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**INEE**

# Education and Fragility in Cambodia



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**INEE**



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This report was developed on behalf of the INEE Working Group on Education and Fragility. The Working Group serves as an inter-agency mechanism to coordinate diverse initiatives and catalyse collaborative action on education and fragility. For more information on INEE and the Working Group, visit the organization's website at [www.ineesite.org](http://www.ineesite.org).

This report reflects a compilation of efforts by numerous individuals. An earlier version of this report was written by Tatiana Garakani, Meredith McCormac, and Kerstin Tebbe, based on field work undertaken in June 2009. James Williams served as the team leader for this first phase. This final report represents a major revision by Chris Toomer, Nina Teng, Mila Cerecina, and Xuzhi Liu, with some contributions from the original team. Additional editorial support was provided by Denise Bentreto, Lori Heninger, and Leigh Reilly.

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## About the INEE Working Group on Education and Fragility

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The INEE Working Group on Education and Fragility (2008–2011) consists of 20 member agencies:

- Academy for Educational Development (AED)
- Australian Agency for International Development (AusAid)
- CARE
- Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
- The Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts
- Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution
- CfBT Education Trust
- Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Education Development Centre (EDC)
- European Commission (EC)
- Fast Track Initiative (FTI) Secretariat
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ)
- Reach Out to Asia (ROTA), Qatar Foundation
- Save the Children Alliance
- UK Department for International Development (DFID)
- UNESCO Centre at the University of Ulster
- UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)
- UNICEF
- US Agency for International Development (USAID)
- The World Bank

For more information on the Working Group, contact: [educationfragility@ineesite.org](mailto:educationfragility@ineesite.org) and visit [www.ineesite.org/educationfragility](http://www.ineesite.org/educationfragility)

## Presentation of the IIEP series

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UNESCO is often asked to provide an educational response in emergency and reconstruction settings. The Organization continues to develop expertise in this field in order to be able to better prompt and relevant assistance. IIEP has been working most recently with the Global Education Cluster to offer guidance, practical tools, and specific training for education policy-makers, officials, and planners.

The UN General Assembly adopted, in July 2010, a resolution on the 'Right to education in emergency situations'. It recognizes that both natural disasters and conflict present a serious challenge to the fulfilment of international education goals, and acknowledges that protecting schools and providing education in emergencies should remain a key priority for the international community and Member States. The Dakar World Education Forum in 2000 explicitly focused on the rights of children in emergencies in the fifth of the 11 objectives it adopted. Governments, particularly education ministries, have an important role to play in an area that has often been dominated by non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies.

In this regard, the field of educational planning in emergencies and reconstruction is still developing, and requires increased documentation and analysis. Accumulated institutional memories and knowledge in governments, agencies, and NGOs on education in emergencies are in danger of being lost due to high staff turnover in both national and international contexts. Most of the expertise is still in the heads of practitioners and needs to be collected while memories are fresh.

The IIEP series on Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction aims to document such information, and includes country-specific analyses on the planning and management of education in emergencies and reconstruction. These studies focus on efforts made to restore and transform education systems in countries and territories as diverse as Pakistan, Burundi, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sudan, Kosovo, Timor-Leste, and Rwanda.

The situational analyses of education and fragility, produced in collaboration with the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), are the latest of IIEP's publications that seek to broaden the body of literature and knowledge in this field. These include a series of global, thematic, policy-related studies on topics including certification for pupils and teachers, donor engagement in financing and alternative education programmes. In addition, IIEP has published a *Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction* for ministry of education officials and the agencies assisting them. In collaboration with UNICEF and the Global Education Cluster, IIEP is also developing specific guidance on how to develop education-sector plans in situations affected by crisis for a similar audience. Through this programme, IIEP will make a modest but significant contribution to the discipline of education in emergencies and reconstruction, in the hope of enriching the quality of educational planning processes in situations affected by crisis.

Khalil Mahshi  
Director, IIEP

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## List of abbreviations

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BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CPA	Country Performance Assessment
CPK	Communist Party of Kampuchea
CPP	Cambodian People's Party
EFA	Education for All
ESP	Education Strategic Plan
ESSP	Education Sector Support Programme
FUNCINPEC	Front uni national pour un Cambodge indépendant, neutre, pacifique, et coopératif
INEE	Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MoEYS	Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PAP	Priority Action Programme
PETS	Public Expenditure Tracking Survey
SWAp	Sector Wide Approach
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

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## Foreword to the situational analyses

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The publications in this series are the result of a research project, 'Situational Analyses of Education and Fragility', carried out by the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) Working Group on Education and Fragility. The four studies in the series – Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, and Liberia – have been synthesized into an overarching review that aims to identify key elements in the complex relationships between education and fragility.

The INEE Working Group on Education and Fragility was established in 2008 as an inter-agency mechanism to coordinate initiatives and catalyse collaborative action on education and fragility. Its goals are to:

- strengthen consensus on approaches to mitigate fragility through education, while ensuring equitable access for all;
- support the development of effective quality education programmes in fragile contexts; and
- promote the development of alternative mechanisms to support education in fragile contexts in the transition from humanitarian to development assistance.

In late 2008, the Working Group decided to undertake country case studies to further develop the evidence base necessary to understanding the role of education in either exacerbating or mitigating fragility.

One of the Working Group's first tasks was to clarify the concept of 'fragility'. The term evolved from the terminology 'fragile states'. The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD–DAC) defines fragile states as those that have a limited capacity and/or political will to provide basic services to the population (OECD–DAC, 2008). The shift from 'fragile states' to 'fragility' reflects an attempt to avoid pejorative labels that might hinder diplomatic relations or assistance to such countries, as well as a more constructive approach to articulating the conditions of fragility, their causes, and their locations. This new focus no longer considers the state as the only unit of analysis – although its role remains critical. It also allows for a deeper exploration of the various causes (human and systemic) of a failure to provide basic services (security, justice, health, and education) to affected populations.

Fragile contexts are distinguished from non-fragile contexts principally by instability – political, economic, social – often coupled with the presence (or risk) of violent conflict. Any number or combination of the dynamics of fragility may characterize such contexts, including poor governance, repression, corruption, inequality and exclusion, and low levels of social cohesion. The four states examined in the situational analyses of education and fragility (Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, and Liberia) have all experienced, and continue to experience, instability, and/or prevalence of violence.

The relationship between education and fragility is dynamic and often mutually reinforcing. The numerous ways in which fragility can impact aspects of education (including access, quality, relevance, equity, and management) are well documented. There is also a deepening understanding of the impacts of education on fragility (in terms of exacerbation or mitigation).

However, additional evidence is needed to understand the complex dynamics of education in fragile contexts, and to determine the effectiveness of educational policies and programmes in reducing fragility.

Each of the four case studies presents an analysis of a *situation* of fragility. Their ultimate aim is to assist the development of recommendations for policy, planning, and programming strategies and best practice at the country level. All four studies used an ‘Analytic Framework of Education and Fragility’;<sup>\*</sup> developed by the Working Group. This built on existing tools, such as the USAID Education and Fragility Assessment Tool and the Fast Track Initiative’s (FTI) Progressive Framework. The analytic framework laid out common research questions to facilitate a process of (1) establishing the fragility context, (2) understanding the response to the fragility context, and (3) summarizing impact. The research analysed the interactions between education and fragility across five fragility domains (security, governance, economy, social, and environment), and against various aspects of education within four categories (planning, service delivery, resource mobilization, and system monitoring). The analytic framework was also intended to provide a base to develop a cross-comparison examination of all four situational analyses.

Yet, using the analytic framework as a methodological basis for the research proved challenging. In addition to being unwieldy, it failed to clarify the relationship between education and fragility for the researchers, each of whom interpreted the task and the framework in a different way.<sup>\*\*</sup> Complex and abstract definitions of fragility, which proved difficult to operationalize, compounded the problem. Furthermore, the issue of discriminating the interlinking and cross-cutting dynamics between the five fragility domains made it difficult to develop measurable indicators, and thus, methodologies and questionnaires. This led to differences in data collection between the countries, and complicated the cross-case analysis. It became apparent that a full understanding of fragility dynamics was necessary before beginning to tease out how education interacts and interfaces with indicators of fragility.

Due to this difficulty in establishing a shared analytic approach, the studies were less analytically consistent in terms of depth, focus, and quality than had been envisaged. The studies on Cambodia and Liberia, originally intended to be field-based, suffered more significantly from this lack of consistency, and therefore required bolstering with secondary literature.

However, despite the challenges, this synthesis of the four studies identifies emerging themes, commonalities, contrasts, and gaps in research on the relationship between education and fragility. IIEP hopes to use the knowledge garnered from the series to develop additional research and analytic tools for a wider audience.

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\* The analytic framework is available at:  
[www.ineesite.org/index.php/post/field-based\\_situational\\_analyses\\_of\\_education\\_and\\_fragility/](http://www.ineesite.org/index.php/post/field-based_situational_analyses_of_education_and_fragility/)

\*\* Independent researchers at IIEP-UNESCO and the University of Ulster developed the Afghanistan and Bosnia and Herzegovina studies respectively. The Working Group commissioned independent research teams for the fieldwork and development of the Cambodia and Liberia studies.

## Executive Summary

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This report on 'Education and Fragility in Cambodia' is part of a larger research project of the INEE Working Group on Education and Fragility involving three other country case studies – Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Liberia. The aim of these 'Situational Analyses of Education and Fragility' was to strengthen the evidence for understanding education's role in exacerbating and/or mitigating fragility and, ultimately, to lead to the development of recommendations for policy, planning, and programming strategies and best practice, both at country level and beyond.

The purpose of the present report is to examine the impact of education on fragility in Cambodia, both through a review of the drivers and dynamics of fragility, and an analysis of the ways in which education interacts with these drivers and dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

The report begins with an assessment of the context of fragility in Cambodia, reviewing the cultural and historical backdrop, which has significantly contributed to the country's current situation. The report places considerable emphasis on enduring cultural perspectives, including traditionalism vs. modernism and immunity to change, which have remained largely unaltered throughout the centuries and continue to underpin many aspects of Cambodian life. In particular, the report shows how a struggle between traditional Cambodian culture (characterized by a 'patron-client' system of interpersonal relations) and a consistent push for modernization (which can be considered largely synonymous with economic development and the opportunity for social mobility) has lain at the centre of the country's prolonged instability over the past several decades. It also demonstrates how Cambodia's political history has contributed to such enduring cultural perspectives and the country's fragility. The historical analysis reveals a number of striking similarities in the various governments' approaches to governance in general, and more specifically to education. In a context where each political establishment purported social transformation while vying for power within a vertical hierarchy, the education sector has repeatedly served to underpin the hegemonic structure. In addition to its use as a political instrument, education is shown to also have been perceived as a symbol and largely unfulfilled promise of modernization and, consequently, as a source of popular discontent.

The report then examines Cambodia's current context and the ways in which it echoes a number of historical patterns of fragility. While there is growing consensus that the country is more stable now than it has been over much of the past several decades, significant concerns are shown to still exist. Today, the most salient concern surrounds issues of a political nature. A number of grievances stem from the tight governance characteristic of a single-party system, which is both enabled and augmented by the patron-client tradition. This is currently characterized by political disempowerment due, among other things, to media control and censorship, constraints on public dissent, and a culture of intimidation and fear, as well as patterns of patronage and corruption. Economic and social marginalization of the poor and rural population, as well as of many youth, further exacerbates political disenfranchisement, leaving all but the most privileged Cambodians frustrated and cynical. This pervasive distrust

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1. The original basis of the report was to be data gathered during a field visit in June 2009. Due to methodological challenges, however, the present research is now primarily a desk study based on a review of secondary sources.

has usurped social cohesion and is further entrenched by reluctance to speak openly of the nation's recent traumatic history, with the result that wounds from the past cannot heal or be learned from.

This report argues that education has a significant role to play in addressing Cambodia's current instability concerns, especially taking into account the part it has played, both historically and in the present, in exacerbating and mitigating fragility. The contextual analysis is thus followed by an analysis of the evolution and current state of education, detailing the complex, bidirectional interplay between education and fragility, on the basis that this may provide important insights relevant to planning for future reforms.

The review of Cambodia's education system shows that, while the state of education has greatly improved over the past two decades, reaching more children than ever before and ensuring increased equal access to students of all ethnic, socio-economic, and geographical backgrounds, major shortcomings related to fragility continue to limit progress. In this report, the review of the sector is grouped under five broad areas: relevance of education; disparities in access; (dis-)engagement with the education system; teachers; and structures and governance.

