Chapter 3
Primary Education in Cambodia: In Search of Quality

Fata No and Say Sok

3.1 Introduction

The education system in Cambodia is structured into sectors, including the early childhood (5-year-olds and below), primary (grades 1–6), lower-secondary (grades 7–9) and upper-secondary (grades 10–12) sectors, all of which are age-specific. The non-formal and the vocational and technical education sectors, intended mainly for young people and adults who drop out of school, have never attended school or are disadvantaged, are not age-specific. The higher education sector is for those who complete a general education programme(s) to grade 12 or equivalent.

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), as a signatory to the World Declaration on *Education for All* in Jomtien, Thailand, and the United Nations *Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs), is committed to fulfilling its promise of universalising access to basic education, interpreted as the first 9 years of general education. By law, children must enrol in grade 1 by the age of 6 (or at least 70 months). They have full rights to basic education free of charge in a public school. Parents who wish to enrol their child in a private school must pay tuition fees, for which there is no public subsidy. Attendance at a public school for upper-secondary education is also free.

The Government and its development partners have invested heavily in the primary education sector over many years. The investment has achieved remarkable improvements in access and equity. Qualified achievements have also been secured in pre-service teacher education and curriculum development. However, quality and equity remain persistent concerns. Other areas of concern include deficiencies in school management and a declining level of investment in the sector.

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This chapter seeks to provide a bird's eye view of the significant achievements and current challenges in the primary education sector. It also addresses possible avenues for ongoing development at a time of shrinking financial support from the national budget and external sources. It canvases the adoption of innovative and proactive approaches towards realising a vision of the sector that is distinctive for its success in terms of equitable access and quality.

3.2 Achievements

The sector's visible achievements include increased enrolments, reduced dropout and repetition rates, increased promotion rates, improvements in teacher training arrangements, progress in curriculum development and some advances in governance mechanisms. These topics are now addressed.

3.2.1 Enrolments

Cambodia has been highly successful in expanding the size of its primary education sector. Significant public investment and support by development partners have been instrumental in this regard (Keng, 2009). Figure 3.1 shows how the net enrolment rate (NER) over the past 20 years increased from 83.8% in 2000 to 91.0% in 2019. There was a sharp increase after 2000 when the Government made public education free for all citizens. Gross enrolment rates (GERs) jumped from 100.8% in 1999 to 125.1% in 2001. These rates remained at around 120% until 2010 and then gradually

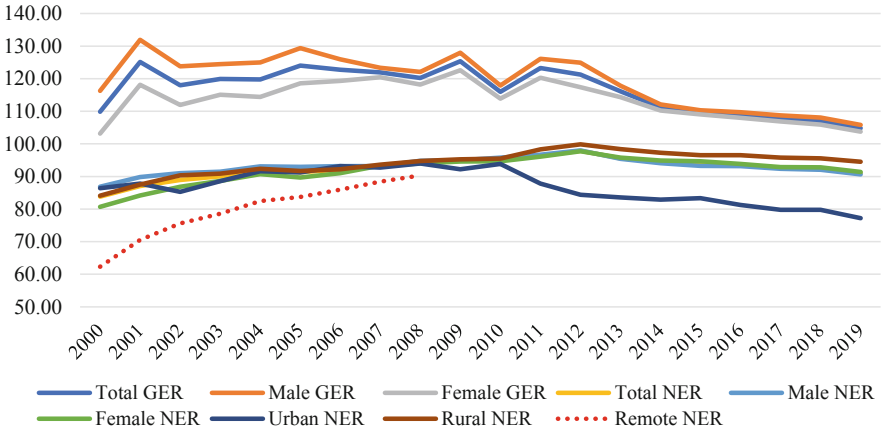


Fig. 3.1 Net enrolment rates (NERs) and gross enrolment rates (GERs) of public primary schools by areas and gender. (Sources: EMIS data from 2000 to 2019)

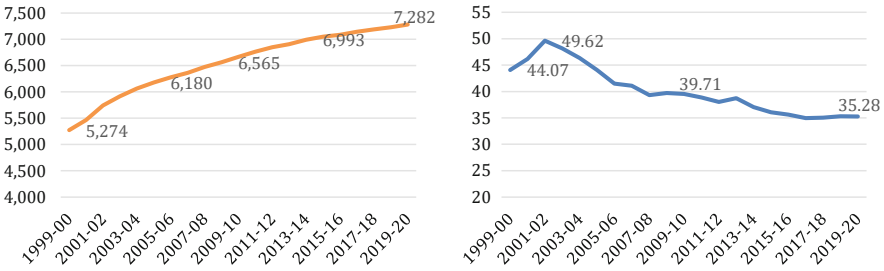


Fig. 3.2 Increased number of primary schools (left) and reduced pupil-to-teacher ratios in the last 20 years. (Sources: EMIS data from 2000 to 2019)

declined to their level in 2019 of 105.8%. The gap between NERs and GERs in Fig. 3.1 indicates that many children had late primary school entry and tended to repeat grades before they finished their primary education. The Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D) survey results shed light on the extent of grade repetition, showing that 29% of the 15-year-olds surveyed in 2017 had repeated a grade at least once at an earlier stage in their education. This rate was much higher than the average for both the OECD (12%) and ASEAN region (13%) (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports [MoEYS], 2018). Another explanation for the gap is late school entry or late admission to grade 1. According to data from Cambodia's Education Management Information System (EMIS), 42.19, 36.68 and 18.12% of the children admitted to grade 1 for the first time in 1999, 2009 and 2019, respectively, were older than the required age for admission to grade 1. In this regard, Cambodia has made good progress in getting more children admitted to grade 1 by the required age.

Enrolment growth has been greatly assisted by national policy initiatives and an expansion in schools and teacher availability. Over the past 20 years, the Government has supported the construction of 2383 new primary schools across the country, and there has been an increase of 10,200 in the number of staff members in schools over the same period. In 2007, it adopted a Child-Friendly School policy that pushed inclusive access to primary education to the front of its priorities. There has, therefore, been a substantial improvement in pupil-to-class and pupil-to-teacher ratios, from 43.4:1 and 44.1:1 in 1999–2000 to 32.4:1 and 35.3:1 in 2019–2020, respectively (see Fig. 3.2) (MoEYS, 2020a, 2020b). Classes became much less crowded, and teacher workloads became less demanding as a result. The enrolment increase was well supported by a policy of seeking to establish at least one primary school per village, one lower-secondary school per commune and one upper-secondary or integrated secondary school per district. Cambodia's development partners also invested strongly in primary education to achieve the *Education For All* vision and the national MDGs.

Cambodia has maintained a reasonable gender balance in its primary education enrolment rates for most of the past two decades. As shown in Fig. 3.1, a gap favouring boys in the early 2000s has effectively been closed. Since 2014, more girls than boys have tended to enrol in primary school. The current gender-disparity index

Table 3.1 Primary school enrolments for public and private schools, and their percentage shares, 2014–2015 to 2019–2020

	Primary schools				Students			
	Number		Percentage share		Number		Percentage share	
Academic year	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
2014–2015	7051	297	95.96	4.04	2,012,175	73,794	96.46	3.54
2015–2016	7085	357	95.2	4.8	2,010,673	95,230	95.48	4.52
2016–2017	7144	417	94.48	5.52	2,022,061	89,570	95.76	4.24
2017–2018	7189	432	94.33	5.67	2,028,694	111,798	94.78	5.22
2018–2019	7228	488	93.68	6.32	2,040,257	122,886	94.32	5.68
2019–2020	7282	574	92.69	7.31	2,023,473	137,637	93.63	6.37

Sources: Extracted from the Education Congress Reports from 2015 to 2020 (MoEYS, 2015b, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2020a)

is 1.01, indicating a negligible difference in enrolment rates between boys and girls. It is not until secondary and tertiary education that the gap widens, favouring males.

