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## **Paradigm and paradox: Education for All and the inclusion of children with disabilities in Cambodia**

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In keeping with international guidelines and to meet the target of Education for All (EFA) by 2015, the Cambodian government, with assistance from non-government and aid organisations, has instituted several initiatives towards including children with disabilities in the educational mainstream. This paper examines these efforts within the context of current socio-political development and the general educational system in Cambodia, and argues that the cultural traditions of elitism and social hierarchy and the uniquely post-Khmer Rouge context of severely limited human resources are paradoxical to the value of universal access and quality imbedded in EFA and inclusive education. It concludes that international guidelines for EFA and inclusive education can serve as much to circumscribe as to galvanise policy direction in developing countries.

**Keywords:** inclusive education; Education for All; children with disabilities; Cambodia

### **Introduction**

The principle of inclusive education was first endorsed as an international guideline to provide educational services for children with disabilities at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994 (Inclusion International 2003; UNESCO 2005). In 2000, the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, set the goal of achieving Education for All (EFA) by 2015 towards including within the educational mainstream, all traditionally excluded and marginalised groups, such as girls, poor children, ethnic minorities and children with disabilities. The same year, the World Bank (2002a), while presenting the Millennium Development Goals as a means of implementing this goal, argued that disability, being both a cause and a consequence of poverty, needed to be targeted specifically in any development efforts. Similarly, the Biwako Millennium Framework (2002) re-emphasised inclusive education as a right and appropriate educational option for children with disabilities. As a result of these international initiatives, many signatory countries, including Cambodia, have begun to focus on the inclusion of children with disabilities (Stubbs 2002).

However, scholars have questioned the suitability of EFA as a paradigmatic approach for many developing countries (Dyer 2001; Kendall 2007), asserting that the implicit principle of universal access to quality education embedded in this approach may be incongruent to existing socio-political structures. For instance, in her research

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on the implementation of EFA in Malawi, Kendall (2007) found that, essentially, it enabled privatisation and shifted responsibility for educational provision and oversight away from the state, as a result of which, the purpose of school – to create an elite – remained essentially unchanged. Similarly, Dyer (2001) argued that the inflexibility of a universal school system, with its fixed school calendar and hours, rendered education virtually inaccessible to migrant populations in Rajasthan, India. Cambodia's attempts to shift towards the paradigm of EFA and inclusive education for children with disabilities also present such contradictions. Examining the government's efforts to provide educational services for children with disabilities within the context of Cambodia's regular education system and current socio-political development, this paper argues that even as the government attempts to endorse these paradigmatic shifts, competing realities and values create paradoxical constraints. It analyses the applicability of universal access and quality embedded in EFA and inclusive education within the context of cultural traditions of elitism and social hierarchy, and severely limited human and material resources.

## **Method**

Data are based on a situation analysis conducted by the author, in the capacity of international consultant, and two members of the Special Education Office (SEO) towards developing policy recommendations and implementation guidelines for services for children with disabilities, over a seven-month period. Through focus group discussions or individual interviews, and five workshops conducted at different points of time and locations, over 300 stakeholders – who included senior- and middle-level officials from the Ministries of Education, Health and Social Affairs, international donor representatives, provincial and district education officers, school directors (or principals), teachers, parents and children with disabilities both in and out of school – gave input on existing services and recommendations for services. Service beneficiaries, such as parents of children with disabilities in school, were asked what benefits, if any, they perceived had accrued to their children from the educational services received and what additional support they could benefit from. Parents of children with disabilities out of school were asked why their children were not in school and what support they would need to ensure their child's access to schooling. Among the service providers, teachers and school directors were asked what accommodations or modifications, if any, they made for their students with disabilities and what supports they would need to enable them to include more students with disabilities in their class. Staff at non-government organisation (NGO)-funded special schools was asked how they could facilitate government efforts to develop inclusive services, while ministry officials were asked how their department or ministry might support such a scheme.

Specific ministry officials and agency representatives were identified for the semi-structured individual interviews, while a purposive sample was identified for the remaining groups of stakeholders, based on their willingness to be involved in a focus group discussion and make policy recommendations. Their responses were recorded in English as they were translated, and later analysed, for a description of current services and directions for the future. A special effort was made to get representation from each stakeholder group and to get a cross-sectional sample across the country by travelling to eight out of 25 provinces.<sup>1</sup>

The team also visited government schools and the few special schools run by NGOs in Phnom Penh and the eight provinces. We selected government schools that were

considered to be inclusive schools, in that they received funding from international donors for training teachers in effective teaching and learning strategies within the EFA framework, or had assigned one classroom for use by an NGO serving students with hearing or visual impairments. We observed classrooms where students with disabilities were present to identify the strategies teachers used to facilitate the students' inclusion, following this up with interviews with the teacher and school director.

In addition to keeping detailed field notes of these observations and meetings, the author undertook a desk review of relevant documents and studies relating to disability and special education in Cambodia. These documents formed the source of secondary data for the study and included national government strategic plans, published and unpublished Ministry of Education reports, country profile reports and research studies conducted by international donor agencies and national NGOs, and presentations by national and international NGO representatives at local and regional conferences on inclusive education. As the findings of the situation analysis began to inform our policy recommendations, we shared them with stakeholders at central, provincial and district levels in a series of workshops to cross-check the accuracy of our analysis and ascertain stakeholder buy-in.

