

CAMBODIA'S STORY:

Rebuilding
basic education
in Cambodia:
Establishing a more
effective development
partnership

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Development Progress



Rebuilding basic education in Cambodia:

Establishing a more effective development partnership

Key messages

1. Cambodia has made substantial progress in re-establishing a more inclusive primary and secondary education system after years of instability and civil war. The country could reach universal primary completion with gender parity in the coming decade.
2. Successes to date have been driven by a more effective partnership between government and development partners; substantial increases in education expenditure and aid; and innovative projects by non-governmental organisations.
3. Achieving the education Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will require increased investments to reach the marginalised, substantial further reforms to improve sector governance and comprehensive efforts to address education quality and relevance.

“Enrolment figures have risen steadily in primary and secondary schools throughout the country.”

Summary

A long process of reconstruction, following genocide and years of instability and civil war, has resulted in substantial progress in Cambodia's education system. Almost all children are now entering school, and far more than before are completing primary. The gender gap in primary and lower secondary has effectively been closed. The rate of improvement has been most notable among girls, in rural and remote areas and among lower income quintiles.

Reconstruction in Cambodia was initially characterised by high levels of political conflict and fragility. Since then, the government has worked with development partners to create more functional and effective sector-wide administration and planning, paired with expanded supply-side investments. Several highly innovative local and international NGOs have worked with the most marginalised to improve the quality and relevance of education, fostering community participation and social capital to expand access to the poorest. Education NGOs are now also more integrated into sector planning.

High levels of corruption and low institutional capacity constrain further progress in education. Dropout rates remain high, and low levels of education quality need to be addressed. Meanwhile, efforts to improve incentive structures in educational governance are progressing only gradually. Achieving the MDGs and Education for All (EFA) goals will require substantial further reforms.

Box 1: Key initiatives to expand access for Cambodia's poor

Fee abolition: Abolition of start-of-year school fees in 2000, paired with extensive information campaigns, has led to a surge in enrolment, particularly in remote areas.

School construction: In less than 20 years, the number of primary schools and secondary schools has greatly expanded. This has been instrumental in facilitating access to education, particularly in rural areas.

Teacher recruitment and deployment: The government has prioritised recruitment of teachers from remote areas and ethnic minorities to teach in underserved schools.

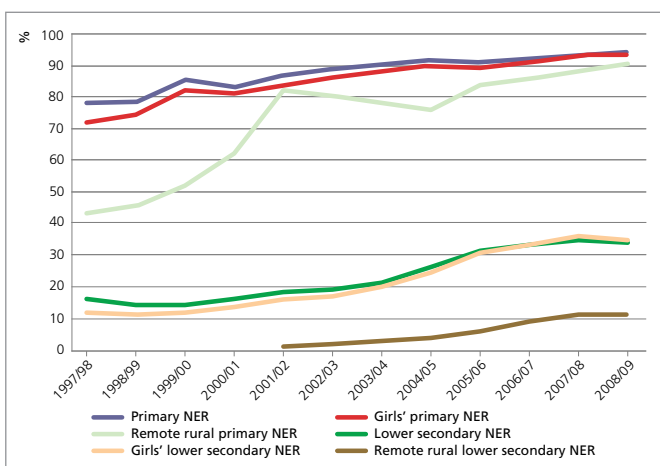
Scholarships for the poor: Local NGOs have piloted scholarships for poorest girls (and later boys), to address demand-side constraints, promote enrolment in lower secondary and incentivise primary completion. These pilot projects have subsequently been scaled up by donors and have been integrated into the national Education Sector Plan.

What has been achieved?

Although Cambodia is still far away from high quality education for all students, in recent decades the country has rebuilt its education system nearly from scratch. Enrolment figures have risen steadily in primary and secondary schools throughout the country. The most notable improvements have occurred since the onset of sector reform (see Box 1).

Almost all primary school-age children now enter school on time – the net admissions rate has increased substantially, from 71.4% in 1999/00 to 93.8% in 2009/10. Universal enrolment is close to being achieved – the primary net enrolment rate (NER) increased from 85.5% in 1999/00 to 95.8% in 2009/10 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Expansion in primary and secondary education¹



The number of students successfully graduating from Grade 6 almost doubled between 2000/01 and 2007/08, with the gross rate of students entering the last year of primary – a proxy for completion – increasing from 47% in 2000 to 79.5% in 2008.

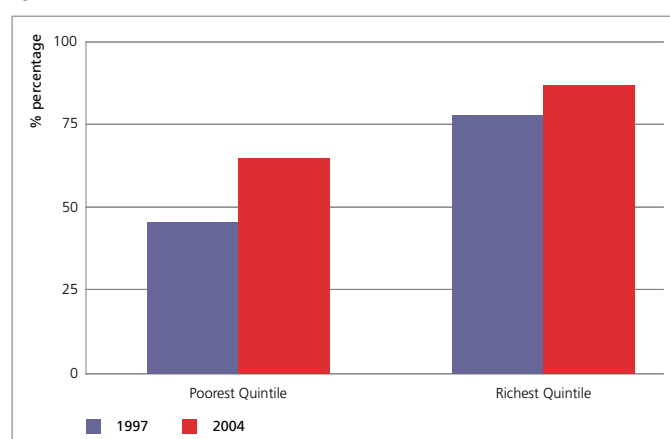
Notable improvements have also occurred in secondary school enrolment. Over the past 10 years, the lower secondary NER has more than doubled, to 31.9% in 2009/10. While this represents a decline compared with 2007/08 (34.8%), approximately two-thirds of Cambodian children can now gain at least initial access



to lower secondary education, though less than 30% are at the appropriate age at entry. The number finishing Grades 9 and 12 in 2007/08 had more than doubled compared with the beginning of the decade. At both primary and lower secondary, Cambodia has achieved gender parity.

