

Engaging the next generation: Using media and communication to increase youth civic engagement in Cambodia

Research brief
June 2025

*Klahan9 SPACE*¹ is a four-year multimedia BBC Media Action initiative designed to increase young Cambodians' participation in civic life. This briefing highlights key findings from a multi-method evaluation of the project (see page 3 for the project and research components).

Reaching 2.5 million Cambodians aged 15–55, *Klahan9 SPACE* has strengthened youth civic participation by:

- Shifting perceptions so that both elders and youth feel that young people can participate in local decision-making
- Increasing young people's levels of: civic knowledge, discussion about community matters and participation in community decision-making

Young people who were highly exposed to the project's media content² were more likely to participate in meetings or contact local authorities to resolve a community issue than youth who did not watch any project content.

A randomised controlled trial (RCT)³ found that youth who watched the project's drama and digital content were more knowledgeable about civic engagement and discussed civic challenges more often than their unexposed peers.

Young people who watched the project's drama and digital content also felt that people like them should participate more in community decision-making. Older people who were highly exposed to the project's media content showed more support for youth civic participation too.

Advanced analysis⁴ showed that being exposed to the project's media content and outreach activities made young people more likely to participate in civic activities such as expressing their views online or taking part in meetings.

The power of storytelling

At the heart of *Klahan9 SPACE*'s success is the power of storytelling. Whether through a drama series, a social media video or a community roadshow, the project brought civic engagement to life in ways that young people could relate to.

“

I really enjoy *Sok San Family* and have watched it multiple times. I love how the story reflects young people's ability to express their opinions within the family, and highlights the importance of parents being willing to listen to them.

”

A 25-year-old viewer from Phnom Penh



A poster of the *Sok San Family* TV drama/BBC Media Action

¹ *Klahan9* means Brave 9, and *SPACE* stands for Stimulating Participation and Civic Engagement.

² People who watched more than five episodes of the *Sok San Family* (Happy Family) or the digital series *Ban Der Ban Deng* (Travelling for Knowledge), and watched videos on *Klahan9* social media channels.

³ In the RCT, the treatment group watched four episodes of *Sok San Family* and four episodes of *Ban Der Ban Deng*, while the control group watched content of comparable genre, length and entertainment value from productions without development objectives.

⁴ Advanced statistical analysis such as logistic and linear regressions controlled for key influential demographic factors such as sex, age, location of residence, income and education level.

