

Education reforms in Cambodia: issues and concerns

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Received: 23 January 2006 / Accepted: 7 February 2007 / Published online: 14 March 2007
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Abstract This paper discusses the key issues and concerns in the Cambodian government's efforts to implement three priority education policies for 2006–2010: ensure equitable access to education; increase quality and efficiency of the education services; and promote institutional development and capacity building for decentralisation. This paper identifies the prevailing problems of low enrolment, high dropout rates and high repetition rates of students in public schools. The paper further explores some concerns which may hinder the government from achieving the desired outcomes in the priority policies: the high opportunity cost of schooling; the heavy education costs due to teachers charging informal fees from students; and the localised socio-cultural setting where transparency, accountability and meritocracy are difficult to achieve.

Keywords Cambodia · Concerns · Education policy · Issues · Reforms · Decentralisation

1 Introduction

Cambodia has a long and eventful history, harking back to the Khmer Empire in the ninth century. It became a French colony in mid nineteenth century until 1953 when King Sihanouk became the ruler for the next two decades. The education system during this period was significantly improved as King Sihanouk embarked on an ambitious plan to build many schools and universities. General Lon Nol led a coup d'état and took over power in 1970. But his success was short-lived as he was defeated by the Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot in 1975. For the next five years, at least 1.7 million people out of about seven million died, including most of the educated population. Backed by Vietnam and other socialist bloc countries, Heng Samrin defected the

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Khmer Rouge and ushered in the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) from 1979 to 1989. Civil conflicts and political unrest continued until 1991 when the Paris Peace Accords was signed which paved the way for free elections organised by the United Nations in 1993. Subsequently millions of dollars from international financial institutions and external donor agencies were poured into Cambodia in the early 1990s. But aid was temporarily suspended due to political struggles between the two coalition prime ministers, Hun Sen of the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) and Prince Norodom Ranariddh of the FUNCINPEC party. Another election was organised in 1998 which led to Hun Sen's party winning the majority votes and he assuming the office of Prime Minister, a position he still holds today.

Basic Education (Grades 1–9) in Cambodia comprises nine years and refers to three stages: Primary Grades 1–3; Primary Grades 4–6; and Lower Secondary Grades 7–9. Upper Secondary Education (Grades 10–12) comprises three years and is divided into two stages: Grade 10; and Grades 11–12. The Cambodian government has stated its commitment to achieve Education For All (EFA) by ensuring that all Cambodian children and youth have equal opportunity to access education by 2015 (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005). The Constitution of Cambodia states that free primary and secondary education shall be provided to all citizens in public schools. The constitution further obligates the state to “protect and upgrade citizens' rights to quality education at all levels” and “take necessary steps for quality education to reach all citizens” (Chapter VI, Articles 65 & 68). The overriding aim of schooling in Cambodia is the development of human capital for the economic progress of Cambodia. The focus on developing human capital is evident in the vision and mission of MoEYS (MoEYS, 2005, p. 1):

The MoEYS vision is to establish and develop human resources of the very highest quality and ethics in order to develop a knowledge-based society within Cambodia.

The MoEYS mission: In order to achieve the above vision, MoEYS has the mission of leading, managing and developing the Education, Youth and Sport sector in Cambodia in responding to the socio-economic and cultural development needs and the reality of globalisation.

The emphasis of MoEYS on the development of human capital in Cambodia is unsurprising, given the global efforts in many countries to shift its economic focus from a strategy of industrial-age production to that of innovation and enterprise (Ng & Tan, 2006). This economic strategy is about knowledge creation and exploitation, and an attitude shift from the dependence on a technological status quo to the pursuit of new opportunities to improve it, or discover new and wider application of it. It is believed that the ability of a country's citizens to enhance their know-how and market it in the global market has a direct impact on the survival and prosperity of the country (Drucker, 1993; Ohmae, 1990).

