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## **Basic Education in Cambodia: The Impact of UNESCO on Policies in the 1990s**

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### **Abstract**

Efforts to enhance opportunities for Basic Education have been growing within many developing nations after the 1990 World Conference on Education For All (WCEFA) in Jomtien, Thailand. In the face of political turmoil, financial constraint and social insecurity, Cambodia with the encouragement and assistance of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), took measures to increase educational opportunities for all her citizens through Basic Education strategic plans and pledged to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000. This article examines the joint efforts during the 1990s of this organization as a key assistance and support UN agency for

educational policy and strategy formulations, and the Cambodian government as a national agency for educational initiatives and implementation. UNESCO's inputs for policy implementation are also detailed to evaluate the overall impact of the organization during the last decade. Analyses are based primarily on interviews with some key government policymakers, fieldwork observation and interviews with school-aged children, several speeches of top government officials, and existing related official education statistics and indicators in Cambodia.

## **Introduction**

UNESCO's conceptual framework of Basic Education has been receiving remarkable policy attention in many developing countries over the last decade. Interest has been fueled by extensive participation in the 1990 WCEFA and increasing ratifications of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in the early 1990s. Those developing nations, including Cambodia, have recognized the rights of children to education on the basis of equal educational opportunity and also taken measures to make primary education compulsory, free and accessible to all (Article 28 of the CRC). Subscribing nations also pledged that all their poor children would have gained access to quality primary education by the turn of the century.

After the 1990 WCEFA, UN agencies, international organizations (IOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) diversified their support programs and activities to facilitate and assist least developed nations to achieve the EFA goal by the year 2000. This world community carries a key responsibility for alleviating the constraints that prevent some countries from achieving the goal of EFA (Windham, 1992).

However, at the 2000 World Education Forum (WEF) in Dakar, a large majority of the 1990 WCEFA participants conceded failure, despite the decline in the world illiteracy population from over 900 million in 1990 to less than 800 million, and despite the fact that more children than ever gained access to primary schooling. The 2000 WEF participants eventually vowed to redouble efforts to achieve Basic Education for all by the year 2015.

Accordingly, this "simple yet profound goal" was described by Sperling (2001, pp. 7) as adding to the existing "crowded graveyard of overly ambitious developmental goals." Sperling (2001) warned that while the provision of basic education can produce significant gains in income and lifestyle, the achievement should really be seen as a starting point rather than an end goal. Sperling (2001) suggested, "The most likely way to achieve universal education by 2015 is through a clear framework for collective action that outlines appropriate and realistic roles and responsibilities for donor countries, recipient countries and multilateral institutions" (p.9). Many Cambodian educational leaders believe that they must spare no effort to give all Cambodians education of acceptable quality.

Cambodia was still at war when it participated in the 1990 WCEFA. A Peace Accord was signed in Paris by all the warring factions considering national

reconciliation in 1991 with the assistance of the international community to put war to an end. Since then, Cambodia has opened itself to the world and called for outside assistance. These ground breaking changes led to a general election organized and supervised by the UN in 1993 to establish a democratic government. Cambodia was seen as vulnerable in the eyes of the international community. The World Red Cross, The World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other organizations and donors came in to help rebuild the broken socioeconomic system. UNESCO in particular was exceptionally active and played a key role in providing consultation and supporting reform of the education system in Cambodia as early as 1990. Doing so has required working closely with the central governments, both pre-election and post-election, in formulating policies for educational development.

According to the socioeconomic circumstances of the early 1990s and recalling that Cambodia was then in a stage of national rehabilitation, Basic Education was focused on primary education and adult education with the primary aim of enhancing the achievement of literacy and numeracy (Hun Sen, 1991). Basic Education subsequently was extended to nine years of formal schooling composed of primary and expanded to lower secondary education. The main goal of this new policy was to achieve "functional literacy" and construct a foundation for vocational and technical trainings, and for higher learning (MoEYS, 1999, pp.14). In recognition of this fact, the Cambodian government has been taking steps to alleviate widespread poverty and has striven to eradicate illiteracy and improve access to quality basic education (Tol Lah, 1997).

The principal aims of this article are (1) to review educational policies and strategies formulated and implemented in the 1990s; (2) to examine the main contributions of UNESCO and the impact on Basic Education expansion; and (3) to identify and explain the successes and failures of the Basic Education developments during the 1990s. This study is, in order to understand the educational policy and development in Cambodia, derived from interviews with national EFA experts and keynote speeches of top government officials. For further understanding and to crosscheck what was heard or written, fieldwork observations and interviews were conducted in five rural provinces of Cambodia with over a hundred children, three local authorities and parents in July-August 2001.

