

## Strategies and Policies for Basic Education in Cambodia: Historical Perspectives

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*This article examines the process of development and change in the state of education in Cambodia over four decades preceding the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All. The author argues that during the 1950s and 1960s, efforts to enhance basic education opportunities for all Cambodians were largely unsuccessful due to the lack of adequate infrastructural mechanisms and a guiding framework for action. Of the periods considered in this study, only the Prince Sihanouk regime (1950s-1960s) was relatively socioeconomically advanced, and saw a growth in the number of modern school buildings, teacher training centres, and universities. The succeeding regimes in the 1970s not only failed to maintain the development, but by the second half of the 1970s the formal education system had been completely dismantled. The collapse in 1979 of the Pol Pot regime made way for the rebirth of traditional socio-cultural structures and the wide expansion of schooling opportunities throughout the 1980s. National rehabilitation and reconstruction during the 1980s, despite lingering social insecurity, marked considerable and fundamental progress towards the present educational situation of this struggling nation.*

Cambodia, basic education, policy, strategy, educational development

### INTRODUCTION

The developing world has made tremendous strides in expanding primary education in the past three decades, and many countries have achieved universal primary enrolment. Most developing countries are, however, still a long way from achieving universal primary completion. With their populations growing faster than primary school enrolments, many countries will have to make a vigorous effort to reduce illiteracy over the next ten or fifteen years. Lockheed and Verspoor (1991, p.37)

Post-conflict Cambodia is no different from the above-described developing nations. Notwithstanding its tragic past, namely, civil conflicts and a massive destruction of socio-cultural settings and human resources, led to a serious social and educational crisis during the 1970s and 1980s. Since gaining independence from France in 1953, the ideal policy of building a nation-state through educational development was successfully implemented. New schools were built reaching to rural and remote areas; and universities, which the French had refused to offer during its colonial period (1863-1953), were established in the capital and several main provincial cities. The improved schooling opportunities of the 1950s and 1960s were expressly declined during the 1970s. It is estimated that between 75 and 80 per cent of the teachers and higher education students fled or died between 1975 and 1979 (Klintworth, 1989 as cited in Asian Development Bank, 1996, p.5).

The restructuring progression in education systems and the overall social services in the early 1980s marks the country's recommitment to socio-economic development and expanding educational opportunity. The schooling rehabilitation process was ruted and obstructed by the

continued social insecurity, especially in the rural and remote areas. The Asian Development Bank (1996) described the educational situation during the 1980s as poor school conditions, large numbers of unqualified teachers, an absence of a national curriculum framework, inadequate book supply systems, and a high pupil dropout rate in primary school. Nevertheless, Duggan (1996) noted since the early 1980s that basic education opportunity had been massively expanded through the initiation of comprehensive primary schooling strategies.

Since the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), Cambodian leaders, especially in the late 1990s have made numerous efforts to provide accessibility for nine years of its currently defined basic education, to all their citizens. The contemporary regime's policy on universal nine-year basic education of high quality, which aimed to achieve before the beginning of the twenty-first century, is excessively ambitious (Dy and Ninomiya, 2003). A bunch of strategic approaches employed to accomplish its profound goal of basic education for all were barely, fully implemented for the lack of funding and disturbed social insecurity in several parts of rural and remote areas during the 1990s (ADB, 1996; Ayres, 2000; Dy, 2003; Prasertsri, 1996). Many of the targets for the year 2000 were not reached for several reasons such as are found in insufficient number of schools, financial burdens on the households, insufficient learning and teaching facilities – which caused low enrolment and high dropout rates within the basic education level.

This study covers Cambodia's recent four regimes of different political trends and ideology dating from the 1950s to the 1980s – attempting to build, reform, adjust, and transform the face of Cambodia from their respective political strategies. The central question begs to be asked here is what can an examination of educational strategies and policies of the previous regimes of Cambodia explain how basic education evolved and why it was not fully enhanced?

