

External Assistance Programs for Basic Education in Cambodia: The Impact on the Government's Educational Policies and Development

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Abstract

Cambodia suffered incalculable socio-cultural destruction, genocide, international isolation, and political economic turmoil during the 1970s and 1980s. This nation, which had been known as one of the most peaceful and prosperous nations in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 1960s, opts to reclaim its prosperity through education enhancement. Regenerating traditional culture and education in the 1980s led to a socioeconomic rehabilitation and political change. The 1993 general election supervised by the United Nations directed to the establishment of a legitimate government and helped draw international support for the nation's improvement.

This proud people with a difficult history regained exposure to the international community through various social and educational support programs of the United Nations (UN), International Organizations (IO), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) as the government's developmental partners during its struggling period of the 1990s. This external assistance was indispensable for this one of the world poorest nations. This paper identifies and examines these bodies' contributions since the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA). It also discusses their combined forces in assisting the Cambodian government to achieve the goal of EFA.

Key words: Cambodia, basic education, education policy, educational development

Introduction

This paper was presented at the 47th Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society of the United States, in New Orleans, Louisiana. It has been reviewed concerning comments and questions from the Conference session participants for this publication. This piece centers on dialogues with three senior MoEYS (Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport) officials, three NGO project managers, and followed by a discussion session with a group of four office staff in the Aid Coordination and Monitoring Unit of the MoEYS

Department of Planning in August 2001 and November 2002—These have given me a fertile ground for examination and analysis of the government policy, its implementations, and the external assistance programs for basic education in Cambodia.

After over two decades of extreme political and economic upheaval, a peace accord was signed in Paris by all the warring factions considering national reconciliation in 1991 with the assistance of international community to put war to an end in Cambodia. Since then this war-torn country was open to the world and called for help to reconstruct its overall sociopolitical and economic structures.

The ground breaking led to a general election organized and supervised by the United Nations in 1993 to establish a democratic government system. Cambodia chose to adopt constitutional monarchy. A coalition government, which was formed by all the three elected parties, co-headed by Prince Norodom Ranaridh and Hun Sen intended for a first five-year term from 1993 to 1998 to alleviate poverty of the people and reform administrative structures.

The newly established government, in order for nation building, set priorities for human resource development and structural reform. Many aid agreements were signed between the government and donors, both multilateral and bilateral to enhance the progress of development and reform. Donors increased their shares considerably from 1994 to 1997 to ease the government first phase of effort—and to help it stand on its own foot. The external aid, which composed of over half of the nation's budget for development, was declining in the following years. Aid has been shifted from a direct offer to the government to projects run by nongovernmental organizations as government's partners, for several reasons. Many criticized the mishandling of fund for the corruption within the government sphere. Other donor countries like the United States withdrew funding from a number of basic education projects after the July 1997 violent transfer of executive power while other complained about ineffective reforms (McNamara, 1999).

After attending the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), Cambodia organized its own EFA conference on 2-6 September 1991, in Phnom Penh, to diffuse the concept of EFA, share experiences and seek out ways and resources to implement this global EFA model. The 1991 national conference, with participations from numerous public concerning bodies, UN agencies, foreign government representatives, and NGOs, came up with a number of overly ambitious EFA developmental goals for the 1990s and pledged to accomplish by the year 2000.

The key targets, which aimed at (1) eradicating illiteracy among adult population by 1995—and (2) putting all school-age children in school by the turn of the century, could not be met. The reasons are simply understood that the country had just been recovering from civil conflicts and facing lingering

insecurity, widespread poverty, shortage of government funding, inadequate teaching and learning facilities, and a high percentage of untrained teachers.

Several measures appeared to be taken to reduce the barriers to EFA implementations: (a) The 1993 EFA Planning Seminar, to revise the policies, strategies, and the action plans, (b) the 1994 Education Investment Framework, and (c) the 1995 Basic Education Investment Plan. However, the plans were not fully implemented as for two of the senior education officials recognized the failure as lack of funding, political will, and mechanism.

However, a momentum of development was gaining slowly despite the aid flow to this post-conflict nation. Several government education officials, as being interviewed, condemned the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime of the second half of the 1970s, which had caused departed to the lives of almost 80 percent of the pre-war intellectuals, especially teachers during those difficult years. The government workforce was not yet capable for the facilitation and cooperation with the donor agencies. As McNamara (1999) observes

In 1993 Cambodian education officials knew (from a period of long deprivation) that aid was good, but had little concept of the mechanisms associated with investment planning and aid realization. A US\$ 7 million ADB loan for urgently needed school building rehabilitation was delayed because MoEYS officials had not realized what action was needed to put the agreement into effect. (p.101)

Evolving Attention to Basic Education and Collaborative Reform

Basic education has been receiving remarkable policy attention in many developing countries over the last few decades. The most noticeable awareness has been fueled by their extensive participations in the 1990 WCEFA and increasing ratifications of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in the early 1990s. Those developing nations, including Cambodia, have recognized the right of the child to education on the basis of equal educational opportunity and also taken measures to make primary

education compulsory, free and accessible to all (Article 28 of the CRC). Subscribing nations also pledged at the Conference that all their poor children would have gained access to quality primary education by the turn of the century.

