How formalization of urban spatial plan affects marginalized groups and resilience practices in Cambodia secondary town: A case study from Battambang

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Abstract
Cambodia has experienced urban growth since the early 2000s, not only in the capital but also in its secondary cities. Like other cities in Southeast Asia, conflict over land use, pressure on infrastructure, ecological changes, and competing interests over these resources among dominant groups have been contentious. This paper uses a Battambang secondary town as a case study. The town has experienced the colonial legacy, is rich with natural resources and is part of the regional economic corridor route development. Recent changes have drawn much attention to the need to formalize a spatial plan, promoting community-led urban development, low-cost housing and equitable land sharing, and networking among urban poor as a shared learning process. Urban resilience has been tested, as the city has had to cope with increased flooding and stress on its infrastructure, processes that involve government agencies, donors, NGOs and local residents. Based on a policy review, semi-structured interviews with key informants, and extensive participant observation, this study argues that while promoting the formalization of land use and resilience, there is an institutional trap being manipulated by emerging strategic groups, associated with dominant political working groups and embedded culture of local elites. Local
knowledge has been adopted by certain groups, known as “subordinate,” in demanding social justice, equity distribution and promoting shared learning among social groups at the communities. Resistance and spreading negative rumours against dominant groups are seen as strategies to increase social resilience and develop flexible institutions.

KEYWORDS
inclusive urbanization, resilience thinking, spatial plan, urban strategic groups

JEL CLASSIFICATION
R1; R2; R3; R4

1 | INTRODUCTION

Cambodian urban growth is being driven by built infrastructure as such roads, satellite cities, commercial and industrial real estate, and residential projects across the country. The ruling elites, business tycoons in cooperation with foreign corporate companies, and the increased presence of the Chinese's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Yamada, 2019) link the urbanization of Cambodia to the geopolitical expansion of China (Lim & Cibulka, 2019), for whom the country presents strategic positions for both security and resource exploitation (Burgo & Ear, 2010).

Excluding the capital city, Cambodia comprises 27 urban centres, with a population greater than 100,000 people. Excluding Phnom Penh, 2008 statistics show that 3.6 million out of total population 13.6 million people were living in urban areas, and most urban residents in Cambodia are shown to be living outside of Phnom Penh. By 2030, 44% out of projected 18.4 million population are expected to be living in urban areas (Kameier et al., 2014). Urban growth centres, which include Battambang, Siem Reap and PoiPet of Banteay Meanchey, along Cambodia-Thai border, located in Northwest of the country and part of the south–south corridor towns. (Figure 1)

Both McGee (1995) and Douglass (1995) for a long time have viewed the integration of former socialist states in former Indo-China into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economic community integration will push for free trade relations, enhance commodity flows, and regional connectivity through spatial shift across the boundary and within the country in creating growth poles of the country. With national and regional connectivity, the three towns provide their distinct economic growth poles but have interrelated connection and dependencies. For instance, Poi Pet's special economic zones of Banteay Meanchey, and Koh Kong have served as the focus of internal cross-border trade with Thailand with an economic value up to US$14.37 billion between 1996 and 2012. Key commodities comprised of clothing, footwear, natural resources, and agricultural products (Krainera & Routray, 2015). As for Siem Reap, with its archaeological park of Angkor temples, the town has attracted more than 2 million foreign tourists visits per year (Esposito, 2018), and generated economic value ranging from US$823–1,594 million. Battambang town has played multiple roles and has an important strategic position in the region (ADB, 2012, 2015). Its current source of economic growth comes from tourist attractions with total visits of 616,138 people of which 98,304 foreigners coming from 11 countries. Income from this sector is recorded at US$38.9 million of which US$11 million generated from foreign tourists (Provincial Department of Tourism, 2018). By 2018, total economic value for the province was US$1,557.6 million with 65% from agriculture, 29% from services, and 6% from industry (Battambang Provincial Office, 2018).
FIGURE 1  Location of border towns of Battambang, Siem Reap and Banteay Meanchey of Northwest Cambodia

FIGURE 2  Map of Preak Preah Sdach commune
In such a rapidly growing city, spatial planning is important for urban resilience, but it is not always inclusive and equitable. In practice, resilience planning often favours urban dominant groups and built infrastructure, with less attention toward social planning among diverse urban groups and institutional traps. It is argued that with more locally-informed, flexible, adaptive practices and shared learning processes, planners can reduce both institutional and capacity gaps in enhancing urban resilience (UCRSEA, 2015). The selection of Battambang town as the case study is unique for many reasons. The town has been designated as a model for town development to be replicated by other secondary towns in the country. Key policies and programmes have been applied to this town, such as piloting which includes the formalization of a spatial plan (Battambang Municipality, 2015), the town is piloting informal settlement with a low-cost housing scheme, equitable land-sharing among the poor is considered as a model urban development to be replicated for other secondary towns in the country, the promotion of cultural tourism is being used to enhance economic growth, and the registration of colonial buildings with United Nations, Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is being used to help preservation efforts and promote tourism (Carter et al., 2016).

The city's spatial plan includes designing land-use zoning and classification on what is buildable and controllable areas. Key aspects include transportation, communication networks, physical infrastructure, future public administration and services, public spaces, and agriculture-forest-water management for the entire urban territory (MLMUPC, 2016b). The process involves nine steps, among these steps three are considered the most important in engaging with multiple stakeholders, which include local residents, to determine what areas are buildable and controllable, to decide what services are accessible, to determine the local economic structure and functions, and to set up the urban development vision. The final step involves approval from municipal and provincial authorities and then a final signature from the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Plan, and Construction (MLMUPC). This multi-institutional process involving provincial departments, municipal office, all commune chiefs, and external development partners in consultation and land-use zoning is estimated to have taken around 785 days and cost US$23,500 (MLMUPC, 2016a). However, as political and market pressures transform, the process of formalizing the spatial plan and creating urban resilience to cope with increased urban floods has encountered challenges with emerging strategic groups, both from dominant and subordinate groups.

This paper examines how the formalization of a spatial plan affects the marginalized groups and resilience practices on the ground. It explores how the state's programmes, supported by external donors, to improve the wellbeing of residents have failed, and how the concept of urban resilience has been undermined by the hidden practice of institutional and policy framing, in addressing urban governance and has not been able to achieve its expected outcomes. This paper also discusses how local urban poor resist and contest this process, advocating for urban inclusion and equitable land-sharing through their shared learning process.

