

PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA TODAY¹



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Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education.

- John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

Nations will march towards their greatness in the direction given by its education.

Nations will soar if its education soars; will regress if it regresses. Nations will fall and sink in darkness if education is corrupted or completely abandoned.

- Simón Bolívar (1783-1830, a South American Liberator)

Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them.

- Dalai Lama

If Cambodia is to achieve the lofty goals as quoted above, it is imperative that Cambodia establishes a high standard of quality and sustainable education system with equal access to learning to all citizens. Choosing and implementing the proper strategy of the developmental path to produce graduates² with the virtue, knowledge, skills and qualifications needed in the market and technology driven environment will be the key to this noble endeavor.

Introduction

The education sector in Cambodia has come a long way and achieved a number of impressive accomplishments following year zero, almost three decades of civil

² Education Law, 2007, Article 18: Higher Education shall teach learners to have complete personality and characteristic and promote the scientific, technical, cultural and social researches in order to achieve capacity, knowledge, skill, morality, inventive and creative ideas and entrepreneurial spirit to the development of the country.

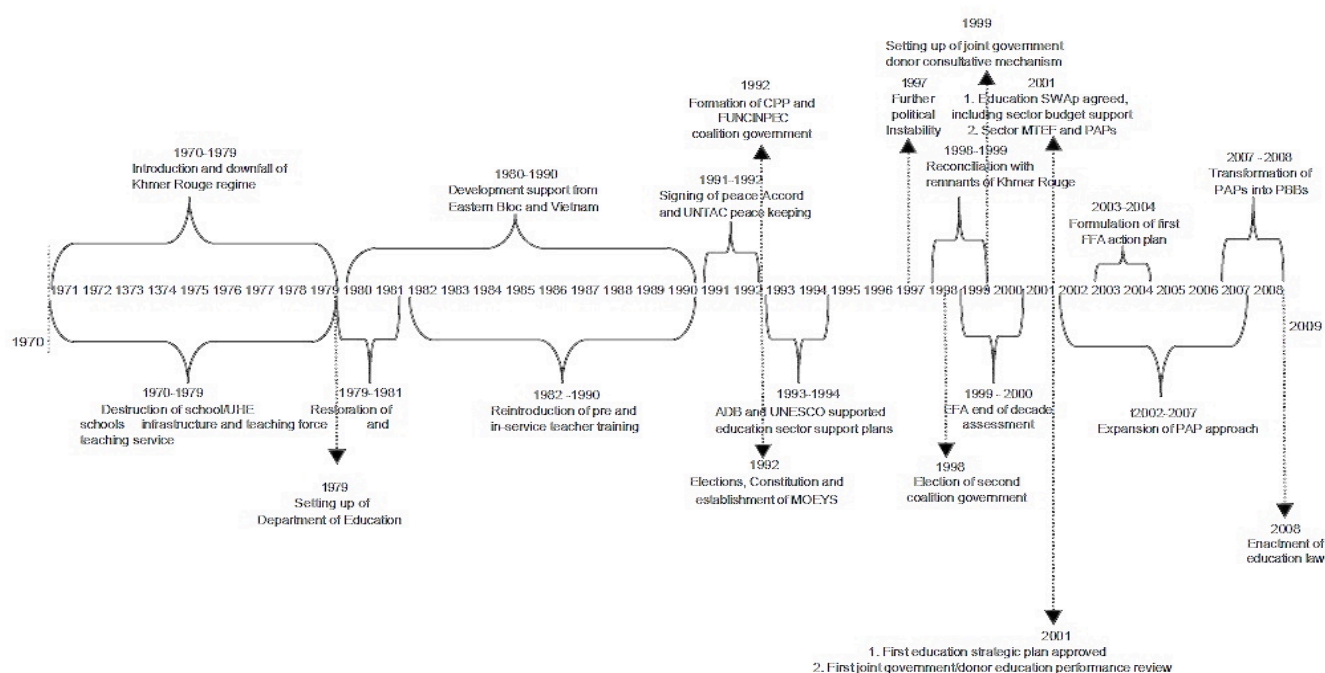
conflicts, internal strife, political instability and backwardness. It is noteworthy that the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) through the establishment of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) in 1992, together with the international partners and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has done a remarkable job in rehabilitating a dysfunctional education system and rebuilding a shattered economy. The transformation of the basic education system that includes solid growth in the number of schools and universities, great strides towards universal primary education and gender parity, and strong participations in elementary, secondary and tertiary education should be commended. The need to develop human capital for both economic and social benefit has been crucial to the Royal Government's strategy to promote new and sustainable sources of economic growth as well as improved living standards. Still, more fundamental challenges remain such as ensuring equitable access to education, improving quality of education and efficiency at all levels from preschool through higher education, learning environment, teacher education and training, decentralization, good governance, gender, and advocating pro-poor education. Moreover, the recent global economic slowdown since 2008 has prevented many disadvantaged children from starting school and more to drop out before completing primary education. Failure to reach the marginalized has denied many people especially in the rural and remote areas their right to education³. There is an immediate need to better educate and train more people in order to promote more efficient and superior cadres to build up a stronger nation with an economic self-sustainability. An education that supports the development of morality and critical thinking skills will be increasingly important for all Cambodian students to restore the identity of the Khmer people from one of victimhood to one of capacity, pride and honor, and also to compete regionally and globally.

This paper begins by identifying the near eradication of education in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge epoch and will highlight the progress up to the present day (Figure 1: Chronological map shows the influence of the political event and the education sector by Euro Trends, 2009). The paper will then examine the challenges of the educational reforms in which both the beneficial and the adverse effects will be

³ UNESCO, Education For All Global Report 2010, Summary: Reaching Out the Marginalized.

presented. As this paper will show, the national strategy to promote new long term and sustainable sources of economic growth as well as improving living standards is based on developing human resources and building human capacity, thus improving the overall quality of education.⁴ Additional transformations in the educational sector are necessary for Cambodia to tackle the challenges of the 21st century, including those of globalization and the achievement the Millennium Development Goals.

Figure 1: Chronological Map of Key Governance and Sector Events



Source: Study on Governance Challenges for Education in Fragile Situations by European Union, Synthesis Report, December 2009, Euro Trends.

