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MSc Thesis

Shrinking Civil Space in Cambodia

NGOs manoeuvring and navigating restrictions and insecurities in the Cambodian pre-election landscape

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ABSTRACT

Shrinking civil space is a pressing global trend spreading over a wide range of countries. Yet in-depth research on how shrinking civil space affects NGOs in such highly insecure and repressive settings physically, organisationally and emotionally, and what response strategies they engage in, is limited. This research analyses how three national and international NGOs active in Cambodia dealt with the limitations and challenges surrounding shrinking civil space ahead of the 2018 national elections. These three organisations were studied during a three-month period of ethnographic fieldwork late 2017/early 2018, through participant observation, informal conversations, interviews, literature study and the study of grey literature.

This research illustrates how the Cambodian government increasingly tends towards an authoritarian regime, characterised by a restrictive civil society landscape. NGOs were affected by classic tools of repression: physical harassment like intimidation and threats, criminalisation, administrative burdens, stigmatisation, and spaces of dialogue under pressure. These had considerable impact both directly and indirectly. Distrust, frustration and cynicism were frequent emotional reactions. A striking phenomenon was the pervasive culture of fear, created through occasional crackdowns in a setting of omnipresent insecurity, opaque political deterrence court cases, shut-down of independent media, rumours, and ambiguous legislation allowing arbitrary repression of adversaries. This culture of fear is a very effective tool to control and silence the majority of Cambodian civil society. It provokes widespread self-censorship both in expressions of critique as well as in cancelling possibly sensitive activities.

The dominant response strategy was keeping low profile as tactical pullback, based on working in the shadows, transparency, and dissociation with 'public enemies'. More outspoken, government-critical voices were present as well, particularly from one organisation. Additionally, NGOs engaged in shielding strategies, ranging from practical security measures to building good government relations and internal cohesion making the organisations more resistant.

I argue that it is essential to understand the power of the culture of fear, ambiguity, and assumptions, for analysing NGOs' reactions to shrinking civil space. Assumptions on the risks, danger and opportunities, yet also positionality of an organisation, including its direct environment, focus, long-term theory of change and objectives affect the choice of response.

This thesis provides lessons on response strategies of NGOs carefully navigating insecurities when facing repression and risks in settings of shrinking civil space. It illustrates strategies of keeping low profile and introduces new concepts to gain in-depth understanding. Beyond, it offers a comprehensive framework for analysing NGO responses. Thereby, this paper strives to inspire the wider debate on how to approach the global of phenomenon of shrinking civil space from an NGO angle.

Keywords: Cambodia, civil society, shrinking civil space, repression, NGOs, culture of fear, ambiguity, positionality, manoeuvring, response strategies

PREFACE

When arriving in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, for my fieldwork in October 2017, I planned to carefully study a rural community network protecting the environmental resources they were living in and from. With focus on their relation to government agents they encountered during their patrol activities. However, during my 3-month fieldwork, I was not able to visit the area they lived in and observe them protecting their resources once. This was due to a tight political situation ahead of the June 2018 national election coming up. The related tense political landscape rendered visits to the natural resource area impossible, especially for foreigners. Not being able to visit my actual research field and only having six days where I could speak to community network members during workshop breaks in the capital, I decided to switch my research focus. I decided to refocus, and study exactly these conditions, restrictions, and developments that depicted the barrier to my original research focus: shrinking civil space ahead of the national elections.

Through being around three NGOs, daily informal conversations, literature study and in-depth interviews, I gained diverse insights into how these NGOs were affected by shrinking civil space, as well as into their response strategies and ways of navigating restrictions and insecurities. I grew closer and closer to the staff members and learnt what the political changes meant for their work as well as personally. I was stunned by the powerful tool of ambiguity and occasional crack-downs creating a culture of fear that often resulted in self-censorship – both verbally and activity-wise. And I experienced myself what it means to work in a highly insecure setting, having to base decision on how far I could go on assumptions about the possibilities and riskiness of the current situation. It was a very insightful, enriching experience rendered possible through the continuous support and openness of the NGOs I worked with. I am very grateful about this special opportunity.

This thesis was then created over a longer period of time, following the three months of fieldwork in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, October 2017 till January 2018. Due to unexpected internship opportunities rising up in the following year, the writing extended. However, this also allowed me to follow recent developments and the subtle easing up of civil space after the national elections took place. This way I could see the shrinking civil space in Cambodia in a broader long-term perspective. I am now very proud to present you my final work: Shrinking Civil Space in Cambodia - NGOs manoeuvring and navigating restrictions and insecurities in the Cambodian pre-election landscape.

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There are a number of people that played a special role enabling my research, that I want to express my special thanks. Without them, my research would not have been possible.

First of all, I thank Monique Nuijten for her great support and steady flexibility. She always had constructive comments and concrete useful questions at hand to help me refocus and find my path. It was a true pleasure having her as supervisor. I deeply appreciated her advice for whatever questions I would encounter, and encouragement when facing doubts. I feel very lucky for her straightforward support, down-to-earth, helpful and enhancing way. My thoughts have been with her a lot and I wish her all the best!

I was just about to round up my fieldwork, when the bad news hit, and left me very concerned about who could provide me the same great support for writing my thesis. I was more than relieved when Gemma van der Haar was immediately ready to take over the supervision of my thesis with great flexibility and understanding. I very much appreciate her down-to-earth, hands-on support and great advice. She always took time to provide me critical yet excellent feedback, ask the right questions, and point out inconsistencies to improve my writing. Thanks a lot for everything!

The person that most shaped my field research without doubt was Senior NGO staff* through all his input, sharing experiences, information and thoughts. As main informant, he was very open, welcoming, and hospitable, letting me not only stay up-to-date about current developments, but also giving me insights into the very human side of shrinking civil space between cynicism and frustration, with a great sense of humour. He became a great friend I don't know how to thank for, who would pick me up every morning and made sure I had everything I needed. As inspiring leader, passionate activist and open witness of shrinking civil society, my research would not be the same without his input, special efforts, openness and rich insights. Thank you so much for everything!

I am deeply grateful for all the support and welcome I received from the NGO staff. They were very kind, and despite the language challenges, always found a common language to communicate. Their passion for their mission inspired me. They always took time to explain me more, took me along to their activities, even to a wedding celebration of a colleague, and almost turned into a second family over my research period. The same applies for the staff members of the other organisations. They were always helpful, and tried their best to connect me to further organisations opening vital new doors for my research. I was impressed by their openness and honesty with which they shared their thoughts and doubts in the interviews and am very grateful for this.

Beyond the circle of the NGOs, I am very grateful for the support I received from the two translators that supported me out during the interviews with community members, they helped me so much! I could have never gotten the same insights from the members, yet also their personal connection allowed them to greatly facilitate the interviews and connect with the respondents. I am very glad I met these two dedicated and motivated people, and was able to work with them. Thanks a lot!

Next, I want to thank Ida Theilade who connected me to the organisations I worked together with in the very first place. Without her setting up the connection between my first supervisor and one of the NGOs, my whole research would not have been possible. She was always very supportive of my ideas, helpful, and it was great to eventually meet her in person.

Last but not least, I want to thank my lovely flatmates during my research period, Reka and Caroline. They always had an open ear for me to share any questions, doubts, and challenges I was encountering. They supported me mentally in many ways, helped me think through, and see my research from a different perspective again. With them I could share my findings, greater insights and celebrate successes.

LIST OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Shrinking Civil Space – A Global Trend

'The democratic space for civil society is under attack. The shrinking space […] for civil society, has become a global trend. In recent years, legislation to restrict rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression have multiplied, and access to funding for civil society organisations has diminished. Actors in development co-operation, human rights defenders and staff working within civil society are subject to acts of violence, threat and murder.'

(Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 6)

Shrinking civil space is a pressing global phenomenon. Numerous reports and articles confirm the reality: civil space worldwide is facing curtailments and limitations over the past decade. The trend keeps increasing rapidly, now spanning the lion share of countries, including Western countries. Repression of civil society, democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms worldwide is rising: 'The closing of civil space has become a defining feature of political life in an ever-increasing number of countries. Civil society organizations worldwide are facing systematic efforts to reduce their legitimacy and effectiveness.' (Brechenmacher, 2017, p. 1).

In response to these developments, the UNHRC set up a Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association in 2010. Former Special Rapporteur Maina Kiai went further in describing the repressive tendency: 'The overall trend is clear: we are clearly in the midst of a massive global conflict. Governments are pushing back citizen engagement, and trying to tighten their grip on power.' (Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 6 citing Maina Kiai). This is a concerning development as civil society plays a major role in ensuring that the voice of the people is heard and to have balanced governance in a nation. Civil society can be described as the aggregate of organisations and institutions that represent the will of the people, the citizens of a nation. It entails a large range of actors, ranging from community networks, labour unions, and social movements to farmers associations, universities, research institutes, religious associations, and not-for-profit media. Often referred to as 'the third sector of society', next to the government and business, it describes groups united by a joint cause and objectives. Its purpose entails the participation of people in shaping the political future of their country. In this, civil society also serves as a balance to the government. To stand up for citizens' rights, and as a control mechanism – a watchdog. Striving to create a power balance, a counterbalance, civil society serves an essential function in the inclusive governance of a nation. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have the potential to defend the weakest and enable citizens to build communities. They can support vulnerable groups, strengthen each other, criticise grievances and call out the government. Together, civil society organisations thus play an essential role to ensure the concerns of citizens are heard, a key role within a nation.

However, civil society organisations worldwide increasingly experience restrictions to do their work. They face a series of constraints hindering them from fulfilling their proclaimed purposes. This process of 'shrinking civil space' often surges from governmental agents yet can also originate from third actors e.g. business moguls. It ranges from intimidation of activists, vague legislation, and the dissolution of CSOs, to deterrence court cases spreading a culture of fear, forced disappearances and even murders of outspoken (government) critics.

This trend is also unfolding in Cambodia: ahead of the 2018 national elections and a tense political landscape, Cambodian civil society increasingly faces serious restrictions and repression. In other words: Cambodian civil space is shrinking. This creates challenges and difficulties for NGOs operating therein. They need to navigate a setting of insecurities and restrictions. In consequence, they have to

develop appropriate response strategies – the topic of this thesis. In this paper, I will via three case studies study how NGOs are affected and deal with shrinking civil space ahead of the 2018 national elections in Cambodia.

Shrinking or *closing civil space* refers to 'when the space is closing for civil society to organise and foster civic engagement, and when external support for democracy and human rights is shrinking.' (Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 6). Since the last decade, more than 50 governments throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia, the former Soviet Union and the Middle East have implemented policies to restrict external involvement in national democracy and human rights issues (Carothers, 2016). Both local, national, as well as internationally connected civil society actors become scrutinised. Despite what one might expect, the phenomenon of 'shrinking space' also affects nations where basic civil rights are supposed to be constitutionally protected. It is also in these settings of allegedly free engagement of civil society actors, that government agents reprimand and repress civil society (Aho & Grinde, 2017).

1.2. The Tools of Repression

The shrinking of civil space occurs by diverse strategies, amongst others:

> 'Legislative changes in a number of countries have undermined the independence of civil society actors and restricted their capacity to function effectively. Defamation laws, criminalisation of previously permitted activities, bans on organisations funded by foreign sources, branding civil society organisations as foreign agent, and strict media reporting regulations are among just some of the legal measures that limit or in some cases entirely supress, civil society.'

> (Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 5)

In shrinking civil space, the more classic means of repression (think of use of force, intimidation, harassment) are often combined with 'more sophisticated measures, including legal or quasi-legal obstacles' (ICNPL, World Movement for Democracy, & National Endowment for Democracy, 2012, p. 10). Often this is under the cover-up of protecting sovereignty and national security, defending the country from terrorism and outside interferences, for purposes of transparency and accountability, or improved coordination of CSO actions. Frequently, these serve as convenient justification while inherently depicting breaks with ratified international treaties. Common accusations are terrorism, espionage, foreign involvement or treason charges. These are particularly common during precarious political periods. (ICNPL et al., 2012)

> 'These are but rationalizations, however; the real motivation is almost always political. Restrictive laws or practices are often introduced as a country prepares for presidential and/or parliamentary elections. These actions are not about defending citizens from harm, but about protecting those in power from scrutiny and accountability. […] Governments argue that they are necessary to promote NGO accountability, protect state sovereignty, or preserve national security. A key problem is that these concepts are malleable and prone to misuse, providing convenient excuses to stifle dissent, whether voiced by individuals or civil society organizations.'

> (ICNPL et al., 2012, pp. 10 & 29)

To provide a clearer idea of the scale of this global trend: in 2015 civil rights violations were present in more than 109 countries worldwide. More than 67 journalists and 156 human rights defenders were murdered or died imprisoned (Aho & Grinde, 2017). Shocking cases include: the criminal conviction of Kazakh human rights activist and World Movement Steering Committee member Yevgeniy Zhovtis 2009 in a politicised trial about a car accident; the 10 year sentence of Chinese author and Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo for 'inciting subversion of state power'; the 2010 murder of African human rights leader Floribert Chebeya Bahizire in DRC; or the life sentence of Abdulhadi Al Khawaja for participating in street protests in Bahrain in 2011, just to name a few (ICNPL et al., 2012, pp. 9–10).

In their most recent report *Freedom in the World 2019,* Freedom House (2019a) stress a concerning trend of increasing civil and political rights restrictions for more than a dozen successive years since 2005 in all regions of the world. Except for Asia-Pacific, the average regional score given by Freedom House in 2018 persistently falls short of the 2005 scoring of each region (Freedom House, 2019a):

> 'In 2018, Freedom in the World recorded the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The reversal has spanned a variety of countries in every region, from long-standing democracies like the United States to consolidated authoritarian regimes like China and Russia. The overall losses are still shallow compared with the gains of the late 20th century, but the pattern is consistent and ominous. Democracy is in retreat. '

<div align="right">(Freedom House, 2019b)</div>

Many previously authoritarian regimes that had introduced certain democratic procedures and standards due to international pressure, now more radically stamp on opposition actors by criminal sentences of their leading figures, removing term restrictions, and shutting down on independent critical media outlets. (Freedom House, 2019a):

> 'Meanwhile, many countries that democratized after the end of the Cold War have regressed in the face of rampant corruption, antiliberal populist movements, and breakdowns in the rule of law. Most troublingly, even long-standing democracies have been shaken by populist political forces that reject basic principles like the separation of powers and target minorities for discriminatory treatment.'

<div align="right">(Freedom House, 2019a, p. 1)</div>

The majority of governments restricting civil space - semi-authoritarian governments, amongst others Russia, Venezuela, Ethiopia, Cambodia and Azerbaijan - follow a special manoeuvre: 'These regimes attempt a continual balancing act between maintaining sufficient control over the political process to secure an indefinite hold on power while allowing enough pluralism and openness to preserve at least some international political legitimacy.'(Carothers, 2016, p. 361)

Frequently, restrictions on foreign civil society funding go hand in hand with a general crackdown on political space, including restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly by a variety of legal (e.g. anti-defamation and treason laws) and extra-legal strategies. Protests are often repressed, actors expressing too critical perspectives convicted, and free media dissolved. (Carothers, 2016, p. 362)

Hossain et al., (2018) point out that regulating, checking and controlling civil society in general is not a harmful governmental move to be condemned altogether. Regulations can increase civil society accountability, monitoring NGO transparency and legitimacy. They can hold illegitimate activities to account and solidify the core ambitions and direction of the civil society sector while securing a sovereign national development path. Yet, they note:

> 'In practice, however, efforts to regulate civic space are often a heavy-handed mixture of stigmatisation and delegitimisation, selective application of rules and restrictions, and violence and impunity for violence against civic actors and groups, motivated by the concentration or consolidation of political power.'

<div align="right">(Hossain et al., 2018, p. 7)</div>

Interestingly, a further undermining trend can be seen in states 'learning' and duplicating each other's' methods of controlling and restricting civil space (Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 10).

1.3. The Cambodian Context

Despite a recent gentle yet promising turn towards democratisation in e.g. Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand, this global trend does not spare diverse Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia being one of

them. Cambodia has seen a fast-paced decline in civil space recently, amongst others via restrictive legal amendments, violent repression, and harassment (Aho & Grinde, 2017).

The same increasingly authoritarian regime has been in place since over three decades. Prime Minister (PM) Hun Sen rules since 1975. He is expanding his power and control over key industry and businesses of the country, spreading influential positions and powerful holdings among his family circle (Global Witness, 2016). While officially a democratic state, the country increasingly saw the domination by a single ruling party turning the country into a one-party-state (Aho & Grinde, 2017).

With alarming support for the opposition party CNRP (Cambodian National Rescue Party) achieving dangerous results in previous elections 2013, the 2018 national election could have marked a turning point for the nation - an event clearly worrisome among the ruling elite, right ahead PM Hun Sen. The possibility of the opposition party winning the 2018 elections was a threat to the PM's decade-long rule. This caused government restrictions and challenges for Cambodian civil society, and NGOs navigating therein. Along the dissolution of the main opposition party, civil space was impacted profoundly. This meant increasing restrictions, exhausting administrative requirements, legal amendments, as well as intimidation, harassment and stigmatisation of civil society actors. This trend did not spare NGOs as one key player in civil space: they as well found themselves impacted in diverse ways:

> 'Politically motivated harassment has increased, with human rights workers and social activists targeted on the basis of their real and perceived political opposition to the government. By suppressing protests and issuing ad hoc bans on non-violent gatherings, authorities are systematically denying Cambodians their right to peaceful assembly. […] Since the ruling party of Cambodia declared victory in the 2013 elections; there have been repeated attacks on opposition voices and NGO workers, land right activists, and opposition political party members. Members of parliament have been arrested, charged and imprisoned.'

(Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 14)

Civil society space has been constrained by legal regulations in the past. Opposition politicians have been detained and convicted, and staff of Cambodia's most ancient human rights organisation ADHOC have been sentenced.

1.4. Research Focus

These recent developments lead to questions of how NGOs affected by these changes and challenges experienced the pre-election situation preceding the June 2018 elections. And how they navigated the insecure civil society sphere, responding to the restrictions, which leads me to my research focus: I did research in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh over a field work period of three months (October 2017 to January 2018), studying three national and international NGOs as case studies. Hereby, I studied how the NGOs and their staff were affected operationally, physically and emotionally by shrinking civil space in Cambodia, ahead of the 2018 national elections. While restrictions - the introduction of new ambiguous legislation and limitations - increased throughout 2017 already, the period of my research, shortly ahead of the tense national elections, was characterised by particularly high restrictions and repression. I studied the way the NGOs responded to challenges, and how they adapted their strategies to cope with the insecure setting. Beyond, I studied differences between short-term and long-term vision and temporary changes in a shrinking and extending space over periods of time, following political cycles.

1.5. Thesis Outline

A quick overview over the different chapters and content of each. First, I will explain my research approach: what is the problem statement? What knowledge gap do I attempt to fill? What is the research

question? Second, the conceptual framework. I will explain the different theories I use in a joint framework that I created to analyse the cases, dynamics and phenomena I encountered in the case studies. Hereby, I follow three levels/steps: firstly, understanding the national political field; secondly the government policies and actions restricting operational space for NGOs; and thirdly, potential NGO response strategies. Beyond, I explain how ambiguity and occasional crackdowns create a culture of fear.

Third follows the methodology section. I will explain the methods I used to gather the data I needed to answer the research question. I will point out challenges I encountered, inherent bias, the profound shift of research focus and other considerations surrounding the methodology of this thesis.

Fourth, I provide a context chapter. Here, I describe the broader national context to understand the national political field. I analyse what kind of government is in place, point out the status of civil society, recent civil society and political developments, and how NGOs more broadly were impacted by recent changes.

The next major chapter then zooms in on how these three NGOs are affected by shrinking political space, following five major categories: physical harassment and intimidation, criminalisation, administrative restrictions, stigmatisation, and spaces of dialogue under pressure. Beyond, I study the impact of ambiguity, culture of fear, and insecurity on the operations and perceptions of the limits of the safe and possible action of the NGOs.

The sixth chapter then sheds light on their response strategies: how do they deal with the challenges? How do they navigate insecurities and threats? Do they follow a more reactive or proactive, an individual or joint approach, and what shielding strategies to they engage in? Here great attention will be given to 'keeping low profile' as major response strategy.

Last but not least, the conclusion and discussion will round up the thesis and summarize the main findings. I reflect on the broader relevance of my findings, limitations, lessons that can be drawn, and the need for more research on particular aspects.

1. RESEARCH APPROACH

In this chapter I will explain 1) how I changed my research focus, 2) the problem statement, 3) the research question and 4) the research objectives.

My original research proposal experienced some profound changes. My initial focus was on a rural community network of around 400 members. They were living in one of the largest natural resource-rich areas of the country, their livelihoods dependent on these resources. Massive resource extraction by companies and private business people endangered the sustainable management and conservation of these resources. To protect them, the community network held patrols to guard them and report illegal activities. Thereby they seize any illegal equipment they encounter, frequently hand it over to local authorities or destroy it, and report these incidents via a special application.

I was particularly interested in their relation to government agents: interactions, access to resources, challenges, how they managed conflicts, and strategies. My plan was to live with the community network for the full research period, or at least spend a few weeks there to be able to do participant observation, interviews with the support of a translator, and join patrols. However, I encountered considerable challenges:

First, there were practical challenges, most dominantly the language barrier: I would constantly be dependent on a translator which would change the dynamic and be costly. Next, it was not possible for me to stay in the field in the sense of living there with the community as there was no accommodation and due to nobody speaking English. Yet what obstructed my research plan most, were the political conditions: they axed my research plan by eliminating the access to my targeted research field. On one hand, a very recent law required foreigners to obtain permission by the Ministry of Environment (MoE) instead of just the local authorities, if planning to visit the initially targeted research communities. Approaching this ministry, appealing for permission, and receiving a permit was likely to take a considerable amount of time. Even an experienced researcher doing research in the field since years and fluent in Khmer was only able to enter the field after six weeks of arranging permissions:

In one instance we were finally just on the way to the field, when the visit got cancelled last minute. Local authorities had interdicted it, as it was just one day after the Supreme Court had dissolved the opposition party in a criticised court case. With the considerable support this competing opposition party had received in the previous national elections 2013 (40-50% of votes) it depicted a major threat to the ruling party. End of November 2017 it was dissolved over treason charges. And restrictions heightened.

It was impossible for me to visit my targeted field, which made data gathering a challenge. In total I had six days of access to the original target community: during trainings they attended in the capital. There, I had some time to obtain data, while they were mostly busy in training activities. I tried to collect as many interviews as possible with the help of translators and engaged in participant observation to gain insights into their relationship with government agents from different levels. Still, the data was limited and likely not representative. There was no time to build up a trust relationship and engage in deeper conversations with the shy community members.

On the other hand, my gate keepers decided to postpone all visits to the area during my research period, as they deemed it as too dangerous. They cancelled all activities planned there, and for me it was very difficult and costly to arrange by myself. Hence, I was not able to go there. This created a considerable dilemma: how to study the community network and their relation to government agents without being able to go there?

Given these challenges, yet at the same time the special opportunity to be in the country in this thrilling pre-election period, and observing these developments, I decided to 'make the best out of it' - go for the opportunity and adapt my research focus: to study how the current political developments and

suppression affected the three NGOs working with the network, and how they adapted their strategies and activities to, nevertheless, realise their activities without bringing themselves into danger. I refocused and made the very obstacle for accessing my original research field the topic of my research: shrinking civil space as part of the pre-election restrictions. Further, NGOs were easier to study, as the large majority of staff members spoke very decent English, were approachable, and I already had access and spent time with them every day. This was a great opportunity I was able to take, and study these interesting pressing developments.

1.1. Problem Statement

There is a range of research on shrinking civil space that provides handy categorisations for making sense of shrinking civil space and NGOs manoeuvring therein. These theories helped me understand the different ways NGOs were affected, gain a broader picture of varying actions and policies hampering NGO activities. They allowed me to notice the subtle yet impactful ways how blurry policies and similar obstruct NGO actions, and how NGOs respond to these restrictions. Nevertheless, there are limitations of scientific research on how NGOs can navigate in settings of urgent pressures, especially concerning their emotional and psychological impact. There is lack of in-depth research on how NGOs in highly restricted settings are impacted and respond to shrinking civil space. In my research I strongly build upon these theories available, and develop them further. Therefore the question I studied is how NGOs navigating in restricted shrinking civil space in Cambodia feel affected and respond to shrinking civil space.

As Borgh & Terwindt (2012, 1067) explain, shrinking civil space is dominantly approached via three different literatures. Firstly, the 'War on Terror' and effects of counter-terrorism measures following the 9/11 attacks. Secondly, the 'securisation of aid', where development aid is provided strategically according to country's geopolitical objectives. And thirdly, 'backlashes on civil society' with a more critical vision towards civil society, questioning if it is intrinsically good and representing the will of the people. all these three approaches have a limited vision, focusing on only one perspective, policy or regime. In order to understand why shrinking civil space affects different organisations that are operating in the same place differently, and the differences how NGOs can manoeuvre and navigate restrictions in shrinking civil space, it is essential to take on a more complex perspective. This is why I adopted their framework, to analyse these different levels and gain diverse focus, to understand NGOs navigating and varying response strategies in a particular setting.

There is not enough attention on the emotional affects shrinking civil space has on actors therein, including NGOs. It is essential to draw the linkage between how an organisation is affected by government policies and actions, towards linking it to the emotional effects this creates. Culture of fear and ambiguity can be powerful tools, that need closer study to comprehend and be able to support civil society in these contexts. Especially in the present situation of more and more exchanges between authoritative governments on techniques to restrict civil space, there is a pressing need for in-depth research to better understand. This importantly needs to include not only easily observable organisational aspects, yet also emotional impacts with strong consequences. By grasping these aspects, ways to respond and deal with restrictions can be found. The focus needs to exceed analysing the organisational, operational and practical impacts, to examine the implications of psychological insecurity, fear, and emotional stress. Understanding the culture of fear is crucial, as this is a tool more effective than organisations having to deal with great bureaucracy.

The scientific relevance is thus to gain new insights on how NGOs in shrinking civil space are impacted in diverse way, and what implications this has on their work and fulfilling their objectives. As well as the connection to the emotional impact and power of the culture of fear. Beyond, it allows to provide tools for adequate context and opportunity analysis in the context of shrinking civil space as global

phenomenon. For this reason, it is important to understand how NGOs as one of the principle actors defending civil space are affected by these changes; what different government tools, actions and policies affect them, and how can they respond and deal with this.

1.2. Research Question & Objective

My research concern was to understand better how the NGOs were affected by government actions and policies, ahead of the national elections. Given the difficult situation, I strived to understand how these restrictions played out in their everyday life. What did they mean for them in their work, but also personally. In other words: how were the NGOs as well as individual staff members affected operationally, physically and emotionally?

Second, I was curious to know more about how the NGOs dealt with these challenges. How did they react to restrictions? How did they 'resist' restrictions and adapt? And most interestingly, how did they balance between continuing their activities and striving for fulfilling their objectives, while at the same time protecting themselves and partners to not face serious repression, or even have their organisation dissolved or worse? In this very tense period with ongoing and increasing restrictions of civil space, I wanted to understand how NGOs can confront these. This led to my main research question:

How are NGOs in Cambodia affected by the shrinking civil space ahead of the 2018 national elections, and how do they navigate challenges and restrictions arising therein?

Three sub questions then delve further into this question:

1) What characterises the tense pre-election political setting in Cambodia? What characterizes the civil space landscape, especially for NGOs?

2) How do the three NGOs and their staff members experience the challenges and restrictions?

3) How do they deal with these challenges and restrictions? How do they adapt their strategies and navigate this insecure setting?

The **research objective** is to understand how NGOs and their staff members in shrinking civil space are affected by government policies and actions in diverse ways. It is to identify impacts of ambiguity and crackdowns; how they manoeuvre and their response strategies. I strived to better understand this global phenomenon present in a majority of states worldwide.

NGOs play an crucial aspect in civil space, often one of the prime actors to defend human rights, democracy, and voicing citizen concerns. In order to keep activities going, it is essential to keep staff members safe, and reduce the impact of restrictions and intimidation. Understanding this phenomenon is essential to be able to support them in this. Through the three case studies, I gained deep insights, and broader lessons that can be generalised to see if they also apply in different settings. They contribute helping NGOs find adequate responses. Also, with this study I want to enhance and complement the scientific debate surrounding this phenomenon, taking diverse aspects into consideration, while also understanding power dynamics, the role of insecurity, and ambiguity in shrinking civil space.

I decided to do three case studies in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. For this, I chose a qualitative research approach instead of a quantitative, as the purpose of the research evolves around examining people's views, perceptions and understandings of particular issues. Understanding these subjective experiences allows contributing to fill the gap connecting emotional impacts to the regularly examined organisational and operational impacts of shrinking civil space. The topic of my research touches on perceptions, thoughts, values and emotional impact of shrinking civil space. It is about sensitive information and insights gained through small remarks; information that is rather difficult to get through 'stiff' questionnaires, trying to understand how changes are affecting people's lives. It is not only visible

tangible implications of organisations having to obtain certain permissions and facing bureaucratic hurdles in their operations, but also emotional impacts that are powerful, as this thesis will point out.

Qualitative research is well-suited for understanding beliefs, experiences and meanings held by the research population. Understanding subjective experiences cannot easily be measured via surveys and similar tools. The topic concerns perceptions, how people feel affected, and what responses they engage in; it refers to inter-personal aspects and subjective responses not easily visible. Therefore, I decided to follow a qualitative approach and via three case studies get a deeper understanding of the phenomena at place. Still, it would have been great to also have quantitative research and see the outcomes. Thus, I recommend more large-scale research to be able to draw more general conclusions for a larger population.

Further, it is an inductive research. I studied specific case studies, researching how they were affected, to later - with the help of theories - find possibilities to generalise my findings and draw broader lessons for NGOs navigating similar settings of shrinking space.

My research group entailed NGO staff from three NGOs, a community group and other relevant informants like activists, researchers, journalists and further people related to NGOs. I followed an ethnographic actor-based approach, allocating the NGOs and their experiences as starting point, and engaging with them in their everyday surroundings. Mostly my selection of respondents was influenced by practical reasons and considerations of accessibility, who would have most insights and relevant information to share. Within the NGOs, that was largely the higher-up NGO staff for two reasons: First, because they have excellent English skills and thus no translator interfering in the interview flow was required. Second, they have a particular overview of what's going on in the organisation through their management functions. They were involved in strategic decision making on how to respond to shrinking civil space. They have different knowledge, a different perspective and were very accessible actors. While I also had a few interviews with regular staff members that spoke good English, I lost other perspectives and knowledge of staff members with no or very limited English knowledge. This might have provided me different perspectives on the situation, complementing my insights.

Concerning other respondents, the journalist, activists, researcher, other NGO staff, these interviews allowed me to get an outside perspective to confirm information via 'independent voices'. While no actor can be fully independent in this setting of course, they nevertheless have a certain external perspective on the organisations I studied. Not being directly involved, they shared a different angle, and could confirm impressions and insights from a diverse viewpoint. Nevertheless, due to the rather limited size of the group, it has to be considered in how far my findings can be one-to-one generalised to larger populations in similar circumstances.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Shrinking Civil Space

Via this thesis, I strive to analyse the Cambodian pre-election context of shrinking civil space for NGOs. The overall research question tries to answer how three NGOs were affected and dealt with the challenges and limitations arising in this special setting. To investigate this, after extensive examination of relevant scientific theories available, the theory provided by Borgh & Terwindt turned out as most suitable. I encountered a very fitting article which offers a comprehensive theoretical framework: Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) '*Shrinking operational space of NGOs – a framework of analysis*'. They suggest handy categorisation tools to understand what shapes civil space, actions and policies restricting it, as well as aspects of NGOs responding. Therefore, I largely rely on Borgh & Terwindt (2012), as framework of analysis. Their framework for the national context analysis helped answering sub-question 1 on the national civil society landscape. The categorisation of actions and policies restricting operational space for NGOs then proofed to be a handy tool for studying sub-question 2 on how NGOs were affected by restrictions and limitations. And lastly, NGO response strategies could be partly analysed by the third part of their framework for categorisation – how NGO responded to these challenges and limitations.

However, in my research I found it essential to understand emotional aspects of shrinking civil space, as NGOs are often affected indirectly. Therefore, I needed to complement my framework when noticing the important role that the culture of fear and ambiguity played in my findings. Eventually, after a long search for adequate theories, I found a fitting theory (Stern & Hassid, 2012) that adequately explained the phenomena encountered. Especially how ambiguity and insecurity, combined with occasional crackdowns have massive implications. Step by step, I adapted, and that way created a tailor-made conceptual framework, based on selected theories suitable for the phenomena encountered in these case studies. Yet only these theories turned out to be insufficient to understand diverse, complex responses.

Borgh & Terwindt's theory (2012) was a useful basis for my framework, yet throughout my field research, I found that I needed to elaborate and extend my framework further. Considering the actions and policies restricting space, the reasons why CSOs engage in self-censorship are for example not explained well. They offer no analysis for technical tools, changed wording, but also their differentiation is simplifying. It does not pay enough attention to the complex process of navigating insecurities, omnipresent ambiguities, but portrays the situation as simple. This does not live up to the complex ambiguous conditions on the ground. That is why I complemented it with alternative theories and thereby developed my own fitting conceptual framework. It is a combination of different theories plus elements I developed myself. They allow me to analyse and explain all aspects concerning NGOs being affected and responding to shrinking space. Hereby, I follow three steps:

Firstly, based on Borgh & Terwindt (2012) I will explain the theoretical background for understanding the national context – differentiating between democratic and authoritarian, as well as strong and weak states. This is useful to get a greater understanding of the national landscape.

Secondly, I will elaborate on five impact categories from Borgh & Terwindt (2012). They are suitable to recognise how NGOs are affected by different policies and government actions. Importantly, this can be both directly, as well as indirectly. This brings me to another theoretical concept, essential for understanding the effects of shrinking civil space under a climate of ambiguities, occasional crackdowns and insecurities. After long search, I found a fitting theory to explain the phenomenon of fear, self-censorship and insecurities, explained in Stern & Hassid's (2012) article '*Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China*'. Here they describe exactly what I encountered and thus provide a great theoretical base for my analysis.

Then thirdly, I move on to theories analysing response strategies. Borgh & Terwindt (2012) and Terwindt & Schliemann (2017) suggest to differentiate reactive/proactive and coordinated/individual responses. This indeed is a helpful categorisation, yet insufficient to properly explain the different responses I encountered in the case studies. For this reason, I also build on Carothers (2016), more exactly adaptation and mitigation responses to closing space including four different means present in the Cambodian case studies. Through his theory, I can explain the overall response strategy of the NGOs, why they chose certain technical protection tools, and distanced themselves from government enemies. His theory goes in-depth by offering diverse adaptation and mitigation aspects in response strategies.

Nevertheless, this still does not grasp all aspects and responses I encountered. For example, they do not offer an analysis of the role of unity and dedication within an organisation, the essential continuous assessment of the situation to be able to manoeuvre therein, working in the shadows. This conceptual framework I developed, complemented by these theory allows me to explain the NGOs' response strategies, ways of navigating insecurities, ambiguities, and the culture of fear.

In the following I will elaborate and explain my tailor-made theoretic framework. Reminding, I follow three steps: 1) *national context*, 2) *how NGOs are affected* via actions & government policies affecting civil space, in combination with *culture of fear*, and 3) *response strategies*.

2.2. Shrinking Operational Space

NGOs face a diversity of threats and restrictions, ranging from operational burdens of legal nature, to intimidation, stigmatisation and harassment. In this thesis, I study how three NGOs are affected by shrinking space. Borgh & Terwindt (2012) explain:

> 'to understand the actual impact of these restrictions on NGOs, it is important to distinguish between the very different challenges and threats that specific civil society organisations are facing in different political contexts and the way in which these affect their operations.'

(Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1066)

More exactly, they differentiate between three essential aspects that influence NGOs' space for manoeuvring: 1) *Characteristics of the local political context*; 2) *policies and actions restricting NGOs* and 3) the *characteristics, objectives, operation style and functions of NGOs themselves* (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1066).

> 'By operational space of NGOs we mean their capacity to function as an organisation and to perform the key tasks of the organisation, in accordance with the principles protecting civil society that are embedded in international law.'

(van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1068)

It refers to NGOs being able to fulfil their objectives and operate according to their principles and functions. Operational space is not something static. Instead, it is fluid and can change, expand and shrink. Different actors e.g. governmental, private and civil society actors hereby can jointly define and create operational space of NGOs, and it may be claimed or adapted by NGOs themselves. Thus NGOs are not reduced to passive actors, but have agency: they can create strategies to overcome or prevent limitations and restrictions, and expand, reclaim or create new operational space. (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012)

2.3. Political Context

I start with the first theory making up the conceptual framework: the civil-political context. One aspect shaping the operational space of NGOs is the national civil society context. Based on Tilly (2007), Borgh

& Terwindt (2012) differentiate between a) the *state capacity* and b) the *political regime*. They envision a spectrum ranging from *strong states* to *weak states* as of *state capacity*. As of *political regime*, they differentiate between *more authoritarian* and *more democratic states* (see figure below).

Shrinking operational space of NGOs

Political regime State capacity	More authoritarian	More democratic
Stronger states	Strong authoritarian state	Strong democratic state
Weaker states	Weak authoritarian state	Weak democratic state

Figure 1: State strength and political civil liberties, Borgh & Terwindt, 2012

Strong states on one hand can and do strive to control public space, the civil society, and limit NGOs in their possibilities by diverse means. They strongly affect the space for NGOs to navigate in, and restrict it by diverse means e.g. exhausting requirements, intimidation and supervision. Weak states on the other hand control the public sphere only to a limited degree. This can be both in a positive as well as a negative sense: they restrict NGOs less, yet also protect them less from third party restrictions and influences. (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012)

2.4. From Authoritarian to Weak States - 3 Situations

Here are three examples of different situations covering all the extremes: 1) authoritarian states, 2) relatively open democratic societies and 3) weak states. In the first situation – *authoritarian states* - governments mainly use administrative means to control NGOs. For example by forcing them to register, control their funding, and provide diverse organisational information about employees, projects and funding sources. Examples are Iran, Belarus or China. In strong authoritarian states, the government has strong control over the public space and confines NGOs in their activities; while in weak states 'the state capacity (or willingness) to make rules, defend the public sphere, or defend NGOs can be limited.' (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1070). Additionally, the government may try to coopt NGOs by forcing them to implement activities that are actually fulfilling the government agenda. Summarizing key terms are: monitoring, regulations, cooptation and evaluation of the NGO space. Further the government can employ repression, intimidation, and even killings. They can stigmatise CSOs and accuse NGOs with international donors to be 'puppets of a western agenda' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1074). Via laws and regulations, NGOs may be closed down. For human rights and other advocacy NGOs in particular, 'the operational space is extremely limited and a high degree of self-censorship is likely' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1074). This is very relevant for the three case studies of this thesis.

In the second situation – *open rather democratic societies* – states may not be interested in protecting civil space and rights. This is frequently the case in partial democracies. Here, NGOs will mostly just face challenges, if they are active in advocacy as 'claim-making' NGOs. The two areas most risky are human rights and the environment. Usually, these limitations are not broad affecting the whole civil society sector, but focused on the most outspoken and critical adversary NGOs. Challenges may also rise during particular periods of governmental decision-making or resistance, and afterwards cool down again – another insightful aspect for the Cambodian pre-election setting. Usually, physical harassment

and intimidation are not that common in these societies. Yet there may be occasional harsh crackdowns and violent infringements against government critics, to remind civil society actors of the limits and red lines they cannot cross (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012), such as this example shows:

> 'For example, in Indonesia, Munir, the Executive Director of a human rights organisation calling for the punishment of human rights violations in East Timor, was poisoned and died in 2004. This incident served as a clear reminder that the operational space to hold the government accountable has its limitations.'

(van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1075)

Sporadic yet nevertheless shocking and influential determent cases like this can also be found in Cambodia, as I will explain soon. Areas likely experiencing most restrictions are surrounding natural resources. These can be challenged by diverse state, private, community, and civil society actors causing conflicts. Consequentially, also in more democratic societies, organisations and communities involved in resource conflicts run a significantly higher risk of facing restrictions, as diverse powerful actors may have considerable interest in these resources. Claim-making organisations challenging access to resources for corporations and governments may find their operational space considerably restricted in comparison to service-oriented NGOs. (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012)

> 'In relatively open societies, restrictions on operational space further revolve predominantly around conflicts of access to resources, such as water, land, timber, and metals or minerals. These are big assets that can be contested by a variety of parties, including the government, corporations, and different ethnic groups. Grassroots organisations making claims regarding such resources are most affected by the restrictions that occur in the course of these conflicts. These organisations can be critical of large-scale economic projects (such as dams or mining), touching upon vested economic interests of powerful groups in society. […] When governments and corporations come to view these NGOs as an obstacle on the road to economic progress, they can restrict the operational space for claim-making. […]
>
> Thus, in relatively open societies, service-oriented NGOs are comparatively free to operate. However, certain claim-making NGOs can be affected by restrictions, particularly professional NGOs involved in accountability claims and grassroots organisations with resource claims.'

