

# CAMBODIA: FROM DEPENDENCY TO SOVEREIGNTY – EMERGING NATIONAL LEADERSHIP<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the millennium leading up to its days of glory and regional leadership under the iconic Angkor empire, and even in the centuries of dependence since, Cambodia has often benefited significantly from the influence of its patrons, starting with traders from India who sailed up the Mekong at the beginning of a magnificent water transport system including an inland sea. Most recently such benefits have been from global and multilateral sources. Equally, due to its pivotal strategic location at the centre of the South-East corner of Asia, Cambodia has also suffered, at times enormously, from the competing influences of a plethora of well-intentioned but radically different influences: religious, cultural, linguistic, imperial, political, ideological and educational. This article will review the educational system of Cambodia and the issues that come with achieving political and now psychological freedom from dependence on foreign dominance and tutelage.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Post-independence fragmentation, massification, privatisation, political resolution, fragilities.*

## Rehabilitation – Dependence on International Support

After the expulsion of the Khmer Rouge (KR) in 1979 from Phnom Penh to the Thai border, Cambodia's Vietnamese saviours faced the task of assisting a demoralized and largely starving population to rebuild a functioning state and to commence the rehabilitation of an abandoned and shattered school system.

Despite the human and material resource limitations of the first post-KR decade, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) initially made considerable quantitative progress in rebuilding primary education enrolments from 947,319 in 1979 to 1,597,081 in 1982 (MoEYS, 2010–11). However, total primary enrolments had fallen off to 1,279,053 by the 1987–8 school year and did not again exceed the 1982–3 figure until 1993–4. This decline was no doubt due in large part to the effects of the poverty of the period (Mysliwiec, 1988). The quality of primary education was a major issue, with consequences persisting through to today (see below the section *Strengthening the quality of education*).

Following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991, Western bi- and multilateral aid commenced to flow into Cambodia, a further leap to hitherto unprecedented levels of external support. However, this high level of investment called for experienced educational planners to facilitate absorptive capacity and achievement of delivery deadlines.

## The Missing Generation of Trained and Experienced Educational Leaders

In 1992–3 it was common to see Education Ministry staff playing *boule* in the Ministry yard, gossiping at their desks and departing early for lack of any clear idea of what to do in the office. But following the election of the National Assembly in 1993, political leaders had welcomed the promise of large-scale foreign aid, concurrently urging Cambodians to be enterprising and to take the lead in national development.

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Unfortunately, few education personnel with the necessary experience were available. So from 1994, frustrated donors had to recruit large numbers of experienced, but necessarily foreign, advisors and consultants to fill the planning gap. However, the foreign consultants themselves were often constrained by the diverse sets of implementation regulations of their own particular agencies. Many were ill-informed on the Cambodian context and, visiting on short-term contracts, few stayed in country long enough to understand the unique challenges to be faced.

A further constraint on development planning and implementation was the intransigent behaviour of the Khmer Rouge (KR). Despite the overwhelming evidence of the 1993 election results, which clearly put the lie to the KR claim that they had the support of most of the nation, the KR remained a destabilizing force, continuing to receive covert foreign support, partly fuelled by the surviving dynamics of the Cold War. A remaining distraction was the contending political parties, only resolved in favour of establishing an orderly state towards the final years of the twentieth century. Following the resolution of these limitations, there were some significant achievements during the first decade of the new century.

### **The First Sector Wide Education Policy Framework**

The final stage of dependency was still reliant on international consultants working directly to the Minister for Education, Youth and Sport and his secretaries of state. This stage saw the establishment, from the first plan in 2001, of the planning mechanisms of the annually updated ESP (Education Strategic Plan) and the ESSP (Education Sector Support Programme) (see, for example, MoEYS, 2006a, 2006b). This effective initiative in aid coordination, using a Sector Wide Approach (SWAp), was donor-led by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Pok and Ratcliffe, 2006) and multi-donor supported. This advanced planning process was fully realized, progressing in published annual rollovers of the four-year forward plans throughout the first decade of this century (MoEYS, 2010).

The ES(S)Ps from 2003–6 through to 2006–10 were the last major plan documents written primarily by foreigners. For future plans, following considerable debate over who was to determine content, the choice of planning priorities shifted to national leaders in the Ministry (albeit often assisted by foreign consultants, but by now working at Ministry official rather than Minister level).

### **The Evolving Cambodianization of Education Development**

Over the two decades from 1991, misperceptions on both sides of the aid transactions led to rising disillusionment with foreign-aid planners by both Cambodian political leaders and their educational administrators. As the new century proceeded, better educated and more experienced Ministry managers began to focus attention on significant professional issues in educational planning.