It must be pointed out that this situation analysis does not claim the methodological rigour of a qualitative research study as the intended outcome was to gain an understanding of the political, social and economic context so as to inform our policy recommendations. Currently, information about the education of children with disabilities in Cambodia is fragmented, inaccurate or non-existent; the purpose of the situation analysis was to develop as comprehensive and accurate a picture as possible within these constraints. It is possible that our position as international consultant and ministry officials may have influenced what the stakeholders were telling us; indeed, had we been presented with only the positives, we may have been concerned. However, stakeholders quickly understood it was in their own interests to be honest about what was available and what was not in order to ensure that a policy might then seek to remedy the situation. Our observations in classrooms and visits to families provided corroborative evidence to the information we received through interviews, facilitating the triangulation of data, as did the recursive process of cross-checking by interspersing workshops with interviews. The next part of the paper analyses two paradoxes of elitism versus universal access and limited resources versus quality, examining the implications of each for children with disability. The final section discusses the repercussions of these paradoxes on the development of inclusive education.

### **The paradox of elitism versus universal access**

Scholars of ancient and contemporary Cambodia alike (Chandler 2000; Rusten et al. 2004; Vickery 1998) have found evidence of, as Chandler puts it, 'the pervasiveness of patronage and hierarchical terminology in Cambodian thinking, politics, and social relations' (2000, 2). Seemingly unchanging through the ages, Cambodian society has consisted of a highly stratified society consisting of at least two classes: one referred to variously by writers as the rulers (Vickery 1998), the protectors (Chandler 2000), the patrons (Rusten et al. 2004) and even the 'Khmer riche' (Marshall 2009), and the other, the ordinary population who were ruled – the protected, the clients. This mutual dependence between the two classes created communities that emphasised the importance of reciprocity and harmony, values that were further entrenched through Buddhism.

Analysing pre-Angkorian Cambodia in the seventh and eighth centuries from temple foundation inscriptions, Vickery (1998) learned that persons of high status, rulers with ritual functions who also controlled the economy, were expected to perform ‘punya’, or a work of merit, which was to establish a god or, more often, make donations to an already existing god or gods. These members of the ruling class assigned specific personnel to the temple and its production in a highly stratified class structure from temple functionaries, through musicians and dancers with elite-sounding names, and different types of craft workers, to field labourers, the lowest-ranked category, at the end. Both Vickery (1998) and Chandler (2000) have suggested that the economic focus being on agriculture, with rice as the staple crop, rather than trade, and wet rice cultivation requiring large numbers of labourers, the rulers were as dependent on the labourers for grain surplus as the labourers were dependent on the rulers for protection. Thus, each temple became the centre for self-contained units of production, with increasingly centralised control of land and wealth and strong patterns of client–patron relationships among communities. While maintaining a value inequality between the classes, this structure also generated the concept of *noblesse oblige*, or the understanding that those who are better off shall look after those are less well off, creating an intricate network of obligation.

In his seminal study of Cambodia from the Angkorian era to the 1990s, Chandler (2000) identified similar patterns in values and behaviour across the centuries and commented particularly on the ‘symbiosis’ that existed between the protector and protected, which stressed the welfare of the community rather than that of the individual, and the ‘conservative changelessness characteristic of a subsistence-oriented society’, perhaps best exemplified by the Cambodian proverb ‘Choose the path your ancestors have trod’. Even as political stability has brought globalisation and development to Cambodia at the start of the millennium, he asserted, ‘the traditions of deference and hegemony have made Cambodians reluctant to consider changing the social arrangements and political leadership’ (2000, 247).

In their analysis of decentralisation in the contemporary context, Rusten et al. asserted that in a patrimonial culture like Cambodia, ‘where “you have to ask permission to make noodles”, as one provincial governor put it, democratic procedures are foreign (and) people are used to directives from the top’ (2004, 42). Rusten et al. (2004) and Un (2005) independently concluded that a system of political clientism, in which political power resides with personal power, has emerged in Cambodia, fuelled by donor funding, whereby political elites, or local patrons, use state resources not only for themselves but also for their supporters,<sup>2</sup> their clients, for political legitimacy. In return, instead of legitimate taxation, the patronage system is nurtured through non-transparent and unaccountable ways.

Thus, we see that value inequality and social stratification are recurring motifs across the ages in Cambodian culture, with profound implications for the educational system. The next section draws from Ayres’ (2004) comprehensive analysis of the historical and contemporary general educational system to examine the paradox of EFA expectations of universal access within this context of elitism and social hierarchy.

### ***Elitism and the educational system***

Traditionally, religious-based instruction provided in temples by monks was reserved for royalty and male aristocracy. While there is some evidence that royal women did receive some education in pre-Angkorian times, mostly in the arts, this became less

frequent with state centralisation and the development of patrimonial structures. The didactic, morality-based instruction emphasised the Hindu, and later Buddhist, principles of reciprocal relationships based on dependencies and hierarchies, while prescribing the need for harmony and conformity (Berkvens 2009).

This approach was gradually usurped by the educational system that the French brought in under the guise of egalitarianism and increasing access to education (Ayres 2004). Strongly French-based, in terms of both medium of instruction and curriculum, however, its primary purpose was to groom students for the elite colonial civil service (Ayres 2004; Tully 2002). As a result of the French Protectorate's policy of benign neglect towards Cambodia, only a few secondary schools or *lycées* were built; in 1900, only eight out of the total students were Cambodian (Humbert-Hesse 1923, cited in Berkvens 2009), and in 1944, only one engineer in the country was Cambodian (Tully 2002). Further, expansion did not include rural areas. Despite this, by the time of independence in 1963, the colonial educational system had succeeded in reducing the legitimacy of the indigenous monastic structure of education, while maintaining the elitism (Ayres 2004; Berkvens 2009; Tully 2002).