In its effort to promote capacity building and human resources development, MoEYS aims to impart technical, scientific and entrepreneurship skills to the students. Such a view reflects the modernisation theory, which links a country's development to economic growth. This theory, advocated by The World Bank for Third-World nation-states such as Cambodia, holds that human resources development, coupled with free trade and minimum state intervention, are the priorities for these countries to progress (Ayres, 2000). Since 2001, the Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MoEYS) has published several documents that outline the government's Education

Strategic Plan (ESP). To date, there has been three Education Strategic Plans: ESP 2001–2005; ESP 2004–2008; and ESP 2006–2010 (MoEYS, 2001, 2004, 2005). This paper discusses the key issues and concerns in the Cambodian government's efforts to implement three priority education policies for 2006–2010, and explores the prevailing problems of low enrolment, high dropout rates and repetition rates of students in public schools. Research for this paper is based on literature review, document analysis, and interviews conducted with a group of Cambodian university lecturers, school leaders, teachers and students in Cambodia in 2006.

2 Education in Cambodia

Since the 1990s, external donors such as UNICEF and International Red Cross have helped to rebuild 6,000 educational institutions and trained thousands of teachers (Dunnet, 1993, quoted in Dy & Ninomiya, 2003). Between 1993 and 2005, donor agencies have given US\$ 5 billion to Cambodia, including US\$ 504 million pledged in 2005 Matthews (2006). Two major donors are World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB) which have a combined basic education portfolio of nearly US\$ 73 million for the period 2005–2010. With help of the donor community, the education budget as a part of total government spending in Cambodia increased from between 8.4% and 9.6% during the period 1994–1997 to 12% in 2002 (Pheng, Savonn & Soly, 2001; World Bank & ADB, 2003, both cited in The World Bank, 2005, pp. 71–72). There are about 113 organisations supporting 233 education projects in Cambodia at an estimated cost of US\$ 225 million in 2003–2008 (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005). An example of such a partnership is the implementation of education reform through the Sector-wide Approach (SWAp) between MoEYS and UNICEF (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005). The focus of educational reforms in the 1990s was supply-side interventions such as building more schools, providing teaching materials and training for teachers. For example, primary schools in Takeo, Kampot and Kandal provinces have received cash grants through the Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP) (The World Bank, 2005). But the spotlight shifted to demand-side interventions in the 2000s through programmes such as Priority Action Programme (PAP) which aims to reduce the educational costs for poor Cambodian families.

Since MoEYS' first Education Strategic Plan (ESP) in 2001, there has been encouraging signs in the enrolment, repetition and dropout rates between 2000 and 2005. Table 1 shows that the enrolment rates for all grades and for female students have gone up since 2001, with the greatest improvement in the enrolment rate for primary level in remote areas. Table 2 shows that there are slight improvements in the promotion and repetition rates from Grades 1 to 3 for the total population as well as for female students.

Despite the good progress made in the enrolment, repetition and dropout rates between 2000 and 2005, it is important to note that MoEYS has not met most of the targets set for 2004–2005. Table 1 shows that the enrolment rates in 2004–2005 for most levels have fallen short of the targets set for the same period. The high dropout rate is seen in the enrolment rates dropping drastically from 91.9% in the primary level to 26.1% in the lower secondary level, and further to 9.3% in the upper secondary level. Table 2 shows that the grade promotion rates are lower than the targets, and the repetition rates are much higher than the targets for 2004–2005. The specific challenge for the government is to reduce the dropout rate especially at Grade 3 so that the students can progress to upper primary education from Grade 4 onwards.