The annual updates of the ES(S)Ps through to 2006, initially written in English, then translated into Khmer, brought to light numerous priorities, and the absence of other priorities, to which national education leaders within the Ministry began to take exception. The conflict resolution and inter-language communication tasks, and the consequent planning process reforms required by the Ministry's national promoters of this changeover, led to a long gap of four years in plan production, so that the next plan, actually finalized at the end of 2010, incorporated Cambodian initiatives in the priorities to be funded under the ESP<sup>2</sup> 2009–13 (MoEYS, 2010).

By contrast with what had been observed in the 1990s, it was now possible to find, from the latter part of the first decade of the new century, many Cambodian staff acting in a professionally disciplined way. However, this capacity is still unevenly distributed across and within schools and higher education institutions, between regions, provinces and districts and across departments within the MoEYS.

Cambodian initiatives in education and in other fields were beginning to replace those of the donors in shaping the country's future. For example, revisions were made to methods of learning to read in order to take account of the unique characteristics of written Khmer (see below the section

*Strengthening the quality of education*). Another example from primary education is the reduction of the long enduring (1985 to 1997), but eventually resolved, massive 40 per cent repetition rate in the transition from Grade 1 to Grade 2, still 41 per cent in 1996–7 (MoEYS, 1997).

By this stage international organizations were beginning to recognize the need to work directly through adequately trained Cambodian professionals and administrators, rather than through transient foreign consultants. This message (Godfrey et al., 2000) took some years to be fully realized and applied.

### **The First Nationally Driven Education Strategic Plan – the ESP 2009–13**

This was the first plan that Cambodian professional leaders could call their own. It has undoubtedly benefited from foreign consultant support to Ministry directors, but embodies many policy changes initiated by Cambodian professionals.

The current version of the ESP (MoEYS, 2010) justifies the long four years of its gestation by the superior quality of its systematic approach to identifying strategic priorities, then detailing programmes and budgets to address them. Programme 7.3, Enhancing Aid Effectiveness (MoEYS, 2010, p. 91), concludes the statements of the new initiatives in all programme budgets with the following declaration of ownership of the reform and development partner (DP) processes:

#### Opportunities and Next Steps:

MOEYS leadership and its ownership of the sector reform and development partnership processes will be further strengthened through the dialogue surrounding the formulation, implementation and monitoring of the new ESP 2009–2013 which has received support from all the DPs.

The new ESP's utility as a planning instrument has been considerably strengthened, particularly by reporting progress on target indicators, including the frank documentation of significant shortfalls where experienced. The format has been changed to incorporate the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP), formerly a separate supporting document, into the ESP. All recurrent budget-funded development elements of the plan are now built around the programme-based budgets (PBB), now the planning, funding and reporting basis for reform implementation. The PBBs provide a clear statement of the prioritized strategies and how much is to be invested in each over the coming four years. The statistics presented mark a keen awareness of emerging needs. Serious disparities between city and country, between regions, between remote and central provinces and districts, and between poor and rich families, are tracked and addressed.

One outcome of the analysis of performance reports incorporated into successive ESSPs was a recognition that the national level plan was not well understood and incorporated into planning at implementation levels below that of the Planning Department. Even the Ministry-level departments were patchy in their incorporation of ESP policies into their departmental plans, let alone planners at province, district, cluster and school levels. This shortcoming was particularly noticeable in many of the departmental presentations to the Annual Congress of provincial and central Ministry staff, attended also by the DPs. These shortfalls formed the basis for demands from the joint Ministry–DP Education Sector Working Group (ESWG 2007, p.33) for incorporation of all levels of plan implementation into the planning process.

One of the strengths of the current ESP is the high priority it gives to the development of Annual Operation Plans (AoPs) at technical department and field levels, aligned with programme budgets, and designed to address emerging implementation tasks. A typical implementation task, now identified and to be tracked in successive ESPs, is the preparation by each department of its plans to achieve in its own subsector the good governance goals of the Education Law (RGOC, 2007). It is envisaged that this priority in the mechanics of turning plans from wish lists into effective central and field level plans

will progressively be applied to the development of AoPs at province, district and cluster level, through to school development plans prepared by school management committees.

### **Sovereignty Confirmed**

Following the elections of 1993, the regular Government–DP Cross Sectoral Coordination conference addressed issues of harmonizing conditional DP support with national development planning. For the DPs, a key element of this process was their joint advice to government on such general governance issues as transparency in the management of financial resources and respect for human rights. DPs regularly sought government commitments on targets to meet these conditions.

By 2011, China, never a participant in the Government–DP coordination meetings, was investing at a level rapidly approaching that of the largest donor. China does not demand commitments other than to achieve the goals of its aid projects and to repaying, admittedly at relatively high interest rates, the development funds advanced.

