In Cambodia, early childhood education (ECE) is offered through 211 public preschools, pre-school classes available in 55 per cent or 4,071 of the country’s 7,304 primary schools, as well as through community-based programmes. The latter evolved from what had been early childhood care centres started by UNICEF in the 1990s. The model has proven popular, and the network of community-based preschools has grown nearly fourfold from 780 in 2006 to almost 3,100 in 2022.

UNICEF has been the main supporter of these community-based preschools from their founding; to the development of governing quality standards, teacher training, and parental education; and through to the Government’s efforts to endorse them against quality standards. To date, approximately 1,250 community-based preschools have been endorsed, which, in turn, enables educators in those preschools to qualify for additional monthly incentives paid by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

The country has made important strides in improving both the access to and the quality of ECE services. According to the application submitted by UNICEF to the Global Partnership for Education for the Variable Tranche of the Education Sector Plan Implementation Grant (2018-2021), dated 13 February 2018, the “expansion of preschool classrooms and the growth of community preschools, which is a major initiative of the Second Education Sector Programme (GPEI), allowed enrolment in pre-primary to grow by 143 per cent since 2007/08.”

Results-based financing is being considered to support the ECE sector. Cambodia has implemented results-based financing in basic education with good results. UNICEF is the grant agent of the US $6.2 million distributed under the Variable Tranche of the GPE implementation grant. Funding for the activities is advanced through a pooled fund of education sector partners, called the Capacity Development Partnership Fund. Once the agreed-upon targets have been met and verified by an independent third party, monies under the results-based Variable Tranche are released to this pooled fund.
However, demand continues to outstrip supply: only around one-third of Cambodia’s nearly one million 3- to 5-year-olds are enrolled in ECE. Two of the major constraints are: 1) having only one preschool teacher training college that graduates 200 preschool teachers per year and 2) mismatches or gaps in teacher training; for example, those children in preschool classes housed in primary schools are taught by primary teachers rather than those with a specific pre-primary training.

Additional teacher training is also an important aspect of UNICEF’s ongoing efforts to help the country’s community-based preschools meet the ministry standards. Greater training and government incentives for educators working in community-based preschools are seen as key to ensuring greater sustainability within the ECE subsector.

RESULTS
In the 2020/21 school year, Cambodia achieved the following results in its ECE programme, to which UNICEF contributed:

- approximately 327,000 children aged 3 to 5 years of age (165,000 girls) were enrolled in ECE programmes;
- an estimated 68,000 (35,000 girls) of the 327,000 children enrolled in ECE programmes are served by the community-based preschools supported by UNICEF and other education partners; and
- approximately 27,500 children attend the 1,250 community-based preschools endorsed as meeting quality standards.

LESSONS LEARNED
- **Results-based financing is starting to shift the focus away from activities and inputs.** Cambodia’s experience with the GPE’s Variable Tranche has supported a shift towards results-based planning and budgeting and sharpened the focus on achieving sector or sub-sector wide outcomes identified in the education sector plan.

- **Careful, consensual setting of indicators and targets is key.** The targets must be challenging enough to foster meaningful change but still be feasible for the Government. To date, Cambodia has met five targets but missed one — the outcome indicator on the reduction of the repetition rate in Grade 1 in 26 districts within a two-year period: it was simply too ambitious. Two targets are still pending.

- **Strike the balance between transaction costs and expected benefits.** Development and implementation of a results-based financing programme may involve higher transaction costs, which need to be commensurate with the expected benefits that can be delivered within the applicable time frame.

- **Third-party verification is a critical element of the results-based financing framework.** The third-party verification of results in Cambodia worked relatively smoothly, although there had been some back and forth on data requests involving the multiple ministries and the various levels at which they work. The education partners concluded that the quarterly technical working group meeting chaired by the Minister was an important mechanism in resolving any issues and ensuring smoother coordination. If any disputes over results had been raised, this would have been the forum for resolution.

NEXT STEPS
UNICEF and other partners will continue to support the sustainable scale up of ECE through collaboration with the Government. UNICEF will support, in phases, the improvement of the remaining 1,850 community-based preschools against national quality standards through ongoing systems strengthening work as well, as a programme using a results-based funding. This is expected to reach an additional 37,000 early learners (18,500 girls).

Cost effectiveness: In Cambodia, UNICEF invested an estimated monthly cost of US $9.5 per child in community-based preschool, which enabled a partner to provide standards, in-service training to teachers on the approved curriculum for the community-based preschools, and the provision of basic supplies, with the Government handling the costs of teacher incentives.

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