



DISCUSSION NOTE:

Achieving Greater Efficiencies in Educational Development
through a High and Low Cost Development Strategy

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Purpose of the Present Document: The current document is intended as a discussion note to stimulate additional thinking among Government officials and Development Partners with regards to possible strategies the Royal Cambodian Government (RCG) might employ to make educational development more efficient. This paper was prepared by Kampuchean Action for Primary Education at the request of the Ministry of Economy & Finance (MoEF) as one possible tool to help stimulate such discussion. The Ministry of Education, Youth, & Sport has embarked on a laudable strategy to improve educational quality, access, and management through an ambitious reform program that moves farther than the education system has ever moved before. MoEF is considering even more investment in the education system to bring these efforts forward quickly and effectively.

1.2 The Key Challenge: A key challenge for the RCG is how to move the education system forward in a way that greatly accelerates improvements in *educational quality* while at the same time ensuring that considerations of *social equity* and *justice concerns* are also addressed. This is particularly challenging given that resources are greatly limited. It is particularly tempting to frame this challenge as an either-or choice (i.e., a choice between investing in social equity at the expense of educational quality or vice versa), especially given the observation that past investment has not yet yielded acceptable improvements in educational quality though there have been major improvements in educational access.

1.3 Finding a Middle Path: It is KAPE's belief that this challenge could be addressed through a **multi-track development strategy** that includes a high investment pathway in a smaller number of schools and institutions that are strategically chosen as well as a low investment pathway that allows the RCG to address social equity concerns (and some quality concerns) in the rest of the country. That is, no one is arguing that the RCG should ignore half or more of the country to pursue a high investment strategy in fewer locations. To be sure, such a multiple track strategy may not seem 'fair' on the face of it and will generate challenges about which schools and institutions most deserve high investment. It means hard decisions and sacrifices that may not be evenly borne. Nevertheless, a strategy in which everyone suffers equally in the pursuit of a minimum standard will clearly not meet the strategic educational needs of Cambodia. If these decisions had been made 10 or 15 years ago, Cambodia might today have been in a much better position with respect to its human resource base to more easily support the needs of national scale implementation of educational reform. Sadly, the country's human resource base today does not appear to be robust enough to support many of the ambitious investment plans currently being considered (see below).

Strategically, more individualized channels of high investment in educational development today will generate the high quality human resources that will in the future be better able to support an expansion in the quality of educational services to the entire country. However, for each development cycle that these hard decisions are

delayed, the more difficult future decisions will become. The pressure for a move in the direction of a *multi-track development strategy* has grown over the last five years with major changes in Cambodia's social and political context. For example, ASEAN integration has now begun, greatly increasing the competition with countries in the region for a 21st Century work force and education system. Similarly, the rapid rise of private schools has meant that the state no longer has a monopoly over educational service provision with the result that tens of thousands of middle class families have pulled their children out of the public school system, greatly impoverishing the student body in the process. With these and similar changes moving at an accelerating pace, there is no longer any time left to put off the hard decisions that need to be made.

2. CONSIDERING THE LESSONS OF THE PAST

Any future discussions about the above challenges should consider the difficult lessons of the past that have historically muted the effectiveness of educational investment. While the list below is not exhaustive, it captures some of the key factors that need to be considered before embarking on a new educational investment strategy that may repeat many of the same mistakes of the past:

1. ***Inadequate Human Resource Base:*** Historically, the scope of national planning and policy-making has not matched the available human resource base available to effectively implement such plans. The best example of this was the decision to implement Child Friendly Schools nationally without adequate human resources for training and monitoring to make the transition from a successful pilot to nation-wide implementation.
2. ***Spreading Resources Too Thinly:*** In a quest to achieve maximum levels of social equity, resources have generally been spread very thinly throughout the entire education system following a ***uni-dimensional development track*** that has focused on a universal minimum standard. While such a strategy was seemingly fair from a social equity point of view, it was probably not a wise choice given that human resource constraints ensured that nation-wide planning could not be effectively implemented.
3. ***Focus on a Minimum Standard:*** The observation that many schools are operating at a standard that is far below what is considered acceptable, even by local standards, has been used as a justification for the pursuit of a 'minimum educational standard' across all schools. However, the pursuit of minimum standards in other countries has proven to be a dangerous strategy that often ensures educational systems are built to a 'low' standard. One must question whether a national education system built to the lowest standard will serve the needs of Cambodia in the 21st Century. While the use of minimum standards may be suitable for those schools operating far below an acceptable minimum, there must be a parallel strategy for other schools to achieve 'maximal' standards of education that are more open-ended. More than anything else, the dangers of the minimum standard approach call for a multi-development strategy that also ensures some focus on maximal standards as well.

