

Basic Education Clusters in Cambodia

Looking at the Future while Learning from the Past

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ABSTRACT

School Clusters have been adopted as an education policy by most Asian countries since the 1960s. In Cambodia, primary schools have been organized in clusters since 1993. Clusters were considered a mechanism for quality improvements of education and a way to facilitate sharing and interaction between schools. Primary school clusters have been partially successful. Today there is a growing interest among Cambodian policy makers for integrating primary schools (Grade 1-6) and lower secondary schools (Grades 7-9). In this article we provide a policy suggestion by arguing for extending the cluster mechanism to these integrated basic education schools with all grades from 1 to 9.

Keywords: education, civil society, governance and public policy, Cambodia, East Asia

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Introduction

Education systems play a key role in equipping individuals with the skills and knowledge required to respond to the demands of the labor market. To do so, education systems need, in addition to good quality of teaching, to be managed in an efficient, transparent and accountable way. It is to this second point, the management of education systems, that this article is focused, and in particular, on the school cluster approach as a strategy to decentralize the management of schools and improve the efficient use of, and access to, scarce human and financial resources of primary and lower secondary schools.

The discussion around the benefits of decentralized education systems started in the early 1990s and was spurred from the evidence that standardized and centralized control of education systems did not have the flexibility required to shape education to local circumstances (Cummings 1997). School clustering (or school cluster approach) is one of the most widely adopted policies in the world to pursue the decentralization of education. Several countries in Asia have adopted the approach, including Cambodia.

The Royal Government of Cambodia has been implementing various decentralization reforms since the mid 1990s in what Mark Turner (2002) has defined as a 'piecemeal approach'. In this article we want to explore whether school clusters continue to be a viable approach to decentralized school-based management in Cambodia and/or whether policy changes need to be introduced while remembering that the school cluster policy was first promulgated in 1994 and few or no changes have been made since then.

In order to be viable, clusters need to evolve along with their surrounding environment so that they continue to be relevant. Our intention here is not to conduct

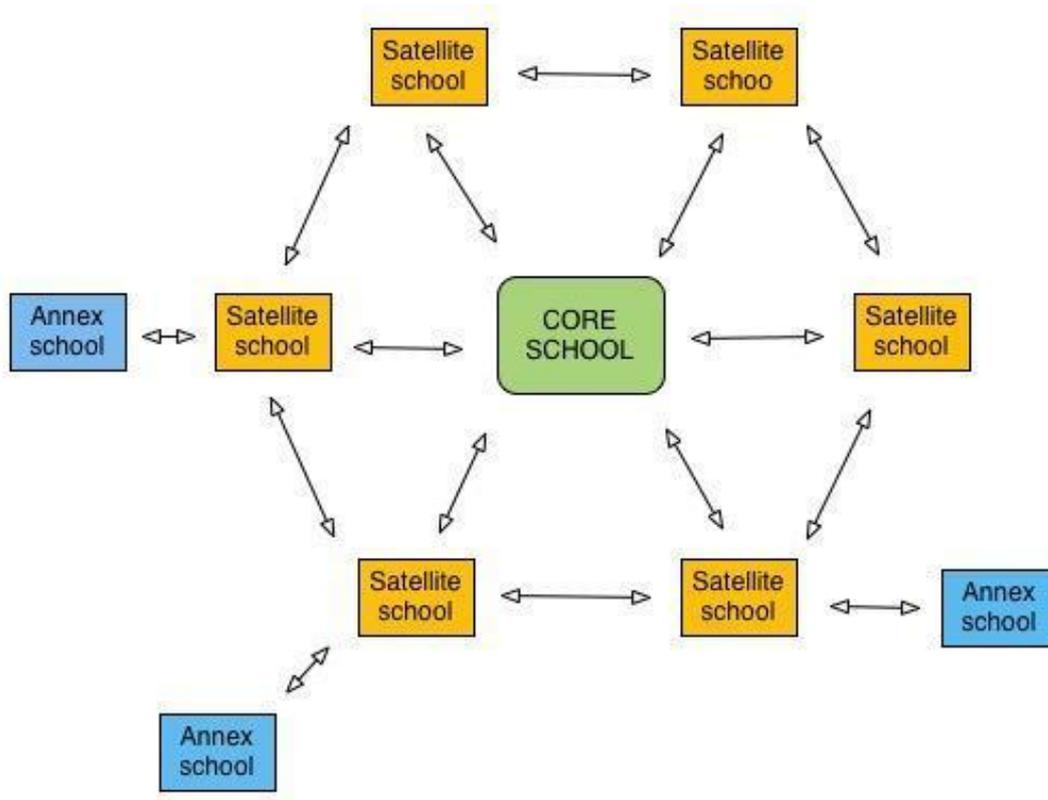
an impact assessment of the school cluster approach in Cambodia. Our aim is rather to explore if and how the school cluster approach is suited to the new governance environment for basic education in Cambodia. In doing so we want to write an academic paper which is also providing an evidence-based policy recommendation on how school clusters can be moved forward. We refer here to the growing interest among Cambodian policy makers to integrate primary schools (Grades 1-6) and lower secondary schools (Grades 7-9) into what are known as *basic education schools* with all grades from 1 to 9. Such an eventuality would lead to the possible development of *basic education clusters*.