Table 1 Actual achievement against target on equitable access

Indicator	Actual 2000–01		Actual 2004–05		Target 2004–05	
	Total (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)	Female (%)
Admission rate	76.4(%)	74.9(%)	81.0(%)	79.5(%)	90(%)	90(%)
Net enrolment ratio						
Primary: nationwide	83.8	80.7	91.9	90.7	92	91
Primary: urban area	86.4	83.2	91.6	90.4	95	94
Primary: rural area	84.1	81.0	92.4	91.2	92	91
Primary: remote area	62.3	58.2	82.5	79.4	76	75
Lower secondary: nationwide	16.6	13.7	26.1	24.8	40	39
Lower secondary: urban	29.5	26.8	41.3	40.5	50	49
Lower secondary: rural area	14.1	11.0	23.7	22.2	35	34
Lower secondary: remote area	1.2	1.0	3.9	4.1	15	15
Upper secondary	7.7	5.4	9.3	7.9	15	14

Source: MoEYS (2005)

Table 2 Actual achievement against target on quality and efficiency

Indicator	Actual 2000–01		Actual 2004–05		Target 2004–05	
Pupil teacher ratio						
- Primary	53.3		53.5		51.0	
- Lower secondary	18.3		27.7		26.0	
- Upper secondary	25.3		29.4		28.0	
Promotion rate	Total (1999–00)	Female	Total (2003–04)	Female	Total	Female
Grade 1	60.9%	60.9%	64.8%	65.4%	88%	88%
Grade 2	71.5%	72.4%	73.4%	74.8%	89%	89%
Grade 3	73.9%	75.0%	77.3%	78.9%	88%	89%
Repetition rate	Total (1999–00)	Female	Total (2003–04)	Female	Total	Female
Grade 1	28.5%	27.5%	23.6%	22.4%	6%	6%
Grade 2	17.6%	16.4%	16.1%	14.4%	5%	4%
Grade 3	15.0%	13.5%	13.2%	11.3%	5%	5%

Source: MoEYS (2005)

The dropout and repetition rates are so high that it is estimated that a child will take an average of 19 student years to complete primary school (Duggan, 1996; Thomas, 2002). Overall, 11% of children do not attend school in Cambodia, 56% of children between 15 and 18 years of age who enter school complete primary school, and 35% of those who start school actually complete the basic education cycle (The World Bank, 2005). Only about 30% of the adult population has some school level completed, and the illiteracy rate is 63% (The World Bank, 2005).

The latest document, Education Strategic Plan 2006–2010, sets out MoEYS' priority policies and strategies for five years of reform implementation (MoEYS, 2005). Three priority policies have been announced: (1) ensuring equitable access to education; (2) increasing quality and efficiency of the education services; and (3) promoting institutional development and capacity building for decentralisation. To ensure equitable access to education, MoEYS aims to achieve universal nine years of basic education with the targets set at ensuring that all children complete primary schooling by 2010 and basic schooling by 2015. It also hopes to eliminate gender inequality between urban and rural areas in basic, upper secondary and tertiary education. Plans to help students from poor families include providing scholarships to them, and constructing more school buildings. Another target group is young people aged between 12 and 24 years who currently are school drop-outs or have limited access to post-primary education and training opportunities. MoEYS aims to reduce the financial costs of education for parents by increasing operational budgets for schools and teachers' salaries. To reduce repetition and dropout rates in all grades, the ministry states that it will revise the school curriculum, introduce more effective remedial classes, and impose regular student assessment and standards monitoring. To ensure teacher provision in remote and disadvantaged areas, efforts will be taken to recruit teacher trainees from these areas, and provide incentives for teachers to work there. In order to create more quality upper secondary education based on ability, new merit-driven support programmes for post-basic students from poor families, girls, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups will be introduced.

The second priority policy is to increase the quality and efficiency of the education services. A major proposal is to increase teacher remuneration and introduce quality oriented priority programmes in areas such as teaching materials, teacher development and service efficiency. Linking to these programmes are measures to ensure that there is a robust system of accountability by staff, improved transparency and more emphasis on achieving results. MoEYS hopes that a climate of accountability will be created where teachers are paid equitably through their performance. The ministry aims to train 10,000 new teachers at all levels, improve pre-service and in-service teacher development, and introduce staff performance appraisal system at every level of the education system. Another key strategy is to implement a new curriculum policy for primary and secondary education curriculum which focuses on achieving learning achievement standards and life skills for the students. Life skills are defined as "the intellectual, personal, interpersonal and vocational skills that enable informed decision-making, effective communication, and coping and self-management skills that contribute to a healthy and productive life" (MoEYS, 2004, p. 8). The minimum standards of student achievement for Grades 3, 6 and 9 will be implemented nationwide and the results of the yearly standard testing will be publicly disseminated by mid 2008 onwards.