Impetus for the further democratisation of education again came from the international community through UNESCO in 1956, which recommended that newly independent Cambodia pursue a policy of universal primary education (Ayres 2004), in an early version of what we now know as EFA. Under King Sihanouk, education was made compulsory, and between 1950 and 1955, the numbers of students almost doubled at nearly all levels<sup>3</sup> (Tully 2002). However, although the government built more schools, particularly in rural areas for the first time in Cambodia, and converted the language of the curriculum from French to Khmer to increase its relevance, Ayres (2004) asserts that these changes were merely cosmetic, as the content retained its French orientation and the perception of education as a means to acquire a job in the administrative service remained unchanged. For instance, students tended to follow the liberal arts and humanities programmes rather than taking the technical and vocational professional options, which would have served the country better (Berkvens 2009).

More significantly, scholars have suggested that the main reason for the laggardly outcomes for this early EFA effort was the poor fit for an egalitarian ideal in an extremely hierarchical society (Ayres 2004; Berkvens 2009). Despite the new egalitarianism of the French and post-colonial educational policies, the old system of patronage and elitism flourished, ensuring the perpetuation of the social hierarchy (Berkvens 2009). With the new secular education, teachers replaced monks as the repository of knowledge and authority figure in village life, and continued the didactic, authoritarian instructional style of their predecessors (Ayres 2004). In urban areas, a tightly knit elite, based on kinship connections or patronage, controlled the highly centralised state structure that, led by King Sihanouk, sought desperately to maintain the status quo (Ayres 2004), even as increasing numbers of educated youth, new to access an education, remained unemployed: more than a million students competed for 40,000 available jobs within the government (Berkvens 2009). It was sections of these disillusioned students, led by a small group of secondary school teachers returning from France, who brought the principles of communism and Marxism to an increasingly receptive rural population and established the Khmer Rouge regime – which, in a supreme twist of irony, became more totalitarian and hierarchic than the political systems it had ousted and destroyed. Chandler (2000) has argued that in a society as deeply conservative as Cambodia, the resurgence of these values during this period of crisis was not surprising.

In summary, as a result of these deeply embedded values, education was always and has essentially remained an institution for the elite. Both colonial and post-colonial government efforts did little to change this: even as they sought to universalise primary education and increase access to secondary and tertiary levels, the unchanged content of the curriculum perpetuated its elitist traditions. Students pursued programmes of study that made them misfits for the agrarian lifestyle they had come from. While a select few entered the elite civil services, many became teachers and enjoyed the high status accorded to them, replacing monks as the new rural elite. The next section analyses the implications of this high level of stratification for children with disabilities.

### ***Implications for children with disabilities***

Unlike many developing countries, where people, especially children, with disabilities tend to be either lumped together among ‘other disadvantaged groups’ or overlooked completely (Lynch 1994; Peters 2004), there have been strong policy champions for disability in Cambodia, perhaps as a result of the large numbers of landmine and combat victims. (At one point, Cambodia ranked second in the world in the number of landmine victims [Powell 2005].) NGOs which established themselves building rehabilitation services for adult victims, working closely with the Ministry of Social Welfare, soon moved towards serving children as well.

A review of national policies reflects this awareness of target group specificity. For instance, the national Education Strategic Plan for 2006–2015 recommended the need for ‘formulating a national policy and strategies for disabled learners’ (MOEYS 2005, 17), while both the 2008 Education Law and the 2009 Protection and Promotion of Rights of Disabled Persons Law also make specific reference to children with disabilities, stating that disabled learners have the same rights as able learners and have separate special rights (Kingdom of Cambodia 2008; Kuch 2009). Within the EFA umbrella, the Policy for the Education of Children with Disabilities was developed and approved in 2008, well before the Gender Policy in 2010.

While such political will is encouraging, the fact is these statutes are top-down responses to international imperatives. This is evidenced by the responses from senior ministry officials interviewed, who subtly indicated that, left to itself, the Ministry of Education would prefer to focus on what they referred to as ‘low-cost, high-impact children’, or those who could avail of an educational system with minimal government intervention, before turning its attention to those groups that needed greater investment of resources. The low priority given to disability is also indicated by the fact that the SEO was initially established with international donor support, and although it now receives government monies for salaries, it continues as a backwater office within the Primary Education Department. Government ambivalence regarding people with disabilities is also evident in the edict (or *Prakas*) on the Criteria for Teacher Candidates’ Physical Appearance for recruiting public primary and pre-school teachers, which states quite unequivocally that candidates must be ‘free of disabilities’ (Council of Ministers 1995, cited in Japan International Cooperation Agency 2002). Disability advocacy groups were disappointed that the Education Law, which was expected to overturn this discriminatory statute, continues to allow the Ministry of Education to determine ‘the minimal physical and professional criteria’ for recruiting teachers (Kingdom of Cambodia 2008, Article 20, 5).

Similarly, the reality at the grassroots level is quite different from the international perspective. The few empirical studies on beliefs and attitudes towards disability in Cambodia indicate some levels of acceptance of adult landmine and combat victims, especially in areas of high prevalence of landmines<sup>4</sup> (Disability Action Council 2001; Kang and Fox 2007), but it appears that children with disabilities remain socially excluded (Thomas 2005; Vanleit, Channa, and Prum 2007). They are often teased and called by pejorative descriptors of their disability in lieu of their given names, a practice that appears to date from pre-Angkorian times<sup>5</sup> (Vickery 1998). Many families do not seek any intervention, educational or therapeutic, in the belief that the disability is a result of the child's *karma* or fate, or that a child with a disability cannot benefit from an education (Action for Disability and Development 2006; Harknett 2005; Kalyanpur 2007). The gap in school participation between children with and without disabilities is twice as high as the gaps associated with rural residence, wealth and gender (Filmer 2005).

