



# COUNTRY SYSTEMS IMPACT

2021

**An Overview of System Strengthening for  
Improved Child Welfare and Protection in Cambodia**

# CAMBODIA





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# NEW WAYS TO COLLABORATE AND DRIVE SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Traditional development work often results in geographically disparate projects that have limited overlap or collaboration among their activities. Donors find and fund partner organizations to address different aspects of a social issue among different populations. These projects impact the symptoms of issues and support individuals, but they can be less effective in addressing underlying problems.

This report examines a different approach, one that addresses the structural elements needed for sustainable generational change (system strengthening) and invests in multiple partners working collaboratively in a single geographic area (country systems).

These discoveries and insights are based on GHR Foundation's work to improve child welfare and child protection in Cambodia. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) is prioritizing family- and community-based care for vulnerable children over a residential-based care system.

**These are the lessons learned so far.**

# INTRODUCTION



# CAMBODIA'S CHILD PROTECTION FOUNDATION

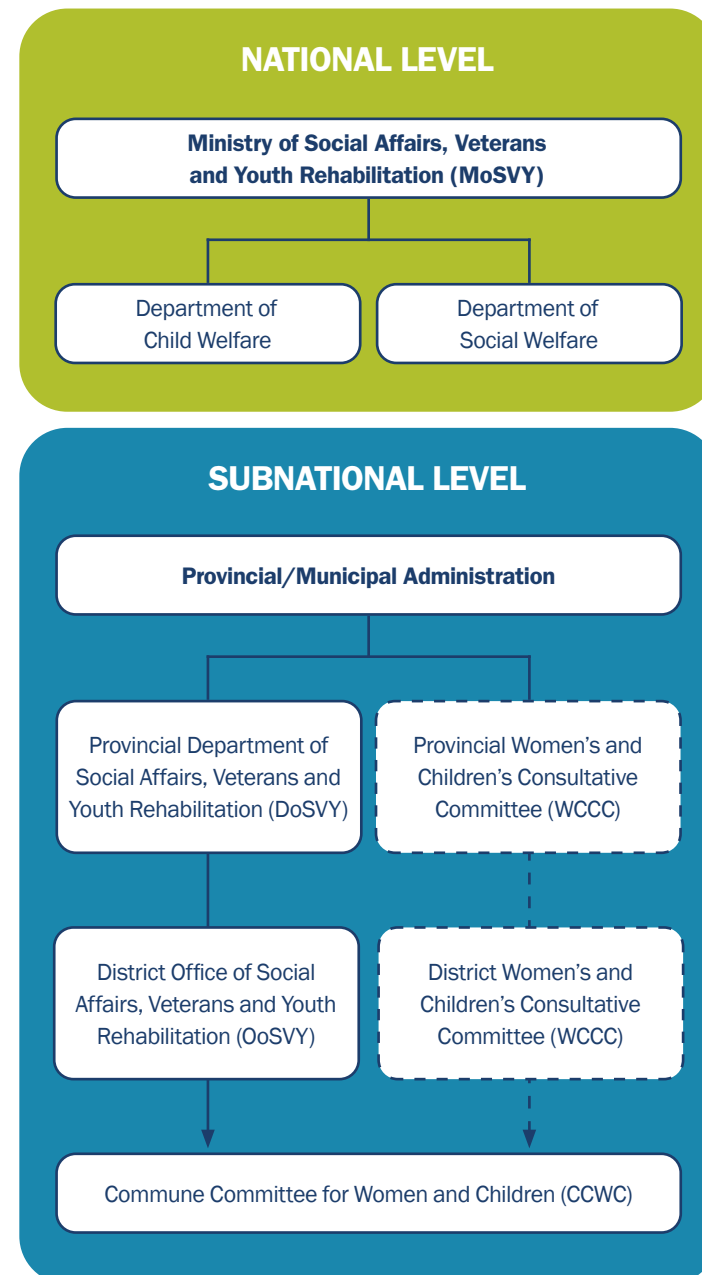
RGC has had a comprehensive national policy framework addressing the alternative care of children since 2006. The framework began with policies related to the alternative care of children and proclamations on the standards for residential- and community-based settings.