2 | FORMALIZED SPATIAL PLAN AND URBAN RESILIENCE IN PRACTICES

Land-use zoning and formalized urban spatial planning have become spatial strategies developed by the state in shaping urban space, influencing, and controlling the people over the space assigned (Brenner & Elden, 2009). Urbanization tends to impact existing social-ecological systems (SES). Thus, managing urban resilience means managing its social-ecological system (Lebel et al., 2006). This implies key issues to be addressed which include poverty, justice, equity, well-being and rights (Friend & Moench, 2015). SESs can be treated as bounded entities and territory units within the urban system (Elmhirst et al., 2018). For a system to be stable, governance, institutions and the capacity of key actors need to be strong enough to cope with change. In dealing with SESs, both formal and informal institutions often interact and fall into traps (Lebel et al., 2011). These traps included fragmentation of institutions, inability to be flexible, poor co-ordination among different scales, elite capture of the reform benefits and crisis management. As for projects
being influenced by external donors, governance and operational influence often favour its funders although the
programmes aim to address critical local issues like infrastructure, lack of information, limited planning capacity and
insecure access with intention of addressing local problems and marginalized realities (Lebel et al., 2018). Other
scholars insist that resilience cannot be achieved without addressing access to power, resources, and knowledge
(Matín et al., 2018). This will require policy-makers, donors, practitioners to engage with each other and discuss the
policy of social, cultural, and political changes. This process requires a shared learning process as suggested by Lebel
et al. (2010). Fainstein (2015) differentiates between resilience and sustainability. The first may refer to the ability to
predict the future impact of a change on the system, while the second may focus more on the system stability and
restoration after the impacts. The use of the resilience concept also creates key debates around social justice.
Fainstein (2010) argues for an urban plan to be just, the planners need to address democratic participation, the
equity of resource distribution among social groups and the ability to recognize diversity between social groups,
races and ethnicity. This idea has been extended further in discussions of achieving social justice by looking at the
structural base and distribution across the social system (Walker, 2012).

Like most countries in the region, Cambodia's capacity to deal with change and resilience does not meet the
standards of knowledge practice imposed by external donors and bilateral aid providers. Thus, shared learning is a
process for building both scientific and local knowledge, which is often seen as a solution.

Equally, urban resilience and spatial justice cannot be achieved without addressing social injustice embedded
among different groups. Historical dimensions of the groups' politics and economic backgrounds often influence
urban plans and strategic resource allocation. Scott (1998) shows why many government schemes to improve
wellbeing that includes urban areas with imposed high-modernism ideas have failed. This is because the state
tends to see these projects as state simplified administrative practice, and the lack of local participation and
local knowledge engagement is their undoing. Ferguson (1990) rejects this premise and argues that the state
project has not failed, but only not achieved expected outcomes as desired by the local people and those from
donors' institutions. It has been claimed that it has served to legitimized government intervention
(Ferguson, 1990).

As a country in transition, changes in political regimes tend to affect social classes. Evers (1973) and Evers and
Korff (2000) examine the strategic groups, a concept which is different from social class, and argue that the groups
tend to be more resilient with social and political regime changes. These include migrants and those with
ethnic-business backgrounds who come to settle down in the region and who have a strong influence on both
political and economic relations. This concept is similar to Giddens (1984) structuration process in which dominant
groups with their resources, capacity, and capital compete to influence the country's structure and regulations in
gaining access to those strategic resources as such land (Giddens, 1984). Most of the groups that fall into this type
include current urban elites and those with a Sino-Khmer business background within the town (Verver &
Dahles, 2015). Studies tend to overlook local resistance from groups known as “subordinate strategic groups,” who
also struggle to gain access to their land through their social networks, local politics, and power relations. Their action
also leads to counterclaim over social justice, access rights and even lead to resistance. Some even confront opposing
groups face-to-face, while some create false consciousness for not respecting the ruling elites (Thuon & Cai, 2019).
This action is often neglected by urban resilience scholars. Daniere et al. (2019) also show that urban resilience
scholars often miss the process of inclusive growth and productivity which need a more flexible institution and
governance.

The relationship between formalized spatial fix and urban resilience can be analysed by adopting the framework
developed by the Urban Climate Resilience in Southeast Asia Partnership (UCRSEA) Partnership project. The
UCRSEA's conceptual framework draws on political ecology to interrogate the transformative process of urbaniza-
tion and better understand the growing risks emerging at the intersections between regionalization, urbanization and
climate change (UCRSEA, 2015). This framework prompts researchers to take an actor-oriented approach to unpack
the complex systems on which urbanization processes depend. The UCRSEA project included a wide range of
research, drawing on knowledge from conventional academic sources and action research projects with a range of
local stakeholders, many of which focused on learning how individual, group and institutional capacity can be strengthened to address issues arising from rapid urban transformation.

This conceptual framework helps address how climate change impacts existing poverty and vulnerability and identifying how existing poverty and vulnerability are, in part, products of the process of urbanization. This interplay between the drivers and impacts of urbanization and how they interact with complex ecological systems is critical for building resilience, as it highlights infrastructure, ecosystem, and institution-related factors that need to be addressed to build urban resilience. One important insight from studies that use this conceptual framework is the need for better governance, specifically “flexible and adaptive institutions capable of dealing with uncertainty and risk in ways that are representative and participatory” (UCRSEA, 2015, p. 1).

The literature on governance for urban resilience suggests the need for improved local engagement, creating trust and space for civil society action, and building the capacity of autonomous state institutions for dealing with the complex issues of urban resilience and urban justice.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

Drawing from UCRSEA framework, this research took a mixed-method approach and collected actor-oriented qualitative data from local stakeholders about their experiences of the urban transformation process, as well as quantitative data about the urban development process from a review of grey literature, including the urban development master plans, and official and unpublished reports from government agencies, development partners and NGOs. Case studies on the informal settlement, low-cost housing practice and equitable land-sharing were conducted with four different social groups and compared to identify patterns and distil insights about power inequities, different forms of resistance, and efforts to seek social justice.

Most information used in this analysis is qualitative and derived from key informant interviews between late 2016 and early 2019. These key informants included representatives from provincial departments, municipal offices, NGOs, real estate developers, religious institutions, and affected communities. Qualitative interviews allow me to gather perspectives about how existing policies are implemented, the contested values of stakeholders in terms of how the urban system should function, as well as insights into how resources could be allocated more equitably. In total, 27 key informants were interviewed. Of these interviewees, 12 were village level representatives; three were from the municipal government; five were from NGOs; three were from provincial departments, and three were Buddhist monks. A local real estate tycoon was also interviewed. The interviews were used to develop a case study on informal settlements and resilience thinking under the external pressures of urbanization, climate change, and regional economic integration. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, pseudonyms are used throughout this analysis to protect the confidentiality of the research participants.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Formalizing spatial plan and urban transformation

Battambang is the second-largest city and most rapidly growing secondary city in Cambodia. By 2030, all the communes in the municipality are expected to be fully urbanized through the built environment. However, understanding the power dynamics involved in this process of urban transformation is essential for working towards socially just and inclusive urbanization. While spatial planning appears to be a benign technical practice, this study shows it involves significant political manoeuvring among strategic groups (Table 1).