First, as far as relevance is concerned, the report shows how Cambodia's current education system has failed to lead to employment and social mobility. Moreover, the skills it provides appear to be of limited political and civic relevance due to a lack of promotion of critical thinking and participatory learning, as well as to a long-standing neglect of national history, in particular relating to the genocide. This has resulted in a general lack of understanding of the factors that led to the worst political abuses in modern Cambodian history – an element crucial to ensuring their non-repetition, as well as to social healing and reconciliation.

Second, the report demonstrates how disparities in access to education – a salient symbol of inequality – persist in Cambodia, despite a purported policy of inclusive education. These disparities follow lines of deeply entrenched socio-economic divisions within the country, in particular between poor and rich, and urban and rural. The importance of gender and ethnicity as factors in determining educational access is also highlighted. While levels of female school enrolment have gradually increased, Cambodian women are still far less educated than men. Also, many indigenous minorities and forest-dwelling communities are disadvantaged in terms of access to schooling as a result of forced land migrations and geographic and language barriers. In addition, equal access to quality education is hampered by primarily urban/rural disparities in distribution of qualified teachers.

Third, the report shows how a number of factors have led to the disengagement of various groups within the education system. Private education, to which the elites have tended to turn, has led to their disengagement from the government system, thereby reinforcing inequalities and deep divisions between rich and poor. Furthermore, entrenched systems of corruption, which favour patronage over merit, have tended to disadvantage and disengage the poor, who are often unable to pay the frequent unofficial fees. In addition, inadequate language education, resulting in widespread poor English skills and the inability to access less-censored English materials, serves to increase longer-term, broader disengagement with political and social institutions.

Fourth, as far as teachers are concerned, the number of qualified school personnel has gradually increased. However, the report shows that capacity still remains a major challenge:

teachers are largely under-qualified and in short supply. In particular, challenges persist in relation to insufficient in-service training and professional development opportunities – vital for unqualified teachers, especially in remote and rural areas where there is an especially acute shortage of qualified teachers – and a lack of qualified teacher trainers. Existing challenges also include inadequate teaching pay and conditions, which have led, among other things, to the de-motivation and low societal status of teachers.

Fifth, regarding issues of structures and governance, the analysis shows that current structures continue to promote centralized control, reflecting the centralizing and authoritarian tendencies of the government in place, in spite of efforts at reform aimed at promoting decentralization and collaborative governance of the education sector. At the local level, community involvement and accountability remain inadequate despite several reforms and initiatives. As far as external assistance is concerned, Cambodia is heavily dependent on aid, but has taken a positive step towards ownership of its educational future and breaking the cycle of entrenched aid recipient status. However, the Cambodian government has difficulty in leading donor efforts given its institutional corruption and weak public financial management system, which have led to reluctance among donors to provide direct budget support through the national budget.

In its conclusion, this report demonstrates the interplay between education and fragility in modern Cambodia by highlighting the following thematic areas: politics and the politicization of education, history education and the failure to teach the genocide, socio-economic disparities and unequal access to education, social fragmentation, utilization of rote learning and other forms of traditional pedagogy, educational relevance, teacher capacity, incomplete decentralization, and the involvement of the international community.

*Politicization of education:* Political actors have solidified their power through the use of education to disseminate and entrench their ideologies and reinforce the traditional hierarchy, while using its promise of modernization and social and economic mobility to give hope to an otherwise frustrated population. Previous failures to deliver on promises of modernization stoked discontent among teachers and students, which mobilized support for the Khmer Rouge. Today, the education system is once again being used by the government to buttress its power, and has fallen short of producing a politically savvy electorate.

*History education:* Due to the conspicuous absence of the Cambodia genocide from the curriculum, an entire generation has been raised without a formal understanding of the conditions surrounding the darkest period in their country's history. Not only does this rob communities of the opportunity to heal and rebuild cultural pride, but it also produces an electorate that is relatively ignorant of the mechanisms through which previous regimes wielded and often abused power.

*Disparate access:* Disparate access to education and postgraduate jobs, partly due to systemic corruption, maintains the inequitable status quo and has the potential to lead to grievances. Social exclusion is mirrored in schools with education a prominent symbol of broader inequalities between the rich and poor, and the urban and rural.

*Social fragmentation:* The struggle between traditional and modern concepts of education in Cambodia underpins larger issues in society. Parents and the community at large are not directly involved in the teaching and learning of civics and morals, and traditional Buddhist moral teachings so central to Cambodian culture are eroding.



*Pedagogy:* The failure of schooling to develop critical thinking skills is likely to significantly impact the citizenry's ability to express its opinions, organize communities, exert political influence within the established order, counter manipulation, and arrive at alternative models of governance. Also, the power dynamics of the teacher-student relationship reflect and reinforce the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of Cambodian society, leaving students without the critical skills necessary to question their roles in society.

*Relevance of education:* Education has consistently failed to provide skills that lead to real-world opportunities. These unfulfilled promises have left Cambodia with an increasingly educated but disenfranchised population, a condition which in the past fuelled revolution and ultimately genocide. In addition, schooling plays no role in raising young people's awareness of environmental issues in a country experiencing rampant deforestation, depletion of fisheries, and unpredictable flooding.

*Teacher capacity:* The shortage of qualified teachers in Cambodia is both a symptom and a cause of fragility. This has inevitably resulted in an overall low quality of instruction. The poor salary, working conditions, and social status accorded to the profession have left many teachers disenchanted and aggrieved.

*Incomplete decentralization:* Although efforts have been made to empower local-level decision-making in educational matters, actual power seems to be poorly distributed. While certain financial and administrative responsibilities have been decentralized, critical elements such as curriculum development remain tightly centralized. The patron-client system and pervasive fear amplify this disempowerment of local communities, leading to the absence of a decision-making culture. Continued government reluctance to decentralize power may also inhibit the development of district and local capacity and contribute to fragility by further weakening critical institutions.

*The international community:* Due to the scope of its involvement, international aid remains essential to the functioning of the Cambodian education system. While aid has the potential to work as a force to strengthen fragile institutions by promoting local ownership of the education development process, donor activities have instead frequently weakened institutional capacity by dominating the allocation of resources and draining national coordination resources. These constraints inhibit the country's institutions from taking on greater responsibility, and risk leaving gaps in service in the event that large donors decide to pull or reallocate funding.

By bringing to light the current interplays between education and fragility in Cambodia, this report hopes to stimulate positive actions to tackle these issues, enabling education to mitigate fragility rather than exacerbating it.

# 1 Introduction

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The present research is primarily a desk study based on a review of secondary sources, including academic literature, country- and project-specific reports by NGOs and donors, and other resources. While the original report was meant to be based on data collected during a three-week field visit in June 2009, these data are not included in the report for the reasons stated in the **Foreword to the situational analyses** above. As a result, references to interviews have mostly been removed.

The report attempts to consider the impact of education on fragility; this will be accomplished through a review of the drivers and dynamics of fragility in Cambodia and the interaction of education in Cambodia with these drivers and dynamics. The fragility context will be assessed by first reviewing the cultural and historical backdrop – with an eye towards education’s impacts – as it provides the essential framework from which the successive analysis is derived. Second, the report will briefly highlight the current fragility context in Cambodia and how it echoes a number of historical trends. Third, a deeper exploration of the evolution and current state of education will detail the complex, bidirectional interplay between education and fragility. Finally, conclusions of the impact of education on fragility will be laid out.

## 2 The Cambodian context

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Cambodia today is one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia. Unlike other Southeast Asian nations that have achieved transformative economic progress and political stability over the past several decades, Cambodia remains mired in poverty and political flux. While there is little question that Cambodia is better off in an absolute sense than it was in 1970, 1979, or even 1993, a fundamental uncertainty exists beneath the current perception of stability.

What is most striking and unique about the Cambodian context is that the manner and degree to which education has historically impacted fragility (and vice versa) continues to hold true in the present day. These recurring themes may provide valuable insights to the current education system and for planning for future reforms.

### 2.1 The Cambodian cultural perspective

Few assessments of education and wider development challenges include a thorough examination of the cultures and traditions that exert considerable influence on Cambodian society (Ayres, 2000a: 440). Reform efforts often fail to recognize these cultural complexities, leading to efforts that fail to address or even exacerbate the problems they are designed to address. These complexities are an essential starting point, however, for the analysis of any country – particularly in how it approaches and responds to policy challenges. In short, ‘culture matters’. This report will place considerable emphasis on enduring cultural perspectives, including traditionalism vs. modernism and immunity to change, that have remained largely unchanged throughout the centuries and underpin many aspects of Cambodian life.

### 2.2 Traditionalism vs. modernization

A struggle between traditional Cambodian culture and the drive to modernize has lain at the centre of the country’s prolonged instability over the past several decades. Tension between these competing forces has likewise been a major influencing factor in the development of the education sector (Ayres, 2000b).

The ‘patron-client’ system of interpersonal relations in Cambodia is one that has evolved over the course of many centuries (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 9). Heavily influenced by both the divine conception of the King during the Angkor empire in the twelfth century and the significant exchange of ideas through commerce with India, the system has created an intricate hierarchy that permeates every faction of Cambodian society, from commoners to the elite. In addition to upholding the unquestioned authority of the King, the system is characterized by citizens’ involvement in relationships of patronage/clientship as well as an absence of the notion of mutual obligation. Survival at the top of the hierarchy meant developing a network of clients large enough to stave off rivals, while survival at the bottom was ensured by the protection of powerful patrons. The bottom of this pyramid existed to be governed by the top, with power flowing in only one direction. ‘The result was that power became an end in itself – those with authority sought to become more powerful while having absolutely no obligation to better the lives of those upon whom their authority had been established’ (Ayres, 2000a: 11–12). The

modern day government has been observed as a single patron-client system that permeates Cambodian life, a monolith with power held firmly at the centre (Calavan, Diaz Briquets, O'Brien, 2004: 1, 7).

In stark competition with Cambodian tradition has been the consistent push for modernization, which can be considered largely synonymous with economic development and the opportunity for social mobility. Education has been promoted time and again as a critical driver for this development. Cambodians define education from a traditional, social, and cultural perspective, as 'an honest route to better the human condition, intentionally aimed at shaping individuals for a better lifestyle, knowledge, and good manners for living in their respective societies' (Dy, 2004: 93). The contemporary Cambodian perception of education, however, is to provide the knowledge and skills that will increase human capital for Cambodia's economic development (Tan, 2008: 566). This contemporary view of education, characterized by the opportunity to improve one's standing in society, is largely attributed to the ideological influences of Cambodia's colonial French rule, which planted the seeds of modernization that have since been sown to different degrees by subsequent governments for political ends. These governments have attempted to legitimize their authority within the social norms of the traditional hierarchical model, while appearing to develop the nation in the name of modernization. In most of these cases, governments and the education systems under their respective administrations failed to reconcile these competing interests and fulfil their promise of economic and social progress to more than a handful of Cambodians. While modernization remains an attractive prospect to the majority of Cambodians accustomed to being helpless, its failure to come to fruition and the tenacity of traditional hierarchical values continue to cause substantial grievance across society (Ayres, 2000b: 2–3).

## **2.3 Immunities to change**

By any standards, Cambodia has survived a painful modern history. A number of cultural characteristics have likely been strengthened by these tumultuous events, which have the effect of making the society resistant to political and social change in a number of ways.

For the older generation of Cambodians who lived through the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge era, there is 'an overwhelming value placed on stability and a strong aversion to risk' (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 13). While many cultures perceive concentrated political power as an obvious threat, many Cambodians view this aggregation of power advantageously in that it ensures a steady political structure. Given the strong patron-client culture in Cambodia, as long as the ruling party is fulfilling its patron role, the client is obliged to fulfil his or her role. Voting against a steady patron would thus seem irrational (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 13). Similarly, in cases when decision-making power has been decentralized to some degree, people at the local level are reluctant to accept the shared power as they are accustomed to relying on a higher authority. In addition, given that the services provided by patrons have historically been minimal, Cambodians have low expectations and are apt to tolerate the most basic of provisions. Finally, difficult times in the past have increased the resilience of the Cambodian people and their communities. Accustomed to (often unwilling) migration and economic hardship, they have the ability to cope with limited resources (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 13).