In 2017, the government adopted decentralization reforms to transfer key child care responsibilities to the subnational level and closer to the communities where services are delivered. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) is responsible for policy development, legislation, oversight and provisioning of services.

Within MoSVY, the Department of Child Welfare is responsible for child protection and alternative care, and the Department of Social Welfare is responsible for social workforce development. MoSVY also leads a number of committees and working groups that include non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

From there, responsibilities cascade to provincial- and district-level offices for Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (see *Figure 1*). Women and Children Consultative Committees coordinate with provincial and district staff to jointly solve issues and implement mandates. Commune Committees for Women and Children identify cases and report them to the appropriate agency or to NGOs for service provision.

**In Cambodia, child welfare responsibilities are shared between national ministries and subnational departments and committees.**



*Figure 1: The dotted lines indicate that the WCCCs at provincial and district levels are supportive in nature and vary in their operability.*



Courtesy of GHR Foundation



# A COUNTRY SYSTEMS APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING CHILD PROTECTION

RGC is transitioning away from an institution-focused care system for vulnerable children in favor of more family- and community-based care. RGC's child protection vision is based upon decades of evidence showing that children thrive when they grow up in family or family-like settings, and upon a strong national commitment to the well-being of all Cambodian children.

In response, system actors and funders are collaborating across the child protection continuum (e.g., prevention, alternative care and emergency response) to achieve the government vision. Together, they are addressing root-cause, societal issues that affect child safety and working to strengthen the system overall.

Unlike traditional development work, a country systems approach invests in multiple partners within a single country who understand the context and culture feeding into local issues. Program goals and ambitions are driven by the state, with system actors and funders aligning their activities in support. Funders support each partner equitably with appropriate resources and by fostering a collaborative environment between the partners. Partners commit to working together and integrating their efforts to achieve a more effective and holistic program delivery (see *Figure 2*).

*Courtesy of GHR Foundation*



Country systems development work attempts to address root-cause issues and deliver programs more effectively and holistically, in accordance with a government's vision.



*Figure 2*

## Strongest Together

Protecting children means strengthening their schools, their home lives and even the income security for their families. It is a tall order — and not something any agency or government can manage alone.

This is the point of country-specific system strengthening. To achieve sustainability, governments should take the lead in providing care for children, but they often need help.

By working together, partners and funders can build capacity, fill gaps and fortify relationships across the entire child protection system. With stronger connections across the system, governments can deliver a more cohesive approach to supporting vulnerable children and families.

Working in concert strengthens the entire system, not just its parts or its most urgent shortcomings. This requires governments, partners and funders to rely upon and maintain strong relationships and to holistically surround children with protection. As a result, they strengthen the chances for longer-lasting, more meaningful support.

# BUILDING TOWARD A STRONGER CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM



Courtesy of GHR Foundation

## The Building Blocks of Cambodia's Child Protection System

A literature review of system strengthening in child protection systems identified five essential elements of Cambodia's system: government policy and practice, social workforce development, civil society engagement, research and funding.

Partners working in-country uncovered additional "building blocks" for system strengthening. For example, they suggested government implementation was a distinctly different driver than government policy. They also said coordination and data management needed to be urgently addressed (see Figure 3).

## System Gaps

Cambodia's infrastructure is robust but not yet strong enough to fulfill the country's desire for more family- and community-based care on its own. Partners and stakeholders identified current gaps in the system's building blocks:

### • Funding

It is unclear how much funding is being directed toward child protection overall since services are often provided by non-state actors or entangled in other ministry budgets. However, it is clearly insufficient. At the national level, stakeholders say severe underfunding affects their ability to conduct research, host consultations, raise awareness of new and existing policies, and build workforce capacity. At the subnational level, agencies are not able to conduct sufficient needs assessments, home visits, reintegrations, or monitoring activities.