The town is divided into 10 administrative communes and 62 villages. The town consists of colonial buildings for UNESCO preservation registration, old temples both Hindu and Buddhist, pre-colonial ancient wooden houses for cultural tourism classification, market towns and natural resources and fertilized land for both agriculture and fishery.
All co-exist making the city one of the most attractive, charming and diverse within the country. Modernization, beautification, and liveability have been sought after in the city through good environmental management, the land use plan, and zoning. This formulation of spatial planning and land use classification lead to an emerging concept of community-led urban development through informal settlement, low-cost housing development, and equity land-sharing among those being classified as urban poor. The town has been selected as an urban development model to be replicated other secondary towns in the country, with five significant frameworks developed and tested.

First, the large-scale land survey was developed from 2003 to 2009 to prepare technical land use master plan for municipality 2015–30 (Battambang Municipality Office, 2015). This plan was supposed to get approval since 2009 but was delayed up to 5 February 2016, where major land use zones had been manipulated by the dominant groups and the urban elites (Kotoski, 2016).

The second is the provincial spatial plan 2010–30 with a technical draft for consultation in 2011 by the provincial committee for land use master plan in 2011. The plan was later approved by the council of ministers in mid-2018, has mapped out provincial resources, technical infrastructure needs, tourism and cultural sites, and key natural resources for districts located along the Thai border and serves as key drivers for municipal urbanization and classification. The plan was developed at two different scales. At the provincial scale, it was aimed at realizing benefits from cross-border trade with Thailand. The plan reflected trade and investment agreements made to facilitate and incentivize private sector investment in the food processing and tourism industries, as key economic sectors. It also focused on the development of sub-regional economic development centres, short-term economic development zones, and natural resource management zones as part of the Greater Mekong Sub-region Economic Corridor (MLMUPC, 2018). At the municipal level, Battambang was outlined as the strategic provincial centre designated for rapid urbanization, economic development, and as a regional connection point within the country for economic flows between Thailand and Vietnam, and further afield, Japan and China. Infrastructure development was focused on facilitating the flow of commodities and labour.

### TABLE 1  Projected land use and population changes 2015–30

| Land use category (ha) | Existing | Future (2030) |
|-----------------------|----------|---------------|
| Residential land      | 456.7    | 1267.9        |
| Residential with agricultural land | 1379.6 | 975.3 |
| Mixed use zone        | 584.5    | 1,040         |
| Commercial zones      | 42.1     | 124.9         |
| Administrative zones  | 132.6    | 181           |
| Cultural zones        | 104.4    | 99.2          |
| Small and medium industry zones | 65.5 | 81.1 |
| Public green space    | 17.6     | 178.1         |
| Sports and recreation zone | 9.1  | 15            |
| Agriculture zone      | 8557.5   | 7353.4        |
| Water bodies          | 89.9     | 81.6          |
| Technical infrastructure zone | 10.5 | 22.1 |
| Transportation zone   | 64.2     | 104           |
| Military zone         | 29.6     | 20.3          |
| Total settlement areas| 2,896 (ha) |               |
| Total area in hectares (ha) | 11,544 | 11,544 |
| Projected population  | 2015 157,749 | 2030 212,309 |

Source: Battambang Municipal Land-Use Master Plan, 2015–30.
The economy of the province is currently based on agricultural production where rice, red corn, and cassava remain key crops for exports. Up to now, tourist services through promotion of urban heritage such as colonial buildings, cultural village development and other services remain key economic drivers.

The third policy was an outstanding National Policy for Housing drafted since 2003 which has been foundational to test the practice work in Battambang and as the result, the outcome will be used to provide input to the final policy approval. Thus, a low-cost housing development was the catchy and attractive instrument to attract financial support and investment from multi-development agencies, donors and government investment. By 2014, the 3rd draft of the policy has been discussed but not fully approved up to the current stage.

The fourth is the legal framework and one of the most important is known as National Circular 03 on Informal Settlement Development and Upgrading. This policy was approved by the government on 10 May 2010, to serve as legal bases for informal settlement regulations (RGC, 2010). To avoid urban eviction and make sure no one is left out or made worse off, this policy provides seven steps for operation where special working groups need to be established: (i) identification of informal settlements; (ii) mapping and classifying an identified areas; (iii) conducting household interviews; (iv) developing solution options for each site; (v) determining either the need for on-site upgrading or relocation plan; (vi) following procedure for infrastructure development and public services on proposed sites; and (vii) determining the timing for participation from different stakeholders.

The fifth framework is to promote the urban tourism vision, strongly supported by the Ministry of Tourism, and provincial and municipal governors. Based on its urban heritage, the urban tourism sector envisioned Battambang as a UNESCO Historic Urban Landscape site (Carter et al., 2016). This would act as a collective source of pride for the local community, and as a foundation for the preservation and enrichment of Khmer culture for future generations, while at the same time boosting the reputation of the city as a desirable tourist destination. This vision sees Battambang as receiving international recognition for its urban heritage tourism values, which included Angkorian temples, French colonial buildings, and the Khmer Rouge legacy. This heritage, combined with agricultural and fishery livelihoods, religious and cultural practices, art, crafts, and cuisine, means the city has great potential to develop into a tourist economy.

These procedures were considered and agreed to by development implementers, government counterparts, and civil society as one of the most utopian and novel urban development approaches. Also, multi-institutional agencies were involved ranging from relevant ministries to provincial department, local authority, donors, international and local NGOs working on technical, capacity, and legal development since 2008.

4.2 Equitable land sharing and low-cost housing development scheme

The upgrading of informal settlements through proposed low-cost housing developments in Prek Preah Sdach was viewed as a pioneering practice in Battambang to serve as a model for urban development in other secondary cities in Cambodia. While it is hard to argue against land sharing and low-cost housing development, this study highlights how existing power relations and the contested nature of urban space, if not critically interrogated in the planning process, can recreate patterns of marginalization and exclusions for many groups, for example (Figure 2).

During the fieldwork conducted in Prek Preah Sdach, the land allocated for low-cost housing development was estimated to be an area of $36 \times 1771$ m. The land has been designated as a public park since the 1980s but was recently reclassified into five large blocks as part of the land-use planning process. In total, 648 new demarcated plots were distributed between three villages in the commune. This included 374 plots in Blocks 1 and 2, 180 plots in Blocks 3 and 4, and 94 plots in Block 5. These blocks were allocated to Ou Kcheay, Makara 13, and Chamkar Russey villages, respectively.

Of these land allocations, Ou Kcheay village has been the most contentious and the most striking example of why planning aimed at achieving urban resilience needs to be aware of existing power relations and the contested nature of urban space, particularly concerning resistance from marginalized groups. An interview with the village chief in Ou Kcheay, it was revealed that the total available land in the village was 63 hectares, largely in low-lying
areas. This included 2.28 hectares (38 × 600 m) of land from the area previously designated as a public park. It was now designated as part of a social land concession (SLC) targeted at local cost-housing development. Social land concession over urban space was classified into different blocks. In Ou Kcheay, two blocks were highly contentious among four different groups.

