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The political economy of primary education reform in Cambodia

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Abstract

This paper examines the quality of primary education provision in Cambodia using a 'political settlements' framework developed at the University of Manchester. The framework characterises Cambodia as a 'hybrid' settlement with a weak dominant party and predatory administration, albeit with some islands of administrative effectiveness. Such states can achieve developmental progress in circumscribed areas with multi-stakeholder support, but more wide-ranging, top-down reforms will normally disappoint. We use the framework retrospectively to explain the balance between quantity and quality in Cambodia's education provision, and also prospectively to assess the prospects for reform. We conclude that, although new leadership in the education ministry promises to bring faster, deeper reform than ever before, powerful forces for inertia still exist. These forces could potentially be alleviated with enhanced international support, but development partners' current ways of working leave much to be desired. The paper concludes by outlining a number of policy options.

Keywords: Cambodia, development, education, political economy, political settlements

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Abbreviations

CESSP	Cambodia Education Sector Support Project
CFS	Child-friendly schools
CNRP	Cambodia National Rescue Party
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
DOE	District office of education
DTMT	District training and monitoring teams
ESWG	Education sector working group
FUNCINPEC	Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant Neutre Pacifique Et Coopératif (a royalist political party)
JTWG	Joint technical working group
KPRP	Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (the forerunner of the CPP)
MOEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports
PB	Programme budget
PCK	Pedagogical content knowledge
POE	Provincial office of education
PS	Political settlement
SOS A	Secretary of State 'A' (MOEYS' most powerful technocrat)
SSG	School support group
SIG	School improvement grant
TPAP	Teacher Policy Action Plan
TPS	Teacher professional standards
TTC	Teacher training college
TTD	Teacher training department

Interview codes

EA	Expatriate advisor
FG	Focus group
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
IS	International scholar
LMA	Local MOEYS official, province A
LMB	Local MOEYS official, province B
NE	National expert
NM	National MOEYS official
SSA	School staff, province A
SSB	School staff, province B
TTCA	Teacher training college, province A
TTCB	Teacher training college, province B

Introduction

In August 2014, Cambodian students up and down the country sat for their Grade 12 national exit exams. Unlike in previous years, elaborate measures had been taken to ensure that exam questions were not leaked by education officials, students were frisked for mobile phones, calculators or other cheating aids by thousands of volunteers, and in some cases, exam halls and papers were protected by armed Anti-Corruption Unit guards.¹ One student summed up the situation with the statement, 'It's damn strict this year' (Brehm, 2014)(NE2, TTCA). When the exams were graded, it transpired that of the 75,000 students who sat them, a mere 26 percent had passed – a striking contrast to the 87 percent that passed the previous year – with only 11 individuals receiving an 'A' grade (Ponniyah and Heng, 2014).² Dismal though they were, these results came as little surprise to experts on Cambodia's education, since they reflect a system which, while successful in building infrastructure and getting large numbers of children into school, has been much less adept at delivering educational quality.

The exam reforms were the brainchild of Dr Hang Chuon Naron, a new education minister with the mandate to shake up the sector and deliver tangible results prior to the birth of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, and to what are expected to be hard-fought general elections in 2018. He has explained them as both a tool for diagnosing the ills of the sector, and as one part of a wide-ranging reform agenda (2014b). In this paper, we delve into the politics of the reforms, applying a 'political settlements' framework developed at the Centre for Effective States and Inclusive Development (ESID) at the University of Manchester.

Political settlements analysis focuses on the power relations that lie behind formal institutions, and categorises regimes according to how power is organised and exercised. In this paper we use the framework to explain, retrospectively, how Cambodia's political settlement has conditioned the emergence of an education system that focuses on quantity rather than quality, and also prospectively, to help us assess the prospects for reform.

The paper is based on a review of secondary literature and official documents, one focus group with national NGOs and expatriate advisors, 25 national-level interviews, and 26 local interviews.³ It begins by discussing the politics of primary education up to 2013, incorporating a discussion of educational outcomes, and the national and sectoral political settlements that underlie these. It then proceeds to the present period, examining, among other things, the government's new Teacher Policy Action Plan, and the international, national and local stakeholder interests surrounding it. It

¹ In fact, there was also a clampdown on cheating in 2002, which also saw a dramatic decline in the pass rate. However, subsequent years saw a return to cheating as normal (Brehm, 2014).

² Following protests, failing students were given a second chance to sit exams in October. However, regulations were again strictly enforced, and the failure rate was 82.06 percent (Barron, 2014a).

³ A list of interview codes is given at the start of the paper.

concludes that although there is now definite political will at national level to improve quality throughout the system, powerful actors, especially those charged with implementing the reforms, remain ambivalent. Much effort will be needed to provide appropriate incentives for them, while difficult challenges of sequencing, coordination, and capacity must also be overcome. Development partners can assist here, but current aid modalities leave much to be desired.

The ESID framework

The ESID 'political settlement' framework, in common with other work in the political settlements genre, is an attempt to specify how different societies solve the problem of endemic violence or civil war, and the implications this has for developmental progress. It is based on the assumption that durable peace depends at a basic level on a balance of power between social groups and classes, and a common understanding (at least among elites) about how power should be organised and exercised.⁴ Political settlements vary greatly in their economic dynamism, but all presuppose a type and level of economic activity sufficient to support the existing political arrangements. Political settlements are not static and do evolve over time; however, because powerful groups are heavily invested in them, change tends to be gradual: sharp, discontinuous changes imply either a collapse or transformation of the political settlement (DFID, 2010; Di John and Putzel, 2009; Hickey, 2011; Khan, 2010; Levy and Walton, 2013; Levy 2014; North et al., 2009).

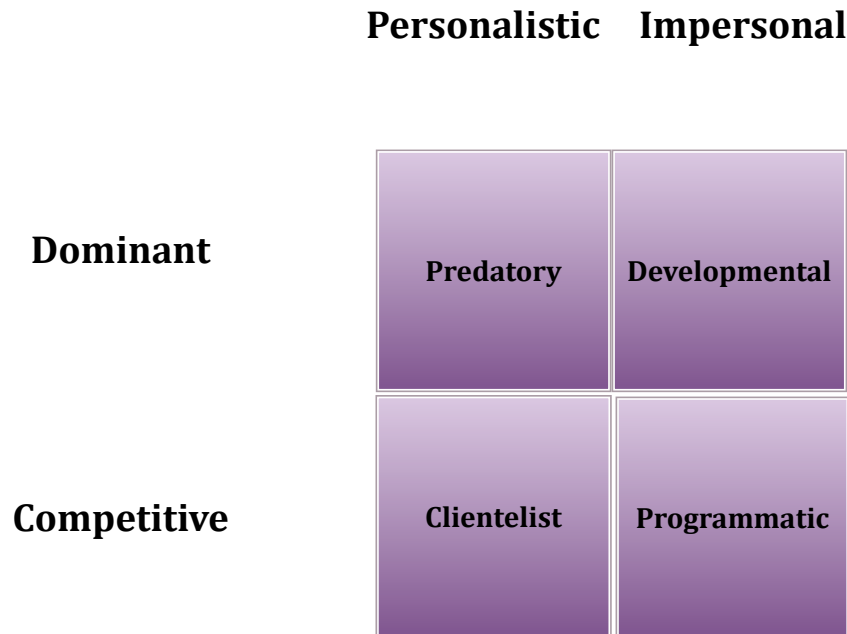
ESID classifies the diversity of the world's political settlements along two main axes. The first axis concerns the degree of competition in the political system. In 'dominant' settlements, it is very difficult to remove the leader or ruling party from power, while in 'competitive' settlements, this is much easier. The other axis concerns the degree of organisational or institutional complexity, for which the degree to which institutions are 'impersonal' or 'rule-governed' provides a proxy. In 'impersonal' settlements, Weberian legal-rational norms are adhered to, while in 'personalised' settlements, the opposite is the case (Levy and Walton, 2013).⁵

The framework (see Figure 1) yields four basic types: dominant-personalistic; competitive-personalistic; dominant-impersonal; and competitive-impersonal.

⁴ Both power 'over' and power 'to'. For a discussion, see Haugaard (2012).

⁵ Indicators of where a settlement stands on the organisational complexity axis include: "The extent to which *the rule of law* functions as an impartial, third party mechanism for resolving disputes among private parties, within the state, or between public and private parties; the extent to which *political parties* become formalised, and organised around programmatic platforms rather than the conferral of patronage to insider clients; the quality of *elections* – i.e. the extent to which they are competitive, free and fair; the extent of *openness* – i.e. the presence of rules (e.g. on freedom of information) and actors (such as the media) that ensure the open operation of civil society, and the transparent flow of information; and the extent to which the *public bureaucracy* – both the 'central bureaucracy' and front-line executive agencies – functions in an ad hoc, personalised way or according to impersonal rules" (ESID, 2013).

Figure. 1 The ESID typology



Dominant and competitive ‘personalistic’ settlements are likely to be predatory or clientelistic in nature, and consequently not very good at securing the public goods that typically underlie developmental progress.⁶ Dominant and competitive ‘impersonal’ settlements are likely to be more successful in this regard, approximating, respectively, authoritarian developmental states and programmatic democracies on the ‘doorstep’ of advanced country status (Levy and Walton, 2013).

Historically, almost all countries in the world were once governed by personalised elite bargains, so one of the main puzzles for political settlements theory is how some settlements become more impersonal, and thereby developmental, over time (Levy and Walton, 2013; Levy, 2014; North et al., 2009). The ESID framework hypothesises that this rarely happens by means of sweeping, top-down efforts to reform political systems and administrations, since these, by going against the grain of existing arrangements, are likely to result in resistance or collapse. Rather, progress in dominant settlements is more likely to come via a step-by-step approach to bureaucratic reform, while in competitive ones it is likely to arise when coalitions of stakeholders provide support for ‘islands’ of administrative effectiveness (Levy and Walton, 2013).

