



Unlocking Cambodia's future by Improving Access to Quality Early Childhood Education



Despite being recognized as a critical foundation for future learning and development, many children continue to lack access to good quality early childhood education (ECE) services, especially in remote areas.

Beyond primary school achievement, early childhood learning impacts brain development, health, behavior and economic opportunity. Improving access to quality early childhood education can ensure the next generation of children – the “motor” of Cambodia’s continued growth – have the best start to become skilled, educated and healthy workers.

What is currently happening in ECE?

The early children education enrolment rate is far behind that of primary education. In the 2018-2019 academic year, only 18.5% of three-year-old children were enrolled in early childhood education, as well as 39.4% of four-year-old children and 63.1% of five-year-old children.ⁱ

Children living in rural and remote areas, indigenous children, those from lower socioeconomic background, and children with disabilities face significantly greater obstacles to accessing early childhood education opportunities than others. Children living in urban areas are 36% more likely to attend an early childhood education programs than children living in rural areas (11%)ⁱⁱ and five-year-old children in the poorest quartile of households are one and a half times more likely to be out of school than children from the richest quartile.ⁱⁱⁱ

Challenges for indigenous children are compounded since multi-lingual education services are only provided in 3 state pre-schools and 104 community pre-schools across five provinces, and inclusive early education programs in preschools have not yet reached national scale.^{iv}

Even when children have access to ECE services, the quality is often low.^v In 2017, 23.2% of the preschools were taught in rooms in pagodas, 71.5% were operating without water and 81.3% lacked a latrine for children to use.^{vi} Such inadequate facilities have adverse impact on the attendance and learning of children and the working conditions of pre-school teachers. Currently, only 32.2% of existing ECE services meet quality standards^{vii}.

Early Childhood Education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is a key component of achieving **SDG 4.2**:



By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

What is the impact if access to quality ECE is not improved?

ECE is recognized by the Royal Government of Cambodia as an important way to promote enrolment in primary schools and as a means for building an educational foundation that will improve child learning outcomes, minimize early grade repetition rates, and reduce the likelihood of school drop-out.^{viii} Evidence is clear that investing in children in the early years has a much broader impact on children than educational achievement alone. Other areas of impact include: gender equality and empowerment, better health and education outcomes, improved skills, abilities and productivity, narrows the income and geographic inequality gaps, provides timely intervention for persons with disabilities, and is a cost effective strategy for eliminating disadvantage^{ix}.

^{ix} While SDG Target 4.2 specifically focusses on early childhood education and development, it is a critical component for achieving at least 7 of the SDGs on poverty, hunger, health (including child mortality), education, gender, water and sanitation and inequality.^x

The long-term economic benefit of states investing in early childhood education are increasingly well documented – especially in relation to human capital. Beyond primary school achievements, early childhood learning impacts brain development, health, behavior and economic opportunity.^{xi} If ECE is not improved, Cambodia will likely see limited progress in long term measures of human capital development, as well as other measures of progress for minorities and groups of vulnerable children.

What are the obstacles to progress in ECE?

ECE is a cost-effective strategy to meet critical educational, health, nutrition and social protection objectives, and the government has shown a renewed commitment to improving services (such as the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development in 2010 and its accompanying Action Plan 2014 – 2018, the new Action Plan 2019-2023, and the new Guidebook on Community Pre-school Management for CCWCs). While government plans have some very positive elements^{xii}, they remain significantly underfunded when seen in relation to the whole education system. In 2017, only 0.3 percent

of MoEYS' recurrent budget was allocated to ECE, which is the smallest share of MoEYS' total recurrent budget for programmatic interventions compared to other sub-sectors, such as primary education (3.6%), secondary education (4.0%), and higher education (1.7%).^{xiii}

This limited financial focus is compounded at the local level where authorities have limited understanding of the benefits of ECE and so do not prioritize it in local planning. Despite an increasing number of children enrolling in public pre-schools, Commune Investment Plans tend to allocate only 2-4% of local budgets to social services such as pre-schools.

In late 2017, the Royal Government of Cambodia issued Sub-degree (No.245) on the Management of Community Pre-School for providing support to community-based pre-schools that meet minimum standards. However, this has not addressed the issue of quality, or the challenge of high pupil-teacher ratio (at 38.9 in 2016-2017).^{xiv} Despite plans to train 450 new preschools teachers per year, only 250 were trained in 2015, and 200 in 2016.^{xv} The usage of contract teachers has helped alleviate some of this pressure, however, the training contracted teachers receive is insufficient to ensure quality learning for all children, especially those who are most marginalized or vulnerable.^{xvi} In fact, looking at differing recruitment and training criteria between different types of teachers – for example, urban based private pre-schools versus pre-schools in remote areas – differences in teaching quality were inevitable.^{xvii}

Finally, children require improved access to age-appropriate reading and play materials. According to the CDHS 2014, only 4 percent of children under age 5 have at least three children's books (a number that jumped to 11 percent when looking exclusively at urban areas).^{xviii} Another 2017 study in the Tonle Sap area showed that only 9% of households have access to books published for children aged 0-6.^{xix} A 2017 market survey of books from 26 publishers revealed that none were appropriate for children under three years old, and few were appropriate for children aged from 4-6 years.^{xx} Additionally, few publishers indicate the intended reading age for their books and use text that is too complex for young readers.^{xxi}

What needs to be done to improve access to quality ECE?