MoEYS also aims to consolidate and extend measures that contribute towards institutional development and capacity building for decentralisation. This involves

greater delegation of authority and responsibilities to provincial, district, commune and school levels. To achieve this, the ministry hopes to increase public/private partnership and strengthen governance, accounting and internal audit systems. The ministry has announced the adoption of the Education Law by the end of 2006, which aims at improving predictability for medium term financial planning and decentralised management, and improve governance and regulatory systems by increasing transparency and accountability of resources. It is planned that institutional and financial reforms for higher education will be improved to allow greater operational autonomy and income generating authority for higher education institutions.

3 Key issues and concerns in Cambodia

The policies and strategies under ESP 2006–2010 appear to signal MoEYS' resolve to reform the education system in Cambodia. The ministry has focused on the target groups that need the most assistance to gain access to education: students from poor families, girls, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups. Strategies to achieve equitable access to education such as increasing the school's operational budgets for schools, deploying more teachers to remote and disadvantaged areas, and providing more quality upper secondary education, if effectively and consistently implemented, will encourage more children to be enrolled in school and complete at least nine years of education. Similarly, strategies to increase the quality and efficiency of the education services, especially the plans to increase teacher remuneration and roll out quality oriented priority programmes for teaching materials and teacher development are much needed by teachers in Cambodia. A 2003 qualitative study indicates that the main sources of teachers' dissatisfaction are low pay and poor supply of instructional materials (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005). A new curriculum policy with an emphasis on achieving learning achievement standards and life skills for the students also serves to develop the students holistically. The move to promote decentralisation of education through institutional development and capacity building will complement the first two priority policies to enable better management of resources, as well as greater autonomy, authority and responsibilities at the local levels.

Although the priority policies and the corresponding strategies are pertinent and helpful to the educational needs of Cambodia, there are some issues and concerns related to the successful implementation of the priority policies. A key concern in achieving equitable access to education is the high opportunity cost of schooling for many Cambodian families, especially the poor living in rural areas. Despite more than two decades of external aid, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of US\$ 320. While MoEYS has announced plans to offer scholarships especially to students from poor families, this is not enough to encourage the parents to send their children to school. These parents usually need their children to help out in the farm, or find a job to support the family. These parents are simply unable to bear the opportunity cost of losing the income their children may generate for the family by working, if their children were to attend school. Even if the children from poor families are enrolled in a primary school, they may not be able to complete their primary school education as many of them are unable to cope with studying full-time and working part-time after school to support the family. A vice-principal of a primary school in Cambodia who was interviewed said that fatigue due to part-time work as well as frequent absenteeism from school due to work during school hours have led to children from poor families in her school dropping

out of school altogether. This is in spite of the scholarships offered to them, which are enough to cover the educational costs, but insufficient to meet the daily needs of the family. A number of parents from the villages also discourage their children from continuing their study after upper secondary level as they think that their children will not be able to find a job, given the high unemployment rate of university graduates in Cambodia. There are, therefore, economic and socio-cultural factors hindering children from poor families from studying and completing their nine years of basic education.