In mid-2011 government cancelled the scheduled annual coordination meeting with the other DPs. The cancellation of that meeting could be seen as the final step in the Government's emergence from dependency on DP direction as a condition of support to the assertion of unrestricted sovereignty.

### **Risks: Cambodia as a Fragile State**

This article would be unbalanced if it did not draw attention to the worst case scenario. Ayres (2000) documents thoroughly the background to, and the KR processes in, the destruction of the education system, arising out of the chronic crisis in educational planning which characterized the third quarter of the last century (the years following independence from France). These failures contributed to the KR establishment of the paradoxically named 'Democratic Kampuchea'. Ayres' incisive analysis is then carried through to the two decades succeeding the expulsion of the KR from Phnom Penh.

For a description of the characteristics of the paternalistic mode of governance persisting to this day in Cambodia, the reader is referred to *Education and Fragility in Cambodia* (IIEP, 2011). This work cites numerous examples of current cases of the tension between traditional Cambodian and contemporary international values.

The continuing predominance of the tradition of patron–client relationships, symbolized at the peak by the king as the patron of his subjects, and now in the form of Prime Minister–citizen relationships, is seen as a constraint on change and development. While the French colonial period achieved much in the way of stability, economic development, population growth and quality of life, it is seen as essentially promoting education as an aspect of loyalty to the state, marked by the persistence of traditional rote learning rather than by developing the capacity to analyze, criticize and challenge. It is not surprising then that DP-supported efforts to develop the learner's capacity to be a 'self-starter' are often inhibited by the traditional culture of loyalty to the patron protector.

Contemporary international policies are written into the constitution and the laws, often at the instigation of DPs, but fail to be implemented. Cambodians' apparent tolerance of the loss of their human rights is surprising to many foreigners working in Cambodia. However, those who have never had a tradition of entitlement to human rights could hardly regard them as being lost. Post-KR Cambodia is seen by the writer as effectively a one-party state, in which respect for and, at worst, fear of authority undermine the capacity to challenge policies constructively.

An education example of collateral damage is the persistence, contrary to repeated policy direction, of 'informal' fees charged by schools (Bray and Bunly, 2005), often at classroom level on the initiative of the individual teacher. While the needs of underpaid teachers cannot be denied, the exclusion from teacher delivered benefits of pupils whose parents cannot afford the fee is a daily model to all pupils of the corruption of paper entitlements (the Constitution) and the impunity of agents of the state who fail to enforce policies (Tan, 2008, quoted in IIEP 2011, pp. 41, 47).

Some argue that KR survivors will put up with any neglect of human rights rather than risk another civil war. But what will happen when the younger generation, knowing little about the KR horrors, express their dissatisfaction with the lack of employment? This could be a future challenge to current paternalist practice. Government leaders seem genuinely bewildered by donor demands for the separation of the powers of the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Such concepts have no validity in Cambodian history and traditional practice. It is, perhaps, not surprising that democratic protections, which evolved in the West out of centuries of learning how to regulate corrupt practice, have not yet developed some meaning in a short few decades of the history of modern Cambodia.

In short, Cambodia has made much progress since the expulsion of the KR, but the persisting cases of fragility do provide warnings of the risks which might be faced in future years unless these fragilities are effectively addressed. Counterbalancing these fears is the evidence of growing reform, albeit demanding time and patience.

## **Evolving Characteristics of the Cambodian Education System**

### *Early Childhood Education (ECE)*

The prioritizing of primary education has not included ECE until quite recently. The few pre-schools in operation at the beginning of this century included small numbers of Ministry and private pre-schools, mainly in Phnom Penh and the bigger towns. Pre-school enrolments in 1996–7 totalled 44,814 as against 678,863 in Grade 1 (MoEYS, 1997: Tables 1 and 7). By school year 2010–11, total enrolments in formal pre-schools had more than doubled to 99,130, still well short of Grade 1 enrolments of 454,346 (MoEYS, 2010–11: Tables 1 and 16).

Until the implementation of the Fast Track Initiative (FTI – World Bank, 2010), pre-school education was not a high priority investment target for government, so such pre-schooling as did exist was largely dependent on parent fees and DP support. A national pre-school teacher training centre based in Phnom Penh received considerable Japanese support and produced 100 teachers per year, allowing limited scope only for expansion.

Since the end of the last century there has been growing public and Ministry awareness of the critical importance of the foundation years in education. This perception has been reinforced by the global priority given to Education for All (EFA). By 2007, with the prospects of joint international donor funded support (World Bank, 2010) to achieve EFA through a Fast Track Initiative (FTI) grant of \$57m., attention was focused on the enormous gap between current formal pre-school provision and the scale of the task of achieving universal pre-school education in Cambodia.

