

Book review: Education in Cambodia: From Year Zero towards international standards (Education in the Asia-Pacific region: Issues, concerns and prospects, book 64)

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1. Introduction

Today, Cambodia's education system stands at a crossroads as it grapples with the tasks of improving quality and ensuring equitable access across the board. The reason is mainly that the nation is still getting over the Khmer Rouge era (1975–1979), which destroyed the educational system and claimed the lives of almost two million people, including 75% of teachers, 96% of college students, and 67% of all students enrolled in primary and secondary schools (Benveniste et al., 2008). While there has been notable progress in rebuilding schools, modernizing curricula, reforming policies, and expanding educational opportunities in all subsectors, the journey is far from complete. The current book provides a careful look at the issues at hand. This book, entitled ‘Education in Cambodia: From Year Zero Towards International Standards’, is truly a remarkable journey of Cambodia's education system. Edited by Vincent McNamara and Martin Hayden, it aims to inform readers of how the country has moved from the shadows of the Khmer Rouge era to the current efforts to match international educational standards. It nicely blends historical context and current endeavors with a vision for the future.

In a sense, this book is like a mini-library of research evidence and insights into issues in Cambodia's education subsectors, policy changes, and the inclusion of marginalized communities, such as women and multilingual. It comprehensively captures both the strides made and the challenges that persist. This makes it an invaluable read for anyone interested in the educational progress of Cambodia. In this book review, we will provide summaries of each chapter and discuss the key themes, structure, evaluation, and contributions of this book.

2. Summary of the book

The book is divided into three parts, comprising 16 chapters in total. Part 1 covers from early childhood through higher education by tracing both advancements and hurdles in each chapter. Part 2 focuses on the infrastructural elements. It tackles key topics like the evolving teaching profession, education assessments, policy-driven budgeting, and transformative university reforms. Part 3 delves into the modern principles of education. It stresses the importance of inclusivity by highlighting the roles of women and the importance of multilingual education. Notably, the chapters are written by a mix of local Cambodian scholars and international experts. Many of these contributors have firsthand experience in the Cambodian education sector.

In Chapter 1, McNamara and Hayden (2022) provided an overview of Cambodia's education system and introduced the other chapters in the book. It starts with a brief historical account of the country's setting and the impact of "Year Zero." The regulatory context of Cambodia's education system is also outlined, followed by a summary of critical challenges faced by the system, such as educational quality, grade-level repetition, disparities between rural and urban schools, and leadership and management issues. The authors also drew attention to the need to shift focus from improving access to attaining equity and quality while acknowledging the significant effort and funding required for such a transformation.

In Chapter 2, Om (2022) investigated early childhood education (ECE) in Cambodia to address its current challenges and development trends. The study found that while there has been steady growth in ECE enrollment, there are obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of qualified teachers, and insufficient funding. The chapter also highlighted the critical importance of ECE for children's development and future academic success. It boldly advocated "An official agreement among all key stakeholders to designate specialized departments within MoEYS to manage all types of public ECE programs responsibly and effectively (p. 22), as a comprehensive policy measure and increased investment to improve access and quality while also recommending ongoing efforts to establish quality standards and develop a more robust ECE framework to establish a solid foundation for Cambodia's early-age learners.

Chapter 3 by No and Sok (2022) examined the state of primary education in Cambodia with an emphasis on the quest for quality. The study reported that while significant strides have been made in increasing enrollment rates and improving infrastructure, some challenges in educational quality persist. Issues such as inadequate teacher training, insufficient teaching materials, and large class sizes hinder effective learning. They said, "While social demand for quality primary education increases, the budget available for the public primary schools is declining." (p. 51). The chapter, therefore, appeals to the need for comprehensive reforms to focus on teacher professional development, curriculum enhancement, and better resource allocation to address the quality of primary education. Despite these struggles, the chapter

acknowledged the roles of ministerial and educational partners' support and the importance of sustained efforts to ensure all Cambodian children receive a high-quality primary education.

In Chapter 4, Bredenberg (2022) addressed the progress made in reforming secondary education in Cambodia. This chapter stressed that there have been two major reform cycles since 2000, each targeting different aspects of the education system. The first cycle focused on expanding access to secondary education, while the second one aimed at improving educational quality and school governance. The article stressed, "For the first time, current educational reforms are moving beyond access concerns to focus on educational quality and governance" (p. 77), which indicates the shift in Cambodia's educational reforms, now prioritizing both improving the quality of education and strengthening governance in schools. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain, including disparities in access and quality between urban and rural schools, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient resources. The chapter called for sustained leadership and strategic policy implementation to continue advancing secondary education reform in Cambodia.