Achieving change at scale

2.5 million

Reached by any of the drama, digital content and outreach activities

2 million

Drama content viewers

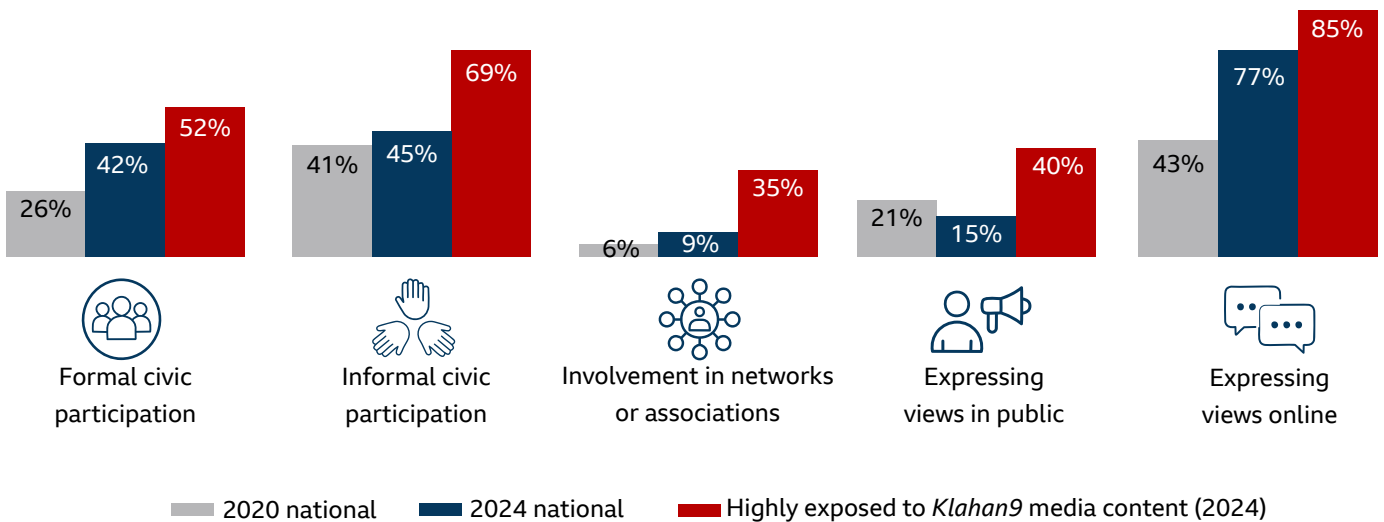
6.6 million

Digital content engagements

- The *Klahan9* SPACE project reached **27% of Cambodians aged 15–55**, including over **1.1 million young people aged 15–30**.
- Notably, *Sok San Family* alone reached **2 million viewers**, with two-thirds of them accessing the drama via **Facebook and YouTube**, reflecting Cambodia’s shift towards digital media consumption.
- Over the project’s duration, **711 short-format digital content** pieces were published on the *Klahan9* Facebook page, generating **6.6 million engagements**, including **85,000 comments**.⁵

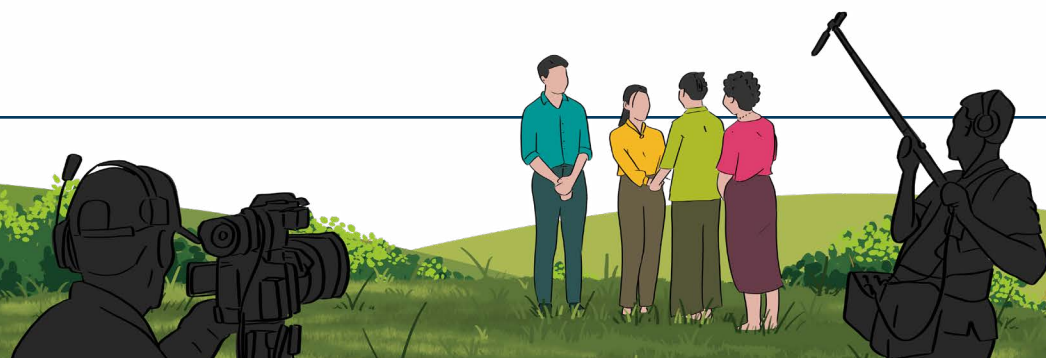
Klahan9 SPACE has not just fostered civic engagement – it has facilitated a culture of acceptance, inclusion and equity.

Figure 1: Young Cambodians’ civic participation, showing *Klahan9* SPACE’s impact⁶



Formal civic participation: attending community meeting or contacting local leaders

Informal civic participation: volunteering or participating in community sports or social activities



⁵ Cumulative total engagement with all short-format digital content posted on the *Klahan9* SPACE Facebook page between June 2021 and December 2024. This includes reacting to, commenting on or sharing a post, viewing a photo or video, or clicking on a link.

⁶ Source: Nationally representative baseline survey 2020 (n=1,510) and nationally representative endline survey 2024 (n=863). High exposure calculation included booster sample as well as probability sample.

Context

The majority of Cambodia’s population is made up of young people and yet they are often not engaged in civic activities. BBC Media Action research⁷ revealed that while individuals aged 15–30 expressed positive attitudes towards civic engagement, they lacked the requisite knowledge, confidence and opportunities to participate actively in public life. Furthermore, only 49% of young people surveyed in 2020 believed that their opinions were valued by elders and decision-makers.

Klahan9 SPACE, an innovative multimedia and youth-led initiative by BBC Media Action, was designed to address these barriers at scale. The project’s robust intervention design and strategic approach to using media and communication as catalysts for change has proven to be effective and impactful.