(van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1073)

Last but not least, the third scenario is of *weak states* e.g. during civil war. Here all kind of conflict parties contesting state power restrict civil space and may use diverse forms of violence, in settings like Afghanistan or Papua New Guinea.

In the context chapter, I will provide insight into the Cambodian national context, around recent political developments, shrinking civil space, and the consequences and challenges this brings for NGOs. However, I have to highlight that these categories are extremes on a continuum, where states may be categorised tending towards one side or the other. Nevertheless, some general categorisation of the Cambodian pre-election setting is possible. And this will help understand the space that NGOs have to navigate in. To then in the next step zoom in - have a closer look at the direct and indirect actions and policies affecting them. Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) categorisation of the political field thus allow us to gain a better understanding of the Cambodian setting, particularly the civil society sphere.

2.5. Affected NGOs - Restrictive Policies and Actions

After understanding the national political field, we can now take the next step: analysing the particular government actions and policies restricting operational space for NGOs. We zoom in from Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) theory that helps us analyse the broader national context, to the part illustrating the very actions that affect NGOs in their operations. Borgh & Terwindt (2012) differentiate between five

different types of government actions and policies restricting NGO operational space: a) *Physical harassment and intimidation, b) Criminalisation: Prosecution and investigation, c) Administrative restrictions, d) Stigmatisation* and *e) Spaces of dialogue under pressure.* (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1070) Beyond, my conceptual framework builds on a second theory to analyse the culture of fear pervading Cambodian civil space. In the following I will explain what they entail, and what further sub-categories can be encountered.
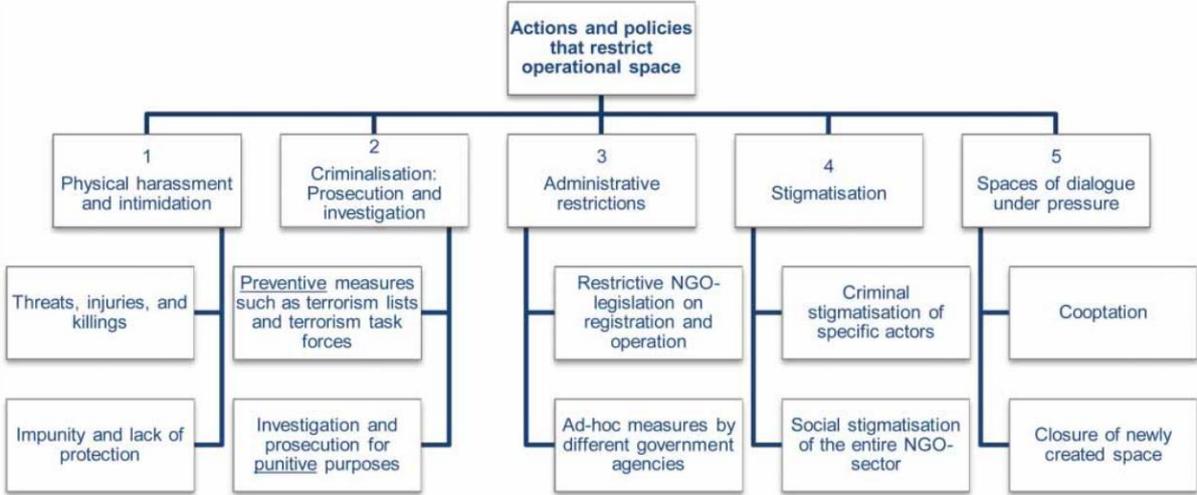

Figure 2: Actions and policies that restrict operational space, Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, 1070

The first category, *physical harassment and intimidation* includes both *threats, injuries, and killings* as well as *impunity and lack of protection.* This means it includes both activists being wounded, attacked, as well as menacing phone calls. Yet also incidents of the rights of activists getting injured by third parties, as the government does not fulfil its duty to protect and defend activists' basic rights. Making a clear distinction of the perpetrator can be difficult, e.g. in injuries or murders committed. Often it is not clear if those are committed by third parties, yet commissioned by government actors. (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012)

This can be recognised in several renown murder cases of outspoken Cambodian activists. Further, threats are very present, ranging up to open death threats from the Prime Minister. The 2016 UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders report highlights that 'those speaking out about natural resources exploitation are at high risk of personal attacks, including killings' (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017a, p. 8). Just between 2002 and 2013, more than 900 people were killed for environmental activism and land conflicts (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017a quoting Global Witness).

Secondly, *criminalisation* refers to:

> 'the act of isolating a generally defined conduct and labelling this conduct as criminal, thereby opening up the possibility of public – and sometimes private – prosecution. This enables the use of coercive mechanisms under state authority against individuals for the purpose of finding this person guilty of the specified conduct and imposing a sentence, such as a monetary fine or imprisonment.'

> (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1071)

It entails searching offices, pre-trial detention, confiscating laptops, phones and documents, costly bail-outs, investigations and jail time (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017a). Interestingly, often stigmatisation of certain actors in the media is followed by legal criminalisation, with the previous stigmatisation somewhat legitimising the criminalisation. (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012)

There are two aspects to criminalisation: *a) Preventive measures such as terrorism lists and terrorism task forces,* and *b) Investigation and prosecution for punitive purposes.*

'Counter-terrorism measures are laws and practices by governments and supranational institutions intended to prohibit, prevent, investigate, and punish specific acts of terrorism. In the absence of international consensus on the definition of terrorism, many countries have terrorism statutes that define acts of terrorism in broad terms and, thus, provide the authorities with leeway to criminalise particular actors.'

<div align="right">(Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1071)</div>

This is an element very recognisable in the Cambodian context in relation to the colour revolution. While it does not exactly refer to terrorism, there are many similarities, which I will explain later.

A third action, or rather policy restricting operational NGO space, is through *administrative restrictions*. This refers to laws and legal regulations on NGOs and civil society, that: "restrict fundamental rights, for example by making registration both obligatory and burdensome.' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1071). This is very present through the Cambodian LANGO law, making it mandatory for NGOs to register, while having diverse challenging requirements therefore. Administrative restrictions are omnipresent and decisive in the Cambodian pre-election context, with a range of vague and restrictive legislation, inhibiting fundamental civil society freedoms. Next to *a) restrictive NGO-legislation on registration and operation,* it also entails *b) ad-hoc measures by different government agencies.* This means that government agents abuse their power to monitor and harass NGOs spontaneously. Independent of legal regulations, 'restrictive administrative measures […] can also be the product of the willingness and ability to use bureaucratic power to obstruct NGOs in their operations, such as the example of delaying NGO registration.' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1071) Thus, ministry staff may for example on purpose delay approving permission letters. Both these are patterns in the Cambodian pre-election setting, with several organisations facing closure due to issues with their legal registration and permit, as well as ministries frequently delaying permissions and other legal requests. More about this in chapter four.

Fourth, *stigmatisation* is another aspect of actions and policies restricting civil space. It is 'cases where groups or individuals are portrayed as non-believers, or as criminals or terrorists, and thus constitute a threat to security or social order of society, without giving major substance for these claims'(Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1072). Here, there can be *a) Criminal stigmatisation of specific actors* as well as *b) Social stigmatisation of the entire NGO-sector. Criminal stigmatisation* refers to 'government agents using criminal labels to discredit certain activities or actors' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1072). This may be calling political opponents traitors, accusing them of treason. *Social stigmatisation* means the 'rejection of particular influences, values, or ideas that are seen as contrary to the dominant social norms and values e.g. demonising liberal Western ideas.' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1072). E.g. rejecting human rights and democratisation attempts as type of neo-imperialism and imposing euro-centrist values to the rest of the world, as I will explain more later. Both types of stigmatisation can be found in the Cambodian context: Competing politicians are frequently openly accused as criminals. At the same time civil society in Cambodia is experiencing social stigmatisation, with people being afraid of being associated with CSOs. Here again, the interrelation of stigmatisation and criminalisation has to be highlighted: 'Stigmatisation of opponents in speeches, documents, and the media often precedes the judicial criminalisation. Stigmatisation can legitimise acts of criminalisation, while detentions and criminal trials can have a stigmatising effect.' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1072)

Last but not least, there is the government action of putting *spaces of dialogue under pressure.* It means the 'application of pressure on institutionalised forms of interaction and dialogue between government entities and civil society groups' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, 1072). More exactly, there are two ways this can occur: a) through *cooptation* or *b) closure of newly-created spaces.* In the former, government agents try to convince or force actors to join a particular party, organisation, or institution. The latter includes spaces like round tables and social forums for a civil society-government exchange. They can

be shut down, or become 'fake spaces' - spaces that actually do not provide opportunity for real discussion and influencing, but rather serve legitimising purposes (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017).

These five categories - *physical harassment and intimidation, criminalisation, administrative restrictions, stigmatisation* and *spaces of dialogue under pressure* - are useful for analysing more closely the diverse ways how Cambodian civil society in general, and NGOs particularly are affected by the shrinking of civil space in Cambodia. They allow to understand how the government succeeds to restrict and control NGOs. What actions and policies they make use of, how they are related, and how they shape civil space in Cambodia. I will therefore use them as main theoretical tools for examining the different ways how NGOs and civil society more broadly are affected.

2.6. Culture of Fear

Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) categorisation of restrictive policies and actions serves as suitable theory for understanding how NGOs are directly and indirectly affected. However, there is one major phenomenon they are not able to disentangle, yet that is indispensable for comprehending what I encountered: ambiguity and the culture of fear. The counterpart of the puzzle to how the government is restricting NGO operational space: the way NGOs experience these restrictions. In other words, the emotional impact these policies and actions have on NGOs navigating civil space. A key element to understand the Cambodian civil society context is what I describe as 'culture of fear'. In my research, I again and again encountered parts of a culture of fear, participants refraining from doing certain things. I encountered an insecurity and ambiguity, that I could not pin down by the theory provided through Borgh & Terwindt (2012). This insecurity came back repeatedly, yet I lacked adequate tools to analyse this phenomenon. For a long period, I encountered these recurring elements in informal conversations and interviews I held. Small comments about a supposed black list and spies. Remarks that they are allegedly being watched. Yet people not being really sure about it. Rumours going around. Supposed actions and behaviours that might bring your organisation into risk and thus need to be avoided at all costs. Yet I could not quite make sense of them, see the broader picture, as I had no adequate theory at hand, to analyse this phenomenon.

Finally, I encountered an article describing exactly this phenomenon. And offering me an excellent tool for making sense of what I encountered in my research. In their article '*Amplifying Silence: Uncertainty and Control Parables in Contemporary China*' Stern & Hassid (2012) assess this phenomenon when analysing how the Chinese government succeeds to control civil space miraculously, with minimal effort: While only 0,2% of Chinese lawyers and journalists are affected by state coercion (imprisonment, administrative measures and violence), they nevertheless almost all restrict themselves in their activism and expressions. This effect is not limited to the profile of journalists and lawyers. Instead, I will draw comparisons to civil society more broadly, and NGOs more closely. Here too, this fascinating phenomenon is omni-present. The secret is this:

> 'Not just heavy-handed state repression, but instead deep-rooted uncertainty about the boundaries of permissible political action magnifies the effect of each crackdown. Unsure of the limits of state tolerance, lawyers and journalists frequently self-censor, effectively controlling themselves. […] Uncertainty helps maintain the status quo. […] Unpredictable flashes of repression instil fear and amplify silence.'

(Stern & Hassid, 2012, pp. 1230–1231)

This holds interesting parallels to Foucault's theory of the panopticon as metaphor of modern society, where you cannot know if you are being watched. And hence you behave as if you were continuously. Through not being able to know if somebody is watching your actions, and the possibility being given, prisoners control themselves. This is a very interesting complementation to Stern & Hassid's (2012) theory: On one hand you do not know if you are being watched, and thus strongly control yourself. On

the other hand, you also do not know what depicts an 'illegal' activity, that may cause harsh retaliation, as the boundaries are not clear.

While only a tiny minority of Chinese lawyers and journalists are directly touched by governmental repression, not knowing what will and what action will not provoke government retaliation leads the grand majority to not engage in any potentially provocative actions. Few isolated incidents have a shocking impact, combined with broad ambiguity about what depicts a 'crossing the line'. The result: broad self-censorship and fear that is largely silencing civil society. People are insecure about what article they can still publish, what topic might be too risky and provoke a crackdown, what case they can still take on. (Stern & Hassid, 2012)

Based on this theory, I could comprehend the emotional impact, yet also the consequences this drew on the actions of NGOs and their staff. And what is even more interesting: due to lack of clear lines to judge upon and overarching ambiguity, narratives of what Stern & Hassid (2012) call 'control parables' develop and spread. Their purpose: to explain why a certain topic, behaviour, or action provoked an incident; why certain articles could be published smoothly, while others could not. They serve to make sense of seemingly arbitrary government crackdowns and occasional harsh incidents:

> 'Although heavy-handed laws, threats, and violence assuredly help maintain order, coercion is the exception rather than the rule. More often, <u>uncertainty</u> over the limits of political tolerance amplifies repression and pushes people to control themselves. Public professionals are not, as others have argued, "acutely aware of permissible political boundaries," but daily cope with the anxiety of not knowing exactly where those boundaries lie (Zhao & Sun, 2007, p. 207). Uncertainty strengthens the effects of coercion and regulation and transfers much of the burden of control onto professionals themselves.'

(Stern & Hassid, 2012, pp. 1233–1234)

This aptly summarizes the phenomenon of uncertainty and self-censorship. The logic here is straightforward: if you do not know what is still safe to do, what activity you can still realise without getting into trouble, then better refrain and cancel them all to protect your own and your environment's safety. Prevention based on presumptions instead of certainty, as there is none under these insecure conditions. Civil society actors have to guess where boundaries might run; what might be within the realm of the safe, and what crosses that line. This results in lots of rumours, stories being told and hints and tips going around, as can also be observed in the Cambodian case. It can have a very stigmatising effect. Just punish a few very outspoken actors, and the others will silence their tongues as well. In the Chinese case, this illustrates:

> 'how uncertainty magnifies the effect of each instance of coercion such that it is possible to limit the political ambitions of a national network of lawyers and journalists with only relatively rare recourse to heavy-handed retribution.'

(Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1235)

This is very recognisable in Cambodia: there are few shocking examples - three prominent activists were killed in the past decade; 'just' a few high-profile organisations were shut down. Still this was sufficient to obtain a way broader silence overarching the whole sector. Not knowing what action is safe and which is not, creates a great anxiety and insecurity: 'Confusion over the boundaries of tolerance, in turn, leaves citizens unsure whether any given action will be encouraged, forbidden, or ignored.'(Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1242). This is surprisingly similar to what I encountered in my case studies: not being sure if a certain action would cause government retaliation, they frequently choose to better completely skip it to stay on the safe side. But more about this fascinating effect soon. Beyond the border between the permissible and impermissible being blurry and ambiguous, there's another convenient tool: incoherent governance:

'In a far-flung, decentralized system, uncertainty also arises because state policy is not necessarily coherent or consistent. […] Uncertainty is a potent type of control, regardless of who knows it. By allowing authorities to avoid the expense of scrupulously enforcing a uniform policy and simply zero in on whomever they want, uncertainty provides a particular advantage in large, hard-to-govern territories.'

(Stern & Hassid, 2012, pp. 1236–1239).

This has remarkable parallels to the Cambodian situation, especially concerning the LANGO, with different requirements in each province, ministry and level. Here two aspects are convenient: on one hand different requirements throughout the government create insecurity and additional hurdles. At the same time, occasionally constraining and reprimanding some agents via policies spreads fear and insecurity. This comes in handily: just almost arbitrarily target some very visible actors and thereby scare everybody else – little effort, large effect. More about this later. This is the essence of the ambiguities:

'Self-censorship is a common reaction to systemic uncertainty punctuated by occasional retribution. […] it is extraordinarily difficult in China to "anticipate state activity, search out its pattern and, in light of that pattern, calibrate movement . . . between the innocuous and the suicidal." (Boudreau, 2004, p. 3) And the very difficult calculation pushes would-be activists to err on the side of safety.'

(Stern & Hassid, 2012, pp. 1237–1238).

This greatly indicates how great ambiguities, uncertainty and retaliating shutdowns now and then lead to insecurity about permittable actions, and often result in actors being very cautious - to make sure they stay on the right side. And what is even more, Stern & Hassid (2012, p. 1238) explain: 'And when well-known organizations are shut down, others often retreat to lower profile, less controversial activities.' Retaliation of respected renown actors sends a clear signal to all civil society and can traumatise, as I will illustrate in the Cambodian context.

Control Parables

To make sense of where the line between permitted and illegal run, locals:

'transmit didactic tales of fear among themselves … increasing its reverberating effects (Robin, 2004, p. 181). […] control parables: stories about transgression that counsel caution and restrict political possibilities. Control parables are a type of didactic story that invent or recapitulate an understanding of why certain types of action are dangerous or even impossible.'

(Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1240)

These stories may be exchanged during lunch breaks or meetings, whispering how colleagues faced issues, warnings, retaliation or infringements and it is then that speculations start: about why this behaviour, topic, or circumstance crossed the line to provoke government retribution. 'Rules' are being set up about safe and unsafe behaviour, topics, etc. This is similar to notions in the Cambodian case, where organisations strive for great transparency, dissociation with the opposition party, and that way hope to stay off the government radar. And even though following these 'rules' does not guarantee protection, 'cutting back on controversial behaviour is often seen as the best way to avoid surveillance, harassment, and arrest.'(Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1243).

This theory of ambiguity, culture of fear, and control parables allows us to analyse and understand a dominant phenomenon in the case studies and Cambodian civil society more generally. It allows to better comprehend the challenges actors are dealing with - next to direct threats prominently also great insecurity about what actions would cause retaliation. This depicts a very powerful tool, that is essential in order to understand how NGOs navigate a landscape shaped by insecurity and ambiguities. Therefore,

this theory provides an indispensable addition to Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) framework for analysis: it complements their categorisation with the powerful tool of ambiguity and occasional crackdowns in a setting of insecurities. This is why these two theories jointly allow to analyse the way the NGOs are affected by the Cambodian pre-election landscape and challenges and limitations coming along with it, and thus depict essential building blocks of the overall conceptual framework.

2.7. Response Strategies

After a long search, I found different theories covering parts of the responses in the case studies. Yet all of them are not fully able to explain all aspects in themselves. Therefore, I developed a combination of different scientific theories available, complemented them with additional elements encountered and that way build my own tailor-made framework for analysis of the response strategies. This framework relies on Borgh & Terwindt (2012), Terwindt & Schliemann (2017a), Terwindt & Schliemann (2017b), Braathen et al. (2018), as well as Carothers (2016).

Borgh & Terwindt (2012) suggest a set of categories to closer analyse response strategies of NGOs. First, they ask *What do they do?* Are they *service-oriented* – thus providing certain services like trainings or material support for communities in need? Or are they *claim-making and policy-oriented* – engaged in advocacy, human rights activism and lobbying? Especially the latter are more often targeted and hit harder by limitations and suppressive actions.

Second, they examine their responses i) *individual* or *coordinated*; ii) *Reactive* or *proactive*; and iii) *pragmatic accommodating* or rather *confrontational*.
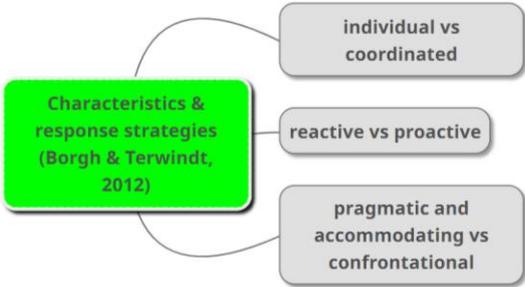

Figure 3: Characteristics & response strategies, after Borgh & Terwindt, 2012

Following Borgh & Terwindt's (2017) model, Braathen et al. (2018) offer and explain the different moves going along the diverse response strategies – following the spectrum of *individual vs. coordinated* and *reactive vs. proactive*. This categorisation was a useful tool to analyse the broader strategy of the NGOs In the figure below you find a comprehensive overview, next I will explain them in more detail.

	Reactive *Dealing with immediate pressures or protecting against symptoms*	Proactive *(Re-)claiming space*
Individual	> Close down; > shift activity to the local level; > emphasise service delivery; > self-censor; > improve the transparency and accountability of own organisation	> Build local constituencies, empower local communities; > build public awareness through evidence-based lobbying; > collaborate with the mass media; > generate revenue through domestic fund-raising, membership fees
Coordinated	> Seek alliances, protective networks at the national, regional or international level	> Mobilise people and organisations through demonstrations or petitions; > Sue the government (litigate); > Lobby for new tax regulations that enhance donations and CSOs' own revenue generation through national, regional or international funding mechanisms

Figure 4 : Response strategies, Braathen et al., 2018, p. 19 citing Borgh & Terwindt

Reactive response strategies

Defensive or reactive response strategies are mostly applied when facing imminent risks and threats. They range from security measures to self-censorship, ceasing activities and protecting the organisation. It can mean avoiding certain places, travel restrictions, constant staying-in-touch with staff members, changing the language to not include sensitive vocabulary, updating security standards, and training staff members. (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b)

Therein you find *individual reactive responses*. The most extreme response is closing an organisation or stopping all activities. Alternatively, the focus of these activities may be switched, particularly from claim-making to the less contested area of service delivery, and from a national level to a more local level. Self-censorship is very common in this context, especially surrounding delicate themes as means of protecting from harassment. Often this is during bridging a very restrictive period, while hoping for civil space to broaden up again. In phases of immediate pressure, a mostly reactive individual approach is very common. (Braathen et al., 2018)

> 'Reactive and individual responses seem to be more about surviving as activists, journalists or organisations, than an elaborate response strategy as such. This should be considered in light of the contextual opportunities for alternative strategies. It seems that reactive strategies are more prevalent in the most repressive regimes and contexts. Importantly, some refocusing strategies should also be considered pro-active.'

> (Braathen et al., 2018, p. 26)

Coordinated defensive response strategies in contrast to *individual strategies* focus on direct self-help jointly with other agents. This may entail providing security trainings, setting up an alliance, and generally coordinating responses with other organisations. Security measures frequently are a very prominent response strategy, however for long-term proactive response strategies, they are less efficient. (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b)

> 'Anxiety and paralysis due to past experiences or fears of future repression can lead to self-censorship, which can manifest in the decision to remain silent, to disguise one's objectives. […] Many communities and NGOs choose to adapt in order to fly under the radar of surveillance and restrictions.'

> (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b, p. 85).

Self-censorship spans all the way from full silence to adapting wordings. Often organisations assess that given the present circumstances, threats and risks, a defensive response strategy is the inevitable and best choice to counter these. Still, following a reactive response strategy brings along certain restrictions one should be aware of. (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b)

First, security measures may require a lot of time and resources – training staff members in internet security, following protocols to ensure staff safety when in the field etc. – time and resources that thus cannot be invested elsewhere, and that likely distract from the actual work and focus of the organisation: 'Security measures are often time-consuming, tend to distract attention from political work, and reduce capacities for longer-term strategies.' (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b, p. 83) Second, not openly criticising but instead silencing oneself on nuisances and drawbacks can result in: 'invisibilisation of pressing issues. […] Many instances of attacks, intimidation, or fabricated charges may remain unknown, as they are not reported, or their possible connection to natural resources exploitation projects may not be clearly revealed.' (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b, p. 86)

Staying silent about infringements, illegal incidents and retaliation measures thus may not draw the news' attention, and receive the attention they deserve, bringing it on the broader society agenda. Yet what is most impacting, is that a reactive strategy unlikely will succeed to change present dynamics restricting civil space in the first place:

'Most importantly, although security measures and (temporary) withdrawal may be necessary in specific moments of heightened risk, they do not challenge or change the underlying patterns that put those speaking up for their rights at risk in the first place. […] security tools pursue the immediate aim of keeping the movement alive. It is about de-escalation and preserving the movement. Nevertheless, it is necessary to work on both tracks: reactive, but also preventive.'

(Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b, p. 87)

Proactive response strategies

Opposite to a more reactive protective strategy in situations of immediate and pressing threats, there is a more proactive response strategy. The goal: (re)claim space and shift the level of operation. Especially when the government is unwilling to open up 'invited spaces' for dialogue, participation and consultation where civil society actors can participate and share their concerns, they may see the need to actively 'claim space' e.g. via protests and demonstrations. There is a clearer long-term vision that attempts to enduringly change the structure. They are 'designed to have a structural space-making impact, such as joint advocacy for legal reform.' (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b, p. 83). They are however more challenging to achieve, and therefore less common, especially when facing specific threats. Frequently, expanding space goes along with shifting activities to a higher (international) or lower local level. This reduces government control while at the same time empowering local communities to stand up for their concerns. This way, change from below can be achieved, it empowers grassroots organisations and groups to lobby, engage in the political sphere, and defend their rights. (Braathen et al., 2018)

An individual proactive response strategy often means demanding protection from the government, incriminating violations, engaging with the press, demonstrating, starting legal precedence cases, and making incidents appear before the public (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b citing Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014). Joint action within a proactive coordinated response strategy on the other hand signifies:

'coordination and networking between organizations with a view to push for structural change i. e. form a network or alliance to monitor pressures, develop a longer-term strategy or campaign, set up collective dialogue with government agencies, send out a collective press release to call attention on experienced pressures'

(Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b citing Van der Borgh and Terwindt, 2014, 135)

General patterns in response strategies are focusing on local communities, adapt activities often with a switch from claim-making activities to service-provision, investigative research, as well as building alliances with other organisations nationwide. This strives to build momentum for political change from below, open up new spaces for dialogue and draw attention to inadequacies. (Braathen et al., 2018)

Under very strong pressures and dangers, it is very natural to engage in rather defensive responses. While at a later stage, once the situation improves and civil space is less restricted, there may be more possibilities to reclaim space again, be more confrontational and outspoken. Similarly, a thorough context analysis is essential. Therefore defining 'best practices' is difficult. It is indispensable to consider topic, time period and actors involved, when analysing a response strategy (Braathen et al., 2018):

'Response strategies work best when they are based on a careful analysis of the particular country context, including the actors involved, power relations, strengths and opportunities for alliances/networks of CSOs.'

(Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017b, p. 29)

This illustrates how important considering the national civil society landscape as well as period is. Depending on these circumstances, different responses are feasible and advisable. Positionality of each organisation is essential, understanding all dynamics, risks, as well as the particular position an organisation finds itself in. This way, a comprehensive analysis of response strategies is possible. These theories are tools to approach questions like: what general response strategy do the NGOs of my case studies choose? Why? What consequences do they have?

2.8.   Adaptation & Mitigation

Besides these useful theories, I encountered further recurring elements in my research, that did not fit in any of these categories. I needed additional tools to make sense of different important findings, e.g. security measures the NGOs would engage in. Thus going one step further, from categorising whether a response strategy is reactive or proactive; individual or coordinated, I complement the conceptual framework with a theory concerning the concrete adaptation and mitigation measures organisations can make use of as suggested by Carothers (2016). He offers four different responses of international aid donors to closing space: *1) Object to specific negative actions, 2) efforts to block restrictions on NGO funding, 3) strengthen the normative and legal framework,* and *4) adaptation and mitigation* (Carothers, 2016, pp. 366–367). Carothers (2016) focuses on international aid organisations and partners supporting democracy and human rights. His perspective is on how the international community can react to civil space restrictions that are limiting human rights and democratisation efforts. Yet I argue that parts of this theory are also applicable to NGOs on the ground like in the case studies. Therefore, I will use and adapt selected relevant aspects of this theory within the conceptual framework.

While the first three are not very relevant for the Cambodian case studies, the last one - *adaptation and mitigation* - offers very useful categorisations. It refers to 'new methods of operating and programmatic initiatives designed to avoid or lessen the effects of restrictive measures' (Carothers, 2016, p. 372). Thus ways to smoothen restrictions. In that sense, it could be categorised within the reactive defensive response strategy explained above, as it is more protective reactive elements. It can be seen as a deeper level within that broader general categorisation tool offered by Borgh & Terwindt. Carothers provides four sub-categories: a) *distancing, b) protective knowledge and technology, c) tactical pullback* and *d) greater transparency*.
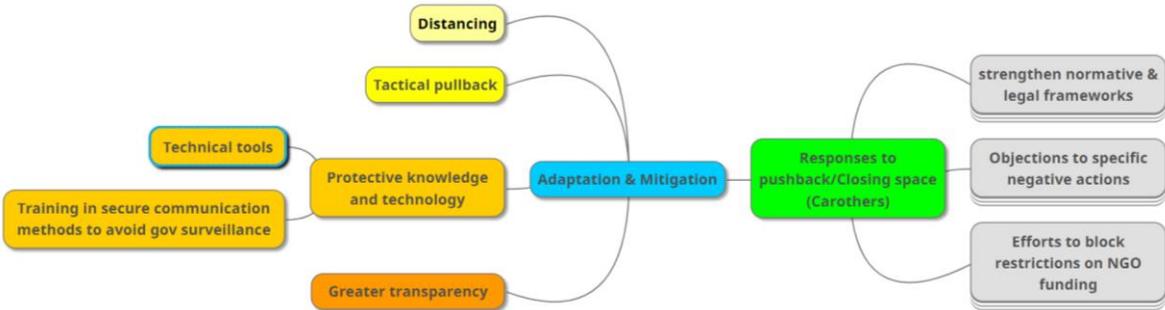
Figure 5: Responses to pushback/closing space, after Carothers, 2016

First, *distancing* means 'lowering the governmental profile of activities' (Carothers, 2016, p. 372). This can be by avoiding certain wording or not participating in risky activities. Second, a *tactical pullback* consists in 'ceasing certain activities or refraining from starting certain new ones when there is reason to believe that doing so may avoid triggering pushback' (Carothers, 2016, p. 373) e.g. not participating in demonstrations or signing petitions. Third, *protective knowledge and technology* signifies to 'increase NGO capacity to protect themselves against government repression, harassment, surveillance' (Carothers, 2016, p. 373). This can be via technical tools or secure communication trainings e.g. via internet security trainings or using special communication channels. Last but not least, *greater*

transparency is achieved via 'making information about assistance more available […] to undercut suspicions' (Carothers, 2016, p. 374) e.g. providing activity reports and funding source documents.

These categories offer a valuable addition as more detailed complex tool for analysing findings on a deeper level, compared to Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) categorisation. They provide additional ways to understand how NGOs respond, especially when facing harsh restrictions, dealing with limitations and repression, thus they fall into reactive defensive responses, but offer additional more elaborate tools for differentiating response elements therein, and thus gaining a deeper understanding. While the first three responses (marked grey in the figure) may be neglected as unfeasible option, as they are too dangerous under the given circumstances, falling into the proactive response strategies of Borgh & Terwindt, the categories surrounding adaptation and mitigation (left) are very useful, as they help understand certain actions NGOs might engage in to protect themselves and prevent damage. Carothers' *Adaptation and Mitigation measures* can be seen as another deeper layer of Borgh & Terwindt's reactive response strategies, thus they fall into this broader category, but provide more detailed categories.

3. METHODOLOGY

After having explained my conceptual framework in the previous chapter, it is now time to go into the methodology I followed for the research. I will elaborate the methods I used to gain relevant data, as well as challenges and limitations I encountered. And last but not least, how I analysed the data.

3.1. Methods

In this section I will explain my research methods, ranging from interviews to participant observation and literature study. Over a period of three months, I did extensive research, was present working in two of the organizations' offices right next to the managing staff daily. I was able to join field trips, and engage in extensive insightful conversations with high-ranking staff on a daily basis. Through lots of informal conversations, participant observation, and formal interviews, I was able collect information from diverse angles and sources (triangulation). I gained even deeper insights into and noticed subtle effects about the ways they were affected, and how they dealt with the shrinking civic space. Altogether, I spent a lot of time with the NGO staff, holding formal interviews, especially towards the end of my research, reading up on news articles to follow national developments while working in their office, and engaging in informal conversations. In this course, I applied five different methods*: 1) participant observation, 2) informal conversations, 3) interviews, 4) research of grey sources,* and *5) literature study.* Also I kept a research diary.

My first method to gain data was **participant observation**. This means being around and participating in any activities my research population would engage in while carefully observing the setting, actions, behavioural patterns, and the general sphere. While participant observation is taking place continuously I was especially focused during special occasions like meetings, training sessions, surrounding interviews, encounters and workshops. Yet also during everyday settings like lunches, scooter rides through the city, and in the office. Just being around the office, I would observe what was going on, join activities and trainings whenever possible. In these occasions especially, I could get a closer sense of the atmosphere within the NGO, the mentality, commitment and working sphere. It was in these moments that I would strongly sense the internal unity prevailing through the NGOs, solidarity of staff to their organisation and colleagues, the role of faith and personal dedication, as well as organisational commitment, and trust. I would join activities, excursions whenever possible, and that way slowly get part of the team. Feel the atmosphere, understand the culture of fear, and observe how people reacted. During meetings, eight days of assisting workshops celebrations, and two trips of several days – once with a small team, the other time with the whole staff of one of the NGOs, and even attending a wedding. The result: extensive observations of these diverse activities, giving me insights into how the NGOs were affected. And even more so, what makes them stronger and more resistant internally to stand up against challenges.

Second, I engaged in **informal conversations** with different stakeholders, whenever they arose - with NGO workers, or any other stakeholder. Over my research period, I was working at the office of two NGOs. It was mostly here that I could engage in informal conversations by just being around, picking up comments, asking questions and having quick conversations: small chats about how things work in the office, what challenges they are facing, updates/catch-ups on a scooter ride about political developments and how they perceived the current political situation, lunch chats about what this means for them and their work, how they try to manage it, etc.. By working in the office, joining day-to-day activities, and sharing insights and listening, I built up a trust relationship, and they would share more about their experiences and challenges. That way I could better understand how they were impacted on a daily basis, organisationally, facing bureaucratic hurdles. Yet I could also perceive the emotional toll

that restrictions, insecurity and intimidation had on them. I would ask a question, hang in a bit to better understand, follow-up with additional new questions popping up, and see what they wanted to share.

Most of all, I spoke to NGO staff from diverse levels of the three case study NGOs. Yet beyond also activists, other people I met somewhere in the city, that were connected to the NGO sector, like a lady I met working for Oxfam. This could be short conversations as well as longer deeper ones; swift comments up to almost complete interviews, and also messages and emails exchanged. In total I gathered more than 100 informal conversations, that I would immediately write down from my memory afterwards; collect them to later be analysed.

These small conversations on one hand allowed me to keep up-to-date with internal as well as external developments and small incidents. Beyond, they were essential for me, as they allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the impact and NGOs' response strategies to restrictions and oppression. And what is most, they gave me insights into the psychological impact of restrictions and ambiguity; it was in these conversations, between small ironic comments and cynical jokes, that I could notice the frustration and resignation. What is moving people, their struggles, feelings hidden behind sarcastic comments. Their strength of taking this frustration and backlash nevertheless with a great sense of humour, jokingly. Those chats gave me a great notion of how people perceived changes on personal emotional accounts. But especially the culture of fear, and ambiguity. This form of triangulation – getting input from diverse sources and methods to confirm the content, was very useful. After taking the time to build up trust, these informal chats gave me special information, personal insights, and information from a different complementing angle.

Next, a classic main research method were **interviews**. Interviews with staff from the three case study NGOs - from all levels ranging from high-ranking experienced senior levels to trainers and regular staff members as main stakeholders. Beyond also interviews with community network members, a researcher, as well as other NGOs relevant and supportive for my research. Further, I spoke to selected activists, a researcher, NGO umbrella staff, and a journalist with extensive knowledge on the issue.

The large majority of interviews were formal semi-structured in-depth interviews: They were in a formal setting, after requesting an interview with the respondent, usually in a closed private place. They followed an interviewer-respondent constellation and were usually recorded after obtaining the respondents' permission. At the beginning I always made sure to explain the context of the interview, quickly introduce myself and my research, and gave room for clarifying questions. I would explain that recently there have been considerable changes and restrictions in the political as well as the civil society sphere, ahead of the elections, and that I wanted to better understand what this means for the organisations, how it impacts their daily work. I confirmed the confidentiality and anonymity of the information they would share, explaining that all names and traceable information will be removed, and asked if they agreed to recording the interview. Then, I tried to only ask open questions to get extensive and in-depth answers and insights without guiding the respondent to answer in a certain direction. Though, this likely still happens unconsciously to a certain degree. Closed questions provide only limited response categories and steer the respondent to give certain answers, while open questions are way more flexible, provide the option to dig deeper into the topic, respond without following ready-made answer categories, and thus provide greater insights for my research focus.

For most of the interviews, I prepared a basic interview guide with starting questions as back-up. These would guide from first introductory questions e.g. *What are your main tasks in the organisation? How has your work changed over the time? What are the biggest challenges?* to more focused questions on the current political situation e.g. *How does the present political situation influence your work? What changes? What challenges rise? Why? How do you try to deal with these changes? How do you change the way you are working?* After, the guide provided questions about the relation with the government in general and rounded up with the option to ask any question and share remarks and comments they had. Depending on the respondent, I would adapt the interview guide questions to their respective

background, experience and expected knowledge level. These questions provided me a starting-point for the interview, and to later easily check if I had covered all important areas I wanted to ask them about. At the same time, importantly, I kept the interviews very flexible, going deeper into whatever topic would come up, going with the flow, asking clarifying questions whenever they mentioned something interesting. Afterwards, I transcribed the interviews (a very time-intensive process), analysed and categorised them according to the relevant category they were covering.

The interviews lasted from rather quick ones of 30 minutes up to interviews of two hours. In one case even three hours, and several repeated interviews with key informants from the different organisations. These interviews, by far, were the most substantial sources extent-wise from 36 informal and formal interviews. At the same time I was having the very original words of what my respondents said, not a reconstruction from my memory afterwards, which may change or falsify the information. Transcribing hours and hours of interviews was very time-consuming indeed, and I had to carefully check that the recording worked well and exclude background noises. Yet this way I was able to listen openly to my respondents, providing them my full attention. And letting them share anything that would come to their mind, while afterwards knowing their exact wording – much more exact than writing down informal conversations from my memory. This way I made sure to not put words in their mouths that they did not mean exactly that way. I provided them broad space to share and explain, while listening and noting down additional questions coming up. This way I gained great in-depth information about their experiences, challenges, and perspectives.

It was great to sit down with all these people, especially towards the end of my research period, to get their in-depth vision, assessments, have deep honest conversations, and confirm a lot of information I had gathered before, and really get to the point. I must say, I truly appreciate their honest responses, openness and sharing of a lot of personal insights, doubts, disillusionment and challenges. In some instances I even asked for several interviews with the same person, as there were so interesting insights and perspectives. I hope they were glad they could share their experiences and the challenges they faced with me, having an open ear for their concerns. Making their stories heard. As well as providing them a certain platform for them to share challenges. Their expectations likely included the hope of getting support for their organisation by gaining broader awareness. Yet also finding additional funding opportunities for the organisation to continue to exist. Beyond, they were motivated by generosity and wanting me to understand.

When not engaged in informal conversations, I did **research of grey sources**: I read loads of articles, especially news articles. I was following national politics with special focus on NGOs, human rights organisations and natural resources. My main source hereby was *The Phnom Penh Post*, pretty much the only independent English-speaking news outlet left in Cambodia after the shutdown of the *Cambodia Daily*. As the Phnom Penh Post also served as major source of information for my respondents, it was very useful to stay up-to-date on what was happening and moving the country.

Via reading newspaper articles, I was able to follow national developments and know what was going on nationwide: what happened to other organisations and actors, broader political developments affecting the civil society sphere, and ultimately NGOs. I learnt about new legislation, what shaped the national landscape. But I especially paid attention to other CSOs being affected, human rights organisations getting on the watch list, environmental activists under investigation, other NGOs under pressure, and restrictive policies. I collected extensive information to receive a broad picture of the political and civil society sphere characterising the Cambodian pre-election context. Via 50 articles, I gathered information on a range of political and environmental topics.

Beyond, via **literature study** of secondary sources (scientific articles available as well as grey sources), I gained a broader understanding of the overall context, and stakeholders. I looked for relevant scientific literature providing me deeper background information and understanding on the topic, with thematic as well as theoretical focus. Hereby, I used scientific search machines like google scholar to find relevant

scientific articles that describe the topic. Thereby, I gained a better understanding of the phenomena I encountered – shrinking civil space and the culture of fear – both articles providing theories for my conceptual framework as well as articles providing me insights into how these played out in a range of countries, and giving examples via case studies on how restrictions affected civil society in other countries. Next to scientific literature study, I also read relevant reports from sources like Global Witness, Human Rights Watch, or the Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Report. They gave me great concrete insights into the changing civil space and NGO context worldwide. That way I gathered insights from reports over NGOs, NGO publications, scientific articles, thesis research, reports on civil society restrictions, and legislation undermining basic rights.

Last but not least, a very insightful source was the **research diary** I kept throughout my whole research period. Here, every evening, I would take time to reflect and write down my thoughts, questions, progress in my research, data collection, and challenges of every day. I would collect what surprised me, difficulties I encountered, and reflections on the overall progress. The result were 18 pages of 'research diary entries'. These illustrate changes from my very first day over a period of three months, to how my focus changed, what things caught my attention already at the very beginning, my early thoughts and how many of them interestingly were later confirmed. Yet also my struggles, research limitations, restrictions challenges e.g. around 'doing no harm', and personal bias. It shows how I shifted my whole research focus after difficulties of accessing my original field, but also allows to observe my researcher development, growth in research skills, e.g. doing interviews, finding the right people to interview, and working together with a translator. That way it is a beautiful tool to look back at my personal journey, yet also gives great insights about points that stroke me, the essence of my findings, bias, and the key lessons and insights I gained in my research.