### • Social Workforce Development

There is a severe shortage of workers who are trained in constructive social work, both in government/administration and at the subnational level. The social work profession is new to Cambodian society and not formally tied to laws, policies, or case study examples, nor to a "duty of care" that supports entitlements and

human rights. Only a limited number of social work graduates go on to practice in the field.

In addition, decentralize reforms amplified the worker shortage and reallocated already-scarce human resources. Existing social service officials are unprepared to work effectively with children and families. Training is intermittent and unreliable and varies widely between provinces. Deficits are felt most acutely at the commune level since there is no clear plan (or enough resources) to cascade training and coaching to that level.

### • Coordination

More frequent, transparent and effective coordination is needed across RGC's national and subnational bodies and between government, system actors and funders. Decentralization reforms were intended to bring social services closer to communities and speed up decision-making at the subnational level. However, communication, roles and resources are unclear up and down the system. Referral processes are bureaucratic, time consuming and slow. Subnational groups say they are unsure how budget allocations are made and do not have authority to direct funding toward their greatest needs. Local leaders sometimes avoid decision-making or defer to central authorities.

### • Government Implementation

There is a gulf between government policy and implementation. There are not enough human or financial resources to enact policies or hold organizations accountable. Decentralization efforts muddled accountability and created unintended barriers to care. Civil society actors have provided technical and financial support to help the government build capacity but not across the entire country. Overwhelmingly, stakeholders believe

the government is overly reliant on civil service organizations to enact its policies and vision.

### • Data Management

Until recently, Cambodia did not have a national data information and management system to support case management or link service providers. Without a system, service provisioning and coordination was difficult, and agencies did not have enough data to support planning and budgeting.

With support from UNICEF and USAID, MoSVY is adopting a digital case management tool, a digital inspection tool and a Child Protection Information Management System (CPIMS). Innovation in data systems is likely to expand and strengthen welfare surveillance. Coordination, budgeting, case management, service delivery and outcomes all stand to benefit from technology. To achieve the desired result, Cambodia will need to increase digital adoption nationwide.



Courtesy of GHR Foundation

## Literature reviews and work in-country identified the "building blocks" for system strengthening in Cambodia.





### Establishing System-Strengthening Priorities

All the building blocks of the child protection system are important and closely connected; however, stakeholders identified three priorities: funding, social workforce development and coordination. Tackling these three issues could have positive, compounding effects on the entire system.

- **Funding**

Funding directly impacts how effectively and comprehensively the government can implement national programs for its children. Right now, lack of domestic funding is a major and urgent issue. All stakeholders believe the national government relies too heavily on civil society organizations to help care for children.

As a result, donors may be driving strategy development, action plans and guidelines. This raises concerns over policy ownership, long-term



Courtesy of M'Lop Tapang

sustainability and inequities across provinces. For example, with support from UNICEF and USAID, MoSVY has focused most of its efforts in five target areas, to the near-exclusion of other provinces. Funding also tends to be project based, at the discretion of donors and unevenly distributed across social issues.

Stakeholders are preparing a business case for more domestic investment. The Child Protection Sector Strategic Plan will be presented to the Ministry of Economy and Finance; however, the timeline for presentation and approval is unknown.

- **Social Workforce Development**

Cambodia does not have enough staff to perform needed social welfare work, nor the capacity to fully and professionally develop staff. It needs more social welfare officers at every level and clearly delineated responsibilities and training for all.

In the short term, Cambodia's existing social workers need urgent training on the principles of social work, case management, report writing and child rights.

Longer term, institutions need to produce and develop a sustainable social workforce. To do so, Cambodia could establish job descriptions, hierarchies and nomenclature for social work roles, and create standards, qualifications and certifications for employment.

