



## SITUATION

More children in Cambodia are entering school and the gender gap is quickly closing as more girls make their way to the classroom. In the 2010/2011 school year, the overall rate of children enrolled in primary school was 95.2 per cent (95.8 per cent for boys and 94.6 per cent for girls), showing that the gender gap at primary level has essentially been eliminated.

However, these gains are undermined by persistent challenges that affect a child's ability to stay in school and conceal regional disparities. While Cambodian children are filling the seats in primary schools, completion rates for primary, and particularly lower secondary education, are low. Poverty pushes many students out of school as many parents, especially in rural areas, cannot afford the direct and indirect costs related to education and families often require children to help at home with chores and field work.

Lack of quality of education in schools, leading to high rates of repetition, also contributes to high dropout rates, particularly at the primary school level. Repeating grades results in a significant proportion of overage children in primary schools, preventing children from reaching the transition to secondary school at an age where it still makes sense to continue in education.

Challenges multiply for children in rural and remote regions, especially those from ethnic minorities, who lack access to consistent, quality education. In the 2008/2009 school year, nearly half of children in remote areas admitted to grade one were over the age of six, compared to 29 per cent in urban areas. Meanwhile, preschool and other early education

opportunities remain largely out of reach for most children, especially those outside of urban centres.

Scaling up the Child-Friendly School approach enables Cambodia to adjust traditional teaching methods to more child-centred and child-friendly teaching and learning practices, laying an educational foundation in which children are stimulated and equipped with the necessary critical thinking skills that will influence future potential. Even though good progress has been made, learning by rote, in which children are taught to merely repeat after their teachers without understanding context, still continues to be practiced.

### KEY PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION

UNICEF works closely with the government through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and collaborates with other key partners, including the Swedish International Development Agency, the European Union, the World Bank, UNESCO, and a number of NGO partners such as the NGO Education Partnership, Care and Save the Children.

UNICEF contributes to national coordination efforts through the Education Sector Working Group, currently chaired by UNICEF, and the Technical Working Group on Education, led by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, currently co-facilitated by UNICEF.



### MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

MDG target: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

Cambodia aims to achieve this target by providing compulsory primary education for all children and reducing illiteracy by 2015.



## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Children absorb substantial amounts of information early on in life as they begin developing language and social skills. They are primed and eager to learn between the ages of three and five. Providing early learning and development opportunities during this time is vital to their development and serves as a springboard to academic success, as exposure to learning environments early on implants discipline and stimulates the mind. Children who attend preschool are firmly set on the primary school track, are more likely to progress well and are less likely to drop out.

However, the staggering lack of preschools in Cambodia, especially in rural areas, means that many children are deprived of this critical education jump start. Although good progress has recently been made, in the 2010/2011 school year, less than 26 per cent of children between the ages of three and five had access to early childhood development opportunities, such as community preschools, home-based education programmes and state preschools.

UNICEF's basic education programme helps children realize their right to quality basic education by maximizing a child's early-learning capacity through preschool and home-based education.

## WHAT WE DO

- Support local government efforts to expand community-based preschools for children who do not have access to formal preschools. The programme targets pockets of the country with low admission and high repetition rates in primary school, and aims to improve the chances that children will enrol in primary school at the right age.
- Support the modelling of new approaches to reduce disparities in education, such as bilingual education, preschools and integrating children with disabilities into the preschool system.
- Advocate for policy initiatives that address the holistic development of children, including development of an Early Childhood Development National Action Plan.
- Support home-based programmes, which train parents to create a stimulating environment at home that promotes early learning for their children.
- Support preschool teacher training, which focuses on child-centred and holistic approaches and quality monitoring of early childhood activities.
- Support the development and implementation of a holistic curriculum, including early stimulation of language and motor skills, as well as good hygiene and sanitation practices.

## IMPACT

By the 2009/2010 school year, more children than ever before received a head start to their education through enrolment in 932 community preschool classes that benefited 21,258 children between the ages of three and five, more than half of them girls, and home-based programmes that benefited 8,920 children in eight provinces. Enrolment in early childhood education programmes increased from 10.8 per cent in the 2004/2005 school year to nearly 26 per cent in the 2010/2011 school year.