The result of the FTI agreement was a hybrid solution, comprising the addition of a third floor to the Pre-School Teacher Training College to double the annual outputs of fully trained formal pre-school teachers and the construction of new pre-school class facilities (but still far from enough), supplemented in most communes by the provision of support and training for non-formal community-based pre-school classes. Consistent with a number of other very ambitious targets, early childhood education is now defined as covering children aged three to five years, with a notional target population up to half that of the entire primary school system. There also remain serious questions about the awareness and capacity of the staff of the Early Childhood Education Department (ECED), created relatively recently as a separate department and using staff whose task had suffered decades of neglect.

### *Primary Education*

Due to the 30-year post-KR period of priority for primary education, enrolment and retention rates in this subsector, including the participation of girls, have improved greatly, as has quality of teacher output, numbers of schools constructed and provision of equipment, learning materials and school

libraries. The ESP reports significant improvements from the 2005–6 school year in factors such as enrolment and progression rates, with significant effects on both efficiency and equity.

**Table 1. Escalating Enrolment Rates**

	2005–6	2009–10
Net admissions	82.6%	92.4%

Over that four-year period, disparities between the capital city and the rest of the country were reduced as the rate of admission in the provinces rose 3 per cent as against a rise of only 1 per cent in the already well served urban areas. However, mixed progress is seen in achieving the goal of increased efficiency of pupil throughput:

**Table 2. Progression Rates-Mixed Progress**

	ESP 2009–13	EMIS 09–10	
	2005–06	2008–09	2009–10
Repetition	11%	8.9%	9.8%
Dropout	11.6%	8.3%	8.7%
Survival from Grade 1–6	49.3%	61.7%	61.7%

The efficiency gains overall were visible in the shape of the bar graph representation of primary school enrolments by grade, which has been progressively moving from that of a broad-based, narrow-topped pyramid (most enrollees bunched in the lower grades) closer to that of a rectangle. As a result, total primary enrolments actually dropped, making investment in primary education more cost-effective per pupil.

The benefits of these impressive quantitative improvements may be slowing down, despite FTI and other investments since 2008. This is evidenced by the updating of the ESP figures (above), from the EMIS<sup>3</sup> indicators for 2009–10, of the data on repetition, dropout and survival. This slowdown may to some extent be related to concerns over the factors undermining the quality of education, such as, for example, teacher absenteeism in rural areas outside the main centres. Unfortunately this problem is widespread in rural areas (Benveniste et al., 2008, pp. 66-69).

### *Lower Secondary Education (LSE Grades 7–9)*

By the beginning of this century, attention was turning to the woefully neglected levels above primary education. From the beginning of the new century, multilateral DPs, led by the ADB, have invested heavily in successive secondary education development plans, focused mainly on lower secondary education, a subsector which still has major shortfalls yet to be addressed (see relevant websites, ADB (Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP) I, ESDP II and Enhancing Education Quality Project (EEQP)), World Bank (FTI and Cambodia Education Sector Support Project (CESSP)).

Despite the DP support efforts, the number of LSE pupils actually decreased over the period, while the increase in the LSE Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) over the period barely got ahead of population growth. These figures make a strong EFA case for commencing the ADB-funded Third Education Sector Development Programme (ESDP III) to support secondary education development, proposed to target 2012–17, supplemented by further investments in improving primary school throughput.

**Table 3. Stalled Progress in LSE Enrolments**

	<b>2005–6</b>	<b>2009–10</b>
No. of LS Schools	911	1,172
Survival from Gd. 1–9	26.3%	37.2%
Pupil–Teacher Ratio	31.7	24.4
NER LSE	31.3%	31.9%
LSE Enrolments	588,333	585,115

The big issues facing LSE intake are incomplete primary schools and higher repetition rates in primary – the bottleneck at the transition from Grade 6 to 7. LSE needs to be made more relevant as two out of every three lower secondary school-aged adolescents are currently not enrolled and there is a very low parent tolerance for repetition in lower secondary schools (LSS), which results in high dropout rates (18+ per cent). There is a perceived need to develop a coordinated and comprehensive approach to employability skills in LSE, building upon successful initiatives thus far.

### *Upper Secondary Education (USE Grades 10–12)*

Due to the demand for entry to university, upper secondary schools have tended to attract more donations from wealthy Cambodians, many of them university graduates (including those overseas) wishing to support access to higher education in their natal communities.

As statistically documented in the ESP (see below, *Polarization – the revival of social class based on wealth*), the poor are least likely to be among those who get through this gateway to higher education, where a surprising four out of five of those who pass Grade 12 go on to some sort of higher education institution (HEI).

The current ESP (MoEYS 2010, p. 29) therefore plans the following. Upper secondary scholarships for Grades 10 to 12 students will be mainly merit driven, but also poverty-indexed, based on Grade 9 examination scores. There will be scholarships for 3 per cent of the enrolment per year for upper secondary schools including 60 per cent for females.

