ADOLESCENT-LED REVIEW OF THE MAGIC CLASSROOM PROJECT AND COMMUNITY PRESCHOOL PLAYGROUNDS IN CAMBODIA

BACKGROUND

In Cambodia, children still face many challenges in the early stages of life due to risks that stem from a lack of early childhood education as well as from health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene issues. Two

Figure 1: Programmes involved

UNICEF-supported activities that address these difficulties are the Magic Classroom Project and the Community Preschool Playgrounds. Magic Classroom, in partnership with the NGO Sipar, provides educational sessions on health and nutrition as well as on water, sanitation and hygiene, including hand washing with soap, safe drinking water and proper use of latrines, among others. The playgrounds are built to provide local children with the benefit of play and accompanying brain development in an environment that is free of health hazards, like animal waste.
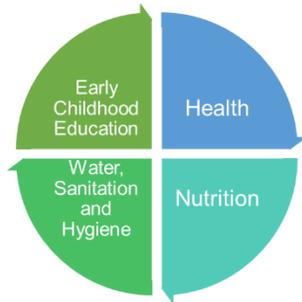
REVIEW PURPOSE AND USE

The purpose of this formative, internal review was three-fold: 1) to look at the Magic Classroom and playground activities to see if they are meeting their intended goals and objectives; 2) to document lessons learned and good practices for engaging adolescent participation in an evaluation activity; and 3) to encourage the full participation of local youth in the activities from which they are meant to benefit. The review will be used to inform future programming and to provide a basis on which to build future child, adolescent and youth participation.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This review utilized adolescent-led evaluation as an approach. Thus, an enabling adult team from UNICEF Cambodia prepared the plan, tools and rubrics and then engaged cohorts of four adolescents aged 15 to 19 in each of the three target provinces: Kratie, Ratanakiri and Phnom Penh.

Next, the cohorts carried out the data collection and analysis, with continuous support from the enabling adult team, as needed. After receiving training on evaluation concepts and how to conduct data collection, the adolescent evaluators and enabling adult team travelled to nearby villages to perform interviews and focus group discussions. After data collection was completed, the adolescent evaluators reviewed the data and provided analysis and recommendations. Finally, after each cohort completed the work in their province, the enabling adult team synthesized the findings and recommendations into a comprehensive report to reflect the activities in all three provinces. This review also includes analysis and recommendations for engaging adolescent participants in future evaluations.
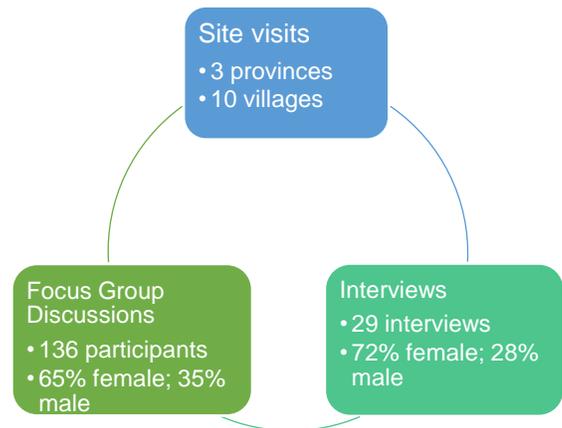

Figure 2: Data collection

FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

For Magic Classroom, this review found that, in the communities visited, **there was a clear need for health, nutrition and water, sanitation and hygiene interventions given that each village had many locations that respondents identified as sources of health concerns**. Also, while there is clear evidence of increased awareness and behaviour change, in some cases it was **difficult to implement lessons because of a lack of access to materials** like soap and latrines. Integrated approaches through partnerships could work to

bridge the mismatch between knowledge and access. The **sessions were engaging for participants in attendance, but there were always those who were unable to join** due to distance, poor road conditions or other conflicts. Additionally, it was identified that **women and girls are taking on more of the burden** for implementing these new practices. Therefore, future programming should make sure information is not being understood or internalized as the responsibility of one group.

With the playgrounds, all respondents reported that the **playgrounds had a positive impact on their children**, making them more likely to attend school, improving their physical strength, providing opportunities to socialize and more. However, **if the local community is not committed to maintaining the playground, they will quickly fall into disrepair** posing safety concerns, or they will be abandoned. Also, the review showed that the location of the playground is important. Too much sun or distance from the village can lead to reduced use of the playground. Finally, **the playgrounds did not include any measures that make them more accessible to children with severe physical disabilities, and different pieces of equipment often became gendered**.

Finally, for the adolescent-led evaluation approach, the review discovered **that adolescents make highly effective evaluators, but it takes time to fully train them.** Also, adolescent evaluators are more familiar with the community environment, and in some cases indigenous languages, which allows **for different perspectives that can bolster the validity** of a review or other evaluation activity. **Adolescents can learn new soft and hard skills which can be empowering and improve access to education or jobs in the future**.
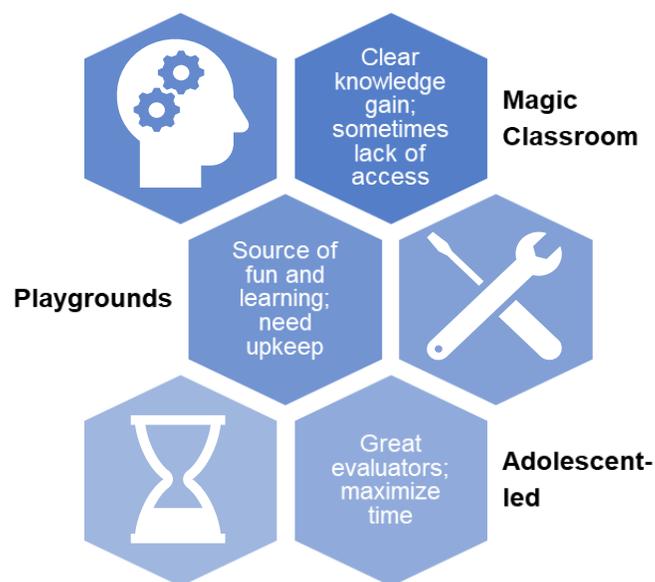

Figure 3: Key Findings

RECOMMENDATIONS

Magic Classroom

- Use an integrated approach to health, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene by collaborating with other organizations or private companies;
- Create and distribute posters or pamphlets to entire communities; and
- Ensure that Magic Classroom videos and materials promote and encourage gender equity, especially regarding the how participants internalize the lessons and behaviours.

Community Preschool Playgrounds

- Create a checklist of prerequisites for playground sites to ensure they are located somewhere where they can be well utilized and maintained;
- Ensure that the community has the resources to maintain the playgrounds or that an alternative monitoring mechanism is in place; and
- Invest in new technologies and playground styles to ensure animals do not enter the playground.

Adolescent-Led Approach

- Continue to include adolescents and young people as important participants in UNICEF programming;
- Create plans and materials that are easily adaptable for slight differences in age or confidence levels; and
- Expand on existing tools and guides in the local language.