The Near Eradication of Education in Cambodia

For three years, eight months, and twenty days (17 April 1975 - 7th January 1979), the Khmer Rouge completely isolated Cambodia from the international community, decimated the education system and created a severe disruption. With the goals of transforming the country into an egalitarian, self reliant, form of utopian agrarian socialism, the regime obliterated everything that promoted capitalism and

⁴ Ministry of Planning, National Strategic Development Plan 2006-2010.

class oppression. The Khmer Rouge leaders deliberately eliminated currency, abolished education and systematically destroyed key social-cultural institutions including family structure, Buddhism, and economic activities. Hospitals, factories, schools and universities were closed, books were burned, libraries were destroyed, and a majority of Cambodia's brightest, talented, and most educated individuals were either eliminated or fled the country (Chandler, 2000). Anyone suspected of being an "intellectual" was tortured and most often executed. Even wearing glasses was considered enough to warrant such treatment⁵. Hinton explains in his article "Truth, Representation and The Politics of Memory after Genocide" presented at the conference on 26-29 October 2005 in Valberg Sweden, the Khmer Rouge believed that the former education system corrupted the minds of the young and that the best education was political indoctrination and learning through 'struggle' on the economic 'front lines'. Like their Maoist counterpart in China, manual labor and political viability were better than knowledge. They affirmed that 'the spade is your pen, the rice field your paper' and 'if you want to pass your baccalaureate exam, you must build dams and canal' (Hinton, 2005). As a result of brutality and an attempt to build this new type of utopia, almost two million Cambodian people died in all, either by torture and execution or by malnutrition and disease.⁶ Although the atrocious regime was officially over, the effects are still prevalent in the mind of the people. Destruction of institutional education such as books, buildings, and other educational resources were widespread (King, 2003). Cambodia was left in ruins and tragedy in term of human resources. It is estimated that 75 percent of all teachers, 96 percent of university students and 67 percent of all primary pupils were killed (Clayton, 1998).

The legacy of the Khmer Rouge left a deep scar and a long-term effect that resulted in a generation of illiterate children.⁷ The entire education system needed to be reconstructed and rebuilt from the ashes to prepare and produce citizens to fit in a knowledge-based and technology-driven economy. No doubt there were many daunting challenges, but there were also long-term opportunities for Cambodia to move forward and to rebuild the future of its people. This development can be best

⁵ Personal fieldwork interview with the Khmer Rouge family survivors at Koh Thom, March 2011.

⁶ Documentation Center of Cambodia

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Cambodia

characterized in gradual phases, from post conflict early recovery to the reconstruction and development period.

Early Recovery and Restoration Period 1979-1989

From 1979 to 1989, education in Cambodia began a slow comeback. After coming to power and given the destruction of the Democratic Kampuchea regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) faced enormous reconstruction problems. With the help of the Vietnamese and its allies in the Eastern bloc countries, the PRK regime embarked on a massive task to redevelop, restore and expand the education sector by opening schools throughout Cambodia, followed by a number of universities. Notably, the Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy reopened in 1980 with a six-year course of study; the Chamcar Daung Faculty of Agriculture opened in 1985; followed by the Kampuchea-USSR Friendship Technical Institute (a technical and engineering curricula), the Institute of Languages opened in 1981 (Vietnamese, German, Russian, and Spanish); the Institute of Commerce, the Center for Pedagogical Education in 1980; and the School of Fine Arts. In education, the Eastern bloc countries provided assistance to the government in terms of professors, books, teaching materials, equipment, and thousand of scholarships for advanced study at universities.⁸ In 1999, Clayton reports that 2,650 Cambodians completed degree programs between 1983 and 1989 from the Soviet Union, East Germany, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Cuba. According to Clayton again, by 1990, Cambodia's institutes of higher education had graduated 977 doctors, dentists, or pharmacists, 2,196 senior secondary teachers, 1,481 foreign language specialists, 474 technical engineers, 400 economists, and 184 agricultural engineers. The Vietnamese and Eastern-bloc assistance in producing this first generation of tertiary graduates was instrumental to the early development of human resources. Finally, details from a study on governance challenges for education in Cambodia's fragile situation by Euro Trends in 2009 stated that pupil enrolment rose from zero to 1.6 million, a nationwide system of schools was created and the teaching service was restored, including through voluntary service and an extensive program of

⁸ <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/Archives/2.1/21clayton.pdf>.

accelerated learning.⁹

Under the PRK regime, the basic education system was developed and based closely on the Vietnamese model. The structures and procedures were highly centralized using the top down approach to teaching and learning (Ledgerwood, 1996). According to Martin in 1986, the terms for primary and secondary education have been changed into direct translations of the Vietnamese terms.¹⁰ The primary cycle had four instead of six classes, the first level of secondary education had three instead of four classes, and the second level of secondary education had three classes. Study Vietnamese language was compulsory from the beginning of the secondary cycle.¹¹ Another example, according to Clayton in 1999, the tertiary students were required to complete the five courses on the “objectives of socialism” taught mostly by Cambodian trained in Vietnam.¹²

The lack of human resources, teaching curricula, educational materials, equipment, libraries and laboratories compounded with budget constraint hindered the progress of educational redevelopment. The government attempted to enroll as many students as possible at schools using “*those who know more teach those who know less,*” (Ledgerwood, 1996). A notable effort was made by the PRK government to identify and recruit former intellectuals, professors, teachers and bureaucrats to enter the field of education. Everyone was encouraged to participate in this challenging endeavor to help rebuild the country. Survivors with any level of education were staffed as teachers. Those potential teachers received minimal training, and then assigned teaching jobs. To fill the void, the Vietnamese provided aid and sent thousands of development personnel, a significant number of whom worked in education (Clayton, 1999). In term of education infrastructure, despite 90 percent of schools’ buildings were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime, classes were often taught in huts, thatched buildings and sometimes under the trees.¹³

During that time, while the system of education was geared on enrolling as

⁹ Study on Governance challenges for Education in Fragile Situations, Study SynthesisReport, Euro Trends 2009.

¹⁰ Martin, M.A. Vietnamised Cambodia: A silent ethnocide. *Indochina Report*, 7, 1-31. 1986.

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_Cambodia.

¹² For a detailed discussion of political education during the occupation, see Clayton: The shape of hegemony: Vietnam in Cambodia, 1979-1989. Education and Society.