In previous work we have argued that Cambodia is a dominant party system subject, intermittently, to strong competitive challenges; institutions are primarily personalistic,

⁶ ‘Public good’ being defined broadly here as any kind of good which, having positive externalities, will normally be undersupplied by private actors.

although some islands of rule-governed behaviour can be found. This makes it a hybrid or 'in-between' case (Kelsall and Heng, 2014 a and b). Developmental progress is consequently possible in circumscribed areas, but more ambitious reforms are unlikely to succeed. Just how much reform is possible, and the best methods of achieving it, remain, however, something of an enigma. By exploring progress in a reform-minded ministry like education, this paper hopes to advance our understanding of this point.

Educational policy and outcomes in Cambodia

The preference of Cambodia's rulers for expanding quantity over ensuring quality in education is not a new problem. The country gained independence from France in 1953 under the leadership of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and quickly embarked on a massive expansion in educational provision. There were rapid moves to introduce universal primary education, universal secondary education, and a higher education system that was the envy of other states in the region (Ayres, 2000). Limited resources, and excess speed, however, meant that 'schools were poorly constructed, teachers hastily trained, too many students were crammed into classrooms, and teaching facilities and materials were inadequate' (Ayres, 2000: 63). The policies produced large numbers of graduates, but, because Cambodia remained essentially a peasant economy, many of them could not find salaried jobs. Graduate unemployment fed into widespread disaffection with the regime, paving the way for Sihanouk's overthrow in a 1970 coup (Ayres, 2000). Five years of devastating civil war ensued, before the republican regime succumbed to the communist guerillas of the Khmer Rouge (Chandler, 1991).

Perhaps no state in modern history has suffered such a dramatic educational reversal as Cambodia under the combined effects of war and the Khmer Rouge. Teachers fled the country or were killed, school buildings were used for non-educational purposes, while whatever education that took place – much of it teaching revolutionary slogans through song and dance (Sloper, 1999) – was entrusted to untrained 'base people' (Ayres, 2000).⁷ When the Vietnamese-backed Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP) overthrew the Khmer Rouge in 1979, the education system was practically non-existent (NM5). The new rulers rapidly rebuilt the system, such that by the end of that year there were 716,553 students enrolled in primary school and 13,619 teachers. However, only 4,000 of those teachers had been formally trained (Ayres, 2000: 132). Throughout the period, 'The major obstacle to improving educational quality in Cambodia remained the nation's teaching corps, who were very poorly trained and poorly remunerated'. Teacher training colleges were desperately short of materials, with many teachers at Provincial Teacher Training Colleges (PTTCs) unfit to be teachers themselves (Ayres, 2000: 143).

In 1989 the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia, opening the door to increased involvement by international donors (Sloper, 1999). Initially, their experience was a

⁷ 'Base people' were defined by the Khmer Rouge as those who joined the 'Revolution', viz. the fight against the Republic, prior to 1975.

frustrating one. National administrators had no idea of how to construct plans or budgets, and, according to one observer, 'it was common to see education ministry staff playing *boules* in the ministry yard, gossiping at their desks and departing early for lack of any clear idea of what to do in the office' (McNamara, 2013: 24). Capacity, nevertheless, was gradually built, and the sector attracted substantial donor funds (McNamara, 1999; Sloper, 1999). It was less successful in attracting government money, languishing at around 10 percent of total spending. And, while most donor attention went into trying to improve quality, the government focused its own resources on infrastructural expansion (McNamara, 1999: 100-101).

The revenue situation improved markedly after 2000, with more funds channelled to the sector under the government's Priority Action Plan (reaching a high of 19 percent of budgeted recurrent expenditure in 2006 (Benveniste et al., 2008: 4, 60)).⁸ Acting under global initiatives, such as Education for All, and the Millennium Development Goals, there has been a big push to expand access. Between 2000 and 2014, the number of primary schools increased from 5,468 to 6,993, and the number of teachers from 45,152 to 55,958 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2014; UNESCO, 2010).⁹ The amount of training received by teachers has also increased steadily over the years, as have teacher salaries (although teacher salaries fell as a proportion of total education spending (Benveniste et al., 2008: 67)). Capacity-building efforts in the ministry have also continued, such that by 2009, the country's Education Strategic Plan was, for the first time said to be genuinely 'nationally owned' (McNamara, 2013). There have also been numerous schemes to improve educational quality, for example the Education Quality Improvement Project, student-centred learning, cluster schools, the Child Friendly School Approach, and life-skills curriculum development (Benveniste et al., 2008; Reimer, 2012). A national survey of teachers in 2011 found that teachers with more than ten years' experience felt the quality of education was better than when they started teaching, while those with less than ten years' experience felt there was no change, or even that quality had declined (CITA, 2011).

Whatever the merits of these perceptions, educational outcomes remain low. For example, the 2010 Early Grade Reading Assessment of grades 1-6 found that 33 percent of children could not read, and that 47 percent of those that could had difficulty comprehending what they had read. A recent impact evaluation found that grade 9 schoolchildren performed no better on maths and vocabulary than children who were not in school (cited in Tandon and Fukao, 2015: 1). The aforementioned grade 12 exam results show that problems continue throughout the system, and indeed, many investors in Cambodia complain of a poorly educated workforce seriously deficient in generic employment skills (Barron, 2014b; Madhur, 2014).

⁸ The actual spend may have been lower (IS1).

⁹ Note that owing to 'a surge in demand', the expansion in secondary education, which started from a very low base, has been even more rapid than that for primary education (Benveniste et al., 2008: 28).

The politics of education reform 1960-2013

What were the political drivers behind this pattern? During the Sihanouk era, policymaking existed at two levels. On one was the world of official reports and policies, usually well-informed and technically sound; on the other was Sihanouk's vainglorious quest to make Cambodia a modern nation overnight, plus a populist desire to satisfy peasant aspirations, in which education represented an opportunity to escape the drudgery and poverty of rural life (Ayres, 2000; Chandler, 1991). In this spirit, Sihanouk consistently interfered with the policies of the ministry, overriding its technocratic approach in favour of grand political gestures (Ayres, 2000). The Khmer Rouge, in part reacting to the excesses of Sihanoukism, had an entirely different vision. According to Pol Pot, 'there are no schools, faculties, or universities in the traditional sense ... because we want to do away with all vestiges of the past' (Ayres, 2000: 104). After the Khmer Rouge's fall, the KPRP vigorously rebuilt the education system; but quality was not the main concern. According to Ayres, 'education was seen as a primary tool for state building and establishing legitimacy' (Ayres, 2000: 135), and, in the eyes of Vietnamese advisors, that meant building a nation of "new socialist workmen" by placing as many students in schools as quickly as possible (Ayres, 2000: 128).

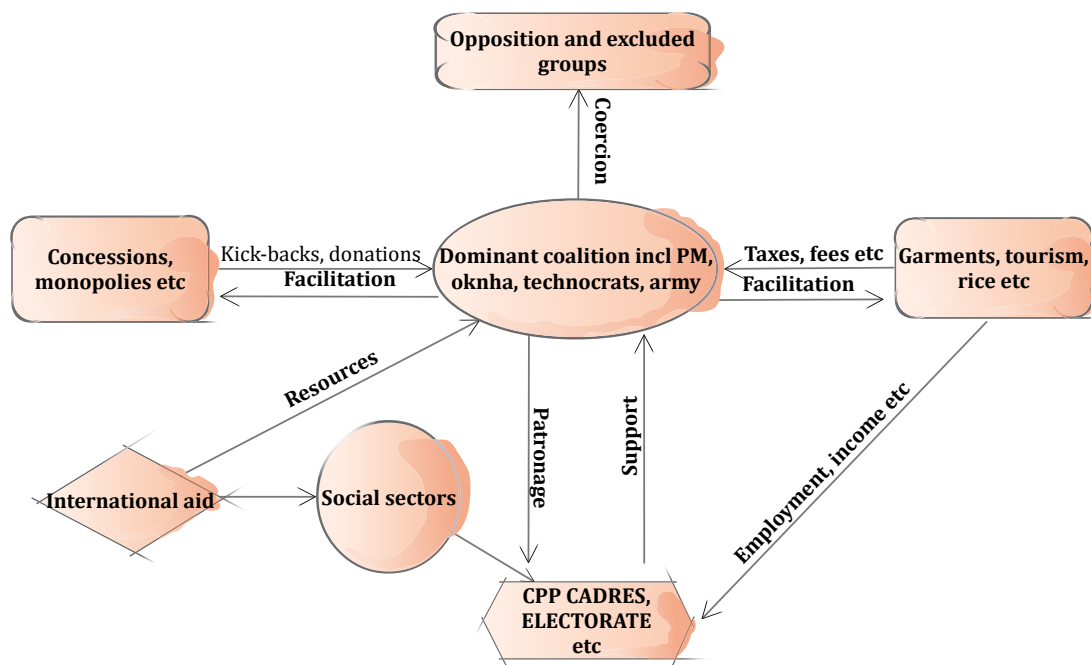
These efforts were proceeding in a context of state-building on a shoestring. When it came to power in the 1980s, the KPRP regime was bereft of Western support and highly vulnerable to revanchist assaults from the Khmer Rouge and other rebel forces. The most urgent need was to establish a network of supporters who would act as a bulwark against ongoing insurgency. Consequently, there was a drive to recruit functionaries to the new state. But with the formal economy in ruins, and formal revenue-raising powers weak, this was done on the understanding that in addition to their meagre salaries, new recruits could use their positions to extract rents. By controlling access to the most lucrative of these, while turning a blind eye to petty rent-scraping, the leadership was able to build a patronage-based state (Gottesman, 2004). As in most patronage systems, loyalty was more important than competence when it came to recruitment – a trend accentuated, no doubt, by the fact that many former, competent, officials had either fled or been murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Consequently, most ministries were staffed by poorly qualified, underpaid staff, who understandably expended as much energy moonlighting or extracting rents as they did pursuing official government policies.