### 3 Fragility in Cambodia: Historical contexts and the politicization of education

Despite experiencing repeated political upheavals over the past six decades, closer examination of Cambodia's disparately principled governments reveals a number of striking similarities in their approaches to governance, and more specifically to education. In the span of less than 50 years, Cambodia has had at least seven distinct types of governments, as summarized in *Table 1*. Over this time, each governmental incarnation has purported social transformation; however, successive restructuring efforts have been more concerned with attempts to vie for power within a vertical hierarchy than true change for the masses.

**Table 1. Political Timeline**

Year	Ruling government (head of state)	Type of government
1863–1953	French colonial rule (various)	Colonialism
1953–1970	Sangkum (Prince Sihanouk)	Buddhist socialism/monarchy
1970–1975	Neo-Khmerism (Lon Nol)	Republicanism
1975–1979	Democratic Kampuchea (Pol Pot)	Cambodian communism
1979–1991	People's Republic of Kampuchea/State of Cambodia (Heng Samrin/Hun Sen)	Vietnamese communism
1991–1993	Cambodia under the United Nations Transitional Authority	Transitional authority
1993–1997	Coalition (Prince Ranariddh/Hun Sen)	*'Hybrid' democracy
1997–present	Cambodian People's Party (Hun Sen)	*'Hybrid' democracy

\* (Un, 2005: 203).

#### 3.1 Under the French (1863–1953)

In 1863, Cambodia became a French protectorate, and was later incorporated into French Indochina together with Viet Nam and Laos. Towards the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Japanese, who had occupied Cambodia, disbanded the French colonial administration, following which Prince Norodom Sihanouk – enthroned by the French in 1941 – proclaimed an independent Kampuchea, which only lasted a few months until the Allied Occupation in October. Starting in 1946, the French reluctantly allowed a gradual move towards independence, which was granted first within the French Union in 1949, and eventually fully in 1953 under intense pressure exercised by Sihanouk.

For 90 years ending in 1953, the French ruled Cambodia in a manner consistent with the governments it followed and preceded, promoting reciprocity, dependency, and maintenance of the status quo. In line with the patron-client model, the French pledged to protect the nation from Thailand and neighbouring British colonies in exchange for Cambodian loyalty. Part of the colonial heritage was the establishment of an education system whose structures and dynamics would be perpetuated and intensified for decades to come, including haphazard educational expansion without consideration to the expectations of graduates and to the relevance of their education to the country or their own lives, as well as manipulation of the system for purposes of political legitimacy. If it reinforced the premium on loyalty, education under the French also

challenged the Cambodian notion of helplessness with the promise that education could offer social mobility through acceptance in the colonial administration. While education provided to peasants by the French had negligible benefit, the colonial period left the hint of egalitarianism and modernity that would challenge traditional Cambodian hierarchy over the following decades (Ayres, 2000b: 18–30).

### **3.2 Under Sihanouk (1953–1970)**

Prince Sihanouk became Cambodia's all-powerful and unquestioned ruler, presiding over the country in relative stability for more than a decade. The political status quo was tightly maintained through the heavy-handed control of national political, economic, and social life. The major mechanism put in place by Sihanouk to project his power and sustain his rule was the political party Sangkum, which absorbed or co-opted most conservative and centrist political groups. Sangkum maintained power from its first election win in 1955 up to the 1966 election by means of political intimidation and violence, electoral fraud, manipulation of resources via corruption, marginalization of the opposition, and stifling of dissent (Chandler, 1993).

Sihanouk's ideology reflected his desire to strengthen the authority of the monarch, while also invoking a struggle against social injustice and underdevelopment. As part of his mission to modernize Cambodia through economic development, Sihanouk invested heavily in visible, low-quality infrastructure – particularly in education – to signal Cambodia's progress with an eye on building legitimacy for his rule among the population. With educational expansion as a dominant policy priority, schools were built across the country, thereby establishing state presence in the localized world of the country's villages for the first time in Cambodia's history (Ayres, 2000b). As a result, by 1969, at least 2 million Cambodians were enrolled in primary and secondary schools and more than 11,000 were attending Cambodian universities (Chandler, 1993). The growth in the establishment of schools, however, was not supported by the necessary resources – materials, trained teachers, staff, or financing – to implement quality education. Similarly, Sihanouk's expansion of tertiary education beginning in the mid-1960s was a superficial effort to bring Cambodian higher education in line with the capacity of other countries in the region. Here again, the infrastructure to support tertiary education was not put in place and there was no cohort of secondary graduates to fill these universities (Ayres, 2000a).

Alongside educational expansion, Sihanouk instituted educational reforms, and in particular the 'Cambodianization' of the curriculum – including revising the syllabi to reflect Cambodia's independence, providing textbooks and teaching materials in Khmer, relegating French to a secondary language in primary education, and adjusting the number of teaching hours in French and Khmer (Ayres, 2000b: 39–41). These efforts, however, also proved to be superficial as the system merely introduced Khmer content into the French model (which had been primarily aimed at turning-out civil servants) without increasing its relevance to Cambodia's development needs by encouraging a shift in graduate skills and expectations, in particular, towards the field of agriculture in recognition of the primarily agrarian nature of the Cambodian economy (Ayres, 2000b: 44).

From the mid-1960s, in the midst of an economic crisis partly caused by widespread corruption and general mismanagement, politics began to take a strikingly factious and cutting tone that manifested in increasingly poor governance, violent insurgencies, and the opening of major cracks in the system (Chandler, 1993). In this period, Sihanouk's ability to maintain



relative stability started to falter as various segments of society began to seek alternatives to the status quo, and his control over the country began to diminish. On the one hand, the left ascended as an opposition force consolidating by the 1960s under the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), also known as the Khmer Rouge. Originally fed by radical students returning from studies in France, its ranks were later swollen by teachers (including former teacher Saloth Sar, later known as Pol Pot) disgruntled with their inability to find jobs in more lucrative areas of the civil service, and student cadres whose expectations for social mobility were frustrated by high unemployment rates (Ayres, 2000b; Kiernan, 2002). As Ayres puts it, 'It was not so much Communism that had ignited Cambodia's students into action. Rather, it was a massive failure in educational policies and practices' (Ayres, 2000a: 60). On the other hand, an anti-Communist and somewhat pro-American elite was growing and had positioned itself contrary to Sihanouk's policies of appeasing both South and North Viet Nam (Chandler 1993: 159). In this context, 'two Cambodias' began to appear: one heavily influenced by the Communist movement looking to upend the hierarchical status quo, and the other embodied by Lon Nol, Sihanouk's occasional Prime Minister, representing the pro-American elite set on maintaining social order (Ayres, 2000b: 43–71). As contrarian segments of society became more entrenched in the late 1960s, increased factionalism, as well as discontent and opposition to the Sihanouk regime's neglect, injustice, repression, and exploitation broke into armed violence. Radicalization within Cambodia contributed to insurgency and the growth of the Communist movement, which led to many of the uprisings in 1967 and 1968 (Chandler, 1993: 157). By the end of the 1960s, the internal instability was compounded by spillover from the Viet Nam War, which led to the US bombing and invasion of Cambodia between 1969 and 1973.

### **3.3 Under Lon Nol (1970–1975)**

In 1970, a military coup led by Prime Minister General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak (Sihanouk's cousin) ousted Sihanouk, inaugurating a period of poor governance, economic downturn, and social fragmentation, as well as simultaneous civil and regional wars. While promising change – including a shift away from Sihanouk's brand of socialism towards capitalism and democracy – Lon Nol's newly established republican government perpetuated dynamics from Sihanouk's rule of absolute power including thriving corruption and nepotism and marginalization of non-supporters (Chandler, 1993). Lon Nol also perpetuated Sihanouk's pledge of development and reliance on education for the fulfilment of promised changes, while attempting to legitimize his seat of power by promoting traditional culture (Ayres, 2000a: 449–450).

Aiming to overthrow Lon Nol's regime, Sihanouk formed an alliance with his former enemy, the rebel communist leader of the CPK, Pol Pot. Through the first half of the decade, the civil war between the regime and its opponents played out in conjunction with the war with Viet Nam – fought by Cambodia with US military assistance – resulting in violent internal repressions and the death of over half a million Cambodians (Chandler, 1993). Combined, these two wars clearly exacerbated the education crisis between 1970 and 1975 (Ayres, 2000b: 90–92). With the country constantly under siege, these years saw a complete breakdown of the education system with the closure of schools, the disruption of schooling for hundreds of thousands of students, and the military recruitment of students to fight in the wars with the CPK and the Vietnamese (Ayres, 2000b). Teachers went on strike to protest against the declining purchasing power of their salaries and students demonstrated against government actions deemed as

unjust and corrupt including, for example, the sacking of the Dean of the law faculty. These protests culminated in events in June 1974 during which the Minister and Deputy Minister of Education were assassinated after being taken hostage by demonstrating students (Chandler, 1993: 232). In general, governance ceased and government functions were *de facto* taken over by the United Nations. According to Ayres,

Although there were a few notable exceptions, government officials had lost interest in national development priorities, leaving education to drift with the tide of countrywide despair. Sensing the lack of concern with the future, the director-general of UNESCO, hoping that the conflict would end quickly (with a Khmer Rouge victory), began to examine postwar possibilities (2000b: 88).

### 3.4 Under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979)

The Khmer Rouge took power in 1975, renaming the country Democratic Kampuchea. During its four-year reign, the country's new leader Pol Pot instituted a vast social experiment aimed at transforming the country into a Marxist agrarian society, eventually resulting in what has been widely recognized as a state-sponsored genocide. Numbers vary widely; however, it is estimated that the Khmer Rouge exterminated between 750,000 and 3,331,678 Cambodians (Clayton, 1999) in the 'killing fields' by torture and execution, exhaustion from overwork, starvation, and disease (Chandler, 1993).<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to obliterate the old society and forcibly impose a rural, agrarian lifestyle, the CPK completely reconstituted social, economic, and political relations and norms, and maintained a tight, omnipotent grip on the population by sustaining an atmosphere of terror through indiscriminate violence and entrenched surveillance systems. This instilled a deep-seated sense of distrust, and a resultant culture of silence (Linton, 2004). Among other things, Western medicine, religion, intellectualism, libraries, and anything associated with the previous regime were discarded or destroyed upon the start of Pol Pot's 'Year Zero'. Knowledge of a foreign language or use of a minority language could be reason for execution. The family structure was significantly weakened through compulsory relocations, forced marriages, and the removal of children from their parents (Clayton, 1999). The regime disproportionately targeted ethnic minority groups, as well professionals from any ethnic group, including lawyers, doctors, and teachers.

The obliteration of the old system included education, and education as it had existed was systematically destroyed. The agenda of the Khmer Rouge – to pursue self-reliance – saw social systems (including education) sacrificed in lieu of economic development centred on a return to agrarianism. Although schooling was provided in most villages and districts across the country, it aimed primarily to teach very basic literacy and numeracy, and technical skills to support agriculture, as well as to inculcate the new revolutionary culture, in order to fulfil the needs of the agrarian revolution (Ayres, 2000b: 106, 118). As highlighted by Chandler (1993), the reality of the regime's purposeful neglect of education in general, and quality in particular, was demonstrated by the recruitment of illiterate peasants as teachers and the organization of classes during the lunch breaks of 14-hour workdays. Consequently, the resulting regression of

2. In 2003, the government and the UN agreed on the establishment of a special tribunal to try senior Khmer Rouge officials on charges of genocide, including Kaing Guek Eav, alias Duch, who ran the notorious Tuol Sleng prison, and Ta Mok, alias the Butcher, who died in 2006 before his trial could take place. In 2007, the first indictment was made, charging Duch with crimes against humanity, and the first trial began in early 2009.



education and social capital during the Khmer Rouge's reign inevitably crippled Cambodia for decades to come (Scheffer and Chhang, 2010).

While the CPK was undertaking its revolution by means of extreme violence against its own people, the war with Viet Nam continued with cross-border incursions by the Vietnamese into Cambodian territory. Democratic Kampuchea finally dissolved in 1979 – largely in response to attacks on southern Viet Nam – with the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia (Ayres, 2000b: 110, 117).

