

# PERSPECTIVE

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## **New Generation Schools: Addressing Cambodia's Chronic Inability to Deliver Quality Education**

*Vatana Chea and Soklim Chen\**



Cambodia has made commendable efforts to reconstruct its educational system and has undertaken several significant initiatives related to overall quality, infrastructure upgrading, and facilities enhancement. In this picture, students, seated in class while observing social distancing measures against the COVID-19 coronavirus, pay attention to their mask-clad teacher in Phnom Penh on September 7, 2020, as schools reopen across the country. Picture: TANG CHHIN Sothy, AFP.

*\*Vatana Chea is Research Associate at the Center for Educational Research and Innovation, Cambodia Development Resource Institute. Soklim Chen is Associate Research Assistant at the Center for Educational Research and Innovation, Cambodia Development Resource Institute. The authors would like to acknowledge funding support from the Lancang Mekong Cooperation Special Fund.*

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- In recent years, the Cambodian government has introduced a reform agenda to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, improve the bureaucratic administration of education, and address other major challenges affecting public schools.
- The new agenda has led to several remarkable transformations in Cambodia's educational system, including the introduction of a new innovative school model called New Generation School.
  - However, the sustainability and scalability of this new model are questionable due to the large investment needed to operate these schools, and the limited government budget;
  - while community involvement can help mobilise resources, there is a limit to how much poor households can voluntarily contribute; and
  - the true effectiveness of the New Generation School has not yet been empirically evaluated although descriptive statistics have demonstrated some signs of success.
- Some other approaches adopted by the government over the years include increasing teacher's salary to raise teacher motivation.

## **BACKGROUND**

According to the World Bank, the world is now experiencing an unprecedented global learning crisis. While many countries have made great efforts in providing educational access to their population and in encouraging universal enrolment for general education, a large number of children in developing countries reaches adulthood without acquiring necessary skills in reading and arithmetic despite having spent many years in school.<sup>1</sup> Being in school is not equivalent to learning, and therefore, school enrolment is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an individual to acquire knowledge and build a fulfilling life. Only when quality education is delivered adequately, will schooling improve individual and household livelihoods and pull a country out of economic misery.

Cambodia's National Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023 is a policy that reflects the aspiration of above statement. The government has introduced a reform agenda that enhances quality of teaching and learning, and the new agenda has led to several notable transformations within the Cambodian educational system including, the National Baccalaureate II Examination, i.e. the grade 12 exit examinations. The exam provides an indication of how Cambodian students perform on average when it comes to strict standardised evaluation and in turn reveals the degree of educational quality delivered. This refers in particular to the rampant cheating that used to occur during the examination. In the academic year 2013-14, when the reform was initially implemented, merely 25.7 percent of 89,937 students passed the exam on their first attempt. This was a considerable decline from previous years in which more than 80 percent of students generally passed with flying colours. Other standardised tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment for Development (PISA-D) in 2017 similarly indicate limited abilities in Cambodian students in comparison with international standards.

This essay investigates schooling challenges in Cambodia and its experience and efforts to make efficient use of limited resources.

## **CHALLENGES IN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

There are several intertwined factors contributing to the unfavourable educational quality in Cambodia in general. Firstly, after the collapse of the Khmer Rouge in 1979 through to the end of the 2010s, the government prioritised increasing access to education, i.e. increasing enrolment, especially in rural areas. The country has now almost achieved universal primary school enrolment, and there is little room for further improvement on that front. However, a major problem presents itself when students get promoted to secondary level. There, we see a prevalent and perpetual dropout problem. While it is true that many factors contribute to students' decision to leave school, the major determinants include lack of enthusiasm to learn and poor performance,<sup>2</sup> which are in turn due to the low quality of teachers and to the education delivered.<sup>3</sup>