Nor did this change much with the advent of internationally-brokered multi-party democracy in the 1990s. Now the KPRP, renamed the CPP, found itself in competition with a deadly enemy, the royalist party FUNCINPEC, for control of the state. The size of the civil service ballooned (McNamara, 1999; Roberts, 2001), with a large share of the budget channelled to the CPP strongholds of the interior ministry and the military, while a large portion of the resources reaching education went to populist measures such as increasing teacher salaries and school infrastructure. Reports from the field mention 'attractive new buildings without equipment or competent teaching staff' (McNamara, 1999: 101).

After vanquishing FUNCINPEC in a bloody contest in 1997, and finally defeating the Khmer Rouge in 1998, Prime Minister Hun Sen was finally able to consolidate his political settlement (see Figure 2). It is based on a dominant coalition comprising local tycoons (often awarded the honorific *oknha*), foreign investors, military men, selected technocrats and international donors. Under its informal terms, technocrats and foreign investors have created the conditions for jobs and growth; business cronies and the military have made rents from concessions and contracts; and international donors have provided technical advice and supported the budget, particularly in the social sectors.

This settlement, it should be noted, is an evolution, not a displacement of, the state-building process initiated in the 1980s, the main difference being that international donors have grown in importance relative to the Vietnamese, and liberal democracy has replaced state socialism as the official ideology. The compliance of subordinate groups – and electoral victories – is secured through a mixture of ideology (the CPP takes credit for defeating the Khmer Rouge), patronage (a portion of the dominant coalition’s rents are channelled to the masses in the form of roads, schools, etc.), programmatic policy (as with some of the donor-supported initiatives in education and health) and coercion (dissenters rapidly incur the wrath of the security forces) (Craig and Pak, 2011; Hughes and Conway, 2003; Hughes and Un, 2011; Kelsall and Seiha, 2014; Kelsall and Heng, 2014 ; Pak, 2011; Un, 2005). But the patronage-based nature of the state has not been radically overhauled.

Figure 2. Cambodia’s political settlement, 1998-2013



Under the terms of this settlement, the most rapid developmental progress is found where the interests of development partners and the political leadership align. This can clearly be seen, for example, in the drive to expand educational infrastructure

and access, which satisfies both donor desires to demonstrate progress on objectives such as the Education for All initiative and the Millennium Development Goals (Brehm and Silova, 2014; Reimer, 2012), and politicians' desire to be seen to be providing something concrete for electoral constituencies. As early as the 1990s, the prime minister was flying around the country in a helicopter, claiming that 'the CPP is a "superpower" when it comes to school construction' (Ayres, 2000: 180).

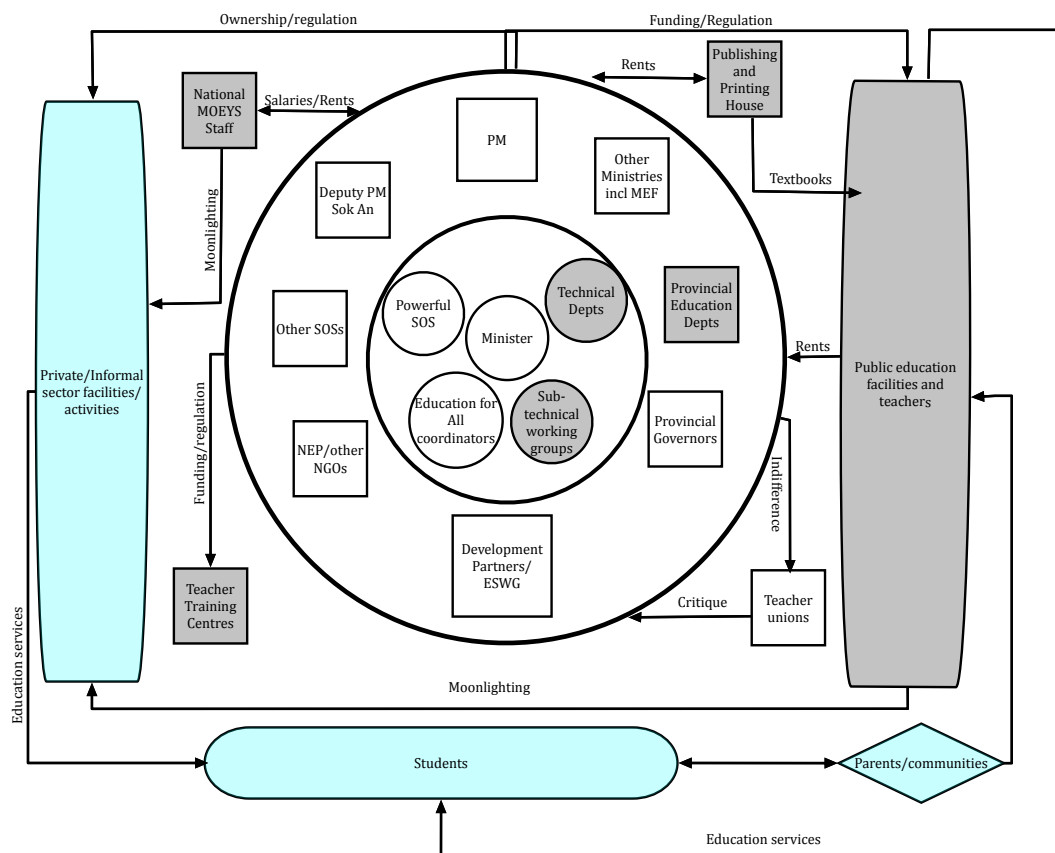
Donor concerns about quality have engendered less political commitment. The prime minister is apparently, 'unconcerned about the finer details of educational quality and relevance' (Ayres, 2000: 190), while 'National leader initiatives ... are driven by political motives, uninformed by the technical considerations underlying the effectiveness of the institutions of a modern state' (McNamara, 1999: 101). This is hardly surprising. Given the devastation to human resources wrought by the Khmer Rouge, simultaneously expanding access and improving quality would have been very difficult, if not impossible. The government has consequently put more energy into outcomes that are easily achievable and earn the most political capital (NM5), and, in light of evidence that the vast majority of students and parents are satisfied with educational quality (VSO et al., 2014: 7-8), its political instincts appear to be sound.

A more granular understanding of the political economy of educational outcomes in the period 1998-2013 can be gained by examining the 'sectoral settlement' in education itself, as illustrated in Figure 3.¹⁰ The main 'policy-making actors' are coloured in white, with the main 'implementing actors' in grey.

In the inner circle of power are the minister (a post held during this period by Im Sethy (CPP), Kol Pleng (FUNCINPEC), then Im Sethy again) and the most powerful secretary of state (whom we will call SOS A). SOS A began his professional life in the teacher training department, where he still retains his strongest power base, working his way up the hierarchy over time. Observers attributed his rise to being in the right place at the right time when the Education for All and Child Friendly Schools policies were introduced, demonstrating his competence to development partners, and subsequently being chosen by the minister to handle donor relations. He has since amassed an enormous portfolio of responsibilities and undoubtedly has the largest patronage base in the ministry (EA6, EA7). Also present are the Education for All coordinators (who work closely with SOS A), the technical departments (with primary implementing responsibility), and the sub-technical working groups.

¹⁰ The diagram is the result of a 'political settlements mapping' exercise, carried out among education NGOs, development partners, and CDRI researchers, held at CDRI in January 2015. The mapping exercise used a tool adapted by ESID from Parks and Cole (2010).

Figure 3. The political settlement in education, as of 2013



In the outer circle of power are the prime minister, Deputy PM Sok An, other ministries for whom education policies have implications, in particular the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), more junior secretaries of state, provincial governors, and provincial departments of education, development partners – the most important of whom, such as UNICEF, UNESCO, JICA, Sida, and the World Bank, sit on the Education Sector Working Group – and NGOs, most influential among whom, perhaps, is the umbrella group National Education Partnership. Note that most donors are focused on encouraging the adoption of international goals in Cambodia, such as the post-1990 ‘Education for All’ initiative, the Millennium Development Goals, and, to some extent, concerns about quality.

Teacher associations, both pro- and anti-CPP, exist, but they are not particularly influential (Pereira, 2014). In a 2012 submission, the Cambodian Independent Teachers’ Association (representing about 11 percent of teachers), lamented that neither teachers nor teachers’ associations were routinely consulted by MOEYS over the development of education policy, despite their pivotal role in implementation (CITA, 2012; see also CITA, 2013). Kim and Rouse similarly argue that teachers are

not generally trusted by education officials to make a meaningful contribution to policies, and are viewed merely as an object of policy or pipeline for delivering outcomes (Kim and Martyn, 2011). As civil servants, teachers are prohibited from going on strike (Pereira, 2014).

Between them, members of the dominant coalition fund, regulate and try to improve public education facilities which supply education services to teacher trainees and students, and are monitored, to some extent, by community-centred school boards. The dominant coalition also regulates private sector facilities, some of which are owned by members of the coalition and other MOEYS staff. Public teachers also moonlight in private facilities or, more usually, teach informal private lessons on their own. Teachers have also been known to pay a percentage of their salaries, plus fees, to provincial education officials, who either facilitate or forestall their transfer from/to remote areas. Another major source of rents is Cambodia's publishing and printing house, which has a monopoly on textbook production (World Bank, 2011).

In terms of the nature of the 'elite bargain', or 'common understanding' about how power is organised and exercised, MOEYS, as with much of the rest of the Cambodian civil service, is a hybrid. For many Cambodian actors, including politicians, education officials, teachers and parents, education is about instilling discipline and building good character. The emphasis, with deep roots in Cambodian history, is on young people as largely passive, obedient recipients of hierarchically transmitted knowledge. Whether or not this is appropriate to an agricultural society transitioning to a low grade, semi-authoritarian industrial society, it is very much at odds with dominant trends in global education discourse, which are about creating active citizens for a democratic knowledge economy. At the same time there is a desire to make use of global models, because of the benefits they are believed to bring (Reimer, 2012).