Regional disparities in primary education enrolment rates continue, however, to be a feature of the sector. From 2000 to 2008, the urban and rural primary school NERs at public schools followed a common trend, increasing from around 85% in 2000 to 95% in 2008 (see Fig. 3.1). During this period, the remote primary school NER at public schools increased sharply, from 62.3% in 2000 to 90.3% in 2008. Cambodia at the time claimed that it no longer had any remote locations. The rural primary NER at public schools continued to increase, reaching 99.9% in 2012, and then gradually declined to 94.5% by 2019. The urban primary NER at public schools began instead to decline, and by 2019, it was 77.2%, compared with the rural primary NER in 2019 of 94.5%. The most likely explanation is that better-off parents living in urban areas started enrolling their children in private primary schools. Table 3.1 provides evidence over the past 6 years of a steady drift in this regard. By 2019, there were 137,637 private primary school students, representing 6.37% of the primary school population. The NER in 2019–2020 was 97.3% (97.7% for females); the NER for the public schools was 91.0% (91.4% for females); and the NER for private schools was 6.3% (6.5% for females) (MoEYS, 2020a, 2020b). Private schools have recently started to reach out to the rural, especially semi-urban, parts of the country.

The expanding role of private schooling in the primary education sector is in line with a public policy of promoting public-private partnerships in education provision. However, explanations for the increasing attractiveness of private education are mainly anecdotal. The main reason appears to be sustained economic growth, resulting in a relatively rapid increase in mostly white-collar salaried workers and businesspeople living in urban areas.[1] These people are more likely to afford private schooling, and they may also be attracted to its pitch of 'better' education, 'better'

[1] Urban areas include provincial towns in 24 provinces and all districts in Phnom Penh. This definition is given in the EMIS data from MoEYS.

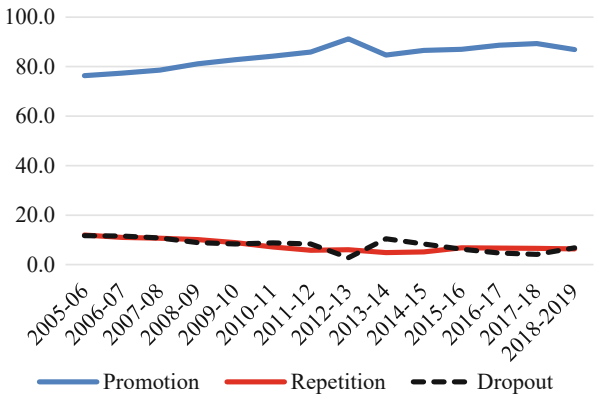


Fig. 3.3 Promotion, repetition and dropout rates in primary education from 2005–2006 to 2018–2019. (Sources: EMIS data from 2006 to 2019)

behaviour and 'better' school administration. There is also an increased incidence of smaller families in urban areas, with both parents working or busy with a business. Some observers also claim that the increasing enrolment in private primary schooling reflects poorly on the trust placed in the public system for delivering quality education.[2] This claim gains some credence from national assessment and PISA-D results, which consistently show private school students outperforming public school students. Student discipline at private schools is strongly enforced, with absenteeism monitored and with the routine provision of feedback to parents on student performance. Private schools also offer other attractive services to busy parents, including school buses, whole-day programmes and catering services for their children. No and Nguon (2018) found that the high incidence of private schools in provincial towns was due to the parents' demands for strong school discipline and education quality management. Of much current concern to parents is student truancy from school.

3.2.2 Internal Efficiency and Survival in Public Primary Education

There has been a remarkable improvement over the past two decades in the promotion rate within primary schools, that is, the rate at which students in a grade level in 1 year are promoted to the next grade level in the following year. Figure 3.3 shows that the promotion rate increased substantially from 78% in 2005–2006 to 88% in 2018–2019, peaking at 91% in 2012–2013. In line with this trend, the dropout rate decreased from 11% in 2005–2006 to 8% in 2018–2019, bottoming out at 3% in

[2]The Government has started to improve the quality of public education in recent years with initiatives such as the establishment/pilot of full-day public schools, new-generation schools and school-based management. These initiatives are showing promise in terms of quality enhancement.

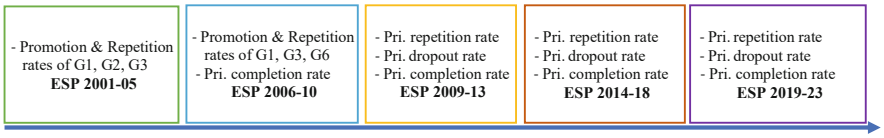


Fig. 3.4 Core breakthrough indicators for primary education quality and efficiency in ESPs. (Notes: Extracted from the Education Strategic Plans 2001–2005, 2006–2010, 2009–2012, 2014–2018 and 2019–2023. *G* grade, *Pri* primary)

2012–2013; and the repetition rate gradually decreased from 11% in 2005–2006 to 8% in 2018–2019.

Over the past 10 years, the primary school completion rate was 80%, plus or minus 5%, with a relatively slight downward trend since 2013. The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS), through successive *Education Strategic Plans* (ESPs) since 2000, has been working strenuously to improve the primary school sector's internal efficiency by increasing promotion and completion and reducing dropout and repetition rates. Figure 3.4 provides a snapshot of the evolving internal efficiency indicators over the past five ESPs. The transition rate to lower-secondary school reached 86% from 2016 to 2018, before slightly dipping back in 2019.

3.2.3 Teacher Training

MoEYS has, over many years, significantly reformed pre-service teacher training. Before 1993, appointment as a primary school teacher required only the successful completion of a lower-secondary education, followed by 1 year of pedagogical training before 1991 and 2 years of pedagogical training after 1991. As shown in Table 3.2, the admission requirement was increased in 1993 and has continued to increase since then. A pre-service qualification for teaching now requires 2 years of pedagogical training following grade 12 of upper-secondary education. The training may be undertaken at any 1 of the 16 provincial teacher training centres and includes content knowledge upgrading and pedagogical training. Teacher trainees receive 2726 h of structured learning across five domains: professional skills; basic education upgrading; major-related knowledge and teaching methodology; pedagogy and practicum; and pedagogical research. The 'major-related knowledge and teaching methodology' domain receives the most time (1209 h), while 'pedagogical research' is taught in 16 h (MoEYS, 2011). In 2019–2020, a new development was a 4-year teacher training programme delivered by the Phnom Penh Teacher Training Institute. This initiative has arisen from a Teacher Policy Action Plan. It is currently supported by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which is helping to upgrade the Phnom Penh and Battambang Regional Teacher Training Centres to Teacher Training Institutes. This 12+4 programme is an expanded and modernised version of the 12+2 training programme.