In view of this we have adopted in this article an historical approach, which starts by reviewing the main policies governing the decentralization of education and the local governance environment where schools are located and making suggestions for the future. The evidence presented here is derived from secondary data from a literature review on school clusters reforms and the decentralization of education, a review of relevant policy and project literature from Cambodia, and observations collected over the last 15-20 years working in Cambodia, particularly by one of the authors. In the next section, we look at the theoretical underpinnings of the school cluster approach and its developments in South Asia / Southeast Asia.

School clusters: definition and outcomes

Mark Bray (1987) has defined school clusters as 'groupings of schools for administrative and educational purposes' (p.7). A typical cluster (Figure 1) consists of six to seven schools.

Figure 1



At the center there is a *Core School* responsible for the administration of cluster activities. The Core School is usually the larger school and hosts a resource center, equipped with library and teaching materials available to the teachers of the other schools of the cluster. The Core School is linked to *Satellite Schools*. In more remote areas, *Satellite Schools* can be further linked to *Annex Schools*, which are distinguished from satellites in that they do not have a full complement of primary school grades. The size of the clusters depends on the geography and accessibility of schools. In Venezuela the *redes escolares* can be up to 15 schools (Giordano 2008). In Peru *nucleos* can be up to 30 schools (Bray 1987).

Shaeffer and Abracia (1994) identify five main rationales for the establishment of school clusters.

- General rationale: school clusters can help to increase the efficiency of educational management by permitting the sharing of resources in resource-poor

environments. This can also lead to greater collaboration across schools in both curricular and co-curricular activities and potentially improve monitoring and supervision of school quality. This can contribute to increased effectiveness of information flow either down the system (because cluster core schools become a useful intermediary between district-level offices and schools) or up (because clusters can help gather and aggregate opinions and needs of member schools).

- Economic rationale: school clusters can help to maximize the use of central government funds, improve cost effectiveness and efficiency, share resources such as facilities, equipment, teaching materials and specialized teachers. They can also contribute to foster community financial support and mobilize other locally available resources, help in building new buildings and renovating old ones, handle emergencies, and improve absorptive capacity of the central government by placing more responsibility at lower levels of the system

- Pedagogic rationale: networking and sharing typical of school clusters can help to improve the quality of teachers through professional discussions, experience sharing and more specific training in teaching skills. Clusters create the conditions for integration of different levels (e.g., secondary, early childhood education) and different kinds (e.g., formal and non-formal) of education and help evaluate school performance. They enlarge the pool of trained staff available to schools, develop and adapt local curricula, materials and lesson plans, provide supplemental classes/tutoring/remedial instruction and provide a supportive environment for innovations.

- Administrative rationale: school clusters can facilitate more informed decisions in regard to local needs and problems. If well managed, they can serve as a center for collecting information from schools (through mapping and micro-

planning activities) and permit cross-institution monitoring and supervision to ensure effective management and supervision. Clusters promote decentralized, action-oriented planning and decision-making and local accountability and promote less bureaucratic controls because more decision-making is done at the local level.

- Community-focused rationale: clusters favor greater sharing and participation between parents and schools about education and the need to keep children in school. The typical mechanisms for parents' participation are Parent-teachers Associations and village education committees. They can facilitate greater participation by teachers into community life and serve as a site for area-based planning, Board of Management meetings and social activities.

Bredenberg (2000) lists the following institutions that usually accompany the establishment of clusters:

- Cluster School Committee: this is usually the main decision-making body within the cluster, which makes all decisions regarding the allocation of resources, general planning and implementation of all cluster-wide activities.
- Resource Center: this institution is responsible for the organization and maintenance of teaching aids, researching and planning the production of new teaching aids, and ensuring dissemination and use of materials in surrounding schools.
- Cluster School Library: this refers to the central library system within the cluster, which coordinates all library-related activities in different schools.
- Teacher Supervision System: this is a local network usually headed by master teachers who provide technical support to teachers throughout the cluster.