To change the game on access to quality ECE, the Child Rights Now! coalition recommends that the Royal Government of Cambodia:

1. Increase financial investment at national and sub-national levels to **expand ECE coverage** across the entire country, with special attention to rural and remote areas.
2. Further equip CCWCs to establish and manage community pre-schools through training to implement the new pre-school management guidebook.
3. Better equip preschools to respond to the needs of children from lower socioeconomic households, indigenous communities, and children with disabilities.
4. Boost recruitment and training of preschool teachers through pre-service training at preschool teacher training facilities at provincial level with standardized curriculum and through ongoing in-service professional development.
5. Support the development, publication and access to **age-appropriate reading and play materials** for children aged zero to 6, especially in rural and remote areas, and develop national standards on book levelling for publishers.^{xxii}
6. Ensure policies, services and government action plans clearly distinguish between services targeting children aged three to six, and those targeting children from conception to age three, which requires a stronger multi-sectoral approach to ensure wellbeing.
7. Revise ECCD curriculum to be **gender transformative and promote participation of men** in parenting education and pre-schools.
8. Increase citizen demand for ECE services by supporting public campaigns, community groups, and other initiatives that promote the importance of early learning.

How child rights are the key to future economic growth and development in Cambodia

On child rights, Cambodia has achieved in less than three decades what many nations took a century to achieve. However, sustaining economic growth and achieving the country development targets will require increased productivity and innovation by a skilled, educated and healthy workforce. These workers are today's children and they continue to experience gaps in the full realization of their rights preventing them to reach their full wellbeing and potential.

For Cambodia to continue its growth and achieve its ambitious plans for 2030, we need to "change the game" for children and address these gaps.

The Child Rights Now! coalition believe that putting children at the center of Cambodia's development strategy will ensure the dramatic progress on child rights needed to develop the human capital Cambodia requires to meet ambitious growth and development targets, including the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals and becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030.

i MoEYS, Education Congress, 2019: The Education, Youth, and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2017-2018 and Goals for the Academic Year 2018-2019, p. 45.

ii National Institute of Statistics (NIS), Directorate General for Health, and ICF International, 2015: Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2014, p.165.

iii MoEYS, 2016: Mid-Term Review Report in 2016 of the Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 and Projection to 2020, p. 18.

iv MoEYS, 2019: Education Congress, The Education, Youth and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2017-2018 and Goals for the Academic Year 2018-2019. p.29.

- v Khieng, S., Madhur, S., & Chhem, R. Eds., 2015: Cambodia Education 2015 Employment and Empowerment, p.198.
- vi MoEYS, 2017: Public Education Statistics & Indicators 2016 - 2017, p. 31.
- vii MoEYS 2019: Education Congress, The Education, Youth and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2017-2018 and Goals for the Academic Year 2018-2019. p.33.
- viii MoEYS, 2010: National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development, Endorsed by Council of Ministers in February 2010, p.2
- ix Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development Task Force for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2012, p. 19 cited in Woodhead, Featherson, Bolton, and Robertson (2014).
- x Young Lives, 2016: Policy Brief: Early Childhood Development in the SDGs. Available at: http://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/YL-PB28_Early%20Childhood%20Development%20in%20the%20SDGs.pdf
- xi For a detailed discussion on human capital and early childhood education, see Harry Patrinos, 2018: The Economic Case for Early Learning, World Bank Blogs. Available at <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/economic-case-early-learning>. See also UNICEF, 2013: Evidence for ECD Investment. Available at https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_69851.html.
- xii The National Action Plan aimed to increase enrolment and enhance protection for children aged 0-6 years (especially children from poor families, indigenous minorities and children with disabilities), and prioritized community-based pre-schools and home-based early childhood education programs. Although it did not contain adequate reference to socio-emotional development or cognitive development (e.g., “early stimulation”, “early learning opportunities”) for children below the age of 3.
- xiv UNICEF, 2017: Updated situation analysis of children and women in Cambodia, p. 62
- xv MoEYS, 2017: Public Education Statistics & Indicators 2016 - 2017, p.35
- xiii MoEYS, 2016: Mid-Term Review Report in 2016 of the Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 and Projection to 2020, p.22.
- xvi MoEYS, 2016: Mid-Term Review Report in 2016 of the Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 and Projection to 2020, p.6.
- xvii Public pre-school teachers are expected to have completed grade 12 and undergo two years training at the Preschool Teacher Training Centre in Phnom Penh. However, in the remote areas with the most disadvantaged communities, such as Mondolkiri and Ratanakkiri, pre-school teachers need only to have acquired a grade nine certificate. Although the lower criteria for pre-school teacher recruitment would help boost recruitment in remote areas, it also impacts the quality in remote areas. Community preschool teachers are expected to have completed education to grade 6 and undergo 35 days of pre-service training, while the requirement for teachers of home-based programs and private preschools are generally unregulated.
- xviii NIS, 2015: Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2014, p.168.
- xix Save the Children, 2017: Early Childhood Care and Development: Baseline Survey of the Tonle Sap Floating Villages, p.24.
- xx World Vision, 2017: Market survey of reading materials for early readers, p.2.
- xxi Most publishers define children’s books as books with more pictures and less text; however, a review found that despite there being ‘less text’ it was still too complex for young readers, typically using formal language and compound sentences.
- xxii A book levelling guideline can ensure books published for first readers (aged 0-3) and early readers (aged 4 to grade 3) are appropriate in terms of size, layout, narrative structures, illustration, vocabulary, phrases & sentences, content & theme.