¹³ <http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/ledgerwood/education.htm>

many students as possible, the government set the limit on the number of students that could enter into upper secondary schools and universities. Such practices generated favoritism, nepotism and widespread corruption in the education system as wealthy and influential parents either paid bribes or used their political power to secure places for their children at the universities (Ledgerwood, 1996). The lack of school resources and little government funding affected the quality of education. There were no such things as educational freedom, autonomy and social protection for higher education students and faculty. Without the assistance from the West, the students “pragmatically accepted socialist ideology as a necessary condition to the receipt of educational resources from Vietnam and other Eastern-bloc countries” (Clayton, 1999). With the state revenue being spent mainly on security and defense to fight the civil war with the Khmer Rouge as well as two non-communists’ movements,¹⁴ the education sector was never a top priority for the PRK government. However, from an empty-handed position as described above, the PRK regime struggled and succeeded initially to overcome the legacy of the Khmer Rouge and was able to restore a semblance of education normality back in Cambodia (Ledgerwood, 1996). The school system was built rapidly and education represented one of the greatest achievements of the PRK regime (Hinton, 2008). The progress, though impressive, still faced many problems.

The Reconstruction Stage in the 1990s

It is important to note that after Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in the late 1989 from the heavy pressure of the West and the diminishing support of the Soviet Union, the functioning government chose a multiparty political system and shifted from a command-and control economy toward a free market orientation. And to maintain viability, the Ministry of Education at that time initiated reforms congruent with post-occupation ways of thinking. Most significantly, between 1989 and 1991, it eliminated the system of political education in place during the occupation and canceled courses in Marxism-Leninism (Clayton, 1999).

After the 1991 Paris Peace Accord, and the United Nations 1993 sponsored

¹⁴ The National United Front for an Independent, Neutral Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC) and Khmer People’s National liberation Front (KPNLF).

election, the education sector (with the support of the United States, UN agencies and other countries) had moved into a new era where *“schools should operate in the best interests of the child. Educational environments must be safe, healthy and protective, endowed with trained teachers, adequate resources and appropriate physical, emotional and social conditions for learning. Together, we can help ensure that every child – regardless of whether he or she attends school in a building, a tent or under a tree – receives a rights-based, quality education.”*¹⁵ The foundation of this modern education system and practices replaced the Vietnamese and Eastern Bloc socialist system. Moreover, in response to the severe problems suffered by the people of Cambodia, the international community also began to support Cambodia. International and developmental aids started to flow. Donor countries have provided an estimated \$500 million or more since the early 1990s.¹⁶ Today, Cambodia is still dependent on international aids, which comprise approximately one third to almost one half of the national budget.

The newly elected coalition government set a new sight, gave education a priority and put emphasis on human resources development as the key to poverty alleviation and national socio-economic development. Everyone regardless of race, color, sex, language, religious belief, political tendency, and social status was given the same education opportunities as safeguarded by the Cambodian Constitution. Adopted on 21 September 1993, the Constitution guaranteed the universal right to quality education as stated in article 65: *“The State shall protect and upgrade citizen’s rights to quality education at all levels and shall take necessary steps for equal education to reach all citizens. The State shall respect physical education and sports for the welfare of all Khmer citizens.”* Article 66 also states: *“The State shall establish a comprehensive and standardize educational system throughout the country that shall guarantee the principles of educational freedom and equality to ensure that all citizens have an equal opportunity to earn a living.”*¹⁷ Furthermore, to invest in Cambodia’s future in people through quality education, the government is fully committed to provide free compulsory education for nine years by the year 2015 as in article 68: *“The State shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public*

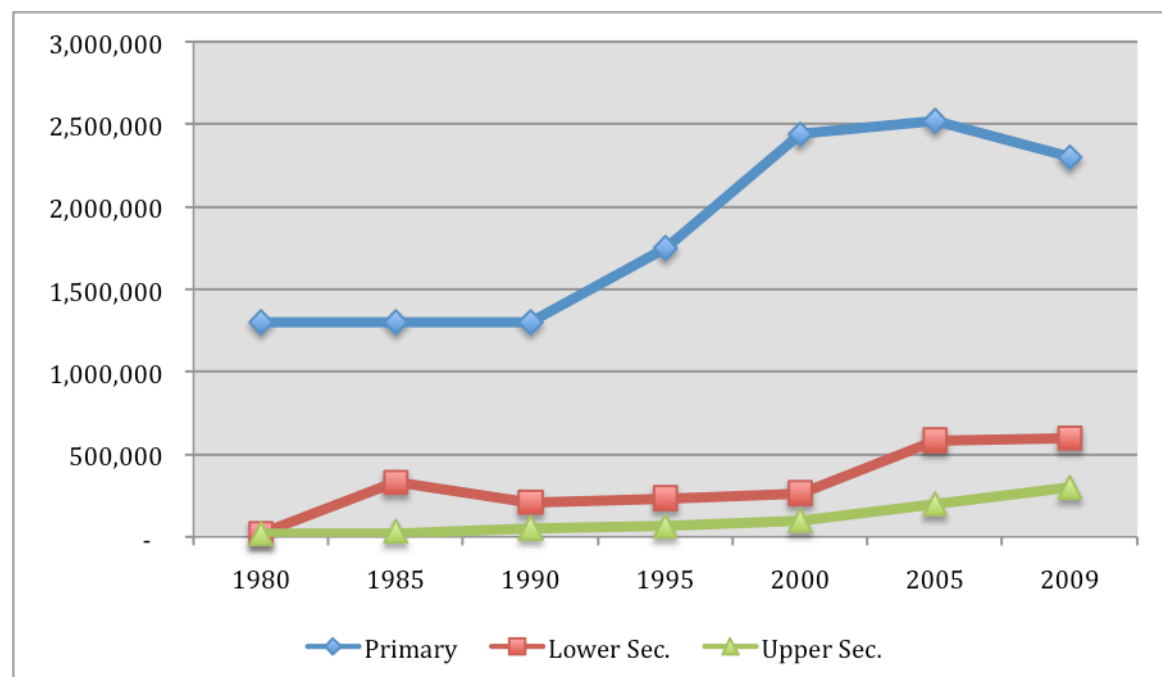
¹⁵ Child Friendly School Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/education/index_focus_schools.html

¹⁶ Teaching Matters, 2008.

