

Chapter 8

Basic Education in Cambodia: Quality and Equity

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8.1 Introduction

Not only is formal education a determinant of an individual's opportunities in the future, but basic education is also a human right. Education is an important requisite for the accumulation of "human capabilities" which are necessary for the individual to reflect, make choices, and participate and live a better life in society (Sen 1999). Given the overriding importance of education and particularly basic education, no country is opposed to the idea of Education for All (EFA). The challenge is how to reach the stage where everyone has achieved at least a quality basic education necessary for their function in society. Many countries that have endorsed the EFA as their education goals have introduced many education reforms to improve both access to, and quality of, education. This chapter seeks to illustrate the challenge in achieving equity and quality of basic education using Cambodia as a case study. It reveals that to achieve equity and quality of education, mere resource provision is not sufficient. Achieving equity and quality is a challenging task that requires a careful and well-coordinated policy design and implementation at all levels of education administration. It requires political will on the part of the central government, and the capacity to innovate and implement progressive policy at the local levels.

The chapter begins with a discussion on what has dominated thinking in education development. It then proceeds to illustrate the case of Cambodia by first reviewing the policy objectives and agenda which have been put forward for implementation with a great sense of optimism. Next, it highlights the impact of the policy reform on the primary education sector, revealing that while the reform was successful at improving enrollment rates in some provinces, it generally was not successful at raising the quality of primary education. The chapter then closely examines why quality of education is difficult to achieve by this large-scale reform. It ends with the conclusions and some policy recommendations for policy-makers to consider when designing and implementing education reform.

8.2 The Usual Thinking

For decades, numerous researches have been conducted and recommendations have been given as to what ensures the achievement of EFA. It is the dominant thinking that resource input into the education sector is the surest way to improve the outcomes of education either in terms of enrollments or achievement. Resources are necessary for the education sector to function. The poor conditions of schools and classrooms in developing countries are often blamed for the lack of access to schools and for the low achievements among students. Scholars and academia analyzing the implementation of education policy in developing countries often suggest the provision of adequate resource to the education sector is one of the most important measures in achieving the success of education policy (London 1993). Many, therefore, believe that even the poorest nations in the world could achieve universal primary education if the distribution of education resource prioritizes primary education (Colclough and Al-Samarrai 2000).

Emphasis on resource increase to the education sector has intensified. This is evident in the many discussions in global forums such as the World Conference on EFA in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990, the World Education Forum on EFA in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, and other important world summits. For example, the World Declaration on EFA, which is the product of the 1990 EFA Conference, signifies that to achieve the expanded vision of basic education, the “increased international funding is needed” (UNESCO 1990: 17). Donor community needs to top up an extra funding of around US\$1.0–1.3 billion every year to educational assistance (Haddad 1990). The same discussion and commitment on the increase of international financial assistance to the education sector was reiterated in EFA World Forum in 2000.

The international community acknowledges that many countries currently lack the resources to achieve education for all within an acceptable time-frame. New financial resources, preferably in the form of grants and concessional assistance, must therefore be mobilized by bilateral and multilateral funding agencies, including the World Bank and regional development banks, and the private sector. We affirm that no countries seriously committed to education for all will be thwarted in their achievement of this goal by a lack of resources. (UNESCO 2000: 9)

Moreover, in 2002 the World Bank initiated the EFA-Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI)¹ to reaffirm its commitment to resource increase for the education sector. Many world summits and gatherings have intensified the focus on increasing financial

¹EFA-FTI is a framework for funding introduced by the World Bank in its efforts to ensure that countries that have shown strong commitment to the achievement of EFA will not fail because of the lack of sufficient funds. To prove their commitment, one concrete criterion is the development of countries' PRSP, which among other development goals, countries emphasize in their plan to achieve EFA. For more information on EFA-FTI, see <<http://www.fasttrackinitiative.org/content.asp?ContentID=958>>.

assistance to developing countries in their endeavors for the achievement of EFA.² The assumptions behind this worldwide emphasis is that with more resources, schools and the education sector in developing countries will improve their education outcomes and the goals of EFA will be attained. If resources are all schools need to improve education outcomes, the more schools receive the increase in resource inputs, the more they should succeed in improving education outcomes.

Nonetheless, what happened in the education sectors of many developing countries indicates that improving schools and education systems is a much more complex task than merely increasing resource inputs. There is a growing realization that policy to encourage the effective and efficient use of resources is needed. To do so, some structural changes are needed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the system. These structural changes include the decentralization of decision-making power to local levels, the privatization of education services, and other reform programs to improve education outcomes. The past decades have thus witnessed a proliferation of education reform initiatives all over the world.

Education reforms, however, are not always successful. While some reforms have achieved a considerable degree of improvement to the system, others have brought little or no change to the system, and some other reforms have instead created more problems for the system than they have solved (Napier 2005).³ At the same time, there has been a plethora of theories to conceptualize the realities of education reform. When it comes to the question of what makes education policy successful or not so successful, most discussions tend to concentrate on the policy-design process and the policy content in order to single out the characteristics of good/bad education policy. In fact, the applicability and viability of reform ideas are tested when they are translated into practice. An education policy can be mediated, modified, or implemented with great diversity and variable degrees of success at local levels, or it may even be thwarted altogether by the lack of implementation (Psacharopoulos 1989). It is apparent that the success or failure of any education policy lies largely in its implementation (Nieuwenhuis 1997).

Almost always, education policy reforms require central, mid-level, and local education bureaucrats to take on more and/or new responsibilities (Grindle 2004). Moreover, the stake is high as education reform “requires long chains of implementation

²These gatherings include G8 summits where world leaders agreed to increase financial support for FTI to assist countries with serious commitment to EFA, the International Conference on Financing for Development (Monterrey, Mexico, March 18–22, 2002) and the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa, August 26–September 4, 2002) which has bolstered the world commitment to development goals including education. See Kitamura (2005) for further elaboration on EFA and FTI movement.