The dropout rate (particularly in the early years of primary and in lower secondary) remains high. Also, despite the abolition of start-of-year fees, sending children to school still entails substantial direct costs for parents – in part because of informal fees that teachers use to supplement low salaries. Although inequalities in educational attainment have been reduced during the past decade, marginalisation remains heavily stratified according to geography (region and rural/urban), income and gender. Nonetheless, the poor in Cambodia are much more likely to attend primary school than before, with the poorest quintile making faster absolute progress in school enrolment (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Primary school enrolment by economic quintile, 1997 and 2004²



Education quality remains a key concern throughout the country. A recent Grade 3 assessment involving almost 7,000 students found that 60% had 'poor' or 'very poor' skills in reading, writing and maths; there were frequent reports of late starting, early closing, teacher and student absenteeism and long breaks during school hours.³

Further, poor working conditions and salaries have resulted in low levels of motivation among teachers and the continued presence of informal fees. Along with low levels of achievement, this is leading to a feeling of dissatisfaction among parents. Promoting local recruitment of teachers in remote and minority areas is proving an important first step in addressing this.

What has driven change?

More effective planning structures

In the late 1990s, discrete and often unconnected donor and NGO projects proliferated. Central planning was uncoordinated and under-resourced. Against this backdrop, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) and donors began to move towards a sector-wide approach (SWAp). The SWAp framework created multiple avenues of consultation that had not existed previously, allowing for a move from the 'donorship' phase of the 1990s towards a more effective development partnership. While many challenges remain, the new planning structure has also facilitated the disbursement of funds to schools and the implementation of key policies through the Priority Action Programmes (PAPs) (now called Priority-Based Budgets).

Increased financing

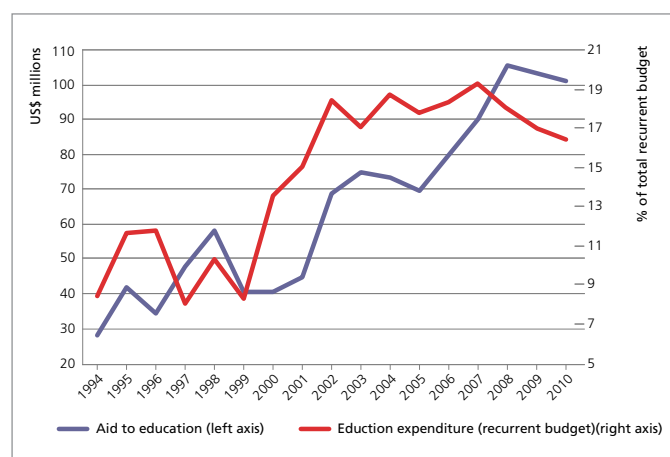
The more effective planning structure was complemented by substantial increases in government expenditure and aid to education, to carry out policies and programmes to expand access. Recurrent expenditure on education has increased 14 fold since 1994, with the share in total government expenditure increasing from 8% to almost 20%. Meanwhile, aid to education has increased fivefold since 1992 – particularly following the development of the education SWAp (Figure 3). This has enabled the implementation of many demand- and supply-side policies and programmes to ensure an equitable increase in access.

² =Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey Data.

³ ISee UNESCO (2009) EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009: Overcoming Inequality: Why Governance Matters. Oxford: OUP.

“NGOs have had an important role in addressing education quality, capacity constraints and curriculum relevance.”

Figure 3: Education expenditure and aid to education, 1994-2010⁴



However, the recent downward trend in education expenditure is disconcerting, particularly given the estimated annual funding gap of \$100 million annually to reach universal primary completion. Achieving EFA goals will also depend on addressing the comparatively low level of government revenue collection (around 12% of GDP).

NGO and community-based innovation

Given the fragility of post-genocide Cambodia, the highly localised approaches of many national and international NGOs have been invaluable in fostering social capital and community participation. NGOs have been particularly effective as sources of educational innovation to address many of the key problems within the system, including the high dropout rate and lower enrolment rates in remote regions. NGOs have also had an important role in addressing education quality, capacity constraints and curriculum relevance, through methods that integrate community needs, foster participation and promote improved accountability structures.

Lessons learnt

- Top-level commitment and leadership are essential to the planning and implementation of policy reforms. The increasingly nationally owned Cambodian SWAp represented an important milestone in systematically addressing supply- and demand-side constraints to education.
- Sustained engagement of development partners has allowed for a more effective partnership and has helped gradually increased capacity of officials at all levels.
- Innovative programmes have increased the enrolment and progression rates of the rural poor. The role of NGOs in addressing demand-side constraints has been instrumental in the reform process.
- Increased education expenditure has been crucial in addressing the barrier that poverty represents to complete schooling, by both reducing the distance to schools and focusing on initiatives to combat dropout.
- To improve education quality and system governance, incentive structures need to effectively promote accountability. Institutional reforms should therefore remain a priority in Cambodia, and aim to foster public participation and improved sector management. This will help further expand access, improve the system's internal efficiency, address consistently low levels of education quality and address concerns about the sustainability of the ongoing reform process.



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