

Enhancing Opportunities for Basic Education for All in Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper examines the current Cambodia's educational policies, basic education commitment, and performance. The article also attempts to investigate educational improvement measures based on fieldwork observation and interview with senior government officials, international consultants, and provincial education directors, conducted in November 2003. The author observes that increasing numbers of participation in the six-year primary education level were remarkable during the late 1990s, however, lingering low retention rates within the constitutionally defined nine-year basic education level is a growing concern among stakeholders over insufficient number of trained teachers and higher-grade schools, educational contents, limited learning and teaching materials, and a lack of intervention policy from the central administration.

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

Introduction

The central part of this paper was presented at 48th Annual Conference of the Comparative and International Education Society, on March 9-12, 2004, in Salt Lake City, Utah. The primary aim of this paper is to describe and analyze Cambodia's recent efforts to enhancing opportunities for equitable access to basic education. It also attempts to disentangle the relationships between qualitative improvement and quantitative expansion which has been posited among developing Asian countries.

The term 'basic education' is used in its broad sense to aim at meeting basic learning needs, which is composed of literacy, oral presentation, numeracy, problem-solving, and knowledge, as well as the skills, values, and attitudes required individual to develop and participate in their respective growing society (UNESCO, 1998). It is generally agreed among the 1990 Jomtien World Conference participants that basic education covers early childhood education, primary

education, non-formal education and it may reach to lower secondary or upper secondary or even higher depending upon the socioeconomic demands and policies of the individual state or society. The most important principle of Education for All is to include the disadvantaged children in getting at least the basics of education (Buchert, 1995; Mehrotra, 1998).

The current general understanding and definition of basic education in Cambodia as well as in some other Asian countries is measured as nine years of schooling in the formal system as the basic level of education. Thus, basic education in this paper refers to primary and lower secondary education. Completion of basic education of good quality will enable individuals to comprehend and compose basic texts, understand and work with numbers, and apply essential life skills (MoEYS, 1999).

Developing countries, including Cambodia, currently view education as a means to national development and improvement of their peoples' socioeconomic status. The existing area of immense

concern in education is quality. The concern about the education system fails to offer basic competency and literacy and numeracy skills at a minimally acceptable standard - this requires timely interventions from the government and external agencies. Achieving universal quality basic education involves community participation, well-made policies, willpower, and sufficient funds (Dy, 2003; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003).

Several studies on basic schooling in Cambodia (namely, Dy, 2001; MoEYS, 1999) highlight one of the main reasons for dropping out of school is that the local communities, especially parents, consider the schooling system fails to meet their expectations and actual needs in their respective locality. This phenomena is consistent with what the Asian Development Bank (1996, p.7) warned that "expanding quantity should be coupled with strengthening the quality of the schooling provided, otherwise, without carefully planned programs, quantitative gains could result in qualitative losses".

Global Challenges to Enhance Education for All

The targets set by a great number of world education leaders at the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) that all poor children would have access to quality primary education within a decade, were not met. Therefore, at the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum, they reasserted their commitment to providing quality basic education for all by 2015. Their approach of improved quality would draw more schooling participation is stimulated by a growing body of research showing that investment in education - particularly for girls - in the world's least-developed nations produces impressive health benefits and high economic returns (Buchert, 2002; Chapman, 2001; Sperling, 2001).

In addition, Cummings (2004, p.14) claims that "education contributes to economic and political development, and development contributes to education - hence there are multiple benefits from educational improvement". Developing countries currently recognize education as a means to national development and poverty reduction. The education systems, therefore, is perceived to be adopted for the benefits of both national goals and individual needs.

The existing area of immense concern in education is how best to provide relevant basic education of good quality for all (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003).

Serious consideration over the issues of quality and relevance has mounted among the world education policymakers. Victor Ordonez, Director of the UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, commented at the 2000 Asia Pacific Conference on EFA Assessment that:

Paying attention to quality enhances quantity; providing trained and motivated teachers, adequate learning materials, and most of all curricular content that meets the needs and aspirations of the local communities is the best way to guarantee expanded and sustained school attendance. (UNESCO, 2001, p.1)

Several scholars (Ball, 1998; Chapman & Adams, 2002, Husen & Postlethwaite, 1994, Power, 2000; Ruperez, 2003; Sanderson, 2004; Sperling, 2001; Tooley, 2000) also raise considerable concern over the capabilities of educational systems and central policies in addressing the emerging issues and actual needs of 'quality' workforce in this twenty-first century. Capable manpower enables smooth developmental process stemming from high quality education provision. The state determines equitable access to quality schooling and assures that the parent's wealth or social standing does not negatively influence the child's educational opportunity (Tooley, 2000).