4.3 | The contested nature of urban space among different groups

To understand how the formalization of the spatial plan affects marginalized groups, this subsection focuses on four major groups who are being settled in the “informal settlement” areas. These groups include: (i) existing residents who agreed to accept land allocations with the proposed plot sizes; (ii) the families relocated from other informal settlements and urban communes in the town; (iii) the military families being moved into the region; and (iv) the subordinate groups who occupied larger plots of land and decided to resist the equitable land-sharing proposal that worked against the dominant groups.

4.3.1 | Existing residents that agreed to the redistribution

This first group comprised 114 families, who had already settled in the area of the SLC when land allocations had been divided into 4.5 × 16 m (72 m²) plots for each household. This group was involved with a community-based organization and had been trained in the process of community-led urban development and the practice of operating a savings group. Households in the savings group made regular payments to enable other community members to borrow money for investing in construction materials to build housing. This is a common practice in rural communities used to develop agricultural land. However, it is generally less successful in urban communities, where local government officers tend to discourage the mobilization of citizens.

The economic activities of residents living in this block are diverse. Some works as hairdressers, cosmetic makeup workers, cake and sweet sellers, local traders, and those who out-migrate and send remittances. Wealthy families including a military leader and a female business person as Sino-Khmer occupied large amount of land and operated small manufacturing in the areas.

The key informant interviewed in this area was a 54-year-old man named Mr Tat Savuy. He moved to the village in 2007 to reclaim land passed from his father-in-law who bought it in 1996 with around 300,000 Riel (for less than US$100) for a 12 × 30 m (360 m²) plot. His father-in-law had divided this land into one plot for himself, and another for his daughter and son-in-law (Mr Savuy), when they moved to the commune in 2007. It was around this time that discussions about the community-led urban development scheme to allocation land from the SLC began. He recalled the history of the community-led urban development scheme. In 2007, a local wealthy resident, known as Mr Thy, who owned a plot of land measuring 30 × 35 m, mobilized residents to form the saving scheme and urban commune. The savings group would start with saving and borrowing money with a 1% interest rate and each member conducted saving monthly between 3,000 and 5,000 riel every month (~US$1). However, later, it became clear that those who joined the community were mostly poor families from informal settlements. If he wished to stay in the group, Mr Thy would need to accept the redistribution of his land, with only a 4.5 × 16 m (72 m²) plot remaining. He left the group in 2007, as his existing plot measured 30 × 35 m (1,050 m²) had a concrete house built on it, where he produced noodle powder in a medium-sized manufacturing operation. He hired local villagers to work for him each day. He did not want to give up his business.

Other sources in the village revealed that Mr Thy was previously a member of the opposition party, known as the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), and a soldier who opposed the ruling party, known as the Cambodia People’s Party (CPP). A rumour spread that he would defect to the CPP as part of a strategy to retain his land. As part of this defection, he was promoted to the rank of General, within the provincial regional unit, despite there being no soldiers
under his command. In 2013, this new community chief was reported to have been robbed of the funds from the savings group. By this stage, the number of families officially eligible to access land in the SLC had increased to 129. However, some residents were found to be occupying plots of land larger than the size originally planned and were informed that sections of the land they were occupying would be allocated to other grantees and they would need to reduce their plot to 4.5 × 16 m (72 m²). At the same time, an accusation was made by members of this group that the community leader was allowing people from outside of Battambang, who were not poor, to access land in the SLC. Moreover, another wealthy woman was reported to have purchased an additional 30 plots from the working group.

These occurrences were resisted by local citizens in an attempt to prevent the redistribution of their allocated land and ensure equal land sharing. Residents within the scheme stopped saving money collectively when the community chief and the savings group leader was not able to provide a financial report regarding the money stolen from the savings fund. It became clear that members of the group would not be able to recover their money.

Mr Savuy identified a 30 × 10 m plot of land, adjacent to his property that had concrete foundations prepared on it. The foundations have been prepared on land belonging to Ms Yeay Khy of Toul Ta Ek, as well as overlapping the land owned by Mr Savuy by 1 m × 30 m in length. He did not know who had constructed the foundation on this land, and they had not yet appeared in person. This problem was believed to have been linked to a rumour that the community chief had co-operated in selling land to outsiders, who were not urban poor people from informal settlements. In this same year, the ruling party lost the election in Prek Preah Sdach commune and it is perceived that they turned their strategy towards influencing the police and military, as local people would no longer vote for them.

Land within this block has also been claimed by military officers from Region 5. The staff of an international NGO referred to a lack of co-operation by these participants with apparent support by local authorities, in their annual report (Habitat for Humanity Cambodia, 2014). Of the 129 families eligible for land in the SLC, there were still 17 seeking a formal land allocation in 2016. Mr Savuy expressed that he accepted the provisions of the community-led urban development scheme of allocations being limited to plots of 4.5 × 16 m and was happy for his land to be redistributed. He recalled:

> When we formed into community savings group in 2007, the land price was still low. Between 2009 and 2010, land measurement at the block commenced, with small plots of 4.5 × 16 m (72 sq.m²), designed without proper road access. In 2010, the value of each plot was estimated to be about US $3,000 and the land started to be distributed to eligible families. From this time onward, the value of the land began to increase. By 2018, each plot in this area was valued between 8,000 and 10,000, with official tenure. My land has legal tenure recognized by the commune and municipal authorities, but not at the provincial level. Based on the regulations, I am entitled to access tenure to a 4.5 × 16 m plot for my family. However, currently, many people have built houses larger than the plot size allocated. The community chief has never come here to manage this problem. (16 March 2018)

Since 2013, the loss of trust from informal settlers had increased towards the working group, mostly operated by the ruling party, plus an increased pressure from the opposition party. The commune election in 2017 resulted in a large loss for the ruling party, where they only managed to win two out of ten communes. Throughout data collection, the issue regarding the size of Mr Savuy's plot of land had still not been resolved despite ongoing protests about unequal land sharing in the village. He currently retains his 360 m² plot.

**4.3.2 | Families relocated from other informal settlements in town**

The second group comprised 82 urban poor families who were living in informal settlements on public land. They settled on the SLC, with support from Habitat-Cambodia. The NGO had been permitted to implement this project as part of the pilot Land Law framework for SLCs in the municipality. (Figure 3)
This project operated between May 2008 and March 2015 and was called “Strengthening Civil Society-Government for Land Tenure Security.” It was operated in partnership with the Battambang Municipality and Kredit Microfinance Institution. It was funded by Habitat for Humanity in Australia and Canada, as well as the Clifford Chance Law Firm in the United States. The land allocated to this group was smaller than the others in the concession at 36m² and much of the land was of poor quality. Many households participating in the programme used their land certificates as collateral to request loans from local banks. According to a signboard issued by local authorities, once a resident had occupied the land for 10 years, they would be able to receive the full land title. Within six months, residents were required to construct a house and live in it. However, within this group, deadline extensions were commonly needed.