By 2006, the School Readiness Programme had expanded to cover the grade one curriculum in 12 provinces, with external evaluation demonstrating that children involved in the programme outperform others in the subjects of Khmer and mathematics. Overall, dropout rates and repetition rates also decreased in schools supported by the programme.

UNICEF has also been advocating for a holistic approach to early childhood education, and in February 2010, the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy was adopted by the government. By adopting this policy, Cambodia has demonstrated its strong commitment to establishing a comprehensive early childhood education system.

## EDUCATION FOR ALL THROUGH CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS

Thirty years ago, Cambodia emerged from a brutal regime that resulted in complete destruction of schools. Since then, rebuilding the country's educational system has been a top priority, and considerable improvements have been made. However, despite these efforts, Cambodia's education sector remains blemished by limited access to quality instruction, inadequate school facilities and high dropout rates. Access to and completion of primary school, in particular, remain a pressing dilemma, as poverty and opportunity costs channel many children away from school, with many children as young as 12 years old entering the labour market.

Late enrolment magnifies the problem by decreasing a child's chances of staying in school. Across the country, more than half of 12 to 14 year olds are in primary school and struggle to keep up with their younger peers.

Schools themselves also present barriers to learning. In 2010/2011, an estimated 17 per cent of Cambodia's primary schools did not offer the full six grades. In the schools that do, fewer than half of children enrolled in grade 1 are expected to complete their primary education. Cambodia's quality of education relating to teacher qualifications, effective teaching methods, school management and community involvement reduces incentives for children to stay in school and limits the impacts of learning once they are there. Lack of water and sanitation only heightens these obstacles to education, with 34 per cent of primary schools lacking drinking water and another 21 per cent functioning without toilets.

The Government's Education Strategic Plan aims to expand and improve early childhood education programmes while raising the



quality of education and ensuring girls and ethnic minority and disabled children, in particular, have access to free compulsory basic education. While the government has made great gains in getting more kids in school, challenges remain in keeping them there and ensuring they are actually learning in class.

UNICEF works with government partners to strengthen capacities at the national and sub-national levels to deliver inclusive basic education. We also complement the work of organizations such as Save the Children and Kampuchean Action for Primary Education to improve the quality of education and increase enrolment of children in school.

### CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS

Child-Friendly Schools address persistent challenges in the education system through a holistic approach to child development and learning. The Child-Friendly Schools model in Cambodia promotes the following six core dimensions:

1. All children have access to schooling (schools are inclusive).
2. Effective teaching and learning.
3. Health, safety and protection of children.
4. Gender responsiveness.
5. Children, families and communities participate in running their local school.
6. The National Education System supports and encourages schools to become more child-friendly.





## WHAT WE DO

- Support the government to develop Child-Friendly Schools that prioritize children's well-being and cultivate creativity by fostering inspiring learning environments, achieve gender balance, engage communities and families and ban corporal punishment. The initiative aims to get all school-age children into classrooms, despite their circumstances, and improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- Support community mapping measures led by local government to help identify children who are not in school and work with parents to advocate for enrolment.
- Assist with the development and distribution of appropriate learning materials by child-friendly teachers trained to engage children in lessons and use appropriate language.
- Support the Ministry of Education to adapt and implement the Child-Friendly Schools approach at the lower-secondary level.

## IMPACT

UNICEF supported the piloting of Child-Friendly Schools in six provinces. Integration of this approach in the pre-service teacher training curriculum at all 18 teacher-training colleges as well as training for school directors and teachers on child-centred education has enhanced the quality of learning for children. By the 2007/2008 school year, the Child-Friendly Schools Initiative had already reached its 2010 target of 70 per cent of schools in six provinces, catalysing a national expansion to cover remaining provinces, along with the School Readiness Programme, which is a "catch-up" programme for grade 1 students who missed out on preschool.

Though the expansion and improvement of Child-Friendly Schools, children are getting a better education and making optimal use of their time in class. The Cambodian Government has adopted Child-Friendly Schools as a national education policy, working to ensure that all children across the country receive quality education.

## ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Over the last decade, Cambodia's education sector has been evolving toward a sector-wide approach to accelerate overall reform of the education system. The process began in 2001 with the adoption of the first Education Strategic Plan 2001-2005, the Education Sector Support Programme 2001-2005 and the development of the National Education for All Action Plan in 2003, which outlined a number of goals to achieve education for all Cambodian children by 2015.