Table 3.2 Primary school teacher training formula from 1980 until now

Years	Training years and required education level
1980–1982	•Short training
1982–1987	•1 year of training for candidates with 7 years of schooling (7 + 1)
	•1 year of training for candidates with 3 years of schooling (3 + 1) for disadvantaged areas
1987–1991	•1 year of training for candidates with 8 years of schooling (8 + 1)
	•3 years of training for those with 5 years of schooling (5 + 3) for disadvantaged areas
1991–1993	•2 years of training for candidates with 8 years of schooling (8 + 2)
1993–1995	•2 years of training for candidates with 11 years of schooling (11 + 2)
	•2 years of training for candidates with 8 years of schooling (8 + 2) for disadvantaged areas
1995–1997	•2 years of training for candidates with 11 years of schooling (11 + 2)
	•2 years of training for candidates with 9 years of schooling (9 + 2) for disadvantaged areas
	•1 year of training for bachelor's degree holders (BA + 1)
1997–1998	•2 years of training for candidates with 12 years of schooling (12 + 2)
	•2 years of training for candidates with 9 years of schooling (9 + 2) for
	disadvantaged areas
	•1 year of training for bachelor's degree holders (BA + 1)
1998–2015	•2 years of training for candidates with 12 years of schooling (12 + 2)
	•2 years of training for candidates with 9 years of schooling (9 + 2) for disadvantaged areas
2015–2019	•2 years of training for candidates with 12 years of schooling (12 + 2)
2019–2020	•2 years of training for candidates with 12 years of schooling (12 + 2)
	•4 years of training for candidates with 12 years of schooling (12 + 4) for only Phnom Penh Teacher Training Institute

Source: No and Heng (2017)

The Teacher Training Department within MoEYS is principally responsible for delivering in-service training on pedagogy, classroom management and so on. However, some other departments also provide in-service training. The Primary Education Department delivers training on early-grade reading and mathematics and specific pedagogical practice; the Education Quality Assurance Development provides training on student assessment; the School Health Department provides training on disability screening and student health training; and the Department of Information Communication Technology offers training on information and communication technologies.

Aggregate data for all in-service training are unavailable; however, data from the Teacher Training Department suggest that the extent of the training provided may be limited. Its quality may also be questionable. From 2012 to 2016, according to a survey conducted by the World Bank (2017), using the recorded training data from the Teacher Training Department, there were around 10,221 teachers trained (see Fig. 3.5). These included 4347 primary school teachers. Thus, there were annually

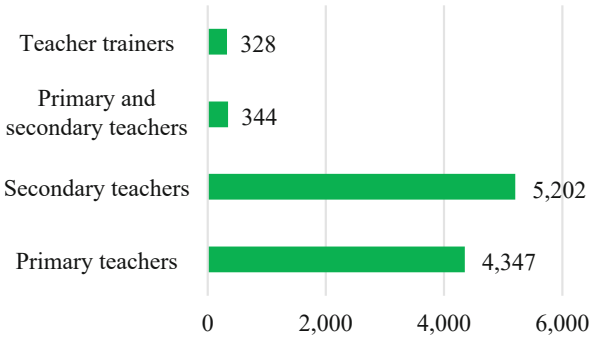


Fig. 3.5 Number of teachers receiving in-service training from 2012 to 2016 (World Bank, 2017)

around 870 out of 46,000[3] primary school teachers who received in-service training on average. The in-service training included training on general pedagogy (27%), subject-related pedagogy (9%), use of specific tools (27%), classroom management (9%), student assessment (9%) and other kinds of training (18%).

There are issues concerning the quality and efficiency of in-service teacher training. First, the training provided by the various departments is random, not adequately coordinated and not well designed to build cumulatively to meet competence requirements. Second, the training is not based on evaluating teaching capacity gaps because there is no systematic annual performance review process to identify these gaps. Third, the training provided tends to be supply-driven or donor-driven rather than focused on meeting expressed needs. Fourth, the District Team for Monitoring and Training is supposed to play a role in the training, but it cannot do so for lack of capacity and an operational budget. Finally, teachers appear to have no real interest in continuous professional development because it is not linked to career development, promotion prospects or prospective pay rises. Teachers are paid based on the grade level taught, and salary differences within a school are relatively small.

3.2.4 Curriculum Development

Over the last two decades, the curriculum for primary education has undergone several developments and revisions. MoEYS developed its first national curriculum framework, constructed around a *Policy for Curriculum Development 2005–2009*, in 2006. Given the lack of internal personnel capacity at the time, international technical advisors were entirely responsible for developing the framework. Its most notable feature was that the early-grade Khmer language teaching method was changed from a phonetic to the whole-language approach, reflecting how English and many other foreign languages were taught. Khmer textbooks for primary school students were subsequently changed, published and sent out to

[3] The proxy number of the primary school teachers in 2017 was 46,157 (EMIS data).

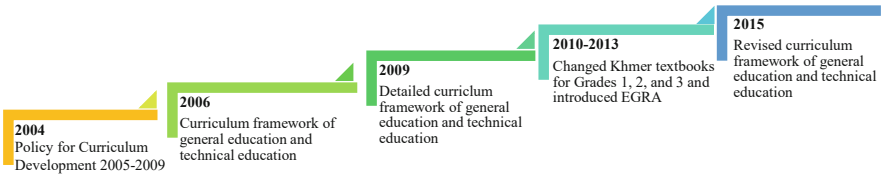


Fig. 3.6 Evolving curriculum development for primary education since the early 2000s

classrooms. Later assessments found that students struggled with reading Khmer, so language achievement was adversely affected. In 2010, MoEYS changed back to the phonics-based approach (known as the *Chet Chhem*), and new Khmer textbooks for grades 1, 2 and 3 were issued in 2011, 2012 and 2013, respectively. Those textbooks have continued in use since then. MoEYS, with support from the World Bank and considering lessons learned from various non-governmental organisations, introduced early-grade reading assessments for the first time in 2010. Figure 3.6 provides an overview of the evolving nature of primary school curriculum development between 2004 and 2015.

In 2015, using local experts, MoEYS developed a new curriculum framework for general and technical education. However, details for specific secondary education subjects were not issued until 2018. The detailed curriculum for primary education has not yet been developed. Development of the curriculum framework was based on an in-depth analysis of the in-use curriculum and textbooks that showed some content mistakes, a negligible link between subjects of study, redundancy between grade levels, a lack of coherent progression of skills and a lack of real-world context (MoEYS, 2015a). The framework aims at realising the country's vision of being a high-middle-income country by 2030 and a high-income nation by 2050. It also seeks to address the needs in the labour market, ASEAN integration and the fast-changing nature of employment. The framework has a strong emphasis on the acquisition of twenty-first-century skills. It includes several new subjects at the primary education level, such as foreign languages from grade 1, computer skills from grade 3 and arts education from grade 1. It also reduces the hours for studying Khmer from 13 h to 11 h per week in grades 1–3. For the moment, though, the older national curriculum framework approved in 2004 remains in force because the new framework does not yet have the necessary assessment tools and inputs for implementation. Therefore, how much this new framework will produce a real impact on teaching and learning is yet to be seen. Table 3.3 provides details of the allocation of hours per week to different subjects as approved in 2004 and revised in 2015.