### **3.5 Under the Vietnamese (1979–1991)**

Viet Nam's invasion ushered in a decade of Vietnamese rule, exercised through a Communist government under the control of the Khmer People's Revolutionary Party (KPRP), led by Heng Samrin. While the Vietnamese invasion and occupation ended Khmer Rouge atrocities, it was also contentious. Many Cambodians had little trust in the new regime because of its association with Cambodia's traditional enemy, Viet Nam. The regime also faced hostility from the international community, which imposed sanctions on both the new People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) and Viet Nam (Ayres, 2000b), while the ASEAN states, China, and the United States financed, supported, and sponsored Cambodian resistance forces. In 1982, these guerrilla movements – including the Khmer Rouge, the royalist National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC), led by Sihanouk, and the republican Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) – aligned to form the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), a government in exile led by Sihanouk and dominated by the Khmer Rouge (Ayres, 2000b).

Following the end of Pol Pot's reign, the new regime was faced with the daunting task of rebuilding a country that was left with 'no currency, no markets, no financial institutions and virtually no industry. There was no public transport system; no trains ran and the roads were damaged and unrepaired. There was no postal system, no telephones and virtually no electricity, clean water, sanitation or education' (Mysliwiec as quoted in Ayres, 2000b: 125). In this context, the PRK faced a massive educational crisis, as both human and physical resources were depleted. At the time, as Ayres describes, 'there was no educational administration in place, no curricula, no adequate learning materials and few qualified teaching personnel' (2000b: 128).

Despite these challenges, the immediate aim of the PRK was to quickly restore the education service and to get as many students into school as possible, hoping also to legitimize its rule. As a result, between 1979 and 1991, primary school enrolment rose from 0.2 million to 1.6 million (Nicolai, 2009). While the first functioning schools were the result of initiatives of individuals, most often without any credentials or qualifications, the state quickly moved to set up an authorized body of officials and teachers, and to rebuild and expand the educational infrastructure (Ayres, 2000b). Attempts were also made to remove any French influence from the newly established education system. While the structure of the education system resembled that of the Vietnamese – characterized by a ten-year structure and decentralized management – the curriculum was a complex blend of Vietnamese socialist and revolutionary cultural ideas (exemplified in the history syllabus' emphasis on practicality and political morality) and the memories of pre-revolutionary teachers (Ayres, 2000b).

As highlighted by Ayres, in spite of such efforts to re-establish a devastated education sector, enormous challenges and flaws remained, especially with regard to the quality of educational

provision (Ayres, 2000b). These included scarce materials and infrastructure; a chronic shortage of qualified staff in the national ministry and schools (partly due to the Khmer Rouge' purge of educated elites), which eventually impacted the effectiveness of the new decentralized structure;<sup>3</sup> and severe psycho-social and health problems which afflicted both teachers and students, affecting both teaching and learning. To these can be added the perplexing orientation of the education system, whose structure and goals conflicted with the continued reflection of pre-revolutionary influence in the curriculum, feeding naïve graduates expectations of assuming posts in the civil service; and the political manipulation of the education sector, which was used as a tool to legitimize the PRK regime and propagate state ideology. Clayton (1999), for instance, noted the political appropriation of education by the Vietnamese as part of an ideological state apparatus promptly erected to propagate their ideas and vision of drawing Cambodia into the international socialist revolution: 'education served as the primary mechanism of this hegemonic mission ... [and] all education ... conveyed Marxist-Leninist philosophy' (2002: 70–71). Similarly, Ayres (2000b) concluded that, 'essentially, education was seen as the primary tool for state-building and establishing legitimacy. The rehabilitation of education, while it had humanitarian motives, was a massive exercise in hegemony, an attempt to rapidly diffuse among the masses the regime's socialist worldview' (2000b: 135–136).

In 1989, Viet Nam withdrew from Cambodia as a result of waning support from a weakening Soviet Union and increased pressure from the West, leaving the nation once again with a fragile government ripe for a power struggle (Clayton, 1999: 74–76). Soon, the newly named State of Cambodia (SOC) emerged with a new constitution and economic ideals, an amended flag, a revised national anthem, and a reinstated Buddhist national religion. Signalling a clear break with the past resulting from a realization of the failure of Vietnamese and Soviet socialism and an eagerness to claim Western aid, the SOC moved to a multi-party system and a liberalized, free-market economy. In this changing context, as Ayres pointed out, education was 'left to struggle with the prospect of adjustment in a vacuum of irrelevance ... The contradiction between explicit socialist rhetoric and an "unsocialist" economic orientation saw the education system perceived as increasingly irrelevant by its users' (2000b: 142). Beside such struggles to articulate and implement a new direction and purpose for the education system, to create a distance from both socialism and Viet Nam, quality remained low, with continuing rapid educational expansion, and inadequate provision of materials (textbooks, stationery, infrastructure, etc.) and number of qualified teachers, lecturers and ministry officials (Ayres, 2000b).

### **3.6 Under UNTAC and the Coalition (1991–1997)**

In 1991, after a decade of civil war and two years of negotiations, Cambodia's four warring factions signed the Paris Peace Accord, leading to a rather fragile peace. Subsequently, an interim coalition government was formed, supervised by the United Nations (UN). In this fragile political context, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established by the UN Security Council to ensure the implementation of the peace agreement, including the maintenance of law and order, the repatriation and resettlement of the displaced, the disarmament and demobilization of combatants, the rehabilitation of infrastructures, and the organization and conduct of free and fair elections. Eventually, what turned out to be highly contested elections in 1993 saw Hun Sen – a former Khmer Rouge official and foreign minister in

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3. By November 1979, only 4,000 out of a total of 13,619 teachers were qualified.

the PRK – use his influence to secure a power-sharing arrangement with Prince Ranariddh, despite the latter winning the popular vote. The result, after much negotiation, was the formation of a coalition government with Prince Ranariddh of FUNCINPEC and Hun Sen as First and Second Prime Ministers, respectively (Ayres, 2000b: 159). The development of dual power structures in the newly established Kingdom of Cambodia – with authority, roles, and responsibilities in the new administration split between the coalition parties – eventually resulted in the creation of two separate and competing party states, which operated within the system through vast networks of clients and bases of power, inevitably leading to a consequent standstill of all crucial administrative decisions and institutional reforms (Ayres, 2000b: 169).

During the transition period, very few educational changes were made under UNTAC. The government retained control over the education sector, which continued to function under already existing administrative structures. In this same period, however, due to an influx of Western assistance, NGOs increased their presence in the Cambodian education sector, expanding their work in the provision of training and technical assistance and conducting feasibility studies and needs assessments for future activities. The immediate effect of these actors on the education system was minimal, however, leaving the education system in a state of crisis characterized by poor quality, irrelevant curricula, inadequate training and remuneration for teachers, rare and unevenly distributed materials, poor physical infrastructure, high drop-out rates, elitist pre-school and secondary school sectors, and access inhibited by low incomes (Ayres 2000b: 155–156).

Following the departure of UNTAC forces in 1993, the state, supported by a still substantial international presence, focused primarily on the tasks of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Within the framework of a common commitment to ‘development’ professed by the coalition partners, the education system became a fundamental priority in efforts to rehabilitate and reconstruct Cambodia (Ayres, 2000b: 454). The often conflicting dual-party system, in which Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) and Prince Ranariddh’s FUNCINPEC shared ministerial portfolios and answered to different loyalty networks (Ratcliffe, Patch, and Quinn, 2009: 130–131), served as an impediment, as did the fact that much of the progress was donor-driven with most resources off-budget (Ayres, 2000a: 143–162). The educational project associated with this commitment went into full swing with the 1994 Rebuilding Quality Education and Training in Cambodia Programme. This programme prioritized universalization of nine years of basic general education, modernization, and improvement of the quality of the education system, and the linking of training development with the requirements of both employers and workers (Ayres, 2000a: 166). It formed the cornerstone of policy-making in education over the next two years, providing a comprehensive policy framework to deal with the crisis in Cambodian education. In the same year, the Education Sector Review conducted by the Asian Development Bank made a range of recommendations regarding teachers, higher education, curriculum, and so on, to try to address quality and equity issues.

### **3.7 Under Hun Sen (1997–present)**

In 1997, Hun Sen ousted Prince Ranariddh in a bloody coup, backed by institutions loyal to the CPP (Un, 2005: 207), under the pretence of preventing anarchy. In so doing, he reaffirmed his absolute power over the institutions of the Cambodian state. Under international pressure, new elections were conducted in 1998. While international observers recognized the elections as sufficiently fair, Ranariddh’s FUNCINPEC and the Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) refused to accept

the victory of Hun Sen, accusing him of having resorted to violence and intimidation against opposition supporters, as well as to vote-buying and coercion (International Crisis Group, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2003). In November 1998, with international mediation, the CPP and FUNCINPEC once again formed a coalition, with the latter subordinated to the former. With the 2003 parliamentary elections, the powerful and resourceful CPP – which had presided over the most peaceful period in the country's recent history and had promised economic recovery – won support from voters (Madra, 2003), especially in rural areas (Kazim, 2003). However, in 2004 none of the parties won the two-thirds majority required to govern alone, so Ranariddh and Hun Sen agreed to form a new coalition, with Hun Sen remaining as prime minister. In 2008, following new parliamentary elections, the CPP, seemingly the only political option to maintain peace in Cambodia, formed a majority government, despite new accusations of vote buying, voter intimidation, and electoral fraud.

Under the current tenure of the CPP and its Prime Minister Hun Sen – the world's longest serving chief executive, described by Chandler as behaving like a monarch who 'has no respect for pluralism, an independent judiciary, or the separation of powers' (2010: 2) – the Cambodian population's desire for 'stability at any cost' appears to perhaps be the strongest mitigating factor of fragility. This acquiescence of the citizenry, particularly among the older generation, is based on a preference to endure current forms of marginalization and exclusion rather than risk reigniting the atrocities of the past. According to a recent report, the CPP – which continues to use the promise of education and other prospects of modernization to its advantage – 'has proven extremely skilful at using this basic cultural mindset and societal pattern to solidify its position' (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 9). Nevertheless, Heder (as quoted in Linton 2004) considers Cambodia under Hun Sen to be currently 'more socio-politically polarized than at any time in history, except under the CPK [Khmer Rouge], thus making for serious class conflicts' (Linton, 2004). In this context, as under previous governments, education reflects political motives: modernization continues to be touted from within an authoritarian political system, civics education fails to discuss Cambodia's socio-political and sociocultural constraints, and students find topics like human rights 'too foreign, abstract and philosophical' (Tan, 2008: 567–568).

This historical analysis highlights a number of themes that will be reiterated by evidence in the remainder of this report. Although each political establishment has interpreted the education sector differently, the underlying values have remained primarily the same, serving to underpin the hegemonic structure. Historically repetitive themes include the use of education as a political tool, education as a symbol and largely unfulfilled promise of modernization, the discontent of students and teachers, and a lack of open dialogue due to single-party dominance. The consistent parallels that can be drawn between periods preceding tumultuous transitions in Cambodia's history and the condition of the nation in present day are of primary concern.

It is essential to recognize that 'stability' in the modern Cambodian context can be understood not as something approaching an ideal state, but rather as simply the absence of 'instability'. Numerous governments have used education as a tool of coercion, hope, or influence, facilitating impermanent 'stability' while perhaps exacerbating state fragility in the longer term. This report concludes that although Cambodia is by most accounts less fragile now than in the preceding few decades, present-day Cambodians have made crucial and likely unsustainable sacrifices in the name of perceived stability under Hun Sen's regime. In essence, Cambodia's fragility is masked.

## 4 Fragility in Cambodia: Current drivers and dynamics

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There exists a growing consensus that Cambodia is more stable now than it has been over much of the past several decades. However, significant concerns still exist. In 2009, The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Cambodia as the fourth most unstable country in the world, tied with Sudan, and ahead of both Iraq and Afghanistan (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). The present-day fragility context in Cambodia in many ways mirrors the past, with a number of drivers pulling on the national fabric in a manner resembling the preceding decades.

The most salient concern surrounds the single-party system, both enabled and augmented by the patron-client tradition, which is firmly controlled by the CPP. A number of grievances stem from this tight governance: media control and censorship, the inability to express dissent, political disempowerment (particularly of opposition parties), a culture of intimidation and fear, severely limited legal recourse, widespread land-grabbing, a dearth of non-state resources, institutions weakened by patronage, and policies without implementation.