## **Understanding Cambodia: Its Regimes and Their Policies on Education**

Cambodia (sometimes known as Khmer or Kampuchea) may not be known worldwide and is sometimes forgotten by or isolated from the international community. Its present condition is deeply rooted in its past magnificence and sufferings. Those who fail to understand the history of Cambodia may find its current situation confusing or incomprehensible. This section traces the pivotal periods from pre-French colonialism (before 1863), French colonial era (1863-1953), post-French colonialism or the first Kingdom of Cambodia known as Sihanouk regime (1953-1970), political turmoil of Lon Nol regime or the Khmer Republic (1970-1975), genocidal regime of the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pol regime (1975-1979), to the Vietnamese occupation period or Heng Samrin

regime (1979-1989). It concludes with a discussion of the regime of the State of Cambodia as a transitional period from the collapse of Soviet Union to the UN organized general election (1989-1993) and the post general election period or as the second Kingdom of Cambodia (1993-present).

The history of Cambodia dates back thousands of years (Chandler, 1988). Cambodian (Khmer) people were among the first in Asia to adopt religious ideas and political institutions, presumably from India, and to create a centralized kingdom occupying large territories with comparatively sophisticated culture (Chandler, 1998; Encyclopedia Britannica, 2001). Since the Khmer people immersed themselves in Buddhism around the twelfth century, the teaching of Buddhist principles was institutionalized and "basic literacy" was needed for religious leaders to circulate religious concepts and to help lead civil society. Buddhist temple schools were established and open for boys and young men, where they could learn moral ethics, literacy and some Buddhist advice about life. The schools have competently provided only "primary education" (Bit, 1991, pp. 50) to boys since they had to stay in the temple or serve as monks.

The teachers were volunteer Buddhist men (monks—*sangha* or *acha*). This practice was seen as early as the seventh century (Chandler, 1988). This Buddhist or traditional education system reached the highest level known as *banddhit* or *highest learning* as noted by Chou, a Chinese envoy to Angkor (former Cambodian capital) during 1296-1297 when Cambodia was known as the Khmer Empire from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries (Chou, 1953). The decline of Angkor supremacy in around the mid-fifteenth century caused a collapse of this nationwide traditional schooling system and a good deal of knowledge was nowhere to be found (Chandler, 1998; Prasertsri, 1996). It is hard to see the Khmer regime's strong commitment to any policy of education in the pre-colonial period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863. Bit (1991) noted that under the French protectorate a limited public school system and only few private schools prepared the elite and higher education was possible only through study abroad. On the other hand, it was noted that tertiary education was first introduced in Cambodia in the late 1940s, namely a Faculty of Law (Sloper, 1999).

For the first twenty years of their protectorate, Chandler (1991) found that the French did little to interfere with traditional politics even neglecting educational development in Cambodia. In the early twentieth century, the colonial administration began to "modernize" the traditional school system by integrating it with the French schooling system, seeing Cambodia's progress in improved agricultural production as serving France's colonial power. However, Chandler (1998) commented, "before the 1930s the French spent almost nothing on education in Cambodia" (p.156). The French were reluctant to enhance education because education would empower Cambodians and loosen France's hold on the colony (Clayton, 1995). Clayton (1995, p.2) with other scholars even argued that "the French purposefully withheld education from Cambodians in order first to consolidate and then to maintain power – French schools did indeed fail to enroll significant numbers of Cambodians until late in

the colonial period.”

Many scholars see the modernization of the traditional education system and the integration of the French-oriented curriculum into the traditional Khmer curriculum as a French socioeconomic exploitation (Kierman, 1985, p. xiii as quoted by Clayton, 1995):

There were 160 modern [that is controlled by the French] primary schools with 10,000 pupils by 1925...but even by 1944, when 80,000 [Cambodians] were attending [some sort of] modern primary schools, only about 500 pupils per year completed their primary education ...by 1944 there were only 1,000 secondary students...even by 1953 there were still only 2,700 secondary students enrolled in eight high schools in Cambodia. (p. 6)

Such a low investment in modernizing Cambodian education probably resulted in part as well from the traditional Cambodian intellectuals', especially the Buddhist monks, resistance to the French attempts to romanticize Khmer scripts in the 1940s as they had successfully done to the Vietnamese (Chandler, 1998; Osborne, 1969). Seeing that their traditional culture of education was on the verge of collapse caused by the French reform, the Cambodians opposed and even enhanced traditional cultural forms in rural areas far from the eyes of the French (for discussion see Clayton, 1995).