This brings us to the second aspect of this inquiry, i.e. the efficacy of traditional teaching methods, which centre around rote learning and memorisation. Using qualitative data, King identified several key challenges including teachers' weak curriculum knowledge, deficient pedagogical skills, and lack of professional development.<sup>4</sup> In addition, for many Cambodian individuals who are still dyed-in-the-wool conservatives, education means instilling traditional beliefs and discipline. In other words, younger individuals are expected to follow what their seniors or those with higher social status say, or be accused of being impolite. Due to such a

restraining environment, the student innovativeness cannot flourish. The PISA-D results have been obvious corroboration of this view and reflect low levels of critical thinking and reasoning skills.<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, many teachers recruited in the 1980s and 1990s and who are still teaching today are unfit to teach because of their poor qualifications, due in turn to limited professional support and a low-capacity development.<sup>6</sup> They were often recruited as teachers due to the paucity of literate individuals in society after the massacres carried out by the Khmer Rouge, which targeted the intelligentsia. Owing to these disadvantages, some senior teachers find it difficult to adopt new cutting-edge curricula or modern teaching technologies.<sup>7</sup> Finally, it is not unheard of that some teaching staff at government-funded schools impose unofficial fees, including private tutoring, to supplement their income.<sup>8</sup> This happens due to low accountability for teacher's work within the classroom. Having said that, private tutoring also suggests that students in general are not taught the full curriculum proposed by the state.

Due to the problems outlined above, which can be considered chronic illnesses of the education system, the Cambodian government has undertaken a fresh initiative aimed at cleaning up the bureaucratic administration and introduced a significant school reform that moves away from the traditional school model. This reformation has led to the development and adoption of a new innovative school model called New Generation School.

## **NEW GENERATION SCHOOL**

New Generation School (NGS) is a nascent initiative and the Cambodian equivalent of Charter School in the United States. Since 2014, the government has sought to establish sustainable and autonomous public schools that are flexible enough to equip students with quality education. Built on a pilot project called the Beacon School Initiative, which was first implemented in 2011 by the Kampuchean Action to Promote Education and piloted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) since 2015, this model introduces a completely new way of teaching, learning and management.

NGS uses a more modern and innovative curriculum that focuses on STEM, ICT, and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. Moreover, NGS students are enrolled full-time instead of attending either morning or afternoon shifts as per current practice. Such schools also receive substantial public investment and are given greater independence in instruction, resource allocation, and operation to cut bureaucratic red tape. It is important to note, however, that this investment is linked to performance, and the schools may lose their investment if they do not maintain the higher educational standards explicitly laid out in the standards of accreditation. Like charter schools, NGS existence is directly tied to the ability of schools to serve students and parents (otherwise they risk losing their accreditation), which comes along with privileges in using special government funds, receiving high quality professional development, and performance-based payments.

Nonetheless, the paramount purpose of NGS is to deliver high quality education to children from all social strata, not just the privileged few who attend private urban schools. In this regard, NGS seeks to reduce inequality in accessing high quality education. In Cambodia (and most countries), there exist private schools, which provide parents a choice for their children's education for a fee, alongside public educational institutions. This fee is not cheap, and ranges from US\$1,000 to US\$20,000 per year.<sup>9</sup> As many parents are increasingly dissatisfied with the

public school system and teachers' misbehaviour, they find private schools more appealing. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in enrolment in private schools, jumping from 168,287 students in the 2016-17 academic year to 253,569 students in 2019-20.<sup>10</sup>

Although privatisation of education offers a new alternative for households, it is also problematic in that the proliferation of private schools amplify inequitable access to high quality education for poor families. One study found that the urban middle-class population is increasingly sending their children to private schools, and public schools are losing between 30-50% in enrolment as a result.<sup>11</sup> In some urban areas, the drop in enrolment is as high as 75 percent. Those staying put in public schools are mostly rural and urban poor students.<sup>12</sup> On that account, the Cambodian educational system has gradually evolved into a dualism in which the privately-paid and better-quality learning institutions are exclusively populated by the urban middle and upper class while the lower standard normal schools are deemed the only resort for students from deprived backgrounds. If quality education is a means to an economic end, then the unfettered proliferation of private schools works to limit social mobility and create social injustice.

A key difference between traditional normal schools and NGS is that enrolment is generally a matter of choice. While the former is free of charge officially, the latter is authorised to negotiate voluntary contributions from households to meet mounting educational needs and cope with future budgetary challenges after three years of operation and after receiving an official accreditation as an NGS. As of 2020, the government had invested roughly US\$6.62 million in 10 NGS sites and one research centre serving 5,722 students in four provinces and the capital city of Phnom Penh, with plans for expansion to 100 schools across Cambodia by 2022.<sup>13</sup> But with unit costs of approximately US\$290 per student per year, sustainability and scalability have been key constraining factors due to limited government budget. Therefore, non-mandatory contributions, starting at US\$65 for each rural household and US\$200 for an urban family per year are regarded as a key strategy to sustain NGS programming. In addition, the MoEYS had since September 2016 planned to establish a Social Equity Fund to subsidise extremely impoverished households who cannot make any kind of contribution.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, to date, it is uncertain when such a fund will be launched and how other necessary resources will be mobilised to support such an ambitious expansion.