3.2. Data Processing

Over the three months, I collected pages and pages of notes and bullet points. I ordered these via the type of method used to gather this information. Names of respondents as well as organisations and places were changed and then anonymised completely to assure protecting respondents. After the field research, I drafted the logical sequence of chapters that I would follow and shortly elaborated what I would cover in each chapter. I carefully screened all my notes, organised them systematically depending on which topic they covered, and arranged them in the according chapter. Then I would re-organise them internally thematically chapter-wise, as basis to writing out the different chapters while applying the conceptual framework for analysis and using quotes whenever fitting and telling. For anonymising respondents information and names, I replaced each name by a nick name during data collection. I removed the location of interviews taken, as well as possibly sensitive information, that might enable a person to be traced back. I replaced all three NGO names by NGO X, making it difficult to trace back which NGO the information referred to.

3.3. Challenges & Limitations

There are several impactful limitations and challenges within my research I need to point out: 1) the language barrier, 2) positionality, and 3) do no harm.

Language Barrier

Firstly, the **language barrier**: As my new research population largely spoke very good English, I could directly engage with them, have informal informative conversations, and was not dependent on a translator. This solved the language barrier issue greatly, yet not fully, as I did not speak Khmer, it was

not possible for me to follow all activities, conversations, catch small comments etc. in Khmer, as this shows:

> 'At NGO X I feel always more part, especially due to Sarah who tells me about her kids, invites me to join for lunch with all the ladies, integrates me. I started bringing my own lunch, bread and pineapple, to share with them :D The only problem so far: I don't speak Khmer, so I don't understand anything except when they translate. So they probably share relevant information in informal comments, but I cannot understand them.'

<div align="right">(field notes, 05.12.2017)</div>

Indeed, while I had loads of great conversations with NGO staff, I mostly was not able to understand their internal conversations over lunch etc., which would have been another great source of information.

Further, there were only limited sources in English I could access because of the language barrier, e.g. the Phnom Penh Post being the only English newspaper outlet left. While the large majority written in Khmer was not accessible to me. This limited my research possibilities and consequently the results.

Positionality – heroes vs. bad guys

Next, the positionality of myself as researcher: here, a double bias is present: On one hand I myself am obviously not a neutral 'research tool' free of bias and stereotypes. Instead, my perceptions, norms and values are strongly shaped by my socialisation and experiences as young white female European student. On the other hand, this, too, influences the way others perceive me. They portray certain expectations and images upon me that may shape their responses, and may deliver 'desirable answers'.

Yet what is even more important concerns me as researcher not being neutral and fully objective, but having a subjective perspective. Being biased into certain directions, which by force influence the research results. In my case, I did a rather one-sided research, focusing on the NGOs and how they were impacted by government actions and policies. Yet not examining the other side of the picture – government agents, as I deemed this as too risky (see later). In this sense, I kind of turned the NGO staff into 'victims" or 'heroes' resisting the challenges and retaliations, which of course is oversimplifying. For a long period, I strongly focused on gaining the inside perspective, understanding how NGO staff were impacted, how they perceived the situation, and bit by bit took over this vision. I tried to really understand the NGO perspective. Yet that meant that I started seeing all government agents in a very negative light, protracting a bad image on any representative, as this was the pre-dominant framing, yet without ever having spoken to a government representative in person.

Eventually I spoke to more outside respondents, gained external perspectives, which allowed me to take on a different perspective. Some overlapped from the NGO perspectives, some differed, which allowed seeing diverse framings and perceptions of the situation, and in that gaining a more differentiated view. At the end of my field research then, I realised that it might indeed be perfectly possible to speak to a government agent, an option that before I did not even consider out of fear of endangering my respondents. Yet due to the little time left, interviewing a government representative unfortunately did not work out anymore. This does not mean that my findings are incorrect. They simply show in-depth how NGO staff experienced and dealt with restrictions and challenges. While this is what my research question targeted, with hindsight, showing both sides of the picture would have been beneficial, to gain a more balanced picture.

Beyond, NGO staff are not one homogeneous plain group with every staff member sharing the same experiences, perspectives, and objectives. Naturally, there are also internal different interest, agency, and strategies. They do not operate in neutral space, where 'the good ones' standing up for 'the right thing' fight against 'the bad ones; the evil' being the government – this vision is clearly improper. Thus with my study, I only studied one side, glorifying my research population to a certain extent by mostly

learning only about their experience and turning them into 'victims' of repressive government actions and 'heroes' defending civil space, which of course changes the research results. Obviously, the government is not one homogeneous mass of corruptible actors exploiting every possibility to repress civil society activism and get some extra cash. It is not one unity, but a diverse collection, where some people indeed want to make a positive difference.

Similarly, I also quickly took over the narrative of the colour revolution being a conspiracy theory, created by the Cambodian government. As tool to justify repressing civil society. Diverse NGO staff and newspapers framed it as a spurious conspiracy theory promoted by the government; a theory that was completely indefensible and to be condemned. Yet given the US history of involvement in other countries and staging coups to overthrow opposing governments, this might not be fully far-fetched. While indeed the US have a history of supporting coups that overthrow unappreciated governments abroad, e.g. in Chile, Brazil, Panama or Vietnam, I quickly adopted the framing of my surrounding of the 'colour revolution': seeing it as an false accusation, to be able to take harsh measures against the opposition party and outspoken NGOs. Yet when watching the extensive explanatory video produced by the government to oust these coup aspirations, Kem Sokha indeed stated that he received continuous training in how to change the government through revolutionary efforts. So who knows how justified and true the 'colour revolution' claims may or may not be?

This likely also was related to my news updates mainly originating from one single source, the Phnom Penh Post, which naturally is not fully neutral in its reporting, but follows a certain perspective, position, and objective, as becomes clear from finding the same formulation about the 'internationally condemned dissolution of the CNRP' in almost every second article they would publish. As politicised and positioned news outlet, one needs to ask questions. If most NGO staff read this newspaper, how objective and reliable is their perspective on the political situation?

Do no harm – navigating a highly contested field

I refrained from interviewing government agents because I too was taken by the culture of fear and afraid that engaging with government actors could easily allow them to draw the line:

> 'Every time more, I'm figuring out how easily my research can get people that shared info with me into serious trouble. Even though I change all the names and use synonyms, but just if the government would check my […] they could easily make the connections. That's scary. I don't think they would check on my research, I don't think it's important enough, no intention to publish it somewhere openly anyway. But still the thought, if all this info got somewhere public and they would start investigating, it's almost impossible to 100% protect my respondents. Very scary thought. And indeed, the one getting into trouble would not be me, but them.'

(field notes, 03.01.2018)

I by all means strived to protect my respondents, and in this very insecure setting, I also did and still do not know how far I can go, before bringing my respondents into danger, what would cross the line. Even when writing this, I find it very difficult to know what information I can include, and what might possibly put respondents at risk. So I chose to better stay on the save side instead of endangering my respondents by interviewing government agents. Also, other students recommended me to be very careful. It was very difficult to know what would be risky, how to secure the key research imperative of 'doing no harm' and best protect respondents? How to eliminate every possibility of bringing them into trouble? In this insecurity, it was very difficult to know what to believe. Was the government's "colour revolution" all made up? Was it simply a conspiracy theory? Or was there something true about it? And does the NGO and critical media perspective adequately describe the situation? I found myself torn between what I could believe, and dived into the NGO perspective. I decided to not interview

government agents for the largest period of my field research, engaged in anonymisation, and when asked about my research by acquaintances, provided rather vague responses to avoid traceability.

In this very ambiguous and insecure setting, shaped by rumours, people being scared of spies, and half-knowledge, it was very difficult to assure to not put participants in danger. How to protect them effectively? What might risk their organisation being shut down, and what info is harmless? What information can be shared, what is safe to say and what crosses the line? This also showed visibly in the very writing of this thesis, not being sure what information given by or about respondents can be mentioned, and what puts them at risk. And even trying to illustrate the risks and what might happen is very difficult, as I just didn't know what the risks were, what might have happened or still happen to them if the 'wrong' type of information gets into the wrong hands. This very difficulty illustrates this blurry, insecure sphere, where manoeuvring within is very challenging, as everything is based upon assumptions, guesses.

A last challenge I encountered was how to study the effects of government policies and actions, and the power of these, when often these effects consisted in organisations <u>not</u> following up with certain activities, <u>not</u> doing certain trainings, and <u>not</u> expressing certain thoughts openly. Thus a lot of actions not taking place, and therefore hard to observe:

> 'Unlike a policy change or a protest, quiescence […] takes place in […] the "hidden sphere" or the prepolitical "semi-darkness" of inaction (Havel, 1986, p. 66). By definition, this is a challenging place for research. It is hard to study actions *not* taken, especially when decisions rely less on fact than on perception. Power, as Lukes observes, is "most effective when it is least observable."'

<div align="right">(Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1232)</div>

While there is a lot of action before inaction, these actions are often difficult to observe. They are exchanges, collecting information, rumours, identifying the problem. Then together evaluating, assessing the situation, the risk, discussing, reflecting. And eventually decision-making, often in collaboration with partners, and communicating these decisions. Through informal conversations and participant observation, I tried to get insights into these assessments, perceptions, collecting information, and eventually decision-making.

All these challenges and limitations need to be carefully be taken into account, when considering the research outcomes, and complemented by further research.

4. CONTEXT – SHRINKING CIVIL SPACE

In this thesis I illustrate how NGOs are impacted and deal with shrinking civil space in the Cambodian pre-election setting proceeding the 2018 national elections. I will illustrate this via three in-depth case studies of three NGOs active in Cambodia, both national and international ones. Yet before diving into their experiences and response strategies, it is important to get an adequate idea of the situation on the ground: the broader context in which these case studies took place - the socio-political climate.

Civil space is shrinking in many places around the world, European countries included. Yet these developments cannot be compared one-to-one to the distinct Cambodian context. Despite similarities, each context is different, due to its history, culture, political sphere and power constellations, and needs to be approached individually. Therefore, I will provide a general overview of the broader Cambodian context, including recent developments in the political and civil society sphere. Beyond explaining the phenomenon of the 'colour revolution', intimidating court cases against opposition politicians, and forced closures of NGOs and media outlets, I will try to convey a feeling of the ambiguous atmosphere, the 'culture of fear' and insecurities dominating the Cambodian pre-election period. It will allow to properly understand the socio-political, emotional, and institutional environment the NGOs were embedded and had to manoeuvre in. It shows what kind of situation national civil society found itself in during the tense pre-election period, and implications thereof for NGOs.

The set-up of this chapter is the following: I first shed light onto the political sphere, explaining recent political developments, the dissolution of the opposition party, and the colour revolution. I will also give a short flashback into recent Cambodian history. Next, I illustrate how the sphere of civil society is influenced. This ranges from public intimidation to limitations and crackdowns in the media and NGO landscape. And finally, I round up with a quick notion into the culture of fear perpetrating civil space.

4.1. Political Sphere - 'Death of Democracy'

In their 2016 critical report 'Hostile Takeover', notorious environmental and human rights INGO *Global Witness* accuse Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen:

> "[…] behind the scenes of Hun Sen's dictatorial rein, his family is amassing vast personal fortunes, tracing the contours of a huge network of secret deal-making, corruption and cronyism which is helping secure the prime minister's political fortress. Hun Sen is the world's sixth longest-serving premier having been in power for 30 years, years that have been characterised by electoral fraud and the brutal suppression of political opposition, including through murder, torture and arbitrary imprisonment."

(Global Witness, 2016, p. 1)

A proud 500 million to 1 billion US$ was the Sen's estimated family wealth, with family members controlling large parts of Cambodia's economy. Hun Sen's extended family profits large-scale from Cambodia's natural resources – foremost land and forests – over decades gaining impressive amounts from this business. Corruption is generally wide-spread. Beyond, large-scale land grabs displace populations in such a scale that they amount to crimes against humanity in front of the International Criminal Court. (Global Witness, 2016)

As consequence to the open critique *Global Witness* were soon after kicked out of the country. What hit headlines more, was the notorious murder of political commentator and activist Kem Ley, a few days after the publication of the report. Ley, in a radio interview, had confirmed that many of the accusations indeed built upon righteous previous investigations, and encouraged the government to carefully revise the accusations and take consequent action. Two days after that interview, he was shot in broad daylight

at a gas station in Phnom Penh. The perpetrator was a man who claimed Ley owed him 3000$. Both his and Ley's wife denied any relation between the two. Impartial in-depth investigations have yet to take place. (Human Rights Watch, 2018)

Ley's murder sent a clear warning to government critics and left many traumatised. It's a name people bring up often, that sticks on their minds, that people murmur premonitorily. Kem Ley became a hero, a martyr, a warning sign.

History flashback

Before diving further into the Cambodian pre-election scenery, here's a quick history flashback into Cambodian recent history to better understand present-day Cambodia: Cambodia formally is an elective constitutional monarchy. In 1953 it gained independence from the French. Two decades later, the Communist Khmer Rouge took power after five-years of civil war 1970-1975. They ruled the country from 1975 to 1979 – a period in which the regime committed dreadful annihilation of any supposed regime opponents, amounting to genocide with around a quarter of the population left dead. In 1991 then the Paris Peace Accords were signed, and after a short transition period lead by a UN Mission through the UNTAC (UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia), national elections took place. The dominant *Cambodian People's Party* (CPP) has been governing Cambodia since 1979, making it one of the longest-governing parties in the world. Since the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, Cambodia is formally a liberal multiparty democracy under a constitutional monarchy. This democratisation process was supported by international efforts to enhance democracy, human rights and the rule of law. While the standard of holding up democratic norms has been contended, and protests disputing the 2013 election results have been defeated with violence, basic democratic principles including the multiparty system were in place. However, since the prohibition of the one major opposition party *Cambodia National Rescue Party (*CNRP) in late 2017, Cambodia has practically turned into a one-party state authoritarian dictatorship. Hun Sen was elected prime minister in 1985 and is since then the longest serving head of government in Southeast Asia, governing the country for more than three decades. And one thing is sure: he is not willing to step down easily and hand over to the unloved CNRP, which creates considerable political tensions ahead of another national election coming up.

Colour revolution

The political situation in Cambodia was remarkably tense during the field research period end of 2017/early 2018. The cause: National elections coming up in July 2018. The rumour of the 'colour revolution' is afloat nationwide - a conspiracy narrative promoted by the government disclosing an apparent coup attempt by the opposition party. The "colour revolution" is predominantly described as a conspiracy theory created by the Cambodian government. It accuses the former Cambodian opposition party – the CNRP, with their supposed strong allies of attempting to stage a coup. The goal: to illegally overthrow the Cambodian government (Lipes, 2017). This attempt supposedly is supported by Western forces, foremost by the USA and numerous NGOs. In how far this movement existed and posed a threat is highly disputed from diverse sides. Critical voices incriminate the 'colour revolution' as conspiracy theory without actual foundation. According to these, this serves as convenient justification for harsh government restrictions and crackdown on adversary opposition and civil society actors.

The government claims to have successfully prevented an impeding revolution, showing apparent proof in an extensive video which links the Cambodian colour revolution to revolutionary movements in MENA using the same clenched first. In this video broadcasted on national television, they accuse around 40 organisations of colluding with the CNRP to overthrow the legit government (Dara & Baliga, 2017a). According to critical news outlets, the video provides justification for extensive restrictions and interventions (Dara & Baliga, 2017b). The government assigns government-critical assemblies as being

part of the 'colour revolution' to seemingly justify interferences, bans, and shut down assemblies (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 44). A popular target: the 'Black Monday protests', where people dress all in black to demand an independent investigation of Kem Ley's murder, appropriate action for land grabbing victims, and the release of jailed human rights activists (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017). Early 2018 then a book is published showing exactly how the government supposedly prevented the foreign-backed colour revolution attempts.

Former opposition leader Kem Sokha is therefore arrested in September 2017, in the middle of the night for treason charges (Sokhean, Dara, & Baliga, 2017). The arrest and following investigation are mostly based on a 2013 video, in which he states that for years he has received democracy training in the USA and was advised on how to achieve a change in Cambodian leadership. More than a year later - after the election turmoil is overcome with a smooth win of the ruling party Cambodian People's Party (CPP) in an infamous one-horse-race - he is finally released on bail in September 2018. The former opposition leader Sam Rainsy remains exiled after fleeing charges of incitement and defamation. Together with a large proportion of Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) politicians that left the country due to threats and the current political pressure. The motive of the charges against Rainsy: accusing strongman Hun Sen and his government of pulling the strings behind the notorious murder of Cambodian activist Kem Ley.

Indeed, it has to be noted that colour revolutions have been quite common recently, ranging from the Arab Spring to revolutions in Eastern Europe. Many civil society and political actors yearn to see political change in Cambodia, with the increasing powerful opposition party channelling their hopes. Yet they dominantly want to achieve this the legal way - through (fairly transparent) national elections, instead of an illegal coup. The colour revolution narrative enables emergency state actions and harsher crackdown on adversaries.

In the line of the colour revolution accusations and investigations, the unexpected happens – a major U-turn for democracy in Cambodia: the opposition party CNRP is dissolved by a Supreme Court decision on November 16th 2017, deactivating the one major party with the potential to challenge Prime Minister Hun Sen's more than three-decade-rule and steadily increasing control over the whole country (Chheng & Nachemson, 2017). More than one hundred opposition politicians are banned from engaging in politics for the five following years, effective immediately. The legal justification for the ruling: Recent legislative changes illegalising involvement with a criminal or plotting with people 'against the interest of the Kingdom of Cambodia' (Sokhean et al., 2017): the March 2017 amendment of the *Law on Political Parties* (LPP) infringes international standards on basic freedoms. Article 18 forbids party leaders to be convicted for a crime or demeanour with non-suspended jail sentence – an excellent legal club to dissolve adversaries: 'This is particularly alarming because numerous political leaders in Cambodia have been subject to criminal charges in politically motivated cases.' (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 19).

Beyond, the amendment brings infringements that can suspend or dissolve a party right at the point. Among others: 'subverting the liberal multiparty democracy and the constitutional monarchy; affecting the security of the state; and incitement that would lead to national disintegration' (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 7). A splendid tool to dispose of undesired contenders.

This legal ruling dissolving the opposition party effectively turns the Kingdom into an authoritarian one-party state, putting away with the increasingly popular CNRP, who had gained 44% of popular votes in the previous national elections 2013 (Richards, 2017). Thanks to previous amendments to election laws, all seats in the National Assembly as well as almost 500 representative positions over the whole country are conveniently transferred to the ruling CPP and other small parties (Sokhean et al., 2017).

Legal actions to dispose of adversaries are accompanied by occasional intimidation ranging up to death threats from the Prime Minister himself. In that, he clearly does not mince his words. So did he threaten

critics and opponents to "prepare their coffins" should they continue to endanger national security, and voiced "In order to ensure peace and protect the lives of millions of people, if it is necessary to eliminate 100 or 200 people, they must be eliminated." (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, 67; Chheng & Chen, 2017). At another occasion he hinted at the assassination of opposition leaders Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, had he known of their 'colour revolution' coup attempts: "If I had seen that at the time, they would already be dead; it would be their funeral." (Chheng & Chen, 2017). The message is clear: anybody too outspoken, too critical towards the government, endangering Hun Sen's decade-long rule, is putting his/her life on the line.

4.2. National Context Analysis

Returning to Borgh & Terwindt (2012) analysis of how NGOs are affected by shrinking civil space, their first indicator for an in-depth analysis is the broader political context. Considering the political regime orientation, there has been a clear shift towards a more authoritarian trend in the recent period:

> 'Cambodia's political system has been dominated by Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) for more than three decades. The country has held semi-competitive elections in the past, but in 2017 it moved much closer to outright authoritarian rule with the banning of the main opposition and shuttering of independent media outlets.'

> (Freedom House, 2018b)

The Cambodian case is strongly leaning towards an authoritarian state with limited democratic institutions and increasing infringement of basic freedoms of expression and assembly. It is basically turning into a one-party-rule. The same prime minister has been in power since more than three decades; there is massive corruption, and a shift towards dictatorship with little space for people to speak out. They still have voting power technically, yet with only one party strong enough to compete with the ruling party being forbidden in a court case, that is not of much use. Cambodians can indeed vote their representatives, yet the selection is strongly limited with the opposition party dissolved by force – 'death of democracy' as Phil Robertson titled.

Power is strongly concentrated in Hun Sen and his family's hand. He controls all three powers, judiciary, legislative and executive. Responsibility to the people is limited, government critiques find themselves in danger. Even Facebook is controlled, and if one speaks out too much, one quickly gets reminded of the destiny of Kem Ley. This answers the question of authoritarian or democratic. *Yet how about the weak state or strong state?*

Applying Borgh and Terwindt's (2012) categorisation of authoritarian states in the Cambodian setting, it is not that the government is unable to protect NGOs and civil space. It is against their interest. Instead, they are the ones actively suppressing civil space and restricting NGO activity nationwide. Thus, I argue that Cambodia is leaning to a *strong state*, as it firmly controls civil space and strongly restricts NGOs and their activities both by direct and even less so by indirect actions and policies. The 'local political field' in pre-election Cambodia can thus be seen as controlled by an authoritarian strong state.

Borgh & Terwindt (2012) beyond describe three different example scenarios of weak/strong democratic/authoritarian states: first an authoritarian state, second a relatively open society and third a weak state with contested power. The latter clearly does not apply to the Cambodian context. Yet many parallels can be found between their first two scenarios.

In **authoritarian states**, government frequently limit NGOs via administrative measures – a policy that clearly plays in the LANGO regulations. Exhaustive procedures include registration, funding approval, reports, insights on staff, funding sources and activities (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012). This conforms with requirements from the Cambodian government to provide detailed reports, lay open the funding, and ask for permission for all activities. Further, governments can try to coopt NGOs. This is

a very recent phenomena, via a new joint governmental umbrella, where NGOs will be able to access Chinese funding, yet only for non-sensitive topics – thus no advocacy, democracy and human rights focus. Borgh & Terwindt (2012) explain that monitoring, regulating, and cooptation of the NGO sector are very common – all which can be recognised in the Cambodian context. Administrative measures, intimidation and social stigmatisation are impressively recognisable in the Cambodian context. The whole NGO sector experiences stigmatisation through NGOs facing legal challenges and people becoming afraid to engage with NGOs overall out of fear. The general accusation is to attempt a coup, thus clearly being anti-government. Legal instruments are a major tool for closing down NGOs as explained above. And direct repression in intimidation and even up to extra-judicial killing are present as well, considering the cases of Kem Ley and Chut Wutty for example. This clearly supports categorising the present Cambodian setting as strongly leaning towards a strong authoritarian state.

The second scenario they describe is that of 'Claim-making NGOs facing obstacles touching upon vested interests in **relatively open societies'** (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1074). Here NGOs only face issues when active in 'claim-making' topics, which then may face serious restrictions. These restrictions may increase during special periods of protest, or for example elections.

Borgh & Terwindt (2012) highlight two NGO types especially vulnerable: NGOs focusing on human rights and natural resources. And indeed, in the Cambodian context it is those two groups that face most retaliations. It is particular groups that are especially at risk, NGOs and grassroot activists. Just think of Kem Ley and Chut Wutty as chilling deterrence cases. These selected crackdowns and murders suffice to silence large parts of civil society.

Considering the Cambodian pre-election case, a shift can be seen from the second to the first scenario. While human rights and environmental NGOs and groups are generally more targeted due to conflicting interest in natural resources or critique of human rights violations, during the Cambodian pre-election period a general trend is clearly visible: towards a steadily more authoritarian regime. The opposition party is closed down, as are several NGOs. Limitations are very frequent, and the government makes use of a large scale of tools and actions to restrict the shrinking civil space, via intimidation, stigmatisation, legal hurdles, physical harassment and cooptation. I thus categorise the Cambodian local political context as authoritarian strong state setting, where NGOs have to navigate in.

4.3. Civil Society Sphere - Shrinking Civil Space

The Cambodian civil society sphere includes NGOs, community organisations, INGOs, unions, political parties, foremost the CNRP, and media outlets. National and international NGOs play a major role shaping civil society sphere. Most NGOs originated after the period of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), in the 1990s, which has been a thorn in the CPPs eye restricting national sovereignty ever since (Baliga, 2017 quoting Sebastian Strangio). Cambodia has then seen a boom in NGOs and INGOs since the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in the early 1990s.

Till 2005 the Cambodian NGO landscape already counted almost 1500 national and 340 international registered NGOs. Yet of these, only 45% of national were active, compared to 93% of international NGOs. In total, 24,000 local and 1,200 international staff were employed. Due to limited membership, accountability was limited and dependency on donor partners was very high with domination of funding by international NGOs. (Sande, 2010) Till 2013 the number rose to 3500 registered NGOs, being the second largest number worldwide, yet less than half of them were active. Frequently, they are active in the fields, where the government fails to provide, and present the first responders in cases of disasters. Certain controversies exist surrounding the lack of structure and coordination among this bulk of NGOs, commercialisation, and misunderstanding of NGOs, applying the label also for for-profit companies. (Domashneva, 2013) In 2018 the number of active NGOs and associations then was estimated to 1,350, with 1,100 small community-based organisations active in Cambodia (Mooney & Baydas, 2018). The

focus was largely on service delivery, while less than 10% focused on human rights, democracy and advocacy. According to the Cambodian government, 5300 NGOs were registered, yet many inactive.

Political scientist and consultant with specialisation on Cambodian politics, Markus Karbaum explains the cause of retribution and harassment for NGOs in the first place:

> "The very nature of national NGOs refusing to subordinate themselves to Hun Sen and his CPP's claim to power makes them a general threat. Many NGOs created in the 90s were founded by former BLDP republicans, with roots in the Lon Nol-regime – both of which were highly combated by Hun Sen, first as Khmer Rouge commander, later as Vice Prime minister. This threat is additionally enhanced by their independent civil self-conception. They nevertheless being tolerated was due to the post-UNTAC period, where Western donors requested at least lip service to democratisation as conditionality of their support. Second, Western donors were indirectly protecting international NGOs thus providing them ample space for action.'

(Karbaum, Markus, personal communication, 16.01.2018)

With the decreasing importance (and particularly amount) of Western aid, this brings the opportunity to get rid of these unloved annoyances interfering in the CPP's path. Complying with democracy and human standards was often closely connected to receiving Western aid. Thus, the government had to, at least formally, subscribe to these and take efforts for enforcing these standards. Often the motivation for this was not intrinsic, but forced upon from the outside through conditionalities for receiving aid funds. Now with Western aid quickly decreasing, and focusing on other pressing needs, also the weight of Western influences – along Western values – is diminishing. Chinese aid does not go along with these kind of conditionalities bound to receiving their funding. Thus the Cambodian government has more freedom to follow its path, without being bound to obligations of complying with certain standards.

The political pressure ahead of the 2018 national elections does not spare civil society: after a shutdown of more than a dozen independent media outlets and radio stations, there is hardly any free press left. Freedom of expression and association is limited. There is strong police presence. Too critical voices are attacked repeatedly. Outspoken NGOs investigated or even banned. Human rights organisation are especially under attack. After drawing an image of the political developments in Cambodia ahead of the 2018 elections, this section now focuses on civil society and how this sector is influenced. Particular focus is placed on NGOs, legal obstacles, arbitrary law enforcement, and the culture of fear created.

Intimidation, freedom of expression and media landscape

Public intimidation is a very present aspect shaping public space in Cambodia, especially in precarious election times. This entailed two aspects: on the one hand notorious cases of organisations being threatened or activists even being killed in dubious ways, most prominently political commentator Kem Ley and environmental activist Chut Wutty.

Secondly, public intimidation also took the form of pervasive police presence throughout the capital city, reminding people of the power of the police forces. In one 20-min ride through the city I for example spotted police officers critically watching the surrounding people three times on the way (participant observation, ride to office, 01.11.2017). Throughout my field months, I noticed strong frequent police and military presence of officers in green uniforms and with arms carefully examining their surroundings, especially surrounding the royal palace area, markets, and major streets (participant observation, riding around the city, 12.12.2017). This heightened especially surrounding the court case on the dissolution of the opposition party. So was a close friend of mine stopped three times nearby the Royal palace, the day before the court case, for apparently no clear reason (Lana, informal conversation, 16.11.2017).

Political freedom of expression is considerably inhibited in the Cambodian legal context, particularly if the expression is critical towards the ruling party. Additionally, the 2016 *Telecommunications Law* restricts freedom of expression by e.g. prohibiting electronic expressions that create 'national insecurity' (Article 80). Unfortunately, a definition is lacking, leaving it all to the mind of the interpreter.

While citizens are mostly free to express their personal views, it is often unclear how far this goes. The internet provides a largely free space for sharing and discussion, yet the government has arrested individuals for critical online expression, such as in July 2017 for a video condemning Hun Sen for the killing of Kem Ley. (Freedom House, 2018a)

Diverse recent legal amendments curtail human rights, particularly freedom of expression and association seriously. This is further enhanced by very blurry and broad formulations because they give broad space for (mis)interpretation and blanket execution. One example of the *Law on Election of Members of the National Assembly* (LEMNA): NGOs and INGOs have to guard '*neutrality and impartiality*' relating to the conduct of electoral affairs. Political speech is restricted, especially when government-critical. Another article of the LEMNA requests: 'any person who, by all means, publicly insults a political party shall be fined.

<div align="right">(Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 8).</div>

These vague and broad regulations severely limit the capacities of CSOs to supervise and monitor dubious electoral affairs and beyond - any critical remark can serve as justification for legal proceedings and harassment (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 21). In a nutshell, exhausting formal requirements, blurry penalization and demands to remain politically independent jeopardize fundamental freedoms:

> 'Onerous registration and reporting requirements, disproportionate sanctions and the requirement of political neutrality threaten the fundamental freedoms of individuals and associations alike. The vague language used in these laws increases the risk of arbitrary enforcement.'

<div align="right">(Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 9)</div>

An open and diverse media landscape is an essential tool providing people access to diverse information. Independent media channels have the possibilities to analyse developments, critically comment and broadcast them to a vast public. They thus play an essential role for opinion formation in democracies, especially ahead of elections - a major chance for citizens to voice their opinions concerning the political trajectory most favoured by them. Freedom House to the point sum up the events on the recent opposition and media crackdown:

> 'Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen oversaw a decisive crackdown on the country's beleaguered opposition and press corps as his Cambodian People's Party prepared for national elections in 2018. [...] In a series of blows to free expression, the authorities shuttered the independent Cambodia Daily, pushed several radio stations off the air, and announced that sharing criticism of the government on social media was a crime.'

<div align="right">(Freedom House, 2018a, p. 14)</div>

There is a massive clampdown on media outlets ahead of the national elections. More than a dozen radio stations, newspapers and news outlets are cracked down. In August 2017 alone, 15 local radio stations are closed, among them popular independent radio stations like *Voice of America* and *Radio Free Asia*. (Freedom House, 2018b)

RFA closes its Cambodian office in August 2017. One month later one of the few independent English news outlets, the *Cambodia Daily*, has to close due to tax evasion allegations and not being able to pay the 6,3 million USD requested (Baliga, 2017). The American owner of the newspaper voices suspicion about the sudden and massive charges being of political nature. Similarly, the last remaining prominent

English-Khmer newspaper *The Phnom Penh Post*, - openly critical of the government and providing the main source of independent information and critical news updates for many – also faced a 5 million USD tax bill. In May 2018 then, notably parallel to resolving the tax issue, big news spreads:

> 'A newspaper widely seen as the last bastion of a free press in Cambodia has been sold to a Malaysian investor with ties to Cambodia's strongman prime minister, a move that critics say further highlights the country's slide toward outright authoritarianism.'

(Wallace & Ives, 2018)

Immediately after the sale, several senior members of the newspaper are fired or resign as reaction to internal censorship: they refused to remove a critical article shedding light on the relation of the new owner to the Cambodian government from the paper's website. This leaves a desert-like media landscape in Cambodia: hardly any independent press available, major critical channels shut down after facing tremendous tax charges, and a dozen local radio stations closed down.

Cambodian NGO sector

In their *First Annual Report* spanning the period from April 2016 to March 2017 (thus more than a year ahead of the national elections, and several months before my field research) the *Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project* zoom in on the situation of the Cambodian NGO sector:

> 'Extra-legal restrictions on civil society and those critical of the RGC (Royal Government of Cambodia) are prevalent. […] Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community groups have found themselves subject to excessive monitoring by RGC actors. Meetings, workshops and training activities across Cambodia are regularly interrupted by police officers who insist on seeing proof of prior permission in order to allow activities to proceed. Often police sit through meetings, take note of participants and/or take photographs.'

(Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, pp. i–ii)

NGOs are frequently monitored and supervised. Often, police interfere or even cancel activities if no permission has been obtained. All these actions have strong intimidating effects on both NGO staff as well as participants in their activities. Beyond, the report accuses the *Law on Associations and NGOs* (LANGO), Trade Union Law and *Law on Political Parties* to '(…) undermine fundamental freedoms (and) pose a threat to freedom of association' (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017), which I will elaborate more on below.

Over their research period, they collected almost 400 restrictions or violations of fundamental freedoms. 60 times they received reports about police illegally interfering meetings and trainings. Only every 7th trade union or civil society leader felt he/she could safely join civil society activities without being afraid of CPP harassment. Interestingly, they also point out the triggering phenomenon of highly curtailed freedom of expression leading to prominent self-censorship in civil society:

> 'The freedom of expression has been curtailed in various ways. While political analysts and the political opposition have been subject to litigation, usually in the form of defamation charges, ordinary protesters and activists have been silenced by being ordered not to wear certain colors, not to use loudspeakers and to remove banners on private property. Similarly, 82% of CSOs and TUs surveyed reported self-censoring. Widespread self-censorship is an indication of significant restrictions to the freedom of expression and prevents associations from operating freely.'

(Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. ii)

Summing up, limitations and restrictions of fundamental civil society freedoms are very frequent in the Cambodian pre-election context. Beyond, interferences of activities and police supervision create a

feeling of insecurity and lead to widespread self-censorship in both speech and activities held. More detailed insights into this intriguing and powerful phenomenon of culture of fear in the next chapter.

NGOs are largely impacted by recent changes, especially NGOs active in Human Rights, democracy, environmental issues, land rights conflicts and advocacy. They are the ones who face increased harassment and interferences (Freedom House, 2018b; Nachemson & Dara, 2017).

Several election monitors and institutes face interferences: In November 2017 the frequently government-critical Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) faces accusations of attempting to stage a coup to overthrow the government, together with the USA, and is threatened of closure (Sokhean, 2017) . Election watchdog Comfrel is accused of working together with the opposition party in an attempt to challenge the 2013 elections. (Nachemson & Sokhean, 2017) Further, the American-funded *National Democratic Institute* (NDI) supporting transparent elections has to stop operations and expel all foreign staff within one week (Baliga, 2017).

Environmental organisations in particular face no easy path in Cambodia. This is closely related to the Cambodian elite benefitting large scale from natural resources – foremost land and forests: 'Cambodia is run by a kleptocratic elite that generates much of its wealth via the seizure of public assets, particularly natural resources.' (Global Witness, 2007, p. 6). Illegal logging hereby occurs on such a degree that it severely endangers Cambodia's forests. Diverse government levels – ranging from army, police, Forest Administration to even higher levels, are all involved and demand their share in this corruption-driven business. The Prey Long forest, Southeast Asia's largest lowland evergreen forest is under particular concern. (Global Witness, 2007) It is Cambodia's largest connected forest, stretching across diverse ecosystems housing a tremendous animal, plant, and tree diversity over around 500,000 hectare. It is located in the central plains of Cambodia, spanning from Kratie and Kampong Thom provinces in the South to Stung Treng and Preah Vihear in the North. It depicts the ecological lung of the country, because it is hampering climate change and reduces climate change related negative effects for the rural population. (Argyriou, Turreira, Schmidt Sogaard, Andersen, & Theilade, 2016)

The forest is of great importance for both the Cambodian population in general, as well as the communities in its direct surroundings. As almost ¾ of Cambodians make their living based on agriculture, changes in natural resources due to climate change, degradation or deforestation have a strong direct impact on their lives (***, 2016). Rural and indigenous communities are particularly vulnerable (***, 2016). The livelihoods of the more than a quarter million people living in 340 villages in and around the forest strongly depend upon the resources the forest provides: on one hand for resin tapping, timber, firewood, food and further material and income generating resources; on the other hand for the spiritual and cultural value the forest connotes (Argyriou, Turreira, et al., 2016; Maza, 2017).

Still, illegal logging is posing a serious threat to the forests ecosystem and dependent communities. Since 1970 the forest cover decreased by more than a third, further intensifying (with an almost 15% annual increase since the new millennium) and ranking Cambodia number one worldwide of countries with the fastest deforestation rate (Argyriou, Turreira, et al., 2016; Maza, 2017). Particularly timber smuggling and exports to Vietnam exploded with wood sourced from both regular as well as protected forest areas of a total value of close to 400 million USD crossing the border in 2015 alone (Argyriou, Turreira, et al., 2016; Maza, 2017; Promchertchoo, 2016). These actions are facilitated and boosted by governmental economic land concessions, corruption at diverse levels and dubious connections between government representatives, loggers, police forces, community heads and business magnates (***, 2016; Peter & Pheap, 2015; Promchertchoo, 2016). Governmental permitted 'sustainable forestry' projects authorize massive deforestation, the creation of monocultures, and deprive indigenous people from their livelihood basis (Scheidel & Work, 2016). The people hit hardest by this massive deforestation and land grabbing are indigenous rural communities, children, and women, whose livelihoods directly depend on these forest resources (***, 2016).

Corruption is a widespread phenomenon in Cambodia's logging landscape. As illustration, in one case, a patrol found a large-scale forest clearance, apparently implemented by the then deputy commune chief (present commune chief), which are "often carried out with complicity of, or directly by, local authorities. The former is often done with the silent permission of authorities in return for votes in the next elections" (Argyriou, Tistan, et al., 2016, p. 27). Police and military agents often willingly take their share, request numerous bribes along the way, and 'overlook' illegal logging and wood transportation, as videos attest (Maza, 2017; Sokheng & Kossov, 2016). Despite opposing voices by anti-logging commission spokesmen and Forestry Administration officials, there seems to be a booming and intimidating bribes business help up by police officers, local and state authorities (Dara & Kossov, 2016). In this context, the name Chut Wutty has to be mentioned, one of the three famous Cambodian 'martyrs', next to Kem Ley and garment union leader Chea Vichea, murdered at a kiosk in Phnom Penh in 2004. Chut Wutty was a Cambodian environmental activist, openly and tenaciously criticising the government and military's involvement in illegal logging and government corruption. In April 2012, he was shot by military forces when trying to expose an illegal logging site, accompanied by two journalists. His name and his activism are remembered vividly, especially around resource protection and combatting illegal logging.

With the elections coming up, two renown environmental NGOs had to face legal hassles: *Mother Nature* and *Equitable Cambodia*. Firstly, after repeated harassment of *Mother Nature* activists, the organisation requested its own deregistration in September 2017. Founder Davidson-Gonzales previously had been deported from the country in 2015, yet intimidations, particularly of the two co-founders continued (Kijewski & Meta, 2017a). In September 2017 then two Mother Nature activists are arrested when taking pictures of sand dredging in a special economic zone belonging to a CPP senator and tycoon (Kijewski & Meta, 2017a). After months in pre-trial detention under precarious conditions, they are found guilty of 'incitement to commit a felony' and unauthorised recordings of a person "in a private place" […]' to disclose illegal sand dredging in January 2018 and eventually get released the following month (Chheng & Reddick, 2018). Co-founder Davidson-Gonzales describes the process as:

> "Their ongoing detention is nothing but a message to hundreds of other activists that they can be sent to jail, despite any lack of wrongdoing, if they poke their noses into the dirty businesses of the mafia-like groups that control Cambodia,"

(Kijewski & Meta, 2017a)

Secondly, land rights organisation *Equitable Cambodia* is facing issues as well – in this case directly related to LANGO regulations: in September 2017 they are forced to suspend activities, as their 2016 request for registration has never been pursued by the Ministry of Interior (Kijewski & Dara, 2017; Kijewski & Meta, 2017b). For five months they are then left in limbo, waiting for a government decision as to whether they can continue operations or have to close. Eventually in February 2018 they are allowed to continue activities after months of uncertainty (Kijewski & Chheng, 2018). This illustrates how, next to human rights, democracy and advocacy organisations, environmental organisations also run high risk of being targeted, (legally) harassed.

Law on Associations and NGOs (LANGO)

One thing that kept coming back throughout my whole research is the LANGO (Law on Associations and NGOs). In 2015 the highly criticised LANGO law was implemented. The objective was to obtain increased regulation, coordination, transparency and accountability of NGOs within the extensive and rather uncoordinated NGO sector (Domashneva, 2013). This was also in a context of broad misunderstanding of the non-profit principle, corruption, and risk of NGOs covering the same target group due to lack of coordination (Domashneva, 2013). Amendments were made in 2017. It includes several blurry critical articles, that do not conform with international standards.