Basic Schooling in Cambodia: Historical Perspectives

Recent history of Cambodia has been clouded with more than its fair share of tragedy such as civil conflicts, killing fields, remaining millions of landmines, and a vast poverty among its over 12 million population. Cambodia, which was known after gaining independence from France in 1953, as one of the most prosperous states in Southeast Asia during the 1950s and 1960s - was sucked into the Vietnam War during the first half of the 1970s and fallen into a modern socio-cultural eradication during the second half of the 1970s. A struggling for improving of

traditional culture, socioeconomics, and education was done during the 1980s with support of the socialist-bloc nations but neglected by the liberal-bloc nations (Chandler, 1991; Dunnett, 1993).

During the 1950s and 1960s, the government's expenditures rose to roughly twenty percent on education sector in efforts to modernizing education system. The efforts made an increasing numbers of schools, teacher-training programs, and flourishing higher educational institutions in the 1960s. However, the innovative teaching method and curriculum reforms were slowly processed. Several scholars (such as Ayres, 2000; Duggan, 1996) interpreted the quality of education (provided by the Sihanouk regime of the 1960s) was relatively poor; and many high school or university graduates faced difficulty in finding employment.

Though priority was shifted to expand opportunities for secondary and higher education in the 1960s, a failing to balance its weight on other service and economic sectors caused negative impact on formal schooling. The regime of the early 1970s reviewed the policy of the 1960s and drafted plans for universalize primary education with more emphasis on Khmer language and culture, but the turmoil during that time, none of the plans was implemented. Besides, the regime even failed to maintain the previous régime's achievements.

Cambodia was still at war when it participated in the 1990 WCEFA. 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 the civil war to an end in Cambodia. Since then Cambodia was open to the world and called for help. The ground breaking led to a general election organized and supervised by the United Nations in 1993 to establish a democratic government. Co-premiership system was adapted to secure peace and stability in Cambodia that required the winning parties to share executive power in the government. The power sharing method went shaky and broke out in July 1997, a year before the second term of the general election.

After over two decades of conflicts and international isolation, this proud people with a difficult history regained exposure to the international community and external assistance for their country

rehabilitation and development in various social, economic, and educational support programs from UN agencies, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations during its struggling period of the 1990s. This external assistance was indispensable for this one of the poorest of the world's poor nations. To date, the contemporary Cambodia is still short of human resources to play in its developmental roles in the era of globalization. This will demand high quality in its education, structural and economic reforms, and political will (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003).

Cambodia declared its end of civil war in 1998, the moment that the Khmer Rouge leadership and mechanisms were destroyed; and their military forces were integrated into the Royal Government. Freedom of traveling and safety were better enhanced nationwide. The security threat in the northwestern provinces gradually disappeared. Under the pressure of the donor countries and international community, the government's expenditures on national defense and security were reduced and added to social welfare including education and public health sectors. The government major policies have been prioritized in integrating Cambodia into the world community and market-economy toward poverty reduction among a majority of the population.

The changing concepts of basic education from basic literacy to primary education, to primary plus lower secondary education in the mid 1990s saw the expansion of learning opportunities for better lifestyle and socioeconomic amelioration in contemporary Cambodia. The experiments of the 1950s and 1960s were largely unsuccessful because modern education contents and outcomes could not meet the actual need of the society at that time. In other words, many Cambodians feared that the modernity would lead to the demise of their traditional culture inherited from their proud Angkorian ancestors (Dy, 2004). However, present-day Cambodians consider reforms in education during the 1990s as positive measures towards socioeconomic development and improving freedom of lives.

The Barriers to Basic Education Completion

The socioeconomic condition and social services in Cambodia are considerably deprived. Estimated 36 percent of the twelve-million population live below the poverty line making less than one US dollar a day. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened since the introduction of free-market economy and the inflow of aid to Cambodia during the early 1990s. Cambodia is less affected with natural disasters but illegal logging and poor management of natural resources in recent years caused flooding and drought in which negatively affected the poor people's economy in rural areas. The amount of fish in the Tonle Sap Great Lake and the Mekong River has terribly receded. A number of landless people have increased. People migrate from the country to the city for better opportunity as well as the number of the poor cross the borders to seek employment in neighboring countries surprisingly elevated.