A multi-platform approach

Running from May 2021 to December 2024 and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), *Klahan9* SPACE combined the expertise of BBC Media Action with Cambodian youth organisations, such as Youth Council of Cambodia (YCC), Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP) and Bophana Center, as well as media practitioners.

The project aimed to equip young Cambodians with the knowledge, skills, confidence, motivation and networks needed to actively engage in their communities and public life. It also sought to create more supportive conditions for their participation – such as challenging negative perceptions and attitudes – so that young people can take a more active role in shaping decisions that affect them.

The project’s four mutually reinforcing pillars: **media production, community outreach, media support and training, and research**, were effective in engaging a broad spectrum of youth, including those from traditionally underserved communities. A successful co-operation with the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport unlocked further ways to reach, engage and build the skills of young people, and to ensure buy-in to, and alignment with the Government of Cambodia’s youth development policy.

Project components

The *Klahan9* SPACE project delivered engaging multimedia content and activities, including:



Sok San Family (Happy Family)

A 33-episode popular TV and online drama series portraying relatable youth experiences.



Ban Der Ban Deng (Travelling for Knowledge)

A 22-episode digital travel show hosted on *Klahan9* social media platforms, exploring civic engagement topics.



Social media digital content

Short videos, podcasts and interactive posts on *Klahan9* social media platforms, reaching young people where they were.



Outreach activities

Roadshows in rural schools, and partner-led activities such as workshops, youth forums and sub-national authority meetings.



Media support and training

Capacity-strengthening workshops for young media practitioners.



Research

Research played a cross-cutting role in *Klahan9* SPACE, using innovative methods and advanced analytics to guide strategy, drive innovation and assess impact.

Research components

This brief is derived from the analysis and synthesis of:

2020

BBC Media Action’s baseline research: AI research; online community discussion; a face-to-face, nationally representative survey of 1,510 young people aged 15–30; and a follow-up qualitative study to enable comparison over time.

2021

BBC Media Action’s formative research: Qualitative study and online community discussion to understand factors influencing civic engagement among young people.

2024

BBC Media Action’s evaluative research: A face-to-face nationally representative survey of 912 people aged 15–55 to measure the project’s reach, engagement and impact; a follow-up qualitative study to understand why change has happened; digital evaluation using social media metrics to analyse online discussions related to *Klahan9* SPACE content; an RCT of 873 young people to assess the impact of media outputs; a qualitative impact assessment documenting audience members’ stories of change; and a panel study with 102 parents of young people aged 15–30 years, to assess how their views changed over time.

2024

Stephen Van Houten and Sarah Pugh’s independent external evaluation: To assess the *Klahan9* SPACE project against the six OECD-DAC evaluation criteria.

⁷ Nationally representative baseline survey 2020 (n=1,510): What is life like for young Cambodians (15–30-year-olds) and how are they participating in civic life?



A poster of Kdeb Ampil, the *Sok San Family* TV drama/BBC Media Action

If I see it, I can be it: The power of drama to inspire engagement

Sok San Family follows the lives and (mis) adventures of three siblings, including **Kdeb Ampil**, a 17-year-old girl who is passionate about social issues. Unlike her twin brother, **Tith**, a wannabe influencer, Kdeb Ampil is determined to attend a commune meeting and make changes for her fellow villagers. Her father, **Pu Sok**, a village chief, disapproves of her ambitions. However, with persistence, she eventually wins over her father and the community.

Driving discussions on issues that matter to youths

Klahan9 SPACE played a pivotal role in fostering discussions on key social and political issues among young Cambodians. Through its multimedia content and outreach activities, the project created space for discussions on democracy, public services and inclusivity. **Exposure to *Klahan9* SPACE significantly increased youth engagement in these conversations.** Those exposed to **all three of the project's media formats**⁸ were **more likely to participate in discussions** (reported by 68%), compared with those unexposed (47%). Outreach participants who also engaged with the project's media content reported even higher levels of discussion (75%).