In Chapter 5, Daroesman (2022) studied the reforms in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in Cambodia from 1970 to 2020. Key findings revealed that while there have been numerous initiatives to revitalize TVET, the sector has struggled with issues of quality, relevance, and funding. Evidently, "The government has experienced ongoing difficulty in providing a stable and adequate funding base for skills development." (p. 91) Historically, TVET has been underfunded and undervalued, leading to a mismatch between training programs and labor market needs. Recent reforms have aimed to improve infrastructure, curriculum, and teacher training, but challenges persist in ensuring that TVET graduates possess the skills demanded by employers. The chapter stressed the importance of continued investment and policy support to enhance the effectiveness of TVET and its role in Cambodia's economic development.

Sen's (2022) Chapter 6 examined how traditional cultural values constrain its development in higher education. The study highlighted that traditional hierarchical structures and social norms can influence higher education institutions and affect governance, quality assurance, and academic freedom. These cultural factors often led to centralized decision-making processes and limited autonomy for universities. The chapter also identified the need for reforms to align higher education with international standards, including the adoption of more transparent and participatory governance models, enhancement of quality assurance mechanisms, and promotion of academic independence. "As a way forward, what might be pursued is a critical examination of any cultural elements that have significant negative bearings on the development of the higher education sector and its reforms." (p. 109).

In Chapter 7, Sot et al. (2022) focused on the teaching profession in Cambodia over the past three decades and identified ongoing needs for reform. The study indicated that, although there have been notable improvements, such as enhanced teacher qualifications and better working conditions, substantial challenges remain. Many teachers still lack adequate training and resources, leading to suboptimal teaching performance. The chapter appealed to the necessity for continuous professional development, improved teacher compensation, and better working conditions to attract and retain qualified teachers. It further emphasized the importance of professional standards and evaluation to ensure effective teaching and improved student outcomes. Therefore, "The focus must be on how to make improvements for the sake of bringing about a better situation in the future." (p. 131).

Chapter 8 by Marshall and Ung (2022) was an analytical walkthrough of Cambodia's decade-long national assessment system. The key findings revealed that while there has been some progress in student achievement levels, significant challenges remain. The data indicated that student achievement is not at the expected levels, particularly in third grade, where many students are not acquiring the basic skills necessary for success in later grades. There are also substantial achievement gaps based on gender, location (e.g., urban vs. rural), and socioeconomic status (SES), with students from urban areas and higher SES backgrounds generally performing better. Despite these challenges, there are signs of improvement, particularly in Khmer and mathematics scores for third graders over the assessment period. However, the chapter emphasized the need for continued efforts to address these disparities and improve overall education quality in Cambodia. As stated in this chapter, "There is still room to improve this function, both at a technical level (such as the use of proficiency scales rather than percentage correct) and in terms of institutionalization." (p. 153).

In Chapter 9, Jones and Nagel (2022) explored the critical role of school principals in the Cambodian education system. The study emphasized the importance of leadership qualities such as transparency, strong leadership, and gaining staff cooperation, which are seen as essential in motivating teachers and improving educational outcomes. Seemingly, "There is a growing recognition of the importance of school leadership and management in Cambodian schools, not only in schools but also at the level of senior management within MoEYS." (p. 170). Despite progress, the study also identified significant challenges, including limited resources, resistance to change, and a lack of qualified leaders. It called for a more structured and merit-based approach to selecting and training school principals, which implied that professional standards and continuous development are necessary for fostering effective school leadership.

In Chapter 10, Pearson (2022) explored multifaceted capacity development in Cambodia's education sector. "Learning drawn from the discourse about global capacity development can be used as a guide to exploring challenges to achieving sustainable capacity within the Cambodian education sector." (P. 175). The integration of cultural beliefs and their influence on educational practices was highlighted, with the incorporation of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Edgar Schein's organizational culture model lending depth to the narrative. Pearson edged on the cultural values that often clash with the principles of child-centered pedagogy, friction evident in the implementation of the Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) Policy. The chapter primarily appealed to enhanced teacher training, robust community engagement, and efforts to challenge and reshape the prevailing cultural norms. However, it could benefit from incorporating specific case studies of CFS, discussions of collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and a broader view of potential barriers to reform.