¹⁷ The Constitution of Cambodia

*schools. Citizens shall receive education for at least nine years.*¹⁸ This is an ambitious task. The right to quality education imposes an obligation upon the Cambodian government and all stakeholders to ensure that all children and people have opportunities to meet their basic learning needs.¹⁹ The newly elected coalition government started constructing many new school buildings as part of their election campaign pledge. The education sector was further strengthened by the support of the international organizations and NGOs. However, public expenditure was limited and many under-served provinces received limited backing from external programs, largely due to continued security concerns and instability from remnants of the Khmer Rouge. Despite these factors, around 2.5 million children were enrolled in schools during that period, state paid teaching was established, and public examinations were re-introduced. Increasing and standardizing compulsory schooling to 12 years, up from 11 in 1996, was another key policy contributing to this improvement (Euro Trends, 2009).

Figure 1: Enrolment Patterns 1980-2009, Cambodia



Source: Study on Governance Challenges for Education in Fragile Situation, Euro Trends, 2009.

The Development Transition Period over 2000/2010

¹⁸ The Constitution of Cambodia

¹⁹ Education Law: Article 31, Right to access to education.

After the political integration of the remnants of the Khmer Rouge in 1998, a transition from an unsettled government coalition to a dominant party government prior to the national election in 2008, and the formation and the elections of commune councils in 2002, Cambodia has seen notable progress in the normalization of life which results a steady improvement in economic growth and social development. The average economic growth rate during the mandate of the Third Legislative, 2003-2008, was around 10% per year, with the record high annual rate of growth of 13.3 percent in 2005.²⁰ Peace and political stability have also allowed Cambodian citizens to go about their normal life. Now, ordinary people have better access to key goods and services. More and more children are now going to schools.

The last decade also marks the extensive restructuring of education reforms that include a rising share of government expenditure and improved donor, NGOs, and government accountability processes. With the abolition of enrolments fees in 2001, special incentives to the poor, girls and ethnic minority students to attend schools (scholarship) and the introduction school block grant, school's enrolment rates have been growing at all levels, including an expanded private higher education sector.²¹

National Strategies for Education

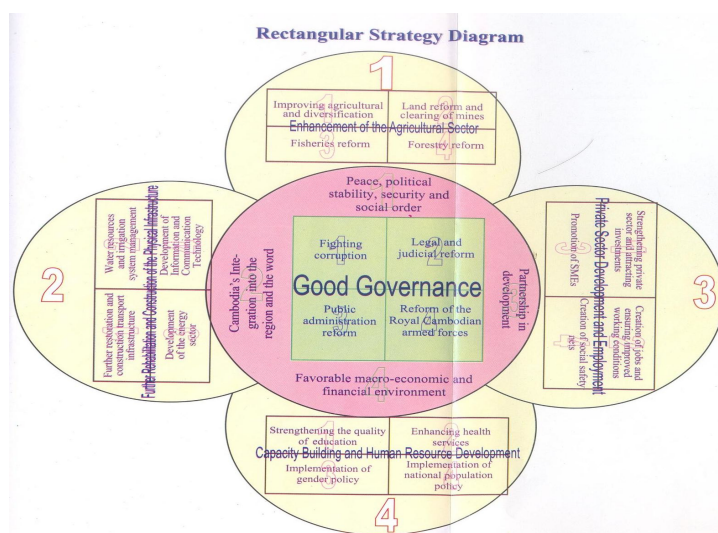
In Cambodia, education has become one of the top priorities. The Royal Government is committed to the development of its human resources and capacity building through the leadership of the MoEYS. The a political platform is defined by the Rectangular Strategy, first formulated in the third legislative 2003-2008 and reaffirmed in the fourth legislative 2008-2013 put capacity building and human resources development that include strengthening the quality education, improvement of health services, fostering gender policy, and implementing population policy, as one of the four pillars to support good governance. The Rectangular Strategy is operated by the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), which includes poverty reduction strategy, national growth, and inclusive education. At the first cabinet meeting of the third legislature government of the National Assembly in 2004, Samdech Hun Sen, Prime Minister of the Royal Government of Cambodia, spelled out his commitment to

²⁰ Achieving Cambodia's Millennium Development Goals, Ministry of Planning, 2010

²¹ Study on Governance Challenges for Education in Fragile Situations, Euro Trends, 2009.

implementing Rectangular Strategy: “The Royal Government will promote sustainable and equitable development, and strength Cambodia’s social fabric to ensure that the Cambodian people are well educated, culturally advanced, engaged in dignified livelihood and living in harmony in family and society.”²²

Figure 2: Rectangular Strategy of The Royal Government of Cambodia



Mobilizing the Resources: Budget and Financial Management

With the political commitment to education, the percentage of the national budget for education has increased significantly (Table 1), from 13.6 percent in 2000 reaching a peak of 19.8 percent in 2004 and currently declined to 16.4% in 2010.²³ Even though the recurrent budget for education has been declining in term of percentage of the government national budget, it still continues to increase in real term. Standing at \$ 198 million compared to \$276 million bigger spending on defense and security, the MoEYS’s budget 2010 covers the recurrent expenditures on the salaries, operating costs, special programs activities and other services delivered. Donor funding has provided materials and capital expenditures such as school infrastructure, new equipment, renovation and major repair of building. More sustainable development can only happen with significant stakeholder involvement and strong government/donor endorsement to providing quality education for all.

²² The Rectangular for Growth, Employment, Equity, and Equity in Cambodia addressed by Samdech Hun Sen, Prime Minister of The Royal Government of Cambodia on July 2004.

²³ MoEYS Key Indicators, 2006-2010.