4. ***Conditions for Success Do Not Exist in Many Schools for High Investment:*** Efforts to upgrade state schools have generally had very mixed results due to the observation that the conditions for success are not present. What are these conditions? While there are many, this paper chooses to focus on the following key factors: (i) ***Lack of accountability*** both among school directors and teachers; (ii) the ***absence of professional learning communities***; (iii) a ***dysfunctional management philosophy*** among provincial, district, and school level administrators that emphasizes *problem avoidance* as opposed to *problem resolution*; (iv) an ***appointment process*** for school directors that is not based on merit; and (v) ***dysfunctional teacher practices*** that are not a function of poor knowledge but rather rigid attitudes, which are not amenable to change through training.

The factors highlighted in Factor 4 above deserve some further explanation, particularly in light of the ambitious plans to implement the *Teacher Policy Action Plan (TPAP)*. Training is generally used as a frontline strategy to upgrade human resources at school and district level. However, this training does not occur in a vacuum. The effectiveness of such training is generally based on the assumption that school directors will hold teachers accountable for their performance following the delivery of training workshops. This assumption is usually not valid because most school directors are appointed on the basis of seniority and not merit. They generally have no formal management training and usually seek to avoid conflict with their teachers, even when this means turning a blind eye to unprofessional or even unethical behaviors. Under these conditions, even increases in salary are not likely to increase compliance with more professional standards of performance that teachers may learn about in INSET workshops. School directors themselves are often not held accountable by their superiors either since the latter also seek to avoid rather than address problems. Thus, the lack of accountability and effective management strategies in many schools ensures that capacity-building efforts often occur under conditions that undermine success.

In addition, even should some motivated teachers actually try to improve their performance, there is no professional community network in which good teachers reinforce each other. Thus, those who swim against the current receive no reinforcement or support to do so. This has serious implications for the placement of new idealistic teachers who are posted from pre-service training centers into school environments that are characterized by widespread dysfunction. Over a number of years, these teachers simply start to conform to the standards of dysfunction around them.

Finally, training efforts often assume that poor standards of performance are due to a lack of knowledge among teachers rather than to deeply entrenched attitudes of a dysfunctional nature. These dysfunctional attitudes, built up over a period of decades, are deeply entrenched and are often not amenable to change through training, especially since there is little follow-up or accountability in the working environments in which teachers work.

3. WHAT WOULD A LOW AND HIGH INVESTMENT EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY LOOK LIKE?

3.1 A High Investment Strategy

The discussion above has made a case for a development strategy that allows for a few very deep channels of investment where there is reasonable certainty that the conditions for success are in place. The following discussion provides some further thoughts on what a 'high investment' strategy in the education sector might look like:

3.1.1 Fewer Development Channels But of Greater Depth

A high investment strategy would first and foremost be characterized by great depth but little breadth in terms of geographical coverage. The sites for such investment should be limited but highly strategic in terms of their purpose. For example, the need for 21st Century Workforce skills would dictate that investments should focus on the STEM subjects, i.e., Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. This is exactly the strategy that MoEYS has already begun to employ at its New Generation School (NGS) sites in Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham Province. The selection of schools and institutions receiving such investment should be done with great care. The New Generation School Reform is already an example of such a strategy in which MoEYS seeks to establish at least one NGS site focusing on the STEM subjects in each of Cambodia's 24 Provinces and Municipalities. Depending on the availability of support from development partners and government funding, this number might be increased based on considerations of human resource availability to support an expansion. The main constraint in this regard is not money but rather human capital.

The NGS establishment strategy could also be applied to other sectors within the education system. For example, given the constraints in human resources, it might be advisable to develop *New Generation Teacher Training Centers* in a limited number of sites, rather than spreading scarce resources evenly across all 18 centers. The selection of such centers should be preceded by careful review of specific criteria including management, infrastructure, and scope for expansion, among others. With respect to the last of these, an understaffed institution or an institution with a considerable number of individuals ready for retirement would lend itself well to considerable flexibility to bring in many young, qualified new staff whereas a large institution with few opportunities for staff upgrading and change would present more challenges.

In addition to TTCs, the same approach could also be applied to districts and even whole provinces depending on local conditions. Creating *New Generation Districts* or even *New Generation Provinces* might be considered when vacancies in senior management arise, which provide for a painless change in leadership at the top to orchestrate change.