Since the 1990 WCEFA, the international institutions—namely, UN agencies, IOs, and NGOs—have diversified their support programs and activities to facilitate and assist least developed nations to achieve the EFA goal by the year 2000. This world community carries a key responsibility to alleviate the constraints that prevent some countries from achieving the goal of EFA (Windham, 1992).

Nevertheless, at the 2000 World Education Forum (WEF) in Dakar, a large majority of the 1990 WCEFA participants conceded failure—despite the world illiterate population declined from over 900 million in 1990 to less than 800 million; and more children than ever having gained access to primary education. The WEF participants eventually vowed to redouble efforts to achieve basic education for all by the year 2015.

In view of that, this “simple yet profound goal” which Sperling (2001:p.7) describes as adding to the existing “crowded graveyard of overly ambitious developmental goals”. He suggests

The most likely way to achieve universal education by 2015 is through a clear framework for collective action that outlines appropriate and realistic roles and responsibilities for donor countries, recipient countries and multilateral institutions. Such a global alliance on basic education could raise resources for poor countries with good education plans by combining multi-lateral, bilateral, and NGO assistance into a pooled lending structure... (p.9)

Sperling's suggestion is on a par with what the interviewed Cambodia's education officials mentioned as barriers in implementing basic education in Cambodia for the lack of resources and collaborative work plans.

External Responses and Contributions

It is simply understood that when a country is not able to perform its tasks effectively it asks for outside assistance or intervention. The external assistance in this context refers to bilateral and multi-lateral aid and loans excluding local public or private assistance. Bray (1995) in his comparative study on the total costs of schooling in nine countries in East Asia, Cambodia happened to be the highest among the East Asian nations that households and communities contribute financially in various kinds to public primary education in a proportion of almost 80 percent. This causes a burden on the household budgets and increasing educational disparities among the socioeconomic groups and regional areas of Cambodia.

Bray (1998) continued to explain that the government inputs were in the form of teachers. This expenditure was not much since their salaries were as low as an average of US\$25. Cambodia spent less than one percent of its gross domestic product on education (see table 2).

Most external aid agencies including multilateral and bilateral donors came to Cambodia in the mid-1990s. Their budget accounted for 58 percent of the annual expenditure for education in Cambodia while the government could afford only 42 percent between 1994 and 1999 (see table 1). According to the MoEYS officials, 75 percent of the budgets were channeled to basic education development that the government named it top priority. In the early 2000s, in order for facilitating the quality improvement in basic education, the government with its developmental partners adopted the Priority Action Plan to increase the number of teaching hours and resources at school levels; and decentralizing the educational management and planning.

The figures, received from the Program Management and Monitoring Unit of MoEYS, revealed that an amount of around US\$158 million has been spending on basic education improvement mainly functioning from the late 1990s to 2005. The figures show that UNICEF and ADB tend to cover most of the programs.

Table 1. Annual education sector spending (budgets in US\$)

Fiscal year	The government	Development partners	Total expenditures
1994	25,500,000	29,175,546	54,675,546
1995	32,000,000	35,320,553	67,320,553
1996	35,750,000	43,590,227	79,340,227
1997	25,181,000	53,206,829	78,387,829
1998	25,711,000	48,385,805	74,096,805
1999	32,825,000	34,120,714	66,945,714
Grand total	176,967,000	243,799,673	420,766,673

Source: MoEYS (1999): www.moeys.gov.kh

Their Collaboration with the Government

International aid agencies came in a large number to Cambodia in the mid 1990s in response to the needs for general reforms. For education sector, in particular, these bodies channel funding and programs to support Cambodia in achieving its goal of EFA. The Cambodian government called these bodies 'developmental partners' composed of UN organizations, multilateral donors, bilateral donors and NGOs (MoEYS, 1999).

The UN organizations include UNICEF, UNESCO, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UNDP (United Nations Development Program, and ILO (International Labor Organization). Their main activities have been to providing technical assistance, running support projects, building capacity of the government staff, facilitating educational management information, and assisting educational system reforms. Multilateral donors are ADB (Asian Development Bank), EU (European Union) and the World Bank. Their main activities take account of working either closely with the central government, the UN organizations and NGOs-working at grassroots level.

Basic Educational Achievement

Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the then State of Cambodia, in his key note address at the 1991 EFA national conference, stated Cambodia's 'basic education' composed of five years of primary education or/and completing adult-literacy programs with the principal aim to enhance the achievement of literacy and numeracy. Since the education system reformed

from 5+3+3 to 6+3+3 systems and following the spirit of the new constitution, 'basic education' was subsequently extended in 1996 to cover nine years of formal schooling comprised of both primary and lower secondary education. The major aims of this new concept are at achieving 'functional literacy', constructing foundation for vocational and technical trainings, and for higher learning (MoEYS, 1999: p.14). The completion of basic education is a foundation upon which opportunities for further learning and employment are built.