Ideally, the government will lead these strengthening efforts in partnership with academic institutions and accrediting agencies. System actors and funders can supplement the government's efforts by offering basic training and coaching in alignment with the government's vision.



Courtesy of GHR Foundation

- **Coordination**

Cambodia needs to improve coordination within the government and between system actors and donors.

As a first step, government agencies need more clarity on budgeting and planning processes. Right now, subnational groups deliver services, while budgets are set and allocated at the national level. The two parties are not closely linked — or even aligned on needs and priorities. Municipalities need methods to apply for funding and to know how much budget is available. Likewise, commune-level committees are responsible for coordinating referrals but not required (or able) to provide services.

The government also needs tighter collaboration between civil service organizations and ministries, which deliver the bulk of child-

“Funding directly impacts how effectively and comprehensively the government can implement national programs for its children.”

protection services. Government workers need to identify and refer cases promptly, even outside working hours. This requires more staff, more training, and effective and efficient referral pathways.

Civil service organizations and funders are also relatively uncoordinated, which creates the risk of overlap, overlooked areas and inefficiencies. Better donor alignment could help Cambodia focus on the most sustainable, system-strengthening improvements.



# A CASE FOR STRENGTHENING THE ENTIRE SYSTEM

Working on all eight building blocks of Cambodia’s child protection system collaboratively and simultaneously amplifies the impact of each partner. It is complex and time-intensive work, but it is possible.

By strengthening systems instead of addressing symptoms, system actors and funders can effect large-scale, even revolutionary change — not just a checklist of outputs or timeline-based goals. The impacts of system strengthening can be monumental, even if “projects” are less results oriented.

Why? Because system strengthening attempts to untangle history and traditional power structures, replacing them with more collaborative, adaptive and sustainable practices. For example, a system-

strengthening approach to child protection can simultaneously support children at risk of being separated from their families as well as those already in need of alternative care. It can also:

- **Promote family as the best context for child rearing**
- **Prevent situations that might result in child-family separation**
- **Ensure that alternative care settings meet appropriate standards**
- **Respond quickly and appropriately when intervention is necessary**

When partners reinforce each other’s efforts, they maximize the overall funding impact, and the sum of each grant portfolio becomes greater than its parts.



Courtesy of GHR Foundation

# A CASE STUDY: CHILDREN IN FAMILIES IN CAMBODIA

GHR envisions a world in which all children — especially those at risk of losing or without parental care — live in stable and nurturing family (or family-like) environments. Its Children in Families initiative funds organizations that strengthen family cohesion, reduce the number of children in orphanages and transition children who are separated from their families into stable home environments.

Beginning in 2015, GHR elected to invest in a country systems approach to strengthen child protection in Cambodia, following a child protection vision established by RGC. GHR

hypothesized that building the capacity of multiple, coordinated partners under the direction of RGC would result in more meaningful and lasting change.

GHR selected Cambodia as a focal country and commissioned a landscape analysis to identify key players and prospective partners, including large NGOs and smaller, community-based agencies. GHR then selected seven partners and mapped their activities to essential elements for system change (see *Figure 4*). GHR’s partners were dispersed geographically but not in the same priority areas where MoSVY and UNICEF were already concentrated.

## GHR mapped its partners’ activities against essential elements for system strengthening in Cambodia.

	Workforce	Civil Society	Government	Funding	Research
Angkor Hospital for Childen	✓	✓			✓
Children in Families	✓	✓	✓		✓
First Step Cambodia	✓	✓	✓		✓
M’Lop Tapang	✓	✓			✓
M’lup Russey	✓	✓	✓		✓
This Life Cambodia	✓	✓			✓
Holt International	✓	✓	✓		✓

Figure 4



Most of the partners' work occurred at the subnational level, where policies needed to be cascaded and implemented. GHR's partners engaged with municipal and local authorities to increase their reintegration and case management capacities and to prevent the placement of children into residential care.