After ninety years under the French colonization from 1863 to 1953, the post-independence Cambodia of Sihanouk's regime from 1953 to 1970 promoted increasing schooling opportunities following the French model of a schooling system. This effort continued what the French had started but accelerated the pace of development. The number of primary and secondary schools increased rapidly, especially by the end of Sihanouk regime (Bit, 1991). Education extended to the university level. There were nine universities in the capital and some provincial cities. By the late 1960s, Deighton (1971) reported that there were more than one million children enrolled in primary education as compared with about 0.6 million in 1960 and 0.13 million in 1950. From 1950 to 1964, secondary the education enrolment ratio increased from 0.04 percent to 17 percent. As further evidence of this increased interest and investment in formal education for building a modern and peaceful state, the regime even increased the national budget for education to over twenty percent of the national expenditure by the late 1960s (Deighton, 1971).

However, some other scholars such as Chandler (1998), Chandler (1991), Ayres (2000), Ayres (1999) and the present senior education officials commented that the regime had failed to universalize basic education and had failed to enhance employment for high school and university graduates. Moreover, Duggan (1996) also criticized the regime as follows:

The education system provided by Sihanouk was biased towards the nation's largest cities. Rural Cambodia did not benefit from the selective expansion strategies employed by the Prince (Sihanouk) and handsomely built universities did not assist rural children and their family's poverty. (p. 364)

Criticisms were directed toward the regime for not widely enhancing nationwide literacy-oriented education or increasing schooling opportunities for all. The Sihanouk regime marked the greatest advancement of Cambodia in the past few hundred years. Dunnnett (1993) celebrated the 1960s in Cambodia pointing out that it had the highest literacy rates and most progressive education systems in Southeast Asia.

The French influence in the educational system and overall administrative systems was still strong in the recent history of Cambodia. The French shadow falls across Cambodian schooling even to the present day. It has been noted by senior education officials that one of the causes of high rates of repeating grades and high dropout rates in Cambodian primary education is the use of the old French-styled classroom management and evaluation methods.

Following the over fifteen years of peace and prosperity Cambodia under the Sihanouk regime, General Lon Nol backed by the United States seized control in a diplomatic coup d'état in 1970 and declared Cambodia the Khmer Republic (Chandler, 1991). It was the first time in Cambodian history that the monarchy was abolished. Almost no reforms ensued, but instead the country was plunged into civil conflict. The Communist uprising reached its peak from the East and spread fighting in rural areas in early 1970s. As a result, educational opportunities were shut off. The regime was in turmoil and collapsed in 1975 (for a discussion see Chandler, 1991). The socioeconomic achievements gained in the previous regime soon vanished.

Cambodia went down and finally sank to “year zero” in the regime of Democratic Kampuchea known as the Khmer Rouge or Pol Pot regime from 1975 to 1979. The regime changed Cambodia into a revolutionary Maoist communist state. This “great leap” revolutionary regime of Pol Pot visited mass devastation on this pitiful nation—devastation of individual property, the formal school system, the social culture--and forced the entire population either into the army or onto collective farms (Chandler, 1998; Dunnnett, 1993). The damage to the infrastructure of education was monumental; Cambodia lost almost three-quarters of its educated population under the regime; teachers, students, professionals and intellectuals were killed or managed to escape into exile (ADB, 1996; Prasertsri, 1996). It has been estimated that about two million of the pre-war Cambodian population of around seven million were killed or died in that genocidal regime.

The People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) or Heng Samrin regime from 1979 to 1989 started to rebuild the country from the utter devastation of “year zero.” The regime, which was supported by Vietnam and other socialist bloc nations, ruled Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. The regime's top priority between 1979 and 1981 was to rebuild educational institutions. Generous support from UNICEF and International Red Cross together with the determination to restructure Cambodia by the PRK, saw about 6,000 educational institutions rebuilt and thousands of teachers quickly trained (Dunnnett, 1993). The regime's policy on enhancing education was seen thus in an interview with a senior education official who had been involved in basic education and teacher training since 1979:

From 1979-1981 was a period of restructuring and rehabilitating of both infrastructure and human resources. The restructuring and rehabilitation I refer was collecting school-aged children and putting them in school despite the poor condition of the school and even conducting classes in the open air or under the trees. We appealed to all those teachers and literate people who survived to teach the illiterates. We used various slogans such as “going to teach and going to school is nation-loving” and so on. There were no licenses or any high requirements for holding a teaching job. We just tried to open school and literacy classes – we didn’t care about quality.