Many parents and children with disabilities we interviewed corroborated these findings. For instance, blind students in an integrated classroom said they had no interaction with typical children, even during recess. Although we did see some accepting behaviours from typical peers, in most situations, siblings or cousins were the social conduits between disabled and non-disabled students. Teachers expressed grave concern about including children with disabilities in classrooms, pointing to the large numbers of students they already had.

Further, poverty is the underlying cause of disability in Cambodia, as over half of the conditions are preventable (Knowles 2005; Thomas 2005). Illness and disease, which includes fever, anaemia, micro-nutrient deficiencies and malnutrition, are the principal causes of disability in both rural and urban areas (National Institute of Statistics 2005; Vachon 2006), as a result of limited access to health care or proper nutrition. Children also become disabled because they have not received primary preventive care, such as immunisation, or secondary preventive care, such as antibiotics for ear or eye infections, that can lead to blindness or deafness. In other words, in a country where over 40% of the population is under the poverty line and 75% of the population does not utilise public health services, the priority focus is on reducing poverty and ensuring access to adequate health care. Because of their low status, children with disabilities are not a primary target group for intervention. For instance, the EFA National Plan for 2003–2015 (Royal Government of Cambodia 2003) identifies the need for interventions such as early childhood care and development, preventive health care and school readiness targeted specifically at poor children, girls and children from ethnic minorities and makes no mention of children with disabilities.

### ***Defining who is disabled***

As services internationally have moved towards a rights-based or social model, so too has the definition of disability moved away from the absoluteness of the medical model towards recognising the interaction between an individual's impairment and their environment. In this context, it is pertinent to ask the question: Who is considered disabled in the Cambodian culture? The process of moving from descriptors based on qualities attributed to individuals to more acceptable and universally understood descriptors is complicated in Cambodia as much by social attitudes as by economic factors.

As in many developing countries (Kalyanpur 2007; Singal 2006), estimates of the population of people with disabilities in Cambodia have tended to vary, depending



upon the source (Evans and Graham 2007; Thomas 2005). In 2004, the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey reported the estimated disability rate at 4.7% (National Institute of Statistics 2005). In 2008, the Ministry of Social Affairs set it at 4%, and in 2009, the National Census identified only 1.4% Cambodians as disabled (Lindsay 2009). Although there is evidence that directly asking an individual or a family member if they or someone in the family has a disability, also referred to as self-reporting, is likely to yield fewer affirmative responses, primarily because of the stigma attached to most disabling conditions, all three surveys used this prompt for identification purposes, which may account for these statistical discrepancies.

Further, the prevailing eight-category classification system,<sup>6</sup> developed in 2003 by the Ministry of Social Affairs, lends itself to individual whimsy (International Labour Organization 2003). It is not within the scope of our study to scrutinise the validity of the process by which this system was developed; we were told that international agencies and ministry representatives developed it, presumably with stakeholder input. Official statistics on children with disabilities in school using this classification system are maintained, since 2008, through the Education Management Information System (EMIS) by the Department of Planning in the Ministry of Education. Unofficial statistics, using the same system, are maintained by the SEO, also in the Ministry of Education, but which reveal results quite different from the EMIS statistics. This discrepancy may be because there is considerable confusion as to what each category actually means. For instance, many directors we interviewed relied on their own judgement when trying to determine which category a student belonged to. Some school staff saw an overlap in certain categories (e.g. mobility and tactile), and a high percentage of children were categorised under 'other'. In one school, an obese 10-year-old girl was pointed out to us as having a disability:

When we asked what her category of disability was, the school director told us that because she had thrown a tantrum and flung her slippers at her teacher, she had been categorized as 'behaviour (disordered)'. The director and the SEO official debated whether a one-time event could justify the student being categorized as having a behaviour disorder, but it was apparent that the student was perceived as disabled by all: Her excessive weight made her look different in a country where most children have stunted growth, and was affecting her socialization, although not her academic progress. The discussion ended when the group decided that perhaps she fitted best in the 'other' category and the change was duly made in the school register. (Field notes, 5 January 2006)

Most significantly, teachers consistently pointed out to us children with mild physical conditions, such as a facial deformity that did not affect their academic performance in the least, as having 'physical disabilities'. However, the largest number of students were placed within the category of 'students with learning difficulties', often referred to by the teachers as 'slow learners' (*rean yuht*). It transpired that many of these children came from poor households and had to support their family, for instance, by working in the rice fields during the planting season; when they returned to school, they had missed too much to be able to catch up with the rest of the class. Other children started school later in the year when their migrant worker parents moved into the area to search for employment, and they were also unable to catch up. Yet other children could not afford to take the remedial classes teachers offered. Interestingly, although teachers and school directors clearly identified this group of children as disabled, international donors and NGO representatives stated that the problem was more economic than medical. Further, they believed that these children

were failing because the system was too rote-based and teacher-led, and that using more interactive and student-friendly methods of teaching would improve the overall quality of learning and help to reduce student failure rates.

Thus, despite the political commitment to EFA and inclusive education, the paradoxical reality is that the education of children with disabilities is less significant in the context of other pressing priorities. For one, evidence indicates that children with disabilities are among the most marginalised within the social hierarchy and with regard to education. For another, the large numbers of students with 'learning difficulties', many of whom may be failing because of impoverished conditions rather than a biological incapacity, suggest that for many students, the problem is more economic than medical. In addition, self-reporting and idiosyncratic labelling signify differences in perceptions of disability, affecting efforts to count children with disabilities, impacting, in turn, advocacy and service provision.

### **The paradox of limited resources versus quality**

The Khmer Republic inherited an education system that was incompatible with the needs of its agrarian society; its reaction, therefore, was to virtually close and destroy all educational institutions, both human and material (Ayres 2004; Becker 1986; Berkvens 2009; Chandler 2000). The result has contributed to a second contradiction in Cambodia's current efforts to implement EFA. This section analyses the mismatch between the expectations for quality in EFA and inclusive education, and the Cambodian reality of severely limited resources.