These families had been relocated from 11 informal settlements in the priority communes: Ratanak, Svay Por, Chamkar Samrong, Toul Ta-Ek, and Prek Preah Sdach. Each family underwent an assessment and land application processing before moving to the project site in March 2015. These applications were approved by the Municipal Technical Working Group (MTWG). To be considered for this project, the family must have been currently living along the corridor of the road, pagoda area, canal, or other prioritized areas in each target commune. Habitat-Cambodia expected this process to be completed, including the construction of housing family by July 2015, however, this process extended into 2016.

Habitat-Cambodia claimed to have helped with the rapid construction of 55 houses. During the data collection period in 2017, another 11 were in the process of being built, while another 16 were awaiting construction. Some of the families with greater access to resources, through business at the local market, had managed to build two-storey shophouses. These are known to be the families of local traders and soldiers. However, other urban residents who had been settled at some of the best locations such as those surrounding Wat Sangker pagoda were reluctant to move. They often made excuses such as their family members being ill or their husband being away and not having

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**FIGURE 3** Low-cost housing model and regulated signboard
the capacity to move and construct a house. At the pagoda compound, households were able to sell fruit, processed food, flowers and drinks to passing tourists, and city residents who came to exercise in the public space in front of the pagoda.

The 82 families have mixed backgrounds include ex-soldiers, retired government officials, and those who work in the informal economy. Some seasonally migrate to access work in other areas. Others are labourers, street vendors, and food sellers. Each group previously had different leaders and community structures, however, as part of the relocation process, official group leaders were selected and appointed by the commune chief. Currently, one community leader, Ms Kim Manet, who relocated to the low-cost housing scheme is the Deputy Village Chief. As a result, she obtained power within the ruling party. A Deputy Village Chief currently accesses a basic salary of 300,000 riels per month (US$75). In a key informant interview, she revealed that currently, only 31 families are permanently residing in the new low-cost housing, while others still need to migrate for work, while others are still waiting for the construction of their house to be completed. Generally, those who live in the village permanently have businesses in the commune, or neighbouring Svay Por or Ratanak. Other residents regularly travel to Poi Pet, or even Thailand, for seasonal work.

The overall cost for a completed house, built with standard materials supplied by Habitat-Cambodia cost around US$4,000. There are several socio-economic categories of families that live in low-cost housing. The first are those who can afford to build their own house; the second requires up to 50% of additional support from NGOs to do so; while the third requires a subsidy of up to 75%. There are only a few families without the capacity to contribute to the cost of their home. Families who require additional funds can use their land certificate as collateral to borrow from a co-operative credit firm, in association with Habitat-Cambodia and local authorities. This provides security to lenders to ensure locals do not leave without paying debts.

One family, Mr Sohun and Mrs Bou Sokhan, whose son and daughter came to stay with them, received support from Habitat-Cambodia for 70% of the cost of house construction while borrowing 30%. The couple work in several jobs ranging from selling their labour in a rice mill and/or factory, selling agricultural fertilizers, and other construction work. They borrowed US$860 to help construct a house and an additional US$2,000 to start a business. Their initial repayments started at US$180 per month, which would reduce to US$150 over time. With a proper house, they expect their lives to improve. For example, they would earn enough to send their children to school. Mr Sohun is skilled in construction and can earn up to US$80 per day. They hope to find employment close to their house, so they can live in the town permanently.

Other villagers interviewed included a street food vendor who lived with a total of eight family members. Her husband, Mr Vin Choeu, is a retired agricultural extension worker from Wat Kor (Chrab Krasaing village). The local authority was able to offer him a plot of land in the village. Of the eight members of the family, four are engaged with income-generating activities. The wife (mother) sells food at a street stall, which she prepares at home; her husband works as a taxi-driver; her eldest son works as a barber, and her eldest daughter who studies in Grade 8 at high school works part-time at a restaurant in the evenings between 5 pm–12 pm. Overall, they spend 30,000 to 40,000 riel per day (US$7.5 to 10.0) on food. This excludes the cost of rice, electricity, water and other expenses. They moved to the new settlement in December 2017. They were provided with support for 75% of the cost of constructing their house building and are required to pay an additional US$821 (25%) back within one year. Having a house close to the market and school makes them feel more secure. They also feel satisfied with the thought that they can use their land certificate to access additional credit from a microfinance organization called Vision Fund in the town.

Many other new residents are street vendors. For example, Mr Theany and his family use his motorbike to sell fried noodles. He sells food at a specific location in the town as well as in Banon, another district in the province. His income-generating activity is flexible and profitable but requires him to know the best places to make sales, such as at the junction of the Psar Thmey (New Market) at noon.

The manager of Habitat-Cambodia also claimed that 60 out of the 82 families were supported by the organization to construct houses, while another 14 families were supported to construct a house close to the Cambodia-
Vietnam soldier monument. Habitat-Cambodia also worked with the Provincial water supply and electricity unit to connect water and electricity to the new settlements and work the land.

Ms Manet, the community chief, suggests that the community situation could be improved if more people were oriented toward collective work, such as managing waste. The settlement is open and lacks a proper drainage system. As the community leader, she actively visits each household in the evening after work. She says that around half the families who have settled have needed to migrate to access employment. She also recalls that:

At first, as people moved from the six communes, some were immoral: smoking and forming a drinking club along the road, making loud noises, getting drunk and cursing others. The situation was resolved after she had been officially appointed as community chief, and later as Deputy Village Chief in charge of this block.

4.3.3 | Military families being moved into the region

The third group are the military families mentioned about the first group. While a claim was made for 82 ex-military families, the land was only actually allocated to 40, while the total land allocation remained the same. Despite this, each site was still demarcated into $4.5 \times 16$ m plots, which meant there was excess land remaining. The Provincial Land Allocation Committee included officers from this allocation on one of its working groups. A military commander has used the allotment rules to obtain 82 lots in the SLC. The families of soldiers who wanted access to this land were required to pay the commander a nominal fee to access a land certificate. Some of the families who received land certificates were not from the military and were observed in the settlement to own luxury assets and expensive cars. This created suspicion among other residents. While previously they were willing to cooperate and share land equitably, this behaviour ruined this goodwill.

An interview in late 2017 with these military families revealed that only 42 of the cohort had managed to access land during the first distribution in 2016, while a further 40 were still seeking their plot. This led to a plan to re-allocate the land equitably, however, the residents who have already accessed larger allotments did not want their land measured. They were concerned about the re-allocation process. This scenario is common in Ou Kcheay, with problems often being caused due to the land being allocated to outsiders. A wealthy businesswoman who ran a cottage industry produced Chinese noodles and ingredients for making tea, claimed to have bought 30 lots from the sub-working group. However, this was never proven. Another man, who lived adjacent to this woman suspected that the local authorities were trying to take land from the SLC and sell it privately. One of his daughters was working for this wealthy businesswoman after school time to generate additional income, of about 10,000 riels (US$ 2.5) over the weekend.

Another issue was the shifting and promotion of the municipal governor. The former, who was involved with informal settlement and land used zoning, promised GIZ support and claimed the project was great, but later it was found out when he was promoted to provincial authority, that he supported issuing 80 plots to the military families in 2013.

