

How Can Scholars Contribute to the Development of Cambodia?

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Scholars are people who pursue academic and intellectual activities. They are intelligent and well-educated people who know a lot about particular topics. In any society, scholars, researchers, academics, professionals, and other highly educated individuals have an important role to play to contribute to the development of their country.

In Cambodia, as is also true elsewhere, there are certain moral expectations that intellectuals or scholars must take part in fostering the positive development of Cambodian society. The expectations are high and have been embedded in the role of this group of educated people.

Cambodian people often speak of how intellectuals in previous generations sacrificed their time, energy, or even freedom and life to contribute to the betterment of Cambodia. From preserving Khmer literature and language to protecting Cambodian land and dignity, there are many accounts of noble sacrifice and patriotic endeavors. These heroic accounts provide lessons and sources of motivation for the current generation of Cambodians, lifting their spirit and soul and encouraging their courage and heroism.

Given the current political context which appears to discourage intellectuals and educated individuals to contribute their part to the development of Cambodia, the role of scholars and researchers has been put under scrutiny and criticism. Some criticize that these educated Cambodians do not play their role effectively or meaningfully, citing their indifference, selfishness, and lack of activism. Others blame these intellectuals for their lack of involvement in bringing about positive changes to

society or their lack of confidence, patriotism, and heroism to effect changes and make a difference.

The criticism is far from illogical as Cambodia is seen to edge toward a less democratic society. More repression from the government has been reported while civic space has shrunk. However, from the government's narrative, a lot of efforts and initiatives have been put in place to develop a better version of Cambodian society. These conflicting narratives will continue and will add fuel to the division between Cambodians who support the ruling party and those who oppose or disregard it. To address this social division and to fix other critical social issues, innovative and inclusive solutions as well as time are needed.

Nevertheless, the question which keeps arising in contemporary Cambodia is "How can scholars or intellectuals contribute to the development of Cambodian society?" Answers to this question will vary from person to person depending on their perspectives and worldviews.

Based on a recent talk given by a prominent Cambodian scholar and organized by *Cambodian Scholars*, a newly established online platform that aims to bring together Cambodian scholars and researchers, both emerging and established, to work together to contribute to the positive development of Cambodia, there are a few key messages that may partly answer the above question.

First, Cambodian scholars, regardless of where they live, can contribute to developing Cambodia in various ways. Those living overseas can find ways to help Cambodian students to get scholarship to study in developed countries. They can also

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collaborate with Cambodian scholars living in Cambodia or with other foreign researchers whose research interests relate to Cambodia or countries in the region. Through publication and other academic engagement in the regional and international arena, they can help raise Cambodia's profile and reputation. Thus, helping to develop Cambodia is not limited to only those living and working in the country.

Second, for scholars residing in Cambodia, they can join the government, work in the private sector, seek employment in non-governmental organizations, or work independently. However, working in an institution is likely to enable scholars to make greater impact than working independently. Returning scholars or recent higher degree graduates may consider joining the newly established Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology and Innovation, or other ministries and state institutions.

One of the best ways forward for scholars who wish to work in the government is to learn to observe, listen, and take notes, not judge. They should not try to focus on negativity or problems too much, but instead, try to see the bright side. Be open-minded, positive, and forward-looking. It is important to demonstrate competence, commitment, and integrity rather than incompetence, judgement, and criticism.

Third, scholars who seek to pursue a research career may consider working in universities such as the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the Institute of Technology of Cambodia, or other established higher education institutions. Alternatively, they may consider joining think tanks and research institutes

such as Cambodia Development Resource Institute, the Asian Vision institute, Cambodia Development Center, or Pasteur Institute, among others.

Fourth, in terms of publication and motivation for academic engagement, it is crucial that scholars understand their role as researchers whose key aim is to generate knowledge, not wealth. Thus, refraining from envy or financial comparison may be emotionally and spiritually beneficial for scholars or researchers who are, in general, less likely to become rich by conducting and publishing research. When writing for publication, Cambodian scholars should aim high and try to publish research in internationally reputed journals to help lift the image of Cambodia.

To be research-productive, scholars or researchers must love research and publication. They must think about research day in and day out. The commitment must be very high. However, financial freedom is vital, too. Scholars may consider and engage in different types of investment to ensure financial stability so that they can focus primarily on research and publication without being worried whether they have enough to support themselves and their families.

Finally, all stakeholders, be it scholars, professionals, politicians, monks, students, or ordinary Cambodians, have a pivotal role to play to contribute to the development of Cambodia. It is obvious that each Cambodian must play their own part to shape and transform Cambodia into a better society; however, for scholars, they may have to bear greater moral responsibility in this endeavor.



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