This paper traces and analyses educational strategy and policy development from 1950 to the period before the 1990 WCEFA with a special concern on basic education strategies and policies. This period is critically significant for the history of formal and mass 'modern' schooling system in Cambodia. It covers the very last few years during the French colonial era, Prince Sihanouk regime (1953-1970), Lon Nol regime (1970-75), Pol Pot or infamous regime of the Khmer Rouge (1975-79), and Heng Samrin regime (1979-1989). It probes the regimes' educational strategies and policies for their citizens in line with the socio-economic factors and their political trends. Their inputs, methods, and outputs are discussed so as to explain their commitments to building or changing Cambodia.

A modernization of the Cambodian traditional education system, done by the French, has lent support to socio-economic development and building a nation-state in the postcolonial era. This essay draws extensively on chronological government reports, ideas of other scholars, dialogues with senior government education officials, Khmer narratives and literature, and personal memory and understandings.

### **BACKGROUND: KHMER TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM VERSUS THE FRENCH MODERN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Cambodian [Khmer] people were among the first in Asia to adopt religious concepts and socio-political institutions, presumably from India, and to create a centralized kingdom occupying large territories in the present-day mainland South-East Asia, with comparatively sophisticated culture (Chandler, 1988; Encyclopedia Britannica, 2001). This Indianized royal headship regarded their religious leaders as their intellectuals and *guru* (teachers), hence this allowed the religious institutions to play the role of educating their children and people. The temple education practice was first seen widespread in around the twelfth century allocating the Buddhist institutional

system of shaping the youth with Buddhist principles about individual life, family, civil society, and at least some basic literacy and numeracy skills. This public schooling system could allowably continue to provide only primary education (Bit, 1991, p.50).

The teachers were volunteer Buddhist men (monks: *sangha* or *acharj*). This traditional schooling system had been implemented as early as the seventh century for mainly the elite members in society (Chandler, 1988). The system escalated to the highest degree of education in Buddhist Philosophy known as *pundit* or the highest learning as noted by Chou, a Chinese envoy to Angkor (former Cambodian capital) during 1296-1297 (Chou, 1953). Bray (1999) noted this long tradition of schooling financed primarily from the contributions by villagers or local community.

This formal learning at the temple schools were restricted to males for one of the main reasons that the teachers were Buddhist monks and the students were required to stay and work at the temple. In traditional education curricula, students were taught sacred Khmer texts such as the Sutra which contains the precepts of Buddhism, literary traditions, and social life skills. The principal aim of the temple schooling system was to equip young men with the principles of life and society such as social conduct, moral ethics, as well as to achieve a certain degree of basic literacy.

The French colonized Cambodia in 1863, but the colonial government did not introduce a so-called 'modern' French schooling system until the early 1900s. This introduction was mainly to target the very few Cambodian elite communities to serve the colonial powers since the temple schools were only aiming to sustain Khmer traditional culture. However, it helped give for the first time, opportunity for girls to have access to formal schooling. For the first 20 years of their colony, Chandler (1991) found the French had done so little to interfere with traditional politics and even neglected educational development in Cambodia.

In the early twentieth century, the colonial administration began to modernize the traditional schooling system by integrating into the French schooling system, arguing that Cambodia's progress in more cooperation and improved agricultural production would serve better the colonial power. Chandler (1998, p.156) commented, "Before the 1930s the French spent almost nothing on education in Cambodia". The French were reluctant to enhance education for the idea that education would empower Cambodians and tentatively bar France's grip (Clayton, 1995). Some scholars even argued that the French purposefully withheld quality education from Cambodians in order to consolidate and then to maintain power. French schools did indeed fail to enrol significant numbers of Cambodians until late in the colonial period.

Several scholars (Ayres, 2000; Bray, 1999; Chandler, 1991; Clayton, 1995) 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 p.6), argued:

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.