3.1.2 Strategic Investments in Technology

A high investment strategy in fewer and very carefully chosen locations lends itself well to addressing the dilemma of how to approach technology in education. Promoting ICT in education in multiple aspects is something that Cambodia can no longer

delay, even though there are hundreds of schools that still lack the most basic of facilities. ICT in education does not only mean 'digital literacy' for students but also the use of technology as a tool for teaching and learning. To be sure, Cambodia does not have either the human or financial resources needed to promote a massive roll out of technology, as they have been doing in neighboring countries. A selective strategy of identifying a limited number of high investment school sites with the necessary conditions for success (see below) will enable Cambodia to start building the human resource base needed to accelerate educational reform in this area in the future. This will in turn enable Cambodia to promote technological proficiency in a manner that is commensurate with its current human resource constraints.

3.1.3 Ensuring the Conditions for Success:

Investments in human resource upgrading in the limited number of locations selected need to consider the existence of the following institutional conditions:

- 1) ***Effective Leadership:*** No amount of teacher education will create change in schools without effective leadership from the top. Planners must determine whether the leadership at any given school or institution is committed to improvement. Are school managers willing to show 0 tolerance for dysfunctional and unprofessional teacher behaviors that may include private classes, extortionary selling of study papers, cakes, etc.? Such leadership is not usually a function of 'training' but one of natural leadership qualities, attitudinal flexibility, and integrity. It is KAPE's belief that while training can strengthen such qualities; it cannot create them where they did not earlier exist. Therefore, planners must show determination in assessing current school leadership and making necessary changes through competitive selection and appointment where necessary.
- 2) ***Accountability:*** It is KAPE's belief that investment without accountability is a futile undertaking. The lack of accountability at multiple levels of the education system is closely linked to the issue of effective school leadership described above and the prevailing management philosophy of many administrators that is characterized by problem avoidance rather than problem resolution. Even high investment in selective locations will not succeed if provincial, district, and school level administrators do not demonstrate a dramatic shift in their management philosophy. It is the lack of accountability and problem avoidance management patterns that have stymied efforts to introduce performance-based pay since most school directors seek to avoid conflicts with their teachers at all costs and will not make hard judgments regarding those teachers who deserve performance-based pay and those that do not. In its Education Strategic Plan, MoEYS has already stated its commitment to be more selective in staff appointments. It is, therefore, hoped that as leadership vacancies arise, MoEYS will start to competitively recruit new administrators who are more amenable to taking risks, who do not fear conflict with teachers who break the rules, and who will hold schools accountable for their performance.

- 3) ***Professional Learning Communities:*** Another essential condition to ensure a return on investment is the existence of a mutually reinforcing professional environment. Teacher education cannot be effective in a vacuum and it is essential for there to be a critical mass of like-minded individuals in a school or institution who can support and reinforce each other. As mentioned earlier, placing motivated and professional teachers in a dysfunctional environment where they are the minority will not lead to change. Quite the opposite, such teachers will tend to adapt themselves to the dysfunctional norm, especially where there is weak leadership at the school. Thus, a high investment strategy must create a professional learning community of like-minded individuals within the target institution for it to succeed. Creating this environment may require the creation of new schools, a school within a school (as has been done successfully at Sisovath HS), or a transformed school where those deemed to be unprofessional are removed, rotated, or encouraged to resign through redundancy packages.

3.1.4 Safeguarding Investments through a System of Strict Accreditation:

Effective investment cannot occur where there is no accountability. The Quality Assurance Department has sought to enforce such accountability and the Ministry has already taken dramatic steps to greatly expand the team of inspectors monitoring the country's schools. Nevertheless, inspection visits are still infrequent, which would put at risk the significant investments made in high investment institutions (such as New Generation Schools). For high investment schools and institutions where the RGC has made significant allocations of resources, there would need to be regular vetting processes in place of both teachers and school directors that lead to continued accreditation of the institution. Failure to maintain accreditation would lead to immediate changes in terms of access to continued investment and the likelihood of staff transfers to other posts and replacements. Because difficult accreditation decisions entail high risk to those making them, it may be necessary for the Ministry to consider creating independent boards that can make balanced and impartial recommendations regarding an institution's accreditation or perhaps even out-sourcing this function to the non-state sector.