It is undeniable that the family and school factors are very much interrelated and determine opportunities for learning outcomes. The family facilitates and encourages the children to go to school on the basis of the school can provide what they expect to receive from school such as of good knowledge relevant to their real needs for living in their communities and further opportunities for better living. How much schooling should be enough for their children in the rural area and why they have to send their children to school are still questioning in their mind. Many families in the locations of no secondary schools or the schools are too far they eventually say primary education is enough since their children know some basic reading and writing. Being able to read and write is acceptable and satisfied by almost all the rural households. Basic education that the state defines for them more or less is conceptually different from what they define. It may be drawn that nine years of basic education according to them is more appropriate to the better socioeconomic group or the urban and modernized society (Dy, 2004).

Opportunity cost when the children of the working class reach the ages of 13-15 they become economically active and their learning opportunity begins to decline. The ideal of education and

democracy are relatively similar in this context. If the basic social services and schools are not available in the way they could have access to, there is no hope that the households and communities appreciate schooling or even of good quality on offer. These interrelated factors may influence each other and this includes the opportunity for schooling of the child.

The barriers to opportunities are wide-ranging poverty. This does not only apply to the parental poverty but also the local community as a whole. The shortage of school, poor social services and learning facilities are considerably crippling the opportunities for basic education. Nine years of basic schooling can only be smoothly implemented as long as the government itself takes more responsibility to ensure that schools are free, accessible and at good quality. Compulsory education should be taken into consideration if not possible for the nine years of basic education; the 6 years of primary education should be worth introducing shortly. When the social services or socioeconomic unit are progressing, the benefits of schooling can be more visible and demanding for educated labor forces may be escalated (Dy, 2003; Dy & Ninomiya, 2003).

Children who live far away from school with the complete range of grades find it difficult to continue learning and many inevitably become dropouts (Dy, 2001). A senior education official expressed a concern in an interview that:

We don't have enough schools for basic education that is why we didn't have a hundred percent enrolment rate. Many of the teachers in rural areas are poorly trained and their educational background mainly just finished primary education in the 1960s...many school-aged children failed to enroll even though the schooling is free.

The Current Policies for Basic Education Improvement

Almost all the senior education administrators I interviewed, view quality of current basic education as poor in terms of teaching, insufficient learning materials and extrinsic motivations of students and teachers with regard to school and classroom conditions. Over eighty percent of schools are in rural

areas. Well-qualified teachers are unwilling to work in rural areas or are not well supported. Most quality teachers are found in urban areas rather than the rural ones. Their pitiable salaries drive them to have one or more part-time jobs. Inevitably, they have limited time for planning their lessons. Thus, even well trained teachers are poorly motivated to their teaching performance.

Collected documents indicated that the government investment in education has significantly increased its budget from 14 percent in 2000 to around 18 percent in 2002 and 2003. This national fund increase was in response to the growing numbers of school-age children and additional teacher employments. Approximately 95 percent of the budget goes to salaries of the staff. School conditions are still considerably poor. Presently, a large number of primary schools are disadvantaged and incomplete range of grades; and over 53 percent of primary schools are without latrines and clean water. Still a large number of teachers are not adequately trained (MoEYS, 1999-2003).

Post-conflict Cambodia relies on external aid from donor countries and the world organizations to help rebuild its overall socioeconomic structure. External assistance accounts for almost fifty percent of the country's expenditure on educational development. Renou, Matthews, and Clement (1999) found 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 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 (Dy, 2003).

During the 1990s, the government's development partners spent almost 60 percent 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 their budgets for the development of Cambodia. He further criticized some

bilateral donors for almost half of their aid to Cambodia as salaries for their own citizens.

Basic education faces immense challenges in the coming decade. National Education Indicators 2002-2003 show (1) primary net enrolment ratio is at 90 percent but only 19 percent of the children aged 12-14 enrolled in lower secondary schools; (2) the transition rate from primary to lower secondary levels is 83 percent, however only 59 percent completed lower secondary education; and (3) almost 20 percent of pupils enrolled in their first grade of primary education dropped out of school. It has been observed over the last five years that the repetition rate has been declining in primary education but the dropout rate rose significantly (MoEYS, 2003).