In Chapter 11, Vire et al. (2022) examined the critical role of mobilizing resources to realize the 'Education for All' objectives in Cambodia. They provided a comprehensive overview of historical commitments and highlighted the triumphs and challenges in education financing. Notably, the post-2013 era saw a remarkable increase in education budgets. No doubt, the rise in funding led to improved teacher salaries, more scholarships, and better funding for academic institutions. Evidently, "Cambodia's investment in education may not yet have fully caught up with its neighbors, but it is on the right path to do so." (p. 214). Their use of tables, charts, and graphs was highly effective. It offered a clearer picture of Cambodia's educational landscape. Nevertheless, the addition of concrete examples detailing strategies and collaborations would enhance the chapter's resonance.

In Chapter 12, Un and Sok (2022) investigated Cambodia's higher education policies and the pronounced neoliberal influences since the 1990s. "Policy discourse, if it is going to have tangible impacts on the economy and society, must be translated into concrete project intervention." (p. 223). The authors understood the pivotal role of foreign aid agencies, especially the World Bank's push for policy paradigms such as privatization. However, they critiqued this neoliberal shift, arguing that it perpetuates social inequalities and mainly benefits an elite segment. Nonetheless, they did an excellent job of advocating for a paradigm shift towards policies rooted in social justice and public welfare as they advocated for equitable benefits and more inclusive higher education.

Chapter 13 by Chet et al. (2022) studied the transformation of higher education in Cambodia. "Cambodian higher education is entering a new phase in its development." (p. 241). Their analysis, centered on the Royal University of Phnom Penh, nicely woven historical narratives with contemporary challenges and triumphs. They also critically appraised the policy environment to leverage Carden's systematic approach to shed light on the complexity of decision-making within Cambodian higher education. At the center, the chapter gave readers a well-rounded view of the complex layers surrounding institutional autonomy, policy change, governance, human resource management, financial management, and leadership's role in driving reforms.

Rath and Tao's (2022) Chapter 14 focused on accreditation in Cambodia's higher education. Their detailed analysis shone a light on the disparities and imbalances plaguing the system, including a lack of a national qualifications framework for recognition of degrees awarded by foreign universities. While some institutions stand out for excellence, others struggle due to inadequate guidelines and structured support such as quality assurance. The report also stressed other challenges within the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC), especially its inefficacy in assuring graduate program quality. Thus, this critical report called for the need for rigorous formulation and revisions to existing educational accreditation standards. Fortunately, "Reform rapidly ensued, including in the higher education sector, which in 1997 was the focus of a National Strategic Plan for Higher Education." (p. 259).

Chapter 15, by Bunry and Walker (2022), examined the challenges and opportunities for Cambodian women and girls in higher education. They found significant barriers to participation, including cultural norms, economic constraints, and limited access to educational resources. Despite these obstacles, there have been improvements in recent years, with more women enrolling in higher education and benefiting from scholarships and support programs. Notably, "Achieving enrolment equality between boys and girls in basic education has been a distinctive achievement of the Cambodian education system." (p. 275). The chapter also stressed the importance of policy interventions and societal change in further promoting gender equality in higher education settings.

In Chapter 16, Noorlander (2022) provided readers with an in-depth look at the complexity of introducing multilingual education (MLE) for Cambodia's ethnic minorities. The chapter emphasized the collaborative efforts between CARE Cambodia (a humanitarian and development NGO dedicated to fighting global poverty and inequality) and MoEYS, highlighting their journey from skepticism to the successful integration of multilingual education. Political support, the Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP), provincial support, and training and promoting community teachers for the MLE in Cambodia play a vital role in its development. However, "For almost two decades, there has been slow

but consistent progress made in providing support for access to education for ethnic minority children living in the north-east region of Cambodia.” (p. 293).

3. Analysis and evaluation

3.1. Themes and style

At its core, the book addressed the pressing themes regarding efforts in educational reform, cultural resilience, and the pursuit of international standards within Cambodia's education system. At the core, it is organized in three parts and addresses sector-level issues, cross-sectoral and policy-related matters, and stakeholder inclusion; it presents a well-connected analysis across the themes. Through a narrative rich in historical context and contemporary analysis in various dimensions of Cambodian education, the book revealed the complexities of rebuilding an education system from the ground up. For instance, the chapter on secondary education reform by Bredenberg (2022) reported the challenges and successes in improving educational quality and governance for the 21st century education.

