



Country-led Evaluation of the National Education Scholarship Programmes of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in Cambodia (2015-2018)

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Evaluation Brief

In recent years, Cambodia has made impressive steps in economic growth, poverty reduction and improvements in educational attainment. As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of children out of school in Cambodia is lower than the average in East Asia and the Pacific (5 per cent at primary and 14 per cent at lower secondary are out of school in Cambodia, compared with 6 per cent and 15 per cent regionally). However, primary completion rates, particularly for boys, are still poor in Cambodia, as only 76 per cent completed primary in 2017-2018. Attainment rates are typically worse for children from poorer rural households. Learning, as measured by standardised tests, also leaves room for improvement, particularly for marginalised households.

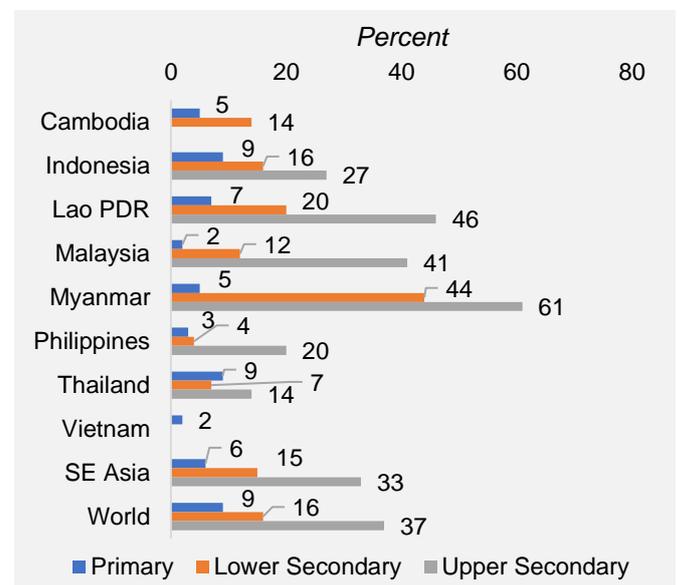
The Royal Government of Cambodia aims to address these persistent poverty and equity challenges. The Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018, and the National Social Protection Strategy 2016-2025 set out plans for this. The scholarship programmes run by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports are key to these plans. The scholarship programmes aim to select children from poor households who are studying at upper primary (grades 4 to 6) or lower secondary (grades 7 to 9) levels, giving each child three payments of US\$20 every year. In order to continue receiving scholarships, students should regularly attend school and have good results.

The idea is that if poor households receive scholarships, then they will spend more on and pay more attention to their children's education. As a

result, children will attend school more regularly, and be better prepared to learn. If these schools are working well, then these students will learn more. This extra learning should help them get a good job, if the economy is working well. This theory of change shows how the scholarships are expected to contribute to better education and reduced poverty in Cambodia.

In 2017-2018, the primary-level scholarships were given to 86,126 students in 4,611 primary schools, 52 per cent of whom were girls. The secondary-level scholarships were given to 71,669 students in 809 lower secondary schools, 60 per cent of whom were girls.

Figure 1: Proportion of children out of school, Southeast Asia

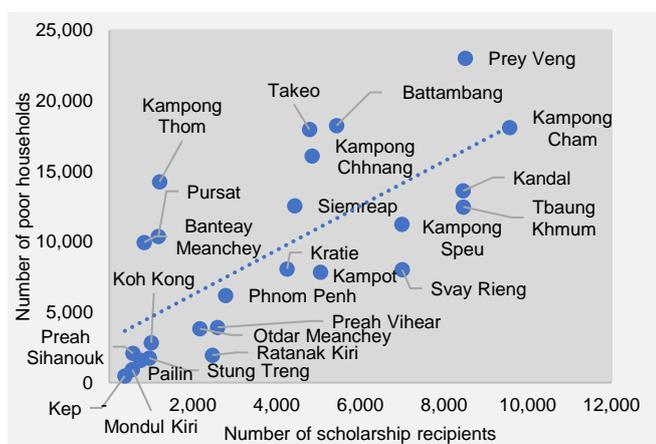


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Main Evaluation Findings

The evaluation concludes that the scholarship programmes are highly **relevant** to the needs of Cambodians and the priorities of the Royal Government of Cambodia and its partners. They are well aligned with existing Government documents and priorities, in particular the Education Strategic Plan 2014-2018 and the National Social Protection Framework 2016-2025. The scholarships are somewhat complementary to other programmes and typically use the IDPoor database to select students. Figure 3 shows a reasonable correlation between the number of poor households in provinces and the number of scholarships.