In the early 1980s, all levels of schools (from kindergarten to higher education) were reopened and total enrolment reached almost one million. Teachers were better trained and quality was gradually emphasized. However, it is worth noting that in any primary school about 30 percent of the children had no father, 10 percent had no mother, and between 5 and 10 percent were orphans (Postlethwaite, 1988). The political and economic disturbance haunted Cambodia until the second term of the Royal Government and the complete eradication of the Khmer Rouge’s machinery and organization in 1998. Nevertheless, the people of Cambodia still have pride in their prosperous, powerful and glorious precedents and this pride encourages them to dream of another golden age.

## **Current Basic Education Development in Cambodia**

A transition period from the planned economy of the 1980s to a free market economy in the 1990s has reshaped the aim of the Cambodian education system in light of socioeconomic realities. The educational trends can be roughly traced through two leadership periods. Pen Navuth, Minister of Education of the then PRK, with multi-lateral support from the socialist bloc, affirmed in 1985 that the “objective of Cambodia’s education was to serve the then revolutionary socialism of Kampuchea (Cambodia) and to form new and good, hard-working citizens with good health, technical awareness and support for the revolutionary Kampuchea. Schools were to be organized as cultural centers open to all and as a system of defense against enemy propaganda” (Pen Navuth as cited in Ayres, 2000, p. 452).

The PRK education system was composed of four years of primary education, three years of lower secondary and three years of upper secondary education. The 4+3+3 system – according to a current senior education official of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) who has been involved in restructuring the education system since 1979 – was implemented in response to emergent needs for human resources for national rehabilitation. Under the leadership of Tol Lah, current Minister of MoEYS of the new constitutional Royal Government of Cambodia established after the UN supervised general election in May 1993, the objective of the present education system is to “develop the pedagogic, cognitive, mental and physical abilities of learners. It aims at developing among its citizens a sense of self-confidence, self-reliance, responsibility, solidarity, national unity, patriotism and culture of peace” (MoEYS, 1999, p.9).



The latter leadership began with educational structure rehabilitation and a series of reforms to meet the global standard as a direction of sustainable social and economic development. It was strongly espoused that universalizing basic education could help alleviate poverty (Tol Lah, 1999). Accordingly, the education system shifted periodically from ten years of schooling (4+3+3) to eleven years as (5+3+3) and lastly in 1996 reached the common worldwide system of twelve years (6+3+3).

As Buchert (1995) observed, the reform of the education system shifted to a predominant concern among international agencies with global poverty reduction, in the context of the implementation of EFA. Essentially, Cambodia found itself lost in the middle of nowhere while seeking socioeconomic development in the late 1980s. The UNESCO's framework in universalizing Basic Education (with its emphasis on achieving poverty alleviation in the near future) has become a topic of concern at the highest levels since the late 1990s.

The ill-designed education system, incapable management staff, social and political instability and economic depression have all worked a negative effect on educational achievement. There has been much evidence that there is no greater guarantee of a country's future than to invest in education for national development and that Basic Education is key to freeing people from poverty (Tol Lah, 1997). The 1993 Cambodian constitution makes a strong commitment of the country to the EFA approach as acknowledged in Chapter VI, Articles 65 & 68 which stated:

The State shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools. Citizens shall receive education for at least nine years. The State shall protect and upgrade citizens' rights to quality education at all levels and shall take necessary steps for quality education to reach all citizens.

Cambodia faces numerous challenges in developing its Basic Education system to keep abreast with its neighboring countries. The 1991 National Conference on EFA indicated that in the 1990-91 academic year, the number of children enrolled in primary schools was 94 percent in urban areas, 75 percent in rural areas, and 50 percent in remote areas. Growing enrolment and participation are revealed in National Education Statistics and Indicators: In 1998-99, (a) 59 percent of urban children, 82 percent of the rural children and 97 percent of the remote children failed to attain lower secondary education; (b) 14.5 percent were unable to survive a full six-year primary education; and (c) the gross enrolment ratio in primary school was 89.7 percent, but downed to 23 percent in lower secondary, and further down to 8.7 percent in upper secondary education (MoEYS, 1996-9).