3.2.5 Financial Management

Over the last few years, there has been significant progress made with national budget support for public primary education (Ashida & Chea, 2017). First, the

Table 3.3 Comparison of subjects and hour allocation for each subject in the curriculum in 2004 and 2015

	Curriculum policy 2005–2009						Curriculum framework 2015					
Subjects	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5	G6
Khmer	13	13	13	10	8	8	11	11	11	9	9	9
Mathematics	7	7	7	6	6	6	7	7	7	6	6	6
Science	3	3	3	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3
Social studies				4	5	5	3	3	3	3	3	3
Physical education	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Health education							1	1	1	1	1	1
Computer							0	0	0	1	1	1
Arts education							1	1	1	1	1	1
Foreign languages							2	2	2	2	2	2
Local life skill programmes	2–5	2–5	2–5	2–5	2–5	2–5	0	0	0	2	2	2

Source: MoEYS (2015a)
G grade

funding modality for schools has improved substantially, having been greatly simplified. Instead of line-item budgeting, as previously practised, each school now receives a block grant that includes a fixed amount for each school and a variable amount based on student numbers. As shown in Table 3.4, a regular school receives 5,350,000 riels ($1304 in US dollars) plus 16,150 riels per student ($4 in US dollars).

Second, the number of budget disbursement rounds has been reduced from four to two, one in January and the other in June, and, since 2015, the budget is directly transferred to each school's bank account (Ashida & Chea, 2017). Each school must create an account with a private bank, and the advance is directly transferred to that account. Transfer and clearance of the budget are, therefore, more timely and more convenient. To clear an advance each round, the school must submit the budget request, an expenditure report and supporting documents to the Provincial Department of Education, Youth and Sport, which consolidates the requests and sends them to the Municipal/Provincial Department of Economy and Finance, which then transfers the money into the bank account for each primary school. Each school and school cluster also gets a small budget for the Thursday technical meetings, and this too is transferred to a school's or school cluster's bank account.

Third, there is an increased level of deconcentration of financial management to the provincial authorities. The Provincial Department of Education, Youth and Sport is the designated budget manager for MoEYS. The Municipal/Provincial Department of Economy and Finance makes allocation decisions on behalf of the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MoEF).

Finally, at the school level, there is a trend to mobilise participation by teachers and the community in decision-making through school support committees and school management committees (Ashida & Chea, 2017; MoEYS, 2017). School support committees were introduced in 2002 with the intention of engaging local

Table 3.4 School operation budget funding modality

	Fixed/per school/per year	Unfixed/per pupil/per year
Regular school	5,350,000 riels	16,150 riels
School in remote area or difficult area	5,550,000 riels	18,700 riels

Source: Ministry of Economy and Finance (2019)

authorities and prominent figures, including monks, people in business, alumni or parents and other stakeholders, in school-related tasks to ensure the effective functioning of school operations. Each school has a school support committee, which plays a role in fundraising and securing community resource contributions to schools (No & Heng, 2015; Pellini, 2005, 2007). More involvement by the community through these committees was envisaged, but school principals mostly continue to hold the financial purse strings. Parents and local communities tend to regard school leaders as having the most responsibility for ensuring their children receive good-quality schooling; thus, it is considered inappropriate for them to 'interfere' (Shoraku, 2008). Establishing a new participatory management structure does not always guarantee a change in social behaviours (e.g. active participation in school management) if the new design seems contrary to its broader institutional setting's cultural norms.

Despite progress made, some significant challenges remain. First, the budget support level for public primary schools' operation is inadequate for achieving effective school functioning and development. School operational budgets were around 13% of total school expenditure in 2014 (Ashida & Chea, 2017). This proportion has been reduced substantially over recent years because of increasing staff salaries. While the funds are adequate to run day-to-day operations (Ashida & Chea, 2017), they are insufficient to support larger civil works, more expensive equipment purchases and meaningful teacher development. Assuming that all two million students were equally distributed among the 7282 public primary schools, a regular school would get roughly 10 million riels ($2500 in US dollars) per annum, or some $200 per month, for its operational budget. Budget leakage, which is not explored here, can further limit active budget allocation. Therefore, construction and significant repairs rely heavily on external funding from non-governmental organisations, international organisations, prominent business and political figures and random public capital investments. The financial support coming from non-government sources is gradually declining, with more and more of this funding being redirected to secondary and tertiary education. The RGC has shown little interest in borrowing money to support public primary school development. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, with general revenue drastically reduced, national expenditure has been halved for at least in the next few years, and development partners are also reducing their funding. The immediate future of the financing of public primary education is not looking rosy.

3.3 Key Challenges

While Cambodia has made impressive progress in expanding access to primary education, there are remaining concerns about quality and equity. These concerns are now addressed.

3.3.1 Quality

To measure student learning progress against the national curriculum, MoEYS conducts national assessments for grades 3, 6, 8 and 11 on a cyclical basis. To gain insight about performance against other countries, it also participates in the PISA-D survey process; and it has joined the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) initiative. These are trusted sources of data about the learning performance of primary school students. Classroom-based assessment is also conducted, but solely to decide on a child's suitability for promotion to a higher grade level. It relies heavily on the subjective judgement of classroom teachers.

To date, the quality of student learning in primary schools remains low, and there is not much evidence that it is improving. As shown in Fig. 3.7, the success rate in Khmer language and mathematics assessments for grade 3 students was low between 2006 and 2015, though with some small improvement—from 40.8% in 2006 to 41.5% in 2015. The comparable rates for mathematics were 38–39.6% in 2006 and 2015, respectively. Figure 3.7 also presents the success rates for Khmer language and mathematics in grade 6. Though higher than for grade 3, these rates had declined over the decade. However, the equated score for the 'anchor items' (test items that appeared in every assessment test across the years) in the 2006 and 2015 tests indicated a slight increase: for Khmer, it increased from 500 in 2007 to 503.5 in 2013 and 504.1 in 2016, and for mathematics in the same years, it decreased from 500 to 489.4, before rising to 519.1.

The relatively low performance in the national assessments is in line with findings from PISA-D and SEA-PLM sources. According to human capital index data on the years of schooling and quality of learning for students aged 18 years, Cambodian 18-year-old students had received around 9.5 years of schooling, which was lower than for all other ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste (see Fig. 3.6). Schooling for 9.5 years translates into 5 years of learning (in terms of competence), which is again lower than that of all ASEAN countries surveyed plus Timor-Leste (see Fig. 3.8) (Deon, 2019). It has been estimated that a Cambodian child born today would be 49% as productive when she grows up if she enjoyed complete education and full health. According to PISA-D, only 8% of Cambodian children achieved a minimum level of reading proficiency; and only 10% achieved a minimum level of proficiency in mathematics (MoEYS, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, a new finding from SEA-PLM (UNICEF & SEAMEO, 2020) showed that only 11% of Cambodian fifth graders had a reading proficiency at the

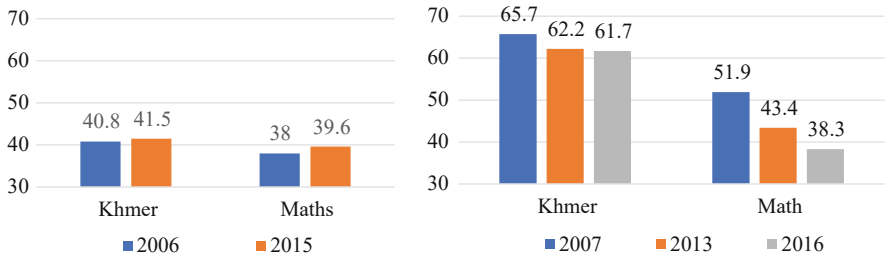


Fig. 3.7 Overall percentage correct in Khmer and maths for grade 3 students (left) and for grade 6 students (right) in 10 years. (Sources: MoEYS (2016, 2017)