³Examples of reform that creates problems include those education policies which have been adopted under the structural adjustment policy. Namely, these are privatization of education services and the introduction of user charge which have created a plethora of problems of discrimination and disparities among different groups of population and that have further marginalized children of the poor. For the review of these examples, see Arnove (1997), Buchmann (1996), Cuellar-Marchelli (2003), and Frances (2002, 2005).

activities and decisions” that pass through multiple layers of implementers because the ultimate entities that need to translate policy into actions and into education outcomes are at the school and classroom levels (Grindle 2004: 7). The education reform policy therefore risks falling victim of indolence, political contention, mistaken judgment, and logistical problems at the implementation stage. The destiny of the reform after it is adopted then lies in the hands of the implementers, who are education officials at all levels in the central ministry of education and in regional and district offices, the school principals, teachers, the community, and parents.

Education systems in developing countries that face competing demands for resources from other sectors cannot afford to waste resource on ineffective and inefficient reform implementation. Nonetheless, there has been a paucity of study on the implementation of education reforms in developing countries. A review of studies on education reform in 19 developing countries by Verspoor (1992) has indicated “an almost universal neglect of implementation issues” and for many policymakers, implementation has only been taken as peripheral to policy design (p. 237). Thus, instead of carefully planning out a sound implementation strategy, policymakers “tend to assume that decisions to bring about change will automatically result in changed policy or institutional behavior” (Grindle and Thomas 1991: 121). The case of Cambodia will manifest whether new policy has achieved any changes in behavior and practices particularly at the local levels that lead to better education outcomes.

8.3 The Case of Cambodia

Cambodia introduced nationwide education reform in 2001. The case of Cambodia illustrates the complexity of the work in the education sector and why education reform although comprehensive and altruistic in nature, fails to achieve the set goals. The case of Cambodia shows that resources are important for some but not all. It works in some settings but it does not work in others. Resources are important for the early stage of development; however, resources are not an effective measure once enrollment rate has risen to a certain level. Very soon, other issues arise. If resources are to be used effectively to improve the education outcomes, local individual and institutional capacity needs to be in place. Local implementers such as local education officers, school principals, teachers, and parents need to be involved in the reform process from the very beginning.

8.4 Research Method

Information obtained for this chapter was gathered by the author between 2005 and 2006 in Cambodia. To obtain detailed information on implementation practices at school level, the study focused on two districts in one province – Pursat – located on

the northeastern part of Cambodia. Pursat was selected for its typical characteristics which generally reflect Cambodia as a whole. In Pursat province, the observation focused on two districts where eight schools⁴ were observed up close. Efforts were made to select districts and schools that manifest similarities and differences in ways that offer insights on the district- and school-level practices in implementing the reform agenda.

Two rounds of field research were conducted for a total period of 12 weeks. First, from March 7 to April 15, 2005, education officers were interviewed at all levels including the officers in the Department of Planning of the Ministry of Education Youth, and Sports (MoEYS), which is in charge of overseeing the overall policy reform implementation. In this first round of field research, the author tried to capture the overall issues and challenges of the reform program. The field research in Pursat Provincial Office of Education (POE), District Offices of Education (DOEs) of Pursat province supplemented the author's comprehension of the reform issues at the national level. Two DOEs of districts in Pursat, i.e., Kondieng district and Phnom Kravanh district, were chosen for in-depth observation. Interviews and discussions in the two DOEs concentrated on their activities in implementing the policy agenda, the history and working structure of DOEs, and the relationships and the services that DOEs provide to schools.

In the second round, from November 8 to December 15, 2005, the author interviewed officers of Kondieng and Phnom Kravanh DOEs and collected qualitative data on four primary schools from each of the two districts. School-level qualitative data collection included school and classroom observations, interviews, and formal and informal discussions with teachers, school principals, Parent-Teacher Association/School Support Committee, and parents. Extensive field research concentrated on the process of implementation and different implementation strategies that schools employ to boost the increase of enrollment and the improvement in quality of education.

8.5 Current Education Reform: Agenda and Objectives

Recognizing the deficiencies in the Cambodian education sector, the government piloted priority action program (PAP) in all primary school in 10 provinces in 2000 and adopted the programs nationwide and sectorwide in the academic year of 2001/02. There are 12 PAPs on education reform targeting changes to the whole education sector. The overall goals of the reforms are to improve access, quality, and efficiency of the education sector. Specific to primary education, the reform targets primary net enrollment rates of 95%, gender parity, and 90% of grade-to-grade survival rate (SVR) by 2005.

⁴All schools are coded as School A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. School A, B, C, and D are in Kondieng district while School E, F, G, and H are in Phnom Kravanh district.

Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2001–2005 and the Education Sector Support Programs (ESSPs) of various years from 2001 to 2005 are the milestone documents of reform policy (MoEYS 2001a, b, 2002a, b). The ESP lays out the overall policy objectives and strategies, and the ESSPs detail 12 PAPs and present a budget plan for each PAP for annual implementation. Directly relevant to the improvement in access, efficiency, and quality of basic education are the PAP1 and PAP2 summarized below.

1. *PAP1: Education Service Efficiency and Performance* This program aims to enhance efficiency of education service through the efficient utilization of education resources, mainly teachers. Main strategies include the deployment of nonteaching staff to teach in classrooms, transfer of teachers from schools with surplus of teachers to those with deficit of teachers, and provision of incentives to school principals and teachers who show improvement in their work. PAP 1 also includes the institutionalization of regular in-service teacher training in all schools across the country.
2. *PAP2: Primary Education Quality and Efficiency* This program encompasses two major program strategies, i.e., the abolition of school fees and provision of operational budget to all primary schools. As earlier described, Cambodian households bear the substantial cost of sending children to primary schools. This high cost has been a burden on poor parents and has prevented them from sending their children to schools and keeping them there long enough to complete primary cycle. To directly mediate the high household cost, the government abolished the start-of-school-year fees and provided schools with school operational fund. Cambodian schools nationwide, for the first time, receive school operating budget from the central government. Each school is to receive an amount of 500,000 riels (US\$125) and 6,000 riels (US\$1.5) for every student enrolled per year.