Table 1: Public Expenditure on Education as percentage of National Budget, 2000-2010

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
13.9%	17.6%	18.2%	18.3%	19.8%	18.5%	18.3%	19.2%	18.1%	17.0%	16.4%

Source: MoEYS, 2000-2010

With the strong support of UNICEF, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), World Food Program (WFP), European Commission (EC), World Bank (WB), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Department For International Development (DFID), France, Australia, Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and many non-governmental organizations, Save the Children of Norway (SCN), Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE) to name a few, Cambodia has made steady and continuous growth in the education sector²⁴. These partnership arrangements have proven to be successful in instituting mechanisms for formal strategic education reforms. Since elementary schools are like the root of education, most of the external support and funds have been directed to the basic education sub-sector. ADB, SIDA via UNICEF have supported the secondary education and the WB higher education²⁵. But in spite of these movements forward, little attention has been given to either science and to research. These two areas are instrumental in contributing to better quality education, responding to the socio-economic challenges and meeting international development targets including all of the Millennium Development Goals.²⁶

Cambodia is also privileged to having a constructive working relationship between MoEYS and the active international community in the education sector. The scale of intervention by various development partners underlines the need for effective donor coordination and selection of donors' strategic intervention. And to move towards better donor alignment and harmonization, the Education Sector Working Group was created in 2001 to coordinate aid effectiveness and development results in the education sector. Given the amount of aid and the number of donors, aid coordination has played a very important role for both policy consistency and

²⁴ For more information on a summary of key development partner see UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

²⁵ World Bank: Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement Project, 2010

²⁶ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

implementation efficiency. As part of mutual accountability for results and improved aid effectiveness, the MoEYS will be responsible for all sources of financial support for education, including external assistance.

Management Structure of Education and Education System

By promulgating the Education Law in December 2007, Cambodia has also embarked on another new era of leadership and ownership to develop a comprehensive long-term vision on how to educate the children, how the schools would look like in the future and how the government supports education. This law puts strong emphasis on the education system reform in line with the constitution and relevant international laws. It administers all educational activities across the whole education system in Cambodia, both public and private. This education law provides more options for all parents so that their children can get the best quality education possible. It also invests in teaching practices that have been demonstrated to work. In short, it aims to foster a conducive environment in which every child can learn and succeed.

The administrative hierarchy and education management consists of four levels, namely national or central (MoEYS), provincial or municipal (Provincial Department of Education and Municipal), the district or khan level (District Office of Education), and local school level. The government is working towards decentralization that aims to achieve better results in term of administration, management and practice. School will play an important role of this decentralization reform. The education system in Cambodia is comprised of public and private education and includes formal, non-formal and informal.

The formal education structure has Pre-School, 6 years of Primary Education, 3 years of Lower Secondary Education, and 3 years of Upper Secondary Education Students. In Cambodia, the pupils attend either morning or afternoon classes with morning shift: Monday through Saturday 7:00am-11:00am and afternoon shift: Monday through Saturday 1:00pm-5:00pm.

in this literacy programs. Even with this increase, the non-formal education program shows slow progress due to declined budget allocation from 13% in 2006 to 5.4% in 2007, low staff capacity, lack of human resources and little community support. In Cambodia, The literacy rate for 15 years old and over in 2008 was 77.6% and 77% of adults aged 15 and above who are illiterate depend on manual labor in farming or production of goods.²⁸ Attention from the MoEYS and donor countries is seriously needed to develop and strengthen the non-formal education programs especially in support to the literacy for youth and adults.

Access to basic education

According to MoEYS Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013, the total number of primary schools, low secondary schools, and upper secondary has increased significantly from school year (SY) 2005-2006 to school year (SY) 2009-2010 (Table 3 below). This positive outcome reflects the commitment of MoEYS to bring schools closer to where citizens reside.

Table 3: Number schools from SY 2005-2006 to SY 2009-2010

	School Year 2005-2006	School Year 2009-2010
Primary Schools	6,277	6,665
Lower Secondary	911	1,172
Upper Secondary	252	383

Source: MoEYS Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013

The MoEYS also reported the total number of students in primary school has decreased from 2,558,467 in SY2005-2006 to 2,239,757 (47.8% female students) in SY2009-2010 due to the population growth rate that has decreased from 2.8% to 1.5%.²⁹ The total number of students in lower secondary school has decreased as well from 588,333 in SY2005-2006 to 585,115 (47.8% female students) in SY2009-2010. However, the total number of students in upper secondary school has increased from

²⁸ MoEYS Key Indicators, 2006-2010.

²⁹ General Population Census of Cambodia 2008 – National Report on Final Census Results, National Institute of Statistic update 2010.

204,925 in SY2005-2006 to 323,583 (43.5% female students) in SY2009-2010. The net admission rate (NAR) and the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) at the primary school are on track to achieve the 2015 Cambodia Millennium Development Goals targets. Table 4 outlines the achievements made by the MoEYS in SY2009-2010 against SY2005-2006.

Table 4: Actual achievement against target for equitable access

Indicator	Actual		Target		Actual	
	SY2005-2006		SY2009-2010		SY2009-2010	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Net enrolment rate						
Nationwide	91.3%	81.7%	96%	96%	92.4%	92.7%
Primary: urban	91.3%	89.7%	97%	98%	92.2%	92.2%
Primary: rural	91.7%	90.1%	94%	95%	95.3%	95%
Primary: remote	83.7%	80.1%	94%	93%	n.a.	n.a.
Lower Secondary (LS) Nationwide	31.3%	30.4%	43%	45%	32.6%	34.6%
LS: urban	50.1%	50.3%	69%	71%	49.1%	50.5%
LS: rural	28.6%	27.4%	40%	41%	29.4%	31.5%
LS: remote	6%	6%	15%	15%	n.a.	n.a.
Upper Secondary Nationwide	11.3%	9.9%	18%	17%	19.4%	19.4%
Number of Students in Public/Private Higher Education Institutions	90,607	29,000	162,000	57,700	145,265	51,596

Source: MoEYS Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013

According to the Education Management Information System, the transition rate from primary from primary to lower secondary recorded in the 2008/2009 was 78.4% which is again far below the 90% target. The transition rate in the remote areas was down to 60.5% compare to the rural rate 76 % and urban areas at 92.6%. This points the urgent needs for investing more resources in the remote areas and rural areas with specific policies providing remedial classes, expanding child friendly school initiatives, providing scholarships to students from poor families, strengthening school support committees for more community involvement, and eliminating informal school fees. Given the recent rate of progress, the “Education For All” goal for 9 years of basic

education target for net enrolment rate in lower secondary school cannot be reached. The major challenges are to improve the primary school flow rates as well as transition rates to lower secondary school.³⁰