Such a low investment in modernizing Cambodian education is likely because traditional Cambodian intellectuals, especially the Buddhist monks, resisted the French's attempt to Romanize their traditional language scripts in the 1940s as the French had successfully done to the Vietnamese (Chandler, 1998; Osborne, 1969). Seeing that their traditional culture of education on

the verge of collapse caused by the French reform, the Cambodians resisted and even actively opposed the French reform in rural areas (for discussion see Clayton, 1995).

### **EVOLVING CONCEPTS OF ‘EDUCATION’ AND ‘BASIC EDUCATION’**

From a traditional, social and cultural perspective, ‘education’ is literally defined by Cambodians on one hand as an honest route to better the human condition, intentionally aimed at shaping individuals for a better lifestyle, knowledge, and good manners for living in their respective societies. On the other hand, the contemporary Cambodian perception of ‘education’ refers to a process of training and instruction, especially of children and young people in schools, which is designed to give knowledge and develop skills.

Both induct the maturing individual into the life and culture of the group. This consciously and purposefully controlled learning process is conducted by more experienced members of society. In traditional education the pupils received instruction in the arts of writing, ethical precepts, practical philosophy, and good manners. There were also traditional codes of conduct and rules (*chbab*) for men and women requiring them to learn and obey to become good members of the Khmer family and society.

Thus ‘basic education’, as a ‘minimally adequate level of education to live in society’ is varied in accordance to socio-cultural and socio-political factors of the state. The majority of Cambodians are peasants relying on subsistence agriculture. Traditional and cultural principles encourage men to be more sociable, gentle, courageous, responsible, and hardworking, while women are supposed to be caring, reserved, and having good housework management skills. Accordingly, parents, senior members of the society, and Buddhist teachers, were responsible for educating boys.

What should be an adequate level of basic education that Cambodian citizens should be equally equipped? The 1990 WCEFA identified basic education as aimed at ‘meeting basic learning needs’. Hence, the length of formal education and education content should depend on the policy of the individual society or country. With reference to this definition, Cambodian basic education was identified in the 1950s and 1960s as at the ‘primary education level’ in urban areas and at basic literacy level (being able to read and write everyday-life texts) in rural areas (Ministry of National Education, 1956-57). The extent of this basic education ideal was first halted in the early 1970s and later dissolved between 1975 and 1979 during the infamous Khmer Rouge regime.

In 1979-1981, putting children back to school and combating the illiteracy among adults were the main tasks of the regime. The level of education, which should be appropriate to meet basic learning needs during this period was unclear. In the mid-1980s the government started its commitment to strengthening the quality of educational provision. Education officials noted that during the 1980s, basic literacy or at least completion of the fourth grade of the primary cycle (then five years in length) was sufficient for achieving basic education.

### **ENHANCING BASIC EDUCATION OPPORTUNITY: 1950-60**

In the last few years before the French left Cambodia, the colonial government, with recommendations from UNESCO, grudgingly introduced compulsory education for children aged 6 to 13 years. Events during these years have shown that the effort to provide compulsory, free primary education was too hasty. In the report presented at the UNESCO 14<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Public Education, Princess Ping Peang Yukanthor in 1951 stated:

The principle of compulsory education can thus not be fully applied – until the government is in a position to fulfill its essential duties through the possession of

sufficient number of teachers able, not only to instruct, but also to educate, and of adequate funds to meet all necessary expenditures (p.1).

Furthermore, Cambodian education was still without a national curriculum. Urban schools were able to offer more subjects in science and technology than the rural ones, which combined to focus on local traditional culture and more social subjects.

Prince Norodom Sihanouk was crowned King of Cambodia by the French colonial power in 1941 when he was still a senior high school student at a French Lycée in southern Vietnam. His policies for education after gaining independence were to attain the goal of compulsory primary education for all and to increase, at all levels of educational opportunities from primary to university institutions. His efforts were to build a prosperous nation-state through educational development. New principles of educational development in the 1950s, with the recommendations from UNESCO, were introduced and some were fully implemented such as increasing more learning opportunities for boys and girls and fighting illiteracy among adults in rural areas. However, the achievement was far from satisfactory. Statistically, only 10 per cent of female adults were basically literate in 1958 (Peng Cheng Pung, 1959).