Findings from the RCT⁹ further confirmed this impact. Participants in the treatment group were 10 percentage points more likely to have discussed community challenges in the previous week than the control group.⁹ By encouraging dialogue both online and offline, *Klahan9* SPACE has helped young people become **better informed, more vocal and more engaged** in community decision-making.

In an independent evaluation, the *Klahan9* SPACE project scored highly across all six **OECD-DAC** evaluation criteria, demonstrating its relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability.

“

This is a great partnership – dynamic, innovative, with a very committed team that is young, trustworthy and impressive.

”

A donor stakeholder

⁸ Researchers used comparative analysis between those exposed to all three media formats (*Sok San Family*, *Ban Der Ban Deng* and social media content), and those with no exposure to any *Klahan9* SPACE content.

⁹ Base: n=873.



A still from the *Sok San Family* TV drama/BBC Media Action

Highly exposed youth

92%

felt knowledgeable about local and national issues affecting them

Highly exposed youth

33%

felt confident to speak up in public

Building knowledge, skills and confidence

Klahan9 SPACE focused on strengthening youth knowledge and skills.

Exposure to *Klahan9* SPACE increased young people's knowledge of civic structures and their understanding of ways to contribute to their communities. Among those with **high exposure** to *Klahan9* SPACE media content, 92% of Cambodian youths reported feeling knowledgeable, compared with 79% of unexposed youths. *Klahan9* SPACE content enhanced understanding of sub-national administrations, youth volunteer activities, migration, challenges faced by vulnerable groups (such as indigenous and LGBTIQ+ communities) and online safety.

In the **RCT**, 60% of the treatment group correctly identified the **social accountability box** as a mechanism for community complaints, an 18 percentage-point increase over the control group. Treatment group participants were also significantly more likely to understand the role of **commune councils** in addressing community concerns.

The project's media content and outreach programmes strengthened young people's **confidence to express opinions** to elders, both at home and in their communities. Findings from the 2024 endline survey showed that 33% of those exposed to all three *Klahan9* SPACE media formats felt confident speaking up, compared with 23% of unexposed youth. Advanced statistical analysis confirmed that this positive relationship held, even after controlling for other influential factors.

Through *Klahan9* SPACE **capacity-strengthening** programmes such as leadership and personal development workshops, young people developed practical skills, including public speaking and the ability to engage with local authorities. Media training also empowered young media practitioners to tell their own stories and raise awareness of social issues.

Moreover, *Klahan9* SPACE motivated young people to engage more in civic activities. Among young people highly exposed to the project's media content and outreach programmes, 34% reported feeling motivated to be involved in decision-making within the household and/or at the commune level, compared with 23% of those unexposed.

“

Before, I had heard about democratic leadership but I didn't know how it worked. Now, I clearly understand what it is. Democracy prioritises citizens' rights. Citizens have the right to vote, voice their opinions, participate and share news about their communities, among other things.

”

A 30-year-old female outreach participant from Siem Reap province

Impact story: Inspired by *Sok San Family* to engage in his community

Sopun Sorn, aged 29, from Ponley commune, Kampong Chhnang province, never saw the value in community meetings, usually considering them a waste of time. However, in 2022, things started to change for Sopun when he began watching the *Sok San Family* TV series.

Drawn to the programme's depiction of real-life issues like waste management, infrastructure and community development, Sopun was particularly inspired by characters who actively participated in solving relevant local problems. Motivated, he attended a community meeting to raise concerns about recurrent flooding in his village. His first request was met with little enthusiasm from the authorities, but he persisted. At the next meeting, his proposal for a drainage system was accepted and, within months, the problem was addressed.

“At first, I thought my voice didn't matter, but after watching the show and learning from the *Klahan9* SPACE team, I realised I had to try. Eventually, the authorities listened and they fixed the drainage system as proposed.”

Sopun's successful advocacy was not just a win for the village, but it also transformed his entire outlook on community participation. He began attending meetings regularly, raising concerns and contributing to various local projects. He has volunteered for environmental clean ups, helped fundraise for a new kindergarten and even donated money to build a dam in the village.