Cambodia has two national coordination initiatives: Family Care First (FCF) and Partnership Program for the Protection of Children. Both initiatives can help Cambodia advance the commune committee layer of child care. There are a limited number of professional social workers, and they could benefit from targeted and routine development opportunities. The professional community (and workforce at large) could play a key role in developing skills and capacity.

All of GHR's partners in Cambodia are contributing to FCF. Their collaboration centers on capacity development and learning from each other. Research, for example, focuses on sharing knowledge and best practices and promoting effective care models.

The partners' biggest priority has been developing the social workforce's capacity in topics that are central to children's care, such as case management, reintegration, alternative care, parenting skills and family support. Toward that end, a partner developed a national curriculum on social work and a system for certification.

To increase civil society engagement, partners participate in national NGO networks and government-led working groups on care-related policies. They also collaborate with local NGOs to improve social service provisioning and referrals to promote family-based care.

Through a third phase of grants approved in December 2021, GHR will continue to support its partners and the overall country systems approach in Cambodia through 2025.

*Courtesy of GHR Foundation*



# PANDEMIC IMPACTS



*Courtesy of M'Lop Tapang*

Because of its worldwide impact, the COVID-19 pandemic must also be considered alongside other elements for system strengthening.

Cambodia detected its first case of COVID-19 in March 2020 and responded with nationwide school closures. Large public events, such as the Khmer New Year, were canceled. In 2021, the government responded to new surges with regional lockdowns and business closures in the most affected areas. As of December 2021, about 82% of the population had been fully vaccinated.

The pandemic decelerated Cambodia's main sources of economic growth and employment: tourism, manufacturing and construction. According to The World Bank, about 40% of paid workers rely on those sectors. As a result, Cambodia's GDP contracted 3.1% in 2020.

In response, RCG issued an emergency cash transfer for eligible vulnerable people, which it defined based on poverty level, location, household size and other criteria (e.g., number of children in a household and other health factors). The government reported sending \$335 million to more than 658,000 households. Eligible households received emergency cash payments of at least \$30 a month until the emergency cash program expired in September 2021.

## System Strengthening Builds Resilience to Crises

The pandemic increased the number of vulnerable children and families, and it continues to stress an already stretched government and civil society. Many children lost their support network, the impacts of which are still evolving. In Cambodia, as in other countries, the pandemic and its effects persist, with no clear end in sight.

Prevention and response services have remained overburdened during the pandemic, creating a significant backlog of child protection cases for registration and follow-up. Lockdowns continue to affect caseworkers' ability to visit households, and placements into alternative care have been delayed due to COVID-driven health and safety protocols.

The government infrastructure was ill-equipped to handle the many impacts of COVID-19, and the burden of additional health and safety requirements has depleted already limited funding. NGOs saw their funding diminish, too, in many instances redirected by funders to support health care systems in Cambodia or elsewhere.

What can be learned from this crisis?





Courtesy of GHR Foundation

To stabilize the essential framework of the child protection system and minimize future shocks, Cambodia can:

1. **Prioritize government policies and government financing to be more adaptable.** This includes budget provisions that allow government and service providers to respond to unforeseen circumstances, and procedures to increase social benefits and local solutions in a timely manner when they are desperately needed.
2. **Evolve social workforce support as crises evolve.** National and subnational officers need more training to adapt to social shocks more appropriately.

3. **Assess emerging needs and respond immediately.** During the COVID-19 crisis, many children became separated from their caregivers. Emergency protocols could have prevented unnecessary separations or allowed for contact between children and their families during separation.

The challenges posed by COVID-19 are not unlike the issues Cambodia faced before the crisis: targeted funding, social workforce support and coordination. Therefore, any effort to strengthen these foundations will support the child protection system overall and its ability to withstand future crises.