The Education Strategic Plan 2006-2010 then set out to achieve these goals through the implementation of three national policies: achieving equitable access to education services, improving the quality and efficiency of education, and strengthening institutional capacity to deliver on education.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has increasingly demonstrated strong leadership and ownership of this approach and, along with education development partners, has demonstrated a strong commitment to increase aid effectiveness to improve the country's education system as a whole. The Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013 has developed under government leadership and without external technical assistance.

Yet, despite making progress towards reform, key challenges remain to ensure long-term sustainability of the education system, built on equity. A continuing challenge is to strengthen institutional capacity in areas such as human resource management and strategic and operational planning. Additionally, further decentralization of education policies and strategies needs to be advanced to ensure they are being effectively implemented at all levels.

UNICEF's work to build capacity for sector-wide reform and decentralization aims to help establish the fundamentals for long-term, sustainable and results-oriented sector-wide education reform by supporting the government to help build the capacity of its staff and institutions.

### WHAT WE DO

- Support the implementation of the Education Strategic Plan 2009-2013.
- Support government capacity building in strategic and operational planning, both at the central and sub-national levels.
- Support the alignment and harmonization of Cambodia's education sector, and enhanced aid effectiveness in education.
- Support policies and strategies in education that advance local governance reform, in accordance with Cambodia's broader sub-national democratic development process.



### IMPACT

Two major mechanisms are now assisting the government to effectively implement Cambodia's sector-wide approach to education: the Joint Technical Working Group on Education, comprising the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and development partners, including those from civil society, and the Education Sector Working Group, which brings together development partners working in education.

One of the most important tasks led by the Joint Technical Working Group is the annual sector performance review, carried out jointly by the government and development partners. This review has been conducted at the regional and national levels since the early 2000s and has been integrated into the Education Congress at the national and sub-national levels since 2006. It is now fully led by the Ministry, a development that reflects progress in strengthening national capacities. Key legal and policy frameworks were also developed in 2009, including a Master Plan for Education for Children with Disabilities and the Early Childhood Care and Development Policy.

## MAINSTREAMING EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN FROM ETHNIC MINORITIES & CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

While Cambodia has improved overall access to basic education, many children who inhabit the fringes of society, either because they come from ethnic minority families or live with disabilities, still struggle to get to and stay in class. In Cambodia, overcoming barriers of language and disability are central to ensuring all children have an equal chance to learn and grow together.

Cambodia has an estimated 20 ethnic groups, the majority of whom live along the country's isolated, mountainous rim in the northeast. Most indigenous families make a living as subsistence farmers. Because many of them practice slash and burn agriculture, they regularly migrate in search of arable land as part of a rotating farming method, living a transient existence that impedes their children's ability to access stable and formal learning environments. Even when ethnic minority children can attend school, language constraints leave them lagging behind. Most of these children do not speak the Khmer language, and teachers, in turn, rarely speak indigenous languages.

Mainstreaming education for children with disabilities is increasingly gaining attention and response by government officials who are working to eliminate education disparities. However, more needs to be done to help move these children from the margins to the mainstream school system. Although the inclusive education training module has been developed and approved by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, few teachers have so far been trained on how to properly respond to the special needs of physically and intellectually disabled children.

## WHAT WE DO

- Advocate for policy initiatives that codify the rights of children from ethnic minorities and children with disabilities to receive an education.
- Support the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to evaluate training needs and develop a framework to mainstream education for children with disabilities.
- Support for a training manual and training of teachers on inclusive education for children with disabilities.
- Support bilingual education programmes for different ethnic minority groups.

## IMPACT

As a result of recent initiatives, children who had been neglected in the school system are now receiving much-needed support through policy measures and ongoing training for teachers and education administrators. Pilot projects in educating ethnic minority children in the country's remote north-eastern provinces and in mainstreaming education for children with disabilities in 18 provinces are beginning to inject equality into Cambodia's education system.

Alongside pilot projects, in 2009 the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport developed the Guidelines on Implementation of Education for Indigenous Children in Highland Provinces, the first formal policy document on bilingual education, and the Policy and Master Plan on Education of Children with Disabilities, which supports inclusion of children with disabilities into the main education system as part of the Child-Friendly Schools approach.





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