8.6 Impact of the Reform on Access

The Education Management Information System (EMIS) is an important database that can trace growth in the education sector. An examination on the basic statistics of primary education sector since the academic year of 1996/97, a few years before the reform program was introduced, shows that overall, Cambodian primary education sector shows substantial improvement in access rate. There has been a surge in enrollment rate, particularly in the first few years of education reform. In absolute terms, the number of primary school pupils rose from 2.2 million to 2.7 million in a matter of 2 years from 1999/2000 to 2001/02 and the number remains stable at 2.7 million pupils since then. It is also observed that the enrollment growth is greater in rural than urban areas and greatest in remote areas where number of pupils almost triples. The growth in number of girls enrolled in schools is also greater as compared to that of boys, raising male to female ratio in primary enrollment from 0.84 in 1999/2000 to 0.89 in 2004/05. The total primary gross enrollment rate

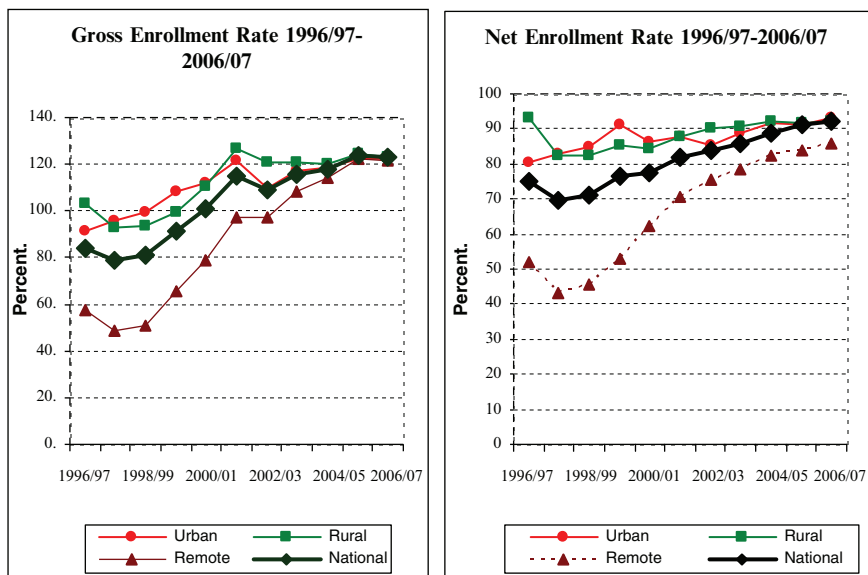


Fig. 8.1 Growth in gross and net enrollment rates between 1996/97 and 2006/07 (EMIS, 1996/97–2006/07)

(GER) has grown from about 90% in the pre-reform period to well above 100% when the reform was introduced in 2001/02. The rate continues to stay well above 100%. Similarly, net enrollment rate (NER) has grown from 85.5% to 91.9% in a very short period of time but remains at about 90% since then (See Fig. 8.1). The growth in access as indicated in both gross and net enrollment rates are significantly remarkable in the previously disadvantaged provinces such as Koh Kong, Rottanak Kiri, and Mondul Kiri where access rates were very low before the reform was introduced. Cambodian reform has thus achieved noticeable success in expanding access to education for the earlier marginalized children such as girls and those in rural and remote areas.

8.7 Impact of the Reform on Quality of Education

Getting children to enroll does not mean regular attendance; regular attendance does not mean learning; and even learning does not mean children receiving quality education necessary for effective functioning in the society. While it is obvious that access to education has expanded to reach many children, disappointingly, if SVR is taken as a proxy, quality of primary education in Cambodia has only minimally improved particularly in provinces where access to school was already high well before the reform was introduced.

As indicated in Fig. 8.2, grade 5 SVR has been appallingly low. It was well below 50% during the years before the reform and reached 50% when the reform was introduced. The reform, however, did not alter the status of children progression at any significant rate. After raising the SVR from 48.3% to approximately 55.9% in the first year of reform implementation,⁵ the rate has remained similar for the last 6 years. By 2006/07, the grade 5 SVR in Cambodian primary schools is only 57%, meaning that 43 out of 100 children who enrolled in grade 1 in 2006/07 will drop out of schools before reaching grade 5.

The figure is even more appalling when provincial level performance is examined. Only two thirds of all provinces performed above the national average while the rest performed below average. More importantly, these differences in quality improvement among provinces are not necessarily related to the level of achievement of those provinces prior to the reform. While one would expect provinces that had achieved universal or near universal enrollment to have focused on and achieved improvement in its quality, the reality indicates otherwise. Quite a number of provinces with 100% gross enrollment rates such as Battambang, Kampot, Phnom Penh, and Sihanoukville in 1999/2000 were able to increase their grade 5 SVR only by a very small margin (see Table 8.1). An obvious example is Kampong Speu province, where the enrollment was already near universal (98%) prior to the reform. It has

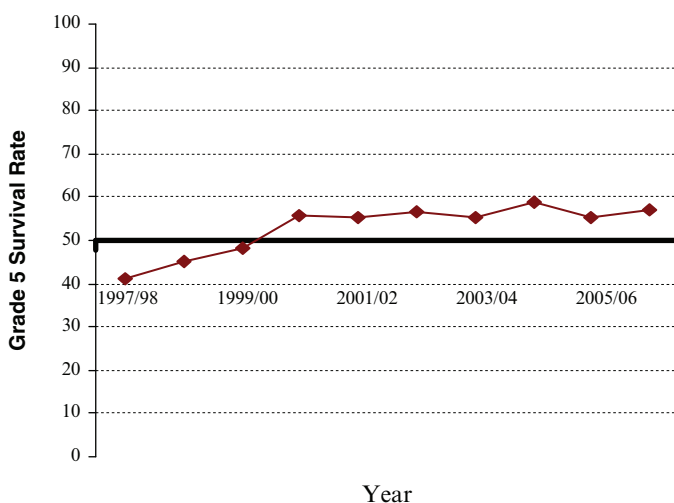


Fig. 8.2 Survival rates between 1996/07 and 2006/07 (EMIS, 1996/97 to 2006/07)

⁵Grade 5 survival rate is calculated based on UNESCO-recommended reconstructed-cohort model. The model computes the student flow rate, taking into account promotion, repetition, and dropout rates of each grade in a given year. Because students are allowed to reenroll in schools in the grade they are eligible to, the promotion rate of the first few years of the reform program tends to be inflated by the number of reenrollees who are counted as promoters. The actual survival rate may even be lower if only promoters from each grade are counted (see UNESCO 1998 for details of the model).