Economic and social marginalization further exacerbate political disenfranchisement, leaving all but the most privileged Cambodians frustrated and cynical: corruption permeates all parts of society and widens the gap between the rich and poor, leading to a culture of complicity and powerlessness (Nissen, 2004: 4). Employment prospects for a burgeoning youth demographic are dismal (Morris, 2004). The poor and rural population is often excluded from access to basic services due to second-rate infrastructure and the coupling of corruption and inadequate domestic resources as a result of formal tax payments that entrench poor health and education services (Calavan, Diaz Briquets, and O'Brien, 2004: 5). Community structures remain broken and the pervasive distrust that has usurped social cohesion inhibits many marginalized groups from uniting to further their welfare (Tan, 2008: 563). The nation's traumatic past is not often openly spoken of, and wounds from the past have not yet healed, and have not yet been learned from.

At the same time, key actors in society deftly promote resiliencies that mitigate fragility, at least in the short term (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009). In present day Cambodia, one such mitigating factor is relative peace of general stability and security; after decades of violence, Cambodia is currently experiencing its longest period without war in half a century, on which a premium is placed, particularly by older generations. The government also provides a minimum level of basic infrastructure and services (such as roads and electricity) to a significant portion of the population. These incremental improvements, although perhaps deficient from most external perspectives, may nevertheless represent a positive trend to many Cambodians (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009). Finally, the historically familiar promise of development, modernization, and social mobility continues to punctuate the rhetoric of politicians. Although by most accounts the government is the source of more grievance than gratitude, Cambodians' desire for stability above all else engenders complacency and the maintenance of the status quo.



## 5 Cambodia in the coming years

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‘The Cambodia of the coming decade will not be like the Cambodia of the last decade’ (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009). The country has the opportunity to turn a corner if key actors can maintain a stable state while mitigating patronage and corruption, diversifying the economy, and improving social services. However, if it avoids these significant reforms, it risks a return to instability and violence (2009: 3). While many challenges are to come, a few stand out as potentially major drivers of fragility over the next decade.

### 5.1 Demographic changes

While yet to exert significant political pressure, the disproportionately large younger generation is more materialistic and thus increasingly likely to disavow the status quo for promises of upward mobility in a climate of rising expectations. Having never been formally taught of the genocide or experienced Vietnamese occupation, Cambodian youth may be much less motivated to maintain ‘stability at any cost’. While this erosion of the collective memory has the potential to yield a foundation for activism, it also exposes the threat of reprisals by a strict government should the system be shaken.

The demographic shift, decline in traditional livelihoods, and the recent saturation or decline of major industries all suggest increased competition for jobs and consequently youth unemployment. While youth joblessness may well be a driver of instability in terms of gang involvement, drug use, and crime, this group has yet to contribute significantly to fragility at a macro level. That said, there is evidence that the government is concerned: in contradiction to years of effort to demobilize its oversized army, the government in 2006 passed a conscription law making young Cambodian men liable to serve a mandatory 18 months in the military. Some sources have suggested that one motivation for this move is to stave off a looming unemployment crisis (BBC, 2006).

### 5.2 Perpetuation of patronage

The same immunities to change which have seduced the current generation into imitating the mistakes of the previous ones are likely to perpetuate. For example, the recent increase in young males joining violent gangs is characteristic of mostly the wealthy and privileged male demographic in Cambodia. Mimicking society’s patronage hierarchy, wealthy young people benefit from powerful familial or intra-familial connections, which allow them to join alliances with other privileged young men to manage supporters from the less privileged class. The privileged youth reward loyalty from the less privileged with protection and other material benefits in gang participation. The Cambodian people ‘accept the oppressive, corrupts and violent behaviour of patrons in return for a degree of societal stability’ in these youth gangs. This is one example of social organization among youth that arises because of lack of other cohesive community or social structures in their demographic. This means that the patronage system is reinforced and legitimized in Cambodian society even among youth in an unhealthy way (Gender and Development for Cambodia, 2003).

### **5.3 Landlessness and environmental degradation**

While some groups have made small strides in organizing against land-grabbing and unregulated degradation of natural resources, government institutions continue to be complicit in controversial land acquisitions and have yet to make a concerted effort to protect the natural environment on a wide scale. Reports suggest that in recent years as many as 380,000 Cambodians have been evicted or forced off their land. In the third quarter of 2009, the government cancelled the World Bank's US\$24 million land-titling programme with little explanation, calling it 'complicated' (Chandler, 2010: 231). Rampant deforestation and depletion of fisheries continues unabated and unpredictable flooding is a major concern (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 17). At the moment, education could be considered an exacerbating factor of fragility in this context by virtue of its absence. Consequently, there may be a critical role for education in raising awareness of these human and environmental rights issues, which has yet to be widely leveraged.

### **5.4 Elections**

The 2008 elections saw landslide wins by the CPP, although the freedom and fairness of the electoral process was somewhat illusory given the lack of opposition (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009: 2, 6). The only remaining opposition parties, the Sam Rainsy Party and the new Human Rights Party, are weak, leaving Cambodia effectively a one-party state, representing a failed democratic project (2009: 3, 4, 9). Given the frustration with the 2008 electoral process, the next cycle could prove a time of tension in Cambodia. Likewise, a sudden change in what has essentially been 25 years under Hun Sen's rule could have unpredictable effects and cause a 'radical change in the system' (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 19). By most accounts, Cambodia appears to be more stable than it has been at any point during the last several decades. The CPP – led by the skilful Hun Sen – maintains strong central control of the nation and its education system, at times ensuring stability through means of coercion, censorship, intimidation, and even violence (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009). Couched in this single party stability, however, is the ominous prospect of what will happen during the next transition. In a country with a condensed history of revolutions and coups, a power vacuum left by a weakened or absent Hun Sen could very well exacerbate fragility over a short period of time (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 18–19). As such, the present tenuous stability may prove one of the greatest potential threats to the Cambodian state.

## 6

## Education and fragility in Cambodia

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At first glance, education in Cambodia has made incredible progress over the past two decades, reaching more children than ever before. In some regards, this is true. Although Cambodia still has one of the least-educated populations in the region, net enrolment rates at the primary level reached close to 90 per cent in 2008. Secondary enrolment – although still low at 34 per cent – has shown a considerable increase from 15 per cent in 1999. Impressively, gender disparity has virtually been eliminated at the primary level (UIS, 2009). Many soon-to-be graduates are optimistic (although perhaps unrealistically) about their chances for employment (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 20).

Upon closer analysis, however, the system continues to be hampered by a lack of quality, high dropout rates and grade repetition, and an abundance of over-aged students. The gross primary *survival* rate was merely 52 per cent in 2007 (VSO, 2008: 58). Nearly 20 per cent of first grade students repeated the grade and 27 per cent of all enrolled students were over-aged. The proportion of female students decreases sharply at higher educational levels, comprising merely 34 per cent at tertiary levels (UIS, 2009).

The Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MoEYS) has implemented a long-term Education for All National Plan for 2003–2015 to ensure increased equal educational opportunity access to students of all ethnicities, socio-economic, and geographical backgrounds, and abilities. In the short term, the government's Education Strategic Plan 2006–2010 outlines three main educational policy areas devoted to capacity building and human resources development (MoEYS, 2005):

1. Equitable access to educational services;
2. Quality and efficiency of education services; and
3. Institutional development and capacity building for decentralization.

Major shortcomings continue to limit progress towards each of these goals. Good policies are often hamstrung by poor and/or inadequate implementation, a theme that has become increasingly common in Cambodia. The following sections will detail the interplay between education and fragility, grouped within five broad areas: relevance, disparities in access, (dis)engagement with the education system, teachers, and structures and governance.

### 6.1 Relevance of education

Cambodian education's relevance to economic, political, civil, and social dynamics is limited. While impressive increases in school enrolment at all levels imply successful reform, education remains a political symbol of modernization that largely masks an underlying story of stagnating quality. As a result, while a record number of Cambodians continue to participate in compulsory education, most indications suggest a poor return on education investment alone in terms of employment and social mobility. Similarly, skills provided often have limited relevance politically and civically due to a lack of critical thinking and participatory learning. And, while new efforts are being made to change this, a minimal focus on history teaching and the long-term exclusion of discussion of the genocide have limited education's potential to contribute to social cohesion.



### *Links to employment and mobility*

A major driver of fragility in Cambodia stems from the lack of correlation between education and socio-economic mobility. As stated by Ayres, 'economic disparity in many respects is a product of the colonial heritage of the education system' (2000b: 187). This is true particularly in relation to employment. Under colonial rule, education was viewed as a lever for social mobility, symbolized almost exclusively by the often unrealized opportunity to aspire to a career in the civil service. This expectation that the state (patron) will provide for educated citizens (clients) has continued to pervade Cambodian society to the present day. Most Cambodians continue to view the civil service as the most desirable career, no doubt to some degree because of a multitude of advantages to be gained from association with the ruling political party. Complicating the situation is the fact that government positions are often obtained not based on merit, but rather through political connections or bribes. The perceived value of education is thus undermined as its correlation with successful civil service employment is suspect. This single-minded focus on civil service robs the nation of students interested in creative professions or entrepreneurship that may better contribute to economic development and mitigate fragility.

While Cambodians still cling hopefully to the idea that education can lead to social mobility, there remains a wide degree of cynicism, particularly among the poor. The poor tend to be cynical or fatalistic about education and are therefore disinclined to invest in it on their children's behalf, particularly at higher levels where costs rise, because of a well-founded belief that good employment is based largely on connections and the ability to pay. Mixed data for the most part fail to make a compelling case for the return on investment in education. Parents from poor rural villages discourage their children from completing higher secondary education because they believe that their children will not be able to find a job upon graduation, given the high rate of unemployment among university graduates (Tan, 2007). Overall, the rewards of education appear to be uneven, although wages have generally increased the last several years. Within any given wealth band, the returns on education appear relatively limited for the population as a whole, although they do appear significant – and increasingly important – for the wealthiest group (World Bank, 2009, 31). Whether this outlying significance is based on increased scholarship, the ability of the wealthiest band to 'afford' better jobs, or other factors is unclear.

For tertiary-level graduates, some evidence has suggested that the lack of demand-side job opportunities in Cambodia has kept enrolment low. Despite the availability of scholarships to students from poorer families, subsidies alone are not enough to persuade parents to keep their children in schools. There are estimated 20,000–30,000 new formal jobs each year for around 300,000 new entrants to the labour force (Hagenlother and Rith, 2006). The university graduates who do find employment tend to work in temporary, part-time, intermittent, casual, and insecure jobs in poor working conditions with little income security (Morris, 2004). Only an estimated 25 per cent of the workforce consists of paid *employees*, and many workers engage in at least two jobs (World Bank, 2009). The ability of the informal sector to continue to absorb workers is uncertain – the International Labour Organization (ILO) asserts that without appropriate interventions from government leaders and experienced professionals, graduates are at risk of becoming marginalized and resorting to violence, crime, and other risky behaviours (International Labour Organization, 2007). Thus, youth unemployment will continue to contribute to fragility and social unrest in Cambodia if job opportunities are not available to keep up with demand.

### Relevant skills

Compounding these trends, skills are often being taught that are irrelevant to economic opportunities. Practical skills – agriculture in particular – are neglected in favour of Western-style subjects that may have little applicable value for the average student. While agriculture remains by far the largest source of employment (see *Table 2*), Cambodian schools largely fail to prioritize skills related to the sector.

**Table 2. Employed population 10 years and over by industrial sector (main occupation) and geographical domain (2007 data)**

Sector (main occupation)	Cambodia	Phnom Penh	Other urban	Other rural
Employed population, number	7,775,000	674,000	711,000	6,390,000
Total percent	100	100	100	100
Agriculture	60	1	32	70
Industry	14	14	15	14
Services	26	85	53	16

Source: National Institute of Statistics (2010).

Centralized control of compulsory curriculum development may inhibit education from being made more locally resonant. The relevance of curriculum to life skills and employment remains a major problem in Cambodian schools, especially given the diverse range of employment opportunities that is largely dependent on local geography and conditions. According to Ayres, ‘all of Cambodia’s post independence regimes have acknowledged the importance of agricultural development to the economy. None, however, has used education to address this sector and its needs’ (2000b: 187). In addition, recent surveys report that experienced teacher trainers in Cambodia view the present curriculum as too varied, without depth and coordination (VSO, 2008). For example, the secondary school level encompasses a total of 12 subject areas that teachers are not highly qualified to teach because they lack adequate subject area training. In short, students are not learning the right subjects with necessary depth and quality.

