



CLOSING THE INFORMATION DIVIDE: Addressing the Information Needs for Persons with Disabilities in Cambodia

Key Highlights

- In Cambodia, one in four people over five years old are estimated to have some form of disability. This group tends to be older, female, and residing in rural areas. The most common types of disabilities include difficulties in seeing, remembering, and walking/climbing.
- Education and work opportunities are limited, especially for women with severe disabilities. Their health and quality of life are lower overall.
- There is no specific legal framework in Cambodia addressing access to information specifically for persons with disabilities, making enforcement difficult.
- Persons with disabilities access information through four methods (mass media, agents, events, and Information, Education, Communication- IEC materials), but their suitability for the type and severity of disabilities can vary.
- Despite the currently accessible information and availability of appropriate modes of access, persons with disabilities demand information on economics, education, healthcare and more, all of which are limited at present. This information should be trustworthy, translated, clear, simple, timely, and tailored to different types of disabilities.

Introduction

All individuals, including those with disabilities, are entitled to the same fundamental right to access information. However, persons with disabilities encounter many barriers hindering them from realising their rights. The obstacles include, but are not limited, to (1) a lack of accessible technology and assistive devices, (2) a lack of accessible media formats and content, and (3) discrimination in social attitudes and public policies (Madaus et al. 2021; Mitra and Palmer 2023; UN 2006).

Cambodia, like many nations, lacks comprehensive legal frameworks to guarantee accessible information formats for individuals with disabilities (Richter et al. 2023). While the upcoming Law on Access to Information, with its explicit inclusion of persons with disabilities, represents a positive step, proactive initiatives, advocacy efforts, and sustained commitment are essential to overcome existing challenges.

This policy brief presents key findings from the comprehensive report "Information Needs Assessment for Persons with Disabilities in

Cambodia," conducted by the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) in collaboration with the UNESCO Phnom Penh Office and with financial support from UN Partnership to promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Multi-Partner Trust Fund (UNPRPD). The study highlights the critical gaps in access to information for persons with disabilities in Cambodia and provides evidence-based recommendations to enhance information accessibility. The research implemented an explanatory sequential design of mixed methods, integrating the data from the 2021-22 Cambodia Demographic Health Survey (CDHS), a mapping review, and data from interviews and group discussions.

Key findings

Demography

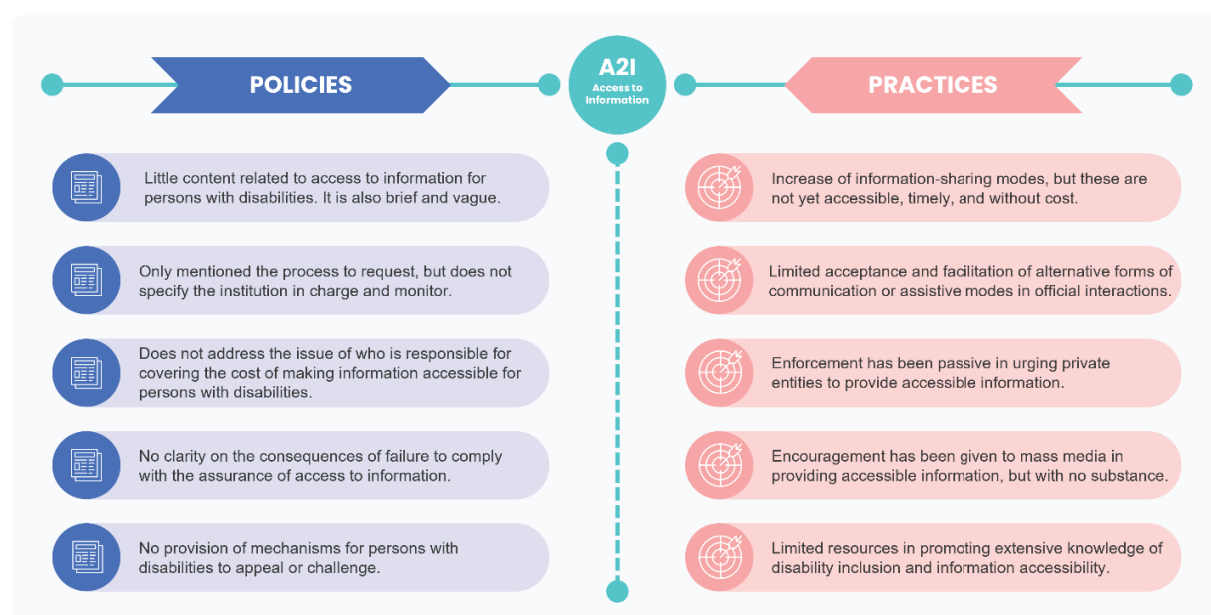
In Cambodia, approximately 24 percent of the population over five years old is estimated to experience some form of disability. This prevalence is evidently higher among females, older individuals, and those residing in rural areas. The most commonly reported disabilities include difficulties in seeing, remembering, and walking/climbing. Educational attainment