Firstly, registration requirements for (I)NGOs are very exhausting and blurry. Second, no activities can be implemented before registration. Next, reasons for rejecting registration of an organisation include '*affect stability and national unity*'. Again, it remains obscure what 'national unity' refers to, and thus what kind of action could be shovelled under this umbrella. Fourth, leaders have to proof that they were never convicted of misdemeanour or a felony. This provision is especially perturbing 'because union leaders and members of civil society have been subject to spurious criminal charges because of their activism.' (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 4). Many aspiring leaders who previously participated in peaceful protests, yet were charged, or even just have parked their scooter in the wrong place risk not being permitted to lead a CSO.

Yet what is most criticised, is that the LANGO demands the *political neutrality* of any NGO or association active in Cambodia: 'Domestic non-governmental organizations, foreign non-governmental organizations, or foreign associations shall maintain their neutrality towards political parties in the Kingdom of Cambodia.' (OHCHR, 2015). Once again, the definition of 'neutrality' remains to be found. Observers say that broad formulations like these allow the government to shut down and prosecute government-critical organisations; or in the words of Human Rights Watch Asia Deputy Director Phil Robertson: "an axe in hand to go after organisations defending the rights of the Cambodian people." (Sotheary, 2015 citing Phil Robertson). Beyond, the LANGO requests the close cooperation with government authorities. While not based on any legal regulation and there is no requirement to request permissions ahead of regular meetings, trainings of discussions, in practice, this means that organisations have to ask for permission of the Ministry of Interior before organising any workshop, training, meeting or other activity (Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 41). Not asking for permission can lead to the shut-down of the organisation. Further, any action that can be affiliated to the opposition party, can lead to investigations.

Next, the annual activity and financial report has to be provided. Any organisation 'that conducts activities that endanger the security, stability and public order, or jeopardize the national security, culture, tradition, and custom of Cambodian national society' (LANGO, Article 30) may be de-registered and thus not allowed to continue activities in the country. (OHCHR, 2015)

There are serious concerns that thanks to these broad formulations, seemingly anything can be interpreted by the government as falling under the LANGO. Observers criticise that, in combination with other regulations such as the *law against defamation and incitement*, this provides an excellent toolbox for the government to restrict civil society and shut down any organisation that does not act to their liking.

Summing up: civil space is facing severe constraints. This is combined with a clearly un-independent court: 'The judiciary is marred by corruption and a lack of independence. Judges have played a central role in the government's ability to pursue charges against a broad range of opposition politicians.' (Freedom House, 2018b). A convenient combination giving ample space for action to the government. And which they make convenient use when NGOs cross their way.

4.4. Culture of fear

The reaction of the NGO sector to restrictions and intimidations going with the recent developments is strongly shaped by a pervasive 'culture of fear':

> 'They do spread a culture of fear, but of course often by using legal instruments. Just the fact that the prime minister has said last year, that it can be necessary to kill one hundred people, to maintain peace and stability, of course creates a culture of fear. And I think fear is everywhere. Even when you and I have this conversation, I turn off my phone, because I do not know if my phone is being monitored. I don't know. So just to be on the safe side, I turn it off. [...] I think this culture of fear is everywhere. It is in the population in general. So people are much more careful what they speak about.'

This clearly shows the power of selective but effective crackdowns on particular organisations and critics, to create an omnipresent fear and insecurity within civil society. A culture that leads them to self-censorship out of fear of becoming targeted themselves. It is a powerful tool controlling civil space, leaving people over-aware of their actions, and ultimately self-censoring themselves as well as their organisation's activities:

> 'RGC actors have singled out and persecuted human rights defenders (HRDs) through threats, judicial harassment and physical violence. The extra-legal actions, judicial intimidation and other forms of harassment likely have a chilling effect on CSOs and other individuals in the exercise of their fundamental freedoms.'

(Fundamental Freedoms Monitoring Project, 2017, p. 20)

Everybody seems scared to being monitored. Rumours and stories go around about hassles other organisations have to face. And the legislation is written in such a blurry way, that almost any action might be interpreted as violation. Any action that can be interpreted as 'acting politically' may justify persecution. Independent of that, the government has diverse legal regulations that provide ample space for interpretation and enforcement; they could target any organisation: "So the government will, it would seem, monitor quite closely NGO activity. And if it sees anything it does not like, it has a number of tools in its armoury, to close them down, should it want to." (Hugh, NGO umbrella staff, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

Having gained an understanding of the broader context, in the next chapter I will zoom in on three NGOs via three case studies, to show how they felt affected by the shrinking civil space. *What direct and indirect actions and policies impacted them? And what role does the culture of fear plays in all this?* This allows for the second step of Borgh & Terwindts analysis – examining the government actions and policies restricting civil space – yet from the perspective of three NGOs. And the last empirical chapter will then illustrate how these NGOs deal with these limitations and challenges.

5. HOW ARE NGOS AFFECTED

As elaborated in the conceptual framework, in order to understand the impact of a shrinking operational space on NGOs, it is essential to 1) gain a greater understanding of the overall local political context/field, before 2) analysing the concrete government actions restricting space, and, 3) the particular functioning, positionality, goals and characteristics of individual NGOs (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1066). That is why in the previous chapter, I provided a comprehensive overview of the general political climate residing in Cambodia, recent political developments, legislative changes, and freedoms and limitations for civil space, - NGOs being a subsector thereof. The main conclusion of this analysis (based on Tilly's (1978) categorisation between *strong* or *weak states*, and *authoritarian* or *democratic states*) captures the Cambodian political field during the research period – from October 2017 until January 2018 - as ever more strongly tending towards a strong authoritarian state with a government

You now understand the broader pre-election environment and phenomenon of shrinking civil space in the Cambodian context. This and the next chapter will now narrow this broader national context down to concrete examples, by means of three case studies consisting of three different NGOs. The analysis is divided into two parts elaborated in two chapters: how the different NGOs are affected by the recent political developments, and how they react to it, including diverse responses and coping strategies. These encompass a broad spectrum ranging from low-profile, strategic-silent, reactive, empowering local communities to outspoken, confrontational responses attempting to actively reclaim/defend the shrinking operational space.

Firstly (chapter 5), I will explain the way the three NGOs felt affected by recent changes. Main themes entail the culture of fear with subcategories thereof, administrative restrictions (legislation and ad-hoc enforcement) and physical harassment (threats and intimidation). Besides, I describe mental responses revolving around distrust, cynicism and frustration, and last but not least funding issues and attempts of cooptation. Secondly (chapter 6 & 7), in the next chapter, I will elaborate on the coping strategies. These show considerable variation, also based on a deeper analysis of the overarching strategy: keeping low profile vs. reclaiming civil space. I will dedicate an extensive part on security strategies, keeping low profile, insecurities, and independence. Beyond, solidarity, and faith play a noticeable role as well.

Borgh & Terwindt's (2012, pp. 1070–1072) categorisation of '*actions and policies that restrict operational space*' serve as major tool for analysing how the particular NGOs are affected by the recent political developments and government policies (chapter I), as far as applicable. As quick reminder, these are divided into five different categories 1) *Physical harassment, 2) Criminalisation: Prosecution and investigation, 3) Administrative restrictions, 4) Stigmatisation, 5) Spaces of dialogue under pressure*. Importantly, the *culture of fear* plays a major role for understanding the reactions of the NGOs. Herefore, I will use insights from Stern & Hassid (2012) on the enormous power of uncertainties silencing civil society to explain the chilling effect selective government retaliation can have on the whole NGO sphere, frequently leading to self-censorship.

Chapter 6 and 7 (responses and coping strategies) then follow Borgh & Terwindt (2012) as well as Terwindt & Schlieman (2017a), drawing on a categorisation between 1) *individual or coordinated*, 2) *reactive or proactive* and 3) *pragmatic accommodating* or *confrontational responses*.

Before diving into the way the NGOs are affected by the recent developments, I want to point out the general broader pattern these follows: *Are these drastic sudden developments vanishing civil space, or are they frequent changes very common in the Cambodian political setting?*

The answer can be found somewhere in-between: On one hand, socio-political changes are common in the Cambodian context, particularly more repressions prior to an upcoming national election.

Organisations frequently manoeuvre these in constant adjustment to whatever the national situation may permit and adapt their strategies accordingly.

> "In general, out strategy has not changed because of the current political developments. It's basically the same we want to achieve, the same way that we work. [empowerment, capacity building…] yes yes. What we share we are more careful about. There are certain things that we do not do anymore."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

On the other hand, however, do the current developments preceding the 2018 elections show a rampant decline of political freedom, compared to previous cases. With the dissolution of the only viable opposition party in November 2017 or the shut-down of more than a dozen radio stations and newspapers. This consequentially has implications on civil space and considerable implications on NGOs active in Cambodia.

However, it is important to emphasise that different organisations are affected and perceive changes differently, depending on their situation, focus, and activities. And even further, different employees working within the same organisations can have very diverse perceptions of how they are being affected by recent pre-election developments: while some described the implications as very serious, and limiting, others perceived them as part of the frequent ups and downs of shrinking/growing civil space, or hardly felt any impact on their work:

> I: *In your daily work, do you feel an impact of the current situation?*

> "No, I think, I'm not sure if I feel a difference. You mean like the last 6 months? For the work of course there's limitations of what you can do, when you work with a network like XX, […] but in a way, for me, I don't see, of course there's a change. But I see it all the time in the project that you, the network is, all the time they're adjusting in order to be able to work in Cambodia in the political context, and also according to how it is changing. […] And of course now, going up to the elections, I see that activities cannot be implemented […].It's a constant adjustment in terms of what is doable and what the network are comfortable with, so they won't *laughs* receive threats etcetera."

> (NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

Generally, a pattern of constant adjustment to the current situation is very common, while at the same time the current developments are significantly more extensive than previously, and a continuous shrinking of civil space can be perceived.

5.1.   Why targeted

In this chapter, I elaborate how the NGOs of the case study are affected by the shrinking civil space. But first, *why are they affected by the recent political developments stronger than other NGOs*? In all three cases, the answer is strongly related to the very causes the NGOs are supporting: natural resources. This interview quote between the executive and a higher-management staff member of another national NGO explains:

> NGO officer: "NGO X - I never hear anything" *laughs*

> Senior NGO Manager:"They are very quiet, low profile, but they work on a very sensitive issue for the government, so they are very careful. They are not for public comment very high, but they work with a sensitive issue, a sensitive group also. This is the challenge for NGO X."

> (NGO officer & senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018)

Natural resources and environmental topics are very sensitive hot topics for the Cambodian government, as the general public is considerably concerned about these issues. Yet, despite positive narratives being spread by government agents about their advances and great successes in largely eradicating illegal

resource extraction, quite the opposite can be seen as being the case: the illegal extraction continues, breaking into new places in the protection area, and the frequency seems to be on the rise instead of declining. And communities whose' livelihoods depend on these resources and who criticise the lack of effective law enforcement, jeopardize this positive narrative and thus also the people's support for the government. Critical voices of network speakers or activists denouncing increasing extraction collide with the government spokespersons' narrative of success in shutting down illegal resource extraction and only minor offenses prevailing. Thus, working with an environmental protection network is a risky undertaking.

> "Natural resources are a major concern for the Cambodian public. So for them (the government) the best would be if no one supports those network associations, because that somehow increase the risks for the government that people in general will understand that they are doing a bad job. So organisations that support local networks and so on, are in the spotlight, because they do know that many of these network organisations cannot survive without the support of partners. They do see that NGO X have a role in telling these bad stories, and that's what they want to stop."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

Consequently, organisations supporting community networks that stand up against illegal extraction depict a thorn in the government's side. Next to organising capacity building trainings and financial support, one of the NGOs plays a major role in the publication of reports and spreading information.

Additionally, NGOs working at the grassroots and empowering local communities can lead to communities becoming more aware and critical about the issues they are facing, and consequentially requesting accountability from the government (NGO officer, informal conversation, 22.12.2017). That is why NGOs providing trainings to community members are under particular risk of getting on the government radar and being out-of-favour.

This is important to understand the ways the organisations in my case studies are affected, so here a basic notion of the origins, activities and organisation of these NGOs. It allows to understand the way these organisations are affected, and the particular response strategies they chose to follow. However, it is not possible to provide too much information about the NGOs, as this might endanger them.

Staff of the NGOs vary from a hand full to around 25, working with communities, government agents, and partner organisations. All of them support a community network standing up against illegal resource extraction in their livelihood area in different ways and fields, depending on their focus and expertise. They support them in diverse areas: project management, communication, access to funding, advocacy and strategic support (NGO Manager, informal unstructured interview, 25.10.2017). Social media, publishing a regular newsletter and managing the website are essential means for advocacy and awareness raising, as other media is often very restricted. Social media is the prime medium to reaching young urban youth - one of the main national target groups (NGO Manager, informal unstructured interview, 25.10.2017). Beyond, they train the members themselves in social media awareness raising through trainings, workshops, and further capacity building. By being visible on social media, they try to create awareness among the broader Cambodian as well as international public, about the incidents and continuing illegal resource extraction. They raise awareness about the insufficient law enforcement, and the activism of the community network.

Besides, the NGOs have been supporting them in their first national campaign, organised youth networks to mobilise young people to support the network striving to protect their resources. They attempt to empower the network by, firstly, providing trainings, and secondly, setting up regular meetings. In the trainings network members learn about their fundamental rights, relevant legal regulations e.g. about environmental law, and human rights. Civil, legal, economic and cultural rights of the communities are treated. Additionally, they provide advocacy training and community organising trainings, as well as support in lobbying. This aims to enhance capacity building of the community itself, through an

increased awareness of their rights, enabling them to stand up for their rights, particularly those related to environmental protection. Beyond, they also provide strategical support to the network as a whole in their campaigns, getting together with the core group, reviewing their operational plan, and advocacy strategy. This ranges from strategic support for organising patrols in the community to organising activities like trainings, workshops or demonstrations in the capital. Moreover, they strive to enhance community reconciliation to keep the network unified, free of internal tensions weakening it, and strong to resist outside interferences. Ultimately the goal is to also improve interactions with illegal extractors when encountering them, and interactions with government agents. By training the community in non-violent activism, they also attempt to stay non-violent during demonstrations and strikes, to not give the government a justification for harsh crack-down:

> "So the ruling party, they try to course the community, the demonstrators to act in a violent way, so they have a reason to attack, to imprison them. That's why our intention is to support the community to, when they are involved in advocacy, to do it in a non-violent way to protect themselves from harm by the government, from imprisonment, and also to be secure in the society, where violence is everywhere."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

Indeed, the protection of partners was essential for the NGOs in several ways. This was by equipping them with the right strategies and responses to counter government threats. Yet also protecting them from repression due to their affiliation to the NGOs was a prime imperative. In other words: ensuring that the community network would not face challenges and repression due to their linkage to the NGOs. This concern was on the minds of staff, being very aware of how essential it was to not bring them in danger. This is particularly, as the network members are directly dealing with the authorities, have less privilege, and fewer opportunities to leave the country. They have less powerful connections, and thus an increased risk and vulnerability of facing harsh repression by e.g. local police agents intimidating and harassing them. NGO staff felt this duty, that they owed it to them, to not bring them any harm.

The NGOs have been very supportive with building up contact with foreign academic institutions and are in touch with diverse governmental actors, ranging from national ministries, to the EU and UN bodies. Due to their expertise, position, and language skills, they are in contact with national government agents, representing the network at a higher level and obtaining international funding (NGO officer, informal conversation, 07.11.2017). They have the means to access governmental and donor institutions:

> "We are somehow the connector between them and national and international actors. [...] I'm a bridge, I'm a connector, so I am not merely representing them, but approaching different actors to facilitate the discussion. [...] Because I'm a foreigner, I have access to many institutions, so I use my position to communicate in English, to connect a local level and national level."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal unstructured interview, 15.11.2017)</div>

The three NGOs are connected in two ways: firstly, in that they each support the community network. Due to the focus of the community network, this makes them more likely as a target, due to the linkage to natural resources being a delicate topic. Nevertheless, they are still separate organisations.

5.2.   Direct Implications of Politics

Generally, a line can be drawn between two sorts of how the NGOs were impacted by the recent developments: the more direct concrete ways on one side, and the more indirect, often mental influences on the other side. The latter – indirect influences - is shaped by a culture of fear, uncertainty and ambiguity as instruments to restrict civil space. Reactions also include emotional responses of frustration, distrust and cynicism. The former – direct influences - entails concrete impacts, such as

bureaucratic burdens, asking for permissions, threats and financial requirements. One of these direct impacts surrounds one organisation's trainings being inhibited:

> "Like in June we're supposed to have a training with the commune councillor. And then they did not allow us to have the training. In xx district, we faced another problem. It is very unjust and unfair. The people in the commune council voted, 12 of 18 seats were won by the opposition party. So, when we recruited people for the training, we recruited from both parties. Yet in November when they dissolved the opposition party, [...] they stopped our participants from joining. So I tried to negotiate with them, so finally they allow them to finish the training."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

Here the recent political developments – including the Cambodian Supreme Court dissolving the major opposition party – directly led to selected trainees from the opposition party being hindered from completing the training. As they were no longer holding their positions in the commune council after the court decision, and refused cooptation acceding to the ruling party, the NGO had to negotiate with the government to let them complete the training. This shows how concrete national political events can directly impact the organisation's activities.

5.3. Administrative Restrictions

Considering the five different categories by Borgh & Terwindt (2012), *administrative restrictions* depict the most direct way NGOs experience government control and inhibitions. The most tangible and at the same time most blurry government policy strongly affecting civil space for NGOs, is diverse recently passed legislation. Firstly, these include general national legislation, which for example defines very diffuse terms such as 'defamation' and 'incitement' as heavy crimes, that can lead to strict persecution:

> I: Do you see the government also using other tools to put civil society, ...
>
> "Yeah, there's some laws against defamation and incitement, and that is often being used against representatives of civil society."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 18.01.2018)</div>

Due to the broad possible interpretation of what these terms actually mean, they provide the government great power to investigate because of seemingly anything. This increases insecurities over what behaviour might depict an act of incitement, and silence activists from speaking out, out of fear that this might provoke them a trial.

Second, there is a range of legislation particularly for the NGO sector on having to provide reports on funding, organisational structure, staff details, year plans, and – primarily - request permissions for activities, - foremost because of the LANGO (Law on Associations and NGOs) regulation.

Bureaucratic burdens

All these regulations imply that NGOs need to spend a lot of time and on the bureaucratic duties of having to submit all kinds of organisational documents, reports, and ask for permission for every activity an organisation is organising. But what makes them more efficient in restricting civil space for NGOs is thanks to their blurriness and unclear formulations, which allows a large range of how to interpret these vaguely formulated regulations, ambiguity and insecurity, as the following segment shows:

> I: *I read there will be a LANGO commission especially for international organisations. What does that mean for NGO X?*
>
> "As far as I know, we do comply with all laws and regulations. But I have contacted a company to check, to ask if they could make a complete compliance review of NGO X, to assess if we comply with

all laws and regulations. Because some of them we know about, some of them we might not know about."

I: *How is that possible?*

"Because there is not that much information available about laws. There is not one document. I heard about, from another INGO, that INGOs have to apply for tax exemption. They have heard about that from somewhere, other NGOs that joined the meeting where that was told, but I have never heard about it before. And whether that's correct, we don't know at the moment. But based on what we know at the present, yes, we comply completely. That has been important for us that we comply, because we know, that if we do not comply, that can be a reason for shutting down NGO X."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

This is clearly based on administrative restrictions, with obstructive NGO legislation on registration and operation as in Borgh & Terwindt (2012). But what is even more, beyond making it difficult to comply with these, unclear regulations lead to a strong insecurity, half-true (mis)information spreading, and rumours going around. Organisations are insecure whether they comply with the present regulations, as these are opaque and vast. Owed to this insecurity and lack of information, organisations are forced to judge the situation based on limited confirmed information, assumptions and stories they hear from other organisations. This greatly illustrates the phenomenon Stern & Hassid (2012) explain: Nobody knows where the limit is, when you are crossing a red line and trespassing a regulation that might risk your organisation being shut down, so you better stay away from it for a mile, just in case.

Legislation like the LANGO-law thus have a triple benefit for the government: on one hand they cause bureaucratic hassles for the organisations, that distract them from their actual work. On the other hand they provide them valuable insights into the organisations, collecting information about the staff, funding etc., that can be beneficial. And last but not least, insecurities and ambiguities about the limitations of what is permitted, or when it fades to be illegal, are so blurry, that organisations frequently self-censor themselves out of fear:

I: *How do they intimidate you?*

"The ministry as a whole now starts to scrutinize our activities. That means, they require NGOs to comply with the LANGO, we have to submit our financial report, activity report, and agreement with donors. They want to monitor the NGOs that are working to support the communities, and working on advocacy and sensitive issues. […] And they can just use the LANGO to break down our activity, by accusing us to be part of the colour revolution. That is the biggest concern.

So currently we are very careful before organising some particular activity. And recently, the MoE require us to change the by-law, and the logo of my association, that is another pressure on us and put more complicated process and administrative work we have to complete with the ministry. And when we have more complicated work to fulfil for the ministry, it surely will affect to our work in the community."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

This abstract shows the heave weight of administrative restrictions, more exactly barriers to the operational activity. LANGO-requirements are keeping resources away from the work, in order to fulfil tiring requirements about things like changing the logo or by-law. Time and energy is spent on complying with regulations instead of on the target communities. At the same time, they are afraid of their organisation being shut down because they do not fully comply with a LANGO regulation.

I: *How do things like LANGO and other regulations effect the work?*

"Well, LANGO is just an instrument to be able to shut NGOs down. […] it's affecting of course, people that I know within civil society organisations are very careful about not making any mistakes, personally also about not making any mistakes, always being on the right side of the law, you could

side. But also, like even a minor thing can, can take it on, basically. But that also comes for the NGOs. If it's like a different name… it's not a secure state. It's really not a secure state in terms of justice. I mean the LANGO can, it's an instrument they have, but I'm sure that they can, they did that with a few NGOs and Equitable Cambodia and another land rights organisations, they found something and then they said… it's an instrument to close organisations down.

As a civil society organisation, you can be on the straight line of the law, and then they can still find something on you, if they want to. So yeah, for NGO X, I think it's obvious that they can close offices down if they want to. That's why it's a continuous assessment of what you can do, and being in good terms with this ministry, so we have to take care of that, to be in good terms with them, so that…"

<div align="right">(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

Regulations like the LANGO provide the government with a comprehensive tool, formulated in blurry terms, that allow a broad interpretation, and minor misconduct is seen as sufficient for the government to investigate and close down your organisation. And beyond the work sphere, people feel even personal behaviour outside the work space can endanger their organisation. They know of other organisations who faced issues, and are afraid of their organisation facing something similar. At the same time, this greatly describes the very insecure nature of the present situation. A situation where no one is really sure what is permitted and what is not. "Deep-rooted uncertainty about the boundaries of the permissible magnifies the effect of these isolated incidents." (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1231) Incidents like other NGOs being shut down, have a strongly chilling effect on others. And not knowing what exactly is still in the area of the permissive, they frequently refrain from any potentially illegal behaviour, even outside the organisational and in the private sphere.

Asking for permission

When talking to diverse staff, constantly having to ask for permission for activities was the one topic that would come up continuously. Its inhibiting nature was mentioned by all respondents invariably: having to ask permission for each event entails one of the biggest difficulties for their work. Officially, this needs to be done three days prior to the actual activity, yet provincial authorities frequently request the letter two weeks prior to the event (NGO officer, informal conversation, 14.12.2017).

Asking for permission is a particularly complicated process with frequent obstacles coming up. The procedure for asking for permission is the following: the NGO writes a letter to the MoI, explaining them their planned activities, the number of participants, and their personal information. Once the letter is written, it is not possible to edit the number of participants. Yet often the ministry delays responding for a couple of weeks. Sometimes personal inquiring is necessary to receive permission. A particular dilemma arises when the ministry does not respond as the event is coming up, delaying their response. However, as they are already informed about the planned event, the NGO cannot realise it without having received the permission, as the ministry is already aware of the planned activity, location, participants and date. Thus in case of no response till the day of the activity, it has to be cancelled altogether (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 07.12.2017). Staff frequently need to approach the ministry personally, to ask about the permission. Common explanations of no response entail that they made a mistake or lost the letter, so they need to write it again (Jenna, informal conversation, 14.12.2017).

The letter can be rejected if it does not comply with the requirements of the particular government body, and 'mistakes' need to be corrected before sending it again (project coordinator, formal semi-structured interview, 15.01.2018). Besides, different governmental bodies, ranging from local, provincial to national levels, request letters complying with different rules and information required. Additionally, when informing the MoI, they are often requested to also ask permission from local authorities (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018), creating an additional burden:

"Actually, in the LANGO law, they ask us to notify, to inform the provincial governor about our activity and gathering of the community. But in reality, it is like we're asking permission. So they have the authority to allow us to do it, but not."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

While technically they would only need to inform local government representative, they practically also have to ask for permission on that level – another bureaucratic step taking up time and resources.

I: Why is it difficult to get the permit?

"Sometimes, they don't have an example letter. But when we write a letter, someplace easy, someplace difficult, but always different. You cannot apply with one letter for all. […] And when you write, sometimes they don't write back. They allow or not allow? So we cannot prepare. I think they use this way for limiting our freedom. And 3rd, now they say the Western from the US, the EU, are enemies of the government. They find colour revolution with the EU and US behind the revolution. So when our partners are from other countries, like white skin, they look down and ask many questions. And 4th, about the LANGO, before we not protest but try to revise this law, because this laws limits the freedom of NGOs in Cambodia. It is really strict."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

Due to the different criteria and requirements in different provinces and levels, NGOs often have to adapt the layout, format, and content of the letter. If they receive no reply from the government – neither negative nor positive – they aren't able to prepare the activity. And last but not least, due to the colour revolution, if Western partners are involved, they receive particularly many questions.

"In the law it says 3 days before the activity you have to inform, but they say 'this is a weekend, you need to inform earlier, more than 3 days', or sometimes they say they are busy, so they create complications during the process, in a bad bureaucratic procedure. […] So when they allow us to do the activity, they just have another letter and say, the provincial governor allows us to do an activity, but we need to cooperate with the local authorities, we need to inform to the commune police, and district, and then.. very complicated. And if they don't want us to do the activity, they just keep our letter and don't respond. So if we do it without their permission, they can arrest or fine us."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

These examples show how complex this process of asking for permission can be, and what obstacles they encounter frequently. Officially, organisations are required to inform the government three days before the activity, but practically they have to ask for permission way earlier.

While the LANGO law does not state that organisations have to ask for permission expressively, it is written in such a blurry way ordering organisations to 'closely collaborate with the government', which government agencies interpret as organisations having to ask the Ministry of Interior for permission before events and meetings (Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 16.11.2017). The broad formulation gives government agents broad space for interpretation, that enables supervision and control of all activities. And not asking for permission is interpreted as illegal and can be a reason to get arrested or even shut the organisation down (Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 01.11.2017).

These bureaucratic burdens eventually lead to frustration over the large amount of time spent and numerous administrative steps that need to be taken to be able to hold an activity:

I: How does that make you feel?

"Sometimes frustrated. *laughs* The government always asks us to prepare the letter. So sometimes I feel frustrated. Because the process is very hard, we're more busy on the paper, not doing things."

<div align="right">(NGO officer, trainer, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018)</div>

All this can be seen as an effective way of keeping NGOs busy and keeping them from doing their actual work, by requesting them to follow this strict procedure, and then find additional requirements that need to be met, changes that have to be done, etc.

Analysing these *administrative restrictions* more broadly, it becomes clear how both elements are very present: on one hand *restrictive NGO-legislation on registration and operation*, most clearly the blurrily formulated LANGO-law with all sorts of requirements, limitations, and leaving plenty of space for broad interpretation. On the other hand, *ad-hoc measures by government agencies* are also a major tool hampering NGO activities: government bodies request different formats, delay, reject due to mistakes, details have to be adapted, and organisations have to go after permissions. All these depict *ad-hoc measures to inhibit NGO activities* – they are "examples of government agencies that use their power to control NGOs in an ad-hoc manner. […] They can also be the product of the willingness and ability to use bureaucratic power to obstruct NGOs in their operations, such as the example of delaying NGO registration" (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1071). This causes delay, administrative burdens and bureaucratic obstacles, which restrict NGOs.

Funding & Surveillance

One very recent administrative obstacle all three NGOs have to deal with are requests to submit financial reports to the finance ministry. This includes an annual report for the MoI and a financial report for the finance ministry. The government checks finance flows, the source of funding, budget etc. (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018). Organisations are required to provide all information about the organisation's funding, the amount and sources, as the government suspects organisations receive funding from the opposition or related organisations (NGO officer, informal interview, 21.12.2017). Additionally, a half-annual activity report is requested from the organisation as well as its partner organisations (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018). These administrative requirements and duties to submit diverse reports serve to put pressure on civil society organisations (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018). And beyond intimidating organisations themselves and making them vulnerable to persecution and investigation, they can also intimidate the general public to engage with NGOs:

> *Senior NGO manager and I have lunch together. After lunch an NGO officer gives Senior NGO manager a form. Senior NGO manager tells him the information to fill in and then puts his fingerprint underneath. There are two photos of him annexed.*

> "It's to register the organisation here with the government. It's a stupid thing. It's for intimidation. We have to give all information about the organisation to the government. The rent, how much we earn, who works here. I also have to give all my personal information. So if they want to get me, it's very easy."

> I: *What happens if you don't give it?*

> "It is suspicious, and they will put you on their watch list."

> I: *Is it a new law?*

> "No, it's not even a law. They just wake up one day and decide they need that information."

> I: *Do all organisations have to register? All NGOs?*

> "Yes, sooner or later all have to give that information. It's intimidation for the people to work with NGOs. So they think if they want to work for NGOs. […] This policy is ridiculous. *angry annoyed laughter* They have all the details, so if something happens, it is very easy for them. They want to stigmatize NGOs so nobody wants to work with them anymore."

> (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 19.12.2017)

Here on one hand, the government can be seen as attempting to stigmatise the NGO sector via administrative restrictions and making citizens reluctant to engage with NGOs - out of fear to get on the government radar. On the other hand, collecting all this information about the staff members, finances, funding, etc. gives the government control and information they can use against staff, and power they can easily play out against organisations should they depict a perceived threat to them.

5.4. Physical Harassments: Intimidation & Threats

Another essential type of direct actions restricting operational space according to Borgh & Terwindt (2012) is *physical harassment*, including *threats, injuries and killings*. These can range from physical surveillance and intimidation to the most extreme cases like the assassinations of political activist and advisor Kem Ley in 2016, or the environmental activist Chut Wutty in 2012, which shocked Cambodian civil society lastingly. While the NGOs have not had to experience such extreme forms of physical harassment, they nevertheless experienced intimidation and threats, which changed their sense of security and behaviour vigorously.

The government frequently uses physical harassment to intimidate NGO staff - through showing police presence, monitoring, activity surveillance, and open warnings. Prior to the court decision for example, police arrived at the office of one of the organisations and stayed overnight, to assure no opposition supporters would stay there, and to watch them (NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018). Commonly, they use the justifying argument of guarding the national security and preventing political instability to justify the warning. *What effect does this have on staff and communities?*

> "It really affects our work and our mental. So when they keep monitoring and follow our activity, we don't feel safe. When we organise a particular activity, we **have to inform** to authorities, and local police and they come to monitor, it means we don't feel comfortable to organise and hold activities more effectively. That is one problem.
>
> And so far, we used to mobilise the young people and community to have a public gathering, or protest, to address our issue. But now we cannot organise that kind of activity anymore. And since the media, some media outlets are shut down, so it really affects our advocacy activity as well. Because Radio Free Asia, Voice of America and Voice of … play a role to broadcast the information about our activity. So these restrictions try to limit the possibilities of the people on grassroots level and also try to isolate NGOs from communities as well, as they don't go easily to work with communities, as they put more complicated new methods."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

Both employees and participants in the activities feel intimidated and uncomfortable under police monitoring the activities. As a result, they frequently cannot speak freely anymore, while other advocacy activities get cancelled altogether. This seems a common trend: all three NGOs have been cancelling activities in the field and holding fewer activities in the office in the capita. Beyond, it inhibits the relation between the NGOs and communities, by putting hurdles in the way and increasing the culture of fear. Especially when organising more critical advocacy trainings and following a more outspoken line, police presence and trainings being shut down seem common:

> I: So you're training them in advocacy and lobbing and human rights. These must be very sensitive topics I guess. Do you see that it's changing recently because of the political situation, …?
>
> "Actually, our training so far has experience with, the police used to come to shut down our training at the community. Because we, at the time, we did not conduct the training in the city, but went to the village, and conduct training in the village. The police in XX province came to shut down our training a few times, and also in another province two times. After the negotiation one or two hours, they let

us continue the training, but do the reporting, take pictures of our activities, and keep monitoring on our activity. But currently, with the political tension, the authorities, especially MoI, orders to provincial authorities to increase to scrutinize monitoring on NGO activity and decries NGO to ask permission or inform them at least 3 working days before holding any activity with the community. […]

And since NGO X and our partner at XX, we always organise advocacy activities, the police always come to monitor our office regularly. The uniform and undercover police. Sometimes when we have the training with community, they always come to us, to ask our staff the number of participants, where they are from. It is also a threat to our staff and our organisation as a whole, because they always come to monitor our office."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

During the shooting of a short clip interviewing Senior NGO manager in the capital at the riverside for example, they noticed a man in civil clothes sitting in the bushes, smoking and watching them. And when he left, another man arrived and started smoking (junior NGO staff, informal conversation, 01.11.2017). Several sources (NGO officer, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018; Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018) similarly referred to police officers in plain clothes or uniform following them, and watching over particularly active people in public, at events, or during activities. One organisation experienced police frequently monitoring their trainings, questioning the organiser and facilitators name, documenting the participants, and watching the training (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018). This easily leads to self-censorship out of fear of making a statement in police presence, that can later be used against you:

"To me it seems like a threat to our security, as well, because sometimes it is hard to speak and talk […]. And sometimes we limit ourselves in free speech, free talk about some realities seeing happening in communities.[…] Sometimes it is hard for us to speak. […] And the communities themselves, that's my observation, they sometimes don't fully participate in the training because they are afraid to talk, and they feel concerned as well, because the police takes their names and report to … so this is a kind of threat."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

Both organisers and participants feel intimidated and likely refrain from sharing all their thoughts on the particular topic, especially if it ranges around sensitive topics like lack of law enforcement or corruption.

Moreover, several staff members received direct threats and warnings by government agents, such as calls from officials warning that they were going too far (NGO officer, informal conversation, 25.10.2017), or an open warning after a publication:

"So far they haven't taken any concrete actions, except for this warning that XX received last December. But we do know they monitor us."

I: *What exactly was the warning?*

"I had a meeting at the MoI to talk about collaboration between our partners and the ministry. But in that meeting they took up the opportunity to talk directly to me, saying that they are not happy with us disclosing information, that could cause political instability, and that they had favoured a place to deal with this. And they also said 'either you're in or you're out'."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

Several respondents shared they received threats of direct, but even more so indirect nature. People in their private or work environment would advise them to be careful, refrain from dangerous activities, and warn them:

"I think there are various different ways of threats. Some come directly, some indirectly. Most of them come indirectly. So you see words by your friends, your colleagues, your family members, about different individuals that were not happy with what we are doing as an organisation."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

5.5. Stigmatisation

Beyond, stigmatisation is another major way how the government can restrict space for NGOs. Often these categories are closely interrelated, as in this case physical harassment and stigmatisation, one frequently enhancing the other:

"Most are genuinely fearful, because of the stigmatisation of *natural resource*, because there have been assassination of Chut Wutty, there have been arrest of Mother Nature and other people, yeah, even killing the reporter, […]. So people are fearful. But at the same time there are people in the government that are not happy with what we are doing, to support the community, […] so therefore they send messages to some friends. And they say 'Take this message and tell NGO X that they should not be doing this, they stop doing this.'"

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

These shocking cases where activists were killed, had chilling effects on civil society and the general public. Advocacy engagement and activism, particularly related to human rights and environmental protection, have become stigmatised in Cambodian society, with people being scared of being associated, out of fear of becoming the target of harassment, intimidation, prosecution or even worse:

"Do you see that pagoda [Buddhist church] over there? The shanty one. They don't have a lot of money. When Kem Ley was killed, we buried him there (*shows to other side of the river).* This was the only pagoda that would accept to bury him. The only one that accepts to burry activists. All the other pagodas are too afraid. They don't accept it. This pagoda now is in difficulties. They do not have a lot of money."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 07.12.2017)</div>

The stigma of being affiliated to Kem Ley was so strong that pagodas refused to bury him. This shows how the intimidating and powerful effect these killings had on the Cambodian public. Incidents of physical harassment – threats, injuries and in these cases even killings, had a strong deterring effect on the public, making it afraid of a similar fate happening to them.

In combination with the sensitive nature of environmental activism, this explains why the NGOs are particularly concerned about becoming targeted. These incidents gave activists a sign, a warning to be careful what to say, whom to criticise, and when to stay silent. A clear sign for civil society, that if you are too outspoken and critical, something might happen to you.

Additionally, Kem Ley was familiar with one of the organisations, Senior NGO manager was in frequent contact with him personally, making the effects and fear of stigmatisation stronger:

I: *When Kem Leng was shot, was it a big shock?*

"Yes, it was a big shock when my friend was shot. For months I was full of fear. Also, for his family it was very difficult. He has five kids, 5 sons. When he shot, his youngest son was not even delivered. It was one month before his wife would give birth. They had to flee the country. They went to Thailand and now are applying for asylum in Australia."

I: *Have many activists been injured or even killed?*

"Yes, so many. Almost 200, more than 180 in the past 20-25 years. About half of them were from the opposition party. And the others were journalists, and activists. The most famous ones were Kem Ley,

and Chut Wutty, the environmental activist. And Chea Vichea the garment union leader. He was killed in the middle of the day, in public."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 07.12.2017)</div>

5.6. Spaces of Dialogue under Pressure

The last element how NGOs are directly impacted by recent changes surrounds *cooptation*, as one NGO elaborated: while before the umbrella organisation CCC was very present, it shall now be replaced by a government-led new umbrella called *Alliance for Civil Society*. All NGOs active in Cambodia are expected to operate under this governmental umbrella organisation. Apparently, it shall provide a budget from China NGOs can make use of, as the amount of financing by Western donors is decreasing:

> "This is their strategy: 1) they try to limit our freedom, and 2) China will provide budget for the activities. But only for activities like education, development. No democracy, no advocacy, no coaching people for human rights.
>
> This is our obstacle in the future. When the politics stay like this, I think, this is my own opinion, the NGOs in Cambodia will die step by step, if they don't follow with the *Alliance for Civil Society*. So they use this voice for supporting the government, and the real NGOs supporting the people are few. And then they say we are part of the opposition party. They try to stereotype us like the opposition party."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

The introduction of this governmental umbrella could have serious consequences for the NGOs. Firstly, under this umbrella, only certain non-sensitive topics can receive financial donations. Sensitive topics such as advocacy, democracy or environmental issues are off the table. If NGOs have no choice other than joining this new umbrella, as feared, there are little chances of enhancing these important issues.

Secondly, joining the association implies particular membership criteria. These would give the government strong control over diverse aspects of the NGO, going beyond limits on the topics that NGOs can work on. Staff are concerned that they will need to submit all kind of sensitive information, and that the currently existing umbrella organisations might be dissolved (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018).

Thirdly, they fear that if they refuse to join the new umbrella organisation, they will be accused of collaborating with the opposition party. This follows the CPP's rhetoric of only their governing party being able to assure the persistence of peace, while without the CPP, internal conflict and tensions would arise. NGO staff are afraid of having to hand over their finances and giving up financial independence, yet not joining might lead to stigmatisation as oppositional traitor.

This depicts a nice example of attempts of *cooptation*, one aspect of '*spaces of dialogue under pressure*' (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012). The government can be seen as trying to coopt NGOs by closing down other spaces, and possibly forcing organisations to join the new government-controlled umbrella organisation in order to continue operating. Yet due to the likely very restrictive criteria and financial control, only certain topics can be worked on, - with exceptions of sensitive issues like human rights or environmental issues. And existing spaces where NGOs meet, coordinate and support each other may be strongly restricted or forced to close down. Thus another element of government actions and policies restricting operational space can be observed here clearly.

6. NGO RESPONSE STRATEGIES

Next to the analysis of the broader strategy between low-profile and reclaiming space, I found recurring patterns of *shielding strategies*. Here, I differentiate between three patterns: a) *Security measures, b) Good relations* and c) *Internal cohesion.* First, s*ecurity measures* on one hand refers to very practical security measures ranging from safe communication to organisational security, yet also beyond organisation-internal strategies. Second, there is a smart strategy – building or maintaining good relations to government agents to have an ally at hand if an emergency arises. Third, *internal cohesion* points to several characteristics strengthening the organisations internally, making them more resistant, less vulnerable, and more united: solidarity, dedication, and faith.