It must be pointed out that although the Khmer Rouge regime ended in 1979, civil war and factional fighting persisted until 1996, when the remnants of the Khmer Rouge fell apart and a *coup de force* against the Royalist Party in 1997 consolidated the position of the current incumbent (Gottesman 2004). Little wonder then, that in 2000, Cambodia's educational system<sup>7</sup> was ranked among the weakest in the world: Its net enrolment ratios were 84% in primary school, 17% in lower secondary school and 8% in upper secondary school, and repetition and dropout rates were extremely high (World Bank 2002b, 2005a). Sustained political stability since then and the influx of donor funds, however, have contributed to substantial gains in the education sector: The latest figures available from the 2007–2008 academic year show net enrolment ratios of 93.3% in primary schools, 34.8% in lower secondary school and 14.8% in upper secondary school (Ministry of Education, Youth & Sport [MOEYS] 2008).

Following on the Khmer Rouge aftermath of the destruction of school buildings, a major thrust of the Education Strategic Plan has been on building new schools. From a total of 5290 primary schools (Grades 1–4), 14 colleges (Grades 5–7) and one *lycée* (Grades 8–10) in 1979 (Ayres 2004), the number of schools has gone up to 6664 primary (an increase of almost 26%), 1172 lower secondary (an increase of 8271%) and 383 upper secondary schools (an increase of 38,200%), with 3410 preschools in addition (MOEYS website, accessed 18 March 2010). School construction continues to be a significant focus. For example, the most recent influx of donor funds through the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) allocates \$41 million out of the total \$57 million (or 72%) towards the construction of school buildings,<sup>8</sup> particularly in incomplete schools<sup>9</sup> and/or in remote areas where enrolment ratios in 2007–2008 were as low as 88.4% in primary schools, 11.1% in lower secondary and just 1.2% in upper secondary schools.

However, certain persisting challenges have forced attention beyond access to the issue of quality of education. The EFA assumption is that with more schools and more

trained teachers, students should not be expected to just go to school (access) but also stay in school and complete at least a basic education (quality) (Royal Government of Cambodia 2006). International standards for quality education measure this in terms of learner outcomes, such as reduced dropout rates, higher survival and completion rates, low pupil:teacher ratios or smaller class size, and lower repetition rates. In Cambodia, the figures on these indicators are a cause for concern. In 2007–2008, pupil:teacher ratios averaged 41.2% and survival rates from Grade 1 to 6 stood at 52%, with repetition rates at 11% (MOEYS 2008). A baseline study on incomplete and/or complete schools found that pupil:teacher ratios averaged 62.7:1 and ranged from 121:1 to 35.6:1 (Primary Education Department 2010). Almost 62% of primary schools offer two 4-hour-long shifts to accommodate larger number of students within one school day; as a result, student instruction time is low, about 850 hours annually, against an international standard of 1000 hours (Education Sector Working Group 2006).

Studies point to several reasons for high dropout rate. The fact that over 39% of schools do not have access to safe drinking water while over 28% have no latrines, has been attributed to many students, particularly girls, dropping out (Beng 2006). Community perceptions of the low economic dividends from education have also contributed to high dropout rates (ILO 2004; Robertson 2006). In a study on dropout in Kampot province, Robertson (2006) found that contrary to popular belief among school personnel, parents also believed education was important for children to acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills which would enable them to contribute to family income, but the realisation that teachers, for all their education, still had to work in the fields with them to supplement their salaries, contributed to many students dropping out after Grade 3. The cultural incongruence of the school calendar has also been considered a contributing factor: school vacations are during July and August, although the rice-planting season, which forces many students to stop attending school, is in October and November. The most significant reason, however, may be the critical teacher shortage.

A challenge peculiar to Cambodia is the decimation of the intellectual elite during the Khmer Rouge regime that has left a crippling and unprecedented legacy of inadequately trained or completely untrained management personnel (Becker 1986; Gottesman 2004). Nowhere has this effect been more devastating than within the educational system, where over 80% of all secondary students and teachers were lost either to political culling or to disease and starvation (Ayres 2004; Becker 1986; Geeves and Bredenberg 2005). The immediate post-Khmer Rouge period found the Ministry of Education struggling to find teachers and co-opting people who had received barely any education themselves to teach students at a lower grade. For instance, a person who had completed three years of schooling became a Grades 1 and 2 teacher. Without any materials to work with, these ad-hoc teachers, quite naturally, resorted to rote and didactic instructional methods.

Scholars have remarked that this legacy marks a significant difference from other countries which have also experienced genocide, such as Rwanda and Germany (Berkvens 2009), and that with Cambodians killing Cambodians, there was no clearly differentiated 'other', resulting in a fragmentation of community and family units and an acute distrust of strangers (Becker 1986; Gottesman 2004). The historical tradition of *noblesse oblige* has segued into a network of loyalty among the survivors, creating a new elite of the well-connected (Chandler 2000; Marshall 2009; Rusten et al. 2004; Un 2005). This combination of 'patronage politics' (Un 2005) and severe shortage of educated personnel means that many ministry staff have been appointed to their

position even if they have neither received any training in pedagogical skills themselves nor ever taught in classrooms (Berkvens 2009). Teachers are no longer the intellectual elite, and as the fourth lowest-paid teachers in the world (ESWG 2006; World Bank 2005b), they have little status in contemporary society.

