Evaluation of Community Preschool Modality in Cambodia

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

This independent evaluation sought to assess the contribution of community preschool (CPS) to early childhood development in Cambodia. The evaluation was commissioned by UNICEF Cambodia, in conjunction with MOI and MOEYS in April 2015. The CPS model is at a critical juncture and the purpose of this evaluation was to provide evidence that will help both the Government of Cambodia and UNICEF refocus, redevelop and improve the CPS experience and inform UNICEF’s 2016–2018 Country Programme’s support strategies for early childhood development (ECD).

MAIN FINDINGS

Relevance: The evaluation found considerable evidence that most CPSs address the needs of children aged 3 to 5 in terms of access and enrolment to quality early childhood education (ECE). CPSs are also relevant to the needs of the most disadvantaged, worst off children through the establishment of schools in areas in which state schools are not providing preschool education. In 60 per cent of the CPSs, commune council and CCWC representatives, as well as teachers, try to encourage parents to enrol and send their children to preschool under all circumstances (e.g., children with disabilities or those in poor conditions).

However, significant gaps still exist in providing access to ECE. Although centrally located CPSs enable easy access, which allow children to go to school on foot, access is severely hampered for children living one to three kilometres from the school. Similarly, commune councils have difficulty detecting children with disability that drop out or have never gone to preschool. When children with disability do access education, those with greater physical disabilities, such as inability to walk, do not receive an education adapted to their needs. Teachers are not trained to deal with children with disability, but in most cases try innovative ways to include these children so that they may benefit from an education.

UNICEF has developed long-standing support to communes to help deliver social services. It has also strongly supported a holistic approach to ECE, according to most CPS teachers and commune councils. However, CPSs are not yet an entry point for inter-sectoral early childhood care and development (ECCD) services (including education, health, hygiene and nutrition) as teachers are not sufficiently trained in these areas.

Effectiveness: Evidence from focus group discussions as well as class observations suggests a clear correlation between the quality of the premises, the teaching material, the teachers’ motivation and parental recognition of the value of CPS. Many CPS settings are of poor quality and teaching material is underutilized. Evidence suggests that most teachers have a basic understanding of child-centred and active learning pedagogies despite vast disparities among communes. However, most teachers operate in isolation and their motivation to make the school welcoming to children depends much on the involvement of the commune council and CCWC members and parents, which is often minimal.

When teachers are motivated and when they received in- and pre-service training, the results on school achievements are better: children attending CPS show a good level of school readiness and transition to primary school.

Efficiency: As far as efficiency is concerned, the evaluation indicates that UNICEF has provided support to teachers who highly value the quality
of training and teaching materials. However, most teachers lack the appropriate knowledge and skills to enforce the ECCD concept, which is relatively new to them. POEs and DOEs provide minimal help as they lack of time and do not regularly supervise the CPS teachers. Despite wide dissemination of guides for teachers and teaching material, most teachers operate in isolation and rarely share practices or ask for help.

**Sustainability:** The recognition of CPSs as a regular model for ECCD is a major factor to ensure sustainability. Despite UNICEF support, the issue of funding ECCD and CPS, the unstable context of D&D, the sharing of responsibilities between MOI and MOEYS, as well as the low level of parental engagement in CPS, threaten the sustainability of the CPS modality. In case of UNICEF’s withdrawal, many commune councils would be unable to operate the CPS as they still need extra funding and technical assistance to deliver such social services.

**Impacts:** The evaluation found little evidence on impacts of CPS on children. The most robust evidence collected shows that overall children progressed on educational and social skills. The absence of children’s performance tests prevents Cambodian authorities and UNICEF from having a more precise and reliable picture of the impact of UNICEF support and country engagement in ECCD and CPS in particular.

**CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

The structure of the CPS modality is adequate and complete in its design as it responds to children’s needs. It is also in line with the national framework in place. The communes are now strongly aware and supportive of ECCD, which was not the case in earlier years. Although results in terms of policy structure and specific tangible outcomes, such as training guides and curricula, have been achieved, implementation on the ground remains hampered. There is no particular incentive nor regular monitoring provided that would make CPSs more operational. This leads to questioning the sustainability of a model that is essentially relying on the communes to function. While ‘upstream work’ may be functional in many instances (i.e., at ministerial level), it lacks the necessary support and much-needed motivation from the ‘midstream’ level (i.e., POEs/DOEs and communes that manage the CPS).

**RECOMMENDATIONS ON POTENTIAL AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

A number of recommendations emerged from the evaluation for different stakeholders. These relate to the integration of the CPS modality into a wider reflection on the effectiveness of UNICEF support to make change happen on the ground and improve the quality of ECE for all children in Cambodia, irrespective of their socio-economic conditions and location.

Recommendations are organized around three overarching tracks of improvement. These are:

- **Involve high-level authorities** to strengthen implementation of the ECCD National Action Plan, embedding cross-sectoral programming and developing a sustainable services and funding model for ECD;
- **Monitor and support commune councils** in the process of implementing the D&D reforms and assist UNICEF in better targeting its interventions;
- **Explore field intervention and pilot-effective CPS** in the most disadvantaged areas by refocusing on a limited number of CPSs, thus better reaching the most vulnerable children, including children with disability, along with UNICEF’s mandate.

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