In the context chapter I gave insights into the national political situation and limitations to civil sphere. I then explained how NGOs are impacted by restrictive government actions, illustrating this through the three case study organisations. This chapter will now examine their response strategies. Hereby the third aspect of Borgh & Terwindt (2012) deserves major attention: the particular positionality, functioning, and objectives shaping response strategies of NGOs. I will therefore elaborate the importance of *positionality* - how the particular position an organisation finds itself in - including its structure, surroundings, ambitions and activities – influence the response strategies it may engage in. This is strongly dependent on the position, assumptions, and objectives of an organisation. All these shape the concrete responses and general strategy it may decide to follow. To facilitate the analysis of my findings with my conceptual framework, in Annex A you can find a visualisation of all findings.

> 'Fear and self-censorship are rampant again in Cambodia. Small repressions and threats suffice to intimidate NGO staff. Most are currently just waiting and probably hoping for a victory of the CPP at the upcoming parliamentarian elections, so by latest 2019 they can return to what they used to do before.'

(Karbaum, Markus, personal communication, 16.01.2018)

Indeed, many NGOs are extremely careful under these insecure conditions. They refrain from engaging in advocacy in any way and are very careful what they share and express. The fear is everywhere. So better be more careful, refrain from doing a certain possibly risky activity, than jeopardising the whole organisation. *What consequences, limitations and challenges does this bring for their activities? What are strategies to deal with these limitations and challenges?*

> 'Duck their head, overwinter, wait for spring to come (if he does). Or staff look for another job. The current political situation will also lead to a consolidation, which is not bad per se. [...] Hun Sen has the power, to destroy everything and everybody with a finger snip quasi. At the moment one remembers that more than a few years ago. Nevertheless, in principle not much has changed. The question rather is: what does the regime need NGOs for? There does not seem to be a clear answer right now. A lot would support NGOs being useful, as they conceal the social state failure. Yet on the 'way to Peking' there are no more socio-liberal certainties and least of all any guarantees.'

(Karbaum, Markus, personal communication, 16.01.2018)

Unsurprisingly, the dissolution is strongly condemned internationally. Yet with shrinking Western development aid - combined with at least formal conditions related to upholding certain human rights standards - heavily increasing Chinese influence shows its impact. On the 'way to Peking', heavy Chinese investments and involvements throughout the country (see for example the massive Belt-Road-Initiative) also signify increasing political influence of China in domestic politics. This affects independence, with a strong focus on and striving for Chinese investments replacing the role that formerly Western powers held. So due to Hun Sen's tight control of the judiciary and military, this strong international criticism had limited weight:

'"Diplomats and UN staff who thought that compromise would bring Hun Sen around should remember this swagger of a dictator unbound who knows he has the judiciary is in his pocket and the military backing him all the way," Robertson said. Additionally, he said Cambodia was freed of the need to "play the game" with donors like the US, given China's support, and could target groups with which it has an axe to grind, such as NDI1."

<div align="right">(Baliga, 2017 citing Human Rights Watch Asia Deputy Director Phil Robertson)</div>

As conditional Western aid is sinking due to other urgent priorities, Chinese business and deals are exuberant everywhere.

Move, postpone, cancel

As a result of the recent developments and limitations, the NGOs decided to cancel several events deemed as too risky. Workshops planned to realize in the natural protection area had to be moved to a safer setting in the office in the capital (participant observation, workshop, 21.11.2017), several other workshops with partners were cancelled completely (Senior NGO manager, personal communication, 26.11.2017), as was a visit to the area with a UN body (Senior NGO manager, personal communication, 14.12.2017). These cancelations likewise led to some frustration about main activities that energy and time was spent on, becoming suspended because they were considered too dangerous under the current circumstances:

"Yeah, like cancelling trainings. We had the *international human rights organisation*, they had a workshop I think. That was being cancelled. Not because there was any direct threat, but because it was just accessed that it was too dangerous. So that's really a success for the government *laughs*, that people are like activities with a lot of money, with EU, a lot of money and preparation, it's been months for them to prepare the workshop, it's a lot of work that's going nowhere. That's sort of worst example that you work towards doing something with the people, but if you are obstructed from that because it's assessed that it's too dangerous. And it might very well be, or it might be that you can bring in people for the activity and then the police shows just up and is like "where is your permission?" and just sends everybody home, because otherwise you might be incarcerated *laughs*. That's what is constantly, yeah, I'm not sure how many activities we can do. […] but some NGOs are also able to carry out the activities, trainings, workshops, the actual things with people."

<div align="right">(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

This greatly describes the insecurities, that lead to cancelations and self-censorship, but also frustration about great resources spent on preparing an event, that then is deemed as to dangerous. Whether this is the case is impossible to tell, but it greatly illustrates how insecurities cause organisations to auto-control themselves and their activities.

Due to the insecure political situation in Cambodia, the NGO precautionarily cancelled trainings and workshops. This shows what an effective tool the culture of fear is in causing organisations to self-censor themselves not only in what they are sharing publicly, their advocacy engagement, but also their regular activities offered to the local communities they mean to support and empower. And who can tell if the police would come, interrupt the activity, and threaten participants, or if nothing would have happen?

Coordination is an essential part of carefully navigating the present situation, assessing jointly the options and restrictions, and how to go about them. A very practical response to the changing climate

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[1] National Democratic Institute, an American institute that was shut down in Cambodia in August 2017

then is the postponing or cancelation of events. So did one organisation for example not host any trainings in the communities or villages during the half year prior to the elections, as it was seen as too dangerous (NGO officer, trainer, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018). Also, certain sensitive areas where the government has a particular interest in such as surrounding land concessions, they sometimes chose to refrain from engaging, to protect themselves in dangerous situations (project coordinator, formal semi-structured interview, 15.01.2018). Some activities are moved to the less vulnerable location of the office in the capital instead of the communities and can still be realised thus, only in a different setting. This also has the benefit of less bureaucratic hassle having to ask for permission and complying with the diverse requirements concerning the layout, etc.

> "I think like now, like we had to pull out our training back to the office [usually you would be out in the communities, and now you're hosting it here?] yes, yeah, usually we would be out. Now every activity we have to ask for permission, we don't have time to ask too many permissions. Like we have ten projects, then we have to ask permission ten times, and each of the projects have their own complication, they don't like the way, the layout of the letter, and the fond of the letter, oh we forgot this word, it's just unnecessary. So therefore, we decide to, you see maybe it's seen as NGO X is fearful, that is their judgement. But when we look inside, it does not mean that we stop working, we just need to be continue working in a different way. And maybe now we are still continue working, and maybe when it is the right time, we still have to be okay we don't do an activity for a period of time. For example, this year we don't plan anything for July. Usually we plan *resource conservation activity* for then. Now we don't plan anything yet. And that doesn't mean we quit, it's just, as I said, it just means we take a break, we stay down."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

Alternatively, after internal consideration, trainings may be moved to a more secure province. This shows how by carefully adapting their strategy, they attempt to still offer their services to communities as far as deemed possible, while attempting to not jeopardise the safety of staff and participants.

6.1.   Culture of Fear

Until here, I described the diverse ways the three NGO are affected by recent changes, following the categorisation of Borgh & Terwindt (2012). Four of five elements can be found directly affecting them: *administrative restrictions, physical harassment, stigmatisation* and *spaces of dialogue under pressure.* The only one the NGOs so far did not directly have to deal with was *criminalisation.* What is even more interesting beyond these very tangible actions/policies, is the culture of fear these government actions and policies create. A fear that restricts and strongly controls civil space in Cambodia. That strongly builds on the fifth category of Borgh & Terwindt (2012): *criminalisation – prosecution & investigation,* besides *physical harassment* and *administrative restrictions.* And that, essentially, leads to self-censorship and the cancellation of activities, due to intimidation, opaque national political developments castigating the opposition party and court cases deterring civil society.

Beyond direct disincentives affecting the organisations as elaborated before - ranging from bureaucratic hurdles to surveillance and intimidation, - indirect disincentives may play a possibly even stronger role in inhibiting the organisation to fully follow its objectives through insecurities and ambiguity creating a culture of fear. This ever-present feature I noticed during my fieldwork strongly shaped the actions, but also feelings of uncertainty, risks, and threat of the organisations' staff. *How did this culture of fear play out? What were examples illustrating this hard-to-grasp yet very powerful effect?* The following examples provide a better idea how the culture of fear manifests in everyday situations:

> "You have to be careful, doing your research. For example we cannot talk on the phone to *organisation*, as the government is supervising the phones. We have to talk only face-to-face. It is very dangerous now, also for foreigners."

The current time is seen as dangerous time. You have to act with great precaution. The government is suspected to frequently wiretap phone calls, which very well might be the case. And anything the government finds, may be used against you, if they are after you:

> I: *And with the bag [having to watch his bag], what is the risk there?*
>
> "I think the computer and smart phone can be something that I need to watch, because it get lots of stolen. There might be document that are illegal to keep, for example report from Global Witness on Cambodia. And some of the communication about LANGO. It should not be bad thing, but if you are already on the list, anything they can find, to get you into trouble…"

<div align="center">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

This pervasive culture of fear hampers people from being outspoken. It makes them afraid of getting accused for a negligible petty offense such as riding without a helmet, and become strongly concerned about their personal and organisational safety. The media is full of new restrictive legislation, deterrence court cases against opposition leaders or critical human rights and environmental activists. Rumours make their way about different organisations under investigation and actors being scrutinized. This culture of fear already makes interns worried about getting arrested if they are being too critical. Like the opposition leader who got arrested for a video made in 2013, as the government always finds an excuse to arrest him; because the government arrests everybody too critical about it, so you have to be careful what to share and post (junior staff and junior staff, informal conversation, 31.10.2017). And warnings going around that environmental NGOs have to be very careful now. Apparently recently also embassies have been surrounded by police (junior staff, informal conversation, 29.11.2017).

While the Chinese context is considerably different, as described in Stern & Hassid (2012, p. 1240), nevertheless several aspects of *control parables – "stories about transgression that counsel caution and restrict political possibilities"* can be found in the case studies within the Cambodian context: rumours about other organisations being affected, that office having been searched, etc. Stories that one needs to always comply with the law, ride the bike with a helmet, provide all funding and documentation to the government to not get on the radar, that by not being affiliated to the opposition, this enhances one's safety, etc. These control parables provide some input for what actions can be taken (not taken) to protect one's security. While they give not guarantee, they enhance the feeling of security and being better prepared and protected by analysing how other actors faced difficulties and listening to recommendations on how to stay on the safe side.

This culture of fear can be seen as reigning civil space. There is a strong insecurity about what is safe, and what crosses the line. Crucially, this results in a lot of preventative self-censorship to make sure to not get into trouble and give the government any justification for investigating against you. It for example creates doubts if translating a blog post about internship experiences in Cambodia, which is partially critical of the government, to English would be too dangerous and crossing the line. And who knows?

In this culture of fear, complying with all regulations and laws is seen as essential, as the tiniest misdoing might give the government a justification to shut down the whole organisation. And NGOs try to prevent any risks possible that might get them into difficulties, e.g. not complying 100% with permissions. In this climate of omnipresent insecurities, deterrence cases of opposition politicians and activists dominating the media, staff members themselves frequently were concerned about their organisation's and their own safety and engaged in self-censorship and postponing of sensitive activities.

Insecurity & Ambiguity

As Stern & Hassid (2012) emphasise:" It's not just heavy-handed state repression, but instead deep-rooted uncertainty about the boundaries of permissible political action that magnifies the effect of each crackdown. Unsure of the limits of state tolerance, lawyers and journalists frequently self-censor, effectively controlling themselves." (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1230).

The very same phenomena can be observed in the case studies: not knowing where the boundaries lay of what is still safe to do, and what crosses the line, hearing stories about other organisations getting into trouble, and knowing scattered deterring examples of activists facing criminal investigations or worse creates sufficiently insecurities that make many actors become silent, cancel activities and auto-censor themselves.

> I: *So probably it's just intimidating and hot air*
>
> "That's the thing, you don't know, and then there is this case of this NGO being suspended or this international NGO being kicked out, and then there's this one case, or this might happen, for us, and it probably is, I think so, but it's hard to tell , […] the most important thing is that the people are safe and can carry out the main activity, which is going on patrols, so it's a constant assessment."

(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

It becomes very clear how ambiguity can serve as powerful government instrument of control, to silence critical voices in the country, simply by occasional crackdowns, that would then silence large parts of civil society.

This is a great depiction of Foucault's envisioning of the panopticon, where, due to its circular shape and special construction style, it is impossible for prisoners to know whether they are being watched or not. Thus they cannot tell when their behaviour is being watched over, and therefore always need to control themselves. Thus the control task is indirectly handed over to themselves. This is very relatable to the Cambodian context. As people cannot know if they are being watched over, - if their phone calls are being tapped, if there is a spy in their organisation, - they control themselves. They self-censor themselves, out of fear that a certain activity or behaviour might cause harsh retribution. Through this insecurity and ambiguity of knowing what is permitted and what is not, a culture of fear is created, where people are afraid of being watched all their time. They are afraid of any action of behaviour potentially being used against them, and thus attempt to defer from any possibly risky actions. As if they were watched all the time, they self-censor themselves.

I discovered two recurring elements in my field work material. First, unsecure formulations like 'I heard, apparently, we are not sure, but …' etc. are very common, indicating insecurity about the degree of truth of the information. Second, my respondents – both international and Cambodian – frequently laughed when touching particularly sensitive and important issues, especially when it is touching insecurities, and fear, or critical remarks. It is a very interesting recurring pattern, showing how the insecurity affects them emotionality, and how they may face an inner tension between wanting to reject this 'big scare campaign', yet also being scared and fearful, for very good reasons.

Blacklist & Spies

A common aspect of the culture of fear consists in the fear of spies infiltrating the organisation and submitting criminative information to the government. While the government sometimes sends people to one of the organisations to check the righteousness of the activities, with prior informing of their attendance, staff were afraid of accidentally selecting a local authority as participant for one of their trainings (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018). This spy can be seen

as the imaginary prison guard in Bentham's panopticon, that might be there, watching over them. But it also might not be, yet people as precaution act as if he was there, and was watching over them.

Additionally, they feared the government would refrain from informing them about their attendance, and simply sending spies to trainings, who could then spy out sensitive information (Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 01.11.2017). These concerns aggravated after occasions of informal inquiry and questioning by government agents:

> I: *Has something happened to staff before?*
>
> "Yes, 2016 one man came here and tried to ask me questions. I meet him and he tried to ask what our organisation thinks about voting. […] It also happened after the killing of Kem Ley, they asked us many questions. Because we put a picture of Kem Ley at our gate. So they came and tried to ask if we support Kem Ley. They tried to get us. They always use hiding people, hiding spy to follow us. By phone, by personal."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

These incidents of questioning and intimidation are another facet of culture of fear impacting their sense of security. They are afraid of spies finding sensitive information, that can then be used to base an investigation and criminal prosecution upon. While some high-ranking respondents, could clearly point out that they had been followed and monitored by spies, even just the notion of having spies around, and not knowing their exact identity and actions created strong feelings of mistrust, threat, and danger:

> "So, but we do know that they (the government) have spies all over the place. If the spies tell the story, then they tell that there's no connection between us or *organisation* and the opposition."
>
> I: *Where would you find the spies, and what does that look like?*
>
> "*Organisation*, among some of the key leaders, whether they are also among our partners, we don't know. But we are sure that there are spies. And they report to the government."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

The culture of fear can create a culture of internal distrust between partners of even within an organisation, which can additionally hamper the organisation from achieving its objectives. Spies are believed to be infiltrating organisations and forwarding inside information to the government, and the NGO tries to protect itself by showing no affiliation or connection to the opposition party.

Next to the fear of spies infiltrating organisations and reporting sensitive information to the government, fear of a black list is very present. Respondents from all organisations mentioned the list frequently. Here, the government seems to list hostile anti-government organisations and actors suspected of collaborating with the opposition (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 15.11.2017). These are particularly watched over – mostly human rights organisations and activists (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 07.12.2017). Parts of this black list were leaked, purposefully or not, to the public and published by the main English-speaking newspaper, naming a few dozen organisations as closely involved in the American-led colour revolution. Organisations listed on the watchlist apparently are monitored tightly by the government. They need to take strong precautions to not face any difficulties such as harassment and investigations.

Opinions, knowledge, and perceptions about this blacklist vary considerably. Some respondents for example were fully convinced that their NGO is blacklisted. Others had heard rumours. And others again stated that all organisations were being watched closely. Again, the spreading of rumours plays an essential role in spreading concern and fear. Without an official blacklist being public, people in the direct environment working at the government would advise and warn NGOs of being blacklisted:

> I: *How do you know that you are on the blacklist?*

> "Some people working in the government, they inform. Like we have friends, relatives working in the MoI or working at the ministry council, and then they inform us and say 'oh, you need to be careful. They try to blacklist you. Take care of your security, your safety.'"

<div align="center">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

This is another form of watching over people, just like the panopticon. It provides people the risk of their organisation being watched, and that way, while possibly only a few are actually being watched (just like the guard could only watch a few prisoners, if present), all organisations are extremely careful and cautious in their actions. With concrete confirmed information on which actors are on the blacklist lacking, given it exists the way it is believed to exist, information dribbles from acquaintances and civil servants. Warnings are forwarded about having to be particularly careful. Actors blacklisted are suspected of supporting the colour revolution (project coordinator, formal semi-structured interview, 15.01.2018). Organisations are apparently watched over closely, organisational information and intelligence is collected, and they are kept under surveillance, yet what scale this entails is controversial:

> "We are very careful with our activities, our security, own safety, and safety of our organisation. Because they try to blacklist NGOs. I heard our organisation is also blacklisted from the government, so they watch us, what we do."
>
> I: *What happens if you're on the blacklist?*
>
> "When the government want to stop, they first put you on the blacklist, they watch you. We don't know what they do. It's confidential. Sometimes they try to report, get information from us, talk to phone, the activity of our trainers, they already watch. How we respond of this situation, first we must take care of us for our personal safety."

<div align="center">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

In response to apparently being on the blacklist, various security measures were taken to protect the organisation. People in the direct environment warning the organisation had a strongly intimidating effect on it. Interestingly again, here uncertainty is very present. Respondents are sure their organisation is on the black list, as they heard it from somebody, but details are not present, neither what exactly happens to organisations on the black list, and what this means for their own organisation. Yet without knowing these details, the 'rules of the game', actors frequently become more careful, and increasingly low profile to not attract any wrong attention by the government. Going back to the panopticon metaphor: the prisoners watch over themselves. They control themselves. They self-censor their activities and themselves.

This blacklist depicting a sort of terrorism list is a great example of *preventive measures of criminalisation*. Following Borgh & Terwindt (2012, p. 1071), "counter-terrorism measures are laws and practices by governments and supranational institutions intended to prohibit, prevent, investigate, and punish specific acts of terrorism ". The narrative of the colour revolution attempting to overthrow the Cambodian government can be interpreted as a type of terror, endangering the national security by American-led outside forces who are trying to tumble the present government. While it does not exactly depict terrorism acts in the narrower sense, similarities can be drawn.

Yet while some respondents envisioned the threat of being blacklisted and possibly shut down as very imminent and perilous, depicting one of the greatest threats for the organisation, others envisioned this aspect as rather neglectable compared to pressing funding issues:

> "Yesterday I spoke to the donors from Australia. When I told them that we are on the blacklist, they were very concerned."
>
> I: *Oh, NGO X is on the black list? How do you know?*

"People say it, but we never got an official confirmation. Since we started working with land rights organisation/communities. But there is no official black list. They would not tell you. It's just people scaring each other. I have been followed a few times. It stopped when the political situation is more relaxed. But the Australian donors were very concerned, that they might shut us down. But chances NGO X being shut down are so small. I told them, it's less than 1% chance that NGO X gets shut down by the government. But 50% chance that NGO X has to shut down because of no more funding. They have to stop worrying about the government and worry about the funding. Nowadays it is so hard to find funding. Donors reducing their funding." *He seems to be upset, moved*.

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 13.12.2017)</div>

Overseas donors essential for the operation of the organisation entailed a far more concrete concern for him, than being blacklisted. Being very dependent on external funding, the risk of this funding being cut depicted an imminent even greater threat for the continued existence of the organisation. Remarkably, he shares doubts about the reality of the blacklist and instead suggest that people in the NGO sector spread a sort of paranoia around the list, which is unjustified. Again, how to know what is true in this context of ambiguities? Here again, opinions diverge between different actors, with different positions and involvements. While some staff judge the risk of their organisation shutting down due to a lack of funding, not because of being blacklisted and prosecuted, other respondents held doubts about the existence of this blacklist:

I: *This blacklist, what exactly is it about?*

"No, that's also, there are many rumours. It's just, I haven't seen any black list. But it was in the Phnom Penh Post, where they released the scheme how it's all structured with the EU and US and colour revolution. I didn't see anything, but apparently there was a list included. I am not sure if there even is this list. But it is something that is somehow in the discourse, that certain organisations can be listed, watched, for example Senior NGO manager from NGO X is quite certain that NGO X is, that they are being monitored. But I think it's all a way, I think it's very good for the government that people are being scared and like talking about it. Because it's nothing substantial, but they are really succeeding in making everybody think that they're being watched or monitored and we have to be careful with our emails and our communications. And it's really successful, because it's a lot of time wasted on, and stuff not being done. And I guess that's essentially also what they want to obtain, that people are obstructed from doing their actual work. So I think, that's more than successful *laughs*."

<div align="right">(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

This describes the power of ambiguities in a nutshell. Independent of whether the list exists, and how it is used, it achieves a silencing effect among many organisations by making them afraid of being on the list, and rumours going around about which organisation encounters itself on the list. But independent from how real the risk of being blacklisted and monitored for an organisation actually is, what matters is the practical impact this has, being loaded with a continuous mental weight, concerns, and taking up space and energy of the staff working for the organisation. Almost all respondents consistently were scared of their organisation being blacklisted, many were quite sure about it, and it was frequently on their mind, likely restricting their work activities and safety red lines set up.

Deterrence cases & safety concerns

Beyond the black list, investigations and court cases played an essential role in intimidating staff. Here, prominent opposition politicians or human rights and/or environmental activists got arrested, detained over months and prosecuted, as elaborated in the previous chapter. This had a strong deterring impact on staff members of the case study NGOs. One prominent case was the detention of two activists from the environmental organisation Rainforest Alliance, that worked against a land eviction. Yet the probably most protruding case was the investigation of the opposition leader Kem Sokha over obscure

accusations (NGO officer, informal interview, 21.12.2017). These cases deterred staff, making them afraid of something similar happening to them.

Additionally, the particular history of the Khmer Rouge, hunger, genocide and civil war – devastating events killing two million people – traumatized people, not wanting a similar horrendous situation again (NGO officer, informal interview, 21.12.2017).

Applying Borgh & Terwindt (2012), an essential element here is *criminalisation: the investigation and prosecution of activists for punitive purposes*. On one hand, notably, the criminal stigmatisation of specific actors then resulted in social stigmatisation of the NGO-sector more broadly, particularly human rights and environmental actors. Interestingly, it is not necessarily the very values and norms of this sector (e.g. human rights and democratisation) that are perceived as opposing the societal norms and values, but rather the fear of association and affiliation to this sector connoting an imminent danger to oneself. The prosecution and criminal conviction has a clear stigmatising effect on civil society. On the other hand, spreading a certain narrative of an imminent threat - the US-led colour revolution attempting to turn over the government - and local forces collaborating with this criminal movement, led to an increased stigmatisation, acceptance of their convictable entanglements, and required criminalisation. This nicely illustrates how these two elements of stigmatisation and criminalisation are closely interconnected and reinforce each other.

What is even more interesting, is how this depicts the clearest example of ambiguities and insecurities can result in self-censorship. Targeting a few most outspoken actors created a wave of other potential outspoken actors to retain in silence. "Uncertainty magnifies the effect of each instance of coercion such that it is possible to limit the political ambitions of a national network […] with only relatively rare recourse to heavy-handed retribution." (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1235) Due to selected activists and politicians facing trial and organisations being dissolved, this creates fears of other actors also being affecting and seeking a preventive strategy carefully keeping low profile to stay safe.

Another frequent aspect concerned the physical integrity and safety of staff members. Particularly during field trips to the communities in the countryside. Following incidents of expressively caused hit-and-run accidents supposedly targeting politicians and some prominent activists, one NGO got concerned about staff members becoming the target of similar provoked incidents where staff might get injured.

> I: *What are the risks about NGO X going to the provinces? Why is it risky?*
>
> "[…] also the security has become a concern. We don't want, I mean this is just thinking, we don't want any accident of our staff, that relates maybe, because they want to, for example the issue of hit-and-run, there could be cases where they know our team and they could cause an accident to start, it looks like an accident, and it happened in many cases already. It happened to political party leaders, it happened to some of the civil society high profile."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

While it is hard to determine how real this threat is to staff members, just the mere occurrence of politicians and activists and possibility of staff falling victim to this has a strongly deterring effect. Reinforcing this are concerns about the increased climate of violence surrounding elections via so-called '*black forces*' being released and spreading violence and terror through assaults:

> "Because I don't know how much it will make sense and you will believe this, but it has become routine in our country, when it comes to elections, it is always a security matter, there will always be a lot of thieves, a lot of robbery, and even a lot of killing. And therefore for me, it has become a pattern, and if you get to know the communist mindset, communist strategy, bad leader strategy, they will often have what they call 'black forces'. These 'black forces' will be released at times when they want to make attention in the society. And usually whenever big event come up like national election, these

forces will always come out and will start doing their violence all over the place. Like thieves, like stealing, breaking into houses, explosion, like weaponize, shooting, doing all, and also intensive violent robbery. […] So that's the concern, if that's happens, we don't want our staff to be in that position. And of course, it might happen in their own home, we don't know. […] These are the things that they use, so my concern when we talk about this, that if they want to, for example have a target victim, the NGO staff are ever likely target, you don't want our staff to be in that position either. So we will take any means to protect them."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

The fear of physical harassment is very present here – through threats, injuries or even killings. While this remains rather indirectly, mostly affecting politicians only, the fear is jumping over to the NGO as well. At the same time, another aspect that can be seen here touches the impunity and lack of protection by the government from attacks of third parties – in this case petty criminals. Provided these incidents of assaults and violent robberies, the government seems to choose to actively not interfere to protect citizens – another form of physical harassment and neglecting its duties of securing the physical integrity of its citizens. Yet most interestingly is how again ambiguity and uncertainty prevail, about these black forces attacking people, causing violence, and possibly injuring staff members.

'Martyrs' & Stigmatisation

The most extreme and daunting cases of deterrence were righteous killings of activists, most prominently Chut Wutty, environmental activist, and political commentator and activist Kem Ley.

"If you do not do what the prime minister wants, if you get a weak penalty, you have to leave the country. If it's worse, you will get jailed. And if it's really bad, you have to take the bullet. Like the activist, Kem Ley, who was advising both the opposition and governing party, and thought the Prime minister would not kill him. But he then was shot at a gas station, right after the Global Witness report about how the Prime Minister and his whole family are involved in all kinds of illegal corrupt businesses, was published and he commented on it. There was an attempt to kill him just the day before, Kem Ley knew it, people reacted strangely, and then he was killed there the next day. I told him to be careful, but Kem Ley was not scared. He took the bullet."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 16.11.2017)</div>

Kem Ley was shot at a gas station two days after critically commenting on a just published report by Global Witness on the family of Hun Sen, confirming the consistency and accuracy of the report, and encouraging the government to take responsibility and according action (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, gas station, 07.12.2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018). These killings, although very few, had a strongly chilling effect on civil society, spreading fear, and their names were often mentioned by respondents.

Besides the fear of spies and the black list, senior staff were very concerned about the risk of an international NGO being expelled by the government, also given the international nature, and preferred to not have their name mentioned as organiser of activities, but rather one of its national partners. This is again strongly linked to the LANGO regulation, permits for operational activities and mouth-to-mouth information about other organisations facing challenges:

I: *What's the difference between a local organisation, or a foreign international organisation organising these activities?*

"NGO X can be kicked out of the country, local organisations, of course they can be closed down, but I guess it's harder, so the risk for international organisations are bigger. We have a MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with the ministry of foreign affairs. It's valid for two years, and if we don't comply, like with the LANGO, then they can simply refuse to renew the MoU. And we know that

a number or organisations have trouble already getting their renewal. So I assume that we can face a similar challenge, and I think that's probably the biggest risk for us right now, that our MoU will not renewed. Our current one will expire mid 2019 and we do know that they are watching us."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

This shows the government's power to use *administrative restrictions*, including *ad-hoc measures* such as delaying processes, to restrict operational space for NGOs as in Borgh & Terwindt (2012). Bureaucratic hurdles and ad-hoc hassles endanger the NGO engagement, and leave NGOs in a difficult situation. Combined with general fear, knowledge about being watched, and chilling examples of opposition party court cases in the media, this creates an effective mix deterring NGOs from being too critical in a shrinking civil space. By hearing stories about other organisations having issues with their permission, the organisation got afraid of also having to deal with difficulties, again a great example of what a powerful tool insecurities can be.

Taken in myself

Very startling was how I myself as a researcher talking to NGO staff daily, following their conversations, their actions, building up a closer relationship, I was equally taken in by the culture of fear:

> "I feel like my own perception of the threat is also strongly influenced by the people surrounding me and that I speak to. It made me start seeing every police man or person in military uniform as corrupt threat, danger, distrust them, believing this 'conspiracy', which might very much be true, but also feeling I need to be very careful in what I do, that there's constant danger, risks. While speaking to more radical worry-less activists (Ouch Leng and Marcus Hardtke), made me also feel like this is over-exaggerated, not so serious, and rather self-limitation instead of the situation really being that dangerous. Still, it's hard to tell what's real."

<div align="right">(field diary/notes, 11.01.2018)</div>

It was simple interactions like the following (*note: the following segment is written from memory, not word-by-word, so the exact wording may be different*), that gave me as researcher a sense of distrust, insecurity, danger. A sense that I as foreign student doing research in this setting had to be wary of the government:

> Senior NGO manager picks me up 7:15. On the way towards the city centre, we ride through a modern gas station with Western café. Senior NGO manager tells me, this is the gas station where Kem Ley was shot. Two days after a report by Global Witness got published on the family of Hun Sen. Because he said something about it the government did not like.

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 07.12.2017)</div>

Passing by the actual place where Kem Ley was murdered, a regular gas station, instead of 'just' talking to NGO staff made my research somewhat more real, closer, and essentially scarier, compared to getting information rather second hand, reading up articles etc.

> We drive by two very flat and huge new buildings without special grace.
>
> "You know what these are? These also belong to Hun Sen."
>
> *I: Are they for apartments or office buildings?*
>
> "These are completely empty. Nobody lives there. They are for money laundering. You understand? When you get a lot of illegal money, you cannot just bring it to the bank at once. They get suspicious. So you have to … "

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 07.12.2017)</div>

Hints and comments like that gave me the perception of Hun Sen and his family owning things everywhere. Of corruption and criminal government involvement being all over the place. Frequent comments when driving around the city, like Hun Sen owning the only casino allowed in the city and seemingly half of the real estate around created distrust and suspicion.

> *A Senior NGO manager takes me for a tour to Diamond island. We cross a bridge with concrete snakes and enter an area that looks like an entertainment park very early in the morning before it's open: big modern buildings, imitating European architectural style, yet somewhat like a cheaper version of it made out of concrete. All empty, hardly any cars, except cleaners and some guys on motorbikes and tuktuks waiting for clients. Nobody on the streets, yet. We stop at the riverside.*

> "Here a lot of poor people used to live. But they got evicted by the government. About 500 families. They were dumped like garbage. They were told that they would take them to another place to live. The police surrounded the area, so they had no way except to follow them. And then they were properly dumped out of trucks somewhere 40 km away from here, outside the city in the middle of nowhere. Where there was nothing, no shelter, no food."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 07.12.2017)</div>

Being in the actual place where massive land eviction took place was a strange, moving experience. Hearing stories like these, or the land eviction around the now fully disappeared Boeung Kak Lake, and seeing the massive modern brand-new high-rise buildings standing there gave me a scaring, frustrating feeling. Even if the numbers and exact happenings may not be 100% accurate but possibly slightly exaggerated, they still give away a decent notion of the events that took place there. And they increasingly drew a negative government image of abuse, corruption and distrust in me.

> *We drive by fancy big villas behind tall fences and walls, that look completely new. We drive by posters showing fancy rooftop terraces with paradise-like looking pools. The streets are almost empty. Street cleaners sweep the dust. Some big cars driving around. Empty store windows. It looks like it was just opened.*

> "All this belongs to Hun Sen and his family. They want tourists to come and stay here. For investment. Tourists don't know people were evicted from here by force. Tourist guides tell them how the government invested here, to make it a beautiful place... I want to tell tourists the real story. Write a blog about it. But I have to be careful, or something may happen to me."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 07.12.2017)</div>

Remarks like this increased my perception of imminent threat and danger. And was this notion justified and required or disproportionate? I don't know.

> *We drive around a big hall which is barricaded by fences, with many police and military around.*

> "Also, if they ask you what you are doing here. Say you are doing sightseeing. And I am your guide. It should not be a problem, but they might get suspicious with us driving around. Possible Hun Sen is there today. [...]"

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 07.12.2017)</div>

While I never found myself in any situation of imminent danger or threat, the few moments like this made me feel that I was part of the game too and might get my respondents and/or myself into trouble, if not acting carefully and keeping a long distance from government agents.

> *The senior NGO manager keeps looking around. I ask if I can take a few pictures or better not. He says Yes, sure. There is a man in green uniform that came to the other side, around 15 meters away from us. Senior NGO manager calls my attention to him. The man has a walky-talky making sounds and then roams by us very relaxedly. We stop talking while he passes us by. I feel a bit uncomfortable, especially wearing the NGO X t-shirt just today – no smart move.*

"You see how he's showing off. He's becoming a machine, not human anymore. They're watching us."

There's a police car stationed about 10 meters away from us. It seems there's people monitoring us all around.

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 07.12.2017)</div>

Looking back, I still cannot say if this was a coincidence, if there was a real threat or not. If being so careful was 'justified' or not. It was, nevertheless, intimidating, and at hindsight fascinating, how I somehow adapted the reactions and perceptions of my respondents, the culture of fear. And this reaction despite hardly being affected the way they were, with just the interaction described above being a 'real encounter' with 'the government'. Doing research about the NGOs being affected by recent changes in the civil space, I unconsciously resumed their perceptions and reactions to a considerable degree.

This notion of experiencing the fear and insecurity myself over, digging in deeper over the period of my field research, is particularly fascinating to me. It illustrates how after hearing all these narratives, that kind of are similar to histories and rumours being passed around, warnings giving between different organisations, at conference meetings, recommendations from family, about what happened to whom, the black list, incidents. And going one step further, what Stern & Hassid (2012) define as "control parables" trying to explain the reasons for government crackdown, I did not recognise the same way of "didactic stories that invent or recapitulate an understanding of why certain types of action are dangerous or even impossible" (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1240), by analysing strictly what a certain organisation had done 'wrong' to put themselves in such a situation. However there were dominant narratives of elements that protect NGOs from government crackdown, primarily non-affiliation to the opposition party, transparency, and obeying all regulations. Even though these do not assure complete security, as respondents would admit, they provided more of a feeling of safety, security measures one could take to reduce risks. Measures like always asking for permission, avoiding the usage of certain words and overall keeping low profile (*see next chapter*). And who knows how they do protect the organisations from harassment and crackdown?

Scepticism, one big scare campaign?

On the other side, there are also voices sceptical about in how far this 'dangerous political situation for NGO's' is a sort of effective intimidation and distraction. A distraction that causes self-censorship and distracts NGOs from doing their actual work; if it is really necessary to be so careful, or if it is exaggerated and the danger is actually not that acute (field notes, 11.01.2018):

"And then, civil society organisations, I think they're (the government) doing a good job in scaring people away. For example when they publish a list, like accidentally publish a list, with all the civil society organisations, or the ones that blacklisted, that's a way to say, yeah, it's not accidental that it's being leaked or published. It's sort of to make people think that they are being watched, and that they can be... I mean it's an insecure environment in terms of that this system is completely – corrupt, and of course many people are afraid that simple things can cause them to have to stop their activities, or suspend their activities. [...] So I think it's not directly violent, but it's at least a way of stating, that they are keeping an eye on, so of course it limits."

<div align="right">(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

This greatly describes the tension of insecurity, of not knowing where the limits are, and how real the threat is. "Power is most effective when it is least observable." (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1232 citing Lukes) Just like the invisible prison guard watching over you in your mind. Taken the case that this list was leaked on purpose by the government, it shows what a powerful tool insecurity and fear are. A tool that creates a chilling sphere over civil society, that spreads rumours, concerns. A tool that brings silenced protest, cancelled advocacy activities, and self-censorship. And as Stern & Hassid (2012)

describe, this strategy requires very little resources of enforcement and coercion, while instead the targeted take on the controlling and becoming silent themselves – a fascinating phenomenon.

> 'For the past decade, there have been several attempts to limit the space for civil society, with new decrees and laws adopted since 2009 containing limitations on civil society and political participation. Some of these limitations have even resulted in the self-censorship of activists. For example the criminal code includes the crime of defamation, thus opening for the criminalisation of critical analysis and protest. Due to this code, activists have expressed that they are being more careful in how they voice concerns, in order to avoid facing prosecution. In fact, Cambodian civil society organisations have learned which criticisms are likely to be tolerated and which will not, and therefore tend to self-censor, and avoid criticising particular government officials and policies.'

<div align="right">(Aho & Grinde, 2017, p. 14)</div>

As it is very difficult to make proper assessments of what can be done, or what is too risky, often decisions are taken based on assumptions, that may or may not hold true. And that may discard considerable resource investments made, both in the sense of time and financially:

> I: *What kind of activities are being done? In terms of trainings …*

> "Yeah, like cancelling trainings. We had the *HR NGO*, they had a workshop I think. That was being cancelled. Not because there was any direct threat, but because it was just accessed that it was too dangerous. So that's really a success for the government *laughs*, that people are like activities with a lot of money, with EU, a lot of money and preparation, it's been months for them to prepare the workshop, it's a lot of work that's going nowhere. That's sort of worst example that you work towards doing something with the people, but if you are obstructed from that because it's assessed that it's too dangerous. And it might very well be, or it might be that you can bring in people for the activity and then the police shows just up and is like "where is your permission?" and just sends everybody home, because otherwise you might be incarcerated *laughs*. That's what is constantly, yeah, I'm not sure how many activities we can do. If even patrolling is going to be, like, we can see that, yeah, but some NGOs are also able to carry out the activities, trainings, workshops, the actual things with people."

<div align="right">(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

It is a constant trade-off between continuing activities, to strive for what the organisation stands for and tries to offer, with controlling the risks and threats, and not endangering staff, partners, and the communities. The culture of fear is everywhere. Organisations restrict themselves due to insecurities. And the notion of the panopticon is very visible: as organisations cannot know if they are being watched by the government, they control themselves. In this it proofs a very efficient tool of leading people to self-censor themselves, to control their words and actions, out of insecurity.

> "I think I heard something, maybe it's a good idea, I don't have an active social media profile. It doesn't say that I work for NGO X, and not in *country* even. And they wanted to make a profile for me, but then decided not to. And maybe it's a good thing, and I don't think that its, but ... I mean it's really easy to let yourself scare off, and I see it a lot of people also, and I, yeah, for me it's mostly just, for me it's very sad because it makes people very busy with being protected and I think the ones who could face anything are more, like civil society organisation activists, so political analysts, or young people being critical on facebook. So I guess, it's really an experience of seeing how efficient a strategy just making people believe that they're being watched. So it's a constant assessment of, and maybe that also shows in the work. We don't know what would happen if we release this report, but we chose not to, because this might happen, but you never know, it's just a constant assessment that there is a risk, so.. so it's safer not to do it. It's safer not to carry out the activity, than to do the activity, because then you might have police showing up on your door, so then it's always safer not to do things, right? *laughs* So I think they are really having civil society, everyone around their own things, at least

activity will be very low at least until the elections, and I think they will win, and there won't be too much trouble."

One of my main findings includes the culture of fear as powerful tool for the government to effectively restrain and control civil society. Via occasional crackdowns of outspoken actors, the government can achieve self-censorship of the large part of civil society sector. This is as actors become afraid of facing similar redemption when 'crossing the invisible line' and thus chose to keep quiet, just in case. Yet nobody can be sure where this line goes. Via legal amendments, intimidation, harassment, exhausting procedures, monitoring and selected crackdowns on major organisations and activists, they achieve to create a culture of fear, where large parts of civil society choose to remain quiet. They self-censor themselves out of fear of going too far in their activism and passing an invisible line which might put their lives on line. So to stay on the safe side, they choose to postpone, cancel, and refrain.

In a situation of overarching ambiguity and insecurity about the lines of the permissible, responses are based upon an assessment of the situation – this again being based on assumptions of what is still permitted, and what goes a step too far. Beyond, I argue that responses to challenges and limitations, as well as the according response strategy vary greatly, depending on the positionality of an organization. Diverse aspects like its surrounding, staff members, goals, focus, the situation it finds itself in and activities have to be taken into account closely to understand the particular response it engages in.

