UNICEF’s Upstream Work in Basic Education and Gender Equality (2003-2012) – Cambodia Country Case Study

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

This study outlines the upstream work carried out towards the advancement of basic education and gender equality in UNICEF Cambodia, as part of a global evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation was to examine UNICEF’s upstream work in education between 2003 and 2012 and assess the extent to which UNICEF has engaged strategically in education sector policy articulation and advocacy. The evaluation was also tasked with determining the extent to which upstream engagement efforts translate into desired transformations in education sector policy and practice, and national system strengthening.

MAIN FINDINGS

The evaluation found that there was a definite, yet gradual, shift towards upstream work within UNICEF Cambodia in the ten-year period (2003-2012). UNICEF took a lead position in donor coordination within the education sector, influenced national level education policies and legislative frameworks, and had its best-practice pilots – Bilingual Education and Early Childhood Education – accepted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) for nationwide replication. In addition, UNICEF made an identifiable contribution to building the capacity of MoEYS for education management.

CHALLENGES TO UPSTREAM WORK IN EDUCATION

There are, however, a number of challenges to upstream work in education in terms of sustainability. First, the fact that UNICEF’s upstream work has not resulted into commitments for increased education funding from the government. To enhance the impact of upstream work, UNICEF Cambodia thus needs to ensure that the government makes financial commitments. Second, while the Capacity Development Partnership Fund (CDPF) attempts to avoid weaknesses of earlier capacity development initiatives, it remains a donor-managed rather than government-managed initiative. UNICEF needs therefore to ensure that the capacity development work undertaken under the CDPF leads to more system-level change. Finally, a lack of relevant methodological tools to monitor and evaluate the impact of upstream work in education was also identified, as well as the missed opportunity in UNICEF Cambodia to foster organizational learning such that successes realized in education upstream work can be translated across other sectors.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following lessons learned draw on findings from the study and aim at providing recommendations for upstream work in education and other sectors.

- CONTEXT AND HISTORY
  The context and history of UNICEF presence in Cambodia has bearing on its ability to carry out upstream work effectively.

- HUMAN FACTOR
  Having competent senior education advisors, who have the technical skills as well as the capacity to develop effective lobbying strategies, is critical for undertaking effective upstream work.

- INVESTING IN STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS
Developing good partnerships with NGOs with good ideas and technical capacity has been important in building strategic pilots on the ground, improving UNICEF’s capacity to lobby the government. UNICEF should be increasingly in a position to confident lobbying for innovative models with solid evidence and documentation on the effectiveness of the models.

- **HAVING A FIELD PRESENCE**
  Having a prominent presence in the field has been important for successfully lobbying the government to adopt national-level policies around issues of concern.

- **MOVING FROM QUICK WINS TO LONG-TERM SOLUTIONS**
  Having the ability to disburse aid is important to winning the buy-in of the government. In the short term, this can make upstream work more effective as the government can adopt policies or models in the hope of ensuring continued aid flows. However, effective upstream work by definition implies long-term sustainability of the interventions through national resource allocations. Thus, there are different gradations of impact of upstream work and having policies adopted is just the beginning, not the end, of upstream work.

- **POLICY GUIDELINES ARE GOOD, BUT NOT ENOUGH**
  The adoption of policy guidelines at national level is a good sign of initial success of upstream work, but it does not mean that it makes the intervention sustainable. At times, governments can find it easier to issue policies to appease donors as long as this helps secure continued aid flows. In Cambodia, this is potentially a high risk as the government has adopted many of the policies proposed by UNICEF and other donors, but the financial commitment is lacking, as has been documented in the cases of Bilingual Education and Early Childhood Education. Sustainability of upstream work in these areas is thus even more challenging and the implications of this need to be considered carefully when setting priorities for upstream work as otherwise it can lead to wasted resources.

- **MEASURING IMPACT REQUIRES BETTER TOOLS**
  Measuring impact of upstream work in education is complicated and better tools need to be prepared to measure effectiveness of upstream work more systematically.

**RECOMMENDATIONS ON POTENTIAL AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The recommendations below focus on enhancing the upstream impact in future.

- Minimize the use of financial incentives for undertaking upstream work.
- Develop a clear plan for shifting management of the CDPF to the government.
- Develop better tools to measure impact of upstream work.
- Facilitate cross-sector learning on upstream work.
- Undertake a cost-benefit analysis of UNICEF leadership of the donor coordination platforms for advancing upstream work.

For more information, visit:
http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/index_74802.html