Administration is also a mixed type. Although efforts have been made over the past 20 years to increase professionalism, some of which have undoubtedly borne fruit (McNamara, 2013), much of the ministry still runs on personalised, clientelistic, rather than legal-rational lines.¹¹ It is commonly held that many MOEYS personnel have been appointed more on the basis of personal connections than professional competence (F1, EA2, EA3), and while a certain threshold of performance is expected – especially with regard to building infrastructure and getting teachers and pupils into schools – equally important to the life of the ministry are using official positions as a springboard for income-generating projects in the private sector, and getting a share of other lucrative rents (EA2, EA3, EA4). There is little in the way of rational human resource management, with tasks apparently allocated by departmental heads on an ad hoc basis. Over the years there has been a great proliferation of departments, as new departments are created to achieve specific

¹¹ SOS A himself, as far as we can work out, also embodies both trends. He is an enthusiastic adopter of global educational initiatives and genuinely committed to improving educational performance; at the same time, respecting ties of loyalty often involves him assigning important responsibilities to incompetent people.

goals, but not wound up when the goals move on. Many act as little fiefdoms, jealously guarding their own privileges and cooperating poorly with others (NM1, NE1, NE2, NM2, EA6, EA7, EA9).

At local level, meanwhile, many senior officials are said to have paid hefty bribes to obtain their positions, and are thus dependent on illicit revenue streams from practices such as exam cheating and re-stationing teachers from remote areas, to recoup their investments (EA1, N6, NGO3).

Development partners do try to make a difference to this scenario, with various projects to build capacity around either general or specific programmatic goals. However, the typical capacity-building intervention involves a set of lofty ambitions operationalised through a series of workshops or trainings, often held at attractive venues outside the capital. MOEYS officials often welcome these initiatives with open arms, since they bring resources into the ministry, fuel patronage networks, and can, to some extent, be skimmed. And while it would be unfair to say such trainings are useless, they usually fall well short of their aims, since most trainees fail to apply what they have been taught to their daily duties (EA2, EA4, NGO7). A 2002 study, for example, could find no relation between in-service training and classroom outcomes, describing most programmes as, 'short, irrelevant, irregular and conducted in a cascade system' (Chinnh and Tabata, 2002).¹²

The ethos of the ministry, to quote one informant, 'is activities rather than outcomes based' (EA2). Many development partners recognise this, but have by and large failed to find more successful ways of working.¹³ Matters are not helped by donor fragmentation (only partially alleviated by coordinating bodies such as the Education Sector Working Group), and the tendency of most development agency staff to work on programmes and contracts that are only two to three years long (EA1, EA2, EA4). A report from the early 2000s commented that lack of coordination between donors created confusion in schools: 'Do I teach the PASEC way, the Redd Barna way, the SCFA way or the Ministry way?' (Care International 1999).

Many of these trends are exemplified by the Child Friendly Schools approach. It has been adopted at a policy level but its key tenets, alien to dominant currents in Cambodian culture and education, have not been internalised at a practice level, despite the expenditure of significant resources and technical support. Why, then, did the policy get adopted in the first place?

First, there is widespread recognition that the Cambodian public education system is of low quality and something must be done – no local options have presented themselves, so an international model is adopted. Second, CFS comes with significant funding resources and technical advice. Third,

¹² Cited in McNamara (2013: 23-45).

¹³ An apparently successful capacity-building initiative around the Education for All initiative is detailed in Benveniste et al. (2008).

Cambodians are very conscious of wanting to appear competent on the regional and global stage and do not want to be regarded as “backward” and “not modern” (Reimer, 2012: 422).

Child Friendly Schools

The Child Friendly Schools (CFS) approach is a good example of what happens when a global educational initiative meets Cambodian reality. Promoted primarily by UNICEF, CFS is intended as a ‘pathway to educational quality’. Consistent with the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, it promotes a ‘rights-based, democratic, child-centred educational system’, organised around the themes of inclusiveness, child participation, health and safety, community engagement, and child-centred, active pedagogies. As of 2009, it was being promoted by UNICEF, UNESCO, and national governments, in 56 countries (Reimer, 2012: 302-303).

In Cambodia, CFS was piloted by UNICEF, Sida, SC-Norway and local partners in several provinces in the early 2000s. Based on these pilots’ apparent success, it became national policy in 2007, organised around six dimensions: 1) All children have access to schooling; 2) Effective learning; 3) Health, safety and protection of children; 4) Gender responsiveness; 5) Participation of children, families and communities; and 6) The national education system supports schools to become more child friendly. MOEYS, with the support of UNICEF and the World Bank, has enthusiastically promoted the policy ever since (Reimer, 2012).

Although adoption of the approach has been almost universal, evidence suggests that there has been an emphasis on form over substance. For example, much effort is placed on making school grounds and classrooms ‘look nice’, so that children will ‘want to come to school’, but materials decorating walls are not incorporated into pedagogy. Teachers have child-friendly lesson plans, which they can teach to in the presence of inspectors, but which they rarely use for normal classes. Group work is used frequently, but mainly as a means of giving the teacher a rest. Teachers realise that corporal punishment is banned, though they still sometimes use it, while others resort to shaming practices instead. Gender equality is acknowledged as an ideal, but there is little attempt to challenge traditional gender roles, or ensure that girls stay in school (Reimer, 2012).

A high-ranking Cambodian official admitted to us that the policy has been most successful in improving school environments (“Easy to do; easy to see”), less so in promoting effective learning (“Easy to say; very hard to do!”) (NM5). In 2008, a statistical study found that the effects of CFS were inconclusive, with the overall ‘flavour’ suggesting that CFS ‘has not had an impact on student learning’ (Reimer, 2012: 311).

The politics of educational reform in Cambodia 2013 ff

Despite its shortcomings, the political settlement described above served Cambodia's rulers well between 1998 and 2013. The CPP recorded three successive election victories, the last one, in 2008, comfortable, and the country was more peaceful than at any time since independence. Improving school infrastructure and access doubtless contributed to this. In 2013, however, the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party ran the CPP extremely close in national general elections. Sustained protests and demonstrations followed, in which the opposition claimed that the CPP had rigged the election and called for Hun Sen to resign. Worryingly for the ruling party, it appeared particularly unpopular among young people – an increasingly large and influential section of the electorate – many of whom had graduated through the education system but been unable to find the kinds of jobs to which they aspired (Cambodia Daily, 2013).

Impending ASEAN economic integration has amplified these concerns. By the end of this year, ASEAN nationals will theoretically be able to take jobs in Cambodia, while Cambodians will be able to take jobs elsewhere. Given Cambodia's lagging educational status, the former appears much more likely than the latter, especially when it comes to well paid, professional jobs. Further tightening of an already straitened labour market for Cambodian graduates is bound to have negative consequences for the ruling party. The response has been an increased interest in adopting ASEAN educational norms, for instance a 12+4 teacher training system, as we will see below (F1, NM1, NM5, EA10).

In September 2013, the prime minister announced a cabinet reshuffle, prominent in which was the appointment of Dr Hang Chuon Naron to the education portfolio. Naron is a well-respected scholar, economist, technocrat and trusted advisor to Hun Sen. Previously he had worked at the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and at the Supreme National Economic Council, the government's economic thinktank. His appointment to the education portfolio has been interpreted as a sign that the prime minister recognises that a new approach to the sector is needed (F1, NGO3, NM1). It can also be seen as part of a wider attempt to shift the political settlement away from its patronage roots and towards more programmatic, higher quality, public goods provision, which at least some high-ranking CPP stalwarts now consider necessary.

On coming to office, Dr Naron made a number of changes signifying the seriousness of the reform effort. Into the inner circle of power he brought a new actor, the newly created Education Research Council (ERC). The ERC comprises, on one side, educational specialists from the university and civil society, and on the other, ministerial staff, especially secretaries of state. The aim, apparently, is to inject fresh ideas into the ministry, create a capacity for evidence-based research, and to provide a national counterbalance to the influence of development partners (NE1, NE2, EA3, NGO4). The minister also brought into the department a number of trusted aides with whom he had previously worked in finance, who immediately began to introduce

reforms such as results-based budgeting (NE2, EA3, NM1).¹⁴ He also made school visits in which he listened to teachers' ideas and complaints, as well as establishing a Facebook page on which the public could air their views (F1). Informants stressed that, unlike the previous minister, the new minister is genuinely curious about the state of affairs in education (F1). By September of 2014 he had produced an eight-point reform agenda, prioritising:

1. The reform of personnel, meaning the qualifications of teachers and their salaries;
2. Public financial reform at the ministry;
3. The issue of education quality;
4. A think tank to assist the ministry in policy recommendation and feedback;
5. Higher education reform;
6. Examination reform;¹⁵
7. Giving young people skills; and
8. Reform of physical education and sport (Barron, 2014b).

Dr Naron is widely acknowledged to have injected a new sense of dynamism and urgency into the ministry, and initiatives such as exam reform, for which the Anti-Corruption Unit was brought into the inner circle, have created a stir (F1, NE1, EA2, NM1). But it is not yet clear that he has the critical mass of support to achieve his more ambitious aims. Upon taking office, there was said to be a tussle between the minister and SOS A, although signs are that the former now has the unswerving support of the latter. Most informants, meanwhile, felt that the minister did not really have the support of the technical departments, though he was trying to change this by seeding them with his own supporters (F1, NE1, NE2, NM2, EA3). And while some informants opined that the new ERC was working well, others claimed that the privileged financial position of the academics on the Council was creating resentment among MOEYS staff (NM2). Dr Naron is also said to be under criticism by Cabinet for paying too much attention to foreigners (EA10). Certain national- and provincial-level officials, meanwhile, have had their interests undermined by the exam and pay reforms, and it is unclear how supportive they will be of more far-reaching measures. To give one example, the ex-minister, who allegedly had substantial vested interests in, among other things, textbook procurement, was said to be trying to poison staff against the reforms (EA7). Consequently, more than one informant said that Dr Naron may become an icon of reform in Cambodia, or may 'fall flat on his face' (EA1, EA2). In the next section we look at these different possibilities through the lens of teacher quality.

Teacher quality in Cambodia

At the root of many of Cambodia's educational problems is the poor quality of teaching, which has long been a subject of concern.

