UK Government Centres of Expertise

Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy

LEARNING NOTE

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GREEN CITIES, INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENERGY PROGRAMME (GCIEP)

Working as one UK system to shape Cambodia's first Green Special Economic Zone

Cambodia is preparing to grow beyond the status of a least developed country by 2029, which has sharpened the government's focus on green, export-oriented industrialisation as a route to sustained growth and competitiveness. Against this backdrop, the Government of Cambodia is exploring the development of a Green Special Economic Zone (SEZ) near Phnom Penh as a flagship project to attract higher-value manufacturing and climate-aligned investment.

Within a wider multi-workstream feasibility study, two UK Centres of Expertise, each with their own programmes – the Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy Programme (GCIEP) and Green Inclusive Growth (GIG) Growth Gateway – jointly delivered the technical, market and financial components that determine whether the project moves to implementation. The GCIEP-led technical feasibility assessment provided the physical, infrastructural and environmental backbone for the Green SEZ concept, while the GIG's Growth Gateway-led work tested market demand and financial viability. Together, these linked interventions demonstrate how coordinated UK programmes can operate as a harmonious system, aligning technical, commercial and policy perspectives to generate coherent, investment-ready outputs for government partners.

The challenge

The proposed Green SEZ is a greenfield development in Kien Svay district, within the rapidly urbanising Phnom Penh–Kandal corridor, where industrial expansion, climate risk and infrastructure gaps intersect. Many of the basic parameters that underpin a viable zone – from ground conditions and flood risk to transport connections and utility capacity – were initially only partially understood, creating uncertainty for both the government and prospective developers. At the same time, the feasibility study needed to do more than confirm technical possibility; it had to produce a bankable proposition that could attract and structure private investment, align with Cambodia's green industrial ambitions and meet international resilience standards. The work therefore demanded an approach that could integrate infrastructure and master planning analysis with demand assessment, financial modelling and broader policy considerations in a coherent way.

Structuring a shared feasibility agenda

The full feasibility study was organised into seven areas of work, three of which – technical studies, market demand and analysis, and financial and economic viability –

were delivered by GIG with GCIEP leading on the technical feasibility assessment. The GCIEP work areas focused on site conditions, spatial master planning, infrastructure strategies and climate resilience, while Growth Gateway supported with understanding tenant demand, positioning the zone in regional value chains and testing financial and economic returns. The two centres agreed a common analytical approach at the outset, linking assumptions on land use, infrastructure standards and phasing from the technical work directly into the demand and financial models. This shared framework ensured that the outputs of each work package are mutually reinforcing, rather than parallel pieces of analysis.

Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy Programme's role

Within this joint structure, GCIEP's core role was to establish a robust technical foundation for the first phase of the Green SEZ. GCIEP's technical feasibility study assessed physical site conditions, including topography, soil and geotechnical constraints, and undertook a climate hazard and flood risk assessment to inform resilient platform levels and drainage solutions. Based on this analysis, GCIEP developed an overall vision plan and concept masterplan, setting out land use distribution, key development parameters, internal road hierarchy, and a green-blue landscape framework for the 177-hectare site. The team then defined infrastructure strategies for transport, water, used water, stormwater, power and other utilities, and prepared Class 5 cost and operating expenses estimates based on the Association for the Advancement of Cost Engineering (AACE) International Cost Estimate Classification System for non-leasable, site-wide works. These elements form the technical baseline against which commercial and financial scenarios can be assessed.

Green Inclusive Growth Growth Gateway's role

In parallel, GIG Growth Gateway examined market demand and the financial and economic viability of the Green SEZ, drawing directly on GCIEP's technical parameters. Their work considered sector priorities such as automotive, electronics and advanced textiles, tested likely tenant uptake under different scenarios and explored how UK investors and developers could participate. They also led on the structuring of the financial model and the assessment of economic benefits, including employment and export potential, using GCIEP's capital and operating cost estimates as key inputs. This division of labour allows each centre to apply its comparative strengths while working from a common evidence base.

Mechanisms for joint working

Joint UK delivery was underpinned by several practical coordination mechanisms. First, the centres adopted a shared engagement structure with the government, aligning technical consultations on master planning. Second, cross-centre review points were built into the workplan, so that changes in one work area – for example, land use options or infrastructure standards – could be rapidly reflected in demand and financial analyses. Third, the centres used the engagements with the Ministry of Economy and Finance and the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office's (FCDO) private sector adviser as joint convenors for review of the work and for connecting the different elements of the feasibility study.