Over the history of the development of the Municipal Land Use Master Plan, there have been various changes in municipal and provincial leadership, for instance, the former Provincial Governor between 1993 and 2013, who was heavily involved making decisions. This occurred at a time when many state buildings, land zonings, and market developments took place. Between 2013 and 2017, the new Provincial Governor claimed to be an advocate for all French colonial buildings to be registered with the UNESCO Historic Urban Landscapes programme. He was highly popular on social media platforms, showing respect to local traders, the urban environment, tourism, and concern about traffic congestion. He has also publicly praised as one of the best governors in the country by the Prime Minister Hun Sen. The current Provincial Governor was formerly the Provincial Director of Land Use Management, Urban Planning and Construction (PLMUPC) and was promoted to the role in late 2017.
At the municipal level, there have been four changes in the role of Municipal Governor since the Municipal Land-Use Planning process took place. The first was focused on the upgrading of informal settlements through low-cost housing. The second was focused on the impacts of climate change and flood mitigation. The third, who later moved from the position of Deputy Governor and previously worked as an architect was in power for three years. He focused on introducing modern architecture, such as building information centres in key public spaces, and discussions about urban slum clearances, including Prek Preah Sdach. The situation became more serious during his tenure as Governor and led to an increase in the level of resistance, leading to the CPP losing the election. The fourth was more soft and polite to both outsiders, researchers, and people in general, tending to be closer to the residents of the town.

In August 2017, a month after commune election, an open letter was distributed on the streets by anonymous soldiers in the village and commune stating:

Soldiers had been deceived by their regional commanders to buy cheap land through certification without land in the village. This letter apologises to local residents for the role of these soldiers, who are supposed to protect the country and people from being harmed, rather than threatening their safety. They regret being cheated by their military leader and request local residents to remain calm and not to take their aggression out on the local authorities, who have been attempting to arrest them, forcing them to accept smaller plots of land and paying additional fines.

One local resident revealed that the third group has become a scapegoat, created by ruling elites at the provincial level as a way of shifting blame and concealing other hidden practice of the Municipal and Provincial leaders.

4.3.4 Existing residents that agreed to the redistribution

The final group of settlers had access to larger plots of land. In most cases, these ranged between 1,500 and 4,000 m², however, one plot allocated to a politician who defected to the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) in Block 1, is estimated to be 7,000 m². Some households in this group claim to have settled in the area in 1983, while others say 1997 or 1999. The Land Law 2001 has a provision that enables people who have settled permanently on land for more than five years to access a legal tenure. However, villagers who experienced the internal conflict and evacuation during both Khmer Rouge regime (1975–78) and later on the regime of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) from 1979 to 1989 had previously been required to share land equally (Slocomb, 2003). They show great suspicion of local authorities and the land allocation working group, claiming that they are not transparent or administering land distributions equitably.

Around 300 families across the five blocks hold larger plots of land compared what was proposed by the Provincial Land Allocation Committee and the sub-working groups at the municipal level. An informant, Mr Set Ra, who has lived in the Prek Preah Sdach commune since 1982 when he was working as a school principal, holds land with dimensions of 14 × 30 m (420 m²). He was being forced to accept a 4.5 × 16 m (72 m²) plot by the working group. He retired as a school principal in 2016 and has six people living with him, including his daughter, son, and grand-daughters. He has little choice but to resist and decided to reject the offer proposed land size. He lives on a pension and supplements his income with work as an ironsmith and motorbike mechanic. One of his daughters used to be a primary school teacher, however, she quit her job and chose to seek work in Thailand, where she expected to earn a higher income. During the fieldwork, she sent remittances to her daughters staying with him for their daily food and extracurricular activities at school in the commune.

Another couple (Mr Lim and his wife) own a plot of land measuring 60 × 20 m (1,200 m²) in the former proposed public park, next to the 82 lots designated as low-cost housing for military families. At the front of this plot, their current house is located on residential land measuring 40 × 40 m (1,600 m², or 1 rai). They also own another plot of land with the same measurements behind the house. This land was all purchased in 1996 for only 50,000 baht (~US
$1,700). During that time, there were no roads in the village and if they wanted to leave the property, they had to travel through the land of other residents. Mr Lim was previously a high school teacher, who quit working as the leader of a human rights NGO working with drug-addicted citizens, while his wife worked in a primary health care NGO. They have both acquired significant legal knowledge as well as a strong understanding of community-led urban development.

The working group, which included the military, police, provincial court judge, and former Municipal Governor, forced Mr Lim and his wife to accept a single plot measuring 72m². Instead, they ended up agreeing to share half their land, resulting in them accessing eight lots instead. Mr Lim and his wife were previously very active both within society and commercial trading. They would purchase products from Thailand and sell them in the town. In 2016, Mr Lim was involved in a car accident, when travelling to Battambang from Thailand at night. He can now only walk with the aid of a walking stick for a short distance and sometimes struggles to speak as his tongue was affected by the accident. As the land conflict has been prolonged well after 2013, his family has struggled to continue fighting. In early 2019, he mortgaged his residential land to access money to pay for his ongoing medical treatment. He has one son, who works as a skilled labourer in Korea, who often sends remittances to help support him. Mr Lim also lost the ability to work as a result of his accident and his health has deteriorated. His wife has also struggled with her business and is often engaged with talking with the media and filing the complaints against the local authorities.

5 | DISCUSSION

The insights emerging from this study’s primary data confirm the need for further work on some of the critical concerns identified in the literature on urban governance in the region: institutional and capacity development are essential to effective urban governance, and institutional traps that hinder urban governance might be addressed by efforts at shared learning.

5.1 | Institutional and capacity building

Land allocation in Prek Preah Sdach has been guided by two major policies, both of which could have been made more effective through formal procedures such as community engagement and bureaucratic accountability. The first is the National Policy for Housing, drafted in 2003. It has been used as a basis to trial the land-use planning process in Battambang, which will be used to inform the final drafting of the policy before it is approved. Within this policy, a low-cost housing development was used as an instrument to attract financial support and investment from multilateral development agencies, donors, and the government. Second is the National Circular 03 on Informal Settlements which suggested steps to engage local participation and civil society engagement was not followed instead many community leaders and civil society leaders had been persuaded to take the side the ruling party and some even stood for the commune elections which is contrary to what local residents wish to see. On other hand, the land distribution was not done properly either. One official from the Provincial Department of Land Use Planning and Land Management admitted that they only have a role of demarcating land based on a community request or instruction from the working groups, rather than to plan equitable land sharing. He suggested that many land conflicts could be resolved by following proper procedures transparently:

The problem was that during land distribution to the first and second groups, they really should have distributed land to those who were officially recognized as being among the urban poor, living on public land in informal settlements. However, in practice, citizens would be distributed land based on their land certificates that were not owned by the urban poor, nor those who were local to the
resettlement area. This is a reason why other residents, with larger plots of land, decided not to co-operate.