Figure 3: Primary scholarships and poor households



Assessing the appropriateness of the size of a scholarship is not an exact science. The evaluation compared the size with that of similar programmes in other countries (see Figure 4), and with the costs of education (e.g., uniforms or transport) and what children could earn if not in school (see Figure 5). The team also analysed school-level interview data and other studies. Based on this, the current scholarship size seems to be in the appropriate range, covering between 15 per cent (upper primary) and 9 per cent (lower secondary) of total direct plus opportunity costs of education.

Figure 4: Comparing the scholarships with other countries

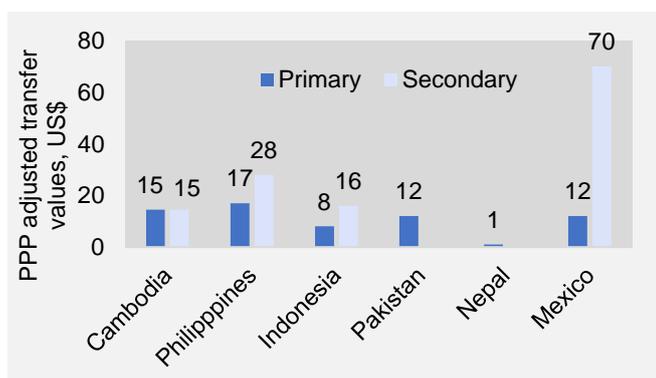
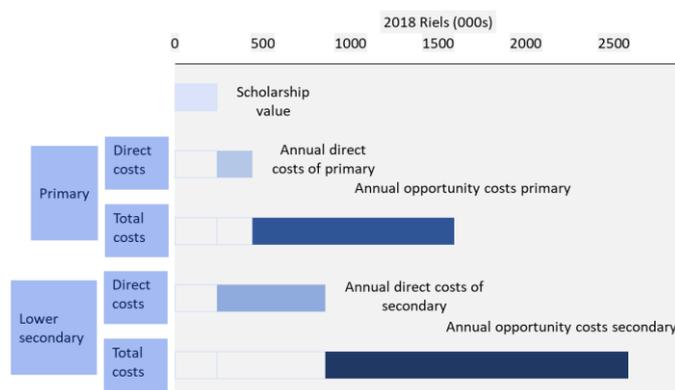


Figure 5: Comparing the scholarships with education costs



The scholarships are currently paid in cash to parents at schools in a public ceremony. This contributes to recipients' motivation in a positive way. Moving to electronic payments would reduce this positive effect.

The scholarships are viewed by recipients as being very **effective**. Recipients are universally very satisfied with the scholarships. There is clear evidence from different sources that the scholarships contribute to children staying in school longer and being more motivated. As one grade 8 boy from Stung Treng put it, "I have the power to continue my study."

However, the evaluation did not find evidence that the scholarships contribute to improved results of scholarship students – because the scholarships alone are insufficient to overcome all the barriers to learning. In addition, the scholarships have not been able to overcome major barriers to regular attendance such as a family crisis or a very uninterested student.

Telling recipients that they needed to attend regularly to receive the scholarships helped reinforce the effectiveness of the scholarships. The requirement to get good results was rarely enforced, and in the view of the evaluation team enforcing this condition would not help achieve the objectives of the scholarships because it would penalise struggling students.

Scholarships are allocated to provinces and districts on the basis of poverty, as Figure 3 illustrates. This excludes poor households who live in districts with low poverty rates. There is substantial variation in how students are selected. Although all recipients are supposed to have IDPoor cards, in most schools the evaluation team met recipients without IDPoor cards. School directors and teachers usually used their discretion to select recipients, which presents a risk particularly in secondary schools where teachers know less about their students' backgrounds.

The **efficiency** of the scholarship programmes could be improved. Transfers have not to date been made at the start of the school year. This means that recipients cannot purchase school inputs when they need them most, and also that students do not get the psychological boost of receiving the scholarships as early as they could.

The transfers are late for two main reasons. The first problem is that the budget allocation from the Ministry of Economy and Finance was in the first quarter of the fiscal year, starting in January, meaning monies were not available to Provincial Treasuries before February for the school year starting the previous November. This problem has now been solved by an agreement between the ministries that the scholarships will receive a budget allocation in the last quarter of the previous financial year. The second problem is the time it takes for schools to identify recipient students at the start of the school year, and then communicate this to districts and provinces. This problem is not yet solved, and will likely mean that the first payments will be made in January at the earliest.