6.2.   Distrust, Frustration & Cynicism

Despite all these drawbacks, fears, threats, intimidation and insecurity taking over, another peculiar feature were reactions of distrust, irony, cynicism and frustration upon the shrinking civil space. Taking the 'dark' situation and limitations with an impressive sense of humour despite all the odds. These sharp comments, cynical jokes and allusions illustrate the disillusion, frustration, and anger about the current situation, but also show a great sense of humour: being able to take one step back out of this seemingly hopeless situation, and ridiculing it – possibly another way of dealing with drawbacks, limitations, and frustration.

As I spent a lot of time with the management staff of one NGO, I was able to note these fine nuances, sarcastic comments, and resentments. In one instant at a meeting of the partner organisations for example, there were as usual no phones allowed in the meeting room because of security reasons – somebody might record the meeting. So Senior NGO manager noted in a slightly annoyed, ironical tone: "*The government managed to scare everyone*." (Senior NGO manager and NGO Manager, participant observation, 25.10.2017), mocking how the government with its 'scare campaign' had succeeded to frighten the public sufficiently for people to engage in self-censorship and become worried about their very surrounding themselves.

A very telling incidence then happened at another team meeting after break, when a senior NGO manager asked: "*You know, the police was outside? Do we have a permission?*". Everybody looked scared, didn't know how to respond, till he told them it was just a joke (participant observation team meeting, meeting room, 13.11.2017). This shows how present fear is, dominating the sphere.

At another moment during a conference organised by a NGO manager and NGO staff from a small international partner organisation, while planning how to interview respondents, the question came up if it was okay to record the conversations questioning respondents about effects of climate change without asking for permission, as respondents would not share and speak openly if they would ask for it. Ben, the senior representative of the organisation commented laughing: "*Well, there's so many leaked phone conversation, that are 'normal' in Cambodia anyway, right?*" (participant observation at partner

conference, conference room, 06.11.2017) – playing on leaked conversations, in a climate where nothing seems to be safe and secure. So why should they stick to the rules?

Generally, cynical jokes among the team and taking the situation with humour, such as having a bet about whether the opposition party would be resolved in the court case on Nov 16th (participant observation, 13.11.2017) seemed rather common in a situation so 'messed up', that mocking and thereby taking a certain distance seemed like a way to express frustration and let out some air. Like a way to express their distrust, chagrin and disappointment. Later on, the participants were encouraged to reflect on potential sources of information about climate change and whom to approach. Many laughed when the partner NGO manager suggested to contact the government, lacking confidence in government bodies.

> Partner NGO manager "You mustn't be so cynical on the government."

> Senior NGO manager: "It's an issue to contact the government. You need a proposal, a letter, … it can take forever. In this ridiculous country, you have to be in the party with them, otherwise … ." *laughing cynically*.

Eventually, the partner NGO manager discussed the action points, asking whom would contact the government – "or are you reluctant to do so?". They all laughed and then decided that an NGO officer, who was already in touch with the government, should contact it. A senior NGO manager noted "We can try and see how it goes.", yet he didn't seem to be quite convinced (participant observation partner conference, conference room, 06.11.2017). These small incidents show the deep distrust in the government, frustration and disillusion. The government is seen as corrupt, ineffective, and untrustworthy:

> A police wrecking truck drives by.

> "You see that police car? That's corruption. That's how they make money. Because they get that car, but then have to see what to do with it."

> I: You mean the police officers don't get well paid and therefore ask for bribes?

> "You see that fancy car? They knock on the window. And if the owner is not there, they take it. If the owner finds it on the way, he pays 50$, and gets it back. Without receipt."

> Soon after, an ambulance passes us by.

> "Once I saw an ambulance, they opened it, and it was timber inside."

> I: Really? Here in Phnom Penh or in the province?

> "Here in Phnom Penh. They use it to transport timber. Also Red Cross cars. You never know."

> (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 12.12.2017)

This shows strong distrust in any government service, ranging from police to ambulance. The government is seen as untrustworthy, corrupt - impressions many news and journal articles confirm. These experiences lead to frustration about the situation, hopelessness and resignation, as things do not seem to improve:

> *We pass by some police forces on the sidewalk of the main street very early in the morning.*

> "You see those policemen so early? There's something going on. This week there are some court cases of activists."

> I: *Oh really? What about?*

> "They always find a reason to arrest you."

> *We drive by another somewhat fatty or well-equipped policeman with additional fluffy uniform pads. We laugh*

The fear of arbitrary arrests and prosecution and sense of powerlessness, resignation and being at the mercy of the government, should they decide to target you was very present. An interesting mix of at one hand trying to do everything correctly, complying with all regulations and keeping good relations, while on the other hand being sure that if the government want to crack down on you, they easily can, no matter what. Still, not providing additional reasons for government to do so can only be beneficial in that sense. Despite this, he can still laugh about the amusing appearance of an over-padded policeman. Frustration surfaced frequently:

> Staff retreat. At 21:00 a small round sits around the barbeque grilling the fish we caught today. [...] We speak about politics, the elections. A NGO officer passes by. He's a bit drunk and cynical, emotional, frustrated. Another NGO officer asks him how he feels about Hun Sen. He says "Sometimes I hate him too much". He seems desperate, hopeless.

(participant observation, 21.12.2017)

Following the unsatisfying developments and setbacks that seem to not lead to any positive change, creates frustration, hopelessness among the staff members. After 30 years of rule and finally having an opposition party likely strong enough to win the election, that then gets dissolved by a court case, and other setbacks brings disappointment, bitterness and cynicism:

> I: *How does the current situation make you feel?*
>
> "I feel scared. I feel hopeless, I feel disappointed with whatever is happening. I feel angry sometimes. I also feel shame, because my country is in that , that politics is cheap, it's so cheap *laughs*. It's not respectable. You have a effective competitive opposition and you dissolve them. It's disgrace, you are not a real fighter. And then you try to point all the finger, "they are bad, that's why I dissolve them". It's not, like Mike Thyson. So shameful. That's what Cambodia is doing. Honestly, if I can give up my citizenship as Cambodian, I will. And I will do it publicly to say I am so disgusted to be Cambodian. To have a stupid prime minister. It's so shameful. If I would have known this ten year ago, I would have done something different. Now I feel a bit late to leave my country. If I, I could have like moved. Like when you have Trump come to election, you have people move to Canada."
>
> I: *But then also when you're somewhere abroad, you cannot change something about it. You cannot try to make a difference.*
>
> "True, yeah, and I'm still here, I don't make any difference." *laughs*
>
> I: *Well, I think not in a large scale, but for some people definitely.*
>
> *laughs cynically* "Yeah, and if I'm too obvious to Hun Sen, then he will destroy me." *laughs*

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

This extract shows a deep sense of frustration, desperation, and rancour. Yet also shame and disgust about living in this country, anger about the prime minister's filthy entanglements and policies, scrupulous actions. Especially being aware of the exploitative history, natural abundance and wealthy conditions the country has to offer:

> "It's the whole history when you look back, it's very depressing. As a country, it has always been like that. Exploited by somebody, by neighbour, by country, and even internal conflict, internal violence, struggle for power, corruption. I don't know when, maybe my grandchildren generation, I hope my children generation will help change a lot. Would be my great grandchildren, I don't know if I will live long enough to see the change *laughs*. I'm not too old, but. As I said, we have so much potential as a country. We have sea, beautiful beach, we have temple for tourists. [...] Our soil for agriculture is very good. Yet, we are not growing. It's a plan to make us poor for as long as we live."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

All these emotional responses how to deal with such a frustrating, intimidating situation show the strong emotional impact. Responses of cynicism, sarcasm, mocking as response strategy, distancing oneself, in a situation that seems so hopeless that making fun and humour are the best way to take it at times.

All three organisations were affected by several categories provided by Borgh & Terwindt (2012). Given the five categories – *physical harassment, criminalisation, administrative restrictions, stigmatisation and spaces of dialogue under pressure* – they were most directly affected by *administrative restrictions* as well as *physical harassment* (threats and intimidation). One direct warning received had strong consequences on the feeling of threat on one organisation, and consequently activities in the aftermath, thus direct physical harassments laid heavy on the organisation. The most outspoken of the three frequently had police monitor or even shut down activities, take pictures, and intimidate staff and participants. The latter manifested mostly in threats and intimidation, while the former involved both restrictive NGO-legislation on registration and operation, as well as ad-hoc measures by government agencies. Administrative restrictions were the most concrete cases, mostly related to the LANGO-law. Both the restrictive way of regulations *legislation on registration and operation*, as well as *ad-hoc government actions* played a major role.

However, while direct actions from the other categories did influence their work in a rather limited degree, I strongly emphasize the impact of these indirect restrictions and actions on the organisation's functioning. They were indirectly strongly influenced by larger developments in civil space and the political scene, e.g. criminal prosecutions of political leaders and activists, court cases, rumours and mouth-to-mouth information from other organisations, and the terrorism lists/black list. How did this come about? These created a culture of fear leading to self-censorship, and the cancelation of events. Insecurities and ambiguities combined with occasional deterring crackdown achieved a broad self-censorship of organisations, cancelling activities, carefully reflecting on each statement. Through warnings, stories going round, rumours and ambiguous information about who might be targeted, what were criteria, etc., organisations tried to protect them by auto-censoring themselves. This served as effective tool to control activities with a considerable mental impact, and I argue might be even more restrictive and effective than direct actions, (excluding the open warning that led to a considerable shift). Indirect stigmatisation via other actors getting stigmatised, prosecuted, harassed and threatened had a strong effect. Very interesting hereby is the interrelation between criminalisation and stigmatisation, with one enhancing the other – criminal prosecution of activists leading to increased stigmatisation of NGOs more broadly, and NGOs striving for non-affiliation to certain actors on the radar. Despite maybe not being affected directly, they can nevertheless easily be taken by fear, examples of others being directly affected, and consequentially being scared of having the same destiny – a strong deterring impact – creating amplifying silence.

Owing to a few high profile cases of investigation and prosecutions of activists, political opponents being bluntly targeted, and frequently critical NGOs being forced to shut down, this caused a strong chilling wave on the whole civil society sector. Via legal regulations - administrative restrictions – yet also criminalisation crystallising in deterrence court cases of too critical opposition leaders, environmental and human rights activists, supported by physical harassment, threats, and intimidation, the government spread a culture of fear through the whole sector. The whole sector experienced stigmatisation. This culture aggrandised itself via rumours, half-confirmed information being passed on, a lack of information, and people increasing each other's fear by stories of incidents other actors faced.

Additionally, negative experiences with government agents create feelings of distrust, frustration, and resignation. Cynicism, mocking and sarcastic comments may be a way to cope with these emotional weight, and a way to let the chagrin out.

In the previous chapter I have elaborated the different ways how the three organisations were affected by recent political developments, ranging from threats, bureaucratic burdens to the dominant culture of

fear and frustration. The next chapter will now explain the different response strategies and coping mechanisms I noticed during my three-month fieldwork.

6.3.   Shielding Strategies

Beyond these different aspect of the low profile strategy, *shielding strategies* presented another recurring pattern to protect the organisations. I frequently encountered them in all three case studies. Hereby, I differentiate between three elements of shielding strategies: 1) *Security measures,* 2) *Good relations* and 3) *Internal cohesion.* The former refers to different strategies to protect the organisation from harassment and outside government interference. Good relations signify building or maintaining good relations with government representatives to have an internal ally at hand in case the government should target the organisations. Finally, *internal cohesion* means internal aspects that make the organisations less vulnerable due to a strong internal cohesion.
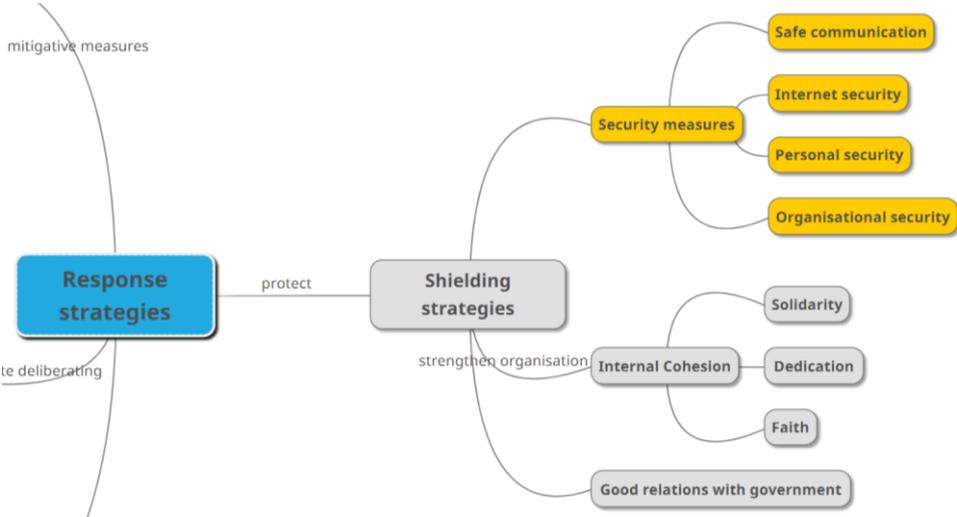
(Figure 9: Shielding strategies)

Next to carefully navigating in the spectrum between keeping low profile and reclaiming space, there is another essential response strategy, independently of the general strategy: *shielding strategies.* Those are concrete strategies to protect an organisation from government interferences. There are three sub-categories of shielding strategies: *1) Security measures, 2) Good relations, and 3) Internal cohesion.*

First, s*ecurity measures* on one hand refers to very practical security measures ranging from safe communication to organisational security, yet also beyond organisation-internal strategies. It entails four different areas: safe communication, internet security, personal security and organisational security. Examples are encrypted emails, safety trainings or entrance controls.

Second, *internal cohesion* points to several characteristics strengthening the organisations internally. They make them more resistant, less vulnerable, and more united: solidarity, dedication, and faith. Solidarity relates to unity, loyalty to colleagues as well as the organisation. Dedication refers to a strong sense of commitment in the purpose of their activities, the objectives the organisation is striving for and believing in doing the right essential thing. And faith is related to dedication, a sense of personal calling and fulfilment. All these help keep an organisation united, staff members motivated and committed, and therefore make it more stronger against outside interferences.

Third, there is a smart strategy – building or maintaining *good relations* to government agents to have an ally at hand if an emergency arises. The aim here is to establish lines to the government that an organisation can fall back to, should it face pressing difficulties.

Security measures

All three organisations set up a series of preventive *security measures* to protect themselves. They refer to a range of practical safety measures ranging from safe communication to internet security and organisational security. They entail straightforward aspects such as using safe communication channels, installing video cameras, and constantly staying in touch with staff members in the field. More exactly, they include four different aspects*: a) safe communication, b)internet security & self-censorship, c) personal safety,* and last but not least *d) organisational security*. In the following I will explain what each of them entails in more detail.

Safe communication plays a major role within these security measures. One NGO for example uses a communication channel considered safer than other regular channels (NGO officer, informal conversation, 22.12.2017). Another one relies on Whatsapp and Signal as secure communication platforms (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018).

A very tangible response concerns organisational as well as personal safety of staff. It starts from watching your bag in public, turning phones off during team meetings about sensitive issues to prevent phone recordings (participant observation; meeting room, 13.11.2017; Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018) or switching rooms. This clearly too is a result of the pervasive culture of fear and insecurity the government spread throughout civil space:

> *Do you see other ways outside the legal sphere of regulations and laws, where the government tries to restrict the space of NGOs and civil society?*
>
> "They do spread a culture of fear, but of course often by using legal instruments. Just the fact that the prime minister has said last year, that it can be necessary to kill one hundred people, to maintain peace and stability, of course creates a culture of fear. And I think fear is everywhere. Even when you and I have this conversation, I turn off my phone, because I do not know if my phone is being monitored. I don't know. So just to be on the safe side, I turn it off."
>
> *How does that affect you personally and your work?*
>
> "Of course we are being much more careful than we have been in the past. The fact that we turn off phones, the fact that we, sometimes, when we talk about sensitive issues, we make sure that there's no one around who can listen. But also of course the general work we do, about reports, statements. So, things that we would do in the past, we don't do anymore."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 18.01.2018)

All these organisational security measures serve to prevent a leakage of information, spying, that can then be used against the organisation to stop its operations or completely shut it down. Beyond trying to prevent the government from tapping phones, the NGOs engage in further safe communication strategies to protect internal information from being leaked. This included switching to using WhatsApp instead of emails, encrypting emails to partners (NGO officer, informal conversation, 21.11.2017), or having certain codes when communicating with network representatives (NGO officer, informal unstructured interview, 08.11.2017).

> *How are daily things like communication impacted?*
>
> "We had a little of, we try to encrypt emails. […] And then the group conversations are also on WhatsApp. Maybe it's good because people feel that they're being more secure. But I think, again, it's really a successful strategy, we spend 1 ½ day on learning how to encrypt emails. So it's good that we learnt it, but you know *laughs* I'm also conflicted on how much it is really "oh, great!" and how much is it just really effective intimidation and making people worry about other things than their work. Because now you need to discuss "okay, so every time we have this conversation, we need to go out of the office.

You know we had the other office. And then we had to see let's leave the office and go to the hallway when we have any sensitive conversation. And, okay, I'm not questioning this because he's saying it, but still *laughs*… that's good because you don't sit on your chair the whole time, but it's another consideration that you have to have all the time, and distracting, and also a bit upsetting, and also for interns, I've seen that it's quite… they were very concerned about this. It took a lot of energy to think about that they maybe. And it took up too much, I think, and in the end, they're not monitoring the interns I think. So I think it's very effective, they're doing that all over the civil society scheme, just to keep people worried about the communication."

<p align="right">(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</p>

This again is a great example of the pervasive culture of fear: Independent of the actual risk, which should not be underestimated - it achieves to extract time and resources from organisations as they try to stay on the safe side. All these aspects depict *protective knowledge & technology* as *adaptation & mitigation strategies* (Carothers, 2016). Staff members are receiving trainings about internet security, communicating through selected channels only. They become trained to leave the room when talking about sensitive topics and use special technical tools to ensure their safety.

Beyond, *internet security and self-censorship* is an important security topic for the NGOs: they received training on internet security, learning about hackers, licenses protecting your computer, harmful software, malware and spyware (participant observation, internet security training, 15.12.2017). One NGO took steps to educate its staff and prevent sensitive data from leaking. Also, they are very careful what to post on social media: Senior NGO manager for example does not have anything that shows him being related to NGO X on his personal Facebook page, while being higher level management of the organisation (Junior NGO staff, informal conversation, 31.10.2017). They are very careful about their activism, especially showing it in public. Additionally, they need to refrain from sharing anything possibly political or disputed on their personal Facebook account (NGO officer, informal interview, 21.12.2017).

Next to adapting the phrasing and terms used, they also engage in forms of self-censorship beyond writing and publishing. This included two aspects: 1) social media communication and 2) training content. On one hand, they are very careful on what content they publish or repost on their personal Facebook account. And about their social media activity in generally, not sharing anything political (NGO officer, trainer, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018). On the other hand, they also leave out certain activities related to human rights during their trainings, to not provide any reasons for distrust (project coordinator, formal semi-structured interview, 15.01.2018). Next to WhatsApp and encrypted emails, personal communicative behaviour is adapted as well, for example not posting or sharing anything government critical on Facebook, to not risk getting persecuted (Junior NGO staff, informal conversation, 29.11.2017).

"Because we don't do anything illegal, but you never know. [They may just find any excuse to…] yes, yes. So we are much more aware of communicating in a secure manner. Also, because there are being so many phone calls, emails, that have been leaked in general in Cambodia. Not so much from Civil Society organisations, more from the opposition. But the fact that they can be, clearly tells that they can if they want also leak organisation emails from civil society. […] What I share on social media has completely changed. So, I rarely share anything about Cambodia on social media, what I did last year. I think that's a genuine trend, it has really affected what people do share on social media, and also what people comment on on social media. So this is this culture of fear."

<p align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal unstructured interview, 15.11.2017)</p>

This too illustrates *protective knowledge & technology* – training staff members in secure communication and how to navigate social media without creating risks. Beyond, *self-censorship* (Braathen et al., 2018) can be found, as staff members refrain from using certain terms, and posting their

political beliefs openly on social media. Last but not least, these measures depict a *tactical pullback* (Carothers, 2016). While they carefully monitor their online activity, it also goes beyond to the offline dimension of their everyday lives – *personal safety*. One organisation for example considers travelling outside of the capital to the provinces for meetings and interorganisational forums as to risky, as local police could stop them along the way. Thus they would not be able to participate in out-of-town activities (Senior NGO manager, personal communication, 14.11.2017).

Similarly, for trainings, during this tense situation they prefer to hold them in the capital in the office instead of traveling to the communities for another reason: it reduces safety risks for the staff, as they fear deliberate hit-and-run incidents that might target and hurt staff members (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018).

> I: *How do you do that (take care of personal safety)?*
>
> "When we get a phone call of a number we don't know, we don't answer. And we will meet with the management team and discuss. And when we travel from home to work, or to other meeting points, we must be careful around us. Because maybe sometimes they try to make accident with us. This happened in our country. And third, we keep some bad doing from us. So we must to take care."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

This shows how serious they take staff member's safety, in the office, their way to work, as well as in the field. They try to act carefully by not attending suspicious calls. Beyond, there are additional security measures especially for the higher management level of organisations:

> "Right now my personal safety has been raised, not to an alarming level, but has been raised higher. So I have to always watch my bag wherever I go. I have to formally disclose my job. […] We used to have meetings outside a lot, like this. But now we have changed to meetings inside. Or even somewhere that is more secure."
>
> I: *Because they might be listening to it?*
>
> "Yeah, some places have camera, and have sound recorder. I installed a camera in my car, back and a front camera. It used to be no camera in my car, but since I was being followed and had intercept people following me a few times, it's good for me to record."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

For the higher level of NGOs, these special security measures can be put in place – watching the bag, watching the surrounding, and disclosing the employment – to protect these likely more vulnerable staff members. Additionally, cameras and meeting in safe places aim to increase protection from incidents and spying.

Clearly, this climate has emotional impact on the NGO staff, creating insecurities and fear. They try to increase security by close communication: frequent internal communication, monitoring where staff members encounter themselves:

> "But we also think about the security strategy as well. For the NGO X team, the team that will be in the field in this year and after onward, we always keep up the information to each other. Every 2 or 3 hours through whatsapp [you're communicating to make sure that everything is alright?] yeah"
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

They keep updating colleagues in office of their whereabouts. Beyond, this means communication with donors abroad, to keep them informed about their situation.

> "We feel scared and we feel fears, because we don't know what will happen to us. We try to, what we call security protocol. So we try to protect ourselves, our family. Every day we notice something strange, we need to notify each other and find refuge to protect ourselves. We try to communicate

with people outside like the Australian donors, and we want them to know about our situation, our conditions, and threatening by the government."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

First, taking these protective measures for staff and their family, as well as following the security protocol aims to increase their safety. Second, letting people outside the country know of their situation rises the potential help in case they get into real trouble. Here, it is very obvious how they follow *protective knowledge & technology,* by installing security cameras and technical tools to stay safe.One further aspect entails *organisational safety*. Here, they try to protect the organisation legally, making sure that they comply with all relevant legislation.

> "And for organisational security, we now have a lawyer help us see the legal requirements from the ministry, and how we can work and deal with this problem. Now we have a lawyer that assists us in the legal requirements, especially in changing the by-law, the constitution of the organisation."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)</div>

They make sure to adhere to the legal requirements, hire a special lawyer for this purpose, and correct any regulations that might give the government a reason to target them. Further, this has a very physical angle, as well, concerning the very location of their offices, by monitoring the flow of people that frequent these spaces:

> "We also think about office security, that we keep more monitoring and checking the people that go in and out of the office. We don't allow committees/community to stay in the office anymore. So far we always provided space, but now not anymore. When we provide a space for them, the police always comes to check, so now we stopped for a while."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)</div>

These security measures depict *protective knowledge & technology* as part of *adaptation & mitigation strategies* (Carothers, 2016). They use technical tools, such as cameras, encrypted emails, as well diverse staff trainings on online and offline security to avoid governance surveillance. All these measures can be seen as responses to physical harassment, and the culture of fear. Measures to protect themselves and stay safe.

Good relations

Another strategy is building and investing into good relationship with government officials of relevant ministries. It smartly relies on social capital. One organisation was particularly active in this respect. These relations can provide a valuable protection strategy in case of organisations facing issues with government bodies. In these situations, a good word put in from another related official may help them to resolve potential issues:

> I: *In your strategies how to deal with the current situation, how would you specify the major strategy you are following currently to not get…*
>
> We probably emphasize more on building, strengthening relationships with government, because we believe that this is important in the current situation, to have good links with the government."
>
> I: *This makes your work more safe?*
>
> "It's hard to say, but I think if we are not connected in any way to the government, if we don't have any interaction, relationship with the government, then there would be nobody to support us within the government, if we one day are being threatened."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 18.01.2018)</div>

This shows that they focused more on strengthening possibly important relationships with government agents, next to generally being more careful and refraining from activities deemed as too risky. In one province for example, training activities could be hold peacefully, due to good relations with the local government. This can be seen as pro-active strategy, building up and maintaining good relations with selected government agents. Interestingly, it is a sort of seeking alliances, yet not only with other NGOs, but also with government representatives. This depicts a fascinating new aspect to the framework (Braathen et al., 2018), a smart move making part of the 'enemy' the ally. They build up a protective network, yet with the other side of the camp.

Internal cohesion

Next to very tangible response strategies around security measures, there was a fascinating element that can be seen as characteristic making the organisation stronger and more resistant to outside threats. Spending time with one NGO daily and being able to join several internal activities, I noticed likely unconscious yet nevertheless effective characteristics serving as sort of coping mechanism in this setting of a shrinking civil space - namely 1) *solidarity*, 2) *dedication* and 3) *faith*. These aspects create a strong unity among the staff members, becoming one team, dedicated to their mission, faith and to each other. This, I argue, partially reduces their vulnerability to intimidation, and motivates them to keep going and doing their work despite all the odds and obstacles. It makes the organisation more enduring, and stronger. Believing in their work, staying united, and faithful is a strong shield against stigmatisation, intimidation and threats they face.

The first of these three elements is internal *solidarity*. The NGO staff members are a strong unit, relying on quite close personal relationships and a shared spirit of being one team where one would support the other. One indicator are social encounters outside the work space, showing they are not just mere colleagues, but also share a close connection beyond the office. When one colleague moved to a new place for example, all colleagues (including me) were invited for the house warming party (Senior NGO manager, personal communication, 08.01.2018), which shows community cohesion.

During the period of my research alone, there were several internal trainings, journeys and activities especially for the organisational staff. These activities have a great team-building effect, making solidarity between employees stronger. Interestingly, during all these internal activities, I noticed a very informal, free and horizontal climate, where staff could enjoy themselves, share, and develop relations. During a security training for example, staff members were vividly joking around, chatting, making fun, and the executive manager was right in it, showing great approachability and solidarity with the regular staff members (participant observation, internet security training, 15.12.2017). Further, during these internal training days, staff members wore less formal office clothing, but instead would put on just a plain t-shirt.

Generally, I noticed a strong feeling of connectedness, mission, and being close to each other. Many staff members have worked at the NGO for 5-15 years. They make jokes, chat, and seem to enjoy their work of bringing peace to the people (field notes, 21.12.2017). Several respondents named creating internal distrust and tensions within civil society and NGOs as government strategy to disrupt and destroy organisations:

> "I think, one of the weapons that the government tries to overcome in the civil society, they try to destroy the unity, the solidarity. Even inside the opposition party, the government interfere, they try to break down, they try to create disunity even amongst the NGOs, among civil society. […] But for us, we are working very united. Our teamwork, our staff, we are very united. […] I think it is very important, actually we cannot do it alone. We need people to come alongside with us and support one another."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

Being united and one team makes them stronger to resist outside interference and stay committed to continue their work, despite numerous encouragements, including from their own families, to leave this sector and search work in a different less threatened area:

> "I don't think if I want to change my work. [...] Because the political situation like this, if I run from the organisation, it is difficult, because we associate each other, when we run from this situation, we lose our friends. We must support each other. Because losing one is like losing whole. We have a Khmer proverb. When we meet the bad or difficult situation and run from our team, it's no good, because we need to support each other. Solidarity."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

The sense of commitment and having to support each other is distinctive. They feel loyal to their colleagues, and that they cannot abandon the organisation, as this may endanger the whole organisation and undermines their solidarity with each other.

A second element of this, closely related to solidarity, is *dedication*: dedication for their work and believing in what they are teaching. One respondent that worked for the organisation for over a decade for example expressed he appreciates his colleagues a lot. What makes his work special is being able to combine both being a peace building facilitator and environmental protector at the same time, with climate change happening at an alarming rate in Cambodia and everywhere. To him, non-violence is very important, as Cambodians experienced too much violence over the genocide and after. Therefore, he loves bringing peace to people, individuals and communities. He wants to help people affected by internal violence in communities, families, as well as structural violence by the government to find peace. (Senior NGO manager, informal interview, 22.12.2017) This shows that he is very satisfied with his work and believes in what he teaches. This seems essential for keeping working, also under harsher circumstances.

Besides, staff members very frequently were wearing the organisation's t-shirt instead of regular clothing (participant observation, 06.11.2017), which indicates a feeling of connectedness, and being proud of their organisation. At one evening during the retreat for example the whole team was heading to a restaurant for dinner. Senior NGO manager had speakers with him and loudly played 'Stand by me' exclaiming "You hear that song? That's a song of change." Senior NGO manager was wearing a t-shirt with 'no more violence, no more war, peace' printed on it, that Sam complimented him on (participant observation, retreat, 20.12.2017). Moments like these indicate how dedicated staff members are to their work, and believing that change will come eventually.

Further, staff members frequently went through a transformation of embracing non-violence themselves, before joining, which strongly shaped their motivation and dedication to their work:

> I: *What is it that makes staff stay here and stay committed to their job and not go somewhere else?*

> "I think we have been one of the long-standing peace-building organisations so far, and we believe in our personal transformation. Everyone, every staff are committed to this, we have the values that we teach others, and I think when we start to hold on and practice all of these values, it inspires us to continue working together as we see that people who come to our courses, who come to our trainings, they change their lives. And from these personal experiences of being changed like myself, it's inspired us to continue to work with NGO X, so we want more and more people changing their life. [...] I have seen myself change from the course that we are doing, so therefore, when we work with others, we see them changing in similar ways, and we are inspired by these are the things that we need in Cambodia. And we need to do more of this."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

As shown above, personal transformation, inspiration and a feeling of doing the right thing are major motivators, that also in more difficult times keep staff dedicated. Last but not least, *faith* plays an

essential role as well. Around 90% of the organisation are of the same faith. They often pray together, have a devotion every Monday, and sing together. Faith is a crucial element to them (field notes, 21.12.2017). During the retreat for example, a few of the senior staff members would in the late evening make a circle around a young mum with the baby crying very frequently. They were praying for the mum and the baby to have a good rest and sleep well. Amazingly, the next day the baby really seemed happier, hardly cried, and even let other people hold it, smiling and laughing sometimes. (participant observation, staff retreat, 21.12.2017). These incidents show the strong connection through faith and celebrating their religion together. Frequently they experience a 'calling' for their work:

> I: *What are the things that despite these difficulties make you eager to continue your work?*

> "I think part of my work and identity, I really want a better society for everyone, for all the people. […] For me, it is *god's* calling for me, I think. And he called me to care for those who are in need of justice, who in unfair.. that's why I love this job. And I pray, and I work, and I keep motivating other people to involve."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

Following this internal motivation leads to more fulfilment, satisfaction, and keeps staff members dedicated to their work.

> I: *Do you also think your faith is important? What role does it play?*

> "Yes, the value of my personal, I am *religious affiliation*, so I try to *god* word to our team, our work and also our partners. We live and work with our faith. This gives us more power, that *god* is with us, *god* helps us to solve some situation. We are not alone, we have *god* with us always. That is my faith. I think, *god* will make intervention to this situation in Cambodia, while we pray every Monday, and read the *holy book*, and we hope that our god will make intervention to our situation in Cambodia."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

Their faith helps them to not lose faith in change coming, but to keep believing and keep doing what they do, despite setbacks and limitations. It helps them be more resistant to shrinking space and drawbacks going along with this. Due to their commitment and decidation, they keep on doing their work in a CSO, despite the challenges in a repressive setting. While there is diversity in their faith, ranging from more conservative positions to liberal views, they still share the same faith, a minority united in their believes:

> "Faith is another big section, that among all staff, not all, but most, share the same faith, although in a different way. You have people from a liberal perspective of their faith, and you have people from sort of conservative faith, and we come together and try to find balance. Also, […] we will pray every Monday, read the *holy book*, pray for our country, our partner, our individual team members. […] So we try to keep faith practice in a team, where we connect to each other faithfully, spiritually. And when we read certain aspects of the *holy book*, we share our understanding to the rest of the team, and it helps us to explore and understand the word of *god*.

> It sounds depressing (situation in Cambodia). But there is hope, there is light at the end of the tunnel. But so far I just pray that *god* will lead me to do what he wants me to do. And I know if he will always get his message to me. I just try to follow his plan."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

7. LOW PROFILE & MANOEUVERING

In the next section I will analyse NGO response strategies, ranging from building good relations with government officials, engaging in self-censorship, to adapting phrasing. Hereby, I differentiate between two general strategies the three NGOs follow: a) *low profile & self-censorship* versus b) *reclaim space.* The former can be seen as a more reactive, pragmatic and accommodating response strategy, while the latter is more proactive, confronting, and challenging (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012). Reclaiming space also includes *defending space* in the first place.

Notably, the more dominant all-overarching strategy hereby is *low profile & self-censorship*. It means trying to not attract any government attention by diverse means. This aims at being able to continue their activities, yet on a very local inconspicuous level. It can be seen as a broader response strategy to omnipresent insecurity and culture of fear in the Cambodian context. Here, securing the physical integrity of all actors involved is of major importance. Two case studies can clearly be identified as dominantly following this strategy as means to protect themselves and their direct surroundings, which I will explain in detail below.

On the other hand, there is the strategy of *reclaiming space*. It means continuing to be more outspoken and confronting. It can be matched to the third of the case studies. This strategy entails continuing to be critical towards the government, being active on social media, and complying only with fully legal requirements. It considers it of particularly importance to challenge repression, inequalities, and continuously stand up to defend human rights, also during insecure risky periods. Nevertheless, this organisation too acts more carefully as previously, and engages in low-profile strategies, yet to a significantly lesser degree, compared to the other two NGOs. Thus, the spectrum between *keeping a low profile* vs. *reclaiming space* needs to be envisioned as a spectrum, where organisations can engage in different strategies. They can combine strategies from the extremes of both camps and create a mix of keeping low profile strategies and defending civil space. Organisations encounter themselves on different positions of the continuum, where a general dominant strategy stands out, yet that does not mean that all actions are restricted to it. And the position of NGO on this continuum may change considerable over different time periods with changing opportunities, risks and threats.

All-embracing the way how to deal with the recent changes is a general strategy of *careful manoeuvring and navigating:* assessing the current risks and opportunities of the situation, making assumptions on what activities are still within the range of safety. It means coordinating with partners, and taking measures accordingly (e.g. moving or cancelling an activity. Or deciding what content to share on social media). NGOs need to make an adequate judgement of the current situation. They need to balance assumptions of given risks and possibilities, to thereby navigate these insecurities, and take decisions of what they still can and cannot do under the current circumstances.

For a greater theoretical understanding, I will rely on my broader analysis of the overall response strategy on the categorisation based on Terwindt & Schliemann (2017) differentiating between a) *individual vs. coordinated* and b) *proactive vs. reactive responses strategies* (Braathen et al., 2018 citing Terwindt & Schliemann 2017). These are strongly depending on the particular present circumstances, political climate, type of pressures and insecurities. For a more detailed analysis, I will apply Carothers (2016) describing different *adaptation & mitigation strategies*: *1) distancing, 2) tactical pullback, 3) transparency,* and *4) protective knowledge & technology*.

The most prominent response strategy revolved around *keeping low profile*. This means, amongst others, not attracting undesired attention from the government by crossing any of the invisible lines. It means trying to not attract any government attention by diverse means, in order to be able to continue their activities, yet on a very local inconspicuous level. This can be seen as a broader response strategy to the omnipresent insecurity and culture of fear in the Cambodian context. Here, securing the physical

integrity of all actors involved is of major importance. It can be seen as overarching feature of two of the case studies and is closely connected to the culture of fear and insecurities prevailing around civil space. Not knowing where the line of forbidden behaviour runs and enhanced by occasional deterring crackdowns (politicians facing court cases, activists being harassed and intimidated as explained in the previous chapter) the NGOs would frequently stay in the very background. Keeping low profile entails three recurring patterns: 1) Working in the shadows, 2) Transparency, and 3) Dissociation & independence. NGOs avoid any public or governmental attention and switch to the local grassroots activities. Further, they would try to be as transparent and dissociated from 'government enemies' as possible and attempt to comply with all regulations, to not provide the government a justification for harassing them.

Working in the shadows

As first aspect of the *low profile strategy*, the NGOs can be seen as '*working in the shadows'. Working in the shadows* means trying to stay unnoticed, out of the government radar. It refers to a certain behaviour trying to avoid catching the government's attention. This can be by switching to the local grassroots level instead of working on the very visible national level, staying in the background, or camouflage - keeping one's name out of the picture and trying to be less visible to the government. This is by three means: firstly, by staying in the background in *camouflage*, secondly by strategic silence and thirdly, by switching their activities to the very local grassroots level instead of visible national activities.

For one of the organisations particularly, 'camouflage' means being very careful, adapting phrasing, acting diplomatically and protecting the name. It means staying in the background when organising bigger events and letting partners take the floor organising possibly risky activities:

> I: *How do you feel the work of NGO X is affected by the current political situation?*
>
> "We need to be more cautious. We need to keep low profile. […] For us it means that we should not be the organisers of certain events, so it's better if it's our local partners that organise things. Then it's hard of the government to understand the grip of NGO X."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

Here, interestingly, one *avoidance and mitigation* strategy (Carothers, 2016) can be recognised: *distancing*. While in this case the distancing does not take place physically by e.g. geographically moving the offices out of the country, it nevertheless can be seen in the NGO distancing itself from a high-profile actor under the eyes of the government to protect themselves. A very similar strategy can also be observed by another NGO, which hands over the organisation of the activities to the community itself:

> "And NGO X will assist community, especially youth networks, to develop their own organisational plan, so we don't want the government to know that we're organising it. So we empower them to do it by themselves."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

By empowering the local youth to organise the activities themselves, the NGO stays safer in the background. They camouflage and keep their name out of the government radar. This camouflaging depicts a form of *strategic distancing* – lowering the governmental profile of their activities and distancing their organisation from a government 'enemy'. This illustrates one aspect of their navigating insecurities and coping with complex, ambiguous conditions. They assess a certain topic as sensitive and possibly risky. Therefore, they prefer to not be openly affiliated with it, and instead choose to empower the local communities themselves to take the lead.

Beyond, a second aspect is staying 'strategic silent'. One of the NGOs attempt to avoid public attention of any kind, especially during this sensitive period, as this example shows: a request to endorse a letter from diverse advocacy organisations for the celebration of international Human Rights Day, that the NGO decided they could not sign:

Senior NGO manager gets a phone call. Is attending. Then he explains:

"Another one. They want an endorsement of their letter. But we cannot do it now. We cannot put our name, it is too dangerous. We cannot participate in activities, be seen in public. We need to keep low. Not like very open activists, that then get into trouble. It is stupid, they always try the same, sending letters. We cannot endorse it. We have very few soldiers. We have to do it like grassroots communities, stay low. We cannot give away their names. Soon is human rights day, on the 10th, they want to send a letter. We cannot participate."

(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 07.12.2017)

Usually they organise an annual petition for this occasion. Yet this year, due to political oppression, they decide that it is too dangerous to participate in such a possibly provoking activity (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 12.12.2017; NGO officer, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018). Instead, they chose to stay mostly silent, not engage in advocacy, and not call any attention upon them. Thus given the present insecurities, they assess that not participating in petitions is the best choice to stay safer.

As the number of NGOs and activists standing up is already rather limited, he considers it essential to protect these 'fighter's' and stay in the background. By avoiding publicity, media attention and visibility, they aim to stay in the background, and protect partners and themselves.

"NGO X is not doing anything in public, we mostly do things behind the scene. So therefore we don't have a lot of things in the public. We have a lot to do in the background."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

This reaction can be seen as a type of *tactical pullback* (Carothers, 2016) – "ceasing certain activities or refraining from starting certain new ones when there is reason to believe that doing so may avoid triggering pushback" (Carothers, 2016, p. 373). Because of the circumstances that are deemed highly risky, one NGO decided to refrain from endorsing a critical petition for Human Rights Day, an activity they participated in previously. Additionally, it describes a form of *self-censorship* (Braathen et al., 2018) as strategy to prevent governmental harassment. By not putting the name of their organisation under a potentially provocative petition, they self-censor themselves as a means of protection.