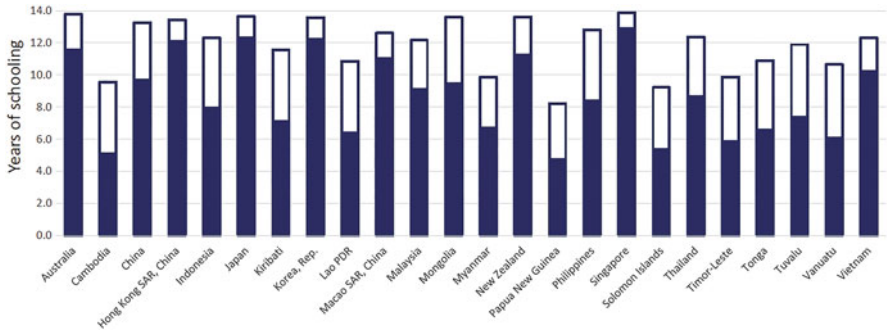


Fig. 3.8 Expected years of schooling, unadjusted and adjusted for learning. (Source: Presentation by Deon (2019) using Human Capital Index 2019 data)

level prescribed by Sustainable Development Goal 4.1.1b for attainment by the end of primary school (Level 6 or higher on SEA-PLM).[4] In mathematics, only 19% of fifth graders performed at or above the requirement of Sustainable Development Goal 4.1.1b.[5] These results imply that years of schooling in Cambodia do not automatically translate into commensurate years of learning. The country is away behind its commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4.

[4] Cambodia ranked with Myanmar (11% of fifth graders achieving Level 6 or higher), did better than Lao PDR (2%) and the Philippines (10%), but performed well below Vietnam (82%) and Malaysia (58%) in reading proficiency.

[5] Cambodian achieved higher than Lao PDR (8% of fifth graders achieved Level 6 or higher), Myanmar (12%) and the Philippines (17%), but achieved well below Vietnam (92%) and Malaysia (64%).

3.3.2 *Equity*

Though access to public primary education in Cambodia is free, children's learning outcomes vary significantly according to social structural conditions relating to the home location, socioeconomic status and the existence of a disability. These matters are now addressed. Also addressed is the extent to which access to a private primary education confers advantages not attainable through the public education system.

There has been a significant improvement in Cambodia's student-to-teacher ratios over recent years, but classrooms remain relatively crowded. The situation is worse in rural areas, where classrooms are often overcrowded and school buildings are more dilapidated. There is also a large gap between rural and urban schools, estimated to be in the order of 10–15% points each year, in grade 6 completion rates. National assessment tests in 2016 indicated that while 62% of grade 6 students from urban areas were either proficient or advanced in Khmer language, only 35% of students from rural areas met this standard (see Fig. 3.9). Only 17% of students in urban regions fell below a basic proficiency level in the Khmer language, but 35% of students from rural areas did so. In mathematics, 61% of students from urban areas were proficient or advanced, compared with only 34% of rural students (see Fig. 3.9). One-third (33%) of students in urban areas fell below a basic proficiency level in mathematics, but 58% of students from rural areas fell below this level. The PISA-D results record a similar pattern, with the rural-urban differences remaining statistically significant even after adjustment for student family resources. Differences were reported in performance on the reading, mathematics and science scales, with the largest differences seen in reading and mathematics (MoEYS, 2018). The extent of the rural-urban gap was estimated to be equivalent to more than 1 year of schooling. Likely reasons for the gap include less school accessibility, higher teacher absenteeism levels, higher transaction costs associated with staying at school and lower-quality teaching for rural students (Edwards et al., 2015; Tan, 2007).

Socioeconomic inequity is also evident in the results of the grade 6 assessment tests. Students from better-off households were much more likely to have outperformed students from less well-off home backgrounds. As shown in Fig. 3.10, 60.6% of grade 6 students from the top quintile of family socioeconomic status were considered proficient or advanced in Khmer language, compared with only 24.4% from the bottom quintile of family socioeconomic status. Only 16.4% of the top quintile students lacked a necessary mastery of the Khmer language, compared with 47.4% from the bottom quintile. The gap was even more pronounced in mathematics. More than one-half (55.3%) of students from the top quintile for family socioeconomic status were proficient or advanced in mathematics, compared with less than one-quarter (23.1%) from the bottom quintile; and while 39.4% from the top quintile were below a basic level of proficiency in mathematics, the proportion for the lowest family socioeconomic status quintile was 73.1% (see Fig. 3.10).

Attendance at a public or private primary school was also strongly associated with different performance levels in the grade 6 Khmer language and mathematics tests. In the mathematics test, 67.4% of private school students obtained correct answers,

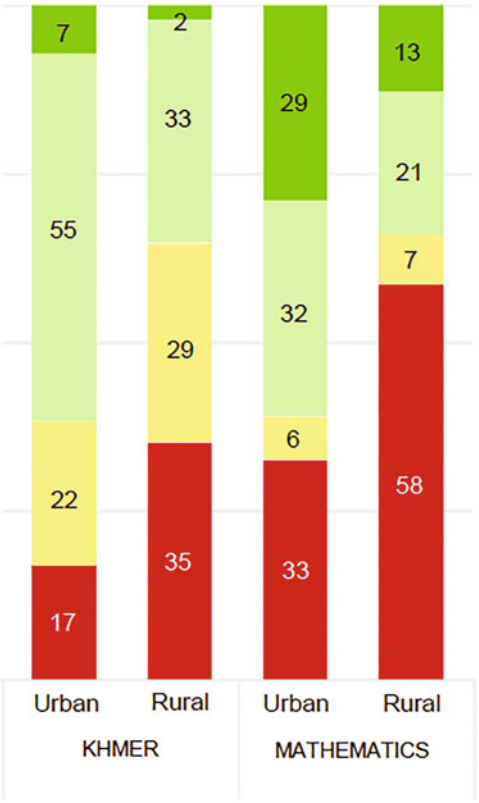
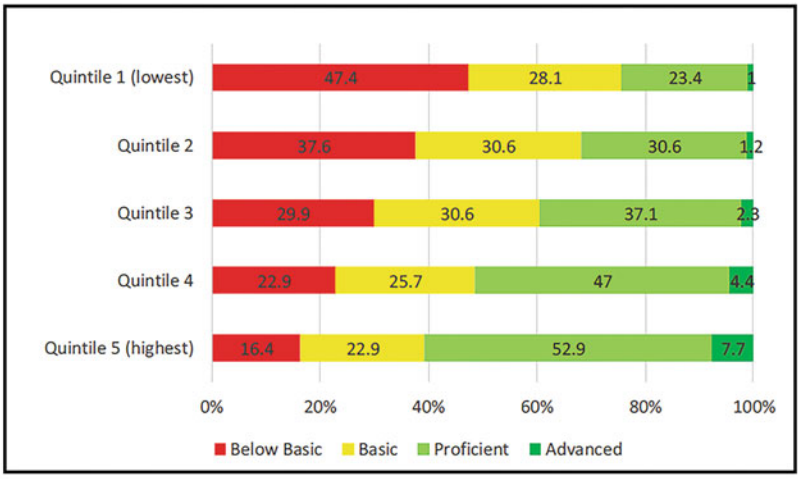