among persons with disabilities is significantly lower, with only 25 percent completing primary school and 6 percent reaching secondary school or higher levels. Unpaid work is more prevalent for this demographic group. While a gender disparity exists in work participation, with men with disabilities exhibiting a higher rate, both genders with severe disabilities experience considerably lower employment and paid job opportunities. Additionally, persons with disabilities face a greater burden of poor health and limited access to essential services, such as clean water and sanitation. This population group is 15 percent more likely to report poor health compared to their counterparts without disabilities.

Status of policies and practices

To date, there remains no specific legal framework in Cambodia addressing access to information specifically for persons with disabilities, making it difficult to enforce. While positive developments have been observed in information dissemination, these efforts often fall short of being accessible, timely, and free of charge. Additionally, the acceptance and facilitation of alternative communication

Figure 1. Comparison between the status of policies and practices related to access to information for persons with disabilities



methods or assistive technologies in official interactions need to be embraced further. Government initiatives urging private entities to prioritise information accessibility are also seen as passive. Likewise, past engagements with media outlets to promote accessible content have yielded minimal substantive progress. Furthermore, limited resources hinder efforts to promote widespread knowledge and understanding of disability inclusion and information accessibility. Nevertheless, the government, development partners, and civil society continue to work together. Initiatives like the development of accessibility standards for infrastructure are a positive step. Please see Figure 1 above for a brief comparison between policies and practices.

Status of information access

Mode of communication/exchanging information

There are four primary modes of communication that persons with disabilities use to access

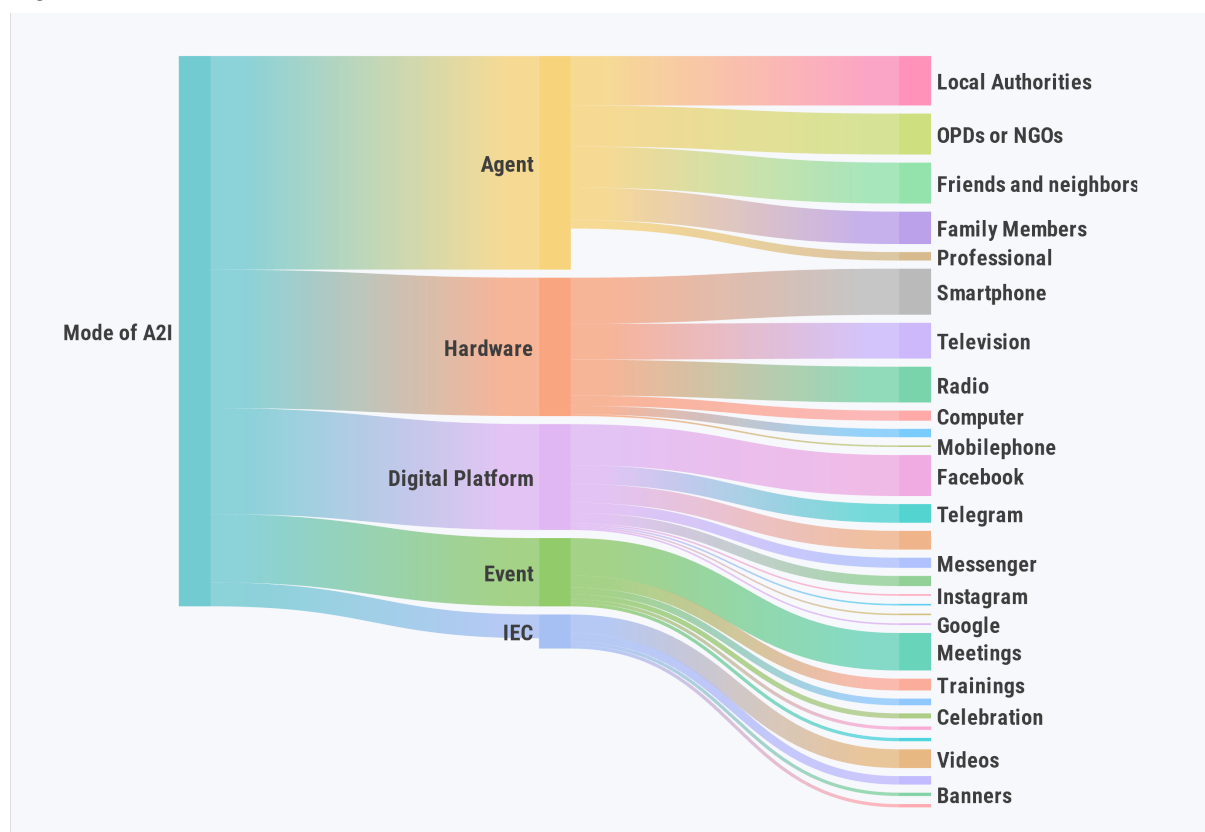
different types of information in their daily lives. Namely, these are mass media (hardware and digital platforms), agents, events, and IEC material (see Figure 2).