- Testing Committee: this refers to a cluster-based committee with broad representation from all schools charged with bringing about greater accountability for student learning through the development and administration of standardized tests.
- Parent Associations: these are cluster-based associations of parents who assist the cluster in implementing specific activities to promote parental involvement in education.

Bray (1987) concludes that clusters are particularly valuable as they provide to (often remote) schools access to additional resources as well as wider social contacts and support. For Bray, a key element of the success of the cluster is the attitude and guidance provided by school directors involved, particularly in the Core School. Moreover, the evidence from implementing cluster systems in some Asian countries has shown that clusters can contribute to achieve a more effective use of scarce financial and human resources through sharing facilities, rotating staff and enabling bulk orders of material; increased access to teaching resources and materials which results in improved quality of education; and strengthening information sharing and networking with communities thus reducing inequalities or drop out from schools (Shaeffer and Abracia 1994).

Regional experiences

School clusters were established during the 1940s in Great Britain. The aim was to enable rural schools to pool resources to support education (Giordano 2008). Thailand was the first country to pilot the approach in Southeast Asia during the 1950s, with a joint initiative between the Ministry of Education and UNESCO. The evidence gathered from that experience demonstrated the benefits of the approach

and informed the national policy, which established and gradually expanded school clusters nationwide between the 1960s and 1980s (Wheeler et al. 1994).

In Sri Lanka, clusters were introduced in 1981, when the Ministry of Education realized that the supervision and support it provided to schools and teachers were insufficient. Clusters were introduced to provide administrative support to all schools through designated leaders, with the necessary autonomy to manage the cluster activities. The expected outcomes were to increase the quality of education, reach out to neglected and remote schools, conduct planning and manage implementation with locally delegated decision-making authorities and ensure maximum contribution and participation from communities.

During the 1990s, a second group of countries adopted the approach. In a workshop organized by UNICEF and UNESCO in Bangkok in 1994, Shaeffer and Abracia presented a paper that synthesized the status of implementation of school clusters in Southeast Asia and the Pacific region. Cambodia and Laos were experimenting with the cluster approach in a small number of provinces at that time (seven clusters and 45 schools in Laos and 13 clusters and some 100 schools in Cambodia). Papua New Guinea was also beginning to introduce clusters with a province-by-province approach. In Myanmar, 80 per cent of schools were included in a cluster. In Bangladesh, all primary schools were organized in clusters as well as sub-clusters. In Viet Nam, 60 per cent of schools were organized into clusters. This was in line with the *Doi Moi* reform (English: Renovation), which began in 1986 and introduced more localized decision-making processes (McGinn and Welch 1999, Bredenberg 2000). In China, clusters involved about 7,000 schools, while in the Philippines there were 1,150. In 1994, the plan was for all countries except China to expand the number of cluster schools and clusters, either nationally (as in Bangladesh and Cambodia), or

to a greater coverage of schools in targeted areas (to 75 per cent coverage in Viet Nam). Indonesia has organized primary schools into clusters of six schools since the early 1990s. Materials and training are provided to teachers in the core school who then share the knowledge with the teachers from the other schools in the cluster.

In Singapore, school clusters were established in 1997 as forums for principals to share experiences and best practices. The clusters comprise secondary schools and junior colleges. Clusters are considered to have helped by opening up channels between schools to share learning, standardize practice and support each other. They also helped strengthen school leadership development, as well as sharing effective teaching and learning practices across schools. School clusters changed the highly centralized school inspection model to one, which is more collaborative and focuses on self-assessment and internal quality assurance (Mourshed et al. 2010).

More recently, Malaysia joined the countries that have adopted school clusters. The decentralization of school management was first outlined in 2006 in the Educational Development Master Plan 2006-2010, which has as a main objective, the provision of quality education in Malaysia. One of the strategic thrusts of the plan is the recognition that school clusters can contribute to better quality education (Aziah 2011).

While almost all countries listed above limit clusters to primary schools, there are exceptions. In Sri Lanka clusters have comprised primary and secondary schools since their beginning, in 1981. In Thailand, the Core School of a cluster can be either a primary or a lower secondary school. The Philippines encourages clusters of primary and secondary schools (about nine primary schools and one secondary school). In Singapore, clusters are mixed and include pre-school, primary and

secondary schools. In Papua New Guinea three to five elementary/*tok pies* (mother tongue) schools (i.e., pre-school plus grades 1 and 2), are linked to a primary school with grades 3 to 8. These experiences show there is variety in the composition of clusters. Besides primary schools, clusters can include (Bray 1987, Bredenberg 2000, Giordano 2008):

- Kindergartens, pre-schools
- Early childhood education and care programs
- Secondary schools
- Non-formal education/literacy programs/adult education
- Public and private schools
- Ethnic minority boarding schools
- Demonstration/laboratory schools

In the case of mixed clusters, the Core School is generally the largest in the cluster, the most centrally located, has the best facilities (such as a learning resource center) and has strong leadership, effective management and close links with parents and the community. Implementing mixed clusters can be very challenging due to often-rigid lines of control between different departments within Third World bureaucracies, especially where centralization is still a paramount feature of the government's administration, as in Cambodia.