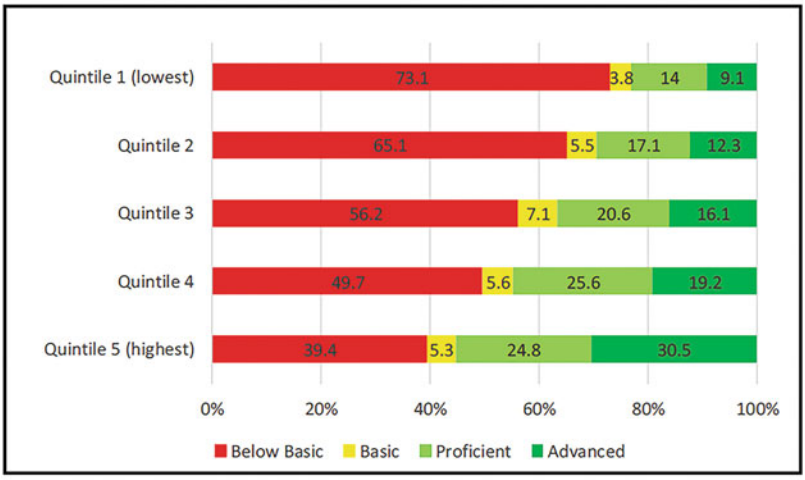
Fig. 3.9 Grade 6 students' performance in the national assessment by regions (urban vs. rural)

whereas only 48.4% of public school students did so (see Fig. 3.11). In the Khmer language test, 52.1% of public school students achieved a satisfactory outcome, compared with 72.1% of private school students (see Fig. 3.11). PISA-D survey results confirm the pattern. Fifteen-year-olds from private schools consistently outperformed their peers from public schools across the three areas of reading, mathematics and science. The performance difference was estimated to be equivalent to more than 2 years of schooling, meaning that, on average, the abilities of grade 6 students in public schools could just match the abilities of grade 4 students in private schools. However, private school education's advantage was largely reduced after adjustment was made for family socioeconomic status. Students from better-off households were more highly represented at private than public schools (MoEYS, 2018).

Disability is often overlooked as a source of inequity in the education system in Cambodia. There are no reliable data on the number of disabled students in schools (MoEYS, 2020a). The *National Strategic Development Plan 2018–2023* reported that there was no accurate information on orphans, vulnerable children and disabled children in Cambodia. However, based on the *National Strategic Plan on Orphans, Vulnerable Children and Disabled Children*, it was estimated that 14% of all



(a)



(b)

Fig. 3.10 The performance of the rich and poor students on Grade 6 National Assessment in 2016

children had a disability. According to EMIS, 11,934 children with disabilities were enrolled in primary schools in 2019–2020, of whom 4906 were female (MoEYS, 2020a, 2020b). Two approaches have been taken to improve access to school for children with disabilities. The first is to improve school facilities and teacher capacity to deal with special needs students in regular public schools. With support from the Disability Action Council, MoEYS piloted an inclusive education project for children with disabilities with one cluster school in 2000. It was expanded to 14 cluster schools and 80 schools, with training for 824 teachers, as of 2008.

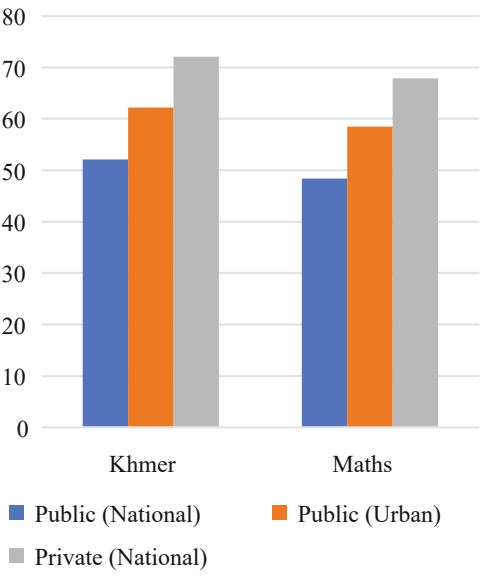


Fig. 3.11 Performance differences among the national-averaged public schools, national-averaged private schools and urban public schools

Besides, 42 integrated classes were created for deaf and blind students across 12 provinces (MoEYS, 2008). The latest data are unavailable. The second approach is to establish special schools for disabled children. Since 2018, five schools for disabled children and an institute for special education (training) have been transferred to the supervision of MoEYS. Previously run by a non-governmental organisation, it has been placed under management by MoEYS. As highlighted in Tables 3.5 and 3.6, those five special schools enrolled around 700 students annually between 2018 and 2020, of whom about 170 students had vision disabilities and the other 530 were deaf. In each special education school, there are around 30 teachers. The National Institute of Special Education is tasked to train teachers for special schools.

As reported in Cambodia's Education Response Plan to COVID-19 (MoEYS, 2020b), there is a large gap in primary education attainment and the out-of-school rate for children aged 14–16 with and without disabilities. In 2018, 73% of the children without disabilities, compared to only 44% of their peers with disabilities, completed primary school. There was a 7% out-of-school rate for non-disabled children, compared with a 57% out-of-school rate for children with disabilities. Inequitable access is seen in an adjusted disability index of 1.88, an indication that children with disabilities are almost two times more likely to be out of school than non-disabled children. Earlier studies by Kalyanpur (2011) and by Hayashi and Edwards (2015) indicated that insufficient attention was being given to the needs of disabled children. As an illustration, in the Education Sector Plan (ESP) for

Table 3.5 The number of students with disabilities enrolling in five special education schools operated by MoEYS

Years	Number of students					
	Blind		Deaf		Total	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
2018	176	56	529	195	705	251
2019	169	61	534	223	703	284
2020	167	59	555	212	722	271

Table 3.6 The number of teachers and teacher trainers by schools and majors

Schools/institute	Intellectual disabilities		Blind		Deaf		Total	Female
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female		
National Institute of Special Education	1	1	12	2	17	6	30	9
Phnom Penh Thmey Special Education School	1	0	13	7	17	11	31	18
Chbar Ampov Special Education School	0	0	0	0	22	10	22	10
Battambang Special Education School	1	0	11	5	12	6	24	11
Kampong Cham Special Education School	1	0	12	3	19	9	32	12
Siem Reap Special Education School	1	0	8	2	21	12	30	14
Total	5	1	56	19	108	54	169	74

Notes: The special schools intake the students from grade 1 to 12.
Sources: Department of Special Education (2020)

2019–2023, the only quantifiable leading outcome indicator was the training of 100 teachers in a special education diploma programme being offered by the National Institute of Special Education.[6] Overall, more attention was given to access for children with disabilities than to the quality of their education. Education quality for disabled students is not explored here.

[6]The ESP enlists the following activities and policy actions on special education: to develop Inclusive Education Action Plan 2019–2023; to provide scholarships for merits students, students from poor families and students with disabilities; to manage the National Institute of Special Education sustainably; to implement low hearing and vision programs and provide materials; to provide training on special education to teachers and student teachers; and to provide adequate teaching and learning materials to all students (including assistive devices to learners with special needs) (MoEYS, 2019b).

