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Planning, Financing and Implementing Lifelong Learning: Quality Education-related Sustainable Development Goals in Cambodia

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Key Messages

- ◆ Lifelong Learning is a new concept and educational journey adopted by Cambodia so the country can accomplish its sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030. Lifelong Learning consists not just of non-formal education but of all formal, non-formal and informal education.
- ◆ In 2016, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) invested US \$764 million in Lifelong Learning. This figure is 76.1% of the total annual educational budget allocated to help all Cambodians achieve nine years of basic education. 48.3% of this was allocated to primary schools, 18.7% to lower secondary schools and 9.1% to pre-schools. Upper secondary schools and higher education received proportions of 9.2% each. While non-formal education is currently believed to contribute a large pool of activities to support Lifelong Learning outside school, only 2.9% (or \$US 22.16 million) of the total annual budget was allocated to this sector in 2016.
- ◆ Bilateral, multilateral and international organisations have funded MoEYS activities and local non-government organisations (NGOs) to help the educational sector meet the country's millennium development goals (MDGs) and SDGs. The Lifelong Learning programme will improve if the government of Cambodia allocates extra money for activities beyond those currently available for non-formal education.

Lifelong Learning in the Cambodian Education System

The concept of Lifelong Learning remains very new to government agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) in Cambodia. As a result, only a few activities have been undertaken that contribute to this concept. Lifelong Learning is a fundamental goal of recent education policies in Cambodia and it is often advocated as a way to accomplish socioeconomic development and as a tool for promoting a knowledge-based society. The increasing significance of Lifelong Learning in both national and international policy results in the need to place it and its implications under close and critical scrutiny. When using the concept of Lifelong Learning, it is important to be aware of the responsibilities of managing, delivering and supporting Lifelong Learning with opportunities to develop our own analysis and practice in what is a constantly changing economic, social, technological and policy environment.¹ The Former Executive Director of the NGO Education Partnership of Cambodia (NEP) is one of the most prominent and experienced civil society actors in the education sector. He has provided a very brief overview about how the concept of Lifelong Learning has been introduced in Cambodia:

In Europe, Lifelong Learning has been introduced for a long time in countries such as Germany. People there also learn at home, in public spaces and at the office. They like reading. Lifelong Learning is a new concept in Cambodia and it was first known when SDGs were introduced. Before 2015, Lifelong Learning was not

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discussed or talked about in Cambodia and non-formal education was very popular. Back in 2015, at the SDG conference in Incheon, South Korea, people started to talk about Lifelong Learning. There have been, so far, very few NGOs working on Lifelong Learning, for example DVV.²

In 2010, officials from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) were sent to receive training on Lifelong Learning in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. After the training, the Cambodian delegates informed the Minister of MoEYS about Lifelong Learning; however, no action was taken at that time. In October 2017, a delegate from MoEYS was again sent to undertake training on Lifelong Learning in Vietnam. In November 2017, MoEYS organised the first workshop with support from UNESCO and DVV, who initiated the development of a policy on Lifelong Learning in Cambodia. A policy on Lifelong Learning has now been drafted and is waiting for endorsement by the Council of Ministers.³ A joint High-Level Meeting⁴ was called by the Minister of MoEYS, HE Dr Hang Chuon Naron, on 17 November 2017 at the Sofitel Hotel in Phnom Penh, which was the first step towards a Lifelong Learning Policy in Cambodia. The meeting gathered representatives of different ministries, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, SEAMEO CELLL and DVV International with the aim of finding a shared understanding of Lifelong Learning and its meaning both internationally and in the Cambodian setting in order to prepare for its translation into Cambodia's national legal framework. The Director of the Department of Non-Formal Education, MoEYS added that:

The policy has been developed with strong commitment and support from UNESCO, SEAMEO CELLL, DVV and other national and international organisations working to support the education sector in Cambodia. There are some problems which may constrain the implementation of Lifelong Learning; they include: curriculum, the strategic plan and M&E mechanisms to monitor the strategic plan.⁵

According to the Phnom Penh-based Chief of Education for UNESCO, "Lifelong Learning is a need of Cambodia. The concept was introduced in 1972 but it is very new to Cambodia. As I am a Hindu... we need to learn the Hindu bible from birth to death. Learning can take place all the time."⁶ The education system of Cambodia includes formal, non-formal and informal education and Lifelong Learning is part of non-formal, informal and formal education types. The former Executive Director of the NGO Education Partnership of Cambodia (NEP) explains that Lifelong Learning is more than just non-formal education: all formal, non-formal and informal education contribute to Lifelong Learning. Facilities can help to improve the access of local communities to skills and knowledge. Lifelong Learning can be best implemented when facilities are well equipped. Each community has its own needs and demands, so community-based learning centre should conduct skills and needs assessments in order to identify local needs.⁷ The Director of the Department of Non-Formal Education, MoEYS identified issues with current understandings of Lifelong Learning, stating:

Non-formal education is a part of Lifelong Learning but we have confusion. Some key actors claim that that non-formal education was an old model and Lifelong Learning should replace it. Non-formal education should not work anymore after the adaptation of Lifelong Learning because we should not waste our time working on two different policies for one thing.⁸

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⁴ See details: http://www.dvv-international.la/detail/news/the-first-step-towards-a-lifelong-learning-policy-in-cambodia/?tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=53ec614f4df60bb47ac82ae3d32ab1e3

⁵ Former Executive Director, NGO Education Partnership of Cambodia (NEP), Phnom Penh.