The country experiences presented here show that the cluster approach can be implemented in different ways to adapt to a country's circumstances. Similarly, it is clear from this diversity of experiences that the cluster approach within a country should not be implemented as a fixed blueprint. The design and implementation of a cluster approach is a complex undertaking that, as noted by Bray (1987) and Bredenberg (2000), requires good planning and organizational management skills by

the implementers. More often than not, the implementation results in different activities being implemented in different parts of the country, as schools are not homogenous in their context, capacity and needs.

The success of a cluster approach depends both on the cluster school's design and external variables, which influence the chances of success. Bredenberg (2000) identifies the following necessary conditions for the successful development of clusters in any given context:

- An official policy framework or, at the pilot stage, permission for schools to experiment in developing local institutions in a cluster framework
- A policy commitment to decentralized control of schools
- Reasonable distances between schools and a transportation and communication network in the target area
- A reasonable level of population density (not too high, not too low)
- An existing culture of cooperation and/or mutual support shown by the presence of self-help groups and community based organizations.
- Sufficient personnel with adequate organizational skills who fill positions such as librarians and/or resource center managers and
- Consensus among stakeholders about the purpose and need for clusters
- Appointment structure is based on merit and not affiliation
- Availability of locally generated resources or state support to ensure sustainability of cluster-based institutions

Not all these pre-conditions may apply to a specific country, however it is important to present them here to highlight the complexity of a cluster approach. It is also important to understand that it is unlikely that school clusters will produce the same

outcomes in every part of the country. In other words, clusters may be suitable for most of a country, but needs are likely to be different so that clusters may serve different functions in different regions and schools.

The next section looks at this point more in depth, examining the Cambodian experience with implementing school clusters.

School clusters in Cambodia: scope and development trends

The initial assessments of the state of education in Cambodia conducted at the time of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (or UNTAC) mission in 1992 found that, while primary schools were fairly organized all over the country and had consistent community participation, the main problems were the low quality of teaching, limited human and material resources at both the central and local levels and centralized decision-making processes (Galasso 1990).

Based on these assessments and looking at the experience of Thailand, the government decided in 1991 to implement a cluster school approach on a pilot basis. It was first piloted by the MoEYS, with assistance from UNICEF and Save the Children Norway, in nine provinces in 1992. MoEYS established the National Cluster School Committee in 1993 with the mandate to plan a nationwide expansion of the approach. During this initial phase, MoEYS maintained control and provided a limited degree of autonomy to the clusters, local governments, and the agencies that were helping to implement the pilot. In 1995, the development of Cluster Schools became national policy through the adoption of Directive 334 EYS/S.N.N. This marked the beginning of the second phase of the School Cluster approach that lasted until 1998 and was marked by rapid expansion.

Clusters are defined in the MoEYS Cluster School Guidelines (2000) as ‘an effective working mechanism to provide direct support for the community in order to promote educational access for children’ (p.5).

In Cambodia, clusters are used only with primary schools and have not been expanded to include lower secondary schools. There were a number of institutional reasons for taking this approach that will become clearer below. Clusters average about five to six Satellite Schools around a Core School. In 2000-01, the cluster system comprised 5,468 primary schools (95%), grouped into a total of 760 clusters. Three hundred and twenty five (43%) were receiving direct support from donors, while the remaining 435 clusters lagged behind, with inadequate human and financial resources (Bredenberg and Ratcliffe 2002). The data from the Education Management Information System Center at MoEYS for the school year 2010 – 2011 listed 1,148 Core Schools with a total of 5,619 Satellite Schools and 864 Annex Schools. Each cluster currently comprises, therefore, on average, 4.9 Satellite Schools and 0.7 Annex Schools. The trend from this data seems to be towards more clusters of smaller size.

The data presented above require further elaboration since they show that the government institutionalized the cluster system and then failed to resource it, leaving it to ad hoc placement of specialized projects by different donors to do so. This has led to an important dichotomy between Cambodian clusters – ‘supported clusters’ that work reasonably well, and ‘unsupported’ ones (*mjah kar*) that have difficulty functioning as a cluster should. Donor support to clusters had reduced over the last few years as shown in Table 1. This is an important consideration to the success of any cluster expansion to basic education schools.