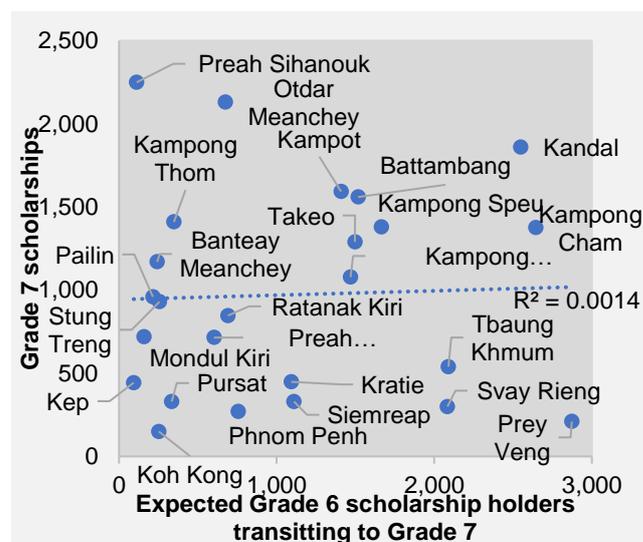
A last finding on efficiency is that there is no budget allocation for travel for school officials either for monitoring or selection. This reduces the impact of the scholarships in three main ways. First, officials cannot follow up easily on students who do not come to school and so do not know how to help them. Second, the Ministry has limited data on scholarship students from which to learn and improve and communicate success. Third, teachers cannot check the appropriateness of targeting by visiting students' homes. This is a big problem especially for secondary students who live further away from school.

Looking at **impact**, there is clear evidence that scholarships were spent – typically by mothers or grandmothers – on educational material or expenses, or food. The overall evidence suggests that the scholarships had substantial positive impacts. However, there were some negative

impacts on non-recipients who were envious and in some cases demoralised by not being selected. These negative impacts were exacerbated when schools emphasised the difference between recipients and non-recipients.

The scholarships have not been able to support transition from upper primary to lower secondary, because these programmes are poorly coordinated. This is illustrated simply by Figure 6, which shows no relationship between the number of Grade 6 scholarships and the number of Grade 7 scholarships available in any province. Figure 7 summarises findings on effectiveness and impact.

Figure 6: Grade 6 and 7 scholarships



Overall, **sustainability** is strong, with high levels of ownership by the government, and the use of Cambodian financial and human resources to run the programmes. Scaling up would require additional resources and capacity, and the development of some new procedures to ensure coherence across primary and secondary.

Regarding **equity**, the Ministry has only very limited data on scholarships disaggregated by gender. There is no centralised place for data on primary and secondary scholarships.

Figure 7: Effectiveness and impact results, based on intended outputs, outcomes and impacts of the scholarship programmes



Key Conclusions

Overall: The scholarship programmes are working well, improving attainment, and are rightly a source of pride for ministry officials, school-level officials and rights holders who receive scholarships. There are, however, various areas where the design and implementation of the scholarships can be improved, including around timeliness, consistent implementation (especially in targeting) and monitoring and feedback. The scholarships pay attention to equity in selection and administration, but there is limited equity monitoring (or monitoring in general).

Objectives: Children are kept in school, enabled by broadly effective implementation and a culture that is supportive of education. However, scholarships have been less effective in supporting transition from primary to secondary, and still some do not attend school regularly despite the existence of the scholarships.

Barriers to effectiveness: Limited coordination between primary and secondary scholarships, late payments, high opportunity costs of education, particularly at secondary, and the difficulty of adding students who drop out of school after an income shock to their household.

Bottlenecks: A long selection and then payment process; and poor collection and management of information on scholarships, especially student-specific information.

Strengths: Widespread support they receive across Cambodia. Aside from some directors of small schools who felt that implementing the scholarships was a burden, respondents were enthusiastic about and felt a strong sense of ownership of the scholarships. The core processes work: students from poor households are identified and paid US\$ 60/year, and this helps them remain in school and encourages them to study hard.

Weaknesses: Late payments, poor coordination between primary and secondary scholarships, imperfections in targeting, and weak monitoring, feedback and communication processes.