Unfortunately, the severe shortages of trained human resources have forced a structure for training that almost completely precludes improvement in quality. In-service training of teachers operates on a system of ‘cascade training’, whereby national trainers train provincial trainers, who in turn, train district education officers. The district education officers then go on to train school directors and one teacher at each grade level, called Technical Grade Leaders, who then train the teachers at monthly technical meetings. However, in an analysis of professional development activities or trainings in the Ministry of Education, Berkvens (2009) found several shortcomings to this system. One, the cascade model of training has suffered badly from the ‘Chinese whisper effect’, where, like the children’s game, the final outcome was distorted from the original intent as it progressed down the line. Two, these trainings usually consist of a workshop between two and five days long, on a variety of topics, of which the most predominant is the component of effective teaching and learning, which rarely, if ever, contain a practical component, and there is little follow-up to ensure implementation of teachers’ learning. Three, as mentioned earlier, the national trainers themselves often lack both skill and knowledge in the first place. When training is provided through international technical assistance, in most cases, it involves western models that are often quite inappropriate to the context and, compounded by the language barrier, end up being rather ineffective.

That this structure of training continues to persist, despite evidence of its ineffectiveness, may be attributed to a difference in perception between the donors or the international community and ministry officials regarding capacity building. While the donors saw teacher training as a basic, initial step in a process towards achieving quality that includes improving learning outcomes when teachers *apply* their learning, most Ministry officials see teacher training, or the increased *knowledge*, as the end or the outcome. As one ministry official put it, ‘3000 teachers know more than they did before. Their quality has improved’.

In summary, although the Ministry recognises the challenge to quality in terms of high dropout rates and pupil:teacher ratios – indeed, its proposal requesting FTI funds was predicated on the argument that quality of education needed to be improved (ESWG 2006), its primary focus continues to be on access through school construction. Further, given the historical context of extreme paucity of teachers, to the Ministry, increasing the numbers of people who are trained as teachers is progress enough that it will in and of itself improve quality.

### ***Implications for children with disabilities***

Even if children with disabilities were a priority concern of the government, with the vast majority of children with disabilities being out of school, the dilemma of quality versus quantity would present itself. There are a handful of special schools, focusing on specific categories of disabilities, all run by NGOs in urban areas, most of which were started in the late 1990s. In response to international initiatives, a few agencies<sup>10</sup> began to include children with disabilities within the umbrella of EFA to some extent. However, reminiscent of the ‘mainstreaming’ trend in the 1970s in the US, where

students were placed in regular classrooms without adequate supports and were expected to succeed, here too, these students were in 'inclusive classrooms', either because they had received a one-time support, such as an orthotic or a prosthetic device or surgery, from an NGO or because they had a mild physical disability, such as a facial disfigurement, that did not warrant any support or modification (Kalyanpur 2007). Children who required more intensive supports were either not in school or in the NGO-run special schools.

Also, in response to international imperatives, the Ministry of Education, Youth & Sport launched its first foray into the education of children with disabilities in 2001. With funding from international donors and technical assistance from the Disability Action Council, a semi-autonomous national advisory body to the government on disability-related issues, the Ministry developed a model of inclusive education in nine primary schools, based on the Lao PDR (People's Democratic Republic) model, where it had proved successful (Holdsworth 2004). In 2003, as the programme expanded, the Ministry created the SEO, which implemented the cascade training system to build provincial and district capacity (Kong and Kalyanpur 2008). However, an evaluation of the project (Yoder 2005) found that the cascade system had been ineffective, mainly due to the 'Chinese whisper effect' discussed earlier.

This government effort, however, was sufficient to give NGOs the impetus to move towards more inclusive services. From 2005 onwards, most NGOs started integrated classrooms, negotiating with government schools to place children with moderate disabilities requiring modifications in separate classes. Integrated classes were attractive for many reasons: they took the pressure off regular education teachers to accommodate students with moderate disabilities, especially since none of them were trained to work with children with disabilities, and they were less cost-intensive than building special schools. However, schools are loath to yield an entire classroom to a population of students widely perceived to be unlikely to benefit from education, although convincing school directors is relatively easier in rural areas than in urban areas, where the pressure of space is more. Further, the critical shortage of trained teachers within the regular education system makes the seconding of teachers to integrated programmes practically impossible.

In 2006, following a study tour to Indonesia, the Ministry decided that a policy and an action plan recommending comprehensive services based on best practice might provide the needed stimulus for propelling the government's agenda on inclusive education forward. This policy and the action plan were developed and approved in 2008 and 2009, respectively, with bilateral funding for implementation through UNICEF and the FTI, a grant from 30 donor countries to 'reach the un-reached', targeting children with disabilities among other disadvantaged groups who present low enrolment and/or high dropout rates, with the overall purpose of reaching the EFA by the 2015 target. In essence, the policy recommends a two-pronged approach that is expected to result in increased identification of children with disabilities and their increased access to education through a systematic provision of necessary supports, as well as increased capacity of teachers in regular schools to respond to the needs of children with disabilities and an increase in numbers of special education teachers to provide educational services in integrated classrooms for various categories of children of disabilities.

Over the years, perhaps because teachers were already familiar with children with orthopaedic impairments and were aware that no instructional modifications would be needed, they became more willing to accept students with more serious motor

limitations, as a result of which inclusion in regular classrooms has been more common and fairly effective for this group of children. Inclusion is less common and less effective with blind students, as teachers, untrained in Braille, tend to leave the students alone; any supplementary instruction is provided in a second shift at the special school.

The inclusion of deaf children in regular education classrooms has been the least effective and must be understood within the historical context of the evolution of a deaf community in Cambodia. The development of Cambodian sign language and deaf communities is still nascent, and many deaf people continue to be isolated and excluded (Fr. Charles Dittmeier, Advisor, Deaf Development Program, pers. comm., 24 October 2006). In one integrated classroom that we visited, three 17-year-old young adults were not only receiving an education but also meeting another deaf person for the first time in their lives. However, efforts to place deaf students in inclusive classrooms paradoxically resulted in their becoming more excluded because they could communicate with no one while the trained sign language interpreter straddled several classrooms. It also denied them the opportunity to develop a sense of identity as a deaf person and to be part of a deaf community as this evolved.