Table 1 – Development Partners’ support to school clusters

Project/Agency	Number of clusters 2011	Number of clusters 2005	Activity	Support started in
EQIP/World Bank		157	Technical assistance and materials	1998
UNICEF and SIDA		60	Technical assistance and materials	1993
Save the Children Norway	53	47	Technical assistance and materials	1992
Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE)		14	Technical assistance and materials	1999
Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE) & Save the Children Australia	3	0	Technical assistance and materials	2009
Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE), World Education & USAID	61	0	Technical assistance and materials	2005
World Education		50	Technical assistance	1998
CARE		3	Technical assistance	1998
Volunteer Service Overseas	36	271	Technical assistance	2005
Total supported clusters	153	602		
Total unsupported clusters	995	435		
TOTAL	1148	1037		

Source: Bredenberg 2002, Pellini 2007.

The cluster system in Cambodian involves primary schools and has been the focus of several donor initiatives through grants to individual clusters (e.g., World Bank’s Education Quality Improvement Program, USAID’ Educational Support to Children in Underserved Populations Project, etc.). These grants have been used to conduct staff training, improvement of the school environment, supply of teaching materials, support to community participation, and improving students’ health and nutrition. The experience from these projects has shown that clusters can be a good channel to fund locally planned activities. They increase accountability in the use of financial

resources and allow for the involvement of a larger number of stakeholders in planning processes, reflecting local needs. Indeed, the use of clusters as a development tool has been one of their greatest successes in Cambodia since they help to vastly expand coverage by reducing the number of management units to attend to (i.e., 4.9 schools can be subsumed into one management unit, the cluster, rather than 5 individual schools). The absorptive capacity of the education system for development aid is, therefore, greatly enhanced as a result. Although there has never been a systematic study to look at the role of clusters in increasing school efficiency per se, there is anecdotal consensus among government and agency stakeholders suggesting that school clusters have contributed to a reduction in dropout and repetition, and have increased parent and community participation in school governance (Bredenberg, 2002). For Bray (1999) they have also made it possible to coordinate and channel households' contributions to schools which, in various forms, were estimated in 1999 at 77% of the total expenditures for primary education, and in 2004, at 56% (Bray and Seng Bunly 2005).

Additional evidence highlighted by the experience of volunteers of the UK-based Volunteers Service Overseas involved in projects such as EQIP (funded by the World Bank between 1999 and 2004) and Mainstreaming Inclusive Education (funded by the World Bank and the European Commission between 2005 and 2009) points to the key role that the leadership, commitment and enthusiasm of the cluster director (usually the director of the core school) play in mobilizing the resources and contribution by teachers and community members. The experience from the Volunteers Service Overseas highlights a second key element in successful cluster school implementation: the value of mentoring support provided by the volunteers to the cluster director and/or facilitators. This key complement to technical training on

school-based management and planning helps build leadership within the cluster, through a collaboration that lasts one or two years. As one informant mentioned, there is evidence of some clusters supported in the province of Kampot (South Cambodia) that continue to have meetings and work effectively long after the cessation of external support from the donor.

Checked evidence of implementing school clusters in Cambodia

While not all primary school clusters in Cambodia have received the same amount and type of support, the benefits can be summarized from earlier discussions as including improvements in school efficiency, reducing management units and transaction costs, expediting communication, sharing of (teaching resources), and better planning. Nevertheless, there have been many challenges in the implementation of school clusters in Cambodia. While school clusters have not been a complete failure, there is the general feeling that they have generally performed well below their full potential (e.g., Geeves 1999, Bredenberg 2002).

One of the paradoxes of implementing school clusters in Cambodia is that while they have a very checkered history in terms of their success rate, they remain wildly popular among many stakeholders from central government, local government, NGOs, and communities (e.g., Bredenberg 2002). This perception speaks largely to their great potential to facilitate effective development as opposed to their actual impacts, which have been more limited. It also reflects the feeling that clusters have been constrained by structural factors within the Cambodian context rather than any inherent flaws in the design of the school cluster concept per se. It is important to understand these factors in considering any possible expansion of the school cluster policy to the lower secondary school level (through the creation of basic education schools), as was mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Various studies have identified many factors that have limited the successful implementation of school clusters in Cambodia over the years (e.g., Schaeffer and Abracia 1994, Wheeler 1998, Geeves 1999, Bredenberg 2002). For purposes of this study, the authors have identified three such factors that are of relevance in determining whether there is any scope to expand the school cluster policy to the secondary education sector in the form of a 'basic education cluster'. These factors include (i) inadequate resourcing of the cluster school policy; (ii) disjuncture between school cluster structure and the educational administrative structure; and (iii) oversight structures that have never worked well, even at the pilot stage.

