



Cambodia Development  
Resource Institute

# Cambodia Education 2015

*Employment and Empowerment*



Khieng Sothy, Srinivasa Madhur, Chhem Rethy (Eds.)



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**Edited by**

**Khieng Sothy, Srinivasa Madhur, Chhem Rethy**



**Cambodia Development Resource Institute**

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## List of acronyms

ACC	Accreditation Committee of Cambodia
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CDRI	Cambodia Development Resource Institute
D&D	Decentralisation and Deconcentration
DTMT	District Training and Monitoring Team
ECCD	Early Child Care and Development
EFA	Education for All
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESP	Education Strategic Plan
GDHE	General Department of Higher Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HEI	Higher Education Institution
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
MOCRA	Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs
MOEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport
MOI	Ministry of Interior
MOLVT	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training
MOOC	Massive Open Online Course
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NEA	National Employment Agency
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSDP	National Strategic Development Plan
QA	Quality Assurance
SSC	School Support Committee
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

## Preface

What kind of a future do Cambodians envisage for their children, their society and their country? How might they prosper not only economically, but in ways that build a strong national identity that allows them to emerge from a painful and fractured past with renewed hope and vitality? How do we bring together the building blocks of a society, drawing on research from other nations, while attending to the core of what we value in Cambodia? It is these questions and more that we explore in this edition, as we seek to develop the full potential of the young and ambitious for true socio-economic progress.

Improving the education system is one of the most significant challenges facing Cambodia today. In light of committed education leadership and sweeping education reforms, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI) initiated a major research project to investigate the issues besetting Cambodia's education system, with a primary focus on skills development. As the new Executive Director, I was pleased and felt extremely blessed to have joined CDRI just after the launch of this flagship project. One may call this serendipity, or perhaps destiny: twenty years ago, out of personal interest and passion, I wrote a doctoral dissertation titled "University and Human Capital in the ASEAN Perspective: The Case of Cambodia." I also taught for five years at the National University of Singapore, where I played an instrumental role in a major and successful medical education reform. For a Cambodian who has lived abroad for forty years, CDRI's very timely and socially meaningful initiative is indeed the best mission one could ever dream of leading.

The key objective of this project is to produce a volume on the theme "Anchoring Education for Employment and Empowerment." Released annually, this CDRI flagship publication offers a snapshot of Cambodia's educational landscape. The study encompasses several main topics: getting to grips with the skill gap; aiming high through higher education; shaping and scaling up TVET; securing secondary education; meeting basic learning needs through primary education; and lifelong learning through preschool and early childhood development. This volume was prepared with the interests of top policymakers, especially from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and their development partners in mind.

This research project is the result of consultation and collaboration with national executive and legislative institutions, education institutions, development partners and the private sector that have provided a repository

of significant skills, knowledge and experience. Contributing authors use various primary and secondary sources to support their claims. A multi-authored volume brings a diversity of views and, inevitably, disagreement or variation in interpretation as one might well expect in a research community. Even so, such variation itself can be a valuable resource, ultimately ensuring robust conclusions.

Through our research and analysis, many research gaps have been identified, with a few conflicts in the data also appearing. This baseline project will allow us to prioritise and conduct further studies in order to strengthen and validate our data, ask good probing questions and generate new and different kinds of knowledge to inspire and inform policy and practice that lead to improved education outcomes for all.

A strong educational system alone is not sufficient to build a united and prosperous nation that reflects the cultural values of a society. Our commitment as a research and development institute includes activities that help stimulate collective dialogue for visioning and thinking through our very important next steps. Social and economic transformation requires us to work collaboratively to enable strong policy formulation that can serve as the backbone for our social systems to progress, while also ensuring we respond to the demands of economic transformation in ways that build a prosperous society. As we consider the education of our future generations, we must attend to both quality and relevance while we work hard to remain forward looking. It is our hope that investment in quality, systemic educational reforms will provide a stable building block that can serve our long-term goals. We are a nation on the move. Sound policies and research will help us chart a prosperous course for our future.

Dr Chhem Rethy  
Executive Director, CDRI

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# Chapter 1

## Why Focus on Cambodia's Education and Why Now?

### 1. 1 Background

Cambodia has achieved strong growth in the past two decades and the country is now on the verge of graduating to lower-middle-income status with a per capita income of about USD1000, a feat that neighbouring Vietnam realised in 2010 and Laos in 2011 (CDRI 2013; Madhur and Menon 2014). Building on this success, the government's aspiration is for Cambodia to break through to the upper-middle-income range (with per capita income of about USD4000, comparable to that of Thailand in 2010 and Indonesia in 2013) by 2030 and reach the high-income ranks (with per capita income of above USD12,000) by 2050 (RGC 2014).

As the country traverses its middle-income path, several factors could constrain growth and development. There is broad consensus among Cambodia's policymakers, the private sector, development experts and development partners (bilateral and multilateral) that an emerging skill gap is one such factor. Skilled human resources even for low-to-medium skill intensive industries are in increasingly short supply. Moreover, the gap between the human resource skills that industries and businesses need and what the education institutions, whether academic or vocational training, are producing is widening almost every year (Madhur 2014). Cambodia will have to tackle this growing skill gap if it is to achieve its vision of becoming an upper-middle-income country in the next two decades and subsequently move up the development ladder.

Interestingly, a skill gap is emerging for the industrial and the service sectors, even as the country has uneducated surplus labour in the countryside and educated but unemployed and underemployed youth in the cities. A poor education system seems to provide the missing link that explains this conundrum of the co-existence of labour surplus and skill shortages (Madhur 2014). Unless the country addresses a whole gamut of issues besetting the development of a robust education system, it will run the risk of being caught in a slow growth middle-income trap. Getting Cambodia's education system right is critical in closing the skill gap.