Policy statements provide a framework for strategic planning. They are subject to change periodically when socioeconomic and political conditions change. Since the nation-wide educational statistic and planning mechanism was established in 1996, MoEYS has systematically formulated education policies and targets in an attempt to achieve the goal of EFA and respond to the 1993 Constitution which states in Article 68 that "the state shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens—the citizens shall receive education for at least nine years". Its emphasis was put on universalizing 9 years of basic education and developing opportunities for functional literacy, modernizing educational system, and improving the quality of education through a series of reform.

Policymaking and strategic planning in early 1990s had been influenced by several significant and interrelated events such as sequential national conferences on EFA and the signing of Peace Accords in Paris by Cambodia's warring factions, the formation of the International Committee on the Reconstruction of Cambodia, the newly adopted Constitution and various national education seminars (Ayres, 1999).

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Although the policies were well designed, the lack of high-quality operating cost assessments that what some experts pronounce as "excessively ambitious policies" remain issues to be addressed. Strategic plans require sufficient budget and staffing management. The current National EFA Coordinator identifies three main factors why basic education targets were not attainable: for the absence of mechanisms; insufficient funding to put plans in actions; and on-going civil war causing social insecurity especially in remote areas. Observing the table below to understand what has been planned to

achieve and what have been achieved.

Statically explained that concerted efforts of Cambodia and its development partners were successful in enhancing primary education opportunities to all children nationwide through the gross primary enrolment ratio by the academic year 1999-00. However, dropping out of school in primary education level of around 14 percent and low enrolment in lower secondary education are a primary concern. This explains that Cambodia failed to achieve its nine years of basic education for all.

Table 2. Basic Education Indicators in Cambodia

Academic Year	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00
<u>Expanded Access and Coverage:</u>				
Gross admission rate	113	97.9	103.3	123.6
Gross primary education enrolment ratio	94.5	88.3	89.7	100.3
Net primary education enrolment ratio	84.7	77.8	78.3	85.5
Gross lower secondary education enrolment ratio	30.5	23.7	23.0	22.9
Net lower secondary education enrolment ratio	23.2	16.3	14.2	14.4
Girls' gross enrolment ratio in primary education	86.4	81.2	83.9	93.3
Girls' gross enrolment ratio in lower secondary education	22.7	16.8	16.1	16.4
<u>Quality Improvement:</u>				
Literacy rate (15 years old and over)	65.9*	67.3	68.7*	
Repetition rate in primary education	27	26.3	24.6	22.3
Transition rate from primary to lower secondary education	56.3	71.9	74.3	76.7
Transition rate from lower to upper secondary education	33.3	38.8	39.4	56.3
<u>Funding:</u>				
Percentage of national budget for education	8.1	10.3	8.3	10
Education expenditure of gross domestic product	1%	0.89%	0.94%	

Sources: EMIS Center, Department of Planning, Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, Cambodia. *Ministry of Planning: 1996 Socioeconomic Survey & 1998 National Census

There has been gradually increasing funding from the government and the external agencies to improve the accessibility and quality. The above table shows slightly improved adult literacy rate and transition rate from one educational level to another. These may be resulted from the improved socio-economic sphere of the people gross domestic per capita to almost US\$300 in the late 1990s and more schools had been built in rural areas.

In view of its tragic past civil strife, Cambodia has made progress in expanding schooling opportunities especially at universalizing primary

education. Mehrotra (1998) discovered that successful basic education policies and implementations in high achieving countries counted on State-support basic social services. Cambodia with poor social service system particularly in rural areas, socioeconomic disparities determined the educational opportunity. In terms of transition rates to lower secondary education, gender equity, and schooling facilities, the socioeconomic ally advanced households are enjoying schooling accessibility of higher quality than the disadvantaged. Consequently, this imbalance of provisions in basic education indicates insufficient

State investment for enhancing equal educational opportunity.

Conclusion

Post-conflict Cambodia relies on external aid from donor countries and world organizations to help rebuild its overall socioeconomic structures. External assistance accounts for almost fifty percent of the country's expenditure on educational development. Renou, Matthews, and Clement (1999) finds most of the government budget for education of around ninety percent spent on its educational staff's salaries and less than five percent went to the schools in the late 1990s. The government spends almost nothing to equitable expansion and education quality improvement and this act will never lead Cambodia to achieve EFA goal or to implement its set policies with the absence of external interventions.

During the 1990s, the government's development partners spent almost 60 percents to improving quality of education in Cambodia with the special emphasis on basic education. However, some government officials and some scholars found a large amount of the external assistance had been flowing to salaries of the foreign consultants or technical assistants. Adams (2002) raised a concern about the high salaries of the consultants of the external agencies that had consumed over half of the development budgets. He further criticized some bilateral donors for almost half of their aid to Cambodia as salaries for their own citizens.

However, shared efforts between the government and external bodies have brought Cambodia close to achieve primary education for all Cambodian citizens. The efforts have put most of the government's priority programs in action since Cambodia improved its resources and renewed its willpower with better mechanism in the early 2000s. Education budgets have been increased to almost 16 percents for 2001 and up to 18 percent for 2002. Seeing better initiations from the government, the loan and donor agencies such as ADB and the World Bank have also increased their shares in order to help Cambodia achieve its basic education for all as planned by 2015.

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