The appropriateness of these modes varies, and while they are widely used, they do not necessarily meet the needs of all types of disabilities. There is a discrepancy between the modes of access used by persons with disabilities and the formats provided by information providers. For instance, development partners often use fewer communication modes, focusing on national and subnational levels rather than direct interaction with persons with disabilities.

Current information accessed/received

There are five key information domains currently accessible to persons with disabilities: economics, education, healthcare, politics, and social/cultural information. Social and cultural information had the highest accessibility rate, followed by a sequential decrease in

Figure 2. Overall Modes of Communication to Access Information for Persons with Disabilities



access to economic, healthcare, political, and educational information. Information access was most limited for women with multiple disabilities, older adults, those in poverty, with lower education, living rurally, and in indigenous groups. A significant mismatch also exists between the information supplied by the government, development partners, NGOs, and OPDs and those received by persons with disabilities. Although the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) seems to provide a broad range of information, NGOs and OPDs focus more on rights advocacy, vocational training, and healthcare information. This mismatch highlights the need for more tailored and accessible information to meet the diverse needs of persons with disabilities.

Challenges in accessing information

External factors

External factors are highlighted as the most significant barriers. These include the limited availability of accessible products and technologies, such as screen readers, Braille displays, and sign language interpretations. The existing assistive technologies often do not cater to the local context, particularly due to language barriers, as many of these technologies are not available in Khmer. The digital literacy level among persons with disabilities is generally low, further impeding their ability to use these technologies. Additionally, the digital divide is significant, with only about 67.5 percent internet penetration in Cambodia, predominantly in urban areas. The poor condition of the natural and built environment, including inadequate public transportation and inaccessible infrastructure, exacerbates these challenges. Discrimination and lack of support from families and communities also play a crucial role in limiting access to information. Families often prioritise earning a living over supporting the information needs of persons with disabilities, and there is a general lack of awareness on how to assist them effectively.

Health conditions

Health conditions also significantly impede access to information. The type, number, and severity of disabilities, along with chronic health conditions, can limit the ability to access and process information. For example, persons with visual impairments may find it difficult to read printed materials or navigate digital interfaces, and those with hearing impairments may struggle with audio-based information. Ageing and the presence of multiple severe disabilities further amplify these challenges, making it harder for individuals to access and use information effectively.