In practice, the land was not shared equitably with the urban poor. Instead, many citizens who received land certificates were wealthy families from the core of the city. This caused residents, who held larger plots of land doubt the integrity of civil society, particularly the local authorities administering the scheme. One of the business tycoons interviewed, who owned land in another commune voiced his disappointment with the local authorities of diminishing the value of the land through the conflict caused among the different actors involved. He also critiqued the decision to allocate land through the Provincial Committee of Land Use Allocation chaired by the Provincial Governor, who holds the right to sign off on land allocations to specific groups without consulting the Municipality working group. He suggests that instead, the Provincial government should have ensured land allocations were fully accepted by residents who occupied the area first, before dealing with the specific cases of people who owned larger plots of land.

For instance, the experience from a nearby community, supported by another NGO Community Empowerment and Development Team (CEDT) showed clear procedures and a process of local engagement was an effective process. It did not matter whether families and community members came from refugee camps or the Mekong delta (Khmer Kampuchea Krom); if a full family interview was conducted, followed by participation in a community-led mapping of proposed solutions and developments, where they received full training and understood the process, there were no problems. Their approaches called, “Community Mapping and Documentation (CMD)”. This approach focuses exclusively on the community members own spatial knowledge and provides the skills and expertise necessary to help the communities create maps, articulate their priorities, and develop interventions by themselves and not by an external party. Interviews with a country programme co-ordinator have suggested this approach to be successful in mobilizing and organizing communities and building ownership over their issues. CEDT builds the capacity of community members and local authorities to carry out activities themselves.

This procedure has been contrasted with what occurred in the three villages extended over five blocks in the public land in Prek Preah Sdach. In this case, the NGO was completely responsible, while the local authority failed to capture the attention of the people who needed to be engaged. Nor was responsibility recognized by the local official in charge. Additionally, the overall budget for the project was not cost-effective was well more than what should be expected in comparison with the outcomes obtained. Interviews with other NGO leaders, working on similar issues, suggested that former Municipal Governors had shown much more commitment, while others disagreed with this.

At the town level, between 2004 and 2019, there were a total of four Municipal Governors, each with a different agenda on urban slum development. For instance, the first governor who was in office from 2004 to 2011, had been involved with the land-use survey since the early stages and had committed to improving conditions in informal settlements. This included the formation of informal settlement support groups and savings groups in which the concept of urban community-led development was applied. However, when he departed the role, upon being promoted to be Deputy Provincial Governor, and then Chairman of the Provincial Councilors, the process fell apart. Some governors have sided with the power of landowners, publicly blaming residents for occupying state land. This type of rhetoric cost these governors dearly during both commune and national elections. The CPP lost the election in the commune in 2017 and both the Municipal and Provincial Governors were removed from their positions. The residents believe this was because they have lost the trust of local people through supporting party officials.

An interview with another staff member of Habitat for Humanity Cambodia, who worked on this issue, during its second phase between 2013 and 2016 revealed that:

Habitat’s policy is to work with the urban poor, and we do not support government officials to exploit the poor. For us, we can help to mobilize funds, materials and technical support from other donors, while land officials in the government need to be responsible. However, it is clear that the local authority is afraid of taking residents from an informal settlement in other places to live here. They
are also afraid of losing voting support from the urban poor. For instance, 82 families were mobilized
to live in the low-cost housing scheme in 2015, however, this has been delayed until 2017. To speed
up the work, we often need to ignore our role and policies.

One local resident who had been involved with resisting spatial fixes accused the members of the Provincial
Working Group of all “being the same person,” reflecting its lack of diverse participation. For instance, a letter dated
29 March 2018 shows a newly appointed governor, who had previously been the Director of Provincial Land
Management, Urban Planning and Construction. He was involved with Battambang Municipal Land Use Plan since
the early stages of its formation and later moved on to take on the role of Deputy Governor. By 2017, he has been
promoted to Provincial Governor, to formulate a new provincial sub-working group at the municipal level. The letter
relayed a decision to establish new committee members to monitor the land development situation in Prek Preah
Sdach commune. At the provincial level, 15 members, including the Deputy Provincial Governor as a chairperson, the
Chief of Police, soldiers, Provincial Departments of Education, Rural Development, Environment, Public Work and
Transport, Water Supply, Electricity and the Provincial Department of Cross-Sector Development were identified.
The letter focused on both problems and solutions, however, the problems faced by local residents that needed to
be addressed were not explicitly mentioned. This committee alone consisted of 19 members.

Political working groups have long dominated local political structures in Battambang, hindering the achievement
of development outcomes. Civil servants are required to be part of the base membership of all political working
groups. The concept of community-led urban development and resource-based development approaches has
become politicized among the ruling party as a result. For instance, in 2010, 13 urban youth networks were
established in the urban community, with support from local NGOs. These youth networks had received training in
urban community development, mobilization skills and resource mapping techniques. These networks were encour-
aged to have monthly meetings, to exchange information about problems faced and their solutions, and arrange visits
to those successful community-led programmes in Phnom Penh. Various local NGOs supported this programme,
including the Cambodia Volunteer Service (CVS), Community Managed Development Partners (CMDP), Community
Empower and Development Team (CEDT), DED and GIZ, and Habitat for Humanity of Cambodia have also played a
key role in supporting local initiatives both financially and technically. Such technical assistance can support local
government officials to create and execute urban governance actions more effectively and can help local community
members to advocate for their rights and hold local officials accountable to political promises (GIZ, 2016).

5.2 Shared learning and institutional traps

Institutional traps, such as elite capture of reform benefits and poor co-ordination among different scales, hinder
transformation in urbanizing communities. Shared learning activities could provide opportunities for local officials
and local communities members to break the habitual, yet damaging, behaviours that have come to be accepted as
the norm.

Since the early 1990s, civil society has grown rapidly to fulfil the roles and functions conducted by the state in
building knowledge and local development engagement. However, democratization and market forces have more
recently questioned the role of civil society, particularly those who hold power and use it to control and exploit state
resources, and even the resources of civil society (Waibel, 2014). The role and function of these groups in the country
have been challenged by government elites who have centralized control of state infrastructure and tend to create huge
gaps in terms of access to knowledge and materials between rulers and those being ruled (Ojenal, 2014). Ojendal also
suggests that civil society has limited cultural belonging and is somewhat disconnected from the role of ancestors and
the politics of birthplace. Also, many people in urban areas are newcomers where local social capital need to be built.

The good intentions established by civil society groups have faded slowly, with the results of the 2013 election,
which showed the ruling party losing ground. The situation becomes worse in 2017 when eight out of 10 communes
were lost to the opposition party. The ruling party shifted their approach as a result, mostly by persuading the youth groups, community leaders and those within NGOs to become part of their cliques, destroying the collective action and local structures, which had been developed. Some leaders were offered positions at the provincial office; others were engaged with political campaigns for the commune council elections, leading them to deprioritize their activities in the community. CEDT, who had been active in 11 urban communities on land security and land tenure postponed their activities between 2016 and early 2018 due to pressure from local authorities and other political issues. They have only now, in late 2019, managed to mobilize additional funding to continue working in the remaining nine communities through private community urban development. A letter of agreement (LOA) has been prepared and is expected to get approval from local authorities if there is no sign of further political tension on the ground.