The school cluster policy in Cambodia has never been adequately resourced from the time of the inception of the policy in 1994 until the present day. As a result, clusters officially receive no budget from the government for travel, meeting costs, supplies, furniture, or other necessary expenditures. Where clusters have been resourced, this has occurred under the auspices of donor projects leading to the emergence of 'supported' and 'unsupported' clusters, as was noted earlier. This has contributed to *ad hoc* implementation of the school cluster policy and many sustainability challenges. There are many reasons leading to this situation but the key factor is that the Ministry of Economy and Finance recognizes only four institutional structures that may receive government funds, namely MoEYS, Provincial Offices of Education, District Offices of Education, and schools. While clusters have official standing as a legitimate institutional structure within MoEYS, they do not have the same recognition from the Ministry of Economy and Finance. As a result, clusters are generally bypassed in any budgetary planning. This situation has persisted for nearly 20 years and there is little hope that the advent of a basic education cluster will make much difference.

School clusters in Cambodia have included a certain degree of de-concentration by assigning to the Provincial Offices of Education tasks such as the creation of Provincial, District and Local Cluster School Committees and the establishment of cluster libraries and resource centers (Pellini 2007). MoEYS (2000) guidelines prescribed a complex structure of Cluster School Committees at all levels of education administration. These measures were intended to ensure oversight of local committees by local government structures.

The Local Cluster School Committee is located within the core school and is comprised of the following members: the school director of the core school, the school directors of neighboring satellite schools, technical grade leaders (i.e., senior teachers), a senior monk, the village chief, the commune chief, the chairperson of the Village Development Committee and members of the School Support Committees. The main tasks of the Local Cluster School Committee are to assist the development and implementation of the cluster's plans, liaise with local authorities, involve communities in school activities and coordinate with the District Office of Education. The Local Cluster School Committee therefore, has a crucial communication and networking function between the schools and District Office of Education. The main shortcoming of this system has been that Provincial Cluster School Committees and District Cluster School Committees never or rarely meet and when they do, they don't know what they should be doing. The tendency within the MoEYS is to set up these committees and give the rigid guidelines for their structure and role, which almost inevitably require the participation of senior managers of departments at district and provincial level. Since they are so busy and in any case have little experience of project management or technical understanding of school clusters, these bodies have existed more on paper than reality (Bredenberg 2002).

In view of these challenges to the implementation of the school cluster policy at primary level, the question we wish to pose here is whether the school cluster policy could be expanded to the lower secondary school sector to test the viability of Basic Education Clusters?

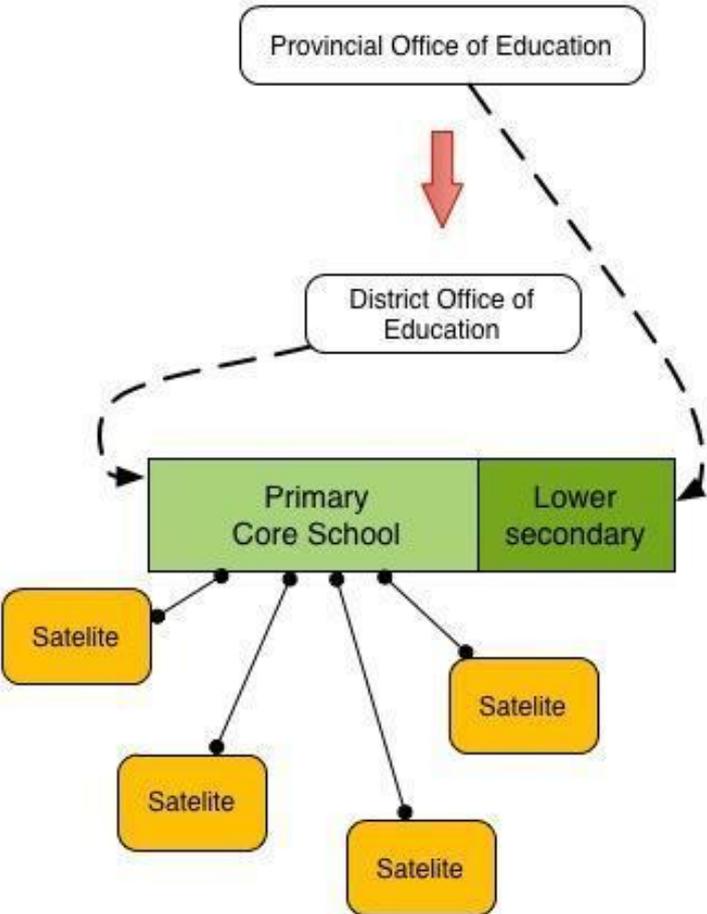
The changing policy context and the opportunity for establishing Basic Education Clusters