The term 'basic education', which aimed at the level of primary education, was first used in the annual government report to UNESCO in 1957 which signified the UNESCO's recommendation to integrate audio-visual materials into the existing teaching methods at basic education level was not possible at that time (Ministry of National Education, 1956-57). Regardless of inadequate quality in basic education system, several scholars (Bit, 1991; Deighton, 1971; Dunnett, 1993) noted that the Prince Sihanouk regime, compared to the French era, had made significant progress in increasing accessibility at all levels of education. Deighton (1971, p.579) statistically described:

By the late 1960s, 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 1965 the number of females enrolled at the primary level grew from 9 per cent to 39 percent. The number of teachers and schools has expanded commensurately from 1950 to 1964. Although primary enrolment rate increased, the illiteracy rate was estimated 50 per cent in 1953 for a population of 3.7 million and at 55 per cent for a population of 6.2 in 1966.

Reflecting its attention and commitment to formal education in building a modern and peaceful state, the regime even increased national budget for education to over 20 per cent of the national expenditure by the late 1960s.

However, other scholars such as Ayres (1999, 2000), Chandler (1991, 1998), Duggan (1996), and the two current senior education officials interviewed for this study commented that the regime had failed to universalize basic education and enhance employment for high school and university graduates. Thus, Duggan (1996, p. 364) criticized the regime:

The education system provided by Sihanouk was biased towards the nation's large 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.

Despite criticisms of the regime for not having enhanced nationwide literacy-oriented education or increasing quality schooling opportunities for all, the regime marked a great recovery of Cambodia in the past few hundred years of its history. Dunnett (1993) claimed that during the 1960s, Cambodia had one of the highest literacy rates and most progressive education systems in Southeast Asia.

Further details of the Prince Sihanouk regime were given in some well-known Khmer accounts, written during the 1950s and 1960s, such as those by Nou Hach's *Phka Sroaporn* (The Flower Past its Bloom), Nhok Thaem's *Kolap Pailin* (Rose of Pailin), and Rim Kin's *Sophaat*, reflecting the struggles of young men and their families for education and employment. The belief that enhanced education would bring the benefit of higher employment in the government sector was raised in these works, which was also subsequently reflected in school curriculum. The social value of furthering the education of the individual, leading to a better future, was closely associated with the increased development of higher education institutions in the larger cities. However, the failure to give top priority to basic education during the 1960s led to the crisis in education system (for further discussion see Ayres, 2000).

### **EDUCATIONAL CRISIS AND DECLINE: 1970-75**

Following over fifteen years of peace and prosperity which Cambodia enjoyed under the Sihanouk regime, General Lon Nol backed by the United States, seized control in a diplomatic coup d'état in March 1970 and declared the creation of the Khmer Republic. This incident may have been caused by the Prince's foreign policy, which was interpreted as 'practically' supporting Communist Vietnam and angering the United States during the Vietnam War. It was the first time that Cambodia abolished its chronological monarchy. Not only was there little constructive reform during this period, but rather the country was driven to civil conflict as communism strengthened to its hold in the East and fighting in rural areas spread in early 1970s, causing barriers to schooling opportunities. In turmoil, the regime completely collapsed in April 1975 and socio-economic achievements of the previous regime soon vanished.

During the early 1970s Cambodia was inevitably drawn into the Vietnam War. The national instability and political turmoil led the Lon Nol regime to reduce educational funding and many school closed in rural areas. Simultaneously, many teachers fled to join the Khmer Rouge movement while student and teacher demonstrations frequently occurred in Phnom Penh. By early 1972, the United States bombardment aimed at slowing the spread of communism from the East, resulted in serious damage to the education system and infrastructure.