Thus, although providing more services for children with disabilities could be perceived as increasing quantity or access, in the Cambodian context, the efforts to provide more educational options beyond special schools, such as integrated classrooms and regular or inclusive classroom placements, are seen in terms of improving the quality of services.

### ***Teacher training as a quality issue***

The critical shortage of teachers in the regular education system also impacts on the education of children with disabilities. None of the teachers of children with disabilities in the NGO-run special schools are graduates of the Ministry of Education's teacher training programme. Most NGOs have developed their own on-the-job training programmes, which are neither standardised nor endorsed by the Ministry of Education. Some regular education teachers have received truncated versions of these trainings during school vacations, enabling them to work in integrated classrooms. However, as mentioned earlier, despite the salary supplements NGOs offer these teachers, schools that are already facing a shortage are reluctant to second their teachers to the integrated programme.

Other regular education teachers have received in-service training in inclusive education through the Ministry, intended to enable them to teach children with disabilities in regular or inclusive classrooms, but the length of the training varies depending upon the Department leading the training: the training by the Teacher Training Department is two days long, while the training offered by the SEO is five days long. The training manuals, which determine the content of the curriculum, are also different, indicating that what the trainees are learning may also not match.

In summary, the quality of education of children with disabilities is also affected by the paradox of limited resources. Even as a shortage of teachers and classrooms presents challenges to increasing the number of integrated classrooms, the most common educational placement for children with disabilities, the very effort of providing different educational options other than special schools is perceived as improving quality.

### **The aid agenda**

If the paradigm of EFA is incompatible in such profound ways with the needs of the country, why is Cambodia still pursuing this agenda? The answer lies within the global context of international development. As a corollary to the Khmer Rouge legacy, Cambodia has become severely dependent on international financial and technical assistance. Liberation from the Khmer Rouge by the Vietnamese in 1979 brought a flood of Vietnamese and Russian advisors (Ayres 2004; Chandler 2000); currently, almost 2000 NGOs and donors provide support with foreign aid, amounting to \$689 million in 2007 (Berkvens 2009). For instance, through the Asian Development Bank (ADB) alone, between 1966 and 2007, Cambodia had received \$947.34 million for 42 loans (33 project loans and nine programme loans), \$125.55 million for 18 grant projects and \$94.36 million for 144 technical assistance (TA) projects, the majority of these having been provided since operations resumed in 1992 (ADB 2008).

Financial help tends to come with strings attached, whether it be a focus on human rights, decentralisation and good governance (Strangio and Meas 2009), or expectations of universal primary and inclusive education. While these outcomes are laudable, the fact is that they emerge from contemporary western sensibilities, from countries whose own historical development was rife with the inequities of protectionism and colonialism, and in evolving over an extended period of time, they enabled them to focus on the most pressing priorities first (Chang 2003; Chang and Grable 2004; Easterly 2006). As Chang states, it is often 'taken for granted that these "good" policies and institutions were used by the developed countries when they themselves were in the process of developing' (2003, 1). However, using roughly the same economic indicators of development against which the countries of the world are measured currently, a composite index<sup>11</sup> of which places countries like Cambodia firmly within the 'developing country' quadrant, the majority of today's developed countries would have been considered as 'developing' in the nineteenth century (Chang 2003; Easterly 2006). For example, universal health insurance was instituted between 1883 and 1898 in most European countries, including Germany, Sweden, Denmark and France, and as recently as 1984 in Portugal and 2010 in the US. Similarly, child labour was widespread in the early days of industrialism: In the 1820s, about half of cotton textile workers in the US were under 16 and British children were working between 12.5 and 16 hours per day (Chang 2003). Finally, Bellah et al. (1985) have argued that the concept of universal primary education in the US emerged in the mid-nineteenth century from the need to create a common curriculum amidst the competing values of immigrant communities. In other words, the west has had the benefit of several centuries to consolidate its economic status. Further, this progress occurred through periods of severe economic and political protectionism that included import protection and export promotion, slave-based modes of production, centralised governance through monarchies, and government-initiated territorial expansion, both within their own region, as the US government did, and where land was not so easily available, on a more global basis, as England, Spain, France and Holland, to name a few colonial countries, did. Colonialism and slavery, among other factors, gave these countries the opportunity to amass great wealth, that is, to become 'developed', as measured on the standards of today's indicators, through administrative and economic structures that were corrupt and neither decentralised nor free trading.

Today's developed countries, as the donors, are holding the developing world to standards of political and economic sophistication that they themselves were not

subjected to and would not have met at a similar phase in their development. Indeed, there is a greater irony, Chang (2003) compellingly argues, in the stronger donor-driven emphasis on the development of political institutions, despite evidence that social welfare institutions enhance efficiency and productivity growth through improvements in labour force quality and reduction in social tensions, which facilitate the legitimacy of the political system. Demanding these outcomes as a condition to international aid, given this context, may be an unfair and premature expectation for newly emerging nation states like Cambodia.

Unfortunately, as with many developing countries, Cambodia lacks the economic advantage to refuse international aid. This results in the Ministry of Education taking on initiatives, sometimes conflicting, more frequently duplicative, that may not be aligned with its own priorities, often with negative consequences. Firstly, although most initiatives are responses to existing needs, developed from needs' analyses of the situation, there is little effort to identify or utilise local, low-cost resources, resulting in expensive imports incompatible with the context and with severely compromising quality. For instance, the Ministry of Social Affairs offers a certified course in prosthetics and orthotics through an NGO specialising in rehabilitation services. The intention was that graduates from this programme would help the Ministry to establish similar rehabilitation programmes in other provinces. However, it turned out that in trying to establish a quality programme, the equipment on which these students had been trained had been imported from the donor country and its costs exceeded the government's budget. As a result, services were not extended to other provinces and the trained technicians remained unemployed.