# CONCLUSION

Governments, civil society partners and funders all have the same desire for Cambodia's children: to ensure they are safe and can grow up in environments that provide holistic, nurturing care for all their needs. By adapting the traditional engagement process, system actors and funders can drive more meaningful and sustainable work under the direction of the communities they support.

Concentrating energy and resources into a single country brings societal challenges into clearer focus. When issues are experienced in context, they are understood more completely and accurately. At that point, partners and funders can help communities pursue culturally rooted solutions instead of just driving down related statistics.

Societal issues are not simple. Each one is entangled in history, culture, policy, behavior and more. To enact sustainable change, multiple partners must work across systems holistically and resolve to strengthen each interconnected part. Country systems engagements and system strengthening require new thinking, unique partnerships and a renewed commitment to the common good.

To learn more about a country systems approach to impact and system strengthening, visit [GHRfoundation.org](https://GHRfoundation.org). Questions from and conversations with individuals, nonprofits, funders and others who want to adopt this innovative approach to philanthropy are welcome.

Courtesy of GHR Foundation



“When issues are experienced in context, they are understood more completely and accurately.”



# METHODOLOGY



Courtesy of GHR Foundation

GHR commissioned Oxford Policy Management (OPM) to assess its country systems approach in Cambodia. This summary is based on the OPM findings and highlights broad challenges and opportunities that are relevant to all stakeholders in the Cambodian child welfare and protection sector.

OPM evaluated the suitability of the country systems approach, identified priority areas for intervention and systems change, and collected and validated narratives about progress toward key milestones. OPM also reviewed stakeholders' priorities for improving child protection systems.

Courtesy of GHR Foundation



OPM's assessment was based on literature and evidence reviews and workshops with GHR grantees and country-level consultants. Two virtual workshops were held in Cambodia, and OPM interviewed key stakeholders from government, civil society and donor organizations to develop a case study. The case study included primary data on the child protection system as well as the opinions and perspectives of 15 stakeholder-informants.

GHR initiated a country systems approach in Cambodia in 2015, and OPM assessed data available through 2020, conducted workshops and interviews during the first half of 2021, and published its findings in September 2021.

## Research Limitations

Workshops were translated live for participants in Cambodia, and collaboration software was leveraged to maximize participation. Still, definitions and interpretations are context specific and, thus, a research limitation.

The COVID-19 pandemic was evolving at the time of the study and made it challenging to assess system needs in their entirety. The full impacts of the pandemic on child protection systems are still unknown.

When needed, OPM integrated partner reports to create a "big picture" of each country's child protection system.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND PARTNERS

## GHR Foundation

GHR Foundation is a hope-fueled global funder that exists to serve people and their limitless potential for good. In collaboration with partners and communities around the world, GHR reimagines what is possible to accelerate progress on global development, family strengthening, education, Alzheimer's disease, racial equity and more. In 2021, GHR awarded more than \$40 million in grants.

To learn more about GHR's system strengthening or country systems approach, visit [GHRfoundation.org/children-in-families](https://ghrfoundation.org/children-in-families)

## Oxford Policy Management

OPM is committed to helping low- and middle-income countries achieve growth and reduce poverty and disadvantage through public policy reform. It seeks to bring about lasting positive change by using analytical and practical policy expertise. Through a global network of offices, OPM works in partnership with national decision-makers to research, design, implement and evaluate impactful public policy.