From the very beginning, contributions by urban households to the NGS system are anticipated to be highly feasible, as parents had been paying an even larger amount of money unofficially at public schools through the private tutoring system. In addition, the proliferation of private schools suggests that many households are more than willing to pay thousands of dollars for high quality education for their children. However, it is worth highlighting that most NGSs are situated in big towns or cities (or suburban areas), and only some people are exempted from user fees. Therefore, if such schools were to be established far from the urban region where the vast majority of parents are unable to make voluntary payments, their sustainability would be uncertain. Moreover, the teaching staff and other personnel may not be willing to travel and work in areas too far from the city centre.

It is also challenging to operate NGS on a small scale. In Phnom Penh, NGSs only offer secondary education starting from grade 7. Students entering such schools from normal primary schools may therefore not have the needed prerequisites to meet the high standards expected. In some provinces, except for Kampong Cham, the school only provides primary education after which students have to enrol in typical public schools to continue their



secondary level. In such a case, their educational development might again be compromised unless they are willing to travel to distant provinces. Expanding NGS facilities is therefore necessary and inevitable.

One crucial question remains: How effective is NGS? Or simply put, are NGS students performing better than those from normal schools? From available statistics, a quick and anecdotal answer is, 'Yes.' While the average passing rate on the *National Bac II Exam* in 2019 was 68 percent, that of Preah Sisowat High School and Hun Sen Kampong Cham High School, both of which are NGS, were a spectacular 94 and 84 percent respectively. Nonetheless, such statistical data have to be interpreted with caution because there is likely a selection bias here. It is worth noting that students who wish to enrol in NGS have to meet its eligibility criteria which involve passing an entrance examination. Generally speaking, students are selected based on merit, and outstanding students are more likely to be admitted. In addition, those with high ambition, confidence or ability are more likely to self-select themselves to apply and thereby be enrolled. These characteristics are not easily captured by statistics.

Therefore, high pass rates might significantly reflect students' own natural aptitude rather than the contribution of NGS. If the former turns out to be true, then NGS should not be deemed to have been very successful since students who have not attended NGS, but with higher ability, are more likely to outperform their less able peers and pass the national Grade 12 exit exam. Furthermore, given their access to large public fund, NGS might not be a cost-effective mechanism, but is a drain on the government's scanty resources. For a developing country like Cambodia, knowing where money should best be spent is of great importance. No rigorous evaluation has yet been done to directly measure the effect of exposure to NGS on a student's performance.

## **ALTERNATIVE NOSTRUMS**

NGS is not the only alternative model to have been implemented in Cambodia. Over the years, various approaches such as conditional cash transfers, scholarship provisions, and school breakfast programmes, *inter alia*, were introduced by either the government or non-profit organisations; yet the vast majority of them did not prevail.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, these approaches, when in full swing, only increased enrolment, retention, and/or attendance rather than enhance quality;<sup>16</sup> thus, they were less relevant to the goal of preparing students for twenty-first-century work.

Several policies have also been successively passed to attract, retain and motivate better qualified teachers; indeed, raising teachers' salary across the board has been among the top priorities of recent educational reforms to curb a political blame game attributing the teachers' inability to carry out their expected teaching responsibilities to their low salary. Nevertheless, using the grade-12 pass rate as evidence, the efficacy of blanket salary increases and their subsequent impact on students' performance is questionable. If teachers' salary is a main indicator of students' learning outcome in Cambodia, and increasing their low wage leads to better student performance as found elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> then it is truly doubtful whether or not, on average, Cambodian teachers are poorly paid? Such an idea can be justified because beyond a certain level, raising wages will add very little extra marginal effect if any at all to student learning outcomes.