3.3.3 Management

Responsibility for the day-to-day management of a public primary school rests with the principal, who is supported by one or more vice-principals, depending on the school size. In 2017, to better define the qualities required in a principal, MoEYS developed a set of six school principal standards. The standards dealt with qualifications, competency and achievements, problem-solving skills and innovation, school leadership on administrative tasks, leadership on teaching and learning and school communication facilitation. It has proven to be difficult, though, to persuade principals to exercise innovative leadership. Most principals subscribe to a traditional view of the role as being purely administrative. They mainly focus on implementing directives from their superiors and following rules and regulations issued by MoEYS and other related regulatory instrumentalities. Besides, they are often not adequately trained to carry out the job because they are mainly trained to be teachers and are promoted among the teachers and thus have little knowledge and experience in school management and leadership.

To support school management teams, MoEYS established school support committees. They were given responsibility for (1) designing the school development plan, (2) enforcing school enrolment, (3) monitoring student learning, (4) collecting and managing funds, (5) developing and maintaining school infrastructure, (6) experience and life skills sharing, (7) irregularity prevention and (8) capacity building. In practice, however, and as reported earlier, they have been important only in fundraising and securing community resource contributions to schools. They have also contributed to enrolment campaigns. Significantly, they have rarely sought to coerce principals regarding school priorities and the utilisation of funds.

MoEYS has responsibility for appointing teachers at public primary schools. The process for doing so is intensely bureaucratic. MoEYS obtains an estimate from its provincial offices of the number of teachers required by all provinces. The Department of Personnel in MoEYS then sends the requests to the Ministry of Civil Service, which works with the Ministry of Economy and Finance on how many teachers MoEYS may recruit. This information is fed back to the Department of Personnel, which then sets about recruiting the candidates to be trained as teachers. The Teacher Training Department in MoEYS administers the entrance exam. It assigns the successful candidates to 1 or other of the 18 provincial teacher training centres (PTTCs) where they complete a 2-year programme to become qualified. All trainees tend to complete the training programme. Provincial offices of education then assign them to approved positions in schools. Success in obtaining an appointment to a preferred school is affected by academic performance when completing teacher training.

An appointment as a teacher or school principal is for a lifetime. Removing someone from a teaching or principal position can be difficult because the process involved is lengthy, centralised and bureaucratic. Based on the Law on Common Statutes of Civil Servants, if a primary teacher or school principal performs unethically or poorly, an ad hoc discipline committee, usually requiring endorsement

by the Minister, must be established to investigate to build a strong evidence base for disciplinary action. MoEYS must then conduct a further investigation. The punishment, including the dismissal of a teacher or principal, requires a directive signed by the Minister. Given the complexity of the process, the more usual punishment is a transfer to work in an administrative capacity in a school office or other part of the MoEYS bureaucracy.

Another issue concerns the absence of a formal annual result agreements and annual performance review process for teachers and school principals. Basing promotion and pay on demonstrated performance is challenging to implement in these circumstances. Salary levels for teachers and school principals are determined centrally, and the salary can be increased incrementally every year, depending upon the national budget. Promotion to the next level in the civil service is done once every 2 years and upon completion of a higher degree. Promotion results in a salary increase too, but the increase is very minimal. Primary school teachers and principals automatically receive lower wages than their counterparts in lower- and upper-secondary school. A long-term trend in the primary sector is for teachers to seek to transfer to urban schools, where opportunities to supplement family income are available. This trend has contributed to ongoing teacher shortages in rural schools.

3.3.4 Budget

National expenditure on education in Cambodia increased from $334.7 million in US dollars in 2014 to $827.7 million in US dollars in 2020 (see Fig. 3.12). However, national expenditure is beginning to decline in the primary education sector as more public funds flow to secondary and other education sectors. As shown in Fig. 3.13, development partners have also significantly reduced the extent of financial support available for primary education. Though the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank have funded several sector projects, most support is now going to the other sectors.

MoEYS has requested its development partners to jointly implement the ESP for 2019–2023 and improve student learning outcomes and ensure equity. Several development partners are working to support the core reform programmes. However, support in the form of grants started winding back when Cambodia achieved lower-middle-income status in 2015. The proportion of overseas development assistance for the primary education sector has reduced from 54% in 2010 to around 27% in 2020. In primary education, USAID, UNICEF (via the Global Partnership for Education financing), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) and the World Food Programme are currently key partners supporting early-grade reading and mathematics. In contrast, the World Bank and ADB support the secondary and tertiary sectors. Though there has been substantial support for the education sector, financial and technical support in the form of grants will be phased out in the next few years, according to a February 2020 mapping exercise on education support conducted by the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG).

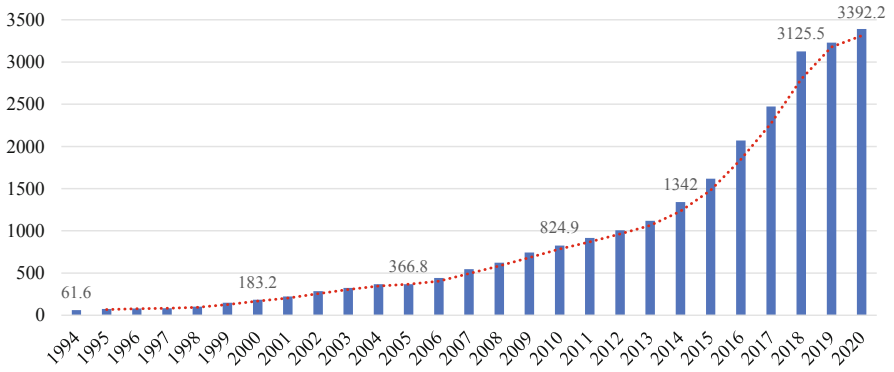


Fig. 3.12 Education budget in billion riels from 1994 to 2020. (Sources: Data on the budget from 1994 to 2013 taken from the presentation by the Minister of Education, Youth and Sports at the National Congress on Education, Youth and Sport in 2015 and the budget from 2014 to 2020 received from the Department of Finance (DoF)) (Note: US$1 ≈ 4060 riels (based on the exchange rate in October 2020))

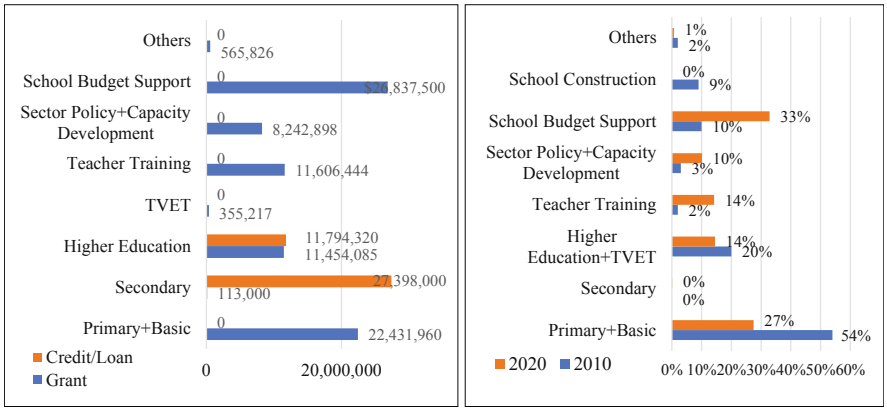


Fig. 3.13 The amount of budget in the form of grants and loan/credit for 2020 by sub-sectors and programmes (left) and percentage shares of the grants by sub-sectors and programmes in 2010 and 2020 (right). (Sources: Data in 2010 were provided by the Primary Education Department and data in 2020 from the database collected by the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG))

COVID-19 has adversely affected the national economic growth, which has already and will continue to hurt the education budget. Following the outbreak, the Government planned to trim the 2021 government budget to around $4 billion in US dollars, accounting for about a 50% drop from this 2020 budget, including an 11.3% drop for social affairs and a 6.4% drop for general administration. The Government will not allow any public instrumentality to spend beyond its permitted budget. This policy will undoubtedly have implications for expenditure on primary education.