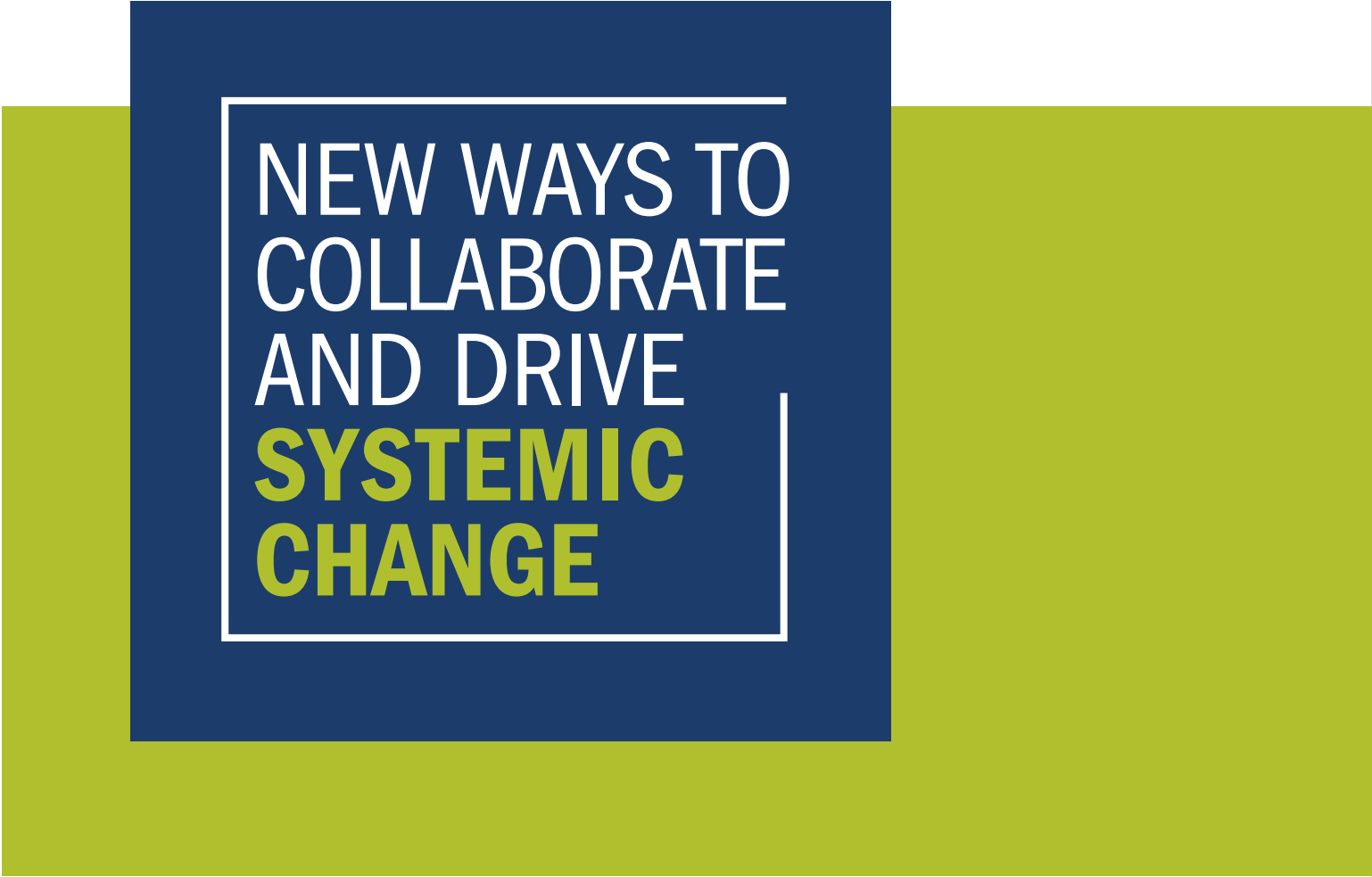
Courtesy of GHR Foundation

## In Gratitude and Solidarity

We sincerely thank the various individuals and communities across Cambodia who contributed their time and invaluable insights to this work. This project and report would not be possible without their collective vision and desire to strengthen community-driven efforts for the care and protection of vulnerable children and families.

GHR stands in solidarity with the many community organizations and local leaders of Cambodia. The foundation celebrates their collective leadership and is humbled by the opportunity to resource, collaborate with and learn alongside these partners. Thank you.



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