Critical and creative thinking is also under-utilized in the classroom. For decades, schools have served to reinforce incumbent power by producing the types of citizens desired by the ruling class. This is perhaps most clearly characterized by the pervasiveness of rote teaching and learning throughout the education system. Little relevant information is being taught, and instead of questioning and analysing, students are expected to parrot answers. Pedagogy within the Cambodian system is prefaced on minimal interaction; students rarely raise their hands in class, and professors rarely take questions. There is widespread concern that reading habits are severely absent in Cambodia, likely in part as a result of passive learning methods reinforced in schools (Locard and Tha, 2008). As a healthy democracy requires an educated citizenry, the inability of Cambodians to independently analyse and question may function to reinforce an unhealthy alternative.

### History and reconciliation

To a large degree, Cambodia has yet to heal from its immensely traumatic past. Both official and unofficial attempts to discuss Cambodia’s history have been inconsistent and in many ways altogether absent. Under Vietnamese rule from 1979 to 1991, the topic of the genocide under the Khmer Rouge was integrated into the history curriculum. It was taken out, however, after the

national election in 1993 and has been conspicuously absent since. Informally, discussion of the subject in open forums tends to be frowned upon, and is consequently broached only within families. 'Many Cambodian students today ... believe the claims against the Khmer Rouge are either blown out of proportion in terms of their severity or are altogether false' (Jones Dickens, 2010: 4). It may be of notable concern that over the next several years, a majority of young families may be headed by parents (and 'voters') who have no formal understanding of the factors that led up to the worst political abuses in modern Cambodian history. There has been considerable debate back and forth over the past few years regarding intentions to reintroduce the topic in the curriculum. Recent efforts in 2009 and 2010 have been made to mainstream a textbook entitled *A history of democratic Kampuchea*, produced by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia (DC-Cam) and published in 2007. The text aims to 'provide an objective account of the regime's rise, reign, and legacy' (Boulet, 2010). While the MoEYS has co-sponsored training initiatives with the Genocide Education Project, it is not yet clear to what extent these topics will be integrated into the national curriculum.

It is important to acknowledge that the ruling party has both de-emphasized the need for healing and co-opted the term 'reconciliation' for political purposes. Although its usage by officials implies that reconciliation has taken place, it actually refers to 'political' reconciliation rather than coming to terms with the past. For the government, this brand of reconciliation suggests the need for factions to work together, which works in favour of the CPP given that parties that would otherwise be rivals have been thoroughly marginalized. As former Khmer Rouge members themselves, Hun Sen and a number of other significant officials have considerable incentive to forget the past and move on (Locard and Tha, 2008: 8). As Hun Sen expressed to the press, 'we should dig a hole and bury the past' (Linton, 2004).

It is also important to consider the role of history education in a sense beyond reconciliation. Not surprisingly, history is not viewed as a valuable academic concentration compared to business or related studies, and is thus less popular with university students. In 2006, tenth and eleventh graders learned about Cambodian history up to its French colonization in the mid-nineteenth century, while twelfth-grade students continue on to world history without exploring Cambodian history in more depth (Thul and Wasson, 2006). In the eleventh and twelfth grade, history is one out of four elective options in Social Studies not required for graduation (MoEYS, 2004). The value of history is not understood at the university level partly as a result of this lack of emphasis at the secondary level. The underestimation of history's value from the perspective of both the government and citizens may continue to contribute to fragility:

If the electors are not aware of the numerous regimes that have dominated the country since the Second World War, in particular, how can they be informed electors and how can they contribute to voting for a truly democratic government that would grapple [with] the country's main problems ... Understanding that history is not only part ... of a nation's identity, but it will help address those problems after an entire generation of educated Cambodians has been wiped out or has emigrated (Locard and Tha, 2008).

## 6.2 Disparities in access

Disparities in access to education in Cambodia are mapped along the lines of deeply entrenched socio-economic divisions within the country, particularly between poor and rich, and urban and rural. A sense of fatalism and low expectations of the government among older generations,

coupled with the desire to maintain stability at all costs, may mitigate the severity of grievances related to these disparities to some extent. In contrast, the younger generation is less accepting of the status quo and clearly desires change (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 13, 19). In this regard, disparate access to education – a salient symbol of inequality – may lead to grievances, and likewise fragility, that crescendo over time as Cambodian demographics shift.

### *Wealth and geography*

In accordance with Education for All (EFA) standards, Cambodia purports a policy of inclusive education. In spite of this, considerable exclusion from education continues to exist among rural and impoverished groups. The two are generally one and the same – the 80 per cent of citizens living in rural areas account for 90 per cent of all poor Cambodians (Beresford, 2005). As education is one of the most visible government services that the government is expected to provide, this inaccessibility is a major grievance contributing to fragility.

A clear disadvantage in accessing education exists for Cambodia's poor. Looking at the percentage of children not in school by wealth quintile shows 35 per cent (poorest quintile), 26 per cent, 20 per cent, 13 per cent, and 6 per cent (richest quintile) not enrolled (Harttgen, Klassen, and Misselhorn, 2008). Furthermore, inequalities widen progressively by wealth quintile as children progress through the system (UNESCO, 2009). Many Cambodian parents do not yet see the value of education:

Poor parents will be forced to sacrifice investment in the future education-related earnings of their children in order to meet current consumption needs, because they cannot afford the direct and/or indirect (opportunity) costs of sending their children to school. Poor and near-poor individuals who cannot afford to fail will rationally decide to undertake activities and investments that minimize risk, rather than those which have slightly higher risk but also much higher potential reward (World Bank, 2009: 108).

In line with the EFA goals, the government has endeavoured to make primary education free for all Cambodian children by 2015. Although the economic reality of the situation reveals that Cambodia falls short of this goal, considerable progress has still been made. While the average private cost for parents remained about Riel 113,700 (about US\$28) in 2004, it has been reduced by about 60 per cent (Bray and Bunly, 2004).

### *Gender and ethnicity*

Literature shows that elevated levels of female school enrolment in Cambodia are associated with reductions in violence, including domestic violence, land conflicts, and serious crime. Significant effects are seen in the highest decile of school enrolment (Benini, Owen, and Rue, 2006). While much remains to be done, the country has made several important strides in this area. In 1958, only 10 per cent of female Cambodians were literate (Dy, 2004). By 2004, this rate had increased to over 64 per cent, although overall Cambodian women are still far less educated than men (CIA, 2004). While secondary enrolment remains low, it has increased steadily and the gender gap has begun to close at an aggregate level, from a parity of 0.53 in 1999 to 0.82 in 2007.

Cambodia is unique in that ethnic tensions have not been a significant driver of national fragility, due in part to their small proportions of around 4 per cent of the total population (World Bank, 2006, 43). Past violence was largely Khmer on Khmer. While there are few official ethnicity-based education statistics, exclusion can be inferred based on the fact that minorities

live in those regions with predominantly higher poverty rates and lower school enrolment, such as Mondul Kiri and Ratanakiri. To varying degrees, ethnic minority groups in Cambodia face particular problems in terms of language barriers, which constrain their access to social services such as schooling and health care (World Bank, 2006: 43). As a result of forced land migrations and geographic barriers to access, many indigenous minorities and forest-dwelling communities are disadvantaged in accessing educational services such as schools and bilingual instruction (Asian Development Bank, 2002). However, there has been some evidence that the support of NGOs and donor outreach has increased educational opportunities for indigenous children (Noorlander, Samal, and Sohout, 2003).

### *Distribution of teachers*

Access is also impacted by disparities in the distribution of teachers. Aggregate data tend to mask the critical issue of the distribution of qualified teachers. Despite often being more highly compensated and increasingly incentivized by MoEYS, rural and remote teaching positions are generally less desirable for potentially transferring teachers. Teachers are reluctant to work in rural and remote areas due to the prevalence of larger class sizes, double shifting or multi-grade teaching, poor living conditions, transportation challenges, and a general lack of support. It has also been reported that, contradictorily, teachers hailing from remote areas who wish to be placed in their home regions have to pay exorbitant 'fees' for placement (VSO, 2008: 35–36). As Cambodians in remote regions are already the most excluded from services and opportunities, the poor quality of education will only serve to reinforce their disenchantment.

## **6.3 (Dis)engagement with the education system**

Disengagement by the elites in the government system as they turn to private education serves to reinforce inequalities and deep divisions between rich and poor. Entrenched systems of corruption, on the other hand, exclude the poorer and often rural learners who can't afford to meet the payments. Additionally, de facto limitations on engagement, such as a lack of materials in Khmer, may in the longer term serve to promote broader and longer-term disengagement with political and social institutions. Compounded language issues, resulting from a lack of materials in Khmer and inability to access less-censored English materials, limit both current learning and future socio-political involvement, which ensures that populations have a stake in the system.

### *Private education*

On the other end of the spectrum of exclusion, education may well contribute to wealthy Cambodians' sense of entitlement in a country that is deeply divided along socio-economic lines. Middle and upper-class Cambodians today largely turn towards higher-quality private domestic institutions or study outside of Cambodia, which justify feelings of privilege. The tendency of this group to receive education in English at the expense of Khmer (which some wealthy do not speak well) serves to further distance them from the majority of the population. This new ruling elite, which has taken over the familiar position near the top of the Cambodian social hierarchy, has been termed the 'Khmer Riche':

Depressingly, the Khmer Riche Kids sometimes seem indistinguishable from the old colonial ruling class. They were educated overseas – partly because their families' wealth made them targets for kidnapping gangs – and often speak better English than Khmer. They carry US



dollars – only poor people pay with Cambodian riel – and live in newly built neoclassical mansions so large that the city's old French architecture looks like Lego by comparison. And their connection to the Cambodian masses is almost non-existent (Marshall A., 2009).

It is well understood that the incredible wealth of this Cambodian class (many of them public officials) is accumulated through elite networks or corrupt practices, rather than from meagre government salaries (Marshall, 2009). Education plays a major role in separating the patrons from their clients from a young age, and in this way, social disparities – and thereby fragility – are further buttressed. What is unique – and somewhat counter-intuitive – to the Cambodian context is that even though the inequalities exacerbate an underlying fragility, this fragility is largely masked. While such visible injustice would in another country engender outrage, it does not in Cambodian society where people *expect* to be treated as inferiors. For an older generation which remembers a time when mere survival was a success, the meagre improvements afforded by the current government, coupled with a sense of fatalism, may actually contribute to short-term stability (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 13). Over the longer term, however, these building grievances may become vulnerabilities.

### *Corruption*

One of the Education for All targets subsequently incorporated into the government's Education Strategic Plan 2006–2010 is to eliminate informal payments nationwide in grades 1–9 by the end of 2008. Seemingly indivisible from the patron-client system, the cyclical forces of corruption are deeply woven into the fabric of Cambodian society and serve to favour entrenched 'haves' at the expense of the 'have nots'. The common requirement that desirable jobs, particularly government jobs, be 'bought' naturally leads to the need for employees holding these positions to earn a return on their 'investment'. As fees associated with corruption generally flow upwards, at a systemic level this phenomenon generally leaves those towards the bottom of the hierarchy bearing the greatest burdens. This trend is mirrored in education at all levels, although it is perhaps most evident in higher education, where a combination of limited scholarship funding and widespread informal fees leads to admission and graduation being often based on financial means as opposed to scholarship. Hardworking students directly encounter the tension between merit and patronage. Unqualified individuals gain access, and highly qualified candidates are excluded from critical professions such as medicine, engineering, accounting, and the judiciary because entry exam results are for sale (Calavan, Diaz Briquets, O'Brien, 2004: 14). Thus, not only does corruption undermine the education system, but the education system in turn introduces corruption to youths not yet even employed. Corruption may also pose barriers to teachers entering the workforce. In a World Bank-supported case study, one prospective teacher bemoaned, 'I cannot find a job; I have finished high school but need to pay bribes to become a teacher. I cannot afford that' (Nissen, 2004).

In a survey of Cambodians, corruption is by far the most widespread grievance (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009). While the MoEYS has prioritized the 'reduction/elimination of parental contributions to basic education', to ensure that basic education is officially free, the problem appears firmly entrenched and school staff often levy unofficial fees. The fact that Cambodia still does not have an anti-corruption law despite constant international pressure illustrates a common phenomenon in Cambodia: official rhetoric is often not backed up by the structural mechanisms necessary for implementation (Chandler, 2010: 2). Fees may be charged against registration and enrolment, classroom materials, or examinations. Data from Kampong

Cham indicate that each child pays approximately R100 to R200 per day on teacher fees. Lesson handout fees range from R1,000 to R21,000 and levies for exam papers oscillate between R1,000 and R30,000 (NGO Education Partnership, 2007). Anecdotal evidence suggests that students who do not pay these levies may be penalized (Benveniste, Marshall, Araujo, 2008).