Beyond *camouflage* and *strategic silence* as strategy of '*working in the shadows'*, a third strategy therein is to *switch to grassroots activities*. All organisations can be seen as focusing more on activities with the communities on a local scale, instead of high-profile national actions. One creative example thereof is to have low profile peer-to-peer learning moments instead of larger visible workshops in the communities:

"Now the authorities are concerned about mobilisation of people to do activities. So when we mobilise more people to join the trainings, they are not happy. But if we just meet with people in a small group, like 2 or 3 people, that's fine. That's one strategy that we keep sharing information with the community. A strategy to avoid the intimidation and restriction our organiser team will go to stay in the village longer, at least one week in one province, and our team always goes to visit members from home to home to talk individually, sharing information, or have a small group discussion with 2 or 3. That is also one strategy that we keep in power and mobilise the community."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

While many activities and training already take place at the local community level, due to the focus of the organisations and recipients, now they are embedded even further at the grassroots level to reduce visibility, by holding less larger trainings, and instead face-to-face exchanges. They switch to a small-scale peer-to-peer learning strategy instead of holding bigger potentially threatening workshops and trainings. Their strategy is to stay longer and talk individually to the community members to avoid calling attention. Simultaneously, they find a way around having to ask for permission while at the same time increasing the safety of both staff and recipients.

This shows how they *shift activities to the local level* as *reactive-individual* response strategy (Braathen et al., 2018), which is safer, avoids attention, and enables them to stay more low profile. It also falls into the category of a *tactical pullback* (Carothers, 2016)*,* as they refrain from visible activities. Through assessing given conditions and reflecting on possible consequences of regular larger-scale activities in the communities, they decide to adapt their regular way of working. Towards shifting the lead more to the local level. And that way be less visible and safer.

Transparency

Working in the shadows is a first important element of *keeping a low profile*. The second element is *transparency. Transparency* again includes three sub-elements: complying with regulations, avoiding confrontation, and collaboration with government agents. This may be via having special experts assuring that the organisation complies with all legal requirements, avoiding potentially conflictive activities, or cooperating with government representatives to a certain degree, to build up good protective relations. Transparency also means to not disguise, but openly show what an organisation strives to do. And what activities they engage in for this:

> "We also will have the dialogue meeting. We will go to propose for a meeting with commune counsellor and local police in the province, to ask for collaboration and propose our work, to make them understand clearly what we are going to do with ****, in order to avoid miscommunication, misunderstandings. But sometimes it is really hard."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

Not holding this information back and being transparent about their activities aims to create understanding and trust of the government. By engaging with the local authorities, they attempt to build a relation of confidence and improved understanding of their objectives. A similar strategy is also present among another organisation, who attempt to build good relations with the relevant ministries, explaining what they strive to achieve. These depict very clear examples of engaging in *greater transparency* as "making information about assistance more easily available to aid-receiving governments and publics might help undercut suspicions about such assistance" (Carothers, 2016, p. 373). Similarly as in these cases, the NGOs of the case studies here try to increase transparency to reduce distrust, and show that there is not affiliation to government-threatening agents. This strategy entails 1) *Complying, 2) Avoid confrontation* and 3) *Collaboration*.

A maybe straightforward but nevertheless important reaction is simply this: *complying*. As one staff member explained: they have to cooperate closely with the local authorities, because the government is afraid of their organisation having a hidden agenda, as they offer active non-violence trainings. Yet once they inform authorities prior about their trainings and invite them, they can hold their training smoothly (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 15.11.2017). This way they show there is no link to the colour revolution and that they do not actively support the opposition party. Making their organisation less suspicious makes them less likely to face harassment. Cooperation and complying with the governmental regulations to ask permission for activities is vital to be able to continue their activities:

> "We highly cooperate with the local authorities, so whenever they require us to submit or inform before we do activities, we don't just go and do the activity without asking for permission. It will cause us trouble and then they will stop us from doing activities. Even though the constitution is clearly stating that every citizen has the right to speak, the right to do activities to promote social wellness, social justice, however in reality it is different."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

While the constitution provides limitations and protection, that frequently stand in contradiction to passed legislation, standing up for the rights the constitution grants is considered too dangerous. Instead they are aware that complying by requesting permissions is essential, independent of whether they do agree with the regulations, or not (as is frequently the case). Here the main objective is to not become suspicious but keep a good image with the government. Thus they follow the request, despite it not depicting a proper infringement, but to prevent challenges and repression. During an internal discussion for example between different partners on whether they had to ask for permission for a network meeting, (the network is not registered under the LANGO) and in that sense 'comply with their bad law' Senior NGO manager expressed:

> "It is a matter of what they see us. Once we are under the radar, best thing is to be less visible, and if we cannot, we need to comply with their procedure, so we reduce the chance that they can attack us. You need to be political, they try to play us, we need to be more political. Complying to their procedure doesn't mean we lose to them."

<div align="right">(participant observation team meeting, meeting room, 13.11.2017)</div>

He prefers to comply with the regulations in all cases, as otherwise they could easily be attacked. Acting politically and complying does not mean giving up but staying on the safe side. This also includes always asking for permission by the MoI for all activities, both outside and inside the office. They strategize that not providing any reason for impeachment is an essential strategy to increase safety of themselves and partners. As the constitution is very blurry, and the government interprets it the way it prefers, the organisation will not take that risk and only join activities that have obtained official permission for. This aims to not position the organisation, the staff and their families in a dangerous situation. They won't engage in anything non-compliant to not risk giving the government a motive to shut the organisation down or harass them. (Senior NGO manager, informal interview, 04.11.2017)

> "We don't agree with the government, but we want to help our people, so we must follow the way the government wants us to do. With the letter [requesting permission for each activity], and soft advocate like this. Like no violence, obeying them, being careful. We walk one step, then think. And then walk another step and think again. We are very careful with our activities, our security, own safety, and safety of our organisation. Because they try to blacklist NGOs. I heard our organisation is also blacklisted from the government, so they watch us, what we do. Because before, we also tried to coach the ******* community that advocate for their land. And so we give them coaching how to advocate without violence. So the government see that we work with them."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

As Senior NGO manager explains, they carefully manoeuvre, comply with regulations, to not get blacklisted and targeted by the government. Step by step, they assess the situation, and how they can best respond to restrictions and risks. They observe, reflect, and then decide on the best strategy to cope with the complexities and insecurities. This might signify adapting their overall strategy, taking a step back when needed, and postponing activities for a later moment. The safety of staff, as well as partners and communities is of prime importance hereby. After previously engaging with a community that was affected by land conflicts, they feel they need to be particularly careful and considerate, as they might easily become a government target. Therefore, they now always submit a letter asking for permission

several weeks prior to the planned event, and follow the regulations (NGO officer, formal semi-structured interview, 19.01.2018).

> "I think what we do different now, and we don't like it, is we submit for permission every time we do our activity. But I guess we have to do it, because otherwise it will be, the label of coloring for NGO X will be worse, they will put a colour on NGO X. We don't want that to happen. And we just want to be able to do what we do for as long as we can. We just don't want to be in a situation where the leadership of the organisation fled the country, and organisation is then struggling internally, staff are in trouble."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

The main priority can clearly be seen as safety - as long as they cannot guarantee this, they cut back their activities. They want to make sure to not pose any risk for their staff members, their families, partners as well as the recipients in the communities. They assess the information they have, experiences from other actors in the playing field, navigating insecurities. If they cannot assure their security sufficiently, they will cut back with their activities. This strategy is a pro-active response strategy, as they strive to secure the safety before an emergency situation might come up, that endangers themselves or their environment. Yet here, these are not active strategies to extend civil space, but protective preventative strategies during harsh insecure periods.

Other partners follow a different strategy. They chose to only ask for permission, when it is clearly required by law, not for internal activities. They see this request as opposing the constitution and illegal. Their assessment of the situation, threats and possibilities is different, they see a larger space for action, and chose to closely follow the law as it is written, not the interpretation of government agents of it. Thus their way of manoeuvring is more risk-taking, challenging, defending civil space and their rights. Different assessments of the ambiguous context, combined with a different positionality and strategy of each organisation, result in diverse coping and response strategies, each shaped by the particular circumstances and analysis of these.

Beyond mere complying with requirements - mainly asking for permission prior to activities – another response of the organisations are to *avoid confrontation*. Even the more outspoken radical of the three organisations temporarily chose a softer approach, being less confronting and instead more accommodating, even though at a different degree than other organisations. They see that continuous confrontation is too dangerous under the present circumstances. They engage in a more accommodating strategy. This can be seen as a sort of survival strategy to make sure their organisation can continue to exist and operate.

> "[...] for our activity, if the police come to stop or ban our training, maybe we will not challenge to do. So far when they come to stop our training, we still challenge, talk with them. But in this situation, if they come to shut down the training, maybe we try not to confront with local authorities. [...]

> For NGO X, in this political situation, we have changed some approach. So far our approach is really hard, but now we try to change the approach more softly. So when we go to organise an activity in the village, we inform to local authorities. If the really is really sensitive and they might ban it, we will inform to them, if we mobilise more people, we may consider to inform to local authority.

> That is a security measure for the organisation and for the activity, we will not organise things that really confront the authorities like protest, but change our strategy to organise mini workshops and forum, and we also try to keep mobilising and raising awareness. So far, we never informed the authorities, but now we have no choice, we have to inform them. But if we organise an activity at national level or in the office or private place, we don't need to inform to the authorities."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

This clearly shows, how they are manoeuvring complex insecure settings. Through assessing the situation, reflecting on possibilities, and risks, they decide they need to change their strategy. As a result, they choose to act more complying than usual. They inform authorities about their activities in the communities and follow a softer approach. Nevertheless, they still engage in mobilising and raising awareness. But temporarily rather confronting activities like protest are postponed and substituted by mini workshops and forums. Beyond, if the authorities should decide to shut the activity down, they will refrain from resisting, and try to not confront with the local authorities. This is another choice they make. A response they did not follow before, when the situation was different. Even this more radical organisation engages in less confronting responses under the given insecure circumstances. This shows how it is a constant process of manoeuvring. Of assessing, collecting information, comparing to what other actors face, and deciding which coping strategy and response they deem the most adequate. Of reflecting on the risks, potential consequences, harm they might cause for themselves as well as for partners and communities. And then taking decision on how to react. A complex process of assessing, assuming, evaluating and strategizing.

Beyond avoiding confrontation, the NGOs even go one step further: work together with the local authorities to show them they do not constitute an adverse threat to the government - *collaboration*:

> "At specific activity we are working with the local authorities to communicate that we are not against you. […] If you say, you have to have a proper documentation or permission to work with these communities, then we will try to accommodate that. We will not agree, but we don't want to be seen as suspicious. […] It doesn't mean that we like that *laughs*, it doesn't mean that we agree, but it's just … okay.
>
> We have times we disagree, we have times we agree. And we don't want to be seen as the enemy image, but actually as partnership, friendship. If we disagree, then we have to disagree. If we agree, then we … then that's good. But if they start saying 'you no longer work with the community', then it's something for us, you cross the boundary."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

By sometimes cooperating with the local government, they show that they do not represent 'the enemy'. They may not agree, but will nevertheless accommodate, and follow the regulation. This way they try to prevent becoming a 'state enemy', and not being able to continue their work. They thus act flexible, diplomatically, accommodating. Only if the restrictions cross certain lines, that make it impossible for the organisation to fulfil their objectives, this will go too far. Then they won't comply anymore but likely take other more drastic means. Thus there are certain fixed lines the organisation decided upon. Certain limits that may not be overstepped. But within this space, adapting, navigating, and strategizing takes place constantly, as coping mechanism to changing circumstances and assessments.

Dissociation & Independence

Working in the shadows and *staying transparent* are major strategies to keep a low profile that the NGOs follow. Beyond, one major strategy of staying off the government radar and not becoming targeted, is *dissociation and independence*. It signifies staying politically independent, not colliding with the opposition party, and avoiding certain phrasing and stigma words. Next it means not being affiliated with government enemies, be they critical, human rights, environmental or advocacy activists. And last but not least this also affects the whole flow of money – including the donors as well as partner organisations and avoiding negative affiliation to suspicious organisations. It means to refrain from any engagement with government adversaries, remain transparent, and politically independent. Managing affiliations to partners, political actors and other organisations essentially means avoiding affiliation to government critics and opponents. This applies to 1) the opposition party, 2) donors, 3) outspoken

activists, human rights and advocacy organisations, and 4) partner organisations. The overrunning ambition is to preserve political independence – in other words dissociation from the opposition party.

First, respondents stated it is essential to follow *political independence and transparency* - to stay neutral and apolitical (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 15.11.2017). Most importantly this means dissociation to political parties (*read* the former opposition party),

> "Because what we do is not illegal in anyway. We do not engage in party politics, and that's, I think, one of the things that they're concerned about that NGOs somehow get involved with the opposition. But we're not involved with the opposition. […] But apart from that, my approach has been to continue being transparent about the work we do, because we do not act illegal. So for us to be transparent should not be an issue. [*yeah, you're not politically involved*] So what we can do, we just continue to be transparent. Because I believe that if you're transparent, at least I hope that if you're transparent, they understand.

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)</div>

Political affiliation or even just the slightest contact with the opposition party is seen as highly perilous. Navigating insecurities, they assess that the government particularly dread NGOs colluding with the opposition party. Thus, by showing no involvement with the opposition, only doing legal activities, and being transparent, the NGOs pursue to prevent possible government targeting and harassment.

> "Organisations have to be very careful not to be associated with the opposition. Because then the government can shut us down easily. Now a major organisation, the Cambodian Human Rights organisation, is under investigation because the opposition leader was involved in its creation. There has always been a lot of monitoring on organisations in Cambodia. We have to be careful."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 27.11.2017)</div>

From observing what happens to other organisations, they weight up what actions can still be done, and what might put their organisation at risk. During a training on internet security for example, the external trainer explicitly stated that this training was offered to recommended partners, active for human rights, and independent groups recommended by USAID, yet not affiliated to any political party (participant observation, internet security training, 15.12.2017).

Transparency and neutrality are vital for the organisation's continuity. This involves diverse spheres: one being social media activity – staff of two NGOs cannot write anything political or government critical on e.g. their Facebook (Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 16.11.2017). Generally, they support neither the ruling party nor the opposition party, but instead aim to empower the communities. By following this strategy of neutrality, they attempt to prevent risks. Beyond, when holding activities, they strive to invite the local authorities, and work together with representatives from both the governing as well as the opposition party (Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 15.11.2017). Without a government permission, their activity and possibly also organisation runs risk of being shut down. Therefore, working together with the government is inevitable, and they have to show that they do not support the unpopular opposition party:

> "We need to work together with the government. Otherwise we could not work. We cannot be associated with the opposition. We have to show that we are neutral. If not, we will not get the permit from the local government. […] We have to integrate the government, work together like a team."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 28.11.2017)</div>

Without having an alternative to cooperating with the government, this NGO strives for transparency and demonstrating no affiliation to the opposition, in order to be able to realise their activities. Tellingly, the notion of training communities in non-violence already makes the organisation suspicious of being linked to the colour revolution and opposition party. Through active non-violence, they hope to help people express their will in a non-violent way. Yet this easily makes the government associate their

activities with the colour revolution. So they have to be careful to stay neutral, apolitical, and transparently work with both sides:

> "So the ruling party, they try to course the community, the demonstrators to act in a violent way, so they have a reason to attack, to imprison them. That's why our intention is to support the community to, when they are involved in advocacy, to do it in a non-violent way to protect themselves from harm by the government, from imprisonment, and also to be secure in the society, where violence is everywhere. Because I'm actively involved with that group, then they try to blacklist me. And then they are accusing us that we are supporting the opposition party and colour revolution. But in reality, we are working very neutral, impartiality. We are not taking part in any political party. We have people from both the ruling and opposition party in trainings, before they dissolved the opposition party. We invite both political parties."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

This again can be linked to Carother's (2016) *greater transparency*. By being politically neutral, and not engaging with the opposition party, they try to stay safe and not give the government any reason for suspicions. Still, not everybody considered staying politically neutral as feasible safe option. Instead, several respondents confirmed that the government considered a politically impartial organisation as part of the opposition. "Either you're with us, or you're against us." Therefore, respondents would see the need to formally ally with the governing party as inevitable:

> "We cannot stay independent. If we do, they treat us like opposition. That is the CPP perspective. If we are not part of CPP, they see us as opposition. So that is the difficult situation. That really affects our work. That is the reason they intimidate us and restrict our activities."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)</div>

Thorough careful assessing and navigating is needed, to manoeuvre political affiliations. In some perspectives, staying politically neutral is not an option. One needs to side with the governing party, otherwise they will see you as threat. Interestingly, despite respondents emphasising their organisation's neutrality or even impossibility to stay neutral, I still got the notion that in their minds and actions they were welcoming movements for change, yet openly they could not express anything that might link them to the opposition party:

> "There's this strange combination of all staff I speak to being very critical about the government, following the political developments, supporting the opposition. Yet when talking about NGO X, they highlight that it's not political in any way. They all seem very much on the opposition side, yet without participating actively, yet indirectly training people in advocacy, yet saying they are not political at all, while holding very strong political opinions and sentiments of frustration."

<div align="right">(field notes, 16.01.2018)</div>

Given the present circumstances of threats, frustration, in combination with legal regulations demanding NGOs to be 'politically neutral', this seems a common reaction. Altogether, this shows how the organisations attempt to stay impartial and politically neutral to avoid facing harassment.

Next to staying politically independent, following a more diplomatic advocacy line and using particular terminologies was another security measure.

Firstly, certain 'stigma words' are deemed controversial, particularly if they are related to the 'colour revolution' and opposition party, such as *active non-violence, change, advocacy, revolution, freedom, democracy, USAID* or *campaign* (Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 01.11.2017). They are closely linked to the general stigma that is being created around engaging with NGOs. Through diverse mechanisms, the government creates a stigma around NGOs, causing people to have negative associations and prevent any relation. This does is not only limited to the opposition party and NGOs in general, but also extends to certain terms that are dominantly part of the opposition rhetoric. Using these

words then risks one becoming affiliated to the opposition, independent of one's activities and actual objectives. Therefore, NGO X cannot use them when e.g. publishing something. Instead they avoid using these key words and replace them by a more neutral term when writing reports, showing that are not affiliated to the colour revolution, such as *peaceful*. These terms are free of stigma, possible affiliation with the opposition party, and the colour revolution. (NGO officer and NGO officer, informal conversation, 05.12.2017; Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 16.11.2017)

This shows how important it is for NGOs to be familiar with the controversy, red lights, and then adapt their working strategy accordingly. For example by adapting their wording. Not using certain words depicts a sort of self-censorship, but also a handy trick, to stay off the government radar by refraining from using controversial opposition-affiliated terms. Secondly, this surrounded phrasing: carefully elaborating internally how to formulate messages in a sufficiently diplomatic manner.

Thirdly, the NGO devised a twofold narrative surrounding the protection area: on one hand they would denounce the ongoing illegal extraction activities in the protected resource area. Yet on the other hand, they would not just tell a negative critical story, but also a different positive story about the beauty of the area, its precious biodiversity, and government efforts to preserve it:

> "I think the decision has been to become a bit more soft, or also tell good stories about the work of the ministry. Not to lie in any way, but also to tell that they are also becoming more actively. […] There also was a decision at some point to not only post about [the problem], but also about the beauty. So that way we tell two stories."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

This strategy offers a less confrontational way, deemed safer especially after having received a direct warning. After consultation and joint reflection, they decided to follow this less critical narrative approach. Yet this softer approach of course also brings along a less critical consistent advocacy line and frustration about forfeiting some of the initial approach to hamper illegal extraction:

> "For me, there's also kind of two ways, in terms of advocacy, more the hard-core proving illegal resource extraction, documenting illegal extraction, and then there's the "oh, the *protection area* is so nice and beautiful, and it has all these beautiful *resources*". […] It's two strategically different ways of talking. It's almost as if we should either chose one or the other, to say that we really are putting up this line of putting up information about the stuff that's going on and that is damaging the *resource*. And then if you chose the line of "Oh, it's so nice! And it has so many resources!". It can go along, but I just don't see…"

> I: *It's two different framings*

> "Yes, and I feel like you can, I see it's more interesting to do the more not so sensitive talking about the *resource area*, but for me that's a shame, it's really a shame. Because who is it pointing towards and who is it holding accountable? No one. And it, okay, we're trying to talk to the public that there is a *resource* and it's worth protecting, but I'm not sure if it has the effect in the end. Because what's really effectful is, if you can send some attention towards the people you can hold accountable for this, right? That's sort of my perspective. So, I'm not completely convinced that what we're doing is actually working *laughs*."

> (NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

Following a dual somewhat contradictory narrative remains debatable and can create a contra-productive impression. However, given the extreme insecurity, lack of clear information, and examples how outspoken activists and politicians ended up being targeted by government agents for being too critical provided solid grounds for assessing, and taking a strategic decision. This can also be seen as a form of *self-censorship*, as they restrict the narratives they spread, or complement them with a more

positive perspective to make it less threatening. Next to the critical reporting on incidents, they also provide a positive narrative, to balance the government critique.

The second risky group to avoid affiliation with entails '*public enemies*': 'radical' human rights, environmental and land rights organisations/activists that depict a major thorn in the side of the government. This for example entails simple acts such as carefully checking to not use pictures showing activists very active in land rights conflicts that are on the government watchlist, for promotion materials (NGO officer and NGO officer, informal conversation, 05.12.2017). Being affiliated with these 'radical' groups is assessed as too risky, especially after observing what these organisations have to deal with (investigations, being shut down, intimidation and threats). Instead, they attempt to completely stay out of the government radar and keep a low profile. Due to their focus, advocacy and human rights organisation are particularly likely to be supervised closely by the government. In the past, NGO 1 used to be very active around the Human Rights Day and openly supported the causes of human rights organisations. Yet last year they assessed such an action as too risky, drawing negative attention to their organisation. Thus, they reluctantly chose to refrain from endorsing calls from advocacy organisations for the Human Rights Day 2017. The fear of prosecution and social stigmatisation, is too strong. Supporting human rights organisation is seen as too dangerous under the current situation. NGO X try to act very carefully, also whom to work with: At another instance an upcoming training had to be cancelled, as a partner organisation was stormed in the previous night, to check if it was adhering to the regulation of having a permit for any activity and meeting. Another risky group is the tuk-tuk drivers association, due to their affiliation to the opposition party (Senior NGO manager, informal unstructured interview, 16.11.2017). NGO X try to avoid any affiliation to both the opposition party, as well as groups affiliated to the opposition party and groups particularly on the government watchlist:

I: *What are difficulties for NGO X now?*

"As you know, the political situation is difficult now. We used to work together with many advocacy organisations like Licadho, do things for Human Rights Day. Now we have to be careful. We can still do conflict management trainings, peace building, but only very little advocacy."

(NGO officer, informal interview, 21.12.2017)

All human rights activism and advocacy is very risky in general, so NGO X try to avoid any involvement and affiliation right now, to not get into trouble and stay out of the radar. Interestingly, this is closely related to *stigmatisation*: in this case the stigmatisation of particularly human rights and advocacy organisations, as well as other very critical outspoken actors, yet even if NGO X are not directly affected by this kind of stigmatisation, they refrain from engaging with these actors to avoid social stigmatisation passing over to them:

And what are government strategies to suppress NGOs?

"What they do now, they restricted every movement. […] they also start, what I call this, stigmatisation, you know the word stigma, right? make something, become negative, that you don't want anything to do with. So this glass is a good glass to drink water. You can use it to drink water, drink coffee. But now government say this type of glass is unhealthy for your health, you put your water in it, your skin will fall off and kill you. Anyone will not use that glass. But in fact it doesn't come like that. The government is using that strategy to put a stigma on some good things so that you will not, for example if you meet more than 10 people, it's colour revolution. If you don't have permission to meet and meet, you are colour revolution. Up to 9 people you can meet, but now even if you meet 2 people or 3, they might consider."

And how does the government stigmatise the work of NGOs?

"They say most of NGOs are involved with colour revolution."

So it's like the national media that puts on the story?

> "Yes, they have some government media. Imagine how community will react when NGO comes in, "I don't want anything to do with you." And if generally they say NGO, like they say specific NGOs, then that is even worse. No one wants to relate to them. You are good, I know, but I cannot form a relationship, I cannot have anything to do with you."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, semi-structured formal interview, 22.01.2018)</div>

Through the government and media portraying NGOs in a negative light, investigating outspoken NGOs, citizens become afraid of being engaged in NGOs in any way. They create a stigma around NGOs in general. These are great examples, how criminalisation and social stigmatisation interrelate: criminal surveillance and up to investigation of certain actors by the government via controls and searching offices, has a socially stigmatising effect upon other organisations, who refrain from continuing to actively support them, for the very reason of fear to get 'co-stigmatised' or contaminated (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012). Last but not least, measures to avoid contamination go beyond the opposition party, US-allies donors, outspoken activists, human rights, environmental and advocacy organisations - and naturally also involve the direct close partners of NGO X:

> "I'm meeting the whole team. The four coordinating committees and all partners. We have to be very careful now, because any action of one of us will impact also all the others."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, informal conversation, 01.11.2017)</div>

Due to their close working relation, one partner getting infamous jeopardises that the partner organisations automatically also get into bad light due to one organisation's misdoing. Therefore, careful manoeuvring with partners is another essential strategy I will go into deeper, later.

Lastly, organisations are careful from which source they obtain their funds, as receiving funding from a US-based organisation, particularly USAID, likely arouses suspicion from the government (NGO officer and NGO officer, informal conversation, 05.12.2017): The US, USAID being a major player, are accused of supporting the 'colour revolution', which brings me to the second group. Beyond, other government-critical actors were also better kept at distance. When one organisation was moving to a new office for example, the option of moving into a building also housing a human rights organisation was too controversial and risky (participant observation, office, 25.10.2017). This shows how they assessed the risk, and decided it to be safer to not be related to any 'troublemakers' or critical actors.

Above I have illustrated how one part of the *low profile* strategy is to not be associated in any form to 'government enemies'. This means, most importantly, the opposition party, yet also entails not using certain colour revolution terms. Affiliation needs to be avoided at all costs. Beyond, it also entails further actors unpopular among the government, namely outspoken activists, critical commentators, and human rights actors. And last but not least, this strategy of dissociation also entails the very funding sources and partner organisations of an organisation, to make sure there is no link whatsoever to a 'government enemy'. All these aspects need to be analysed, assessed, and strategized on in the constant act of careful manoeuvring insecurities and threats.

Protect community & family

So what is the main reason for staying low-profile and engaging in this response strategy? The major objective of keeping low profile I encountered was to protect the immediate environment of the NGO members: their families, partners, and the very communities they work with.

> "We always work more at the grassroots level. With the communities. […] But we are careful to not be connected to ***. Cause when the ministry knows, it can be dangerous. They can use us to hurt ***. We try to not be connected with them. There is a saying: Boats come and go. But the port stays. Meaning that NGOs come and go and do their work. But the community will stay. They cannot just go away. So we have to be careful to not get them into trouble."

By staying low profile, they attempt to protect the communities and family. Through not attracting too much attention, and by not taking many risks. The network could become more vulnerable and suffer if being affiliated to the NGOs. Therefore, they attempt to obscure their affiliation to the community network, even though the government likely knows at least partially about the NGO's involvement.

As one senior respondent expressed, their low-profile strategy can be seen as a form of rest, careful cutting back of activities, to be able to continue with the same strength once the situation is safer again:

> "We just want to be able to do what we do for as long as we can. We just don't want to be in a situation where the leadership of the organisation fled the country, and organisation is then struggling internally, staff are in trouble, we don't want to be in that position.

> And of course, some people, some partners, they say that means that you comply on the side of the oppressor, like if you're not against them, you agree with them. It doesn't mean we agree with that. It just means that now, we have this saying "If you walk and you are tired, you just need to rest. You never give up, you just need to rest. And then you continue walking." And sometimes, you have to take maybe three steps back, but you never stop! If you cannot move forward, you can stand still, of even if you have to move backward a little bit, and even further so that you can walk further. You don't want to be, like I have to walk further, even though you lose you life, what is the point? So for NGO X that is the approach. If it is too tiring, take a break and rest. And when we are recovered, we come back with energy, we move forward."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

When the situation gets more secure again, they engage in more outspoken activities. Yet as long as they cannot be sure that their safety is secured, they chose to 'take a break', and walk further once the situation gets safer, they can engage in more activities, again.

> I: *You also have to submit all the content. Do you see it as a tool of the government, and what do they use it for?*

> "Yes, to control. They want full control of what is happening, and again it's not what we agree with them, if we have a choice, we will not do it, but we don't have a choice. We just have to do it. And we will do it, then we still do our project. We don't want to be in a position where we can face any challenges of being shut down. When we have training for example, we have a strong commitment with our partner, we budget a lot of money for the training, we don't want to be in a position where the authorities can come and shut us down any time. That will mean a disaster not only for NGO X but also for our partners who have commit."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

Clearly, protecting stakeholders is a main priority here. For the long run, they consider it best to stay low-profile temporarily, so they can continue their regular activities once this period has faded, without putting participants at risks. In one situation of a foreign television team coming to visit the protected area and learn about the issues for example, it was deemed as too risky if they would enter the area with big camera equipment, endangering the safety of the network members. Because, as Senior NGO manager pointed out:" It's the community who then gets into trouble, not the people bringing the equipment." (participant observation team meeting, meeting room, 13.11.2017). Protecting the community and not creating trouble with the local authorities was seen as priority, particularly as it would be very difficult for network members living in the resource area to just leave the country if things would get hot, and escape to safety abroad.

According to the NGO it is best to keep low profile and engage in active non-violence strategies under difficult circumstances of strong censorship and risks. Later then, once the situation is more secure, they can be more outspoken and critically engage also in advocacy activities. Thus, they take the potential

risks for communities and partners closely into account in their situational assessment and manoeuvring. This then affects their coping strategies and responses, having that particular risks on their minds.

Hard versus soft advocacy are major terms within the response strategies. Two of the NGOs on one side follow a strategy of being more active and out-spoken during regular periods, yet during more insecure and risky periods, they choose to be very low-profile, accommodating, and avoid visibility and catching attention. The other NGO on the other side follows a more radical strategy of continuing to engage in diverse forms of activism, also during more insecure time periods. They consider this essential, particularly during times of restrictions. They want to challenge the shrinking civil space continuously, also during contested periods. Opinions of these two strategies naturally differ, due to varying perspectives, objectives, and priorities. The overall strategy of how to achieve their objectives plays a major role in defining the strategy they engage in during contested periods of shrinking civil space. So can the more radical approach seem careless and negligent to people following a strategy with security as main priority/derogatory:

> *What is the difference between your approach, and the approach of other partners that are more, that have a different approach, more risky?*

> "I think, my understanding of working with advocacy, advocating for our rights, in countries like Cambodia, we need to be up and down. You know, when we can be up, we can do a lot of visibility things, and when things are not good, then we can do a lot on the ground and be less visible, but we can still do a lot of other work."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 22.01.2018)

This organisations' strategy is to be public and outspoken when the situation according to them is safe enough to do so. When they can be sure that being openly critical may not harm the very community they are trying to support, the organisation itself, or donors. Their strategy is the following: at freer times, to be 'up', be outspoken, critical and visible. Yet at times they need to be 'down', they stay silent, hardly speak out in public, and rather work on a very local level directly with the partners. Depending on the particular situation, possibilities and risks it brings, a combination of hard and soft advocacy is then applied.

> "The hard advocacy is confronting all the time. You are, like your information is really confronting, should go to the media, and attack individuals, and use high reports, and being visible who is who, and who is involved, very confronting. Soft one is a bit more flexibility, more strategy, safety is our main priority. We don't want to do anything that affects our safety. Here (hard advocacy only), they don't care about safety. All we want to care is all the truth is there. And there is no right or wrong. It's just when, when to do each one of them, when to do the two of them. […] There are times to be visible, but we will not be visible if we compromise our security. Especially community, because they will have nowhere to run. Like if we are in trouble, I can run abroad, you know, to Thailand, or I can escape to Australia, Germany, or to Denmark. I can do that. But the community, they have family, children, they have homes, you know, they don't run away. And then they will be in great danger."

This summarises the main points neatly in a nutshell: while hard advocacy on one hand refers to publishing accusing, sensitive information, that asks for responsibility, is very visible and reveals provocative facts, soft advocacy is more flexible, and safety is the main priority. At all costs should endangering the safety of the team and the community be prevented, following this strategy. Particularly negative effects for the community are of concern, as they would then have to deal with the potential government harassment and have few resources to avoid this.

Again, it is important to note that perspectives differ, as do estimations about the risks and possibilities of the present circumstances. And consequentially the according strategies and responses organisations they may decide to engage in.

7.1. Same same but different

Above I explained the organisations engaging in *self-censorship* and staying *low profile* as major response strategies to limitations, insecurities and a shrinking civil space. This means following and obeying regulations and asking for permission. It means staying transparent, accommodating and staying politically neutral, while 'waiting for spring to come'. Protecting partners, staff and communities is a core motivation in this coping strategy of navigating insecurities and restrictions. Two of the NGOs of my case studies can clearly be seen as strictly following this strategy of low profile. The third follows a more out-spoken and government-critical path with deviant reactions and strategies. On this other extreme of the spectrum is *reclaiming space*, which means hard advocacy, continued activism, staying outspoken, confronting and striving to enlarge civil space. This strategy entails continuing to be critical towards the government, being active on social media, and complying only with fully legal requirements. It considers it of particularly importance to challenge grievances, inequalities, and continuously stand up to defend human rights, also during insecure risky periods. Still, there are also many similarities between all three NGOs, despite their differences. Positionality needs to be taken into account when analysing the organisations' particular response strategies, as I elaborate later. In the following segment I explain differences between both approaches, and how to understand them.

While many NGOs chose to be careful and low-profile, others continue rather outspoken, critical, and actively striving for their goals, despite the insecurities and risks. One of the case study organisations can be located in this section of the spectrum. Despite knowing about being monitored, one management level staff remains continuously active, as he considers threats and harassment as going hand in hand with the very career path he chose:

> I: *Have you had, personally, like been followed or you felt directly intimidated?*

> "Ahm, yeah, for my Facebook, there is people that keep looking on my social media activity. One of my friends for the MoI also said, your [Facebook] profile has been documented after a group that was actively involved… I already know. But to me, it is simple, because when we decide to work in human rights, to promote democracy, it is simple that we get this threat and intimidation."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)

He is aware of his social media activity being supervised and his profile documented, yet for him, this goes along with human rights activism. If you engage in this area, it is part of the game. Threats are very common, yet he remains dedicated to stand up for human rights and the environment. He feels it's his calling to defend these rights for everyone:

> "Human rights defender life, it is not easy and we face many challenges, especially when we go to organize the training and workshop in the community, we used to be threatened by local authority. But I am happy to be human rights defender, because I can contribute to my society. Our work not benefit for myself but we work to benefit for the local community and for the nation as a whole because we work for human rights, we work to protect the natural resource, and the natural resources belong to everyone, and the human rights belong to every individual. Everyone can enjoy with their rights."

> (Senior NGO manager, Earthrights International, 2017)

Despite many challenges, he stays motivated, dedicated and believes in the rights for everyone. This intrinsic motivation keeps him driven to face challenges and risks and keep going nonetheless. Still, also his organisation chose to follow a more careful, considerate path under the present restrictions. Certain activities they used to hold previously are transformed into a less visible format. They follow a less confronting approach, yet nevertheless continue advocacy activities:

> "Because, in this situation, we have to keep talking and continue our work. We still keep talking, but just change some approaches to not really confront with the authorities. Like before we would

organise to confront authorities in a public space, now we cannot do this kind of activity. It is also very dangerous, so we just change this activity. We still continue to do joint forums, statements, to create a space and platform that the youth and community can express their voice and concern.

Besides, we also engage university students, to bring the voice and issue of ****** to the national level by organising youth forums and workshops at the national level and bring university students to discuss the issue of illegal ******. And we also organise the world environmental day, where we use university students up to 600 people, and we raise the issue of illegal ****** and hydropower dams in the country."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)</div>

Here too, a process of careful assessment takes place. A process of analysing the situation, and evaluation on how to proceed, what activities to continue as regular, and what activities need to be reduced or adapted. They cut back on challenging activities, openly confronting the government, yet are still active organising forums, statements, etc.. Concerning how to handle the LANGO and the urge to request permission for each activity, another interesting difference can be noted: they inform the local authorities about their activities, as required by law. Yet they take the law word-by-word and refuse to ask for permission for the activities, as they consider this unconstitutional.

"And for NGO X, in this political pressure, situation, we still commit to work with **** like the previous year. We still design some activities in the province as well, but we will inform to the local authorities, not ask permission, but just inform them, about the activity what we are going to do."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)</div>

This is more provoking, compared to other NGOs who strictly follow requests of authorities to ask for permission for each activity they organise. They thus continue their activities and path, in a more careful way, but still more active, outspoken and confronting. Upper management staff members would continue to post government critical posts on social media, speaking out their mind without being afraid of the government, continuing to make controversial political statements (Junior staff and Junior staff, informal conversation, 31.10.2017). One example being a post stating:

"Democracy is not only about free elections, but also about well-functioning political parties, independent media and active citizens in the democratic process."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, Facebook post, 03.01.2018)</div>

He considers it essential to continue being outspoken, sharing, and feels strongly dedicated to continue this struggle, online as well as offline:

I: I think you're quite out-spoken on social media, or via EarthRights international. I see other people that don't share anything on this on Facebook and not putting any link with their organisation. Are you also more careful, or do you think it's really important to do this?

"For me, the activity on Facebook I still keep the same as I did so far. I still keep talking and sharing information about human rights and political issues in the country. I know currently the government put more pressure on online expression. But I think it's important for us to continue our struggle, to continue our expression elsewhere. Because I believe that what I'm doing and talking is safe. I know how to write and speak safely. I also am careful, but I still continue to speak and talk on social media, even on Facebook, twitter."

I: Like you put more general statements and nothing directly linkable to the government?

"Yes, maybe because I have a law background, so I know the limitations, how I can speak safely, and they don't have legal grounds to accuse me that I commit incitement or defamation. I know my personal principle. I know what I am doing. I know what I'm doing is nothing wrong, so I still continue."

<div align="right">(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 14.01.2018)</div>

He continues outspoken, posting and sharing critical content on social media, because he believes this is indispensable to keep reclaiming space. Due to his legal background he feels secure to know where the line goes of what is safe to say, what is legal. This illustrates a distinct process of navigating the situation, more confident about what is still legal and safe to do. A different objective and background. In their manoeuvring, they follow a more proactive approach of reclaiming space through empowering local communities, building public awareness, and continuing outspoken and critical.

Two overarching strategies can be contrasted. On one hand the one of staying low profile and 'strategic-silent' during dangerous periods in order to assure the safety of all actors involved. And to be able to engage in more high-profile activities again once the situation is safer again. On the other hand, that of staying confrontational and outspoken, also, or maybe even especially during periods of strong restrictions and push-back. In order to defend civil space; to *reclaim civil space*:

> I: *So you would say NGO X are even more outspoken than them?*
>
> "Yes, yes. As an organisation, they are involved in a lot of activities, that really challenge the government. *Senior NGO manager* is also frequently quoted in articles, in newspapers. He speaks on major talk shows. Things like that. And that's, not that many go along. He follows a different strategy. I think it has to do with how they view the overall political context. And how they believe it's best to respond to shrinking political space. So according to NGO X, it's best for them to be what they call 'submissive' or strategic-silent, but for NGO XX, they have a different perspective. For them it's important to challenge this shrinking political space. And you do challenge by still speaking out, still engaging in advocacy, and so on. So it's completely different approaches, and I think that's also the overall question, also where NGOs in general disagree. Because some say we need to be submissive, some say 'no, because if we are submissive, there won't be any changes at all, so our role as CSO is to challenge this shrinking political space."
>
> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 18.01.2018)

This greatly illustrates the different perspectives and strategies organisations follow in response to shrinking civil space and restrictions. For some it is essential to challenge shrinking political space. They follow a pro-active strategy of remaining outspoken, continuously *building public awareness through evidence-based lobbying* (Braathen et al., 2018), being present in the media, challenge the government.

So it becomes clear how different organisations decide to follow different strategies in tense periods. Some consider a low-profile careful reactive strategy as best response, in order to not jeopardize any actors involved, and be able to continue working more actively again, once the situation has calmed down and there is more security and civil space available. Others consider challenging shrinking space during tense periods as essential, and continue outspoken and pro-active, as they see this as derogatory for their purpose.

All these responses are built on their assessment of the situation, overall strategy, and positionality, which I will explain in further detail below. They are highly dependent on the type of organisation, its activities, and convictions. Scholars frequently differentiate between *reactive and proactive response strategies* (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012; Braathen et al., 2018), holding a certain implicit appraisal of the chosen strategy. Yet frequently, this does not pay appropriate respect to the real-life experiences of people in NGOs, that have to make such challenging choices, given the particular circumstances and insecurities. Each response and coping strategy represents the most adequate choice an organisation found to deal with a particular insecure and complex situation. Especially in phases of dealing with immediate pressure, the reactive individual approach is very frequent, out of fear of co-stimatisation if working too closely with other outspoken NGOs, the fear of a black list, etc. For the Cambodian pre-election context, this period is clearly not in more open, secure phase yet, but rather in a more defensive period, waiting for spring to come.

