



Unlocking Cambodia's future by Improving Access to Quality Basic Education



Cambodia has achieved incredible progress in basic education, with almost universal access to primary education (enrolment in 2018-2019 was 98%). However, further progress is threatened by low quality learning and inconsistent access for specific population groups.

This substantially limits the full realization of child rights, as well as jeopardizing the future skilled workforce and human capital Cambodia needs to achieve its economic and development goals by 2030.

What is currently happening in basic education?

Children in Cambodia are entitled to nine years of free education. However, specific groups of children struggle to access quality education at different stages of their education. For example, children with disabilities – particularly disabled girls and children with intellectual disabilities – are two times as likely to be out of school compared to their peers, and only 4% of disabled adolescents have completed lower secondary education, compared to 41% of their non-disabled peers.ⁱ

Pervasive cultural beliefs (such as disability being a result of bad karmaⁱⁱ) and low understanding about non-physical disabilitiesⁱⁱⁱ contributes to discrimination against children with disabilities. They also face practical barriers to education, such as lack of transport, limited access to assistive learning devices, or do not have teachers who can respond to their learning needs.^{iv}

While girls tend to have a better educational performance, progression and completion rates than boys, they continue to experience challenges

in accessing full education. Girls drop out of school more often to support their household, and girls with less education are generally more susceptible to exploitation and abuse, such as human trafficking.^v

Children from ethnic minority groups also struggle to access education as they typically live in isolated rural areas, may not speak Khmer, face discrimination from peers, and are more likely to be migratory and be deterred from school due to long distances between home and school.

Basic education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is a key component of achieving **SDG 4.1**:



By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

Only some schools in some parts of the country provide multi-lingual education to children from ethnic minorities.^{vi}

Regrettably, even if children are not vulnerable to such discrimination and do access classrooms, the quality of teaching and learning remains below standard – the quality of Cambodia’s primary education was ranked by the World Economic Forum as low as 110 out of 140 countries.^{vii} As a result, children have shown very low learning outcomes. Poor literacy scores may be partially attributed to a lack of access to reading materials, particularly in rural areas. A 2016 study found that only around 25% of schools have sufficient books and reading resources according to the MoEYS standards set in 2011.^{viii}

Other issues – such as a high student teacher ratio, low education levels of teachers themselves^{xi}, and a loss of teaching hours^x – contributes to the inconsistent quality of education delivered to children across Cambodia.

What is the impact if quality basic education is not improved?

Low quality education and inconsistent access for specific population groups remains a substantial limitation to the full realization of child rights, the development of human capital and achieving the economic and development goals. Strengthening education is central to developing a skilled workforce that can adjust to changes in industry (such as new technologies), enhances financial inclusion among a population, increases diversification and innovation within industry and provides competent employees that make new businesses competitive.^{xi} Additionally, analysis of the SDGs shows that quality education is linked with 15 other SDG targets^{xii}, showing that without progress in this area, achievement in all other targets could be hindered.

What are the obstacles to progress?

Data from Cambodia’s Social Accountability Framework indicates that textbook provision is one of the main obstacle’s citizen’s see as limiting children’s learning, with evidence that the government standard is often not being met at school level.^{xiii} Another

survey conducted in 2018 showed that the additional costs for teaching and learning materials – in both primary and lower secondary levels – is a central financial barrier to consistent school attendance for boys and girls from poorer households.^{xiv} While the situation is improving, low teacher wages continue to incentivize the collection of informal fees and promotes private tutoring, which creates further cost barriers to accessing education. Parents are not always clear on which payments are sanctioned by the government and which are being additionally imposed by teachers or school directors.^{xv}

Additionally, schools are not always safe places for children, with an astounding 73% of students reporting at least one experience of violence at school, and roughly half of students rating their school (classroom and playground) as ‘unsafe’ or ‘somewhat unsafe’.^{xvi} More than one quarter of girls aged 13 to 17 years who have been abused say their first incidence of sexual abuse occurred at school.^{xvii} Such threats to safety, including the prevalence of corporate and humiliating forms of punishment which are still widely accepted, create ongoing obstacles to educational improvement.^{xviii}

Finally, while the policy landscape within the education sector is continually improving^{xix}, implementation remains an obstacle with new policies taking too long to bring about changes in the learning experiences of children (as was the case with the 2007 Child Friendly School policy). This contributes to an ongoing shortage of properly trained teachers, with only 73% of teachers meeting national qualification standards^{xx}, and a continually high student-teacher ratio. In the 2014-15 school year, 38% of all primary schools in Cambodia had student-teacher ratios above 53.1:1, which is far above the UNESCO recommended maximum and MoEYS’ own 2023 target of 40:1.^{xxi} Similarly, education facilities remain limited, with less than 60% of schools having access to safe water and hand-washing facilities for children.^{xxii}

If new policies are to be effectively implemented, district and school officials require increased capacity, especially for developing school budgets and development plans.

What needs to be done to improve access to quality basic education?