A related issue which contributes towards the high dropout and repetition rates is the widespread practice of teachers charging money for supplementary tutoring and other contributions. Such a practice “creates an environment potentially conducive to exploitation, where teachers deliberately cover only part of the standard syllabi during mainstream classes in order to promote demand for their after-school private lessons” (The World Bank, 2005, p. 65). Students who cannot afford to pay the teachers are likely to fail their exams, repeat the grade and drop out of school without completing the primary cycle of six years. This prevalent practice has been attributed to the low pay of teachers. Interviews with Cambodian teachers in 2006 inform us that teachers teaching in urban areas are paid about US \$ 35–40 per month in primary schools, US \$ 40 per month in lower secondary schools, and US \$ 60 in upper secondary schools. The official teacher’s pay is not enough to feed a typical Cambodian family with five members; it is estimated that a teacher needs a minimum salary of US \$ 150 (in the urban areas) and US \$ 100 (in the rural areas) to support a family. So many Cambodian teachers must look for a second job to supplement their teacher’s pay. For teachers teaching popular subjects such as Khmer language, mathematics, biology and chemistry, they will usually give extra classes to their students after formal school hours for supplementary income. Primary school teachers typically charge about 300–500 riels per subject per day, which amounts to about US \$ 8–10 per month for every student taught. Secondary school teachers charge US \$ 5 per subject per month, and US \$ 20 for 3 or 4 subjects per month for every student taught. Experienced teachers teaching in urban areas can earn up to US \$ 300 per month from the supplementary tutoring. For teachers teaching subjects such as history and social studies which are perceived as less important, they usually earn supplementary income by selling worksheets, exam answers and tidbits to their students. The cost of schooling is especially steep at over US \$ 250 per year for students at Grade 9, due mainly to tutoring charges and opportunity costs (The World Bank, 2005). The perennial need for students to pay the teachers means that the cost of schooling is extremely high, amounting to 79% of the per capita non-food expenditure of the poorest 20% of the population (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005).

The practice of charging informal fees by teachers also affects the quality and efficiency of the education services offered by teachers. There is a perception among the Cambodians that a number of Cambodian teachers do not care whether their students are learning during formal school hours. One Cambodian who graduated from primary and secondary public schools in Cambodia said: “They did not teach us to have a good morality. Even if a student is absent from class, he will still get an A if he pays the teacher. . . . Teachers sold the answers to the test. If you want to pass, you should buy.” The report by MoEYS and UNICEF notes the “lack of cooperation and communication between teachers and pupils/parents”, and adds that this “poor relationship between teachers and the community is partly due to the collection of ‘illegal’ fees from pupil by teachers, which is in turn a reaction to low teacher salaries”

(MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005, p. 11). The report also points out that the low pay of the teachers contributes to poor teaching quality, which in turn leads to poor learning achievement of children. Given this context, MoEYS' efforts to revise the school curriculum, introduce more effective remedial classes, and impose regular student assessment and standards monitoring may be desirable but difficult to implement. As long as teachers continue to do "real" teaching during the supplementary classes where students have to pay to attend, and pressure students to buy extra worksheets and exam answers from them, no amount of remedial classes and regular assessment and standards will contribute towards reducing the high dropout and repetition rates in schools. Although the collection of fees and contributions is officially banned by the ministry, many teachers are still practising it, using the school premises for their tutoring with the acknowledgement of the school leaders. In other words, there is no climate of accountability on the part of the school management and teaching staff—another challenge that may impede the effective implementation of the education reforms. Cambodians interviewed have observed that there is a decline in *sammaki*—solidarity and community spirit among the Cambodians. Despite improvements in political stability, living standards and increased educational opportunities, Cambodia has yet to recover from decades of war and conflicts. It is still plagued by poverty, corruption and violence in a culture of impunity. Community structures are broken and social cohesion has been replaced by a deep distrust at all levels of society (Morris, 2000).