7.2.　Careful Manoeuvring & Navigating

Above I described the two strategies within the spectrum that organisations can choose to follow: *low-profile* vs. *reclaiming space*. Importantly, they describe a continuous line of options, where organisations can find the strategy they deem best for themselves. This brings me to an essential general pattern: organisations *carefully manoeuvring and navigating* within the current insecure settings. All-embracing the way how to deal with the recent changes is a general strategy of *careful manoeuvring and navigating:* assessing the current risks and opportunities of the situation, making assumptions on what activities are still within the range of safety, coordinating with partners, and taking measures accordingly (e.g. moving or cancelling an activity, or deciding what content to share on social media).

> "[…] it's not a secure state. It's really not a secure state in terms of justice. I mean the LANGO can, it's an instrument they have, but I'm sure that they can, they did that with a few NGOs and Equitable Cambodia and another land rights organisation, they found something and then they said… it's an instrument to close organisations down. As a civil society organisation, you can be on the straight line of the law, and then they can still find something on you, if they want to. So yeah, for NGO X, I think it's obvious that they can close offices down if they want to. That's why it's a continuous assessment of what you can do, and being in good terms with this ministry, like the one of culture and religious, so they like us, but not so much the MoE, so we have to take care of that, to be in good terms with them, so that .."

(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

As several respondents confirmed, while their general strategy has mainly followed the same line as before the increased shrinking of civil space, it is shaped by a steady careful manoeuvring and navigating of the current situation. This is based on an analysis of the present risks, limitations and possibilities, e.g. very concrete things such as the realisation, cancelation or moving of a planned activity. Based on this analysis, the team would develop a joint strategy of how to adequately respond:

> "Of course [we are] constantly analysing the situation, and also find out how best we can navigate in this shrinking political space. So if at some point it changes, we may become more active again, after the elections."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

Importantly, no extreme radical change took place, instead they were still following the same general strategy they would before, just being more careful under the current situation and constantly adapting to the given possibilities and limitations.

> *I:　And so concerning the work of **** you would say it is changing a little bit concerning intimidation and so on, but the change is not that much…?*
>
> "Yeah, and then the constant assessment concerning advocacy, "can we says this, do we want to say this?" That's of course affecting my work also. That can be something, that a lot of time, argh!, you just wanna. But I don't see any big change otherwise, probably. Of course, the whole adjustment process is also taking time, so sometimes I feel like we're not doing anything. Because it's so much blurrier, it's so many steps to check, when you want to propose an idea or publish a text."

(NGO Manager, formal semi-structured interview, 11.01.2018)

While implications and limitations have risen lately, the actual dimension of changes is perceived very different by diverse actors: while some perceive changes as very serious and urgent adaptation responses required, others see them as rather time-consuming and distracting, taking away resources from 'the real issues'. And it is not always clear if this is related to government interventions because of the upcoming elections, or just a general development. Working with a very sensible issue – illegal resource extraction – requires constant adapting, adjusting, and navigating. While the pre-election period and shut-down on

civil space may be more extreme, this does not mean the complete absence of restrictions and limitations previously. Neither does it mean that these changes control the whole work of NGOs. Instead it is a very fluent, changing process, impacting different actors in diverse ways.

Coordination

Beyond constantly analysing the situation internally, strategic manoeuvring involves frequent consultation between partner organisations, the network, and can lead to many at times very tiring additional steps to check before e.g. publishing something. This can feel like an unnecessary hindrance taking away resources from other places and seeming to have a very reduced impact compared to following a more outspoken advocacy line. It makes it easy to lose patience. Nevertheless, actors involved in the struggle since years if not decades can show strong commitment and trust in an eventual change and success coming about, and frequently are used to a temporary shut-down low-profile period.

The NGOs constantly coordinate with each other. They decide together on important strategy choices, and how to continue their activities with the community network. Thus, they are partners, that together navigate and strategize insecurities and threats. Yet this also brings responsibility towards each other, as well as the network itself, as the actions of one actor can thoroughly impact the others. E.g. if one actor crosses the line, and the organisation may get shut down, partners are likely to be investigated as well, which may put them in a difficult situation. Therefore, it is useful to study the organisations together, as they jointly navigate shrinking civil space. They are linked via the same network standing up against illegal resource extraction.

Within NGO X as well as between partner NGOs and the community network, careful coordination takes place on how to handle certain situations; how to proceed; what activities to realise and which ones to postpone/cancel because they are deemed too risky at the current situation and possible endangering NGOs or the network. Given the present situation, this coordination has become more formalised. It follows a regular schedule of getting together with all relevant partners and elaborating on how to navigate the present situation, and next steps to take.

> "We have regular meetings with the partners around **, sometimes once every two weeks. For about a year. Before it was more informal, for example ** came to Phnom Penh for a meeting, some of the partners would meet beforehand. But now it's very formal, regular basis, we take notes, which are being shared."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 18.01.2018)

Considering Borgh & Terwindt's (2012) analysis of different response strategies, encompassing the differentiation between *individual and coordinated responses*, NGO X's response does depict a response coordinated with relevant partners, yet coordination beyond is rather limited. Direct coordination with other NGOs in the field is restricted, as it is deemed as too dangerous, and due to fear of being stigmatised. Nevertheless, there is constant adjustment, manoeuvring, and joint reflection between the different partners in the game. Thus, there is coordination between the partners, just not strongly beyond that.

Positionality

Positionality is hereby of major importance: a range of factors such as objective, activities, partners, family situation, age etc., all influence how organisations can react to threats and limitations. This greatly illustrates the third element of 'pressures that limit and influence NGO activities' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1065): next to the local political context, and the mix of policies and actions restricting NGOs, a third element is essential in understanding their responses: 'the characteristics, functions and strategies of NGOs themselves' (Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1072).

Working with a community in the country side for example makes them more vulnerable to government harassment and likely harder for them to leave the country in case of emergencies. Thus, they need more protection and an organisation may choose to engage in less provocative activities to ensure their continuous safety. An organisation with younger staff members that may not have a family of their own yet may follow a more radical, dedicated path, due to their larger independence, increased risk-taking, idealism and possibilities. An organisation working on critical topics such as human rights and advocacy may choose to increasingly stay in the background when the situation gets more tense, as their very topics are already 'hot topics'. All these examples show how depending on what situation an organisation finds itself in, the response to the shrinking of space is likely influenced and their strategy may differ strongly from other organisations that encounter themselves in different circumstances. It is thus essential to consider the very structure, objective, actions, and surrounding of an organisation, to understand their response strategies. By taking these aspects into consideration, one can understand the risks, options, and challenges that shape the path an organisation may choose to follow.

Due to one NGO having a stronger focus on youth and young adults, the organisation consists of rather younger dedicated staff members in their 20s or early 30s. Therefore, they likely have to burden less responsibilities and concerns for a family of their own, and generally share a more passionate, charismatic, radical spirit strongly desiring rapid change and improvements, following a more revolutionary, innovative strategy (researcher, informal conversation, 10.12.2017). One may argue that this makes them likely to take more risks, follow their passion and convictions more radically, and strive for short-term change. Many members not having a family to take care of and be concerned about, yet, enables them to engage in more outspoken, potentially risky activities.

Being an international NGO provides particular skills and access to one NGO. They can approach foreign funding organisations for support for the network, as well as stay in touch with the national Cambodian government, trying to build up amicable relations with relevant ministries to enhance the project. Besides, it leaves them in a different position, with foreign staff enjoying a rather more protected position in Cambodia. Being of foreign nationality, they are less of a target and enjoy a certain sense of being 'untouchable', as foreigners are seldomly facing harsh retribution. In intense cases, they might be expelled from the country, yet investigation and imprisonment are definitely the exception for foreign nationals. Yet nevertheless they are thus facing the risk of being thrown out of the country. Though working on a sensitive issue like illegal resource extraction, actively publishing critical reports and being active on social media is a risky endeavour, unpopular among government agents as it leaves them standing in a bad light.

One Cambodian NGO is afraid of direct implications for staff and the communities when getting on the government radar. Working on issues closely related to terms the former opposition party has been active in as well – non-violence and peaceful activism – easily brings them in connection with government enemies and makes them suspicious to the government. Indeed, convictions and the strive for peaceful change follow similar principles and strive to empower people in becoming conscious citizens aware of their rights:

> "We are a capacity building organisation. We believe that when we have the chance to train more people, we empower them to think, and then we empower them to really understand about the way of democratic parties countries is running. We empower them to know their rights, their obligations as citizen. Right now, people still support the ruling party and also people are supporting the opposition party. But we are seeing significant change in the Cambodian society. Now people understand more about their rights and democratics, and they want to have a better condition for their country. [...] So when injustice is raising up in society, when people cannot bare anymore, they always find a way to get rid of the social injustice. That's why I believe NGO X still plays a very important role to empower the community and those who are involved in social change."

(Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)

This means they are nevertheless not directly encouraging people to stand up and revolt, but instead educating them about their rights, the duties of a state, and that way participate in shaping their own future. This, in combination with supporting a community standing up against illegal resource extraction, may easily turn them into a target of government repression. This depicts a form of empowering local communities and building local constituencies as in Borgh & Terwindt's proactive individual response strategy. While mostly following a reactive strategy in this time period, they nevertheless generally follow a more proactive approach of empowering the communities they are working with. So that eventually they are able to stand up for themselves.

Beyond, one strategy entails a long-term vision, with a need to overwinter the current difficult period, to after be able to get active again once the situation is more calm. The other strategy emphasises standing up together closely, exactly now when things are getting hot and reclaiming civil space.

A broad range of aspects play into what strategies an organisation chooses for. Staff, family, partners. So does the more outspoken NGO consist of younger charismatic people, that want to achieve change now, while the other NGOs may have a further strategic long-term vision (Matt, informal conversation, 10.12.2017). Different objectives ranging from conflict management to advocacy, democracy and human rights. Different paradigms of staying low when it is dangerous, to protect all stakeholders, to having to reclaim and defend civil space right now that it is being restricted. And with all these ambiguities and uncertainties, it is impossible to estimate what strategy is best suitable.

Theory of Change

The ways of NGOs manoeuvring insecurities also depends on different theories of changes, short- and long-term visions, and how to obtain these changes. But also, on how to achieve their goals, amongst others to enhance civil society, accountability, advocacy and democracy. Hereby different approaches and theories of advocacy organisations co-exist on how to best achieve these objectives: via change from the inside, working with and via the government; or change from the outside via putting pressure and protesting:

> "[...] it is very much about the relationship with the government and trying to get the government to change the way it does things. And that might be better implementation of existing policies and programmes or developing new ones as a better identified means. Here, as in many countries, it's quite common that the government has on <u>paper</u> some pretty damn fine policies and practices. In reality, it's … paper thin. Here, it's very much acknowledged that you're likely to get further with advocacy if you work in partnership with the government, than if you're standing outside with your fist in the air. [...]
>
> many of them work on the grounds that, if they overstep a law, they're just gonna be closed down, and, worse than that, in prison. You are working at risk. But it's a crucial debate. Is it impossible to take direct action in Cambodia to get anywhere, or is it that it's just not the best tactic? Now, you got to believe that in some instances it could be the best tactic, but does anybody want to deal with the potential costs of doing it? But the garment workers campaign for an increased wage, that got quite confrontational. And that ended up being effective. So it's not that it's impossible, but it's certainly the tactic that they would mostly play, not just NGO Forums, but other advocacy networks and organisations.'

<div align="right">(NGO umbrella staff, formal semi-structured interview, 16.01.2018)</div>

This greatly illustrates the struggle of choosing an adequate theory for change, and the risks going along with either choice. Strive for change from the outside, by open advocacy work, publishing critical reports, openly criticising the government, and that way possibly endanger oneself and one's surrounding, but achieve effective change? Or work in collaboration with the government, not against it, striving for change from within, and this way protecting one's surrounding yet possibly risking lesser

outcomes? No easy choice to be made, which too shapes the responses to temporarily shrinking civil space ahead of major political events like the 2018 national elections. Considering the case studies, one NGO was clearly following the strategy of fighting for change from the outside through criticising, pointing out shortcomings, empowering communities, educating people in their citizen rights and human rights, etc.. While the other NGOs followed a path striving for change from the inside, as well, partnering with selected government agencies, building up good relations to protect themselves, but also to obtain change and reach their organisation's objectives. Through good relations, being transparent about their objectives, and that way trying to achieve some change through working with relevant ministries etc. Beyond, by also giving trainings to government agents, this is another way to strive to change from within the government apparatus. Thus, the way an organisation attempts to achieve its purpose also influences its responses to shrinking space strongly. Whether change from the inside or outside is possible, also depends on the activities and position of an organisation. Educating government officials on human rights, environmental law, and citizen duties might not be much appreciated by these. This also requires to have the relevant legal understanding of these topics and might signify high risks for the communities they are working with more closely. On the other hand, organisations having a close connection to the community network, might endanger the network members overly, if being very outspoken and critical towards the government during these tense periods. They thereby might endanger community members. Thus each theory of change is also connected to the way of working, affiliations, and expertise of an organisation.

Besides, in this setting of prevailing insecurities, blurriness and culture of fear, it is very difficult to estimate the actual degree of risk and danger for oneself and the organisation. *Would this training get shut down? Or would nothing happen? Is it safe to sign that petition and stand up for human rights in Cambodia? Or might this provide a reason for governmental harassment and persecution?*

Due to these immense insecurities, all response strategies are based on an organisation's assessment and judgement of the situation. It is all based upon assumptions, that may, or may not, be true. Who can tell? Accordingly, each organisation navigates the situation in what they deem the adequate and best way, based on their knowledge, assumptions and judgement.

Perceptions of the degree of danger of the situation and changes vary. Carefully navigating the field is required at all times, due to the sensitivity of the topic. Strategies to do so include internal coordination to assess if an action can be realised or should be adapted. And getting together to deliberate about whether it is safe enough. In a setting of culture of fear, insecurities, occasional crack-downs on other organisations, and intimidations, organisations need to constantly assess the situation. Depending on their assessment, positionality (organisation, focus, objectives, staff members, environment, theory of change), they then evaluate, strategize, and act accordingly. This is particularly challenging under these difficult circumstances with lots of insecurity, not knowing where the red lines run, what can be done, and what goes to far. Often this then results in self-censorship, preventive strategy, and generally keeping a low profile to stay on the safe side. Responses of organisations to these insecurities vary. They try to manoeuvre them in the best way. This is challenged due to limited information available, a climate of rumours and fears.

Through the media and from other organisations, they obtain information, rumours, that are then discussed in the management level, jointly with leading figures in the organisations. Through evaluating and assessing, a particular strategy is then decided on, with actions and decisions on what can and cannot be done. Thus the whole process of decision-making is based on assumptions about the risks and possibilities within that particular situation, under extensive ambiguities. Organisations frequently assess situations and risks differently, while also the organisations themselves are very different concerning their general strategy, staff set-up, focus, etc. this, too shapes the course they choose to follow.

The reaction very much depends on how the situation is perceived, as how dangerous it is perceived, how risky. But also what type of organisation, capacities and limitations shape how an organisation reacts and what defines its strategy. While some are very concerned, act cautious and perceive the risk as very acute, keeping a low profile, others perceive it very differently. As the general situation is so ambiguous and blurry, there seems no way how to tell how dangerous the situation really is; if it is just one big bluff scaring people through a culture of fear, if this is justified or exaggerated. All this is perceived differently individually, and accordingly they act in the way that they deem most adequate. And in the end, this is mostly based on assumptions one has to make, as there is no hard knowledge available in this ambiguous complex landscape:

> I: I spoke to many people with different perspectives. But I must say, they all… you cannot say this is better. They all have strong points. And of course you are in a very difficult situation. So how would you blame somebody for…

> "Yes yes. And also, that's often what I see true about this issue, about how you respond to a shrinking political space. You do based on certain assumptions. And no one really knows, whether your assumption is right or wrong. It's an assumption. So NGO X assume that it's best for them to be submissive. NGO XX assumes it's best to challenge. But it's basically assumptions. *[Yeah, you never know how far you can go, or when you would get on the black list, and how real that is… how quickly you can get into trouble.]* And also part of our strategy is also based on assumptions. Just to know some of the things we do, is based on certain assumptions. It is assumptions. And it can't be different. Because you have to assume something."

> I: What are major differences in assumptions you see?

> "I think that's related to what I said before, to shrinking political space. I think NGO X's assumption is by being submissive, they reduce risks. And also NGO XX, there's the assumption that they can still continue challenging this shrinking political space, and that it's important that they do so. Because if they don't the space will get reduced even more. And it's hard to know what's right or wrong."

> (Senior NGO manager, formal semi-structured interview, 18.01.2018)

As this quote greatly illustrates, there simply is no way of knowing what is or is not possible and risky in a highly contested, complex space. All responses are based upon assumptions, as there is no confirmed information available to rely on. And all responses have very solid strong points they rely on. In this insecurity, people try to make sense through telling stories, sharing half-knowledge of what happened to this organisation, yet in the end it is like fighting in the fog without knowing what you really are in. In this great insecurity, everything is open, it is hardly impossible to know where the limits are. Of what is tolerated, and what crosses the line. All actors need to navigate these insecurities based on the assumptions they make, without knowing if they are right or wrong. And while some NGOs assume it is best to challenge shrinking civil space, based on certain assumptions, other NGOs choose to keep a low profile during highly restrictive and insecure periods to after be more active again, based on other assumptions. And how to know how quickly things might escalate?

7.3.   Summarising

Above, I showed the diverse response strategies of the three organisations to cope with shrinking civil space. Hereby, the culture of fear and insecurity are a very dominant trait. There is a broad spectrum of response strategies the three organisations engage in, ranging from low profile, self-censorship and strategic silence to staying outspoken, challenging, and reclaiming civil space.

Low profile on one hand entails working in the shadows – working behind scenes, in background, switching to organise activities at the very grassroot level, as well as transparency, complying with regulations, avoiding confrontation, and dissociation with government-adverse actors. The opposing

strategy on the other hand means remaining active on social media, still organising diverse large scale activities, speaking out in talk shows, and confronting the government.

Low profile depicts a major response strategy of organisations under the current tense Cambodian circumstances and a shrinking civil society space. Following Carothers (2016), these can be seen as *adaptation and mitigation* responses, more exactly as *tactical pullback – "ceasing certain activities or refraining from starting certain new ones when there is reason to believe that doing so may avoid triggering pushback."* (Carothers, 2016, p. 373) e.g. avoiding sensitive activities, working in the shadows, postponing trainings and avoiding confrontation with the government. Beyond, *greater transparency* is very present: complying with legal government requirements, being transparent about the activities and objectives to prevent suspicion, accommodating, to even collaborating with the government. Similarly, dissociation is an essential element of staying independent, politically neutral, and *transparent.* Beyond, *distancing* is present when organisations try to obscure their engagement and prefer others as official organisers of activities. These responses can be seen as responses to a culture of fear, insecurities, and threats.

Many elements of individual reactive response strategies (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017a) are present. NGOs are shifting activities to the local level, focusing on capacity building, and nothing too visible. They emphasise service delivery and self-censor themselves. They improve the transparency and accountability of their own organisation, trying to comply with all requirements, to not run the risk of getting into any trouble. All this is part of navigating and assessing what coping strategy to follow in a setting of dealing with immediate pressures. They are scared of engaging in risky affiliations or engaging in strong alliances, which makes coordinated responses on large scale difficult. However, there is continuous coordination between partners, which I will focus on more, soon. Given the very repressive climate, they focus on passive reactions, and few risky activities of reclaiming space, as they are considered as not possible during this period of time. Thus the focus is mostly on emergency measures. Only very limited advocacy, public campaigns, as they assess them as too risky in the current situation.

Once the situation shall cool down a bit then, future steps can be assessed. These will likely be about reclaiming space. Nevertheless, they are already doing some pro-active activities: empowering local communities, continuing to organise activities that do not cover a 'hot topic', building public awareness through evidence-based lobbying when possible, continuing to collecting information, yet not publishing it yet.

Two of the case study organisations can be categorised as dominantly following the low-profile strategy, while the third is rather outspoken and high-profile. For understanding these differences in the strategies, it is essential to consider the particular positionality of the organisations: their surroundings, perspectives, stakeholders involved, characteristics, objectives and topics they work with. While on one side the main focus can be seen as protecting stakeholders and temporarily staying silent to be able to continue activities afterwards, the other considers defending civil space particularly important under the current restrictions and pushbacks.

Last but not least, there are additional elements of their response strategies: security measures, and internal cohesion making the organisations more resistant and less vulnerable to government interferences. Following Carother's (2012) *adaptation & mitigation* responses, many elements can be found back: firstly, *tactical pullback* is very present, describing the overall low-profile strategy. Secondly, *protective knowledge & technology* can be encountered in the security measures taken. Third, measures around transparency, dissociation and political impartiality depict *greater transparency.* And *distancing* can also be encountered.

Taking one step back to a more general theoretical categorisation, several broader patterns can be pointed out. Borgh & Terwindt (2012) differentiate between *individual or coordinated*, *reactive or proactive*, as well as rather *pragmatic and accommodating or confrontational* responses. In the case of

two of the case studies, they may be located as *coordinated* as long as it entails partner organisations, rather *reactive* instead of proactive, and *pragmatic and accommodating* instead of being too confrontational. They can be seen as shifting activities to the grassroot level, self-censoring themselves both verbally and in their activities, and increasing accountability as part of their low-profile strategy. The third organisation can be seen as more proactive and outspoken, nevertheless they also engage in many low-profile strategies.

Going a level of analysis deeper with Terwindt & Schliemann (2017a), the two organisations' response strategy can be categorised as rather *reactive-individual*. This strategy entails shifting activities to the local level, self-censorship (very visible), an emphasis on service delivery, and improving transparency and accountability of the organisation. They strive for by being transparent, politically neutral, and independent to not provide any justification for closing the organisation down.

Nevertheless, traits of a reactive-coordinated response are equally present: they seek to continue if not strengthen their alliances with their partners, introduced regular formal meetings, thereby creating a protective network with partners supporting each other. However, this network is of rather small scale, not reaching the regional or national level. Therefore, I would rather describe their response strategy as *reactive-individual* response, yet with steady coordination with partner organisations. Howbeit, it has to be highlighted that this concerns a phase of immediate pressure, with dominant fear of co-stigmatisation if working too closely to more outspoken NGOs, the fear of a black list, and a pervasive culture of insecurity and fear. The possibly following phase of reclaiming space is not seen as possible yet. Rather the present period can be seen as a defensive, waiting for spring to come.

This matches familiar patterns of individual-reactive responses being prominent when the very survival of the organisation is essential (Braathen et al., 2018). They point out that "This should be considered in light of the contextual opportunities for alternative strategies. It seems that reactive strategies are more prevalent in the most repressive regimes and contexts." (Braathen et al., 2018, p. 26). These patterns very well match the findings of my case studies.

Further, *legal support* and *emergency measures* (Terwindt & Schliemann, 2017a) can be found, e.g. in them employing a company to make sure they meet all legal regulations, and being way more careful after receiving the warning by telling two stories and engaging in more self-censorship. Yet, *advocacy* or *public campaigns* are deemed as too dangerous under the current conditions.

8. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

'We need to attend to those aspects of power that are least accessible to observation: that, indeed, power is at its most effective when least observable.'

(Lukes, 2004, p. 1)

Shrinking civil space is a pressing global trend, a phenomenon spanning the majority of countries worldwide. Yet research on how NGOs are affected and especially how they deal with these challenges and limitations going along with governments repressing civil space is limited. Few theories offer differentiated frameworks for analysing response strategies on an in-depth level. Theories available frequently boil down on providing categorisations on how governments repress and control civil society via diverse tools, actions and policies; or potential strategies for civil society actors on how to reclaim civil space. Yet few theories focus on the physical, operational and emotional impact on NGOs, and coping strategies of NGOs under highly restrictive conditions.

The main question this thesis strives to answer is this: *How are NGOs in Cambodia affected by the shrinking civil space ahead of the 2018 national elections, and how do they manoeuvre and navigate challenges and restrictions arising therein?* My research focused on the period leading up to the national Cambodian elections that took place in June 2018. My research period (October 2017 to January 2018) thus covered exactly the period when restrictions strongly intensified, and repression reached unprecedented heights. To answer the question above, first I analysed the civil society landscape closely: What characterises the current tense political situation in Cambodia, especially for NGOs? What characterizes the civil space landscape? In my thesis I provided a broad overview over the Cambodian pre-election civil society landscape, the regime type, recent developments and restrictions. There is an increasing notion that Cambodia is experiencing a shift towards authoritarianism, ruled by the same regime in power since over three decades. Ahead of the 2018 national elections particularly, civil pace experiences diverse restrictions, 'shrinking' it. The political opposition is strongly under fire, their party became dissolved by a controversial court ruling. Yet also the civil society sector more broadly found itself under attack: via public intimidation, legal hurdles, stigmatization and diverse other restrictions. Basic freedoms like freedom of expression, association and free press were highly constrained. Organisations involved in human rights and natural resource themes were especially targeted.

So, what were implications/consequences of the tense political pre-election situation for NGOs? How were they affected both operationally, physically and psychologically? In my study of the Cambodian setting, I encountered all five categories of restrictive government actions and policies introduced by Borgh & Terwindt's (2012): from common administrative restrictions of having to ask for permission for each activity in advance, to physical harassment in the form of threats and warnings, stigmatization of the NGO sector more broadly, to criminalisation of major personalities and spaces of dialogue under pressure. Yet, what I need to highlight is - beyond these actions and policies - the strongly emotional effect that the culture of fear and ambiguity has upon individuals. A culture that perpetrates civil space, a constant threat around the unknown boundaries of the permissible. The power of the fear of spies, a black list, safety concerns, deterrence cases, martyrs and stigmatisation, coexisting with feelings of scepticism, cynicism, distrust and frustration rising. Due to insecurity and ambiguity, people frequently engage in self-censorship, effectively controlling their actions and expressions, as they are not sure what would still be tolerated, and what might result in repression. In my case studies I noticed NGOs being mostly directly affected by administrative restrictions and physical harassment, yet also indirect events had a strong impact, as I will point out more below, next to the culture of fear.

Given these diverse restrictions, what challenges and restrictions arise for their work/activities? Here clearly, the most obvious impact was via administrative, legal requirements and regulations, spearheading the LANGO regulation (law on Associations and NGOs), which for example provided the

basis for organisation to have to request permission before each activity they were organising. These require considerably bureaucratic efforts to obtain permission for each activity. Yet also blurry laws and an all-embracing insecurity of what action would still be tolerated, and which one would provoke retribution, were standing out.

Considering these challenges and restrictions, how do they deal with these challenges and restrictions? How do they adapt their strategies and navigate this insecure setting? There clearly is a general strategy of keeping low profile in this tense insecure pre-election setting. NGOs predominantly followed a strategy of tactical pullback. This firstly would include working in the shadows through strategic silence, switching activities and responsibility to the grassroots level, and engaging in camouflage. Second, transparency was an important move: complying with requirements, avoiding confrontation and collaborating with government agents. Third, there was dissociation, meaning to preserve political independence, transparency, avoiding certain phrasing and stigma words, and avoiding any affiliation with 'public enemies'. Nevertheless, I must note that great varieties lay between NGOs, with one of the NGO studied continuing to be more outspoken, reclaiming civil space, and remaining quite active. Thus, each case must be considered carefully and individually. A general strategy then was careful manoeuvring, which I will elaborate further below.

Last but not least, I encountered diverse shielding strategies, via security measures (e.g. internet security, safe communication channels and organisational security trainings), keeping good relations to government agents as recourse in a possible emergency situation, and finally, internal cohesion through solidarity, dedication and faith making an organisation stronger and more resistant to outside threats.

8.1.   Main Findings

What is it I found in my research then? What are my main findings and insights gained?

Firstly, by means of three case studies, my thesis shows how three national and international NGOs active in Cambodia are affected through 'traditional' tools of repression: intimidation, physical harassment, criminalisation, administrative burdens, stigmatisation, and spaces of dialogue under pressure. NGOs are also affected directly – mostly by administrative hurdles and physical harassment in form of threats and intimidation, including an open warning by government agents having a heavy impact on the activities of one NGO. Yet beyond this, the strong effects of indirect actions and tools need to be specially highlighted. I found these to impact NGOs more strongly - e.g. by political leaders being convicted, stories about other NGOs finding themselves in trouble, or an apparent black list - than directly facing repressive actions and policies, in case these are minor in nature.

Secondly and very importantly, I need to emphasize the pervasive power of the culture of fear: how occasional crackdowns on selected civil society actors in a prevalent climate of insecurities and ambiguities can effectively silence almost the whole Cambodian civil society sector – a 'silence [that] governs' (van der Borgh & Terwindt, 2012, p. 1074). Applying findings from Chinese journalists to Cambodian NGOs and beyond, I encountered how direct actions frequently are not even required in an ambience of resounding silence and self-censorship. Little action is required to create this culture of fear permeating civil society. I encountered, how in a highly insecure setting, enhanced by few occasional crackdowns, rumours, half-information spreading, and ambiguous legislation, organisations feel that every move might be the one leading to the crack-down of their organisation. The great insecurity and ambiguity of what is allowed creates insecurity about what can still be done, and what is too risky, which I faced in my research as well. I got indulged in this perspective, like being behind coloured glasses, and still I cannot tell if my caution was adequate or unnecessary. Not being in the field anymore, the distance of course creates safety and makes it easy to brush fear and risks aside. Being a Cambodian citizen without easy possibility of just leaving the country if threatened of course depicts a very different reality. Like in a gigantic panopticon, I described how they feel the powerful sensation of possibly being

watched over, by invisible eyes of the government, and therefore control themselves. This translates in activities being postponed or cancelled, certain critical expressions not being made, etc. Seemingly leaking some black lists, investigating a few outspoken organisations, crackdown on independent media outlets, detaining opposition politicians in combination with blurry regulations and laws leaving ample space for broad interpretation are sufficient to intimidate and silence the majority of civil society organisations. Together with an armoury of tools the government can make use of to inhibit NGOs, e.g. shut them down via ambiguous legislation and exhausting requirements, this depicts a very effective combination to repress civil society without the need for direct open repression. In response to this constant threat, I observed organisations frequently engage in a strict low-profile strategy, and act very carefully in what they do e.g. always asking for permission ahead of activities. Self-censorship then is a very frequent response, as attempt to prevent getting black-listed, or even shut down. NGOs in certain ways also contribute to this culture of fear, by the very process of sharing rumours, knowledge not fully confirmed, recommendations what behaviour might lead to repressive reactions, what actions (e.g. transparency, independence from the opposition) might enhance not being targeted. Yet on the other hand, I also found more outspoken actors, following a more radical approach. Actors that continue to speak up, try to reclaim shrinking space and actively challenge restrictions.

I was struck by the degree in which the responses of the organisations to these conditions differed and looked for possible explanations for these variations. I argue that this is highly dependent on diverse factors, amongst them four striking factors: a) assumptions, b) careful manoeuvring, c) positionality, and d) theory of change.

Firstly, it depends on how one perceives the situation: how serious it is; how big risks and threats are, how quickly things might escalate. This setting is strongly shaped by insecurity, blurry rules, limited independent media coverage, rumours going around, and half-knowledge spreading mouth-to-mouth. I myself during my field research experienced how it can feel like fighting in the fog, without truly knowing what you are really in. In an environment where everything seems open, it is challenging to know where the limits are, what is permitted, and what crosses the line; how careful one must be; what is still safe to say, and what endangers one's security. Every move, every response is based on assumptions and making sense of the current situation. Assumptions about what is safe, and what is not, yet nobody surely knows if these assumptions are correct in this insecure setting. These are assumptions made by observing the general civil space landscape and broader developments, as well as based on their very own experiences. When studying an NGO's analysis of the situation, one needs to be conscious that their assessment of the risks and possibilities in a given context and according decisions of how to respond are always based on the continuous making of assumptions, which change as the situation is perceived as changing. Assumptions of what the situation permits in a world of ambiguities about what is still safe, and what crosses the line. Where rumours, tales, and stories about other organisations affected, deterrence cases, this politician being arrested, that NGO facing investigations etc. play a powerful role. Thus, additional caution is essential.

Closely related to acting based on assumptions, is careful manoeuvring and navigating insecurities. I illustrated how this refers to trying to navigate an insecure situation, constantly make assessments about what the present circumstances allow and finding according coping strategies. It is a constant process of making sense, assessing, evaluating, strategizing, and making decisions on how to cope and respond. This is both internally within an organisation, as well as in coordination with partners. It means finding the best determinable path between limitations, risks, possibilities and opportunities. This frequently goes along with coordination, as well as moving, postponing and cancelling activities if deemed too risky. These too can be seen as form of practical self-censorship. Yet also in general, this refers to a difficult skill to build an adequate picture of the present situation, and how to balance the fine line 'between the innocuous and the suicidal' (Stern & Hassid, 2012, citing Boudreau, 2004, p. 3).

My third major finding then accentuates the importance of positionality – taking into account the particular situation an NGO encounters itself in, to understand its situational analysis and respective response strategy. What needs to be considered, is that it is not just an individual that may have to face the consequences if crossing the line. On the contrary it may be the whole organization, family and community one is working with, that may be endangered by one's actions. Understanding the environment of an NGO includes the escape options, emergency plan, staff members, staff circumstances, objectives, theory of change, long-term goal, strategy, organisational focus, and areas the NGO is active in.

Fourth, touches upon an essential element in analysing NGO response strategies: their theory of change – how they strive to fulfil their purpose, frequently related to enhancing free civil space and promoting democracy and human rights. This again is closely related to assumptions. Pre-given assumptions on how one perceives the political situation, e.g. the very nature of the state, effectiveness of actions, and the best way to respond to shrinking civil space. While some consider a temporary 'submissive strategic-silent' strategy as part of a long-term strategy the best choice, others see it as civil society's duty to challenge shrinking space nonetheless.

Over the three months of research, I have spoken to a lot of people, all with diverse perspectives, contexts, approaches and response strategies. Evaluating the different responses, one cannot say one is more adequate than the other, they all have strong and very reasonable points.

8.2. Going beyond

These findings and insights can be used for other similar cases in other countries, to see if they also apply to civil society and NGOs there, and to further study how the civil society sector is hampered, restricted, and silenced. My findings confirm many elements of government actions and policies restricting the operational space for NGOs, as suggested by Borgh & Terwindt (2012). Their categorisations on the national context and response strategies are also useful, yet here more in-depth focus and differentiation is required to fully understand the complexities in highly repressive settings, like the Cambodian pre-election landscape. Further, Stern & Hassid's (2016) notions of insecurity and occasional crackdowns are very visible in the Cambodian case, and thus are not restricted only to lawyers and journalists, but indeed apply to civil society broader, including NGOs. Thus, I argue that this connection needs to be drawn and included when studying NGOs being affected, manoeuvring and coping with shrinking civil space, as it has tremendous consequences for their response behaviour and activities. This thus depicts an essential addition to the current scientific debate. I recommend further studying of this aspect, and implications, in an effort to fully understand NGOs being impacted and responding, and to finally be able to provide and support adequate response mechanisms. Beyond, my research indicates additional important aspects in NGOs coping mechanisms, surrounding shielding strategies. These include practical security measures, maintaining good relations to government agents, and internal cohesion increasing an organisation's resilience towards outside threats.

What does my work add to efforts so far to understand how NGOs deal with shrinking space? It explains the great power of indirect threats, actions, harassment and rumours. It illustrates the power of ambiguity, yet also importantly, of positionality – how characteristics, setting, and risk assessment of the very NGOs plays a major role.

Beyond it illustrates diverse response strategies, particularly when facing direct danger, repression and risks, before being able to actively reclaim civil space. Keeping low profile here is the dominant strategy, entailing diverse categories: working in the shadows – going local and switching responsibility, transparency – being openly transparent, cooperative, not hiding anything to protect oneself, dissociation – avoiding any affiliation to government adversaries, and shielding strategies. The latter involves security measures, internal cohesion making an organization stronger and more robust to outside threats

through solidarity, unity and dedication, and finally, good government relations. All these depict largely new aspects that are not commonly described in the literature of the keeping a low profile response strategy to shrinking civil space.

Reflecting on the theory already available, how helpful are these theoretical notions? And how could they be refined or complemented? Borgh & Terwindt (2012) definitely prove to be very useful. After extensively looking for the fitting theory, theirs was the only that truly explains well the phenomena I encountered. Nevertheless, it lacks the depth and differentiation to adequately explain NGO response strategies. In this aspect, it simply divides into active or passive, individual or coordinated, and proactive or reactive responses but does not provide a fully adequate tool for really comprehending the complex ongoing process of manoeuvring, assessing, evaluating and taking decisions based on assumptions of the possible action. Generally, more scientific focus is needed on positionality, the power of ambiguity, the culture of fear, and self-censorship in the context of response strategies in situations of acute perceived threat.

8.3. Limitations & Need for Further Research

Nevertheless, there are several limitations in my research, which have to be considered carefully. Firstly, I was only able to study one side of the picture – the NGO perspective, while I did not gain insights into the way government actors see the same picture. For further research, focusing on this perspective – the other side - would be a valuable addition, based on what I found in my work. There is a clear bias to one side and inherent subjectivity shaping the research results. Secondly, due to a short research period (three months only) and language barrier challenges of working with a translator constantly limiting my group of respondents, my findings are restricted. Another challenge lays in the very challenge to study inaction – actions research populations do <u>not</u> take or take differently than usual due to self-censorship. Beyond, the case studies were small-scale, three case studies, thus it has to be reflected in how far findings can be generalised, as each context is diverse. Via triangulation through diverse methods of gathering and confirming data (informal conversations, formal interviews, participant observation etc.,), as well as diverse data sources, I strived to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena at play, nevertheless these still are considerably subjective findings, shaped by me as research tool, with intrinsically related background, assumptions, perceptions, and sense-making. And last but not least, I need to point out that NGOs depict just one part of civil society, one actor in the broader picture, thus this does not show the whole picture of civil society influenced and dealing with shrinking civil space, but only one aspect. Civil space includes a large variety of actors, e.g. unions, indigenous communities, associations, and social movements, which also deserve closer attention.

This leads me to the need for further research. Therefore, I suggest to research 'the other side of the coin' - the government perspective on shrinking civil space. This can provide a valuable addition, e.g. by showing their perspective, the degree in how far creating ambiguity and a culture of fear is a direct purposeful action, or an indirect effect of policies. Second, other aspects and actors of civil society beyond NGOs should be closer examined in the ways they are affected and deal with shrinking civil space, such as social movements who have a very different dynamic themselves, and indigenous groups who face challenges in many places surrounding access for resources. Finally, in-depth research on what to do against a culture of fear, and how to overcome insecurities and ambiguities would be a very valuable contribution to the scientific debate, e.g. raising awareness and lobbying on a more global scale towards major organisations like IGOs with the power to shape repressive national policies. Another very aspect is the time aspect of my research. Following the national elections, the situation improved significantly again. Organisations were more active on diverse media outlets, more freely pointing out ongoing illegal resource extraction incidents, and the culture of fear generally seemed to diminish. This shows how important being aware of the time and specific conjunctures (e.g. elections) is. Yet whether the culture of fear will completely vanish, is yet to be found.

This thesis thus strives to inspire the wider debate on how to approach and tackle this global phenomenon of shrinking civil space adequately, a trend spanning many countries worldwide. How to study and analyse civil society organisations navigating shrinking civil space? What shapes the way they are affected and perceive restrictions and opportunities? How to adequately make sense of their response strategies? And going one step further, how to respond? How to comprehend and support NGOs facing these challenges? And how to support their attempts to reclaim civil space? All these are important questions to discuss and collect further data on via comprehensive research. Elements that need close attention here are both direct as indirect aspects, yet also the combination of insecurity and the culture of fear with repressive policies shaping NGOs' way of manoeuvring. Yet also reflecting on both policy options on how to prevent blurry legislation opening space for ambiguity and insecurities. While also reflecting on ways of supporting NGOs in overcoming these hurdles, through considerable international pressure. This has eventually taken place and shown effect in the EU threatening and starting to lift the 'Everything but Arms (EBA)'-agreement that provides least developed countries duty free access to the European market. As Cambodia is very dependent on its textile industry, giving jobs to thousands of Cambodians, this has major implications for the national economy. And likely is in close relation to the slow yet steady recent re-opening of civil space and lifting of repressive restrictions, the resurging of competing opposition parties, and (still mixed) dialogue with opposition leaders. This is a very interesting aspect of studying the developments and civil space in-depth, now that the elections have taken place. This aspect can provide great complementing insights to the findings of this study, and deserves special attention in future research ambitions. In contexts of ambiguity, and among rumours of Southeast Asian and Chinese leaders exchanging strategies on how to best repress civil society – how to go about this? What political response strategies to follow?

Besides this all and the restrictions and challenges posed by shrinking civil space, another interesting avenue to explore is how decreasing funding for NGOs in Cambodia as general trends interplays with these periodical shrinking and expanding civil space, depending on political developments. NGOs as civil society actor. A major of these are funding bottlenecks in Cambodia, as organisations face increasing difficulties to obtain sufficient outside funding to sustain their organization and its activities. This challenge likely is an even bigger threat to organisations than temporary shrinking civil space. Political developments do have a serious impact, yet following the findings of the case studies, do not depict the most important threat NGOs in Cambodia are likely currently facing.

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