The scholarship incentive for females is needed due to the time lag from nine years earlier when primary school entry enrolments were underweight in girls (now close to parity). In 2002–3, Grade 1 enrolments stood at 656,641, of whom 305,770 were girls (MoEYS, 2000–11: Volume 2002–3, 10, Table 10).

### *Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) and Non-Formal Education*

The former MoEYS Department of Technical, Vocational Training and Higher Education was split following the 2002–3 school year by the migration to the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MoLVT) of the MoEYS Technical and Vocational Training functions and staff.

The TVE policies and plans described in the MoEYS ESP therefore refer only to recent endeavours to include vocational skills as a part of life skills training (LST) in the school level curriculum. The ESP (MoEYS 2010, pp. 36–38) outlines responsibilities to commence planning for TVE education in the upper secondary subsector and for LST at basic education levels.

For the non-formal sector, the current ESP (MoEYS 2010, pp.31–33) outlines the planning steps to be taken to invigorate this long neglected subsector. Plans are to be developed by the responsible department to expand re-entry and equivalency programmes for which a programme budget of over \$3 million is to be provided over the five-year plan period.

## Sector Wide Challenges

Given the long-term evidence, from planning trends since the mid-1990s, of Cambodian aspirations to participate fully in regional and global progress, challenges such as the following will need to be more effectively addressed.

### *Strengthening the Quality of Education and Teacher Capacity*

Quality is one of the three strategic priorities incorporated in the MoEYS strategic plans since the mid-1990s and in the ESP since its early inception at the beginning of this century. The public examination measures adopted to improve the quality of entrants to higher education institutions have failed to achieve this goal, despite substantial investments in testing and certification technology and the management of the examinations.

In an attempt to get a more reliable indicator of the effectiveness of the education system, the MoEYS has in recent years introduced a system of performance testing at Grade 3, 6 and 9 levels, which avoids the distortions of gateway exams by small-scale sampling nationwide, with anonymous results – that is, a measure of the system rather than individual performance (Marshall et al., 2009). The results provide evidence of quality improvement needs on which Ministry professional leaders are now taking action.

For example, evidence of serious weaknesses in Khmer reading performance has drawn attention to pedagogical problems, remarkably similar to the worldwide debate, dating back to the 1950s, over the effectiveness of phonic versus *whole word* approaches to teaching reading (Adams, 1995). The current lack of the phonics approach, which was employed in Cambodia in the pre-KR days, is now seen by professional leaders in the Ministry as a serious lapse in enabling all pupils to read the complex Khmer script. This task is further complicated by the traditional practice in Khmer of running words together to make a whole sentence (i.e. a phonic *whole sentence* approach, which is very difficult). Perhaps a solution would be a compromise, in which the words in a written sentence are separated (as in written Thai) so simplifying the learners' reading task to the application of the needed phonic skills to the decoding of the relatively short string of sounds in each separate word, rather than to the relatively long string of written sounds running the full length of a sentence and not, as in Khmer speech, separated into individual written words which can easily be recognized when each is phonically pronounced.

*Teaching in Cambodia* (Benveniste et al., 2008) is a detailed up-to-date description of the problems at the heart of education quality in Cambodia, of reforms currently under way and of needed reforms yet to be addressed. The final section of the book, 'Teacher performance: delivering high quality education' (pp. 97–102), will give the reader a taste for perusing the full document.

### *Strengthening Decentralization*

Those Cambodian policy and funding innovations at field level which do best do so in the context of the curious mixture of top-down control and largely unregulated decentralization, amounting in many cases to the de facto autonomy of provinces and institutions. Central intervention is largely limited to perceived threats to governing party authority. As a result, increasing attention is now being given to regulating processes of decentralization of management to province, district, cluster and school level.

The World Bank-funded Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP) was an early policy initiative to trial the decentralization to school level of community-level school funding. It piloted in three provinces grants to school clusters to support school improvement initiatives at both cluster and school levels (Turner, 2002). The obvious cash and empowerment benefits of the project to the favoured three provinces were soon demanded by all other provinces.

From school year 2001–2, in the face of irresistible political pressure to share benefits equally across provinces, the government funded rapid extension of the grant methodology to all provinces, financed through the new Priority Action Programmes (PAP), with the grants going direct to each school. This process continues through today, now on a programme-budgeting basis (PBB funding of school operation budgets). Turner describes the effectiveness of this decentralization and also the remaining challenges to these pioneer initiatives in the decentralization of educational planning and management to each school.