Table 8.1 Changes in gross enrollment rates and grade 5 SVR by province between 1999/2000 and 2006/07 (EMIS, 1999/2000, 2006/07)

	Province	Enrollment			Grade 5 SVR		
		1999/2000	2006/07	Change in GER	1999/2000	2006/07	Change in SVR
1	Banteay Meanchey	102.4	132.0	29.6	43.1	58.1	15.0
2	Battambang	103.0	125.7	22.7	47.6	54.1	6.5
3	Kampong Cham	97.9	117.2	19.3	45.0	55.1	10.1
4	Kampong Chhnang	94.4	124.7	30.3	48.6	67.4	18.8
5	Kampong Speu	98.6	135.4	36.8	42.3	48.2	5.9
6	Kampong Thom	91.2	126.5	35.3	38.9	53.7	14.8
7	Kampot	108.5	120.2	11.7	55.1	61.1	6.0
8	Kandal	109.8	122.1	12.3	61.5	69.9	8.4
9	Kep	93.1	133.0	39.9	62.7	69.9	7.2
10	Koh Kong	65.7	107.4	41.7	38.0	52.4	14.4
11	Kratie	95.5	117.6	22.1	37.1	56.1	19.0
12	Mondulhiri	66.1	121.2	55.1	6.6	37.9	31.3
13	Udornmeanchey	96.9	138.8	41.9	27.1	50.0	22.9
14	Pailin	90.9	130.5	39.5	38.4	45.7	7.3
15	Phnom Penh	111.6	115.8	4.2	70.0	64.8	-5.2
16	Preah Vihear	86.0	134.3	48.4	21.6	42.7	21.1
17	Prey Veng	101.8	120.6	18.7	45.3	55.5	10.2
18	Pursat	90.1	127.4	37.3	40.1	49.9	9.8
19	Ratanakiri	45.8	94.3	48.5	13.7	35.8	22.1
20	Siem Reap	86.3	137.9	51.6	37.0	51.4	14.4
21	Sihanoukville	92.0	141.2	49.2	47.0	46.5	-0.5
22	Steung Treng	84.6	109.3	24.6	23.8	45.3	21.5
23	Svay Rieng	109.3	113.1	3.9	51.5	61.1	9.6
24	Takeo	113.8	114.5	0.7	62.8	74.0	11.2
	Whole Kingdom	100.3	122.7	22.5	48.3	57.0	8.7
	- Urban Area	108.3	122.4	14.1	61.2	62.0	0.8
	- Rural Area	99.7	122.8	23.2	46.4	56.9	10.5
	- Remote Area	65.9	121.9	55.9	14.1	40.9	26.8

improved its SVR for only 5.9%, from 42.3% in 1999/2000 to 48.2% in 2006/07. Over the past 7 years of reform implementation, its SVR remains below 50%, suggesting that every year half of all primary school students in Kompong Speu province terminate their schooling before reaching grade 5. Obviously, the reform has encouraged the enrollments of many children but it has not improved quality of education as expected in the plan. A recent study on student achievement in grade 3 confirms the disappointing state of quality of primary education in Cambodia. Using a sample of 6,814 grade 3 students from 210 schools in Cambodia, the study found that grade 3 students on average could correctly answer only 40% of all questions asked on their reading test. Half of all students received zero points for Khmer writing test. Similarly, in mathematics test the overall average for correct responses was only 37.5% (MoEYS 2006). The findings clearly indicate a very low

quality of primary education in many Cambodian schools and the reform cannot be credited for having achieved much improvement in the quality of primary education in Cambodia. The question to be answered is why Cambodian education system remains very low despite a vigorous and ambitious reform over the past 7 years. Section 8.8 examines why it is difficult for the Cambodian education reform to achieve any improvement in quality of education in primary schools.

8.8 Why Reform Does Not Achieve Quality

The ultimate implementers of Cambodian education reform are those at school level. Depending on the policy agendas, the actors making implementation decisions are school principals, teachers, community and parents, and students. The following subsections discuss the implementation issues of each policy agenda at school level to shed light on what has been implemented and why it is difficult for primary schools in Cambodia to achieve improvement in quality of education.

8.8.1 Abolition of Fees that Raises Enrollment but Neglects Quality

The reform agenda most visible to the general public is the abolition of school fees to increase access rates to primary schools for children, particularly those of poor families.⁶ The primary actors in this policy agenda are schools and parents. Schools must cease collecting registration fees that were once disguised as contributions, and parents in response have to send their children to school. On the part of schools implementing the abolition of school fee had been fast and relatively smooth.⁷ By 2002, all public primary schools in Cambodia had ceased collecting fees from parents at the start of school year. The direct cost of primary education has declined substantially. Bray and colleagues have conducted two studies, in 1998 and 2004, on private expenditure of public education in Cambodia (Bray 1999; Bray and Seng 2005). Comparing the 2004 findings to the 1998 study, Bray and Seng (2005) illustrate that the private cost for sending a child to primary school was reduced by

⁶Abolition of fees also covers various parental contributions previously collected on ad hoc bases for sports, some repairs, and special school events. However, parents continue to pay for school uniforms, notebooks, stationeries, and other learning materials except textbooks.