A sequence of political conflicts and civil wars over the past two decades crippled the developmental process in education of this poor nation, which mostly affected education in rural and remote areas. In the 1998-99 school year, the country had a total of 5,156 primary schools, 355 lower secondary and 132 upper-secondary schools. Fifty per-cent of the total number of primary schools mostly found in rural and remote areas did not have a complete range

of grades (grades 1-6) for the primary cycle. Children who live far away from a school with the complete range of grades find it difficult to continue learning and many inevitably become dropouts. A senior MoEYS official expressed a concern in an interview that “We don’t have enough schools for Basic Education; that is why we did not have a 100 percent enrolment rate...many school-age children failed to enroll even though school is free”.

According to the parents, local authorities, the pupils and the dropouts interviewed in rural areas of Cambodia, they complained that the school did not comply with the central policy and the school allowed teachers to charge money for private tutoring and to collect contributions from the pupils. Those who could not afford inevitably dropped out. Most children, though given the opportunity, were placed in large classes of around eighty in primary schools. Almost one-third of the teachers are still untrained. Their salaries are still around twenty American dollars per month, which necessitates their holding a second job.

With annual population growth rate of 2.4 percent, the people’s demands for formal basic schooling are also increasing. The population growth of an estimated 4 million in 1980 to almost 12 million in 1998 requires a formidable effort from the government, which must reform the education system quickly. In 1998-99, the enrollment rate in primary education for the whole country was only 78 percent. In other words, 22 percent of the population aged 6-11 remains outside schools. The increasing number of dropouts in lower grades is the cause of the high rate of illiteracy. The situation is worse in remote provinces as the net enrolment rate is even lower than 50% (MoEYS, 1996-9).

## **Contributions of UNESCO to Educational Development in Cambodia**

Cambodia became a member of UNESCO in 1951 and the United Nations in 1955. As a consequence of political instability and a series of civil wars between the 1970s and 1980s, UNESCO suspended its activities and cooperation – and lastly closed its office in Phnom Penh. Vietnam continued to hold its troops in Cambodia after it intervened in 1979 to install PRK. Though it had helped to rebuild Cambodia from ashes after it won a war with the Khmer Rouge – the international community and many Cambodians saw this as an act of subjugation of Cambodia (for further discussion see Clayton, 2000).

Consequently, the liberal bloc placed economic and political sanctions on the PRK as well as Vietnam. Cambodia could only receive assistance from the socialist bloc. The Cambodian armed resistance forces fought with the Vietnamese army resulting in social unrest in many rural areas. A complete Vietnamese troop withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union a few years later necessitated reforms in Cambodia in almost all sectors to shift from the socialism to a grudging acceptance of liberal democracy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the pillar of the socialist bloc, Cambodia found itself without aid from its socialist donors of the late 1980s. Opportunities were very limited since the country was still under sanctions. The international community prepared to help Cambodia. Shortly after the 1990 WCEFA, UNESCO reopened its office in Phnom Penh in 1991.

As promised at the 1990 EFA Conference, UNESCO, UNICEF, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the World Bank have played an important role in assisting Cambodia in national reconstruction and rehabilitation. A senior education official pointed out that putting every thing systematically in order would have been a difficult task without international assistance and support. The country could not have come to where it is today on its own without external assistance. He further explained:

After returning from the 1990 WCEFA we organized a national conference on EFA in 1991 with remarkable support by UNESCO, UNICEF and UNDP. The running process and support we obtained urgently in 1991 was from UNESCO. UNESCO has been assisting us technically and financially.

In order for Cambodia to keep abreast of the healthier developing world, modernization of the overall systems requires skilled manpower to lead the development process (Ayres, 2000). This underscores the role of education for national rehabilitation. The Cambodian government made an effort to participate in the 1990 WCEFA, and then held its own EFA conference the following year. The conference marked the second consideration of schooling opportunity and literacy after the first attempt to eliminate illiteracy among the adult population in the early 1980s, an attempt devoid of support from UNESCO.

Owing to the roles of UNESCO and the educational problems in Cambodia in the 1990s, this world education body has assisted and supported the national initiatives to achieve the EFA goal (UNESCO, 1993). The organization's mission in Cambodia has moved forward under the banner "fighting poverty by promoting the development of EFA." UNESCO began with building human resources for the ministry of education and providing a new conceptual framework for educational development. It trained 1,200 administrative education officials in educational planning and management, and has also supported the establishment of the Educational Management Information System Center (UNESCO, 2001).

Noting the deficiency in educational statistical data and information for the design of educational policies and decision-making, UNESCO has also focused on strengthening the management system. Additionally, in order to enhance quality basic education, it has guided and supported the reform of curriculum for science education and the production of learning/teaching materials. These contributions, such as providing consultation and support for local initiatives in terms of improving access and quality of basic education, are acknowledged in several senior government officials' speeches (Sar Kheng, 2000; Tol Lah, 1999).