¹⁴ Apparently MOEYS was previously notoriously bad at constructing budgets, and partly for this reason MEF had reduced its share of spending over the years (EA3).

¹⁵ The minister has spoken of the exam reforms as a diagnostic tool for the education sector, from which the main takeaways were the need to focus on maths and science, retraining teachers, and strengthening the inspection system (Barron, 2014b).

As we saw earlier, teacher salaries have increased throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Nevertheless, in 2008 a major report from the World Bank found that teachers were still underpaid, and that a teacher supporting a family of four would have to double his or her income to subsist above the poverty line. To make matters worse, teachers were often paid late, and many had to pay 'facilitation' fees to get their salaries. Poor pay had a number of negative consequences. For example, although numerous people still wanted to join the profession, the calibre of applicants tended to be low (Benveniste et al., 2008). Teacher training colleges struggled to recruit sufficient numbers of qualified applicants, meaning that the teacher pool was not expanding much faster than the pool of students. Pupil-teacher ratios, at around 51:1, were by far the highest in the region (Benveniste et al., 2008: 39). Further, once employed, many teachers charged informal fees in class, as well as taking second or third jobs, often in private tutoring. This tended to work to the disadvantage of students from low-income families, eroding completion rates; additionally, because the opportunities for private tutoring were richer in urban than rural areas, most teachers gravitated towards the former, making teacher-pupil ratios at around 67:1, even more unfavourable in remoter, poorer parts of the country (Benveniste et al., 2008: 40).

Although the quality of teaching had improved over the years, thanks to increases in the entry requirements for teachers, the length of time spent in teacher training, and programmes to encourage 'life skills' and 'Child Friendly' pedagogy, classroom observations suggested that most teaching remained 'frontal' and focused on 'rote learning': 'overall, the picture that emerges is a teacher-centred classroom where students basically receive information and prompting but are not themselves active partners in the learning' (Benveniste et al., 2008: 72, 75). Further, many teachers, especially older ones, lacked 'pedagogical content knowledge' (PCK) with the result that they were unable correctly to diagnose and respond to student errors. The report found that significant groups of students were passing through primary grades 1-3 without mastering basic skills (Benveniste et al., 2008: 77). These findings suggested that whatever improvements recent decades had seen, problems with pre-service and in-service training remained, and the authors described it as 'imperative that preservice teacher training as well as in-service professional development systems are bolstered to raise teacher subject and PCK (Benveniste et al., 2008: 23-25, 87).

Monitoring of teacher performance also left much to be desired, being organised around, 'a bureaucratic (external), low stakes accountability mechanism' (Benveniste et al., 2008: 82). Although the situation was better in primary than secondary schools, significant numbers of teachers were rarely, if ever, observed, while opportunities for effective peer-peer learning were small. Although, under the Priority Action Plan, there had been attempts to include parents and communities in school governance via school support committees, in most cases these were not very active. Further, few incentives were offered for teachers to improve the quality of their teaching, since they faced a highly compressed salary structure, and the bonuses and performance-related incentives that did exist seemed not to be linked in any systematic way to performance in the classroom. 'The absence of a functional teacher appraisal

mechanism leaves a vacuum to resolve problems (...) with regards to teacher performance', the report argued (Benveniste et al., 2008: 98).

In response, the authors urged the adoption of a 'teacher standards framework', incorporating a range of teacher competencies tied to behaviours linked to student learning, that could be observed and evaluated. The standards had already been developed and were under pilot in 10 provinces. If mainstreamed, the report argued, they could act as:

a guiding light to review preservice and in-service teacher training programs in order to satisfy new performance expectations and better prepare teachers to meet these requirements. Second, teacher standards may help strengthen the substance of existing peer mentoring and cluster development networks operating through the existing and very popular teacher technical meetings. Third, it could be an instrument to assess TTC graduates and ensure that they meet minimum standards as a precondition for accreditation (...). Fourth, it could lay down the path for meritorious teacher placement and career advancement (...). Fifth, teacher pay could be tied to observable teacher performance (Benveniste et al., 2008: 100).

Since the 2008 report was written, base salaries have continued to rise at the rate of 15-20 percent a year (Pereira, 2014), and the teaching workforce has continued to expand. However, many of the problems identified in 2008 are still present. A 2015 World Bank study found that on average, teachers earn only 60 percent of what other professionals earn, and that a typical teacher, married, with a two-person family, finds himself below the poverty line. Salaries are still often late, and not paid in full. The profession continues to fail to attract the most talented students, with the majority of teacher trainees having scored C, D or E on their grade 12 exams, and private tutoring is still rampant (Tandon and Fukao, 2015). Other research has found teachers may be unable or unwilling to teach the full curriculum during normal school hours, thereby driving students to take extra lessons. Typically, poorer students cannot afford these, and do less well in exams as a result (Brehm and Silova, 2014).

Teacher training continues to require a significant overhaul. Most teacher trainers have not been appointed on grounds of teaching excellence; indeed, teacher trainer colleges, because of their lack of opportunities for private tuition, are regarded by talented teachers as something of a dead end (NGO2). A recent study found that mathematics knowledge among teacher trainers was similar to that for grade 9 students, and lower than that of their trainees. Teacher trainees are also given insufficient real classroom experience, while teacher training colleges remain somewhat isolated from the rest of the education system. Opportunities for in-service training do exist, but they appear to be somewhat ad hoc, and unaccompanied by attractive incentives (Tandon and Fukao, 2015).

Monitoring also remains an issue. Currently schools are supposed to be monitored by officials at district and provincial level, but evidence suggests that such officials,

although they sometimes visit schools, rarely observe what is going on in the classroom. Teachers are subject to performance evaluations, but these are of a generic, civil service kind, and are not specific to teaching ability. Teachers are also eligible for a number of performance-related bonuses, but respondents felt that these were small, and unrelated to good teaching practice (Tandon and Fukao, 2015).

Very significantly, the teacher standards that were recommended by the 2008 report, piloted, and adopted as national policy in 2010, have in many cases been ignored. Many teacher trainers, teachers and principals have not heard of them, and many of those that have do not use them. Consequently they are rarely incorporated into lesson plans, or used as a basis for monitoring and evaluation (Tandon and Fukao, 2015).

Teacher standards in Cambodia

Cambodia's Teacher Professional Standards, published in 2011, were intended as 'a compass to give direction to all involved in education' (Teacher Training Department, 2011: ii). They consist of four components: professional knowledge; professional practice; learning; and ethics, each with a number of sub-components and 'standard elements'. For example, under professional knowledge, one of the sub-components is 'knowledge of students' and one of the standards is to: 'Know students, their learning needs, capacity, academic backgrounds, and attitude to student learning' (Teacher Training Department, 2011: 3). The ministry states that the standards can be used for in-service and pre-service training, and may, possibly, be used in the future for issuing teaching licences or as performance-based pay criteria (Teacher Training Department, 2011: 4).

The decision to create the standards stemmed from several sources, including experiments conducted by VSO project volunteers in local education offices in the early 2000s, Secretary of State A's research into standards during a sabbatical in Japan, a move to introduce (different but related) standards as part of the Child Friendly Schools policy, and international best practice ideas promoted by the World Bank (EA5, NM5, EA8, EA9).

In the mid-2000s, these diverse currents converged on an attempt to create a set of standards for Cambodia. The initiative was funded under the World Bank's Cambodian Education Sector Support Project, and provided with an expatriate Technical Assistant, housed in the teacher training department. Though not a Khmer speaker, the TA worked with colleagues to produce a set of appropriate standards by visiting local schools and trying to discover what a good teacher should look like. Around 2006, a set of standards was produced; however, having ruffled some feathers in his department, the TA did not have his contract renewed.

Teacher standards (cont).

Field-testing the standards then fell to another expatriate TA, this one a fluent Khmer speaker, who had previously been working on teacher professional development. Apparently there was considerable questioning within the technical group about what field-testing the standards would mean (just one example of friction and communication failures that afflicted the whole project) (EA9).

As a compromise, the TA and his colleagues went out to schools and tried to assess whether or not the standards were appropriate. The first thing they did was to introduce them to teacher technical meetings, to see if they could be used as a tool through which teachers could assess their own teaching and help improve that of others. He says that the teachers he worked with took to this exercise well, and came up with various innovative ways of using the standards in peer-to-peer learning. The next thing was to see if they could be used by school directors as an evaluation tool. At first there was resistance, but gradually directors began to come around. The next thing they tried was to integrate the standards into the pre-service training curriculum. To do so, workshops with Provincial Teacher Training College and Regional Teacher Training College trainers were held to disseminate the standards and discuss the way it could affect pre-service curriculum. This, he claims, had a very limited impact, since there were no subsequent activities to initiate a review of the pre-service curriculum so it could match the standards intended to be reached.

Later, as part of the World Bank's Fast Track Initiative (FTI) project (the forerunner of Global Partnership for Education (GPE)), he worked on incorporating the standards into school director training. The amount of other content introduced compared to the time frame of the training did not allow an in-depth understanding of what the standards were and what they were intended for, giving no serious directions for school principals to start implementing the standards in their school. In the end, the standards had little chance of making an impact, with virtually no follow-up. In his view, there was no political will for a genuine implementation or integration of the standards (EA9).

The Teacher Policy Action Plan

The new minister's main response to the problem of teaching quality is the Teacher Policy Action Plan. Cambodia has had an official Teacher Policy since 2013 (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2013), but shortly after taking office, Dr Naron decided that the ministry needed a 'Plan'. After a first, unsuccessful attempt to produce an implementable plan using a local consultant, development partners funded a team comprising expatriate technical assistance, education experts from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and the original local consultant. After intense discussions, consultations with donors, further revisions, and a national workshop

chaired by the minister, the Teacher Policy Action Plan (2015-2020) was approved and published in January 2015 (Teacher Training Department, 2015).