3.4 Options for the Future

Cambodia now has no problem getting primary school-aged children into primary schools, as indicated by the current enrolment rate of 97.3%. This outcome reflects a strong commitment to the expansion of the sector over the past three decades. After the Khmer Rouge, almost all Cambodian intellectuals were killed or fled the country to seek political asylum abroad, and so the development of a primary education sector had to start again almost from scratch. Cambodia needed human resources to build the country; as a result, it had to expand access to education rapidly, based on the maxim of 'Those who know much teach those who know little and those who know little teach those who know nothing'. With some support from the Eastern bloc, Cambodia worked to expand access with an expectation that a generational cycle of illiteracy could be broken.

More recently, there has been a shift in emphasis to improving the quality of primary education. The transition is partly a result of the Government's commitment to improving its human resources and changes in the commitment of the international community, including the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4.1 on Quality Education, with primary school students needing to achieve at least Level 4 of UNICEF's Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM)[7] and lower-secondary students needing Level 2 of PISA-D. Other relevant indicators include the Human Capital Index launched in 2018 by the World Bank and the Learning Poverty Index established by the World Bank in 2019. Cambodia has committed to policy initiatives that include the *Teacher Policy Action Plan* in 2015 and the *Curriculum Framework for General Education and Technical Education* in 2016. Also recently developed are a revised Curriculum Framework and the ESP 2019–2023, both issued in 2018, and *Cambodia's Education Roadmap 2030*, published in 2019. The Government's commitment to education quality has been spelled out in its *National Strategic Development Plan 2019–2023* and its *Industrial Development Policy 2015–2025*. Education is identified as the top priority for the development plan. Parents are also demanding a better-quality primary education for their children. There was widespread dismay among parents when, in a more transparent final-year secondary school examination in 2014, only 25.73% of students could pass the exam. Previously, under conditions of much less transparency, pass rates of some 80% were the norm. The public is now demanding more from its school system. As the economy expands, better-off parents will turn more to national and

[7]There are various assessment tools used to measure the achievement of SDG4.1. These include Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA); Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA); Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE); People's Action for Learning (PAL); Programme of Analysis of Education Systems of CONFEMEN (PASEC); Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (PILNA); Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); Programme for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D); Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ); and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

international private schools if public primary education does not improve from a quality-related perspective.

While social demand for quality primary education increases, the budget available for the public primary schools is declining. More investment is going into other sectors in the national education system, and development partners are also making less aid available to the primary education sector. The education budget is being and will continue to be further reduced in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Innovation, transparent management of the sources and sound strategy are now critical. In this regard, three broad options are now advanced.

3.4.1 Strengthen the Utilisation of the Current High Share of Expenditure on Staff

As most of the current education expenditures are on the salaries of teachers and non-teaching staff and staff-related categories, MoEYS might seek to ensure that this large expenditure yields a high impact on education quality. This strategy would mean:

- Make teachers and school principals more accountable for student learning and drastically reduce the number of poorly performing teachers and school principals. MoEYS should strengthen its teacher and school principal evaluation system to ensure that teachers and school principals receive the support necessary to perform their work effectively. Merit-based incentives for improvement and performance-based management (tied to incentive schemes) should be introduced. Tracking teachers' absences seriously and monitoring their professional effectiveness are essential measures to reduce the amount of learning time wasted in schools and reduce the number of unwanted teachers. A strict assessment of student learning progress should also be introduced to enable teaching performance and school management to be objectively appraised.
- Tackle the existing uneven distribution of teachers. MoEYS needs to deploy new teachers to where they are required and redeploy surplus teachers. Deploying and transferring of primary school teachers must be strictly enforced and monitored. MoEYS should stop fast-tracking the upgrading of primary school teachers to basic education teachers because this practice results in a surplus of lower-secondary and a shortage of primary teachers.

Target the Operation Budget Targeted on School and Teacher Support

- Allocate more of the operating budget to in-service training for primary school teachers, with a better focus on developing knowledge and skills that will improve student learning outcomes. In-service training should be more of the form of structured coaching, mentoring and peer-supported learning. Its design

should be based on a competency framework that builds the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the teacher trainees from basic to advanced levels.
- Deploy education technology (EdTech) more effectively in teacher training, mentoring and coaching, as well as in teacher evaluation and the distribution of teaching and learning materials. More than 120,000 teachers need professional development, and MoEYS is not up to the task, and the budget can be limited. Investment needs to be more efficient, and it must be more sharply on boosting digital education development. The success of such a new initiative will depend on its careful design and change being adequately managed to ensure buy-in from the teachers.
- Provide budgetary incentives to enable high-performing teachers to produce teaching and learning materials for sharing with all teachers and to mentor other peers and for the effective school principals to share their knowledge and experience through such innovative means as structured, long-term coaching and mentoring of their peer school principals.

Generate Additional Funding for the Sector

- Increase community participation. Parents and communities stand ready to provide financial support to public primary schools. However, they do not trust schools to spend the funds transparently and in ways that will improve children's learning. School-based management as currently practised in the Secondary Education Improvement Project is a reasonable means to attract more investment from parents and communities, alumni and local authorities, as it helps create trust in those stakeholders by engaging them in the operation of schools, showing them transparent processes of managing income and expenditures and, most importantly, producing concrete results from the financial contributions made by parents and communities. Such an arrangement should be implemented across the primary education sector.
- Enhance and regulate public-private partnerships. Private primary schools have been mushrooming in the sector, and MoEYS should have policies to encourage more of them in urban and well-off areas and regulate their quality adequately. MoEYS should then use the savings to develop public primary education in rural and hard-to-reach areas. MoEYS must first ensure quality assurance mechanisms in and for private primary schools work effectively. MoEYS, with support from the Government, should push for the collection of the income tax from private schools. If income tax is waived, then these schools should be required to contribute an equivalent amount to pay the tuition fees for attendance at these schools by underprivileged or disadvantaged children, for example, through the provision of equity-based scholarships to ensure equitable access to quality primary education.

The development of primary education in Cambodia has come a long way, especially in terms of access expansion. That almost all primary-school-aged children can now access primary education amid resource shortage and in the aftermaths of a disastrous genocide is no small feat. The genuine commitment and shared

contribution from the Government, development partners and parents should be duly admitted. Amid decreasing external financing on account of Cambodia having graduated from being a low-income country, the Government will need to continue its commitment to maintain this achievement and to ensure successful completion of primary education and mass transition to the lower-secondary school level and beyond.

Despite progress made in expanding access, improving primary education quality and equity remains a significant concern requiring urgent attention. Achieving success in these two areas is attainable and will require more strategic, participatory and systematic interventions. Good national planning, careful execution of the plan at all levels of the bureaucracy and strategic investment from the Government will hold the key, and sustained support and meaningful engagement of teachers, school principals, parents, communities and private education businesses will be the core driving forces. To avoid the recurrence of its disastrous past and to create a harmonious, civilised nation, Cambodia has no choice but to develop its most important natural resource: its citizens. This commitment will rely heavily on its strategic investment in basic education. A national champion of reform urgency and transformative leaders at all bureaucracy levels will help speed up the reform.

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