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Srinivasa Madhur, Director of Research, and Dr Chhem Rethy, Executive Director, CDRI.

Worldwide experience shows that from a long-term perspective education is both a determinant and a component of socio-economic development, or what is now referred to as human development. True, an educated society (combined with robust health of the people) provides a country with a productive and skilled workforce for strong and sustained economic growth. At the same time, access to quality education and achieving educational potential, especially among youth, who form the bedrock of future growth and development, are important ends in themselves. Not only does education contribute to income growth and help lift people out of poverty, it also enables them to take advantage of economic, social and political opportunities and puts individuals in control of their own destiny, allowing them to better enjoy their lives.

Reforming Cambodia's rather nascent education system then is crucial to both enabling the country to move up the income ladder and reduce poverty, and to empowering its people to contribute to and benefit from the country's economic growth, social progress and democratic development. On both counts, a critical examination of the country's education system and identifying the kinds of education reforms that policymakers need to pursue over the coming years and decades is crucial. This study attempts to make a modest start towards that objective.

## **1.2 The study and its objectives**

The study aims to provide a bird's eye view of past trends and emerging policy issues in the entire education system, ranging from early childhood development (ECD) and preschool through primary and secondary education to higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The objective of the study is not to carve out specific education policy prescriptions but to identify the broad sets of issues that the country's policymakers in particular and society more generally may have to grapple with and find pragmatic solutions for in the future. The study is thus more about raising a set of relevant questions than about providing answers to each of those questions. That in itself is expected to contribute to constructive discussion and debate about the country's education reforms. In many ways, therefore, the study identifies a set of issues to be explored in more depth through further research.

The next chapter (Chapter 2) provides an overview of Cambodia's emerging skill gap. The subsequent chapters then encompass and outline past trends and emerging issues in the six segments of the country's education system: higher education (Chapter 3), TVET (Chapter 4), secondary education (Chapter 5), primary education (Chapter 6), and ECD and preschooling

(Chapter 7). Chapter 8 concludes by drawing together the important issues for the different parts of the education system and collating them into broad sets of questions that need to be discussed and debated in more depth in the effort to find workable policy solutions.

### **1.3 Methodology and sources of data and information**

This study employs an eclectic methodology. First, it takes the existing work on Cambodia’s education system and skill development as a starting point and builds on it. Second, it uses available secondary data and information—both quantitative and qualitative—from national and international sources. Third, it factors in the key messages that came up at the February 2014 Cambodia Outlook Conference on the theme “Skilling Cambodia and Education Reforms” and the September 2014 Symposium on “Getting Education Right for Cambodia’s Changing Labour Market Needs: Reform and Policy Research Priorities” (CDRI 2014; Madhur 2015); panellists and speakers at both events were drawn from government ministries, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), the private sector, and multilateral institutions. Fourth, it deciphers the key issues of major concern to the government that are set out in the National Strategic Development Plan 2014-18 and the Education Strategic Plan 2014-18. These efforts to collect information were complemented by semi-structured consultations and key-informant interviews with representatives from government ministries and departments, development partners, education institutions, private sector and non-governmental organisations, as well as students and parents. In all, about 100 key informants were consulted and interviewed in the period June-August 2014. About one-third of the interviewees were drawn from education institutions (both public and private). The remaining two-thirds were more or less equally divided among five categories: ministries and departments, the private sector, development partners, NGOs, students and parents.

### **1.4 Limitations and caveats**

CDRI is beginning a multi-year *Research and Policy Dialogue Programme on Cambodia’s Education Reforms*, and this study is a prelude. The programme will run until 2018 and has a two-fold objective: to produce rigorous policy-relevant research products, and to contribute to evidence-based education reforms. This study should therefore be seen as a “learning by doing” exercise which forms part of CDRI’s longer and larger research programme.

As an initial exploratory study, the different chapters should be seen as a collection of papers rather than cohesive components of an integrated volume. They each cover broad sets of issues encompassing enrolment and access to education (quantity of education); quality of education; financing education; private-public composition; and institutional framework and governance. Even then, a few limitations need to be highlighted at the outset.

First, not too much effort is exerted to bring in tight consistency in the sources of data used across the chapters, prepared by different authors. Second, within the five broad sets of issues mentioned above, individual chapter authors are given flexibility or a high degree of latitude in choosing the sets of issues they investigate without necessarily imposing a uniform format across chapters. Third, the way policy issues are treated varies across the chapters. As a result, some chapters have raised quite specific policy implications and others have outlined generic sets of issues, while yet others focus on past trends and current status and pay much less attention to policy. Finally, the higher education chapter (chapter 3), comprising four subchapters by different authors, perhaps is the least consistent in the aspects covered and the policy issues identified. The greater variety in its composition means that it is perhaps the least harmonious chapter of this volume.

That said, many of the key issues that still plague Cambodia's higher education are somewhat similar to those identified by Chhem (1997, ix) more than a decade and half ago:

... [it] is elitist ... its management is centralised, ... it is of little relevance, and ... its performance is inadequate ... Given its present state and its new political, economic, and national environment, the tertiary education in Cambodia faces difficult challenges ahead. It will have to balance social demand and its ability to adapt to change with the development of its human resources by providing a well-rounded education for its graduates ...

Cambodia's higher education system is still bound by many of these same constraints, "but the best is yet to come" (William Shakespeare).