In summary, as a result of the government’s universal education policy, primary and secondary school attendance has increased significantly in recent years but access is still far from universal, especially from poor and destitute households, the hardest to reach, notably the disabled children, the ethnic minorities and out of school youth. A good number of children in remote areas are not in school, with many never having enrolled. The main blockade to children’s access in urban, rural and remote areas is poverty. United Nations Human Development Report in 2006 estimated 34% of Cambodians live in less than \$1 per day. Most importantly, the poor are significantly rural. In 2004, 91.6% of the nation’s poor were living in rural areas and in 2007, this rose to 92.7% (Ministry of Planning, 2010). As the students moved on from lower secondary education to the upper secondary education, they showed a very high incidence of dropping out rate (Table 4: Percentage of Dropouts by grade 7-12 and geographical Area 2006-2007). The survival rate from grade 1-12 for 1996-2008 was only 11%. The family financial constraint, the need for students to help out with household chores especially the girls, the cost burden to pay for private classes and bribes to teachers, the lack of understanding of the value and importance of education are some the main reasons for the low grade 12 completion.³¹

Table 4: Percentage of Dropouts by Grade 7-12 and Geographical Area 2006-2007

Area	Lower Secondary			Upper Secondary		
	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
Urban	14.8%	7.6%	14.3%	8.6%	3.0%	14.9%
Rural	23.1%	23.1%	26.3%	19.2%	15.0%	27.4%
Remote	21.4%	19.4%	22.7%	17.9%	15.7%	22.2%
Total	21.3%	19.3%	22.7%	14.6%	9.1%	20.9%

Source: Education Management Information System (EMIS), MoEYS, from 2007- 2008

Teacher Training and Development

³⁰ Achieving Cambodia’s Millennium Development Goals, Update 2010.

³¹ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

Cambodia has made tremendous improvement in rebuilding the education system. According to the MoEYS Education Achievements in SY2009-2010, there were 27 training institutions providing all level of training. Currently, there are about 82,820 teachers (43% female) with a total of 10115 schools that serve approximately more than 3,248,479 students countrywide.³² In 2010, there were 4537 teacher trainees (51.4% females) who completed the training course.³³

Although new teachers have been developed and trained, a myriad of challenges remain in rebuilding the entire teacher education and training system. The efficiency of a school system is measured in part by the teacher qualification. The teacher education level remains low and the quality of teacher education and training needs to be seriously improved to deliver quality education. The bulk of primary school teachers have only post-primary educations. Currently, about 34.5% of teachers in remote areas, and 6.4% in rural areas have not studied beyond the primary level according to UNESCO National Education Support Strategy. The educational requirement for entry into teacher training college for training at primary level is grade 12, or grade 9 for placement to remote areas. Secondary training requires grade 12 for lower secondary, and for upper, grade 12 plus a university degree. The low level of qualification raises concern of insufficient knowledge of the teacher-training curriculum. The high pupil-teacher ratio further aggravates the low teacher qualification with an average of 50 students at primary level, 25 at lower secondary, and 32 at upper secondary.³⁴ Study shows children learn best in smaller classes with qualified teachers.

While most teachers had completed pre-service training, in-service training that included periodic workshop on pedagogical areas has remained insufficient and professional development have been limited. Only 15% of lower secondary teachers attended in service training session during 2005/2006.³⁵ In term of teacher supply, remote areas are constantly faced with a shortage of skilled teachers. There is also a serious shortage of trained teacher trainers and a limited pool of experienced professional teachers to monitor and evaluate student teachers during teaching

³² MoEYS Key Indicators 2009-2010.

³³ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

³⁴ MoEYS Key Indicators 2009-2010.

³⁵ Teaching in Cambodia, 2008.

practice. Another example, MoEYS has yet to produce 5000 new teachers as targeted to meet the growing demand.³⁶ Teachers' placement and promotion can also be improved. The procedures for placements and promotion processes should be well defined and regulated to ensure transparency and objectivity in decision. To further improve teaching and learning, teachers' social and financial statuses can be further upgraded and standardized. Nothing helps a child learn more than a caring, capable, and knowledgeable teacher. The most important school-based factor in a child's education is teacher quality. Investing in teacher is indirectly investing in children and their future. The MoEYS, together with the development partners, must invest in teachers' training and development. Here are some of the recommendations to improve teachers' motivations:

- Pay teacher more to a level appropriate to the cost of living and linked to inflation. Teachers are paid worse than a minimum wage worker in the garment industry where they could earn about \$50 a month. Providing teacher a living wage with honor and dignity is the most important factor to improve quality education³⁷
- Eliminate corruption and nepotism in the work place
- Improve leadership at the ministry, provincial, district, and school level
- Implement the abolishment of all school informal fees as stated in the constitution³⁸
- Reinstate the Merit Based Performance Initiative³⁹
- Develop an incentive to retain most competent teachers

Higher Education

It is clear that ensuring high quality basic Education for All remains the priority of the government,⁴⁰ but in the long term, the development of quality higher education will be a key to economic growth and sustainable development. Furthermore, higher education is often cited as a potential contributor to the reduction of poverty, inequality, and other broader social ills. Cambodia has witnessed the swift and

³⁶ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

³⁷ Teaching Matters, 2008.

³⁸ Constitution of Cambodia

³⁹ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

⁴⁰ Achieving Cambodia's Millennium Development Goals, Update 2010.

substantial expansion of higher education institutions (HEIs) during the last decade.⁴¹ This growth was attributed to the demand for higher education created by the growing number of graduates from secondary education schools and the government policy toward increased private sector participation. With the new government policy of public and private partnership, the first private of higher education institution, Norton University, opened its door in 1997. With such policy and the demand of the graduates, higher education in Cambodia has blossomed especially in the private sector, many of which claim to be high in quality.

At present, there are 33 public and 43 private HEIs offering associate degree to doctor degree programs in nearly 100 field ranging from foreign language, agriculture, business, health sciences, tourism, engineering to law and economics.⁴² While higher institutions are mostly in Phnom-Penh, some were established in 18 provinces to provide significant opportunities to the provincial people to access to higher education. Along with the increasing number of higher education institutions, the MoEYS also pays attention to the quality and efficiency of education services by developing legal frameworks, strategic plan, standards and mechanism for monitoring and evaluation⁴³. The Accreditation Committee in Cambodia (ACC) was established in 2003 and has successfully completed assessments of the foundation years in 41 high education institutions.⁴⁴ The Education Law in 2007 was in place to provide direction to raise the level of human resources development to the need of economic and Cambodian development in the knowledge-based world⁴⁵. Higher education is expected to play a major in producing quality human resources with full capacity in terms of morality, attitude, knowledge, and skills. These graduates will become the future leaders, key decisions makers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, managers, economists, entrepreneurs, artists, writers and intellectuals and will have the ability to respond more effectively to the challenges of poverty, socio-economic development, and social dissonance.