A picture of Sopun helping his community build a new kindergarten/Sopun Sorn

“Now, I attend every community activity. It's not about getting something in return. It's about helping my community. If I hadn't watched the show, I might still think attending meetings was pointless. But now I know that speaking up can make a difference, not just for me, but for my whole village.”

A still from the *Sok San Family* TV drama/BBC Media Action



Empowering youth, increasing civic participation

For many young Cambodians, engagement in public life once felt impossible. In a society where decision-making was traditionally reserved for elders, young people struggled to find their place in conversations that affected their futures. Evaluative research indicates that the *Klahan9* SPACE project has empowered young people to participate more in civic life.

***Klahan9* SPACE audiences were more likely to participate in civic activities, both formal (eg, community and commune meetings) and informal (eg, social activities like fundraising and volunteering), and to participate in associations, organisations or networks.**

Among those with high exposure to *Klahan9* media content, 52% reported engaging in formal civic activities, compared with only 39% of unexposed youth. This positive trend continues among outreach participants who were also exposed to some *Klahan9* SPACE media content, who reported both higher levels of informal (93%) and formal (65%) civic participation.

Moreover, 35% of youth highly exposed to *Klahan9* SPACE media content reported participating in any associations, organisations or networks, compared with just 9% of those who had no exposure. This positive relationship extended to sharing opinions on civic issues. Young people with higher exposure to *Klahan9* SPACE media content were more likely to express their views both online (reported by 85%) and offline (40%), compared with 76% and 14%, respectively, among the unexposed. The RCT provided further evidence of the project's influence on civic engagement. Among treatment group participants, 79% believed that young people should actively participate in communal decision-making, compared with 71% in the control group.

Highly exposed youth

52%

engaged in formal civic activities

Highly exposed youth

85%

expressed views online

Advanced analysis showed that specific activities had particular strengths – mass media content (TV and social media) was particularly associated with self-reported knowledge of local and national issues, while people who attended outreach activities were more confident in naming ways that they could participate in their local area. These results show that the mix of media and local outreach activities (which of course can be resource intensive to scale) can create an enabling environment for community-based activities.



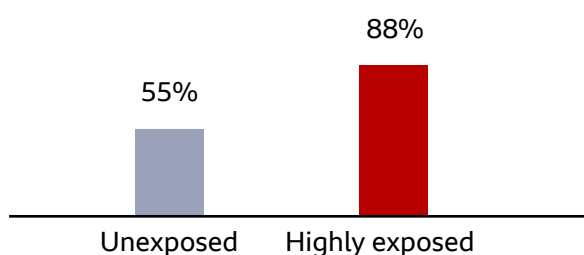
A group of young people attending a *Klahan9* community screening/Vutha Hem

Shifting intergenerational attitudes

Klahan9 SPACE also contributed to **shifting parental attitudes** towards youth civic participation. Historically, many Cambodian elders dismissed youth contributions to decision-making and community affairs. Before the project, formative research indicated that parents often perceived young people as **uninterested or irresponsible**. By showcasing **youth leadership in decision-making**, *Klahan9* SPACE transformed these perceptions. Parents reported **being more open to listening to their children's perspectives**.

Older adults who had high levels of exposure to *Klahan9* SPACE media content were significantly more likely to mention supporting youth participation in at least three ways (reported by 88%, compared with 55% of those not exposed). Highly exposed elders were most likely to express support for young people in their family to volunteer in the community, participate in training and workshops, and attend commune/community meetings.

Figure 2: % of elders aged 31–55 who have supported youth participation in at least three ways¹⁰



“

Before I watched this TV show, I was a strict parent. I rarely let my children participate in any event or gave them the rights and freedom to make decisions because I thought they were still young and incapable of handling such things. The TV show has changed my perspective on my children. I now include them when our family has a decision to make, [I] listen to what they want, and I am more open to them.