MoEYS is now considering Primary Education (Grades 1-6) and Lower Secondary Education (Grades 7-9) as a single education stream under the title Basic Education. This is spelt out in the Education Law (Article 17 RGC 2007) and the Child Friendly School Policy of 2010. This change in perception is driven in part by the disjuncture between the constitutional right to a basic education (i.e., education from Grades 1 to 9) by all Cambodian children and the observation that net enrollment plummets from 96% at primary level to only 32% at lower secondary school level. The creation of a basic education school could potentially increase flow rates from primary to secondary by increasing the proximity of secondary education facilities and improving coordination between the two sectors. The emergence of basic education schools, therefore, seems imminent. But if such institutional changes should actually come about, how will school cluster network need to be adjusted?

For Bray (1987) one important rationale of school clusters is that they can group together schools of different levels. When this happens, they can promote links between primary and secondary schools, so that primary schools can gain access to the (usually more plentiful) facilities of the secondary schools and secondary schools can gain a better understanding of the backgrounds of the pupils that come to them. Clusters can facilitate information flow between schools, departments and MoEYS on policy implementation.

While the cluster system in Cambodia is not formalized at the secondary school level and the directors of lower secondary schools engage directly with the representative of the Provincial Office of Education’s Lower Secondary Schools Office, we argue that school clusters remain valid mechanisms for school management and governance (Figure 2). The cluster mechanism is still in place and is being used by various projects and interventions. For example, school clusters have been at the center of the adoption of the Child Friendly School Program by MoEYS, in collaboration with some development partners: UNICEF in six provinces, Save the Children International in six provinces and USAID/World Education/KAPE in three provinces.

Figure 2



The rationale for testing and introducing Basic Education Clusters in Cambodia are:

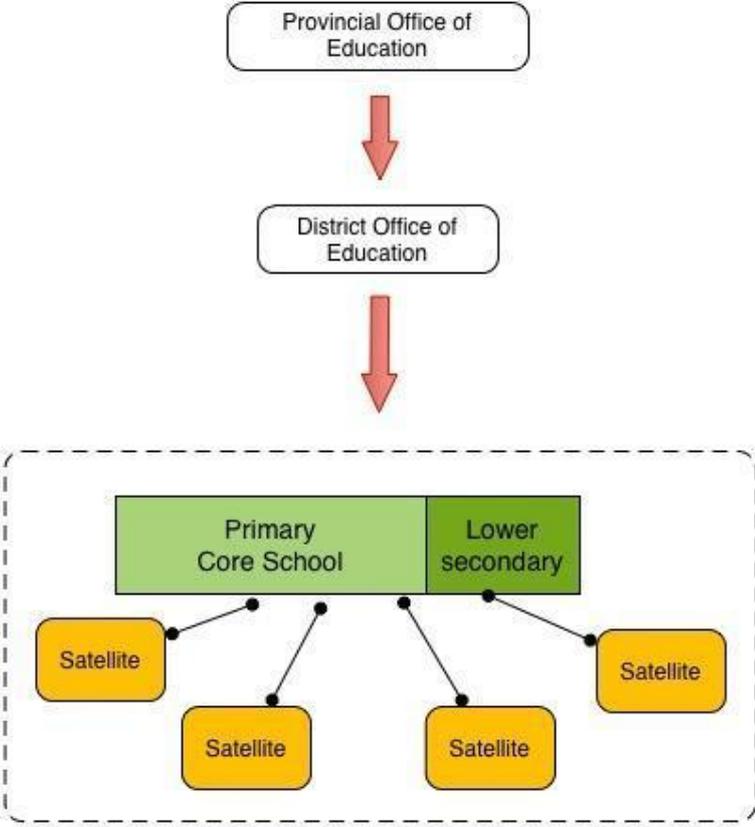
- MoEYS is now considering Primary Education (Grades 1-6) and Lower Secondary Education (Grades 7-9) as a single education stream under the title Basic Education. This is spelt out in the Education Law (Article 17 RGC 2007) and the Child Friendly School Policy.
- 451 lower secondary schools (28.7% of a total of 1,573 in 2010) are attached to a primary school that usually functions as the Core School of a cluster
- In 2010 there were 1,148 Core Schools in Cambodia. Each cluster comprised, on average, 5.9 primary schools (Core School + Satellite Schools + Annex Schools). If the current clusters were to be expanded to lower secondary schools this would result in an increase, on average, of 1.3 lower secondary schools per cluster, which seems manageable.
- The number of lower secondary schools attached to a primary school will increase over the period 2012-2017.