Below are the themes and foci in each chapter.

- **Overview** (Chapter 1: Education in Cambodia: An Overview)
- **Early Childhood Education** (Chapter 2: Early Childhood Education in Cambodia)
- **Quality** (Chapter 3: Primary Education in Cambodia: In Search of Quality)
- **Reform** (Chapter 4: Progress with Reforming Secondary Education in Cambodia)
- **TVET** (Chapter 5: Technical and Vocational Education and Training Reform in Cambodia 1970-2020)
- **Higher Education** (Chapter 6: Higher Education in Cambodia: The Constraining Effects of Traditional Values)
- **Teaching Profession** (Chapter 7: The Teaching Profession in Cambodia: Progress to Date and Ongoing Needs)
- **Assessment** (Chapter 8: Cambodia National Assessment: A Summary of 10 Years of Student Achievement Results)
- **School Leadership** (Chapter 9: School Leadership in Cambodian Schools)
- **Capacity Development** (Chapter 10: Capacity Development in Cambodia)
- **Policy-Based Budgeting** (Chapter 11: Policy-Based Budgeting in Cambodia's Education Sector)
- **Higher Education Policy** (Chapter 12: Higher Education Policy and Project Intervention)
- **University Reform** (Chapter 13: Reforming Cambodian Universities)
- **Accreditation** (Chapter 14: Accrediting Higher Education Institutions in Cambodia)

- **Gender Equity** (Chapter 15: Cambodian Women and Girls in Higher Education)
- **Multilingual Education** (Chapter 16: Multilingual Education for Ethnic Minorities in Cambodia)

The style of all chapters is both informative and accessible, making complex subjects, including policy discussions and leadership, understandable to a broad audience. The diverse perspectives of the contributing authors, all experts in their fields, can potentially increase the book's credibility along with depth. Compared to other works on Southeast Asian education, this book stands out for its comprehensive approach and practical insights. The thoughtful organization and clear, concise writing make it a valuable resource for educators, policymakers, and anyone interested in the intersection of education and development in Southeast Asia. To further enhance its impact, including more voices from local educators and students could provide a richer, more realistic perspective on the impact of these reforms on the ground.

3.2. Contributions

All things considered, this book significantly advances our knowledge of Cambodia's educational development. It offers a comprehensive analysis of the path taken by the nation from the destruction caused by the Khmer Rouge period to the present attempts to meet worldwide educational standards. The book sheds light on the many obstacles and triumphs encountered by the education sector, ranging from early childhood education to postsecondary education and technical training. For educators, legislators, and scholars alike, its thorough examination of policy changes, leadership styles, and the inclusion of marginalized groups provides insightful information. The book can be a comprehensive guide for anybody trying to comprehend and promote educational advancement in post-conflict cultures like Cambodia since it presents both achievements and current challenges. Besides, its depth is elevated by the inclusion of many viewpoints from national and international experts, which make it a vital resource for developing future educational programs and initiatives in Cambodia and other comparable educational settings. Although it recognizes the considerable challenges that still exist, this book motivates a practical outlook in which persistent efforts and deliberate changes may gradually enhance Cambodia's education system to meet global benchmarks, thereby enabling every child to achieve their maximum capabilities.

3.3. Cohesion and structure

The book is organized in a manner that provides a thorough examination of Cambodia's education system. It is structured into three primary sections: sector-level concerns, cross-sectoral and policy-related topics, and stakeholder inclusion, which is useful for a comprehensive examination of every aspect of the education system. Subsequent chapters are constructed upon the foundation of the preceding ones. This method is effective in establishing a coherent storyline that leads the reader through the historical background, current challenges, and future possibilities of education in Cambodia. Nevertheless, while the organization of the content allows for a thorough comprehension of the topics, the complex scholarly terminology used in some parts can provide difficulties for average readers. Furthermore, a greater degree of systematic incorporation of case studies and stakeholders' voices might improve the coherence of the story and provide a more practical viewpoint on the changes under consideration. In general, the book's organized approach helps readers understand the interaction between policy, practice, and progress in Cambodia's educational system. Despite

occasional technical terms and complex statistical data, it remains a valuable reference for further investigation into Cambodia's education system.