The PAP process of spreading school grant decentralization nationwide was distinguished from the EQIP process in that it succeeded remarkably well in moving the process from the initiation of school grant funding using donor funds to its extension funded by a significant increase in the budget share of the Education Ministry. This again gave some hope of government movement towards ownership of both the problem and its solution.

### *Access and Other Disparities*

Statistics on disparities monitored in the current ESP (MoEYS, 2010: Figures 1–3 and Tables 1–3) describe targets, progress and shortfalls in grade repetition, distribution of educational opportunity as between cities and rural areas and between central and remote provinces.

Much has been achieved in reducing gender disparities in basic education but this goal has yet to be fully achieved at post-basic education levels and has a long way to go in the staffing of the MoEYS itself, where the proportion of top level staff who were female had risen from 1 per cent in 2006 to only 7.7 per cent in 2009 (MoEYS, 2010: Table 3).

The most promising sign of future prospects for reduction in disparities is the ESP's careful reviewing of policy goals against the relevant indicators via PBB, and the naming in the relevant programme descriptions of the department in each case accountable, on the basis of annual management information reporting, for implementing the reforms designed to improve performance. For detail on current priorities and funding to reduce the many disparities relevant to the achievement of EFA targets, the reader is referred to the Fast Track Initiative agreement (World Bank, 2010).

Some of the more significant factors underlying quality shortfalls are general (i.e., not exclusive to education) characteristics of the evolving culture of contemporary Cambodia. These include weak governance and the consequent privatization arising out of multiple unregulated conflicts of interest in government funding. In large part the continuing and in some cases growing disparities are due to the low and declining level of government investment in education through share of the recurrent budget, resulting from weaknesses in tax and revenue collection, now being remedied, and in part from limits on MoEYS' capacity to absorb budgeted funds.

## **Underlying Problems**

### *Public Resource Shortfalls and Proposed Remedies*

Government budget items can be important indicators of serious policies and plans for changes in a nation's behaviour. Popular expressions worldwide express this truth in simpler terms, for example, 'Putting your money where your mouth is.'

In the early 1990s, Ministry of Education staff old enough to remember would express their yearning for the days of the 1960s when the education budget was 24 per cent of the total national budget.<sup>4</sup> With the education budget share (as distinct from expenditure) by 1993 of the order of 14 per cent a year (MoEYS 1994, p. 10), it was not too difficult to see why teachers on \$20 a month had to find other sources of income – at the expense of the energy they could devote to their profession – and why supplies of school books, materials and equipment were so inadequate.

By the end of the century, government was commencing a process of progressively raising both teachers' salaries and expenditures on non-salary items. By 2007, policy-driven reforms such as the Priority Action Programme had lifted the education share of the national recurrent budget (often considerably above final expenditure share) to 19.2 per cent.

In 2010 the Budget Law had allocated an education recurrent budget of Cambodian Riel (R) 825 billion (MoEYS 2010, p.102). At 16.4 per cent of the total national recurrent budget (R5029 billion), this was 2.8 per cent lower than the peak share of 2007. However, there was worse to come.

For 2011, the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) (see Ministry of Economy and Finance (MoEF), 2010a) proposed a recurrent budget for the Education Sector of R939 billion, an increase of 13.8 per cent on the 2010 allocation. This would have lifted the education budget share to 17 per cent of the projected national recurrent budget of R5539 billion. But the Budget Law for 2011 provided a total for all government recurrent expenditures of R5518 billion, of which the education share was R916 billion, amounting to 16.6 per cent of the national recurrent budget.

For 2012 the ESP proposed an education share of 19.7 per cent of the recurrent budget for that year (MoEYS 2010, p.102). The revised MTEF had proposed 17.9 per cent (R1133 billion). The Budget Law passed in late November 2011 for the 2012 calendar year allocated R1008 billion (15.91 per cent), a loss of R125 billion (approximately \$US31 million) to other ministries. A further reduction in education resources is revealed in the actual expenditure achieved as a percentage of the funds finally allocated by the Budget Law. As can be seen from MoEF records (e.g. MoEF, 2010a, 2010b), the MoEYS has had a chronic difficulty with expending each year all the funds budgeted. By 2010 the proportion actually expended had declined to 86 per cent, which can help to explain why the final allocations the following year had been reduced so much.

It is not clear what the causes of these shortfalls in expenditure are, but it would seem there is a strong case for a joint investigation by the two ministries responsible. One possible factor is the lack of synchronization between the school year (SY) and the budget year. The school year straddles the budget year, with growth notionally arising each September from new enrolments, requiring additional budget funds, which arrive at best from early January at the beginning of the budget calendar year. But the efficiency reforms of primary education throughputs have resulted in declining enrolments (due to much less repetition) over the past five years as against rapidly escalating post-secondary enrolments (MoEYS, 2010: Annex 1, Table 1). Conversely, the general education budget has proposed marked budget increases (only partly realized) – for example, an increase of 47 per cent for primary education from 2010 to 2011 – while the higher education increase for the same years is 13 per cent. There may be a problem of absorptive capacity in primary education management, given that the great bulk of primary school funding is expended mostly at province level on teacher salaries, which are carefully limited to the actual rather than the projected numbers of teachers being paid for being in front of classes.