The Plan is based on the understanding that teacher quality is the most crucial ingredient in educational outcomes, and the most pressing problem facing the education sector is attracting high quality candidates to the teaching profession: 'Success in recruitment and training of teachers is the key to fundamentally reforming the teacher training system and ensuring that the status and roles of the teaching profession rises significantly' (Teacher Training Department, 2015: 3). It aims to establish a new vision for the teaching profession, improve educational quality at all school levels, reform teaching education institutions, raise the status of teachers, change teaching and learning practices, and lay the foundation for even deeper reforms post-2020. To this end, it outlines nine strategies, 34 sub-strategies, and over 100 tasks or activities. They include: strengthening teacher education and recruitment by improving the financial and social benefits of teaching, automatically admitting top-grade students into teacher training colleges, and implementing a new set of Teacher Education Provider Standards; strengthening professional development by upgrading teacher qualifications via a BA fast-track into the profession, while institutionalising a system of in-school training; updating teacher training systems by creating a BEd 12+4 curriculum; and improving the school environment by revising textbooks, strengthening the accountability of teaching staff, and, once again, properly implementing the Teacher Professional Standards (Teacher Training Department, 2015).

Although some of these reforms, such as automatically admitting top-grade students to teacher training colleges, should be relatively simple, 'stroke of the pen' affairs, others, such as making teacher remuneration competitive, are more challenging, since they involve addressing upstream budgetary constraints (more on which later). Others, for example creating and implementing the Teacher Education Provider Standards, are still more challenging, since they involve coordinating a combination of multiple horizontal stakeholders (in this case the Department of Higher Education, the Department of Legislation, the Teacher Training Department, and Higher Education Institutions), plus downstream, principal-agent relations (TTC principals, teacher trainers).

In sum, the TPAP would seem to present a formidable coordination and implementation challenge. Curiously, and despite being trumpeted as the ministry's 'number one priority' (NM5), it appeared for the first five months of its life to languish in the Teacher Training Department. Behind the scenes, however, a sub-technical working group with expatriate technical assistance has already been working on some of its foundational aspects, in particular strengthening teacher training. Plans have been developed to replace the current two-year teacher-training programme with a new four-year B.Ed degree, which would become the main entry route to primary teaching for high school graduates (EA10).

The plan has some clever aspects. First, it builds on the content of the existing two-year degree, adding, rationalising and revising some modules and expanding the amount of time both in class and in schools, consolidating good pedagogical practice, but not radically overhauling course content. This incremental approach makes it more likely that existing TTC staff will be able to teach it. Second, the degree will be modularised, meaning that graduates will be able to qualify to teach by taking just a year's worth of modules, while existing teachers, and TTC staff, will be able to upgrade their skills, again, by taking just a selection of modules. As for who will teach the new degree, the plan is to use international assistance to train one or two of the best teacher trainers from each TTC, and for them to train their colleagues on the one day of each week which is already supposed to be set aside for improving teaching practice. While this cascade-style training approach is imperfect, it is hoped it can be made to work (EA10).

In our view, this is a potentially weak point of the plan. In-depth analyses of, for example, the CFS approach, show that given Cambodia's prevailing educational culture, uptake of modern pedagogical practices is a huge challenge (Reimer, 2012). There is also evidence that at least some TTC directors and staff are indifferent, if not hostile, to active pedagogies, regarding them as 'un-Khmer', and only to be applied when under the watchful eye of foreigners. Moreover, the English competence of even some of the best-qualified teacher trainers is allegedly poor, presenting a real risk of ineffective training and dissemination (NGO7). In short, if the current reforms are to instil the practice and not merely the appearance of active learning, a huge amount of work will have to be done to change the mentalities of existing teacher trainers. In that respect, existing training models are highly unlikely to work. Training must be lengthy, extensive, and conducted by genuine experts, with the very best recruits. Once the first cadre is trained, there must be a very serious effort to ensure that the new recruits are properly trained.

The improved degree is only a part of the plan, of course. It is unlikely to serve its purpose unless better quality students can be attracted via better pay and conditions, unless better teaching materials are provided, unless provision of the degree is properly monitored, by TTC directors and third parties, unless school directors and district monitoring teams consistently encourage good teaching in the classroom, and make provisions for existing teaching staff to upgrade their skills (EA10).

As things stand, some of these complementary initiatives are already getting bogged down, invaded by unqualified staff whose main motivation appears to be to collect sitting allowances or protect existing vested interests. For example, there are anecdotal reports that plans to solve Cambodia's science textbook problem by adapting Oxford University Press books at next to no cost have been shelved in favour of creating a large committee to handle the issue. A small, competent team that was put together to revise the chemistry curriculum has ballooned into a committee of first 20 and then 50 people, many of whom know nothing about either chemistry or pedagogy (EA7). It remains to be seen whether these rent-seeking elements will completely dilute and undermine the policy, or whether they will simply

act as a drag. In May 2015, an education expert from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, a personal friend of the minister, was appointed as Deputy Director General of Education, with the brief, apparently, of implementing the TPAP. It is to be hoped he will have the clout to mitigate some of these negative trends.

As things currently stand, the new degree is not expected to come on line until 2020. That means the first graduates will enter schools in 2024. Consequently, the reformers do have some breathing space in which to create the institutional supports the new degree will need. And it will be important here not to lose patience, sacrificing quality for quick-fixes and immediately visible indicators of change. With an election to fight in 2018, the CPP may not find this easy. However, as a dominant, albeit declining party, it may have a better chance than some more competitive governments of taking the long view.

Prospects for reform at local level

To get a better idea of the prospects for successful reform we conducted research in two local provinces. The aim was to map the structure of power at local level and assess the constellation of ideas and interests that might advance or impede the new reform agenda.

We selected provinces with two factors in mind: 1) places where we had a network of contacts that would hopefully allow us to gather rich data in a short time span; and 2) places that would show a range of variation in educational experiences and thus, potentially, in the challenges that reforms would face. The aim was not to draw strong conclusions about the determinants of educational quality in each place, or indeed in Cambodia generally. Rather, it was to deepen and widen our understanding of issues first raised in national-level interviews.

The first province (we will call it A) is a relatively poor area dominated by farming, logging, plantations and fishing, some five hours' drive from Phnom Penh. The second province (B) is a middling income area less than an hour's drive from Phnom Penh, with a population of farmers, professionals and garment workers. Province A is in the bottom quintile of performers in terms of transition and flow rates (a very imperfect proxy for educational quality),¹⁶ while province B is in the top quintile.

In each province we conducted interviews with key members of staff at the provincial office of education (the POE head or deputy, staff of the primary education department, staff of the district training and monitoring team), the provincial teacher training college, and with NGOs working in the province. We also visited one district in each province, interviewing the same categories of education officials there, as well as visiting two schools in each district, one identified by authorities as 'well-

¹⁶ Unfortunately it is very difficult to acquire data that gives a better sense of provincial differences in the quality of education. The results of the recently introduced grade 3 and grade 6 tests, for example (which are administered to a nationally representative sample of schools), are apparently not disaggregated by province and district.

performing’ and the other as ‘poorly-performing’. Again, by looking for variation in educational experience, we hoped to shed light on different prospects for reform.

At each level, we asked questions about the structure of power, governance and accountability, both formal and informal; about the balance between quality and quantity of provision; about the success of various quality-focused policies such as Teacher Standards and Child Friendly Schools; and about attitudes to the ministry’s ongoing reforms.

The governance structure at local level

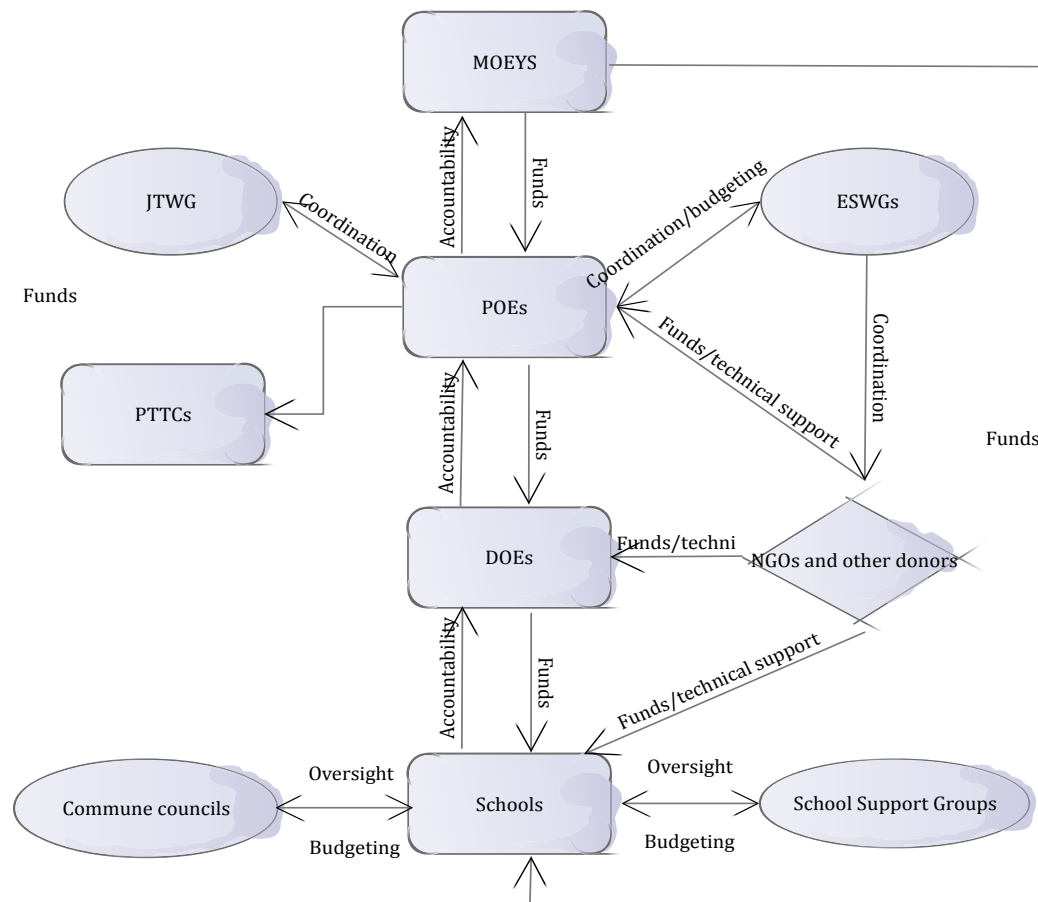
The backbone of educational governance is a hierarchical structure in which policies, information, and money from the ministry in Phnom Penh flow down to schools via provincial and district offices of education ((POEs and DOEs), and in which reports of activities and expenditure flow back up (Figure 4) (LMA5, LMB3, LMB4). In addition to this basic structure, POEs liaise with other local government departments via joint technical working groups (JTWGs) and with NGOs and development partners via education sector working groups (ESWGs) (LNGOA1, LMB2). Schools, meanwhile, liaise with their communities through school support committees, and also liaise with commune councils, the lowest level of elected local government in Cambodia (although there is no mandatory structure to facilitate this) (LMA3, LMA4, NGO10, LMB4, SSB2, SSB4, SSB3, SSB1).