### *Language*

There is a paucity of relevant Khmer language materials at higher levels. While English is now offered (students may also choose French) as a second language from grade 5 through 12, many Cambodian university students do not have a sufficient level of fluency to enable them to access critical academic materials, either in print or via the internet. Although translations of some English texts have been made, a lack of funding can limit them from being published or otherwise widely accessed (Locard and Tha, 2008: 7–8).

Notably, widespread poor English skills may allow the government to appear to be tolerant of the English press and an uncensored internet. While the government furthered its near total media control by closing down two opposition newspapers in 2009, the French and English press continued to print critical news. As these cannot penetrate much of Cambodian society due to language barriers (Locard and Tha, 2008: 7), the government's grip on information may be maintained while appearing to the international community to allow free speech (Chandler, 2010: 231). Within the context of this political climate, the inadequacies of language education clearly present a barrier to a more socially and politically informed electorate.

## **6.4 Teachers**

Historically, disenchanted teachers have acted as a destabilizing force in Cambodia; teachers played a major role both participating in violence and rebellion and, eventually, becoming victims of it during the genocide. Additionally, a discussion of education in Cambodia must also consider one of the fundamental factors limiting progress in education quality: teaching capacity, both at the individual and systems levels. While limitations in capacity appear to be less direct drivers of fragility, they in fact significantly amplify the effects of educational irrelevance, disparate access, community fragmentation, and the conditions that foster corruption within schools.

### *Teacher qualifications*

The legacy of the Khmer Rouge period represented a monumental setback to the education sector as the Cambodian teacher cadre suffered enormous casualties. During the reconstruction period, the number of trained primary and lower secondary school staff increased gradually and consistently, with an increased share of the teaching force holding upper secondary education or graduate qualifications. About a quarter of primary school teachers hold an upper secondary degree, while about two thirds hold a lower secondary school degree. Almost two thirds of secondary teachers have completed at least grade 12, while 18 per cent had some post-secondary education. Although these numbers appear astoundingly low, they represent considerable improvement considering a start from next to nothing following the genocide (Benveniste, Marshall, Araujo, 2008).

Four fifths of primary school teachers have received their teaching certification, while practically all lower secondary school teachers have graduated from teacher training colleges.

Despite numerous MoEYS policies designed to strengthen teaching quality, in-service training has remained largely insufficient and professional development opportunities have been relatively scant. Only 15 per cent of lower secondary school teachers report having attended an in-service training session during the 2005/06 academic year, regardless of school type (Benveniste, Marshall, and Araujo, 2008). Given that low compensation is a primary demotivating factor, attending professional development activities may not be a high priority among educators. Another challenge centres around the perception Cambodians have of education, as reported by one tertiary professor: the 'embedded model of hierarchical relationships between teacher and pupil, where the focus is on teaching rather than learning, means that there has been no historical aim towards developing a facility for lifelong learning' (VSO, 2008: 33). Quality training efforts might be beneficial in reorienting teachers to a more student-centred teaching approach.

While the MoEYS has developed specific goals towards eliminating unqualified teachers, their services are often still necessary. The term 'contract teacher' refers to locally recruited, unqualified staff, almost exclusively in remote and rural areas where there is an acute shortage of qualified teachers. Although the frequency of such arrangements has recently been reduced to fewer than 3 per cent of total teachers, over 13 per cent of teachers in remote areas are 'contract teachers'. There does not appear to be a consistent method to deal with this problem, and school directors continue to hire them as needed (VSO, 2008).

The lack of quality teacher trainers presents another major impediment to progress. Cambodia currently suffers a serious shortage of experienced and thoroughly qualified teacher trainers, in large part a result of the disassembling of the teaching service in the 1970s. Because pulling qualified trainers from current experienced teaching ranks would only exacerbate shortages, development partners may have an opportunity to focus on this area (VSO, 2008).

### *Teaching pay and conditions*

Present-day teachers are highly dissatisfied with their conditions by most accounts. A survey of teachers ranked inadequate pay as clearly the greatest demotivating factor for teachers in Cambodia. Teachers earn, on average, between US\$30 and US\$60 per month, depending on qualifications, years of experience, and number of shifts worked. It has not been possible to obtain current pay scales from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), but some evidence suggests that teacher salaries have actually declined since 2000 as a proportion of the MoEYS budget. Surveys of teachers and Provincial Office of Education (POE) staff alike suggest that a base salary of around US\$100 per month would meet reasonable expectations (2008). According to the World Bank, it is estimated that a teacher needs a minimum salary of US\$150 to support a typical Cambodian family with five members (Burkhardt, 2009).

One recent survey found that 93 per cent of individual teachers interviewed held second jobs and 99 per cent claimed a teaching salary alone was not enough to survive. One of the most lucrative second jobs is private tutoring (VSO, 2008: 26). Tutoring earnings can represent approximately two thirds of the monthly average base salary with basic allowances. These activities, while vital to teachers' livelihoods, pose a troubling risk to the integrity of the education system, especially since many teachers end up personally tutoring students from their own classes (Bray, 2007). This can create a situation where teachers omit parts of syllabi to create demand for extra help. One teacher confessed:



I collect money from students and give extra questions [with answers] ... Some students ... think if they do not buy them they will not get high scores. I told the students, I am a teacher but sometimes ... I am a fake teacher. The question you ask me, sometimes I can answer, sometimes I cannot ... I told them it's because of my salary (Tan, 2008: 564).

Students who cannot or will not pay risk failing exams, repeating grades, or dropping out of school (Tan, 2008: 463). Besides feeding broader patterns of corruption, this phenomenon further entrenches the inequities between the rich and the poor.

### *Recruitment and motivation*

While capacity is a major challenge – teachers are grossly underpaid, under-qualified, and in short supply – the distinct lack of societal status conferred on teachers presents an equally concerning problem. The notion that ‘teachers have a low status and are not respected by society’ further contributes to the undesirable appeal of the profession (Cambodian Independent Teachers Association, n.d.).

To address continued teacher shortages, MoEYS relies heavily on the use of double-shift teaching. Many rural schools rely on teachers who, theoretically, teach two four-hour blocks each day. This may involve teaching two different classes – one in the morning and one in the afternoon – further complicating established problems of insufficient time for planning and administration. There are reports of teachers combining two classes into one larger one as the double-shift option is clearly not preferred. This may be because it prevents the teacher from holding a second job and most payments for the second shift are delayed, reduced, or paid at the end of the year (Geeves and Brendenberg, 2005). The World Bank gives credence to these reports, as it states that while two thirds of rural primary teachers claim to work double shifts, three quarters also claim to have a second job (Benveniste, Marshall, and Araujo, 2008), usually in farming (VSO, 2008).

Limited teaching capacity, and thus poor quality of education, has driven and may continue to drive fragility in a number of ways. Poor quality education can serve to amplify society's lack of confidence in state-provided services that have again failed to deliver promised indications of modernization. Furthermore, the distribution of existing capacity is such that it contributes to further inequity within society, particularly among the rural and poor populations. Finally, there is an inherent danger in an unhappy educated class: some of Cambodia's most troublesome times were in part fuelled by disenchanted intellectuals and their frustrated pupils.

## **6.5 Structures and governance**

Decentralized and collaborative governance of the education sector has limitations in Cambodia resulting from historical and deep-rooted predispositions on the part of both the population and the government. Despite efforts at reform, structures continue to promote centralized control – which reflects the central, authoritarian government in place – as a result of broad social norms and political tendencies. External assistance has added yet another layer to this in terms of coordination, resources, and accountability.

### *Decentralization*

Education in Cambodia has historically been managed as a tool for political control and to build government legitimacy. In recent years, the CPP has made overtures towards relinquishing

some central control over education, particularly in operational and financial planning and management systems. This has distributed some responsibility to the local level, and has to an extent engaged communities in contributing to education management and to working with each other. However, the 'culture of fear' is so prevalent in Cambodia that many people feel they cannot voice their opinions freely without inviting the threat of incarceration or physical violence (Calavan, Diaz Briquets, O'Brien, 2004: 10). The impact of education reform has been limited in areas where it has not genuinely empowered provincial and local management. The emphasis of reform efforts on achieving quantitative objectives and demonstrating efficiencies and cost effectiveness has also been criticized for pushing attention to issues of quality to one side (VSO, 2008: 19). Notably absent from the list of decentralized activities is curriculum design, which is still undertaken at the national level and is therefore viewed as a cause of much of the curriculum's irrelevance at local levels.

The decentralization of education in Cambodia mirrors precisely the underlying cultural tension in the country. While the government has acknowledged the need to relinquish control of key processes to the provincial and local levels in order to modernize, it continues to rely on strong central control to retain certainty of authority. In general, the government has seemingly thus far conceded activities which can either remain under its relative control or do not pose a threat to the government's agenda.

Ownership at the school and community level is crucial for the successful implementation of national EFA and Millenium Development Goal (MDG) plans. Bottom-up control by communities is needed as a regulatory mechanism for the flow of aid, which is normally supervised and audited by the central government. In Cambodia, ownership has been strengthened through the creation of parent associations, increasing children's involvement in enrolment mapping at the village level, and using NGOs as technical agencies for capacity building as well as for linking donors, local government and communities (UNESCO, 2009).

In 2000, the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MoEF) introduced a new financing mechanism called Priority Action Programmes (PAPs), which facilitated channelling of operational funds to schools and other organizations, through the government's own financial planning and management systems. Apart from paying teachers through hand-delivered bundles of cash to districts and schools, the PAP also pushed the education and finance ministries to work more closely on defining and resourcing education reform priorities, and provided a rationale for use of sector budget support by some donors.

In a political sense, the PAP represented more than just a financing scheme; it represented 'a symbol of national pride and confidence' (Ratcliffe, Patch, and Quinn, 2009). The PAP mechanism provided an opportunity to promote and implement aspects of decentralization policy. Block grants were provided to schools, school/parent committees were given significant delegated authority on spending decisions, and greater autonomy was given to central, provincial, and district education departments for disbursing and accounting for these funds.

However, there have been challenges to implementation. A lack of predictability in disbursement of PAP funds kept schools from planning effectively and undermined the PAP process, especially in 2004–2007, when funds normally reached schools in the third quarter of the fiscal year and schools had little time to spend wisely.

Another issue acknowledged by MoEYS and development partners is that the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP) is not well communicated and is not used for planning and

implementation by departments and decentralized levels (provinces, districts). Varying progress has been made depending in part on whether there is development partner support. Each province has developed its provincial ESSP, but district and school-level ownership is essential, as they are the implementers of education reforms (UNESCO, 2009).

### *Community involvement and accountability*

The 2004 PETS (Public Expenditure Tracking Survey) found that parent-teacher contact is infrequent and limited. On average, parents met with teachers only 0.27 times (with a median of 0 times) during the course of the 2003/2004 school year, and met with school principals even less frequently (on average, 0.16 times). Finally, parents reported meeting school committee members even less frequently than school teachers and directors, at an average of only 0.07 times during the 2003/2004 school year. Again, the frequency of meetings was significantly lower in rural and remote schools than in urban schools.

The PETS survey also found that social accountability mechanisms established at schools to monitor school operational funds spending are not very effective, particularly in small schools. School support committees have little parental representation, and parents do not have the necessary information to participate and monitor school performance and management of finance (Benveniste, Marshall, and Araujo, 2008). Cambodia has recently espoused a Child-Friendly School approach, striving to foster greater community involvement in school-level planning and decision-making through School Support Committees (SSC). A new financial planning and accountability system for school operating budgets was also introduced with the Priority Action Programme reform, with explicit guidelines for involvement of parents and community management, building out from past successful pilot programmes such as the Education Quality Improvement Project school grants programme (Benveniste, Marshall, Araujo, 2008).

NGO involvement in education in Cambodia is high. From the perspective of the NGO community, a recent concern is potential restrictions suggested by the increasingly aggressive rhetoric of the government. Hun Sen has prioritized the passing of an NGO law that detractors claim is an attempt to silence growing criticism of the Prime Minister and his party from civil society. While the law purports to increase NGO transparency, Hun Sen himself warns that 'NGOs whose activities seem to serve the opposition party will be afraid of it' (Lei Win, 2010).