Recurrent budget allocation records since 2006 also show declining shares for the Programme Based Budget (PBB), the policy-innovation-focused portion of the education recurrent budget. The ESP (MoEYS 2010, p. 84) proposed that up to 22 per cent of the recurrent budget should be committed to the PBB, with the remaining 78 per cent sustaining already established operations. While the PBB cash amount has been virtually fixed since 2007, and is projected to increase slightly through 2015, its share of the education recurrent budget has slid from 26 per cent in 2006 to 15 per cent in 2011. In purchasing power parity terms, inflation adjusted, its annual value has slipped by approximately 16 per cent since 2006.

In the light of the decline in actual recurrent budget allocations over the years 2008–12, the target education share of 22 per cent of the national recurrent budget seems unlikely to be achieved, particularly when account is taken of unanticipated costs such as the border conflict with Thailand and the flood damage in Cambodia, both experienced in 2011. The ministries of Defence and of the Interior seem much more likely to be the ones receiving large increases in their budgets. These shortfalls could be mitigated by the large-scale loans now being planned. The Budget Law for 2012 has authorized an

expenditure of \$2.6 billion. Concurrently the government is discussing with donors, including China, the borrowing of an additional \$1.1 billion (*Cambodia Daily*, 25 November 2011). Will Chinese loans include the funds needed to achieve the well planned ESP programmes for system improvement?

### *Resource Anomalies and Teacher Quality*

At all levels of education the low level of government teacher salaries constrains the capacity of government to enforce regulations which could serve to assure some degree of equality of opportunity. The benefits prized by underpaid teachers are long holidays (both formal and informal) and short hours (four hours per day), so allowing the teacher time for other forms of income generation or food production, often at the expense of lesson preparation time (Benveniste et al. 2008, pp 56–59).

A 2005 nationwide survey of teachers by the Cambodia Independent Teachers Association (CITA) found that 40 per cent of teachers surveyed earned more from their second income or enterprise than from their pay as teachers (CITA 2011, p. 8). That proportion is probably higher now.

### *Polarization – the Revival of Social Class Based on Wealth*

As is evident from the effective political pressures to ‘spread the butter thin’ in extending school support grant funding from three provinces to all, the majority of Cambodians have a strong preference for equality of opportunity. At the base of many disparities is the increasing polarization of the post KR communist society in terms of equality of opportunity. Starting in 1979 from a communist base of absolute equality, albeit equality in misery, Cambodia has achieved, within three decades, the following differences in access to education:

**Table 4. Proportion of children in poorest quintile 2009–10 (MoEYS 2010, p.5) attending:**

Primary schools	77.2%
Lower secondary schools	16.9%
Upper secondary schools	7.3%

The educational consequences are obvious, sourced in the now growing differences in wealth as among classes of parents. The effects of the rapid post KR polarization (see below) of Cambodian society are only too evident where those pupils in a class who can afford to pay their teacher for private tuition receive priority attention and higher test scores than their classmates, whose parents cannot afford the fees demanded by the teacher. Fees are forbidden in government primary and secondary schools but routinely collected wherever parents can afford such fees (Bray and Bunly, 2005; Brehm, 2011). In many cases they are collected and retained at the level of the poorly paid classroom teachers.

Many see one possible solution to the shortfall in government funding in the funding of schools either partly or fully from private sources. Private primary and secondary schools are popular with those parents who can afford them, particularly in the towns. Since the 1997 elections a broad range of private schools has appeared, catering for Cambodian and international parents and for a diverse range of religious affiliations. Enrolments in these schools are not included in education statistics. The private schools proudly announce on their websites authorization by the municipal or provincial Ministry of Education office but receive little supervision. The growth in Cambodian enrolments at private schools is seen by some as evidence that many parents lack confidence in the quality of government schools – and those who can afford it are voting with their feet. The issues are finally beginning to be addressed. The ESP (MoEYS, 2010) proposed implementation of

a sub-decree and directive on providing licences to private primary educational institutions, reviewed and strengthened in 2012.

### **Capacity Development**

This article has traced the beginning of the process of learning to take control of their own affairs which has marked the gradual re-empowerment of Cambodian educational leaders in taking control of development planning.

It should not be overlooked that their foreign partners are also undergoing a learning process to enable them to engage more effectively with their Cambodian counterparts. Much of this re-education of the foreign staff of agencies providing support to Cambodians relates to the question of what constitutes effective capacity development.

