

Context

After the collapse of the Democratic Kampuchea regime in 1979, education system in Cambodia was destroyed. Virtually all Cambodian intellectuals and teachers disappeared because of the execution. Books were destroyed. Schools were demolished and some of them were turned into prisons or livestock. To tackle the issue of education and rebuild the country, Cambodia prioritized access to education over quality of education. In 1980s, the survivors who had obtained at least 3 years of education can get one year training before they could teach. This policy was enforced due to the high demand for education, and very limited supply of teachers.

In the context of post conflict country, it is understandable that giving quality of education is difficult as there were lack of infrastructure, financial and human resources. However, after more than three decades of conflicts, education quality in Cambodia remains low. Many employers complain that student graduates do not have enough capacity to work, and require more training before they are able to work.



Issues:

Poor quality of education is caused by two major challenges—corruption, and infrastructure. Corruption has been a major issue in Cambodian education. It can happen at any level and anytime. With regard to exam, students can bribe teachers or education officers to pass the exam. They can also copy from each other during the exams by giving some money to teachers and invigilators. In some cases, students can also pay the teachers, who are assigned to monitor the exams, to solve the exam questions for them.

Learning is improved through extra reading in the library. However, most libraries do not have books for students to read. Library spaces and environment are not convenient. Almost no public school has a functioning laboratory where students can do the laboratory work on their physics, biology and chemistry studies.

In addition to problem of physical infrastructure, some schools in the rural areas do not have clean lavatories and drinking water for students. Most school buildings in the rural areas do not have fans making it hard for student to study especially in hot season with temperature of up to 40 degree Celsius.

Education Reform in 2014

A big move of education reform occurred in 2014 after a new Minister of Education was appointed as part of the government's rigorous reform agenda. This change was *partially resulted from politics of change*. After losing many seats to the main opposition party in the 2013 national election, the Cambodian ruling party (which has been in power for almost three decades) has started many reforms including the education sector. The ruling party sees education as an attractive sector to attract the constituents. The Prime Minister presides over the education reform committee and gives lots of powers to the new Minister of Education who has a good history of corruption-free to do the reform of education.

The new Minister of Education started the reform with a very critical step of eliminating corruption during final exams of grade 9 (secondary-school exam) and grade 12 (high school exam). Cambodia has three-day standardized exams for students in grade 9 and grade 12. Each year, corrupted officials are believed to take bribes from students through these important exams. Corruption occurred when corrupted officials leaked the exam questions to students in advance, invigilators help answer exam questions, students can copy from each other in exams, and students can bring cheat sheets into the examination schools.

To tackle this issue, Anti-Corruption Unit and other external bodies are invited by the Ministry of Education to take part in monitoring of the three-day exam making the cheating impossible. Officials and students will be punished harshly if they are found to commit corruption. As a result, a significant numbers of students failed high school



exams in 2014. Merely 26 % of students passed high school exams compared to 87% in 2013. With the same harsh measure, number of students passed high school exams increased to 56% in 2015. This is an admiring practice that is favoured by the public including parents whose children failed the exams. With this, students will study harder and not depend on cheating.

In addition to reform of examination system, the Ministry of Education also set other seven priorities which include 1) Improving the quality of learning and teaching by giving opportunity for teachers to pursue further training; 2) Increasing civil service and teachers' salaries basing on merit-based performance; 3) Increasing resources available for front-line service providers to improve the teaching; 4) Establishing a policy think-tank for education by establishing education councils to advice the government; 5) Reforming youth and vocational skills programs to equip students with skills that can fulfill employers' demands; 6) Implementing higher education reform and student job counseling; and 7) Reforming the sport sector—that has not been functioning well—in order to prepare Cambodia to host the Southeast Asian Games in 2023.

Sustainability

Although new reform strategies and implementation look promising, better quality of education requires years and commitment from the government. In this regard, sustainability of education reform is at the questionable stage. As education reform is also *dependent on politics*, it is uncertain if the reform will keep moving after the next election. It is uncertain if the next minister of education will be committed to improving quality of education. In addition, Cambodia is also in need for more funding to improve school physical infrastructure such as school buildings, libraries, laboratories, and lavatories.