The added value of an integrated UK offer

The value of the UK system approach has been most visible in two areas:

- **Alignment of technical and commercial design:** GCIEP's masterplan options and infrastructure standards were developed with explicit consideration of the commercial and financial thresholds being

Photo © GCIEP

GCIEP carrying out site surveys for a proposed Green Special Economic Zone.

tested by GIG Growth Gateway. For instance, choices around platform raising and drainage solutions were framed not only as engineering decisions, but as inputs that would affect capital cost envelopes, tariff structures and the attractiveness of the zone to targeted sectors.

- **Integrated climate resilience and competitiveness:** The climate hazard and flood risk analysis undertaken by GCIEP has informed a resilience-oriented site strategy, including options for full or partial platform raising and stormwater management, which feeds into the overall cost and risk profile assessed by GIG Growth Gateway. By treating resilience as an integral part of the feasibility case rather than an add-on, the centres have jointly positioned the Green SEZ as both climate-resilient and commercially credible.

This way of working has allowed the UK offer to be presented as integrated and strategic rather than fragmented, with GCIEP and GIG Growth Gateway seen by partners as components of a single UK advisory platform.

Outcomes and emerging uptake

As an interim output, the GCIEP-led technical feasibility assessment had already generated several tangible results in early 2026. It had delivered an initial master planning framework and infrastructure strategy that confirms the physical and infrastructural feasibility of developing the first phase of the Green SEZ, subject to the incorporation of primary survey data in the final stage. It had also provided indicative capital and operating cost estimates for non-leasable infrastructure, giving GIG Growth Gateway and government counterparts a basis for financial and economic analysis and for testing different phasing and development options.

Together with the GIG Growth Gateway-led work, these outputs have informed decisions by the Government of Cambodia, FCDO and partners on the preferred masterplan configuration to be taken forward. The joint UK work also supports wider objectives under the UK-Cambodia Strategic Infrastructure Partnership, including positioning UK standards and firms in the emerging developer procurement process and demonstrating an integrated approach that could be replicated in other Green SEZ or industrial zone initiatives in the region. The UK centres' coordinated model has strengthened government confidence, maintained developer interest and provided a clearer route from concept to implementation.

Key learning from the integrated UK Centres of Expertise approach

- **Early joint scoping across centres is essential:** Defining the shared analytical spine – how master planning, infrastructure standards, demand assessment and financial modelling would interact – helped avoid duplication and ensured that each output directly supported the others.
- **Technical design needs to be structured for downstream financial analysis:** By organising GCIEP's technical outputs around clear cost, performance and phasing parameters, the centres have made it easier for GIG Growth Gateway to translate engineering choices into financial and economic scenarios, without GCIEP needing to engage directly with investors.
- **Embedding climate resilience for better delivery:** Climate resilience strengthens, rather than complicates the investment case when integrated early. Embedding hazard and flood analysis in the core feasibility work has allowed resilience measures to be costed, justified and communicated as part of the project's long-term competitiveness.
- **Shared government and market interfaces create a unified UK offer**: Using common engagement platforms and joint messaging has reduced transaction costs for Cambodian counterparts, while reinforcing the perception of the UK centres as a coordinated system.
- **A model that is replicable in other contexts:** The Cambodia Green SEZ experience suggests that coupling GCIEP's infrastructure and urban expertise with GIG Growth Gateway's trade and investment lens can be applied by FCDO to other large-scale, climate-aligned industrial or urban projects where feasibility assessments must bridge technical and commercial domains.

GCIEP is a demand-driven initiative focused on sustainable green cities and climate-resilient infrastructure in lower-income countries. As the flagship programme of the UK's Centre of Expertise for Green Cities, Infrastructure and Energy, GCIEP supports the UK Government's mission to accelerate investment in, and delivery of, infrastructure and urban development that is responsible, reliable, inclusive, low-carbon and climate-resilient.

A significant proportion of GCIEP's work is carried out in seven priority countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Philippines, Mozambique, Vietnam and Zambia, where a Deep Offer programme provides long-term, systemic interventions focused on transformative change and infrastructure financing.

To keep up to date with GCIEP's work:

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