Having said that, teachers' salaries are likely much higher than that of a typical salaryman if we look at the ratio of their premium to working hours. Considering that most teachers only teach either morning or afternoon shifts and only a few days per week, a simple wage comparison between office workers and teachers by adjusting for working hours is likely to show that teachers are handsomely paid. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that for political reasons, the ministry has continued to introduce reform by using carrots without stick, and teachers are generally not held accountable for a student's poor performance or misconduct.

## FINAL REMARKS

Cambodia has made commendable efforts to reconstruct its educational system and has undertaken several significant initiatives related to overall quality, infrastructure upgrading, and facilities enhancement. While these achievements deserve praise, chronic challenges continue to persist, leading to an attempt to address them through the introduction of the NGS approach.

Despite being promising in appearance, the true effectiveness of NGS has not been empirically validated. Such empirical inquiries would bolster the evidence base of policy intervention both in terms of operational efficiency and cost effectiveness. Without such a study and sufficient knowledge about the effect itself, Cambodia might be incurring too much a risk. In other words, the country might unintentionally be directing its capital toward lower-return investments. On the other hand, with strong empirical evidence showing its positive efficacy, one could more easily push for an expansion of NGS and of annual public spending for education.

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank. World Development Report 2018: Learning to realize education's promise. Washington D.C., 2018.

<sup>2</sup> National Institute of Statistics. Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey 2014. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Planning, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Bettencourt EM, Gillett MH, Gall MD, Hull RE. Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm Training on Student On-task Behavior and Achievement. *Am Educ Res J.* 1983 Jan 1;20(3):435–50; and Patrick BC, Hisley J, Kempler T. "What's Everybody So Excited About?": The Effects of Teacher Enthusiasm on Student Intrinsic Motivation and Vitality. *J Exp Educ.* 2000 Jan 1;68(3):217–36.

<sup>4</sup> King E. CFS policy and Cambodian teacher education and training: Beeby revisited. *Int Educ J Comp Perspect.* 2018;17(2):16–29.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. Education in Cambodia: Findings from Cambodia's experience in PISA for Development. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Hang C. Education Management Reform Strategies for Enhancing the Quality Citizenship in Cambodia. Chulalongkorn University, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. New Generation School Annual Achievement Report: Year 4 Implementation (Jan - Dec 2019). Phnom Penh, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Brehm W. The contemporary landscape of education in Cambodia: Hybrid spaces of the public and private. In: Brickell K, Springer S, editors. *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017. These unofficial fees sometimes comes in the form of quid pro quo payments for better grades, and thus students from disadvantaged families tend to suffer the most as they are unlikely to be able to pay, and hence receive low grades.

<sup>9</sup> Brehm W. The contemporary landscape of education in Cambodia: Hybrid spaces of the public and private. In: Brickell K, Springer S, editors. *The Handbook of Contemporary Cambodia*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education Management Information System. Private Education Statistics & Indicators 2019-2020. Phnom Penh, 2020; and Department of Education Management Information System. Private Education Statistics & Indicators 2017 - 2018. Phnom Penh, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Kampuchean Action to Promote Education. Enrolment Trends in Phnom Penh: A Needs Assessment. Phnom Penh; 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Kampuchean Action to Promote Education. Enrolment Trends in Phnom Penh: A Needs Assessment. Phnom Penh; 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. New Generation School Annual Achievement Report: Year 4 Implementation (Jan - Dec 2019). Phnom Penh, 2020; and Donaher M, Wu N. Cambodia's New Generation Schools Reform. In: Reimers F, editor. Empowering Teachers to Build a Better World: How Six Nations Support Teachers for 21st Century Education. Singapore: Springer, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Education Youth and Sport. New Generation School Operational Policy Guidelines. Phnom Penh, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Bredenberg K. Secondary Education: Progress with Reforming Secondary Education. In: Chhem R, editor. Education in Cambodia: From Year Zero to International Standards. Singapore: Springer; forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> Filmer D, Schady N. Getting Girls into School: Evidence from a Scholarship Program in Cambodia. Econ Dev Cult Change. 2008;56(3):581–617; and Pellini A, Bredenberg K. Basic education clusters in Cambodia: looking at the future while learning from the past. Dev Pract. 2015 Apr 3;25(3):419–32.

<sup>17</sup> Evans D, Yuan F, Filmer D. Are Teachers in Africa Poorly Paid? Evidence from 15 Countries. Washington D.C; 2020. Report No.: World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 9358.

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