⁴¹ This term refers to both universities and post secondary institutions that offer higher education degrees.

⁴² UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

⁴³ MoEYS, Education Strategic Plan, 2009-2013.

⁴⁴ World Bank, 2010.

⁴⁵ Education Law, 2007, Article 18: Higher Education shall teach learners to have complete personality and characteristic and promote the scientific, technical, cultural and social researches in order to achieve capacity, knowledge, skill, morality, inventive and creative ideas and entrepreneurial spirit to the development of the country.

While there are signs of progress in term of numbers, much remains to be done in term of quality in higher education. In an article “Cambodia’s Sinking Higher Education System,” Tivea Koam and Colin Meyn from The Phnom-Penh Post, Cambodia’s Newspaper, on April 20th, 2011, point out some major issues of the rapid and uncontrolled expansion of HEIs and offer a recommendation to the government:

If we take a serious look at what is actually being offered in the buildings of these “universities”, it is easy to see that, more often than not, it is not what a modern academic would recognize as post-secondary education. This is the greatest stumbling block on the path to producing capable human resources in the Kingdom. These business institutions use the guise of academics to attract tuition money, and as such they count success in terms of the bottom line, ignoring the service of schooling they purport to provide and the country so desperately needs. Some higher educational institutions have very good policies on paper (like the government they work under), but this rarely results in good practice. Uniformly, cheating is not allowed in exams, but it still happens and students continue to resort to this sort of behavior, believing it to be a legitimate strategy for scholastic success...Education drives progress in all parts of society. The government must begin to refuel Cambodia’s empty tank or it will suck its own people dry.

The establishment of private universities is driven by market force and commercial interest versus academia. Many private universities owners are more interested in profit rather than producing qualified human capital. Revenue and profitability are their major concerns, often time at the expense of quality. Moreover, most students who enter higher education institutions are unprepared for rigorous study at the university level. They lack certain skills including, but not limited to, analytic reading, basic writing, independent study, critical skills, and problem solving. Major improvements must occur at the primary and secondary sector to create a better opportunity for students to enter higher education. According to one expert, “A number of students are content to pay for a degree and do not realize the benefit of a good education. Some students are scared of studying hard and think what they need is any degree, not quality. The final result will be jobless,” (AsiaOne, 2008). The

effectiveness of higher education rests on a solid foundation on the quality product of the primary education system.⁴⁶

The rapid growth of the private higher education institutions also concerns all education stakeholders and policymakers with the issue of quality higher educational services. ACC is lack of resources and expertise to provide quality assurance at the international level. Many so-called “universities” don’t meet the national and regional requirement.⁴⁷ The teaching staff is both weak and insufficient in number. At the level of higher education, the proportion of lecturers with higher degrees is still very low.⁴⁸ Special attention needs to be given to faculty and staff development to strengthen their academic, research, and financial and administrative skills.

Research is also a vital component of higher education. Besides providing students with the best educational experiences, independent research plays an important role in the development of the country. It promotes creative thinking and autonomy to solve many potential problems (Branchini, 2003). In Cambodia, based on Scoping Study: Research Capacities of Cambodia’s University, research across the boards in all areas of intellectual exploration is limited due to funding and low salaries for lecturers. At the university level, research must become a core mission beside academic programs. Most universities do not have a clear research policy with supporting institutional mechanism to promote the quantity and the quality of faculty research. This issue needs to be addressed. The research culture needs to be gradually created and re-enforced through increased government funding and expanded partnerships among universities in Cambodia and abroad.⁴⁹

Extensive improvement at HEI level is urgently needed in terms of providing quality higher educational services including research capacity building and quality assurance to the new generation of Cambodian scholars to be competitive regionally and internationally (Chet, 2009).

The Challenges: Addressing the problems of equity and quality education

⁴⁶ UNESCO Reaching The Marginalized, 2010.

⁴⁷ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

⁴⁸ Scoping Study: Research Capacities of Cambodia’s Universities. The Development Research Forum in Cambodia, 2010.

⁴⁹ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

Cambodia is at a crossroads. While these recent gains in the education sector are unprecedented in term of school buildings, overall increased number of students, and amount of new trained teachers, there is still an unfinished agenda. In particular, there appear to be serious remote and urban quality gaps. It is also noticeable that the system of education in Cambodia emphasizes quantity over quality education.⁵⁰ The country still faces numerous fundamental challenges in the education sector. Without a “quality” educated and competent workforce, Cambodia cannot compete on an equal scale with its neighbors. Providing quality education for all is one of the most important developmental tools to combat poverty, promote prosperity, and create a better Cambodia where inequality and lack of opportunity devastate families, hamper growth and cause instability. The issue with equity and quality education remains the main barriers to developing competent human resources capable of facing the challenges of the knowledge age. The fact that people have schools doesn’t necessarily mean they have a quality education. Ensuring equitable access to Education for All and providing quality education are essential to the future of Cambodia and the key to the national socio-economic development.

Addressing the problems of equity

Schools are symbol of order and stability. Despite great progress in the expansion of access of education over the past decade, inequalities still exist mainly between remote, rural and urban areas. Genders gap is also a problem at all education level.⁵¹ There are several factors that contribute to widespread to inequitable access in education. First, the low level of socio-economic condition affects the poor family mainly in the rural and remote areas. Cambodia has a high percentage of people living below the poverty line.⁵² With poverty rising and income diminishing, many of them are forced to cut back on education spending and withdraw their children, especially the girls from school to help support family’s most basic needs.⁵³ The International Labor organization estimated 45% of 5 to 14 year olds, or over 1.5 million children in

⁵⁰ Teaching Matters, 2008.

⁵¹ The Cambodia Daily, “Prime Minister Calls for More Girls to attend Schools”, March 25, 2011.

⁵² Achieving Cambodia’s Millennium Development Goals, Update 2010.