Ambiguous: The flexibility given to school level duty bearers, especially directors. Where these individuals are committed, altruistic and well informed, this flexibility is a strength. Where they are not, it is a weakness. Good practices and innovations could be spread across the programme, though this is not straightforward.

Lessons Learned

There are some interesting lessons from the evaluation that are relevant to other programmes elsewhere:

Relevance: Cambodian parents and students have high aspirations and expectations of the role of education in helping find better jobs. These expectations will be challenging to meet without good quality schools and available jobs. However, they provide an excellent basis for designing and delivering education related programmes.

Effectiveness: Scholarships are effective in reinforcing these positive perceptions of education. However, they are very unlikely to entirely address problems of dropout, even if they made very large payments. Students will continue to drop out as families migrate, or have health problems or other challenges. There are limits to the effectiveness of the scholarship programmes in the context of continued poverty, migration, and issues with school quality. This is in line with the out of school children studies in Cambodia and elsewhere.

Efficiency: The scholarship programme has many forms in different schools, which is both a source of strength and weakness for the programme. In practice, this means that the efficiency of implementation – and subsequent effectiveness, impact and equity – is quite heavily determined by local level duty bearers. This is very common in many programmes and to service delivery, especially in education, where ‘frontline worker discretion’ is essential (to e.g., good teaching). This works very well where teachers and directors are both knowledgeable and caring, and poorly where they are not. It puts a high premium, therefore, on effective monitoring, training, support and communication. The scholarship programme underinvests in these areas and this is inefficient.

Sustainability: Rights holders and duty bearers emphasised the importance of equity and indeed equality throughout. This is common in many countries, especially in rural settings. This has implications for expansion, targeting and setting transfer size – in general that rights holders and local level duty bearers would prefer that more people get smaller transfers than fewer people get larger transfers.

Equity: The absence of child-specific information in Cambodia (e.g., not having child-specific information in management information systems) hampers the effectiveness of the scholarships, as it does other aspects of education service delivery.

Recommendations

The most important recommendation is that the scholarships programmes should be continued and improved.

Further recommendations are grouped by overarching theme, below:

1. **Timely payments:** Some important steps have been taken to improve timeliness. However, the Ministry of Education should pay further attention to this issue. In particular they should shorten the processes by which i) schools select students and communicate this list to districts and provinces, and ii) Provincial Offices of Education requisition transfers from the Provincial Treasuries. In this way, the first payments should be made in the first half of January each year, starting in 2020.



2. **Consistency:** The Ministry of Education should as soon as possible develop a detailed manual for school-level duty bearers covering all areas of activity and make some plans to provide training to key duty bearers before November 2019. In addition, they should communicate through Provincial and District Offices of Education that schools should not label scholarship students in class and should downplay within classrooms the fact that some students receive a scholarship.



3. **Targeting:** The Ministry of Education should as soon as possible develop and implement a more consistent basis for the allocation of scholarships to provinces, districts and schools across primary and secondary scholarships. This should include allocating both primary and secondary scholarships to districts on the (same) basis of poverty or education indicators. Districts should then allocate scholarships to schools on the basis of poverty, education indicators (such as dropout) and the



relationship between primary and secondary schools, to ensure transition (see recommendation 5). The Ministry of Education should provide clear guidelines for schools to select students on the basis of poverty (including IDPoor) and attendance and provide budget for school-level officials to visit households to verify their poverty status. Gender-based quotas should be removed.

4. **Monitoring and learning:** The Ministry of Education should develop a costed monitoring and learning strategy for the scholarship programmes, for financing by the Ministry of Finance in 2020-2021. The Ministry of Education should from 2020 invest in communications around rights and entitlements, feedback systems, and the use of these data, so that rights holders know their rights and can complain if these are not met, and duty bearers respond to these complaints. Both Ministries should agree to increase funding to monitoring students.



5. **Coordination:** The Ministry of Education should include in the revised scholarship framework in 2019 a commitment to develop a strategy for how the scholarship programmes can support improved student transition between grades 6 and 7. A long-term transition strategy will require unique student identification, in which the Ministry of Education should invest. Short-term, the Ministry of Education should pilot and assess an approach to improving transition within a district.



6. **Conditions:** The Ministry of Education should in 2019 remove the requirement that scholarship recipients achieve good results. The condition of regular attendance should be kept, but teachers should continue to implement this sensitively and support students who are struggling with attendance for good reason.



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For the complete report, please visit <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia>.