⁷Only a few schools in the Phnom Penh city resisted the abolition of school fees at first. After some warnings from the ministry of dismissal if they do not observe the policy, the schools agreed to take up funds from the government and ceased charging start-of-school-year fees. Many schools in cities, however, continue to charge other unofficial fees such as private tutoring during official class hours, photocopies, etc.

about 60% across the grades. This has obviously boosted the enrollment and re-enrollments of many children in many primary schools across the country.

However, some problems have arisen out of the implementation of this policy. High dropout rates and the interrelated problem of student absenteeism pose serious setbacks to the system. Schools and teachers blame the education wastages on the more reckless behavior toward education among parents as a consequence of the free education policy, and they encounter greater challenges of managing schools and classrooms.

In almost all schools covered by the study, school principals and teachers noted about the increase in absenteeism as one of the main problems facing schools since the PAP started. The school principal of School B commented that “the current free education policy makes people value education less. Parents do not think hard before asking their children to be absent from school on some busy days or to quit school in the middle of the year. This is just because they know they can always re-enroll their children later.”⁸ Absenteeism is highest during the harvest season of November and December. In a grade 4 class in School D the author observed as many as 18 out of 54 students were absent on one particular day. High absenteeism was attributed to children’s chores inside and outside their homes. School fee abolition obviously has not changed some parents’ attitude toward the education of their children at all.

Why is that so? From the parents’ perspective, despite the reduction in direct cost, opportunity cost of their children’s schooling remains high and this high opportunity cost is exacerbated by the lower expectation these parents have of the education sector.⁹ Parents generally agree that abolition of school fees has encouraged them to send children to schools. However, many parents view the disruption of their children’s education as justifiable. Some plainly said that “not going to school for a few days does not make much a difference. Those neighbor kids who go every day do not seem to be smarter anyway.”¹⁰ This sentiment reflects the parent’s lack of expectation from the schools, as they see the learning and teaching in schools to have low quality and that their children’s time in schools is generally unproductive. Parents ranked student discipline and teacher professionalism as the most important criterion in defining quality of education.¹¹ Parents appreciate schools that foster

⁸ Interview with the principal of School B, November 16, 2005.

⁹ Opportunity cost generally refers to the forgone opportunity to contribute to the economic production of himself/herself or to his/her family when they have to go to schools (Bray, Xiaohao and Ping 2004). A child’s contribution to economic production can also be calculated as the child’s activities in helping parents in household chores or in looking after younger siblings so that the parents can engage in economic production. The opportunity cost of schooling for very young primary school children can also be measured as the opportunity forgone borne by an older child or the adult who have to make arrangement to stay home to prepare meals and to look after the young pupils after school when they otherwise could go off to engage in productive work away from home with the pupils. I found the later kind of opportunity cost as prevailing in Kondieng province where many people are engaged in wet-rice farming along the Tonle Sab bank away from the village.

¹⁰ Discussion at a villager’s house in a village where School D is, November 24, 2005.

¹¹ Discussions with parents in several villages from November 7 to December 13, 2005.

the children's commitment to learning and they believe it is possible only in schools where students are well disciplined and teachers are punctual and attentive to their children's learning. This must be achieved through many fronts including teacher discipline, teacher professionalism, and strict school promotion policies. If parents see education quality in terms of discipline, in their eyes, quality of education has not improved but declined with the reform implementation.¹² Low education quality does not justify the opportunity cost of their children's schooling.

8.8.2 Lack of Teacher Involvement

Undeniably, education reform is credited with the building of important institutional mechanisms in schools, one of which is the establishment of PAP committee and subcommittees to handle the school's PAP budget which allows teachers to participate in the school's administrative and financial decisions. In every school, there are PAP committee and subcommittees headed by the school principal. The PAP committee has five subcommittees responsible for (1) basic learning and teaching materials; (2) sports, arts, crafts, and agriculture, etc., (3) small repairs; (4) school and classroom decoration (garden, fences, in-classroom decorations); and (5) miscellaneous (transportation, stationeries, materials for meeting). The PAP structure aims for teachers' participation in financial management to ensure transparency. Moreover, because in principle, PAP committee has to achieve consensus on the school development plan, the school body and plan offer opportunities for debate and discussions on issues for school improvement. All schools visited had a PAP committee and subcommittees in their structure and all had their annual school development plans. However, the establishment of these institutional mechanisms did not guarantee greater teacher involvement in school management and planning. The involvement of teachers in school administrative and financial process faces two main constraints.

First, the implementation guidelines on the school's operational expenditures are rigid and pre-decided by the MoEYS, leaving little room for school-level decision-making. Funds are already earmarked for at least 30% on teaching materials, at most 15% on sports, arts, craft, and agriculture, and at most 7% on miscellaneous; the rest is divided between components 3 and 4 of PAP.¹³ All teachers and school

¹² As I will discuss later in the chapter, the reform implementation has generally led to loosening rules and regulation on staff and students in many schools. This is part of the mechanism to maintain harmony and cooperation among school staff amid the dynamic and conflict-prone situation created by the reform. Moreover, for school principals and school leadership and possibly for the DOEs, "good schools" tend to be those with nice gardens, beautiful fences, nicely painted buildings, and beautiful classrooms with flower vases on the walls, but less of those with committed teachers and with productive and strong classroom dynamics. After passing through the many layers of administration, the spirit of reform has been diverted.