”

A 40-year-old mother from Takeo province



A poster of the *Sok San Family* TV drama/BBC Media Action

Empowering vulnerable groups

While changing societal attitudes takes time, *Klahan9* SPACE has shown promising signs of influencing gender norms around youth participation, and breaking down barriers for marginalised groups.

Traditionally, Cambodian women have encountered greater challenges than men in asserting their voices in public life. The qualitative formative study indicated that young women and girls faced greater restrictions than their male counterparts in participating in civic and community activities, primarily due to parental concerns regarding gender-based vulnerabilities and the risk of sexual harassment. The 2020 baseline study found that just one-third of young women and girls were likely to engage in informal civic activities such as volunteering, compared with almost half of men and boys (49%). Moreover, young women and girls were less likely to engage in online discussions than young men and boys.

¹⁰ Disaggregated by level of exposure to *Klahan9* SPACE. Base: 31–55 (n=512)

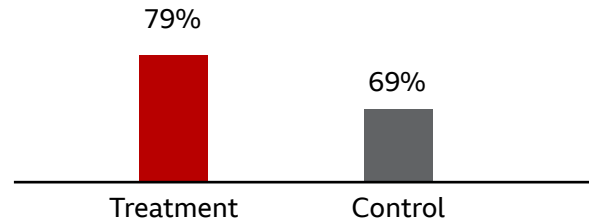
By honing strategies to tackle these barriers, *Klahan9* SPACE has increased female civic participation. Young women exposed to both its media content and outreach activities were more likely to report engaging in formal civic participation (reported by 62%) than men (51%). The qualitative study revealed that since the launch of the project, **more women were taking leadership roles in community initiatives**, from environmental clean-ups to disability rights advocacy.

In addition, young people who had watched *Sok San Family* and *Ban Der Ban Deng* were more likely to support young women balancing education, work and civic engagement. RCT respondents who had watched those programmes were 10 percentage points more likely than those in the control group to agree that women could reconcile their study/work with involvement in community development activities.



A poster of the *Sok San Family* TV drama/BBC Media Action

Figure 3: RCT respondents choosing the statement: Young women can reconcile study/work with involvement in commune development activities¹¹



“

At first, my parents didn't understand why I was so passionate about helping my community. But when they heard people, even the district chief, praising my work, they felt proud. Now, they support me fully.

”

A 21-year-old female *Klahan9* viewer from Ratanakiri province

By portraying young women actively participating in community development and showing elders supporting them, these programmes challenged traditional gender expectations, which often confine women's roles to household responsibilities.

Inclusivity is at the core of *Klahan9* SPACE. Through its work, **non-binary youth, people from indigenous backgrounds, people with disabilities, and other young people from marginalised groups, are gaining confidence and acceptance in their communities.** For example, a young non-binary individual who attended *Klahan9* SPACE's Roadshow Academy publicly shared their gender identity for the first time.

“

After attending the sessions, I became braver. I can now open up about what I've been hiding for so long. Many people now know about me and accept me. I even spoke in front of my entire community to gather support for my [library] project.

”

A 17-year-old non-binary individual from Oddar Meanchey province

¹¹ Base: n=873.

Looking ahead

The future of Cambodia – and indeed, any society – depends on the active participation of its youth. It is vital to make sure their voices are heard and that they are engaged in matters that affect their lives and the country's future.

The *Klahan9* SPACE project's multi-format approach – integrating media with on-the-ground outreach and capacity-strengthening activities – has proven effective in reaching and inspiring young people at scale. An independent evaluation conducted in early 2024 found that the four interacting implementation pillars of the project – media production, community outreach, media support and training, and research – have been impactful. Though outreach has a more limited scale, when strategically combined with media initiatives, it significantly enhances impact. This demonstrates that integrating both approaches can maximise engagement.

By amplifying young people's voices and equipping them with the tools to engage in civic life, *Klahan9* SPACE has helped lay the foundation for a more participatory and dynamic society. Sustaining the progress shown in this evaluation depends on continued investment in youth civic engagement, and adapting strategies to an evolving social and political landscape.

The question now is: how can we build on this momentum to ensure that young people remain at the heart of decision-making?

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