Even with the many actions that UNESCO has undertaken, the progress of reform in educational management in Cambodia is still slow. Still the number of trained staff is limited in the educational system. However, UNESCO's contributions were indispensable. Despite the fact that education personnel are equipped with knowledge and skills, substandard operational resources and

their low wages (of less than 30 US dollars per month) appear to have adverse effects on motivation. The former EFA coordinator raised the issue that the poor living standard of the staff and lack of resources had reduced their efforts from full commitment in implementing the policies. This mind-set not only reduces the positive impact of UNESCO but also interferes with the achievement of the goal of EFA in Cambodia. It is unquestionable that the undernourished and unmotivated workforce is sorely challenged to create good results.

## **Characteristics of Cambodian Basic Education**

In Cambodia following the UNESCO's framework, Basic Education is constitutionally defined as nine years of formal schooling, comprising primary and lower secondary education. It aims to contribute to improvements in the socioeconomic sphere as a whole. According to UNESCO (1998b), "Basic Education" must meet the basic learning needs of all human beings. These needs comprise literacy, oral expression, numeracy, problem solving and knowledge, as well as the skills, values and attitudes required by an individual to develop and participate in society. Although education is "officially" free of charge in public institutions, practically in the 1990s all schools required students to pay some maintenance fees. This served to run off thousands of children of the poorest of the poor from enrolment because almost 40 percent of the population in 1997 lived below the poverty line (UNESCO, 1998b). In the Basic Education Social Sector Plan 1996-2000, the government anticipates that nine years of schooling will become compulsory in the future.

The official school age at the primary level is from 6 to 11 years. Pupils are advanced through grades 1 to 6 after passing tests at the end of each year. Pupils who fail a grade can repeat only twice during the primary cycle. The official school age of lower secondary level is from 12 to 14 years. Pupils can only repeat once at this level. The official number of school days in a year is 228 and there are 1,254 sessions. Several studies by UNESCO note that the grade-to-grade promotion regulation is difficult, and sometimes the criteria are not clearly defined, which results in high repetition rates in grade 1 of around 40 percent during the 1990s (UNESCO, 1998b). The national examination from primary level to lower secondary level was abolished in the late 1990s in order to encourage more participation in secondary education. However, the limited number of secondary schools in rural areas and opportunity costs obstruct opportunities for further schooling (Dy, 2001).

## **Basic Education Attainment**

Policy statements provide a framework for strategic planning. They are subject to change periodically when socioeconomic and political conditions change (UNESCO & UNDP, 1999). Since the nation-wide educational statistics and planning mechanism was established in 1996, MoEYS has systematically formulated education policies and goals in attempts to satisfy the international community, donor countries, the CRC and the 1993 Constitution. Its emphasis was put on universalizing nine years of basic education and developing opportunities for functional literacy, and modernizing and improving the quality of education through effective reforms.

Policymaking and strategic planning in the early 1990s have been influenced by several significant and interrelated events such as sequential National Conferences on EFA and the signing of Peace Accords in Paris by Cambodia's warring factions, the formation of the International Committee on the Reconstruction of Cambodia, the newly adopted Constitution and a series of National Education Seminars (Ayres, 1999). Although the policies are well designed, the lack of high-quality socioeconomic and operating cost assessments led some education experts to pronounce the 1990s' policies "excessively ambitious." Strategic plans require sufficient budget and excellent staffing management. The current National EFA Coordinator identifies three main factors that make the basic education targets for the year 2000 unattainable: the absence of mechanisms to carry out reforms, insufficient funding to put plans into action, and on-going civil war causing social unrest especially in remote areas.

A great deal of effort has been made to achieve basic education for all. Cambodia's ambitious goals included helping a hundred percent of school-aged children in urban and some rural areas of geographically plain provinces to achieve access to primary education, and eradicating illiteracy of all adults by 1995. Without carefully weighing its resources, it set another ambitious goal—that all school-aged children in remote and mountainous areas should gain access to primary education by the year 2000. An education ministry official recently noted in an interview that "if it was worth giving education to our children we had better make it good quality." Hence, the 1991 national conference on EFA did not neglect quality improvement. (State of Cambodia, 1991).

