report climate disinformation and work proactively with independent media to disseminate accurate Indigenous climate information.
- Conduct capacity-building activities and training workshops on climate disinformation for Indigenous communities, led by trusted local CSOs and NGOs and delivered in Indigenous languages.
- Foster transparent and fluid communication channels among diverse communities to improve the flow of accurate climate information and enhance overall understanding.
- Collaborate proactively with technology companies and the media sector to implement robust digital literacy training programmes.

5. Conclusion

Since the late 2000s, Cambodia's growing internet access and widespread use of social media and messaging apps have driven the digitalisation of its media sector, fuelling the rise of disinformation.

Of particular concern is the growth of climate disinformation, which is often disseminated through government-aligned media, platforms like Facebook, and offline communications by officials seeking to shape climate narratives and influence local engagement with state-led initiatives.

Collectively, such climate disinformation undermines IPs' agency to effectively respond to climate change and deforestation - an issue that disproportionately impacts IPs, who mainly live in forested areas and face heightened environmental risks. Despite its growing significance, climate disinformation remains largely overlooked.

This report examines how both online and offline disinformation are used to undermine IPs' ability to protect their natural environment. It finds that climate disinformation plays a central role in delaying and denying the realities of climate change and deforestation through state-aligned one-sided narratives, false climate solutions, corporate greenwashing, and denial of deforestation. In Cambodia, projects such as REDD+, hydropower dams, and the designation of protected areas are often presented as beneficial, while concealing the harm they may cause.

The report identifies four key impacts of climate disinformation on IPs. These include: exclusion from climate discourse, as limited accessibility to independent media hinders the sharing of Indigenous climate perspectives; forced displacement from ancestral lands, with disinformation used to justify land grabs targeting IP communities; intimidation, where government presence creates a climate of fear silencing IPs' voices and concerns; and the criminalisation of environmental defenders, as disinformation is used to legitimise actions against Indigenous climate actions. Collectively, these impacts marginalise Indigenous voices and undermine their meaningful participation in climate dialogue.

While these findings form the core of the report, the research has also surfaced three critical insights that extend beyond the immediate evidence. These reflections highlight the need to bring *climate disinformation* to the fore in the discussion on disinformation in Cambodia while offering valuable directions for future research, advocacy, and project design.

First, climate disinformation should be understood as a deliberate strategy rather than a communication failure. The Cambodian case shows how disinformation is embedded in broader systems of control. It is disseminated not only through media channels but also through direct, coercive practices (door-to-door visits, surveillance, legal harassment) aimed at exerting tighter control over those seeking accountability. These tactics illustrate that disinformation is used to manage resistance, not simply to misinform. Addressing it requires confronting the power structures that sustain it, not just improving information access or media literacy.

Second, climate disinformation must be recognised as an effort to nullify agency by negating the truth. It operates not merely by spreading falsehoods but systematically diluting IPs agency by delegitimising traditional knowledge, and reinforcing a singular model of climate action. In Cambodia, this is evident in the ways REDD+ projects, hydropower dams, and protected areas are promoted as climate solutions, despite their often-harmful impacts on IPs. These narratives block IPs' contributions towards sustainable land stewardship and justify their exclusion from both land and climate governance. A truth-

based climate future must centre Indigenous knowledge systems, secure their rights, and embrace plural climate imaginaries.

Third, the Cambodian experience reflects and validates a wider transnational pattern that impacts IPs in the region. Indigenous communities across the Global South face similar dynamics: exclusion from climate governance, criminalisation of traditional practices, and erasure by dominant conservation and development discourses. International actors – whether carbon certification bodies, global NGOs, or tech platforms – play a role in sustaining these systems. Future responses must therefore be rooted in cross-border Indigenous solidarity and accountability mechanisms that expose and challenge the global drivers of climate disinformation.

Together, these insights point to the urgent need for a reimagined approach to climate governance, one grounded in justice, plurality, and the full recognition of Indigenous self-determination.

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Annexe I: List of Respondents

Interview Code	Respondent's Background	Date of Interview
KII01	Representative of an Indigenous CSO	12 June 2025
KII02	Representative of an Indigenous CSO	14 June 2025
KII03	Representative of a human rights CSO with Indigenous background	16 June 2025
KII04	Representative of a human rights NGO	16 June 2025
KII05	Representative of an academic institution	17 June 2025
KII06	Female journalist	20 June 2025
KII07	Representative of an Indigenous community	21 June 2025
KII08	Representative of an Indigenous community	21 June 2025
KII09	Representative of an Indigenous community	26 June 2025
KII10	Media professional	01 July 2025

Annexe 2: List of Participants of Focus Group Discussion on 15 July 2025

FGD01	Female journalist
FGD02	Representative of an Indigenous CSO
FGD03	Representative of an Indigenous CSO

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