⁵³ UNESCO Reaching the Marginalized, 2010.

absolute terms, were economically active in the 2001 reference.⁵⁴ Moreover, the poor students and parents don't value education. Second, a shortage of schools and the long distance between home and school prevent a large number of children to access to basic education (table 4). Access to secondary school becomes even more difficult with the low number of schools and the longer distance from home. Currently, there are 187 communes that don't have lower secondary schools.⁵⁵ A good number of existing disadvantaged schools, which have unsafe roofs and floor, no drinking water and toilets, are located in those hard to reach areas. About 2/3 of 9000 incomplete schools are in the rural area and remote areas.⁵⁶ Third, there is a serious shortage of teachers in the rural and remote areas. To compound the problem, irregular practices permeate the education system such illegal fees and payment for hiring, transfer, and promotion.⁵⁷ Fourth, government funding is another issue in promoting education opportunity. According to Southeast Asia Globe 2011 Foreign Business Survey, Cambodia attributes just 1.6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in term of education spending as a percentage of GDP, equating to just \$33 per capita much lower when compare to Thailand 4% and Indonesia 3.5%.⁵⁸ The lack of teaching materials, textbooks, and others learning resources can easily be found in the remote areas. The Government of Cambodia allocates \$1.50-\$1.75 per student per year to each primary school for teaching materials and school operating costs.⁵⁹

Addressing the problems of quality

The two most powerful influences on children as they are growing up are home and the school. The lack of quality education is one of the root causes of poverty.⁶⁰ For the poor people of Cambodia, education is essential to economic development. According to the Hewlett Foundation's Global Development Program working in a unique partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation, citizens who can read, calculate, and think critically have better economic opportunities, higher agricultural

⁵⁴ Achieving Cambodia's Millennium Development Goals, Update 2010.

⁵⁵ MoEYS, Progress of Suntuk declaration on One Commune, One Lower Secondary School., 2008.

⁵⁶ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

⁵⁷ UNESCO National Education Support Strategy, 2010.

⁵⁸ Southeast Asia Globe, Foreign Business Leaders Survey, 2011.

⁵⁹ The Challenge –Why Educate Cambodia. <http://www.schools4cambodia.org>

⁶⁰ UNESCO Reaching the Marginalized, 2010.

productivity, healthier children, and better reproductive health and rights.⁶¹ Improving the quality education in Cambodia can lead them to this path.

Article 21 of the 2007 Education Law states: *“The state shall promote the quality of education to satisfy the basic education and professional needs for the careers of the learners to better improve their capacity and to enable the learners to efficiently participate in the development of the country. The state shall pay attention to equip appropriate and modern technique of teaching and learning to ensure its quality and efficiency.”* Providing quality education in Cambodia is in the hands of the MoEYS. The importance of training a capable and competent of teachers, schools principals or other educational staff cannot be stressed enough. Countless studies have proved that teachers are the most significant factor in any student’s schooling (Thompson, 2002). Teachers are fundamental to achieving the aim of quality education.⁶² They play a very important role in forming the foundation of the students. Without good teachers, increasing enrolment, and new classrooms all have limited value. Well trained, highly motivated, disciplined and professionally competent teachers can make a significant impact in the lives of the students. Each individual student’s interest and welfare should be nurtured to promote lifelong learning. The teaching learning process should put each individual student first as a subject not as an object and treat all learners as ends rather than means (Strike and Soltis, 1998). Students must become active in learning. A good reading habit is a prerequisite for better learning (Sadiman, 2004). To complement teaching and learning, a relevant curriculum that matches the need of students, community and workplace should be adopted. It is unrealistic to have quality education with low quality teaching and irrelevant curriculum. The aim here is to build a different kind of school culture, one that develops an exemplary curriculum, identifies effective teaching approaches, eliminates all forms of corruption, cultivates teachers and students’ relationship, and establishes an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Corruption and poor governance have a negative effect on quality education. The epidemic low teachers’ salaries contribute to a vicious cycle that encourages students to bribe their way through school, and eventually use bribery to carry them through

⁶¹ For more information, check Quality Education in Developing Countries/ Hewlett Foundation. <http://www.hewlett.org/programs/global-development-program/quality-education-in-developing-countries>

⁶² Teaching Matters, 2008.

life. In the national educational system, Cambodians are educated in corruption early – students aged 6-years-old and up are forced and taught that paying unofficial fees to supplement teachers' salary is a part of growing up. Teachers demand students pay school fee everyday.⁶³ Eliminating systematic problems such as corruption, nepotism, and poor leadership with transparency and accountability will contribute to quality education. A school system, that is free of corruption, is characterized by the following (Heyneman, 2002):

- Equality access to educational opportunity
- Fairness in the distribution of educational curricula and materials
- Fairness and transparency in the criteria for selection and more specialized training
- Fairness in accreditation in which all institutions are judged by professional standards equally applied and open to public scrutiny
- Fairness in the acquisition of educational goods and services⁶⁴
- Maintenance of professional standards of conduct by those who administer education institutions and who teach in them, whether public or private.

The elephant in the room

Given the generosity of the donor nations and the hard work of educators, administrators and politicians there is one special challenge still facing the education system in Cambodia. It is the elephant in the room no one wants to discuss or even admit exists. It is quite simply the mindset of students and many others towards the value of education and critical thinking. Many students falsely view education as a necessary obstacle to overcome to obtain greater economic rewards. Learning is not important or particularly valued. What is important is to overcome that obstacle by any means possible. In the end we are left with a generation that can barely read and write.

⁶³ The Cambodia Daily, "Teachers to Return to Classes after Ovecharging Allegations," December 8, 2009

⁶⁴ For more information, see Stephan P. Heyneman, Education and Corruption. Paper presented to the International Forum at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Sacramento, California, November 2002.

As educators it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking if only, we had better equipment, better classrooms, et cetera. While the building and equipment situation in Cambodia is not perfect and many schools lack many of the basics this is not what is holding back teaching our children to read and write. It is this mindset, created in part by the utter devastation of the education system by the Khmer Rouge, that learning is not to be valued. With this mindset it is difficult to advance our level of education and knowledge. Only when we can advance education can we advance the nation.

Our challenge as educators, administrators, politicians, citizens and parents is to change that mindset. It is an enormous challenge. The first step is we must agree that we have a problem, then and only then can we begin to discuss solutions.

Conclusion

In Cambodia, education is a work in progress. Based on the amount of money allocated to education and the lack of willpower, there is doubt about the government commitment to improve the quality of education and provide equal access to all its citizens. However, if Cambodia is to take a great leap forward to improve its education system, it must translate those lofty goals into actions for the benefit of all Cambodians.

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