In an interview with the village chief of Ou Kcheay village (2018), he voiced concerns about the political working group operating from the national level. They often ask him about what the people want and how can they help them. He suggested that land conflict is an outstanding issue, and it is important to trust people in voting now, as they are voting in the booth with a secret ballot. A Buddhist monk from nearby also expressed scepticism toward local authorities in dealing with urban governance and informal settlements in the commune. He said the way the local governance deals with the urban informal settlement is like paving the floating grass in a lake. Once you pave, the floating grass goes but once you leave, the floating grass has returned. This reflects the nature of urban governance and local authorities who have the right to deal with the urban slums and informal settlement. The authority should be more transparent, consistent and should not engage with nepotism or local politics (Chief of Monks, Kandal pagoda, January 2018).

Another Chief of Monks based in Prek Preah Sdach reveals that the CPP has shifted their position to stop the practice of gift-giving at people’s house to the Buddhist temple. He explained that since the commune election in July 2017, the ruling party, include government officials have used the pagoda as a place of claiming political ideology and spread their key message to local residents, particularly those who have land on the proposed public land and in the low-cost housing development scheme. He also explained that:

Before the 2017 election, the ruling party elite often went straight to meet people at their house and village level, persuading them to vote for them and promising to build infrastructure and bring development. However, some of the gifts provided through the village chief often ended up with the chief’s relatives. The commune election in 2017 demonstrated that the level of support from residents for the ruling party had declined. They lost the election. Now they have shifted to work with youth groups and local Buddhist monks at the temple. They use the temple as the base for political propaganda.

Rumours and information about the land conflict over the public land in the commune have attracted the attention of various levels of the government. It has also attracted further political discourse among different other political elites. For instance, the issues have recently attracted the newly formed committee from the Council of Ministers dealing with land conflicts, which plays a role in providing advice to the Prime Minister. This includes Mr Mam Sonando, a former opposition party member, who defected to the ruling party. He was assigned to monitor the land management issues in the commune and report back to the Prime Minister. It is clear that local people are demanding their land back unless others are willing to sacrifice their land as well. Negotiations and resistance against spatial injustice related to what the government calls, “informal settlements and low-cost housing development” have continued. This has become politicized because of climate change impacts (Bulkerley, 2013) and the risks to the legitimacy of the ruling party and dominant groups.

Formal institutions established by the states and with support from donors fall into traps in political crises and lose trust among residents and marginalized groups. Buddhist monks remain neutral in the study areas in mediating between mistrust politicians, civil society representatives, and local residents and between dominant and subordinate groups in negotiating and discussing the option of equitable land shared and resilience practices. Breaking the patterns of political power and cultural inertia within urban governance systems is key to moving towards effective
urban governance for social justice. Interrogating the formalization of this spatial plan with local community members allowed us to identify institutional traps and the impacts they had and may have supported community members in their efforts at resistance.

6 CONCLUSION

Battambang has been viewed as a model of urban development for other secondary towns in the country. The town is endowed with a lot of French colonial architecture, buildings, markets, historical religious buildings, and ancient wooden Khmer houses. The town is located at the strategic position for regional market hubs, administration and educational centres, and obtained huge support for urban revitalization and beautification since the country emerged from the civil wars of two decades. Land-use zoning and formalization of spatial plans pave the way for city modernization, cultural and architectural heritage preservation with UNESCO in promoting tourism, clean and liveable city development in the region and the country. The fate of Battambang’s spatial planning process will have implications for other planning processes throughout the country, therefore it should be critically appraised.

Various policies, frameworks and development projects are being implemented to improve both urban heritage, city beautification, climate resilience, and urban slum upgrading were taken placed. Things have fallen apart due to lack of co-ordination, strong local political working groups, and the emerging dominant urban strategic groups capturing strategic resources while concealing urban justice concerns and equitable land-sharing efforts among the urban poor. These processes have created institutional traps that make it difficult to achieve development outcomes and instead legitimize more urban political working groups in favour of those known as a dominant strategic group. Many steps suggested by the spatial plan and national policy on informal settlement upgrading were not fully addressed and engaged to determine land use-based zoning and regulations. The lack of accountability in this process created institutional traps in favour of dominant strategic groups, leaving less space for marginalized groups to resist. Only those subordinate groups with privileged access to resources, knowledge on legal frameworks and social networks including local politicians and media that allowed them to voice their discontent and spread bad news against ruling party through election campaigns were able to resist effectively.

While in resilience thinking, resilience is viewed as the ability to survive, to cope when exposed to external impacts like floods, urban system collapses and urban change, there is a lack of common understanding about the impact of internal dynamics on resilience among key actors and institutions involved with national policy. They fail to see how shared learning and local engagement can reduce the financial burden and improve social harmony among both residents, marginalized groups and officials in charge of the governance work. This study suggests the need for state institutions to free themselves from institutional traps by becoming autonomous from dominant groups, the need for a robust and trusted civil society, and the importance of shared learning and participation with local people. For a city to be resilient and sustainable, and achieve more equitable resource distribution, it is necessary to engage the urban poor in participation during planning efforts (Healey, 2010), allowing them to contribute to a shared urban vision. This process could help avoid development traps which reproduces the colonial legacy through benefiting only dominant groups in such reform and development intervention. The city will become less desirable with an increase in urban poverty and inequality. Institutional traps created by local urban dominant groups should be addressed at the national level. Moreover, building trust among civil society, development partners, and government agencies needs to be revitalized and should be treated as a learning process where local engagement is encouraged in setting an urban vision and resilience practice. Incentive work and merit-based work for highly committed and talented local government staff should be encouraged to provide urban service and institutions accountable and autonomous work.

This research used UCRSEA’s conceptual framework to interrogate the transformative process of urbanization using an actor-oriented approach to unpacking the complex systems on which urbanization processes depend. Rather than relying on quantitative or official information as the main source of data, this study unpacks the
experiences of community members to help us understand how urbanization impacts existing poverty and vulnerability and how existing poverty and vulnerability are, in part, products of the process of urbanization. By creating a holistic understanding of the many factors that affect the land use planning process by drawing on knowledge from a range of local stakeholders, these research findings have offered insight into how individual, group and institutional capacity can be strengthened to address real-life issues arising from rapid urban transformation. The study does not touch on current Chinese investment influence in other secondary cities and the role of Sino-Khmer relationships in capturing urban resources was not fully addressed here but represents an opportunity for further academic research.

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ENDNOTE
1 By end of 2014, only 136 agreed with land re-demarcation and re-blocking. Among these 15 families from Chamkar Russey of Block 5, 37 form 13 Makara from Block 3 and 4 and 85 from Ou Kcheay of Block 1 and 2 (see Habitat for Humanity Cambodia, 2014).

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