### *External assistance*

The international community has done much good and also considerable harm in Cambodia. Cambodia is still heavily reliant on international development assistance, which equalled or exceeded the national budget until 2004. The aid flow to the education sector between 2002 and 2006 is estimated to have been around US\$56–70 million per year (Prasertsri, 2009). The danger of such high levels of aid dependency – a volatile source of funding – is that Cambodia is not being empowered to build internal education sustainability, without which it cannot gain independent control over an education system that has the potential to lift Cambodians out of poverty (Greenhill, 2007). At the same time, recent reviews of aid effectiveness have praised the Cambodian government's increased assertiveness towards donors. Since 2001, MoEYS has signalled a transition from passively receiving aid to actively partnering with donors through the creation of the Education Strategic Plan (ESP), the Education Sector Support Programme (ESSP), and the Education For All Action Plan. These plans were created through a Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp) involving donors and government, and are actively manifested in the Education Sector

Working Group and various other coordinating committees. This represents a positive step on the part of Cambodia towards taking ownership of its educational future and breaking the cycle of entrenched aid recipient status.

The Cambodian government still remains a somewhat ineffective partner, given the high levels of institutional corruption and its weak public financial management system. A country-wide education expenditure tracking study of operational budget disbursement to individual primary schools states that over 60 per cent of schools reported having paid 'facilitation fees' to officials in return for disbursement of funds. (Sida/UNICEF, 2005–2006). Monitoring of these activities remains inadequate, and financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank decided to reduce loan volumes to Cambodia due to poor Country Performance Assessments (CPA). Likewise, only 2 out of 60 donor programmes and projects are provided as direct budget support through the national budget, while the remainder opted for a mix of other less centralized funding modalities. UNESCO reports that:

Most donors have expressed concerns on the delay by the Government in implementing the Good Governance Action Plan and the passage of the Anti-corruption Law because this delay will affect not only the external aid flow but also the collection of internal revenues in Cambodia. Ultimately, it affects the expansion of access to education, quality improvement, as well as private investment in employment generation for school graduates (UNESCO, 2009).

In addition, very poor coordination between MoEYS and the MoEF leads to frequent delays in disbursing funds (Prasertsri, 2009). Donors are increasingly cautious of government and seek to bypass the MoEYS, preferring to working directly with local partners according to their own management systems, rather than focus on addressing signs of weak governance (Sophal *et al.*, 2008). Prasertsri warns, however, that MoEYS staff capacity will not improve if the Ministry is bypassed by donors (2009). At the same time, given the history of turmoil, Cambodians are wary of donors that seek to empower government (Prasertsri, 2009). Indeed local determination of priorities can be an important way for civil society to exert meaningful ownership of the process of rebuilding the Cambodian education sector (Ayres, 2003). There is evidence that civil society prefers grants with more conditionality rather than less, to actively undermine the strength of government control (Greenhill, 2007). This demonstrates a difficult tension in practice between improving centralized capacity and following principles of decentralization to improve accountability.

From the donor side, it appears that donor preferences continue to dominate the allocation of education spending. As is typical in many developing contexts, donors tend to favour large capital-intensive projects, such as the building of new schools, without sufficient investment to cover long-term associated recurrent costs, such as training of teachers (Prasertsri, 2009). This approach echoes the eras of Sihanouk and Lon Nol, in which highly visible education infrastructure was prioritized over quality of education. This has meant many important initiatives remain underfunded, such as timely delivery of instructional materials, early childhood education, provision of viable education alternatives to dropping out, and adult literacy programmes (Prasertsri, 2009).

In addition, the decentralization preferences of donors mean that aid initiatives are highly fragmented, with many disparate projects run by many partners. All the different assistance programmes tend to impose their own rules, funding schemes, formats, monitoring, and so on, which act as a drain on MoEYS coordination resources (Hattori, 2009). The European Commission

and Asian Development Bank are the only two providers of pure financial aid, while the remaining 14 major education donors active in Cambodia focus on specific project delivery (Prasertsri, 2009). This is in addition to the 130 small donors supporting 240 individual projects around the country. The aforementioned partnerships go some way towards harmonizing donor practices and even pooling funding sources for common projects. However, it is not apparent that this has been sufficient to reduce the transaction costs for MoEYS of overseeing the coordination effort (Prasertsri, 2009).

## 7 Conclusions

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A lack of access to relevant education in Cambodia has a clear link with fragility, in that citizens have been unable to express their opinions, organize communities, and exert political influence within the established order to counter manipulation by a series of authoritarian governments. Education as a precursor to instability was illustrated in post-independence Cambodia:

The quality of education was rapidly degenerating, infrastructure was being constructed at a rate that was impossible to sustain, while unemployed graduates and disgruntled intellectuals not only began to agitate for reform and change but became increasingly drawn to the promises of equality whispered by those radicals who had rejected the status quo and fled to the countryside to prepare for a revolution (Ayres, 2000b: 4).

Social parallels between the present and the pre-Khmer Rouge era are hard to ignore. Many of the grievances that led to sympathy for the revolutionary Khmer Rouge are still resonant today: wide-scale teacher disenchantment, students disgruntled by the failure of optimism to materialize, autocracy, and poverty and desperation among the people (Ayres, 2000b: 89–90). While these parallels cannot be used to predict the future, the highly cyclical nature of Cambodian politics suggests that valuable lessons may be couched in the rapid rise and fall of previous governments. Among the older generations, a sense of fatalism and low expectations of the government, coupled with the desire to maintain stability at all costs, may mitigate the severity of grievances within the fragility context to some extent. In contrast, the younger generation is less accepting of the status quo and clearly desires change (Interagency Conflict Assessment, 2009: 13, 19), indicating a potential desire for alternative systems or opportunities.

The interplay between education and fragility in modern Cambodia is particularly resonant in the following areas.

### 7.1 Politics and the politicization of education

Education has been a political pulpit throughout modern Cambodian history. Multiple power brokers with widely diverse ideologies solidified control by using education to disseminate and entrench those ideologies and reinforce the traditional hierarchy, while at the same time using its promise of modernization and social and economic mobility to give hope to an otherwise frustrated population. Previous failures to deliver on these promises of modernization stoked discontent among teachers and students, which mobilized support for the Khmer Rouge.

Perhaps the gravest threat to long-term stability in Cambodia is the CPP's firm grip on power and elimination of any serious rivals, and the questions this raises about the future of democracy in Cambodia. Eighty per cent of Cambodians live in rural areas and have what Tan calls a politically 'recessive posture', which is most commonly found in monarchical systems (Tan, 2008: 565). The education system is being used once again by the government to buttress its power, and has fallen short of producing a politically savvy electorate. The nation's absolute dependence on Hun Sen suggests that dramatic consequences could arise from a major disturbance in the current power structure.



## 7.2 History and education

The genocide is not often publicly spoken of in Cambodia. Complicit in this failure to discuss difficult issues in Cambodian history is the conspicuous absence of the topic from the curriculum. An entire generation of young Cambodians has been brought up without a formal understanding of the conditions surrounding the darkest period in their country's history. Not only does this rob communities of the opportunity to heal and rebuild cultural pride, but it also produces an electorate that is relatively ignorant of the mechanisms by which previous regimes have wielded and often abused power.

## 7.3 Socio-economic disparities

It is clear from the literature that socio-economic disparities and the resultant disparate access to education and postgraduate job access – a salient symbol of inequality – maintain the status quo and have the potential to lead to grievances, and likewise fragility, that crescendo over time as Cambodian demographics shift. Power and poverty in Cambodia are closely intertwined, and cannot be easily separated (Nissen, 2004: 4). Widespread corruption and impunity, which ultimately siphon wealth from the poor to the rich, is modelled in schools and witnessed by children from a young age. Social exclusion is accurately mirrored in schools – those who can pay progress – and education has become a prominent symbol of broader inequalities between the rich and the poor, and the urban and the rural. Likewise, corruption and bribe-taking in the educational and employment systems maintain the inequitable status quo and exacerbate fragility; those that can pay do, and those that cannot are left with frustration and anger that, if left to fester, can result in violence.

## 7.4 Social fragmentation

A high level of displacement and internal migration – both a legacy of the Khmer Rouge era and a symptom of modern environmental and land pressures – have left many communities fragmented. The social hierarchy separates society vertically, and the pervasive culture of fear and mistrust impedes cohesion within communities. The struggle between the traditional and modern concepts of education in Cambodia underpins larger issues in society: 'Parents and the community at large are not directly involved in the teaching and learning of civics and morals,' and traditional Buddhist moral teachings so central to Cambodian culture are eroding (Tan, 2008: 567). Youth problems such as unemployment, violence, and gang involvement and drug and alcohol use may all be exacerbated by this erosion of values.

## 7.5 Pedagogy

Teaching methods that develop critical and creative thinking abilities, in contrast to learning by rote, are under-utilized in the classroom. The lack of development of critical thinking skills can significantly impact a citizenry's ability to express its opinions, organize communities, exert political influence within the established order, counter manipulation by a series of authoritarian governments, and arrive at alternative models of governance. In Cambodia, this lack has permitted the perpetuation of a dictatorship and the traditional patron/client social order.



## 7.6 Relevance of education

The traditional emphasis on education in Cambodia was established under the French system, which sought to create a class of civil servants and was not geared toward agricultural development – the main sector and industry. Education has been promoted by a succession of governments as a catalyst for future employment and social mobility, and has consistently failed to provide skills that lead to real world opportunities. These unfulfilled promises have left Cambodia with an increasingly educated but disenfranchised population, a condition which in the past fuelled revolution and ultimately genocide.

In addition, environmental science is currently absent from the curriculum, even though Cambodia is experiencing rampant deforestation, a depletion of fisheries, and unpredictable flooding. This can be considered as exacerbating factors of fragility due to their absences in the curriculum. There may also be a critical role for education to play in raising awareness of human and environmental rights issues, which has yet to be widely leveraged.

## 7.7 Teacher capacity

The shortage of qualified teachers in Cambodia is both a symptom and a cause of fragility. Decimated under the Khmer Rouge, the teaching corps and its trainers have only partially recovered. Many instructors have attained levels of education no higher than the students they are instructing. Low capacity, and subsequently low quality of instruction, serve to intensify entrenched socio-economic disparities and undermine an already irrelevant education system. The grossly insufficient pay, working conditions, and social status accorded to the profession have left many disenchanted. Historically, aggrieved teachers have been a driving force for political change in the country. The power dynamics of the teacher-student relationship itself reflects and reinforces the authoritarian and hierarchical nature of Cambodian society. This relationship is complicit in corruption and in reinforcing the nation's 'tentative peace', by producing students that lack the skills to question their roles in society.

## 7.8 Incomplete decentralization

The current government has attempted to demonstrate democratic values by enacting policies to decentralize education decision-making to local communities; however, its failure to fully implement and sustain decentralized structures reinforces its power. Although efforts have been made (such as through PAPs) to empower local-level decision-making, mixed evidence suggests that actual power may not be well distributed. While certain financial and administrative responsibilities have been decentralized, critical elements such as curriculum development remain under tight central control. The patron-client system and pervasive fear amplify this disempowerment of local communities, which results in the absence of a culture of decision-making. Continued government reluctance to decentralize power may also inhibit the development of district and local capacity, and contribute to fragility by further weakening critical institutions.

## 7.9 The international community

Due to the scope of its involvement, international aid remains essential to the functioning of the Cambodian education system. However, donor activities have also weakened institutional

capacity by dominating the allocation of resources and draining MoEYS' coordination resources. These constraints inhibit MoEYS from taking on greater responsibility, and risk leaving gaps in service in the event that large donors decide to pull or reallocate funding. With appropriate conditionality, aid can work and has worked as a force to strengthen fragile institutions and expand teaching capacity by empowering local ownership of the education development process. Finally, donor involvement must carefully consider Cambodian cultural perspectives and competing views of traditional and modern education in order to mitigate current weaknesses in the Cambodian education system by promoting education initiatives that truly meet the needs of communities.

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Inquiries about the Institute should be addressed to:  
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## The study

Cambodia today is one of the poorest countries in South-East Asia. While significant improvements have been made since the Khmer Rouge regime and the civil war, a fundamental fragility exists beneath the current perception of stability.

While the state of education in Cambodia has greatly improved over the past two decades in reaching more children than ever before and in ensuring increased equal access to students of all ethnic, socio-economic and geographical backgrounds, major shortcomings related to fragility continue to limit progress.

This report, published by UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP), examines the impact of education on fragility in Cambodia through a review of the interaction of education with the drivers and dynamics of fragility.