The benefits, which need to be carefully monitored while testing the Basic Education Clusters (Figure 3) are linked to strengthening the formal link between primary and secondary institutions reinforces and the idea that all primary school children should aim to proceed to lower secondary school, since this is considered part of the basic education cycle, access to which is guaranteed by the Cambodian Constitution.

Basic Education Clusters can also increase the opportunities for sharing between primary and lower secondary school teachers. Primary teachers will know what conditions the pupils will face when the children move to secondary schools. Similarly, lower secondary teachers will know what the pupils have been taught at primary level. This can contribute to reducing the isolation of lower secondary schools and improve the intake and transition of students in the cluster from primary

to lower secondary. The closer link between primary and lower secondary school can contribute to increase the coordination, sharing and communication with Provincial Offices of Education and District Offices of Education which at the moment is the Achilles heel of the cluster system. The link and engagement with/of Provincial Offices of Education and District Offices of Education can be more effective if they deal with larger clusters which include also lower secondary schools. The mixed clusters could also provide office space for one District Office of Education staff that would support the director of the Core School with the management and administration of the cluster. Larger clusters can also justify a greater coordination and communication of information with the elected commune councils and district councils (Figure 3).

Figure 3



Moreover Basic School Clusters can increase the opportunities for raising awareness of the importance of full, basic education completion, among the community through communication, advocacy and social marketing mechanisms. Importantly they can ensure that primary students studying in Child Friendly Schools at primary level do not fall off a cliff when and if they go to a lower secondary school since the Child Friendly Schools policy is not well-articulated or implemented at Grades 7 to 9. MoEYS plans to expand the policy to secondary soon. Basic education schools would facilitate the expansion of the Child Friendly Schools policy to secondary so that secondary schools might be learning from primary schools as well.

There are challenges and risks associated with introducing Basic School Clusters in the local governance and political context of Cambodia. The most significant challenge is the limited institutional flexibility. At the moment there are two separate departments overseeing primary and secondary schools. How will this sharing of jurisdiction be adjudicated? The Programme-based Budgets (PB) for schools (i.e., school operating budget from central government) is money that currently can only be signed for by a primary school director for primary PB funds and the same for secondary. How will one director of a Basic Education Core School sign for funds? The experience of the failure of the government to resource clusters is instructive here. One reason why clusters were never resourced in the past is that the Ministry of Economy and Finance recognizes only Ministry, Province, District, and School level. Clusters did not figure into this structure even though they are part of an official policy. The Basic Education Cluster will suffer from the same limitation – one reason why it would be useful to talk a little more about challenges that clusters have encountered in the past (Bredenberg and Ratcliffe, 2002):

- Tension between the directors of the primary school and the lower secondary school about who should lead the cluster
- Provincial Office of Education is in charge of the communication and oversight of the lower secondary school, while District Office of Education is in charge of the communication and oversight of the primary school/cluster
- Tension among teachers due to the perceived higher status and skills of lower secondary teachers
- If primary and secondary schools are grouped in the same cluster, the secondary schools might tend to dominate. The staff of the secondary schools may not be sympathetic to the needs of primary schools, risking the operation of the cluster becoming unbalanced.
- For most matters, schools need only cooperate with other schools at the same level, while in curriculum matters, the chief needs are for staff to discuss problems with other staff who face similar problems.

Conclusions

A key idea stated at the outset of this paper is that the viability of a cluster school network depends on its ability to evolve in a way so that it remains relevant to the needs of the educational context. As the emergence of a new institutional structure known as the Basic Education School appears more and more imminent in Cambodia, it will be important for the country's school cluster network to respond to this challenge by reflecting on the past experience while designing solutions for the future. This would presumably involve extending the school cluster policy to the lower secondary school sector so that basic education schools with Grades 1 to 9 could become the Core School in an increasing number of clusters.

On the surface of it, the idea of a Basic Education Cluster has great merit in terms of the efficiencies that it could realize for facilitating better student flows from primary to lower secondary school level. Such arrangements could also powerfully project the child friendly school policy into secondary schools, improve shared use of facilities between primary and secondary schools, and strengthen information sharing. However, the challenges to realizing such efficiencies appear to be mainly structural and bureaucratic in nature. The education system in Cambodia has not historically demonstrated adequate flexibility to accommodate new policies and institutional changes. It was pointed out that even after 20 years of implementation, the school cluster is still not officially recognized by the Ministry of Economy and Finance as a legitimate institutional structure that can manage its own budgetary resources. As a result, school clusters in Cambodia are generally under resourced and their full potential unrealized. It remains to be seen whether the government can demonstrate the leadership and creativity necessary to move school clusters to the next stage of their evolution in a way that can form improved links between the primary and secondary school sector.

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