Secondly, when a particular approach is applied successfully on a small scale by an NGO, government and donors will often decide to adopt it within the national strategy without considering that its success is predicated upon much higher capital and human investment per child by the NGO than the government can afford. The Child Friendly Schools (CFS) framework developed by UNESCO (Schaeffer 1999, cited in UNICEF 2006), and initially applied in one province, is one such example. CFS focuses on applying child-centred teaching techniques such as interactive learning, peer supports, small-group instruction, and frequent and/or informal assessment. One of its components is inclusive education, identifying strategies to include various populations of marginalised children, including children with disabilities. In 2003, the Ministry of Education, with funding from UNICEF, endorsed the CFS framework for all primary schools in Cambodia, and in 2006, it claimed that 20% had received CFS training (MOEYS 2006), even though the donor's focus on improving quality was not aligned with the government's need for quantitative increases. Similarly, the two-year pre-service training curriculum has been modified in the last four years to include not only the CFS framework but also separate modules on child rights, hygiene, gender and HIV/AIDS. In his interview, the Teacher Training Department Director threw up his hands and asked, quite rightly, 'And where do you expect me to add inclusive education?'

The idea of universal access embedded in the concept of EFA is incongruent with dominant values of hierarchy and value inequality in Cambodia. With the additional severe limitation of human resources, a legacy of the Khmer Rouge regime, a step-by-step approach where groups currently out of the educational system are targeted at a later stage in the development process would be more appropriate, but the constraints of international aid, which assumes the universal applicability of EFA, make this difficult. Similarly, donor emphasis on the quality of learner outcomes is equally out



of place in a situation where the content and structure of educational personnel training is badly flawed and the priority is on increasing numbers. Beleaguered by donor priorities that they may not necessarily see as priorities themselves, Ministry officials have become both the creators and the victims of a fragmented education system that is trying to do too much too quickly. The Cambodian way, they said in interviews, was to go ‘step by step’, whereas now they were at the point of having to ‘prioritise the priorities’ and were quite conscious of the irony that the donor countries themselves had had the luxury of time to adopt a step-by-step approach that was now being denied to a country that would be most suited to it.

## Conclusion

The basic assumptions of EFA as an everything-for-everyone approach and of inclusive education as the most appropriate option for children with disabilities are paradoxical in countries like Cambodia with severely limited human and material resources, deeply embedded values of social hierarchy and competing priorities. The basic premise of international development that prevailing concepts and values in developed countries are superior to those in developing countries is also questionable: After all, these values emerged in the developed world only after the issues that developing countries are grappling with currently were already resolved. In the ultimate analysis, all the players, government, donors and consultants, are equally enmeshed in this state of incongruence.

Perhaps, we need to investigate alternative paths to development that also build on the strengths and values of developing countries and offer an amalgam that may be more meaningful. In developing policies and services for children with disabilities in Cambodia, it would be more meaningful to seek the middle path between international imperatives and local realities, between the values of inclusive education and EFA, and the values of a post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. This could involve creating greater awareness of the importance of educating children with disability at the family and community level to offset, but not upset, the top-down approach of policy decisions. It would also involve expanding the variety of educational settings to accommodate school building and classroom shortages and the needs of specific groups, such as deaf students. Finally, it would involve the incorporation of inclusive education components within the pre-service curriculum and a practical, interactive module for in-service training to respond to competing curricular priorities without compromising on quality.

## Notes

1. Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, Kampong Cham, Siem Reap, Battambang, Sihanoukville, Pursat and Kampong Thom.
2. These include not only voters but also government officials and business tycoons (Un 2005).
3. Numbers went up from 183,000 to 286,000 (an increase of 56%) at the primary level, from 1570 to 3810 (an increase of 143%) at the secondary level, and from 240 to 350 (an increase of 46%) at the higher education level. It is significant, however, that at the technical level, the increase was a mere 18%, from 280 to 330.
4. However, a beauty pageant organised by an international donor for female landmine victims in 2009 was vetoed at the last minute by the Ministry of Social Welfare on the grounds that it was not ‘culturally appropriate’.
5. Vickery asserts that the pre-Angkorian tradition of naming people on the basis of qualities ascribed to the individuals, for example ‘names like *cke* “dog”, *sa-uy* “stinker”, *svaa kmau*

- “black monkey” and *kdi* “arse” given to “slave names” or lowest status personnel indicate the invidious status of many of the workers named in the inscriptions’ (1998, 247).
6. These categories are: vision, hearing, speaking, mobility, tactile, mental, learning difficulties, seizures/epilepsy, and other.
  7. Currently, basic education includes six years of primary (Grades 1–6) and three years of lower secondary education (Grades 7–9). Upper secondary education involves three additional years of schooling (Grades 10–12).
  8. In contrast, the amount allocated for inclusive education was a mere \$300,000.
  9. Incomplete schools refer to schools that lack adequate infrastructure, such as a roof or walls, or parts thereof, or have only one building.
  10. These programmes received funds from various sources such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK-based Department for International Development (DFID), or UNICEF.
  11. The use of composite indices can be further misleading. For instance, it is often overlooked that on inequality measures of the richest 20% to the poorest 20%, such as the Gini index, Cambodia’s score for 1992–2005 is 42, while the score for the US is just one point ahead at 41 (UNESCO 2010).

### Notes on contributor

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