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# Decentralization of education: The solution to close the educational gap in Cambodia

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## Abstract

Recognizing the importance of sound reforms needed to foster economic development and accelerate poverty reduction, Cambodia has embarked on its decentralization journey in various sectors including education. With the promise of improved quality, transparency, and better accountability, decentralization is deemed an ideal solution to problems of the educational gap that exists between public and private schools in Cambodia through the transfer of functions and resources from the national to sub-national levels. This article offers insights into problems arising from the divide between public and private schools as a result of increasing privatization of education in Cambodia, and discusses how decentralization of education could address the problems.

**Keywords:** Decentralization of education; educational gap; privatization of education; Cambodia

## Introduction

Post-war Cambodia has seen much progress in many sectors, and education is no exception. In 2016, the country's primary net enrollment rate reached 97.7%, indicating the success of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in ensuring universal access to primary education (USAID, 2021). At the national level, many attempts to improve the quality of both formal and informal education sectors have been undertaken by key development

partners, such as the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and non-government organizations. This has increased access to primary and lower secondary education for minorities, girls, and vulnerable children (Bredenberge, 2018).

Despite the progress, Cambodia's public education system has suffered severe setbacks as the Kingdom's pursuit of economic liberalization in the recent decades has given rise to the increasing privatization of the education system, resulting in a greater educational divide between private and public schools.

This article highlights the issues brought about by the divide between private and public schools and argues that a decentralized education system is the solution to the educational divide. It first discusses the growing trend toward education privatization in Cambodia, and then offers insights into how decentralization of education is effective in addressing the educational gap.

**The trend toward private education in Cambodia**

The advent of education privatization has had a remarkable impact on Cambodian higher education since the late 1990s when non-public higher education institutions were allowed to operate. From 2014 and 2018, higher education institutions increased from 110 to 125, 48 of which were public and 77 were private (MoEYS, 2019a). At the school level, education service delivery has been traditionally poor, mainly due to limited resources, inadequacy of trained teachers, and lack of school performance monitoring system (Benveniste et al., 2008). Unlike public schools that employ the same national curriculum, most private schools in Cambodia now offer more flexible curriculums, giving parents more choices to let their children be exposed to different learning experiences following models adopted from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, or Singapore. This practice is deemed beneficial and necessary for their children who are likely to pursue their overseas study in the future (Nop, 2018).

In terms of class size, many private schools permit an average of 18 students per class (International Schools Database, n.d.), while there were, on average, 50 students in public secondary schools in 2007 (Haddad & Sato, 2008). Smaller class sizes allow teachers to manage the classroom more effectively. Parents

have also expressed their satisfaction with private schools. One of the most important motives behind parents sending their children to private schools in Cambodia is the quality of teachers (Yinsieng et al., 2018). Another motive behind sending their children to private schools is the perception that private schools have better regulations and administration to ensure the security and safety of their children. In addition, as children's presence during school hours is compulsory, their parents will be notified through telephone calls if the children are absent without prior permission.

Thus, the growing tendency toward sending children to private schools in Cambodia is not simply a mere parental preference. It is the perceived quality and other benefits not commonly found in public schools, which attract a large pool of students from the middle and upper class of the society to private schools, leaving the average and disadvantaged students in the public school system.

**Decentralization of education is the solution to the educational divide**

With the growing educational divide facing the public and private education system, decentralization of education has become a key reform agenda of many countries (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2004). In Cambodia, MoEYS also includes decentralization and deconcentration in its reform agenda (MoEYS, 2019a). The goal of the reform is to increase the autonomy and accountability of the sub-national and public institutions by transferring functions and resources.

Recently, there has been a growing shift toward decentralization, which refers to delegating power and authority from the national level to local levels of government within a country (Böckenförde, 2011). One argument in favor of decentralization is that national policies operate on a one-size-fits-all approach. Policies must, however, be adapted to meet the needs of different communities. In a centralized system, the control over finance, personnel, and resources as well as management of policy, curriculum, and assessment is centralized to one actor (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2004). However, a decentralized system gives more control and participation of the involved actors, thereby minimizing the gap between decision makers and the beneficiary (Winkler & Yeo, 2007). This, in turn, can lead to improved learning

outcomes, higher parental satisfaction, and stronger accountability through community involvement and support (Donnelly et al., 2017).

With regard to resources in education, decentralization addresses the issues of how resources are allocated. The central government body allocates resources to sub-national and public educational institutions based on political considerations, population sizes, target populations, and needs-based criteria (i.e., the number of households below the poverty line). The unit cost of basic education is also minimized when the local operating bodies are given the authority to manage their own system. In addition, if the complex bureaucratic processes and the need to refer decision-making to the central government are eliminated, local officials may become more productive and efficient in addressing problems in their own educational institutions.

**New Generation Schools: A welcome initiative**

In Cambodia, the recently introduced New Generation School (NGS) program, which came as a result of reform by MoEYS (KAPE, n.d.), was launched in 2015. It aims to enhance the quality as well as the relevance of education as a preparation for Cambodian youth to enter the 21st-century workforce. This school model offers greater autonomy and funding to foster a more innovative curriculum, better teaching practices, and more efficient resource allocation to improve the learning outcomes (Donaher & Wu, 2020)

One of the core principles of the NGS governance framework is operational autonomy. It epitomizes a decentralized school system whereby school staff, including teachers and principals, are given a high level of autonomy as long as they can "promote innovation and increase educational quality" (MoEYS, 2019b). This autonomy encompasses the freedom to recruit teachers, modify the curriculum, improve the teacher-student ratio, and utilize technology in the classroom. The NGS principals are given a special budget to finance innovative teaching and learning practices (MoEYS, 2019b)

After three years of implementation, there have been reports of the NGS reform's success in achieving its desired outcomes, although ongoing monitoring and evaluation are needed (Donaher & Wu, 2020). Nevertheless, research has indicated that the NGS framework and school-level professional

support have been well-implemented (Donaher & Wu, 2020). Increased local participation in school management, improved accountability and responsiveness to students' needs, and better resource management have resulted in improved students' learning quality (Sherman, 2016). Thus, the NGS initiative will help enhance the quality of education in Cambodia.

## Conclusion

Many researchers (e.g., Androniceanu & Ristea, 2014; Busemeyer, 2012) have suggested that resources can be used more efficiently in decentralized systems. This can, in turn, lead to improved learner performance, higher parental satisfaction, and stronger accountability with community involvement and support. Thus, governments with fiscal constraints are attracted by this ability of decentralization to boost the efficiency of the expenditure (Sherman, 2016).

To bridge the educational gap, it is essential for the Cambodian government to build capacity across and between different levels within the education system. The central government has a crucial role to play to ensure an education system that can provide equitable opportunities and promote excellence among all learners. It needs to foster shared ownership of the vision for education across various levels, including national, sub-national, and local levels. In transferring responsibilities and autonomy to the local level, it is vital to have practical mechanisms in place to ensure that necessary support and capacity building are provided to concerned stakeholders so that they can effectively manage the increasing demands in education. The capacity building at the local level requires competent school leaders or principals, who are trusted by the local community, to increase schools' capacity to include all learners.

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