Listening to informants’ accounts of this structure, the flow of information appears to be largely top-down, with little evidence of local consultation in the policy-making process (LMB3, LMB4). However, POE heads do get to attend the National Education Congress once a year, when they give feedback to the ministry (LMB2).

Until recently, budgeting has also been top-down, with budget allocations made by the ministry largely on the basis of perceived need and past expenditure (LMB3, LMB5, SSB1). As of this year, however, there has been a more concerted effort to make bottom-up budgeting a reality, with schools submitting annual operational plans upwards to districts, provinces and MOEYS, before money, in the form of the programme budget (PB) flows back down (NGO8). Nevertheless, schools still have to follow strict guidelines in what they ask for, otherwise their requests will not be granted. More flexible is the School Improvement Grant (SIG), donated by Sweden, under which schools can suggest projects under four broad priority areas (LMA1, LMA4, LMB4). In addition, the World Bank’s GPE provides scholarships for certain children. Schools are also encouraged to raise money from their communities, with considerable variation in the extent to which they succeed (LMB3).

School activities are monitored by provincial and district monitoring teams, and also by school directors themselves, sometimes referred to as ‘permanent inspectors’. Each province’s schools are arranged in ‘clusters’, which also play a role in quality improvement and control (LMB5, LMA2, LMA5).

Figure 4. Governance structure at local level



Quality issues at local level

In both provinces, informants felt that the quality of education had improved over the past 10 years. They attributed this to initiatives such as Child Friendly Schools, increased teacher salaries, and various initiatives run by NGOs, such as trainings for teachers and reading competitions for students (LMA1, LMA3, LMA4, LMA5). Some also mentioned improvements in teacher training, including increasing the length of teacher training programmes, increasing the exposure of trainees to the classroom during training, better qualifications of teachers, and increased use of lesson plans (LMA1, LMA3, LMA4, LMA5, LMB5, LMB3).

Despite these similarities, quality issues seemed to be more of a priority for province B than province A. The deputy head of the POE in B mentioned strengthening school management, teacher discipline, cluster technical meetings, and the Child Friendly Schools approach as key priorities (LMB1). The head of the POE in A, by contrast, did not seem to regard quality issues as particularly pressing, except insofar as remote schools tended to be staffed by unqualified contract teachers (TTCA1, TTCA2, LMA3, LMA4). Another interesting finding was that several of our interviews in A also revealed an apparent confusion between the quality of education and

access to education – for example, teachers would say that the quality of education would be improved if more parents sent their children to school (LMA1, LMA3, SSA2, SSA3, SSA4) – a phenomenon also noted in other research (Reimer 2012). Even in B, one stakeholder added a rider to the POE’s commitment to quality.¹⁷

In each province the energy and ability of school directors seemed to be important to explaining the quality of teaching provision (NGO6, SSA2, LMB3, TTCA1, LMB5). In the ‘well-performing’ schools, directors had a better grasp of what policies such as Child Friendly Schools and student-centred teaching actually meant; they seemed to have more open and transparent relations with their staff; and they more actively sought out the help of their communities (LMB3, LMB5). Unfortunately, we do not know why some directors are better than others: it did not appear to be a function of age, or, at least in one province, proximity to the district headquarters; it may be related to education or training, but verifying this would require more research.

In both provinces the inspection regime is active, but under-resourced. Until recently, district monitoring teams did not have their own budget, and were therefore dependent on the goodwill of other departments (the problem had been alleviated somewhat in B, thanks to UNICEF donating motorbikes) (LMA2, LMA4, LMA5, LMB3, LMB5). Despite these difficulties, all the schools we visited had received regular visits from inspectors at both district and provincial level (SSA1, SSA2, LMB3, LMB5). The inspectors apparently observed classes, assessed teachers, and gave advice. In some cases, however, teachers and directors felt that they did not really understand the advice given (SSA1, SSA3), other informants felt that in some cases the inspections were a perfunctory box-ticking exercise, with the inspectors themselves not always understanding the deeper import of the questions (NGO6, NGO10).

In both provinces, informants regarded teacher salaries as a key constraint on teaching quality (LMA5, SSA2, SSA3, SSA4, LMB5, LMB3, SSB1, SSB3). Not only did low salaries encourage teachers (and directors) to take second jobs (NGO9),¹⁸ they also made inspectors hesitant about providing too much advice. For example, some inspectors told us that they did not ask teachers to make too many changes to their teaching, since they knew that with low pay, they lacked the incentive to do so

¹⁷ Paraphrasing from notes:

Interviewer: ‘Is the government supportive of NGOs, is it a good partner?’

Interviewee: ‘Yes, it provides strong support for NGOs and never says “no”.’

Interviewer: ‘Do you think government and NGOs have the same priorities?’

Interviewee: ‘Sometimes the priorities are a little bit different – but we have the same goals.’

Interviewer: ‘Can you say a bit more about that?’

Interviewee: ‘Well, we want to improve teacher quality, but they might prefer school improvement. For us, if a teacher is a good teacher, he can teach under a tree. The government prefers physical things. But we can work together easily all the same’ (NGO9). Another NGO informant in province A told us that the POE director is also more interested in physical buildings: ‘I can see a building, with capacity building I don’t see anything,’ he is reputed to have said (NGO10).

¹⁸ In one poor-performing school we were told about, the school director moonlighted as a wedding MC.

(LMA5) (LMB3). Other officials told us that it was difficult to discipline teachers because low pay created a teacher shortage, and they could not afford for teachers to quit (SSB2, LMB5, SSB3).

All our informants were familiar with the Child Friendly Schools programme, and could describe it to us in varying degrees of detail. Recent teaching graduates were at an advantage here, since CFS forms a module in current teacher training programmes (TTCB1, TTCB2, TTCB3, MOEYS, 2012). In both provinces, a lot of emphasis appeared to be placed on the access dimensions of the programme, although more research would be required to confirm whether or not this overshadowed issues of effective teaching and learning. When it came to student-centred teaching, there were mixed views. All our informants said that they employed student-centred as well as teacher-centred pedagogy, sometimes in the ratio of 60-40 (SSA1, SSA2, SSA3, SSA4, SSB2, SSB3, SSB4, LMB3). However, some provincial and district officials claimed that teachers only teach this way when they know inspectors are coming, and that most are too lazy, or too poorly motivated to create student-centred lesson plans (LMB3). Both teachers and inspectors, meanwhile, said that students were often too weak to benefit from a student-centred approach (LMA5, SSA3, SSB3). They also mentioned the poor availability of appropriate teaching materials, and also the difficulty of using a student-centred approach with very large classes (LMB3, LMB4). One informant thought that the problems stemmed from the deeply hierarchical nature of Cambodian society and the culture of passive obedience and rote learning it created (NGO6).

In neither province were teacher professional standards exerting an influence of which informants were conscious. In each province one or two provincial-level officials had heard of the standards and remembered being trained in them; there had, however, been no follow-up (LMB5, LMA2, TTCB1, TTCA1, TTCA2). At district and school level, most informants claimed never to have heard of the standards (SSB2, SSB4, SSB3, SSA1, SSA2, LMA5, LMA3). More research would be needed to see if they exerted a subliminal influence, as some of their creators seem to have intended.

Attitudes to reform

Most of our informants welcomed recent reforms introduced by the new minister. For example, the exam reforms were said to have made students more serious and motivated, and to some extent parents too (SSB3, TTC1, SSB2, SSB4). Provincial and district training and monitoring teams welcomed the fact that they were to be given dedicated budgets, increased allowances, and new monitoring materials (LMA2, LMA5). Teaching staff welcomed the recent pay increases they had received, and they also welcomed the fact that salaries were now going directly to their own bank accounts (LMA2, LMA4, LMA5, SSA3)(LMB3, SSB1, SSB3). The new budgeting arrangements were also given a cautious welcome (LMB4, TTCB1, SSB1, LMB2).

Not every aspect of reform received unequivocal support, however. For example, on the matter of pay, most teachers wished that the promise of million riel salaries by the year 2018 could be brought forward (LMB3, LMB5, SSB1, SSB3, LMA3, LMA2, TTCA1, NNGO5).¹⁹ More problematically, several informants told us the fact that new graduates were now earning almost as much as their senior colleagues was a source of serious resentment among older teachers, and was demotivating them (LMA5, SSA2)(LMB5, SSB3, LMB3, TTC2, LMA4, LMA2). Some provincial-level staff claimed that teachers were now earning as much or more than them, which was unfair, while others told us that school directors were paid only a little more than teachers, but were expected to work twice the hours (SSA1, LMB4, LMB3). School directors were particularly overworked by the new budgeting arrangements, when they were already overburdened with training, report-writing, and numerous other duties (LMA2, LMA4, LMA5, SSA2, SSA3). One informant told us that the creation of teacher bank accounts had removed an important source of staff leverage from school directors, a potentially serious unintended consequence of reforms (though this was not a common view) (LMB3). Finally, the proposal to enforce teacher contracts in remote areas more rigorously, while welcomed by some staff, was regarded with some disquiet in more than one of the schools we visited (SSA3).