3.1.5 Investing to Build Management Capital:

The lack of effective leadership among many school directors has continually undermined investment in the education sector. Historically, the development establishment has sought to address this deficiency through short-term in-service training programs (e.g., CESSP, IBEC, CDPF, etc.). But as noted above, training individuals who are often not suitable to be school managers in the first place has yielded poor results. To date, Cambodia has not a single institution dedicated to the competitive recruitment and training of school administrators. The establishment of such an institution could have far reaching effects on the education system because it would focus on the most strategically placed person in any given school or institution – the person in charge. With an output of 100 persons per year, such an institution could quickly create the critical mass of talent needed to drive forward proposed educa-

tional reforms at school level.

3.1.6 Promoting Incremental Reform

The human resource constraints mentioned continually throughout this paper are a strong argument against nation-wide implementation of certain reforms, especially those that require changes in behavior and attitude among the nation's teaching force. Although the idea of incremental reform presents risks because it will slow Cambodia's readiness to meet the demands of ASEAN integration and rapid globalization, it seems the only realistic alternative given the failures of the past. Illustrative examples of incremental investment and reform could take the following forms in the following contexts:

- Establishing 2 New Generation Schools each year for the next 5 years
- Establishing 2 New Generation Teacher Training Centers every 3 years
- Rolling out the new Life Skills Education Curriculum in 50 new sites each year, limiting the scope of such expansion to only 10 provinces.

Although one can argue about the details of what pace of implementation is most suitable in light of Cambodia's human resource constraints, the RGC should avoid rapid, nationwide implementation of reforms particularly when these relate to behavioral and attitudinal change.

3.2 A Low Investment Strategy

Proposing a high and low investment strategy for the education sector is not to suggest that the RGC should ignore half or more of the country. There are investments that can be made effectively that are less susceptible to some of the difficult conditions described earlier (e.g., ineffective leadership, etc.). Many of these have already been identified in the MoEYS' *Education Strategic Plan* and are currently in progress. This includes upgrading the intake of TTCs to include A, B, and C-level graduates, national curriculum reform, examination reform, and others. Each of these measures raises educational standards and some actually save money such as the abolition of the nationally administered *Diplome* Examination. These observations indicate that in many respects, MoEYS has already embarked on a low investment strategy to raise standards for the entire country by realizing efficiencies in the way that specific functions are carried out.

The following list, while hardly exhaustive, presents some additional suggestions for realizing improved efficiencies in educational quality and access through low investment strategies:

3.2.1 Limiting INSET Provision to Teachers Under 50

Although it has been suggested above that INSET planning should be scaled back to be more commensurate with the realities of Cambodia's human resource constraints, it is likely that these plans are too well advanced to be delayed or rescinded at this late stage. Nevertheless, there are still ways that INSET delivery could be made more efficient. For example, MoEYS could limit participation to teachers who are under 50. Older teachers are less likely to change their teaching styles and are also less likely to

be entertaining ambitious plans for career advancement. While it is not politically correct to state such views, there is some element of truth to these observations and the suggestion to limit INSET delivery in the way described could save the RCG a great deal of money and improve outcomes by focusing on those most likely to change their teaching practices (i.e., younger teachers).

3.2.2 Linking Per Diem Payments to Actual Changes in Performance

INSET workshops have in the past been undermined by *entitlement expectations* for per diem payments at all levels. Teachers attend workshops, receive their per diems, and return to their schools with little accountability to actually change their classroom practice. It is obvious to all but the most naive that millions of dollars have been spent in this way over the years with little impact on educational standards at school level. Several organizations have devised schemes that link per diem payments to changes in performance so that teachers do not get paid if they do not exhibit change in their classroom practice. Such measures will push back against entitlement expectations, save money, and increase the likelihood of realizing solid outcomes for the investment made. More details on such an approach can be found at the following link: <http://www.slideshare.net/danielapapi/cambodian-teacher-training-model>

3.2.3 Funding Redundancy Packages to Older Teachers in Urban Areas

For many years now, Cambodia's education system has been struggling with teacher surpluses in its urban areas and severe shortages in its rural areas. These surpluses have become even more pronounced as urban students flee the public schools for the private sector causing PTR levels to plummet in some areas. Plans for re-assigning teachers are likely to encounter fierce political resistance from teachers and will likely be undermined by provincial level administrators who seek to avoid conflict. It may make more sense for MoEYS to consider providing *redundancy packages* to urban teachers, particularly older teachers, to leave the teaching service. While requiring considerable investment up front, these measures are likely to save significant amounts of resources in the future and enable the RCG to increase its intakes of younger teachers who would be paid less than senior teachers. In addition, these teachers could be recruited from the areas where they are most needed, and realize additional benefits because younger teachers are easier to train and are more likely to be versed in technology.