4. Personal reflection

To date, this book is a comprehensive report on Cambodia's educational system. The progression from early childhood to higher education in the first section provides readers with a holistic understanding, while the systemic introspection in the second section brings out the complex layers of policy, assessment, and university reforms. It is not a myth that the emphasis on inclusivity, especially the roles of women and multilingual education in the third segment, is particularly significant in this era. This focus highlights the importance of diverse voices and perspectives in shaping a more equitable educational landscape (UNESCO, 2021). Each chapter, penned by various experts, attempts to capture distinct facets of the connection between historical context with present achievements and issues. As such, the multiple-perspective approach can help increase and inform readers' various perspectives on the subject. For instance, Chapter 5 by Daroesman (2022) further connects TVET programs with industry needs, including broad categories such as learning to learn, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills, while fostering public-private partnerships, enhancing inclusivity, integrating soft skills, and incorporating technology in training (ILO, n.d.).

While the book does an excellent job of detailing the status of Cambodia's education with reliable statistical findings and visuals, it could benefit from incorporating more comparative studies to situate Cambodia's trajectory within the broader Southeast Asian or global context. Some chapters, though informative, might delve deeper into the tangible impacts, as in strategies, policies, reforms and implementations, which can be useful with additional specific case studies to illustrate successes and pitfalls. Moreover, a bold focus on forward-looking strategies, especially in light of emerging global educational trends such as educational technology, could offer readers, not just a fresh understanding of where Cambodia's education stands but also where it could potentially head in the future. In another respect, a more explicit emphasis on stakeholders' voices, including students, parents, and educators, might also provide a ground-up perspective, complementing the top-down policy examination. This approach would appeal to the experiences and insights of those directly impacted by educational policies and implementations for more effective and inclusive reforms. As highlighted in the World Bank Education Report, engaging stakeholders at all levels is crucial for the successful implementation and sustainability of educational initiatives (World Bank, n.d.).

Some chapters could be further strengthened with the inclusion of statistical information and illustrations, specific examples, and even case studies. For instance, Pearson's (2022) discussion on the CFS Policy would benefit greatly from real-world instances of its implementation; deeper dives into NGO collaborations would offer a broader understanding of potential solutions. The chapter on education financing in Cambodia (Chet et al., 2022; Un & Sok, 2022; Vire et al., 2022), while enriched with data visualizations, would be more impactful if it demonstrated tangible outcomes of financial strategies and collaborations. A consistent critique across multiple chapters is the need for concrete, on-ground examples that allow readers to connect theoretical frameworks to practical implementations. Additionally, a more balanced perspective to address the successes, potential barriers, and related narratives would provide a well-rounded view of the complexities involved in educational reforms.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this book embodies a groundbreaking effort to bridge the knowledge gap about Cambodia's education system. It brings together Cambodian and international education experts to explore the nation's educational landscape in detail. Indeed, it gives a thorough and deep look at contemporary education in Cambodia. It nicely balances historical context, current challenges, and future aspirations while also offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers. The book's structured approach and diverse perspectives make it a useful resource, though some sections may benefit from simpler language, more visuals, and case studies. Despite these minor limitations, the book succeeds in painting a realistic yet hopeful picture of Cambodia's journey toward educational excellence. We believe it stands as evidence of the resilience and determination of those working to transform Cambodia's education system. As a teacher and teacher trainer, reflecting on its contents, we are inspired to contribute to this ongoing progress and continually believe in the potential for every Cambodian child to receive a quality education that prepares them for a brighter future.

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Keywords

Educational Reform: The process of implementing changes and improvements in educational policies, practices, and structures to enhance the quality and effectiveness of education systems.

Inclusivity: The practice of ensuring that education systems are accessible and equitable for all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, or geographic location.

MoEYS: This is the acronym of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of Cambodia.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Collaborative arrangements between government agencies and private sector entities to enhance the quality, relevance, and delivery of educational programs and services.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A set of global objectives established by the United Nations to address various social, economic, and environmental challenges, with specific targets related to education (e.g., SDG 4: Quality Education).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET): Programs and policies aimed at equipping individuals with practical skills and knowledge for specific trades, industries, and occupations.

Year Zero: The period of the destruction of the previous regime, many of its officials and teachers, and its education system following the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia in April 1975. The Khmer Rouge declared Year Zero to signify a radical restructuring of Cambodian society, which caused the devastation of the educational infrastructure and the elimination of a significant portion of the educated population.