¹³ The PAP fund was already divided into components at the POE level.

principals interviewed for the study claim the absence of disagreement on the school development plan (expenditure plan) simply because there seems to be nothing to agree or disagree upon.¹⁴

Second, the unpredictability of funds resulting from late and irregular disbursement makes it impossible for PAP committee and subcommittees to reach consensus on fund utilization. When funds arrive unexpectedly, an ad hoc meeting of all committee members, who are teachers, is called. In as much as teachers are usually unable to attend these meetings due to their class schedules, decision-making is usually hastily done by school principals and staff without teachers' involvement.¹⁵

8.8.3 Unable to Instill Community Involvement

Literature on decentralization of education postulates that one way to improve quality of education is through the involvement of the community in school management. It is the guiding principle of decentralization that "the most effective governance of any organization occurs when authority for decision making is located as close as possible to the site where the action takes place" (McGinn and Welch 1999: 94). Cambodian education policy has clearly encouraged community participation as a way to instill school accountability toward the community. The reform policy demands that the community, represented by the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) or School Support Committee (SSC), endorses the school development plan and expenditure report.¹⁶ These documents must be signed by PTA/SSC representatives before submitting to the DOEs and POEs.

On paper, the rules have been followed in all schools visited for the study. Yet, none of the PTA/SSC of the eight schools visited sees any change in their influence even though they had signed the school documents.¹⁷ The PTA/SSC sees their involvement merely as a formality and views their attendance at meetings as merely helping the school fulfill the requirements of PAP procedure rather than as an opportunity to voice the community's concerns over the education of their children. A PTA/SSC representative of School G related: "The meeting is all about what to build and what to buy for the school. It is up to teachers and school principal to decide on what they want. They manage the school so they should know best." Also, because PAP is government money, many community representatives do not

¹⁴As I will illustrate later, new developments that have been sponsored by the PAP money are almost unformed for all schools. Buddha stupa, gardens, and fences are new in many schools.

¹⁵Interview with the principal of School A, November 8, 2005.

¹⁶PTA and SSC are the same although SSC is an official and up to date form of PTA. Although all schools now have the SSC on official documents, in some schools they are referred to as PTA.

¹⁷Interview with PTA/SSC representatives to the eight schools during the field visit from November 7 to December 15, 2005.

see themselves as having any responsibility or power to control it. “School principals and teachers are government staff. They are responsible and have to answer to government when they use government’s money.”¹⁸ Complex rules and regulations from the central ministry exacerbate the matter. “PAP spending has many rules. School principal and teachers know how to spend money correctly according to the rules. We hardly understand them.”¹⁹ The formal appearance on the school documents does not change the community’s subordination and indifference to school’s management affairs – the indifference that has long been entrenched in the Cambodian culture.²⁰

It is important to note also that PTA/SSC has the power and control only over the management of school’s community fund they help collect through donations and other religious ceremonies. A member of PTA/SSC of School A puts it thus: “I know about the community fund and what project it was for but I don’t know about PAP fund. Only the head of PTA/SSC is invited by the school to sign their plans and reports. But, it is the school’s money, anyway.”²¹ Apparently, the imposition of community participation in schools through the formal endorsement of plans and financial reports has not changed the relationship between community and schools. The reform has failed to make schools more accountable to the community.

8.8.4 Inefficient Use of School Operation Fund

While the agenda has intended the fund for institution building, the fund is actually used for the materials necessary for the daily learning and teaching and for schools’ infrastructure improvement. As earlier noted, funds are to be earmarked for basic teaching and learning materials including stationeries and office supplies, school repairs, school decoration, and materials for sports, arts, and agriculture. All schools received fund according to the distribution formula. Depending on the number of students, the amount varied. However, the focus here is whether the fund can always be used to meet the needs of schools. My observation on schools in the two districts shows that not all schools could use the fund to meet their needs in a timely manner.

The needs of Cambodian primary schools differ in many significant ways. Some schools may have a large campus, with newly built or newly renovated buildings, and well equipped with classroom materials. There are schools in urgent need of repair and where leaking roofs often interrupt classes during rainy seasons.

¹⁸Interview with PTA/SSC of School B, November 18, 2005.

¹⁹Interview with PTA/SSC in School F, December 3, 2005.

²⁰See Pellini (2005) for further discussions on the culture and traditions that explain the lack of community participation in school management.

²¹Interview with PTA/SSC of School A, November 10, 2005.

Schools' needs vary in terms of the amount and type of resources. Some need to spend more on repairs while others need to spend more on teaching and learning materials. However, regardless of their condition and volume of needs, schools receive the same amount of fund, i.e., 500,000 riels (US\$125) per school and 6,000 riels (US\$1.5) for every student enrolled.

The school operational fund is released in several small chunks during the year, making the spending limit for each item even smaller. Schools are required to spend the funds and produce a financial report before the next installment is released. The system does not allow schools to save funds for major projects, as they end up using the funds on minor items that they may not need urgently.

School H in Phnom Kravanh district is a good example where fund utilization has been ineffective and school needs go unmet. The school has one wooden school building that lost its roof during a storm the previous year. As a result, two classrooms have been put out of use. Obviously, fixing the roof became a priority. For 2004/05, the school received about 3.9 million riels in total school operation fund. The school allocated about 32% for basic materials, 33% for school environment, and 13% for repair, 15% for sports and arts, and 7% for miscellaneous items including transportation, and other expenditure. However, because the roof repair would cost about 60% of the total operational fund, the school was not allowed to use the school operational fund of the PAP program for that repair.²² Delays in fund releases and rigid spending guidelines leave the needs of some schools unmet.

8.8.5 Mismatch Between School's Management Capacity and the Demand of the Reform

PAP implementation entails heavy administrative work load for the school management team, consuming much of the school principals' time away from their daily duties as both school managers and pedagogical leaders. The PAP implementation requires a great increase in administrative work such as organizing and attending numerous meetings, making school development plans, writing numerous activity and financial reports, and getting these plans and reports approved by the DOEs. Most school principals interviewed bitterly complained about the time-consuming office workload in fulfilling PAP requirements. The principal of School C said: "There are more reports to submit now. While before I could allocate about 2 or 3 days a week to observe classrooms, I could hardly find time for classroom supervision these days."²³ Report preparation and getting the reports accepted and

²² Although since 2003, the annual guidelines erased the allocation formula in order to allow for flexibility in school expenditure, all schools I have visited continue to practice this allocation formula. The reason for doing so is simply to avoid complexity at auditing stage.