Related to the absence of a climate of accountability in schools is the difficulty in ensuring transparency and promotion based on meritocracy. The traditional socio-political culture is one that is hierarchical, bureaucratic and centralised, with promotions largely based on one's seniority, wealth and social standing. Commenting on the planning and implementation of education reforms in Cambodia, a report by MoEYS and UNICEF notes that the planning of reform agenda has been pursued "mostly in a top-down and centralised manner, and Ministry staff at lower levels have been implementing reform initiatives without full awareness of the rationale for reforms—particularly at districts, communes, school clusters and schools" (MoEYS & UNICEF, 2005, p. 17). Such a practice is reflective of the patronage and clientele system inherited from the Angkor era where the Angkor kings adopted the Indianised concept of *devaraja* (God-King) (Ayres, 2000). This patronage and clientele system rests on the notion of "the-winner-takes-all" attitude where there is no tradition of real power sharing (Morris, 2000; Pellini, 2005). Based on this top-down approach, the patron is accountable to no one but himself, and any question from his clients is seen as an act of disloyalty. Instead, the ruled are expected to maintain the patronage relationships by accepting the patron's authority. The patron strives to maintain his network of clients in order to neutralise his opponents and keep the loyalty of his followers by funding them. Leaders who are at the top of a pyramidal structure of relationships can elicit bribes from both domestic and international sources (Roberts, 2002). Such a system, where people secure jobs and favours from their patron, interferes with the goal of having a system with transparency and accountability. It also makes it difficult for MoEYS to effectively implement a staff performance appraisal system at every level based on the individual performance of teachers. Teachers who are more capable and deserving of promotion may be sidelined by the school management who prefers to maintain the existing hierarchy of power based on seniority and status.

4 Conclusion

This paper discussed the key issues and concerns in the Cambodian government's efforts to achieve three priority education policies for 2006–2010: ensure equitable access to education; increase quality and efficiency of the education services; and promote institutional development and capacity building for decentralisation. This paper pointed out the prevailing problems of low enrolment, high dropout and high repetition rates of students in public schools. The paper further identified some concerns which may hinder the government from achieving the desired outcomes in the priority policies: the high opportunity cost of schooling; the heavy education costs due to teachers charging informal fees from students; and the localised socio-cultural setting under the influence of the patronage and clientele system which makes transparency, accountability and meritocracy difficult to achieve. Any attempt to achieve the priority policies defined by MoEYS needs to take into consideration the economic, social and cultural constraints in Cambodia. To encourage more poor families to enrol their children in schools, and to keep them in school for at least nine years, the government needs to address the issue of high opportunity cost for schooling in particular, and the problem of poverty among the Cambodians in general. As for teachers charging informal and illegal fees, the government has to increase the teacher remuneration to at least the minimum wage needed for a Cambodian teacher to support his or her family. The ministry also needs to go beyond the rhetoric of abolishing extra charges by teachers to effectively enforce the ban in schools nationwide. Achieving this requires more comprehensive strategies as it is linked to broader civil service reform constraints, involving “a deeper teacher remuneration overhaul inclusive of teaching service conditions, minimum standards, and performance-based incentives within a sustainable budget framework” (The World Bank, 2005, p. 7). A robust quality assurance system is needed for the Cambodian government to set the national standards for schools. An example of such a system is the School Excellence Model (SEM) introduced to Singapore schools. The SEM is a comprehensive quality management system for schools to do self-appraisal, with an emphasis on value-addedness, leadership, staff management and strategic planning (Ng, 2003; Tan & Ng, *in press*). Such a model encourages schools to be excellent schools where the leaders lead staff, devise strategies and deploy resources, all of which are systematically fed into clearly identified student-focused processes for which targets are set and performance monitored and managed. These “enablers” then produce results in staff and stakeholder satisfaction, thereby contributing to a quality and holistic education. The results obtained should meet the school's targets, are sustained over a number of years, and show positive trends. Other strategies to promote greater transparency, integrity and recognition based on merit are required before the priority policies identified by MoEYS can be achieved. Such strategies need to be accompanied by a major change of mindset—the key stakeholders of education, led by the government officers, must demonstrate their determination to create and sustain a conducive political and social culture to promote greater accountability, meritocracy and community spirit in the country.

Considering the endemic economic, social and cultural realities in Cambodia, MoEYS faces an uphill task in bringing its proposed education reforms stated in the Education Strategic Plan 2006–2010 to fruition.

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