⁶ Chief of Education, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Phnom Penh.

⁷ Former Executive Director, NGO Education Partnership of Cambodia (NEP), Phnom Penh.

⁸ Director of Department of Non-Formal Education, Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MoEYS), Phnom Penh.

Financing the Educational Sector in Cambodia

According to *The Strategy for Educational Reform (2018–2023)*, the current focus of MoEYS is on academic management, financial management and human resource management. Each of these factors are essential for improving the quality of education in Cambodia and achieving Goal 2 of the Cambodia’s customable development goals by 2030 (Hang, 2018). MoEYS’s Education Strategic Plan has a clear goal of supporting the immediate and future economic growth and competitiveness of the nation in order to realise its ambitions. This depends on people having the right knowledge and relevant skills that reflect Cambodia’s cultural and ethical heritage. In 2006, approximately US \$946 million was spent driving educational development in Cambodia. Of this, 80.8% was provided by the government, with development partners providing 18.1% and loans making up 1.1%. According to the mid-term *Education Strategic Plan 2014–2018*, MoEYS invested US \$764 million in 2016. In addition to this, development partners, including bilateral and multilateral agencies, allocated US \$135.8 million to contribute to the implementation of the *Education Strategic Plan 2014–2018*. MoEYS has committed to gradually increasing the annual budget for education to US \$1,033 million in 2019, US \$1,368 million in 2023, US \$1,804 million in 2028, and US \$1,984 million in 2030. Such investment may help the Royal Government of Cambodia to reach its ambition of transitioning from a lower-middle income country to an upper-middle income country by 2030 and a developed country by 2050 (MoEYS, 2014). Development partners allocated 10.3% of the total official development assistance (ODA) in 2008. This rose to a peak of 14.1% in 2016 but dropped to 11.0% in 2017 and was only 7.4% in 2018. In order to replace these funds, educational loans increased from US \$9.10 million in 2014 to US \$24 million in 2018.

The largest proportion of MoEYS’ annual budget is allocated for school-based management to ensure Cambodians achieve nine years of basic education (76.1% of the total annual budget in 2016). This further breaks down into spending on primary school (48.3%), lower secondary school (18.7%) and pre-school (9.1%). The Ministry allocated upper secondary (9.3%) and higher education (9.2%) similar proportions. However, only 2.9% (US \$22.16 million) of the total annual budget in 2016 was allocated for non-formal education. A lecturer at the Faculty of Education observed that while the Non-Formal Education Department of MoEYS has made a strong effort to ensure that all children, youth, adults, poor people and those with disabilities realise their rights to a basic education and Lifelong Learning, only a limited number of rural and poor Cambodians have access to skills that can successfully support them to seek decent jobs. Some of the reasons for this are dependence on development partners and the limited budget from the government.⁹ The Director of the Department of Non-Formal Education at MoEYS has appealed for more attention to be paid to non-formal education through budget allocations from the government and development partners because non-formal education is a very important contribution to achieving the SDG goals on education.

Lifelong Learning has been included in the SDGs to be achieved between 2015 and 2030. One of the Cambodia’s 17 goals is SDG 4: “*Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.*” Since Lifelong Learning is a global commitment, Cambodia through MoEYS will integrate it into the existing mechanism. A policy on Lifelong Learning is now in draft and waiting for endorsement from the Council of Ministers. Thirteen or 14 relevant ministries have been included to work on this new initiative. We also aim to work closely with NGOs and development partners who are enriched with both financial and human resources. For example, lessons learned and best practices of NGOs are useful to promote Lifelong Learning in Cambodia. However, this policy will not succeed unless all the relevant stakeholders work together. Lifelong Learning is a cross-cutting issue.¹⁰ Lifelong Learning is one of the 12 prioritised programmes proposed in the *Education Strategic Plan 2014–2018*. The 10th prioritised programme was formulated as follows:

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Literacy and Lifelong Learning program – equivalency programs and clearly defined mechanisms for literacy and Lifelong Learning to enable the country’s human capital to continuously adapt to and benefit from emerging opportunities in the social, cultural and economic environment. (MoEYS, 2014, pp. 15)