²³ Interview with the principal of Kravanh School 2, November 28, 2005.

approved by the DOEs are of great concern to school principals. "PAP reports are meticulous. Before I can get them right, I have to travel to Kondieng DOE two to three times to clarify things in the report."²⁴ As school principals emphasize reports preparation and getting them approved, the daily management of schools becomes secondary. Clearly, school principals are caught in the vicious trap of trying to fulfill administrative requirements to the neglect of actual learning improvement which is the ultimate goal of the reform program.

Complaints over the heavy administrative workload comes from the fact that PAP report requirements exceed the capacity of many school principals and management team, many of whom have not had any administrative and finance training. All schools covered by the study do not have trained accountants. All school principals and office staff are former teachers who have been promoted to the administrative posts without necessary training in administration.

8.8.6 Centralized Administration

The school operational fund has also changed the way DOEs and schools relate. Frequent evaluation and monitoring activities have brought DOE and schools closer. On the other hand, schools have become more submissive to DOEs and enjoy less autonomy than before. Some DOEs make use of the closer relationship to encourage better performance, while others use this as a way to exert more patronage and domination on schools.

Prior to the reform, DOEs had little control over the school's fund collected from parents and the community. Their role was limited to being pedagogical advisers. Since schools were not required to submit financial reports to DOE or POE, they had extensive autonomy over how to spend the fund collected from parents. With the reform, schools became dependent on government for funds to operate. Their relationship with government, particularly DOEs, changed. With the reform agenda, schools are required to submit regular and timely financial reports to DOEs. These financial reports are reviewed and evaluated by the DOEs before passing on to the POE. DOEs have become financial inspectors for schools. Most school visits by DOE are largely about PAP expenditure and reports. As a result, schools have far less autonomy than they did before the reform. This contradicts the overall intention of the reform which is to gradually empower schools.

Having no financial management skills themselves, DOE officers sometimes create more difficulties for schools rather than help schools improve their performance. Schools spend a lot of time on report preparation making sure the spelling is correct and the use of vocabulary is sophisticated enough to meet the language adopted by the central MoEYS. As the school principal of School B said, "In the financial

²⁴Interview with the principal of Kondieng School 4, November 24, 2005

report, spelling mistakes are big problems. You can not erase by darkening it or by using the white-inked erasers. You have to rewrite.”²⁵ Only meticulously correct reports are accepted. In addition, there are no guidelines on expenditure categories, giving rise to misunderstanding and allegations of irregularity.²⁶ This useless meticulousness costs school principals time and energy away from their daily work at schools. Moreover, most of the time, schools have to please DOE in ways that guarantee the DOE’s patronage. Schools can benefit from the patronage for the timely advice and guidance in the process of PAP implementation and report writing, the compromises, the understanding, and finally for being reported as having least problems, and possibly for being selected to receive awards as best schools.

8.8.7 Regressive Cooperation Between School Leadership and Teachers

To ensure transparency in PAP fund management, the government subjects PAP expenditure to thorough inspection and auditing from four different entities at the central level: the MoEYS departments, Internal Audit of the MoEYS, the inspectorate of Ministry of Economy and Finance, and the National Audit Authority (NAA). All central entities, except the NAA, do their regular monitoring and evaluation of the POEs and sometimes DOEs annually. Although the focus of these central-level monitoring teams is POE, all four entities and the POE will conduct their inspection and audit on school’s PAP expenditure if any irregularity is reported. The monitoring process is meticulous, tedious, and time-consuming.²⁷ Schools risk being reprimanded by the POE and DOE for wasting their resources and time for having to host and accompany the inspectors from the central government.²⁸ Teachers are likely to complain to the media in cases of conflicts.²⁹ Oftentimes, school principals would compromise with their teachers in return for the teachers’ cooperation. For example, there is widespread tolerance from the school leadership for teacher’s tardiness, laziness, and inattentiveness in classrooms. At least six out of eight school principals blame teachers’ unethical practices on teachers’ low income and teachers’ difficult living conditions but not on teachers themselves.³⁰ Most are reluctant to take serious disciplinary actions for fear that those actions on teachers could fuel conflicts and encourage teachers to complain and make

²⁵ Interview with the principal of School A, November 16, 2005.

²⁶ Interview with the principal of School E, November 28, 2005.

²⁷ Two schools I visited had experienced the fierce evaluation from the center once. Both report the drudgery of having to answer to all the meticulous details by different evaluation teams.

²⁸ A school principal overheard Pursat POE director as having said that next time schools are to be responsible for all the provincial cost if they invoke any unexpected inspection in the province.

²⁹ Teachers in Cambodia are one of the most vocal groups and have strong political power.

³⁰ Interviews with the principals of all schools, November 8 to December 15, 2005.

accusations on school leadership. PAP expenditure is a very sensitive issue and in case of conflict teachers often take advantage of the PAP issue to backfire at school principals because it receives immediate attention from the media and the central government.³¹ In School B, the principal is reluctant to impose disciplinary measure on a teacher who is notorious for tardiness and laziness for fear of revenge. The principal has been advised to find ways to convince the teacher to commit to the work instead of taking any disciplinary action, in order to avoid conflicts.³² Conflict-avoidance takes precedence over professionalism in the sensitive context of PAP implementation.

Teachers and school principals are the core actors in implementing the reform agenda. When they cooperate to maintain the status quo for their own convenience, education reform is not likely to achieve its intended outcomes and long-term impact.

8.8.8 Lack of Dialogue Between the Implementers at School Level and the Policymakers

To encourage education service efficiency, the policy has an incentive program that awards teachers who have exhibited outstanding performance. Under PAP 1, the MoEYS allocates funds to award the top 8–10% of total teachers for their outstanding performance. Award recipients are decided by an evaluation committee at DOE level. Competition is among teachers within the districts.