Quality primary education did not result from the modest investment of effort and resources. Notwithstanding these government efforts and even with the help of with significant donor support, several policy issues, such as institutional strengthening and quality improvement, remained unresolved (ADB, 1996). Furthermore, after experiencing a more stable socio-political environment and full international support, the Cambodian government attempted again to mobilize and combine resources, and numerous reforms had been undertaken recently in its educational system. The efforts were focused on enhancing quality of learning and teaching, increasing access to basic education, ensuring equity in education services, and increasing effectiveness in planning and management. These efforts have resulted in primary education enrolment increases all over the country (see Table 1), and successful reforms of the educational system, curriculum, data management facilities and school management networks.

Another critical goal in the second term of the Royal Government of Cambodia was to achieve an effective balance between quality improvement measures and selective expansion of educational services. Thus, the government reestablished targets for the year 2000 as follows: 1) increase net primary education enrolment to 90 percent ; 2) improve net lower-secondary education enrolment to 85 percent; 3) reduce repetition rates in grades 1 to 6 to below 10 percent; and 4) help 85 percent of first grade students in primary education to complete grade 6. This second period saw an improvement in educational

opportunities given by the state through additional school buildings, more training for teachers and increased educational awareness of parents. Further progress is witnessed in growing participation and funding from communities and households amounting to almost 80 percent of total expenditure for education (Bray, 1996). However, the low salary of teachers still exists and increases in government funding are slow to occur (see Table 1).

In view of its tragic past civil strife, Cambodia has made progress in expanding schooling opportunities especially at universalizing primary education and slightly increasing the transition rate from primary to lower secondary education. Mehrotra (1998) argued that successful “Basic Education” policies and implementations in high EFA achieving countries depend on state-support basic social services. Cambodia, with a poor social service system particularly in rural areas, is in a situation in which socioeconomic disparities determine the educational opportunity for quality learning. In terms of transition rates to lower secondary education, gender equity, and school facilities, the wealthier households enjoy greater access to quality schooling than do disadvantaged families. Consequently, this disproportional provision of basic education reveals insufficient state investment in universalizing educational opportunity.

## **Quantity vs. Quality**

Recent changes in the school system and curriculum reform in Cambodia have contributed to both quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement. Keynote political speeches of Cambodian educational and government leaders stressed the need for nine years of quality basic education for all Cambodians (Tol Lah, 1999; Tol Lah, 2000; Sar Kheng, 1999 & Sar Kheng, 2000). How they define quality is still uncertain since much of what they have accomplished has been mainly in the area of improving accessibility, such as building more schools and recruiting more teachers and paying less attention to increased funding for the improvement of teaching and learning. Through dialogues with some MoEYS senior officials, the concept of “Basic Education” was found to be imprecise and “basic learning needs” too broad and confusing for most educational leaders to act on until they were clarified in the 2000 WEF.

In the early 1990s, major efforts were made to consolidate teacher improvement systems, continue restoration of school buildings and develop systems to supply effective textbooks and teaching aids (ADB, 1996). There are limited education indicators available from the early 1990s. Most of the goals and strategies set at the 1991 National Conference on EFA were carried out until 1994 with limited success. Then the educational initiatives were reformulated in 1994 in consultation with donors and technical agencies for the 1995-2000 strategic plan and also the socioeconomic plan for 1996-2000. Victor Ordonez, Director of the UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (PROAP), stated in his commentary at the Asia Pacific Conference on EFA Assessment 2000 that:

Policy makers are slowly getting over – the sometimes false – dichotomy of quantity versus quality. Under this dichotomy, when budgets are limited, one must often choose between more textbooks and facilities for those already in school (quality), or additional

buildings and teachers for those not yet in the system (quantity). The drive towards universal primary education in Asia has tended to favor quantity or expanded access. (Ordonez, 2000, pp. 2)

This sentiment was echoed by the former and current officials in charge of EFA in Cambodia. They believed that awareness of the value of education and nationwide diffusion could lend support to strengthening the quality of schooling. Reaching all and inviting all to cooperate were the main goals of the 1990s. Another pressing concern is the low level of success in producing qualified or adequately skilled candidates for gainful employment. This underscores the need to find a workable balance between striving to educate as many as possible, and providing a quality education to those who reach graduation. One approach is to take important steps to curb dropout and enhance transition rates.

Expanding quantity should be coupled with strengthening the quality of the schooling provided. Otherwise, without carefully planned programs, quantitative gains could result in qualitative losses (ADB, 1996). Through meetings in the late 1990s, "quality improvement" was stressed and prioritized. However, Dungan (1996) reported that unqualified teachers constituted around 80 percent of the active teaching force. One must wonder about the quality of teaching. In comparison with other Southeast Asian nations, the gross secondary education enrolment rate in Cambodia was the lowest (Dy, 2001). It may be concluded that basic education development programs, especially those of the late 1990s, affected quality and enrolment in secondary education.