Over 90 percent of schools have received basic education textbooks; and the textbook content is revised every five years. A number of schools are frequently affected by natural disasters like flooding or heavy rain. Many other rural and remote areas are still badly in needs of secondary schools. Instructional hours are still roughly around 500 per annum for the pupils have class only in the morning or afternoon basis. The salaries of schoolteachers and staff are as low as around US 25 dollars. And a large number of teachers are not sufficiently trained with new teaching methodology widely known as learner-center approach.

Regarding the quality of teaching, one of the provincial education directors describes:

If we talk about quality of education in Cambodia, I would say it is low. We don't have enough teachers with well-trained or having high knowledge of the subjects they are supposed to teach. When we recruited teachers several years ago, we took them on an emergency basis and now they remain in the school system. Though some of them have been trained and others are continually trained, their low salaries and poor living conditions have a negative impact on their task performance.

Other provincial directors and the three school principals I interviewed also expressed a concern of teaching quality stemming from the poor salaries and fading professionalism of the teachers.

“Quality of learning and teaching is in the hands of the school principal and his leadership,” stated the senior government officials and a provincial education leader - “that is why, we have conducted a series of training for them.” On the other hand, the foreign education consultants who have been working closely with the senior education officials observed that the quality of education in Cambodia counts on the teaching content, improved school environment, and the characteristics, qualifications, and living condition of teachers.

Level of training that the teachers receive does not matter much but their motivation does affect or enhance the quality of learning. A government’s three-year quality improvement project, which covers 23 percent of the total primary school population, has been implemented in three provinces with special focus on producing and enhancing the use of teaching and learning materials, building friendly school environment, and providing in-service training for teachers. The project also trained school principals and administrators to be able to plan their school budgets and strengthen management.

What was lacking such as mechanisms and participations in basic education system have been reinforced in the EFA plan for 2001-2005. The basic concept and mechanisms has taken roots into district and commune levels over the last few years. One of the provincial education directors in a remote province conceded lack of knowledge of the government EFA policies made during the 1990s as noted:

EFA conceptual framework and universal basic education target came to my clear understanding only over the last few years, I heard some people at the central level mentioned that in our annual meetings but I was afraid to ask for further explanations. What should I say about quality of basic education in my province? A majority of primary schools here have placed over 50 pupils a class since we lack classrooms and teachers; many of the teachers are not well trained; and they are poorly motivated since their salaries are not decent and frequently overdue.

Not only teachers but also the school principals and district education officers and even provincial

education leaders have limited understanding of the central guidelines of policies and strategies for basic education quality improvement. It has been observed that a series of training on capacity building for administrative staff including school principals was not so effective for the dramatic changes in political and social environment.

Conclusion

At the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, 180 countries committed themselves to a simple yet profound goal: providing quality education for all the world’s children by 2015. The key objective of the Dakar forum was to assess the steps taken since the 1990 Jomtien WCEFA, when most of the same participants had pledged that all poor children would have access to quality primary education within a decade. The 2000 Dakar framework gave an innovative momentum to the promotion of quality in education based on the consensus that expanding access to education would have a beneficial impact on individuals and on society only if the education is of good quality (Sperling, 2001; UNESCO, 2002).

Concerning the Dakar EFA framework, Cambodia made a series of effort to restructuring educational system and shaping its educational policy to keep abreast with the regional movement. The efforts to improve equable access coupling with enhancing basic education quality for all have been on top agenda of executive discussion but never have been fully implemented.

Senior government officials pointed that the major achievements that Cambodia has made were in having completed EFA policy formulation and establishment of a nine-year basic education system with strategic plans and strategies toward achieving the goal of basic education for all. The government admitted failure to universalizing basic education and the issue of equitable access and quality of basic education are still far from achieving the goals.

Over the last few years, many of the Cambodian education officials have gained a perception that effective basic education requires literacy and life skills, prevocational training and building a foundation for further learning opportunity. They came up with strategies toward achieving the EFA goals by 2015 by

increasing government funding to enhancing efficiency and quality school improvement. However, it is still uncertain whether Cambodia is on quantitative expansion or qualitative improvement track. Given that the economy and technology grows and the market demands for educated and capable workforce that quality education must be strengthened accordingly. In coping up with the increasing dropout rates and crisis in quality, the basic schooling system should be accompanied by the quantitative expansion of secondary education and qualitative improvement of primary education.

However, shared efforts between the government and external bodies have brought Cambodia close to achieve primary education for all. The efforts have put most of the government's priority action programs in action since Cambodia improved its resources and renewed its willpower with better mechanism. 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 Asian Development Bank 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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