The fact that some of these reforms were eliminating lucrative informal revenue streams from which some officials presumably benefited, was not regarded as a big problem by our informants. More research would be needed to see whether, in reality, this is demotivating some staff, or prompting unhelpful unintended consequences. One informant, speaking of the reforms in general, opined that they were good but going too fast: 'If you are riding a *moto* and turn too sharply,' he said, 'you are likely to fall off' (LMB5). While others opined that the ministry could not expect too much of its staff with salaries in their present position: 'The reform is like an ox cart. Even if we have enough oxen and carts, if we do not have enough grass for the oxen to eat, the carts will not move far' (LMA5).²⁰

Local informants' recommendations

In the course of our field research, informants, in addition to the points already mentioned, expressed various concerns – for example, about low management and leadership skills of primary school directors, low participation of parents and school support committees (NGO10), late arrival of budget (PB), and inappropriate official mindsets. They recommended that directors' skills be improved by mobilising skilled human resources and providing them with more incentives to encourage them to work in rural or remote areas. Additionally, they strongly requested participation from parents as well as school support committees. Without them, they thought, it would be difficult for the reforms to succeed. They also recommended changing the poor mindset of relevant reform stakeholders, by strictly applying education regulations (LMB4, LMB5).

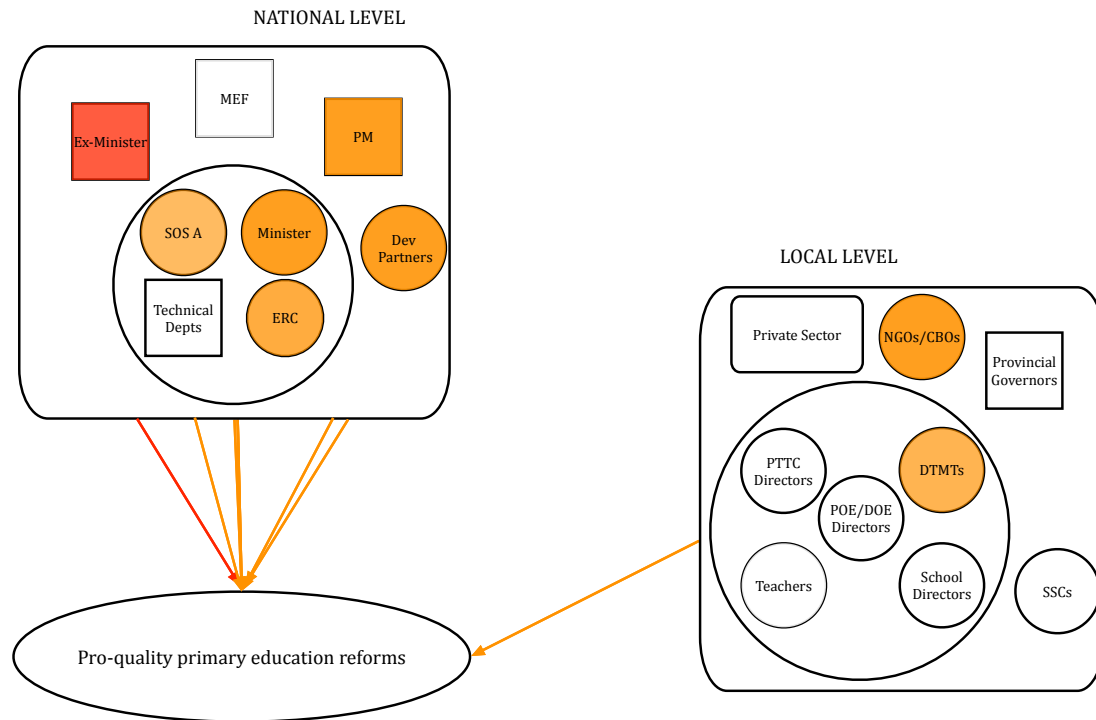
¹⁹ Note that CITA, the independent teachers' union, has long proposed \$250 a month (around 1m riel) as a realistic living wage for teachers (CITA, 2013).

²⁰ Note that many of the attitudes to reform we heard echo those found in NEP's research into teachers' views on TPAP (National Education Partnership, 2014).

The political economy of improving primary education quality

We are now in a position to provide a basic mapping of political interests around improving primary education quality, as at Figure 5 below, using simplified models of the political settlements at national and local level.

Figure 5. A mapping of the interests around primary education reform



In the diagram above, actors in favour of pro-quality primary education reforms are coloured in orange; actors opposed are coloured in red; and actors who are ambivalent or indifferent are not coloured. The diagram shows that at a national level, the balance of power is decidedly in favour of making the reforms a success. At local level, by contrast, there is only a slight balance in favour, with most actors, including four out of five of those in the inner circle of power, ambivalent or indifferent. The next few paragraphs explain why.

At national level, the key actors in the inner circle of power are the minister, SOS A, the ERC, and the technical departments. The minister has been a driver of reform from the start, and it appears that SOS A, after a period of ambivalence, is also on board. Members of the ERC have been intimately involved in the creation, for example, of TPAP. These actors are supported in the outer circle of power by the prime minister (broadly speaking) and by development partners. The only key actor apparently actively blocking the reforms is the ex-minister, and although he may be able to slow down and dilute the process, he seems unlikely to derail it. A more serious problem is that the technical departments appear, as far as we can tell, to be ambivalent about reform. Evidence suggests that the majority of staff are inherently

conservative, reluctant to change, and, in some cases, massively unsuited to life under the new dispensation. The minister is currently attempting to counteract this by putting his supporters in key strategic positions, thereby creating channels of effectiveness in otherwise moribund structures. To the extent that he is successful, the reforms should move forward, albeit with deadweight staff creating significant drag.

At local level, where the biggest responsibility for implementation lies, the picture is less rosy. Only NGOs – with their close links to development partners – and district training monitoring teams – who can expect an elevated status – can be expected to be strongly in favour of the reforms. Other key implementing personnel face making considerable, often culturally confronting, changes to existing ways of working, often at or beyond the limit of their capabilities, for little obvious reward. As we have seen, administrative staff are already concerned about the insufficiency of their salaries, and the cutting down of options for graft is likely to make them more so. School directors, it appears, are already overburdened, and it is not clear that they can absorb much more training. Teachers have had their pay increased, but not by enough, and that increase has not been linked to improvements in performance. Moreover, while those increases may have created a reservoir of goodwill among younger staff, they appear to have generated some resentment among older employees. PTTCs, meanwhile, should see their status increased through the reforms, but it is not clear that these changes will particularly benefit directors.

A potential source of positive reform pressure is school support committees. However, currently most of these appear to be insufficiently knowledgeable or active to make a big difference in this regard. Provincial governors and, indeed, the entire local political system also have a role to play, although presently there is not much sign that they regard educational quality as their business.²¹ Perhaps this is changing with the advent of exam reforms, but the evidence in favour is not yet strong.

Unless better incentives are provided, then, we would expect the local-level implementation of reforms to be patchy, moving very slowly in most places, and slightly quicker in areas that have, for one reason or another, exceptional school directors and/or well-conceived NGO/DP support. In many places, the appearance of reform will be adopted without the substance.

Conclusions and policy implications

The ESID political settlements framework predicts that hybrid formations such as we find in Cambodia are most likely to make developmental progress when multi-stakeholder initiatives create islands or channels of effectiveness in otherwise predatory, clientelistic administrations. Ambitious, wide-ranging, top-down reform

²¹ Finally, the private sector, less important in primary education than in other parts of the system, can also be expected to be ambivalent. Although improving public education should in theory decrease demand for private schooling, in practice, increased awareness of quality issues is likely to ensure a steady supply of clients for the sector.

programmes, by contrast, are likely to disappoint. Our research into the politics of primary education reform in Cambodia has generated considerable evidence to confirm the predictions of the ESID framework, and little to make us rethink it. At the same time, the framework is unspecific about just how broad these channels of effectiveness can become, especially when there is strong leadership from the top. Our research suggests that with the current evolution of the national political settlement, and changes at the top in the education ministry, reforms are likely to go faster and further than ever before. Nevertheless there remain powerful forces for inertia, extremely challenging sequencing and coordination problems, financial and human resource constraints, and ineffectual working modalities that will inevitably weaken them.

How might stakeholders address this?

First, the system needs more resources, including for improved salaries. Second, a more aggressive approach to human resource management, retiring or dismissing corrupt or incompetent staff, while supplying appropriate training, resources and performance incentives for the creation of an effective educational administration, would, in theory, strengthen the reforms. Third, there is abundant evidence that prevalent models of technical assistance, training, and capacity building are not very effective. Consequently it seems imperative that MOEYS, DPs and other stakeholders explore new and more effective ways of working. As part of this, increased efforts should be made to bridge the gap between national-level policy makers and local-level implementers.

The problem with these recommendations is that they all, to some extent, go against the grain of Cambodia's current political settlement. A much higher level of education resourcing, for example, implies either a reorientation of priorities on the part of the government and/or an increase in revenue-raising, both of which are likely to antagonise its traditional support base. More performance-oriented public sector management risks upsetting a civil service still based predominantly on norms of patronage, loyalty and rent-seeking; while more effective capacity building implies the elimination of easy rent-earning opportunities, and greater effort and imagination on the part of all stakeholders.

Doubtless, incremental improvements in all these areas can be made, and we have already found some evidence of this. But will incremental improvements be enough to fulfill the needs of a very ambitious reform agenda? While not wanting to pour cold water on the enthusiasm for reform, we hope that this paper will encourage all stakeholders to have an honest discussion about which elements of the global education agenda are both desirable and possible to realise in the current Cambodian context. Moreover, while we hope to have provided a convincing diagnosis of why improving quality is so difficult, we are less confident about prescribing a cure. Solutions will only emerge after education stakeholders experiment with different ways of working – learning and course-correcting as they go.

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