**Table 1. Basic Education Indicators in Cambodia**

Academic Year	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00
<b>Expanded Access and Coverage:</b>				
Gross admission rate	113	97.9	103.3	123.6
Gross primary education enrolment ratio	94.5%	88.3%	89.7%	100.3%
Net primary education enrolment ratio	84.7	77.8	78.3	85.5
Gross lower secondary education enrolment ratio	30.5	23.7	23.0	22.9
Net lower secondary education enrolment ratio	23.2	16.3	14.2	14.4
Girls gross enrollment ratio in primary education	86.4	81.2	83.9	93.3
Girls gross enrollment ratio in lower secondary education	22.7	16.8	16.1	16.4
<b>Quality Improvement:</b>				
Literacy rate (15 years old and over)	65.9*	67.3	68.7*	
Repetition rate in primary education	27	26.3	24.6	22.3
Transition rate from primary to lower secondary education	56.3	71.9	74.3	76.7
Transition rate from lower to upper secondary education	33.3	38.8	39.4	56.3
<b>Funding:</b>				
Percentage of national budget for education	8.1	10.3	8.3	10

Sources: EMIS Center, Department of Planning, Ministry of Education Youth and Sport, Cambodia. \*Ministry of Planning: 1996 Socioeconomic Survey & 1998 National Census

## Discussion

No country can afford to neglect education since it is the foundation for development and modernization of the state. In recognition of this truth, Cambodia has made various attempts to strive for success in basic schooling accessibility and quality. Even in the course of social and political instability, Cambodia made significant progress, such as in increasing number of schools (from 4,665 primary schools in 1990 to 5,274 in 2000; from 66 upper-secondary schools in 1990 to 140 in 2000) and pupil enrolments (1.3 million enrolled in primary in 1990, increased to 2.2 million in 2000, and upper-secondary enrolments of 47,562 in 1990 mounting to 108,213 in 2000). These accomplishments can be credited to the government's development partners (such as UN agencies, multi and bilateral donors), improved management within the government, and household communities for their assistance and participation. With reference to Ordonez (1997-2001), if the spirit of the EFA programs was to get as close to the targets as possible, Cambodia almost achieved universal primary education at this end of the decade. Thus, this cooperation with UNESCO along with the existing resources and aspirations have brought about quantum leaps in educational achievement.

Future challenges in realizing the UNESCO's EFA principles demand additional inputs and willpower. Many of the problems entail inequality of access to quality education, regional disparities, and the vast poverty of the people of Cambodia. The quality of basic education is deficient, especially in rural and remote areas that cover nearly 80 percent of the children to be served.

UNESCO's framework and assistance for Cambodian basic education policy and strategy formulations had a great impact on the educational. The primary accomplishments of UNESCO assistance in Cambodia involved strengthening the statistical management of schooling, strengthening working networks and building capability of the staff, establishment of educational data systems, and introduction of a nine-year basic schooling system in the mid 1990s.

Accordingly, the weight of UNESCO may be underscored in long-term efforts of the government of Cambodia to universalize basic education through enhancement of funding. In other words, the efforts of UNESCO and other organizations in providing consultation and recommendations to policymaking and goal shaping have led to building human resources and stimulating international aid donors. This effort has established a foundation for policy formulation and fundamental approaches to schooling improvement in the era of change.

## **Conclusion**

There remain formidable challenges for Cambodian policymakers in realizing the 1990 WCEFA's goals. On the other hand, as demonstrated by the above analyses, progress towards these goals with the essential presence of UNESCO has been considerable and overall encouraging. The greater developmental goals are neither too lofty nor too easily accomplished nor already written in stone. Rather, as the case of UNESCO in Cambodia, the goals must exhibit both idealism and malleability, changing periodically in light of observable progress and existing realities.



The major success of UNESCO in Cambodia since the 1990 WCEFA was in advocating basic education for all. The illiteracy rate declined, and more young people were able to go to school than ever before. Though the national budget for education in Cambodia of the 1960s (approximately 20 percent) is higher than in the 1990s' (approximately 9 percent), school enrolment is lower. This illustrates that the UNESCO's EFA conceptual framework is effective regardless of limited education expenditures. However, political will and international support along with a growing sense of the value of education among Cambodians have raised participation in schooling.

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