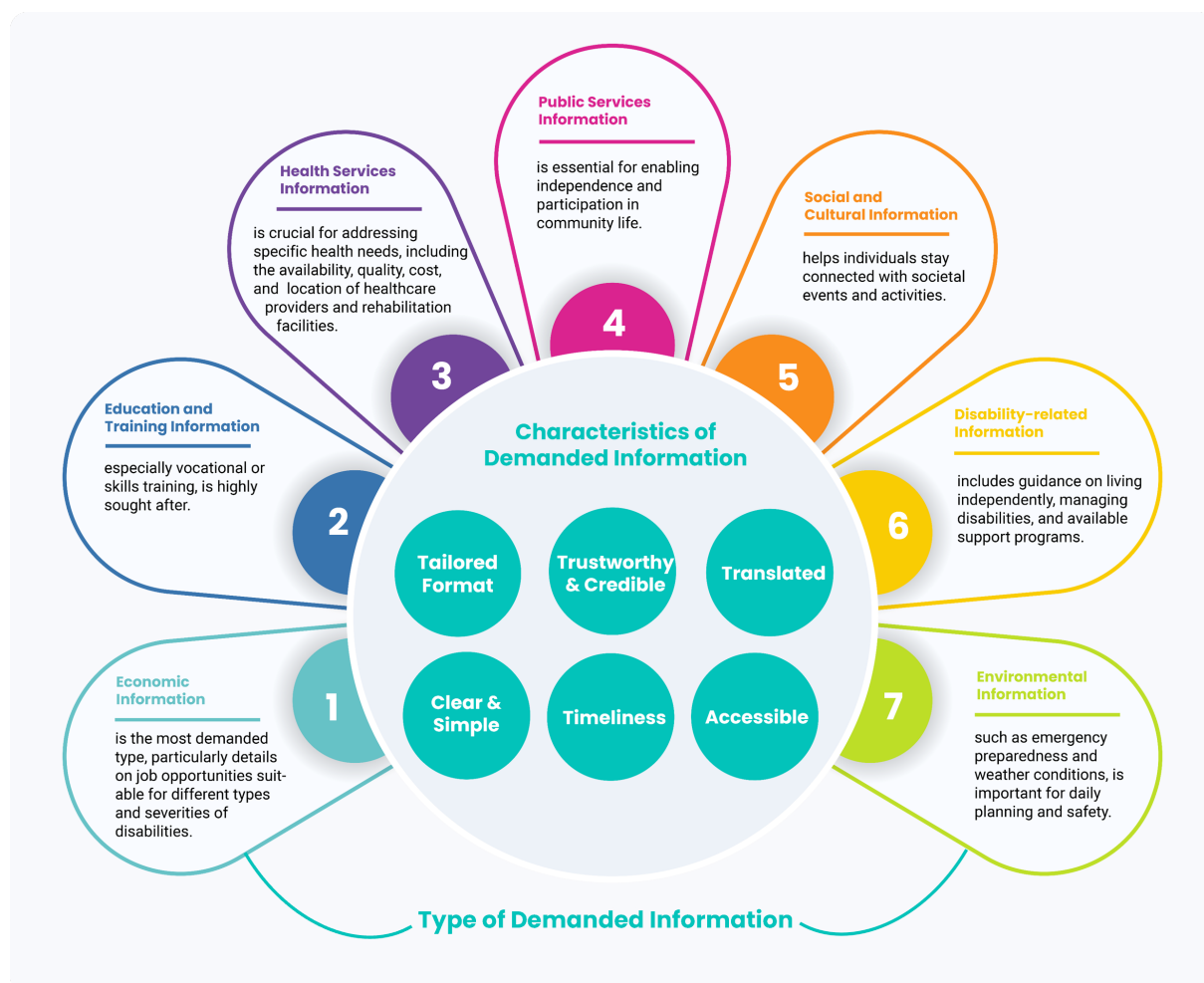
Internal factors

Internal factors such as a lack of motivation and confidence significantly hinder persons with disabilities from accessing information. Many individuals have had past experiences of failure or difficulty understanding information, discouraging them from seeking it out. Feelings of isolation, discrimination, and low self-esteem contribute to a reluctance to engage with information. Additionally, a lack of awareness about the relevance and importance of information for their lives further reduces their motivation to seek and utilise information. This internal barrier creates a cycle of exclusion, where lacking motivation leads to reduced participation in society and further marginalisation.

What information do persons with disabilities need?

The study identified seven key types of information that are in high demand: economic information, education and training, health services, public services, social and cultural information, disability-related information, and environmental information (see Figure 3). To improve the accessibility and usability of information for persons with disabilities, information should have the following characteristics:

Figure 3. Type and characteristics of information demanded by persons with disabilities



- **Tailored formats:** Information should be available in formats such as Braille, audio, large print, sign language interpretation, and closed captioning.
 - **Trustworthy and credible:** Information must come from reliable sources to ensure accuracy and dependability.
 - **Translated:** Information should also be translated into Khmer and other relevant languages to ensure inclusivity, especially for indigenous groups.
 - **Clear and simple:** Information should be presented in plain language, avoiding jargon, and structured in a visually supportive manner.
 - **Timeliness:** Up-to-date information is particularly useful in areas like health, finance, and employment opportunities.
 - **Accessible channels:** Information should be accessible through easy-to-reach channels to ensure that persons with disabilities can receive updates promptly and efficiently.
- Recommendations**
- **Legislative and Policy Reforms:** To address the identified gaps and challenges, legislative and policy reforms are essential. The Law on Access to Information should be expedited and enacted with specific provisions that cater to the needs of persons with disabilities. Furthermore, existing national policies must be aligned with the principles of Articles 9 and 21 of the UNCRPD to ensure comprehensive information accessibility.

- **Capacity Building and Awareness:** Promoting capacity-building initiatives is vital for enhancing the understanding and implementation of disability inclusion and information accessibility among government officials, information providers, and the general public. Raising awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities to access information can significantly contribute to this effort.
- **Monitoring and Oversight:** Establishing a specialised body to oversee, monitor, implement, and report on the status of information accessibility is necessary. This body should be adequately resourced and have a formal structure to develop and enforce national guidelines on the accessibility of information across all sectors.
- **Infrastructure and Technological Enhancements:** Investing in accessible technologies and infrastructure is crucial for supporting information access for persons with disabilities. Ensuring that all public communication platforms and services are designed to be accessible to persons with different types of disabilities can greatly enhance their ability to obtain essential information.
- **Engagement with the Private Sector and Media:** Engaging with private entities and mass media is another critical step. Private entities should be encouraged to provide information in accessible formats and promote the use of sign language and other augmentative communication methods. Partnerships between the government, private sector, and NGOs can facilitate initiatives to improve information accessibility.

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