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

1. Better equip teachers with improved training for early grades learning at teacher training centers, as well as capacity building on gender transformative pedagogical methods, inclusive education practices, and use of technology for learning.
2. Increase teacher recruitment and retention through investments in teacher professional development, especially in rural areas.
3. Minimize informal fees at schools, including reducing incentives for compulsory private tuition through increases in teacher salaries & allowances for teachers in remote areas (as recommended by the Minister of Education, Youth and Sport at the Education Congress 2019).
4. Further collaborate with specialist NGOs to develop materials for early grades numeracy and literacy and to expand use of technology in teaching.
5. Make schools safer for children through improved implementation and monitoring of the 2016 Policy on Child Protection in Schools, including adequate resourcing for the Operational Plan 2019-2023 and a focus on training teachers in positive discipline.
6. Support the scale up of ISAF in schools to improve accountability of local decision makers for effective planning and budgeting that responds to the specific needs of each community and deepen Cambodia's positive decentralization agenda.
7. Cooperate with other ministries and the private sector to ensure migrant children, and children who migrate with parents, can freely access schooling.
8. Improve the water, sanitation and hygiene infrastructure in schools, as well as improvements to the child friendly learning environment.
9. Continue to increase national budget allocation to the education system, to at least 20% of national budget expenditure.
10. Improve the capacity of sub-national officials in school management, budget planning, and data management (including digital monitoring tools) for the allocation and maintenance of teaching and learning materials.

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 UNESCO, 2018: Education and disability: Analysis of data from 49 countries. P.20 and p.23.
- ii UNESCO, 2018: Education and disability: Analysis of data from 49 countries. P.20 and p.23.
- iii Halim, Hanamariya, 2017: "Mental illness in Cambodia: Raising awareness." Phnom Penh Post. 20 January 2017.
- iv Plan International, 2014: Vulnerable and Marginalised Children's Access to, Learning and Participation in School: Understanding the Challenges.
- v SOS Children's Villages Cambodia, 2015: Child Right Situation Analysis: Children at Risk Losing Parental Care and Children Losing Parental Care, and Sonyka, Va, 19 March 2015: "More High School Girls Drop Out" Khmer Times.
- vi UNICEF, 2015: Cambodia's Multilingual Education National Action Plan, Fact Sheet & Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere: Mainstreaming Education for Ethnic Minority and Disabled Children, and Mayhew, Joanna. "Educating Cambodia's Ethnic Minorities." Deutsche Welle. 3 March 2016.
- vii World Economic Forum, 2018. The Global Competitiveness Report, available at <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-competitiveness-report-2018>.
- viii World Vision, 2016: Current Situation & Use of Primary School Libraries: A snapshot across 5 provinces in Cambodia.
- ix An Assessment of Early Grade Teaching Quality in Cambodia showed that 'whilst many of the teachers can pass a student level test and have a basic grasp of the mathematical concepts from the grades 1-3 curriculum, there is an alarming number of teachers who could not demonstrate even a basic level of understanding of the subject material they teach' (NEP, 2017: An Assessment of Early Grade Teaching Quality in Cambodia, p.32).
- x On average in 2013, 27% of teaching hours (50.5 days) were lost due to additional official school holidays, teacher absence and shortened teaching sessions (NEP, 2015: Teaching Hours in Primary Schools in Cambodia).
- xi Berger, H and MacDonald, M, 2018: IMFblogs: Grading the G-20 on its Growth Goals. Available at <https://blogs.imf.org/2018/11/19/chart-of-the-week-grading-the-g-20-on-its-growth-goals/>
- xii Vladimirova, K & Le Blanc, D, 2015: How well are the links between education and other sustainable development goals covered in UN flagship reports? A contribution to the study of the science-policy interface on education in the UN system. Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2111education%20and%20sdgs.pdf>.
- xiii A total of 812 Joint Accountability Action Plans across 812 communes (in 18 provinces) were analyzed by 5 implementing partners - RACHA, World Vision International, Save the Children, Care, and STAR Kampuchea.
- xiv Save the Children, et al., 2018: Education Budget Policy Brief 2018 – Addressing cost-barriers to schooling for primary and lower secondary learners from poor, rural and remote households.
- xv UNDP Cambodia, 2014: Curbing Private Tutoring and Informal Fees in Cambodia's Basic Education
- xvi International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) & Plan International, 2014: Are Schools Safe and Gender Equal Spaces: Finding from a Baseline Study of School Related Gender-based Violence in Five Countries in Asia.
- xvii Ministry of Women's Affairs, UNICEF Cambodia, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014: Findings from Cambodia's Violence Against Children Survey 2013.
- xviii Although progress has been made through the adoption of the Action Plan to Prevent and respond to Violence against Children 2017-2021, corporal punishment is still regarded as an effective way to control and correct socially undesirable behaviour by children (World Vision Cambodia, 2018: Policy Brief on Child Protection. Ending Corporal and Humiliating Punishments in Cambodia).
- xix New policies from government are very positive including: the Child Protection in Schools Policy and Action Plan in 2016; the Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to Violence Against Children launched in 2017 that bans corporal punishment in all settings; the development of multi-lingual education programs and a mobile preschool class to reach indigenous children; improved disability inclusion standards in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- xx MoEYS, 2019: Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, p.28.
- xxi Conochie G, Sopha A, Anderson C, 2017: An analysis of the Deployment of Primary School Teachers in Cambodia 2010-2015, NGO Education Partnership, p.12.
- xxii MoEYS, 2019: Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, p.27.