### **SCHOOLING ABOLITION: 1975-79**

Cambodia was eventually plunged into a complete darkness during the regime of Democratic Kampuchea, or the infamous Khmer Rouge, locally known as the Pol Pot regime which came into power in April 1975. The regime led Cambodia into revolutionary Maoist communism. Pol Pot's so-called 'great leap' revolutionary regime further ravaged Cambodia through the mass destruction of individual property, schooling system, and social culture by forcing the entire population either into the army camps or onto collective farms (Chandler, 1998; Dunnett, 1993). Damage was inflicted not only to the educational infrastructure, but Cambodia also lost almost three-quarters of its educated population under the regime when 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 through suffering in that genocidal regime.

Duggan (1996) noted that under the Pol Pot regime, literacy education beyond the lowest grade was abolished and formal schooling of the Western kind was eradicated. People were grouped into cooperatives by gender and age. Some basic reading and writing were introduced, albeit in an unstructured way and with no national curriculum, to children in some working collectives of about two to three hours every ten days (personal experience). During the early years of this regime, basic education was deemed unnecessary since almost all citizens were working in factories and farms (for further discussion see Chandler, 1991,1998; Duggan 1996).

### **EDUCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND RECONSTRUCTION: 1979-1989**

People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) or Heng Samrin regime (1979 to 1989) started to rebuild the country. This regime, which was supported by communist 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 reinstall educational institutions. Generous support from UNICEF and International Red Cross, together with a strong determination to restructure Cambodia by the PRK, saw about 6,000 educational institutions rebuilt and thousands of teachers trained within a very short period (Dunnett, 1993). According to an interview with a senior education official who had been involved in basic education system and teacher training since 1979, the regime's policy on enhancing education was:

1979-1981 was a period of restructuring and rehabilitating of both infrastructure and human resources. By restructuring and rehabilitation I refer to collecting school-aged children and putting them into schools despite in the poor condition. Classes were even conducted in makeshift, open-air classrooms or under trees. We appealed to all those surviving teachers and literate people 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 official licences or any requirements for taking on the teaching job. We just tried to open schools and literacy classes, regardless of their quality.

The rebirth of education in Cambodia in 1979 represents a historically unique experience from that of any other nations. In the early 1980s, all levels of schooling (from kindergarten to higher education) were reopened and the total enrolment was almost one million. Many teachers were better trained and quality gradually enhanced. Enrolment in primary education in 1989, increased to 1.3 million, and in lower secondary to 0.24 million, compared with only 0.9 million and 4,800 in 1980 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 1999). However, it is worth noting that in any primary school, about 30 per cent of the children had no father, 10 per cent had no mother, and between 5 and 10 per cent were orphans (Postlethwaite, 1988). The political and economic disturbance haunted Cambodia pending the second term of the current Royal Government and the complete eradication of the Khmer Rouge's machinery and organization in 1998. Nevertheless, the people of Cambodia still have pride and look forward to a golden age when their nation will again be prosperous.

### **CONCLUSION**

Social and political factors of the last four decades from the 1950s to the 1980s determined the flux of crisis and progress of the schooling systems. The former extensive Khmer Empire, Cambodia suffered massive socio-cultural destruction, political turmoil, genocide, international isolation, and socio-economic crisis during the civil conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s. Political and economic problems during the above two decades were not isolated from the education structure, which was also seriously damaged during the civil conflicts. Shifting from limited or no access for girls to formal education within the traditional school system to the French schooling system in the early twentieth century was a positive step towards universal basic education. However, although primary education was made compulsory in the 1950s and 1960s, there was no presence of mechanism in handling the implementation of the policy.

The changing concepts of basic education from basic literacy to primary education, and to primary plus lower secondary education in the mid 1990s saw the expansion of learning opportunities for better lifestyle and socio-economic amelioration in contemporary Cambodia. The experiments of the 1950s and 1960s were largely unsuccessful because modern educational contents and outcomes could not meet the actual needs of the society at that time. In other words, many Cambodians feared that the modernity would lead to the demise of their traditional culture

inherited from their proud Angkorian ancestors. However, present-day Cambodians consider reforms in education during the 1990s as positive measures towards socio-economic development and improving freedom of lives. This acknowledges tremendous support from international community for guidance and recommendations.

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