Making the National Policy on Lifelong Learning a Reality

During the fieldwork, people stated that they believed that their learning period ended after getting jobs; however, they did say they would consider going back to school if their knowledge and skills were not able to satisfy or achieve their employment goals as planned. Today, many people understand the importance of professional development throughout their life, especially when they have faced struggles and challenges in doing their job. The main goal of Lifelong Learning is to encourage people to consider learning as a non-stop activity so they keep updating their skills and knowledge to meet social, economic and technical changes. Lifelong Learning provides many individual benefits because skill advancement is highly correlated with knowledge and skills. For example, moving from one type of job to another requires learning new skills and improving knowledge to improve competency. Many countries work to improve economic growth, and governments work to guide learning for all of the people in the country. Lifelong Learning helps economic growth and helps people to become global citizens.¹¹

A draft of the National Policy on Lifelong Learning was completed and has been submitted for endorsement at the Council of Ministers. In late 2018 or 2019, actions will be made in regard to Lifelong Learning in order to transform it into reality. Between 2000 and 2015, Cambodia adopted and localised the millennium development goals (MDGs). One of the nine goals, Goal 2, was accomplished in 2015 when the country achieved universal primary education. Post-MDG, Cambodia has continued to commit to achieving the 17 SDGs. Goal 4 requires the world to commit to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting Lifelong Learning opportunities for all between 2015 and 2030. To achieve this, Cambodia has now developed a National Policy on Lifelong Learning. However, serious questions must be asked as to whether Cambodia is solving real problems or simply following buzzwords introduced by the United Nations. Moving from MDG to SDG with its own existing education system will be very difficult in the Cambodian context due to the limited government budget for education generally and in particular for the adaptation of Lifelong Learning. Various activities are required to promote Lifelong Learning, but quality and equity are key. Although Lifelong Learning is a new concept to Cambodia, the existing education strategic plan (ESP) already includes many key components of Lifelong Learning concepts. Lifelong Learning has two points: being flexible and learning for decent jobs.¹²

When people have the low capacity to pay for their individual education (a cost of approximately US \$231 per person per year on average in Cambodia), support from government agencies and development partners is vital for bringing people back to school for professional development. In 2016, MoEYS invested US \$764 million on education; of this, 94.6% of its national budget was allocated for formal education and only 2.9% was for non-formal education. There was no budget line clearly revealing from which section the Lifelong Learning programme budget would be allocated. If it is from the category of non-formal education, which appears most likely, then Lifelong Learning seemed to be only a buzzword that Cambodia has adopted in order to be aligned with international commitments. Therefore, to achieve Lifelong Learning, an increased budget from ODA and loans is essential. On average, ODA for the educational sector (2008 and 2018) and educational loans (2014–2018) were US \$135.8 and US \$14.3 respectively. They were mainly derived from bilateral agencies (i.e. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)), multi-lateral agencies (i.e., United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund is a United Nations Agency (UNICEF), and United

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Nations Development Programme (UNDP)) and international organisations (i.e., World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB). The international community should consider increasing the education budget for the non-formal and information educational sectors to ensure the Lifelong Learning programme is successful.

Bilateral, multilateral and international organisations have funded MoEYS activities and local NGOs are working in communities to support the educational sector; however, they have mainly funded activities implemented in Cambodia that contribute to international commitments, for example MDGs and SDGs. In this regard, the Lifelong Learning programme would benefit if and when the government of Cambodia allocates an extra budget for activities beyond those available within non-formal education. The available budget is already small and cannot support various activities such as classes for improving literacy and professional development and vocational training. The availability of a national budget for the Lifelong Learning Programme will not only sustain the long-term operation of the programme but also help to reduce international dependency. In 2015, Cambodia was re-classified as a lower-middle-income economy by the World Bank Group; its gross net income (GNI) per capita was then US \$1,070. If the country meets its ambitious goal of transitioning from a lower-middle income country to an upper-middle income country by 2030 and a developed country by 2050, international aid will be automatically reduced and replaced with the national budget. Ensuring the improved knowledge and relevant skills for economic growth and the competitiveness of the nation that reflect Cambodia's cultural and ethical heritage will only happen if there is more investment via the national budget for improving formal, non-formal and informal education.

Suggestions for Planning and Policy Implication

Develop a legal framework based on the National Policy on Lifelong Learning. After receiving endorsement from the Council of Ministers, MoEYS should establish a unit or a national task force in charge of Lifelong Learning. This unit or task force should work on a legal framework such as a strategic development plan and action plans to be aligned with the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP), ESP and SDG indicators.

Improve educational infrastructure and facilities for transferring knowledge and skills across the country. Improving the function and the operation of community-based learning centres can help to improve the transfer of non-formal and informal education. If possible, technologies and IT facilities should be fully equipped in order to allow people to upgrade their skills and knowledge.

Increase access to informal education through social media. Many Cambodian people now have access to social media and networks, for example Facebook, Integrate, Telegram, WhatsApp and YouTube. These platforms play a very important role in sharing knowledge and improving skills and competence.

Establish a coordination mechanism and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. In order to track progress, an M&E system should be established that works in close coordination with MoEYS. The existing EMIS system is the best option as all of the indicators related to Lifelong Learning can be included in the system in order to track progress for reporting and evaluation. In addition to this, EMIS not only helps to reduce the cost of M&E implementation but also aligns with the existing ESP and NSDP.

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