#### *Training Boom and Bust*

The shortage of experienced Cambodian educational planners in the 1990s (see the earlier section, *The Missing Generation of Trained and Experienced Educational Leaders*) led to a DP prioritizing of what was described as capacity building, delivered via training courses, often cascaded. DP support for the MoEYS gave a high priority to teacher training, with in-service training of serving teachers seen as the quickest way to get results. Subsequent experience with mass training workshops over several years began to raise questions about their effectiveness.

The limitations of training workshops in Cambodia were first identified a decade ago, but it took a long time for the message to be widely recognized. Chhinh and Tabata (2002) describe an early evaluation of the effectiveness of in-service training of MoEYS teachers in a sample of Phnom Penh schools in the school year 2001–2002. The summary of the results is instructive:

... the study found no relationship between student achievement and the numbers of in-service training programs the teachers have attended since the introduction of the new curriculum in 1996. Investigation must be pursued to find out the mechanism underlining the issue. In-service training programs are thought to be one of the most outstanding achievements in educational reforms since the middle of 1990. However, the payoff at the classroom level seems to be minimal ... It is difficult to conclude whether the teachers learn what they are expected in the training programs or not as the programs are short, irrelevant, irregular and conducted in a cascade system (Chhinh and Tabata, 2002, p. 13).

Years later, Pearson (2011a) has now described in detail the learning experience of some NGO aid workers as they have grappled with the discovery of Chhinh's 'mechanisms'. What does and does not work in developing the capacity of Cambodian counterparts to deal with global change and its impact on Cambodia? Pearson demonstrates that the answer to this question depends on encouraging a constructive Cambodian dialogue between Cambodian demands for modernization and traditional Cambodian values. Drawing on her experience of training workshops in various Cambodian ministries over the past decade, Pearson has concluded that conventional training methods, which work well in cultures with a long tradition of universal literacy, do not work so well in Cambodia, nor in other countries with a strong reliance on oral rather than written communication.

#### *Effective Capacity Building*

Despite the achievements of senior MoEYS professional leaders in taking over from international consultants the direction of educational planning and management, effective leadership at provincial and school level is still heavily dependent on staff with limited professional training. Chhinh and Dy (2009, pp. 113–130) list some of the factors which limit success in implementing reforms.

They question the effectiveness of capacity building in the form of training and of study visits to other countries. Training can be very effective where it relates to manual skills such as those of a motorbike mechanic. However, it is hindered by a ‘knowledge gap’ where ‘analytical, predictive and evaluative skills’ are required to enable management, planning and leading. This was a problem for the then 5916 out of 7119 Cambodian school administrators, including school principals, whose education had not gone beyond the end of secondary school. Those who are capable are most likely to have the marketable skills to move to adequate remuneration by leaving government employment.

Pearson’s view now, based on her long experience of the challenges of capacity development in Cambodia, is of a need to develop in learners the will and the capacity to reflect on experience, leading to critical thinking, confidence in questioning the status quo, and flexibility in adapting to change. Training may be appropriate for tangible ‘hard’ skills such as knowledge of regulations, procedures, and budgeting. But learning for understanding, analysis and application requires developing the capacity for flexibility in adaptation to change and in the use of new technologies in responding to the needs for global participation. Pearson (2011b) concludes that conventional training courses have a very low rate of success in development of the less tangible ‘soft’ skills of learning from reflection on experience, analysis, critical thinking, leadership initiatives, negotiation, political relationships, and ultimately changing organizational culture.

Developing the capacity of workplace managers requires long-term mentoring of their experience in applying the multi-dimensional complexities of innovations as affected by the concept and language limitations of the learner’s cultural and political context. Constraints include those imposed by trainer funding conditions and by particular donor policies such as results-based management, in a local culture where the results cannot be predetermined but need to be shaped by evaluating the evolving process of managing the change.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was originally published as McNamara, V. (2013). Cambodia: From Dependency to Sovereignty – Emerging National Leadership. In L.P. Symaco (Ed.) *Education in South East Asia*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp.47-69. Revisions were made to suit the journal.
- <sup>2</sup> This current plan, for the period 2009–13, will henceforth be referred to as the ESP (MoEYS, 2010). Earlier plans will be reference labelled with the dates of their coverage, ESP (calendar financial years covered, e.g. 2006–10, to finance enrolments for school years 2005–06 to 2009–10) reference (MoEYS, 2006a).
- <sup>3</sup> Education Management Information System (EMIS), comprising statistics and indicators (MoEYS, 2000–11).
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/cambodia/public-spending-on-education-total-percent-of-government-expenditure-wb-data.html> (accessed 17 October 2012).

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