Teachers' views on the performance award scheme vary. There are many reasons for the contrasting views. First, the award of about 120,000 riels (US\$30) encourages the already hard-working teachers to work harder but is hardly an effective incentive to poorly performing teachers to improve.³³ The hard-working teachers take only a little bit of preparation to receive the awards. On the other hand, medium- and low-performance teachers have to work extra hard for one whole year to be awarded at the end of the school year. Although the award is equivalent to one month's salary, it is not worth it for many teachers, especially those who have the second jobs.³⁴

Second, the awards have weak linkages with the extra workload that the reform requires of teachers. For example, while the award is only for the top 8–10% of the teachers, the recent education reform in Cambodia requires all teachers to handle

³¹ Interview with the principal of School B, November 11, 2005.

³² Interview with the principal of School B, November 11, 2005.

³³ The award value 120, 000 riels (US\$30) for the best teachers, 100, 000 riels (US\$25) for the second best, and 8,000 riels (US\$20) for the third best (MoEYS 2003).

³⁴ Teachers earn their award at the end of the school year based on criteria such as teacher's lesson plan, teacher's collection of teaching aids, teacher's relationship with community people, and student repetition and progression rates.

many additional tasks such as producing teaching aids, designing innovative instructional techniques, devising strategies to assist the slow students, and participating in the construction of school development plan. All of these activities demand that teachers invest additional time and energy in their jobs.

Nonetheless, many Cambodian primary school teachers devote only half a day to teaching and spend the other half day on additional income-earning activities besides teaching because they earn a low salary from their teaching job in the government schools. The monthly salary for a primary school teacher ranges between 120,000 riels and 160,000 riels (or US\$30 and US\$40), depending on the years of experience. Some teachers, particularly those in urban areas augment their low salaries by private tutoring, helping in their family businesses, or by petty trading after school hours. The performance award does not sufficiently encourage the majority of teachers to reduce their nonschool work and concentrate more on teaching.

Moreover, teachers, except those who are on double shift, work only 4 hours a day in the classrooms. Other tasks outside classrooms are only additional and optional to teachers. Schools that are on single shift are also closed in the afternoon. With this institutional setup, it is hard to expect teachers to spend the afternoon producing materials or preparing lesson plans. Teachers are expected to carry out these extra tasks at home. Given the fact that many teachers have additional job besides teaching, it is not likely that teachers spend much time on extra school tasks, if at all.

The reform's in improving the quality of education hinges on the extra time and hard work spent by teachers on school-related activities such as producing teaching material, improving classroom management skills, and other preparation for classes. Any incentive system must link the additional work teachers have to handle under the reform; until this is recognized, teachers are unlikely to do what is required of them by the reform.

8.9 Conclusions

As evidenced from rural schools in Cambodia, improving the quality of education is not a simple resource issue. Despite the most comprehensive and ambitious reform program ever introduced in the Cambodian history of modern education, the quality of Cambodian primary education today remains appallingly low. Student achievement is far from satisfactory. The reform has not made much progress to the quality of the primary education sector in Cambodia.

An examination of rural schools in Cambodia uncovered many important issues that the reform failed to tackle, making the 7 years of reform implementation unsuccessful at raising the quality of education. The lack of capacity of individual implementers and the lack of institutional capacity as a whole to handle the complex reform program was a foremost constraint. The school fee abolition and the opening of reentry program led parents to take their children's school attendance for granted, resulting in increased absenteeism. Delays in the release of the school operational

fund and rigid fund guidelines likewise constrained the program's success. Moreover, the implementation of the reform policy has added an extra heavy workload on schools. As most were not prepared for the sudden increase in workload and complexity of administrative work required in the reform implementation, many schools ended up distracted from teaching and learning. Improvement in the quality of education was low despite the many millions of dollars spent.

Obviously, policy interventions of the current reform, to a large degree, have failed to address the real problems behind the low education outcomes. The most important factor that has been overlooked is the role of teachers. The policy reform expected teachers to carry out the reform without addressing the many obstacles they face in their work. Teachers' work norms and working conditions were not addressed and teachers' professionalism, attitudes, and behaviors were not the concern of the policy agenda. Effective education policy reform must directly address teachers' working conditions before the reform can expect them to carry out additional tasks to improve their teaching practices in the classrooms. Adequate compensation for full-time work comprises not only the hours that teachers spend in the classrooms teaching, but also the extra hours for lesson preparation and research, and other administrative tasks such as record keeping and tracking of the student's learning process and progression. While monetary compensation is one requisite, the policy should also have concrete measures that build teachers' teaching skills and innovation as well as measures that encourage constant application of skills in the classrooms. Addressing the issues of teachers' work efficacy is difficult, but Cambodia must start now rather than later given the prolonged delay in the focus on teaching quality enhancement in the history of its education development. If schools cannot prove the connection between enrollments and the end product of children's cognitive development, the education system fails parents and children who have to undergo substantial opportunity cost in order to attend schools. Education reform therefore needs to address the right issues for change if it is to achieve real and sustainable improvement in quality of education.

To improve the chances for success Elmore (1980) and Dyer (1999) suggest a "backward mapping" approach in policy design and implementation. The "backward mapping" approach proposes the policy design and implementation process that begins with "a statement of the specific behavior at the lowest level of the implementation process that generates the need for a policy" (Elmore 1980: 604). The process of mapping then works backwards, questioning "what ability each unit has to affect the behavior that is the target of the policy; and what resources it would require to do so" (p. 604). This allows resources to be directed "at the organizational units likely to have the most effect" (Elmore 1980: 604). According to Elmore (1980: 610), this process minimizes "reliance on abstract, standardized solutions," allowing for "local knowledge and skill at delivery level," which is essential since "the problem-solving ability of complex systems depends not on hierarchical control, but on maximizing discretion at the point where the problem is most immediate" (Elmore 1980: 605). By adopting the backward mapping approach to policy cycle, policy-making will be well informed by knowledge of the divergence between actual and desired practices, which the policy will seek to

close. The implementation of the policy reform will be more effective and efficient as the approach clearly enhances the policy dialogues between the lowest-level implementers and the policymakers at the central level.

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