

IBEC Problem Analysis

Despite improvements and achievements in Cambodia's education system brought about by reforms and increased government spending since 2001, significant challenges persist related to access and quality. This is particularly the case for those residing in remote and rural areas, and those marginalized by poverty, ethnic minority status or gender. The development hypothesis underlying IBEC's technical approach is that in order to achieve access to a relevant basic education of quality, one has to simultaneously address a myriad of both demand and supply side constraints in a way that both empowers local stakeholders and builds ownership. There are five main constraints that are closely linked and have guided the IBEC Project design.

1. Supply-Demand Side Constraints and Their Relation to Work Place Skills Training

Previous programming implemented by World Education with USAID funding was based on a balanced consideration of both *supply-side* and *demand-side* needs within the education sector. Supply-side concerns relate to factors within schools that constrain educational access such as the inadequate supply of teachers, run-down infrastructure and poor penetration of state schools into remote areas. In such cases, demand for education from a large part of the local population already exists, but the primary constraint for such households appeared to be one of educational supply. For another part of the population who exhibit high risk characteristics (e.g., high poverty rate levels, food insecurity, minority ethnicity, etc.), demand for education appeared to be the problem. To a large extent, this analysis continues to be valid and plays an important role in the present project design.

The IBEC Project brings this analysis further along by looking at a key issue that seems to straddle the supply-side and demand-side divide. This refers to the absence of a concrete curricular focus in the state schools, particularly lower secondary schools, on employment readiness and other life skills. Employment readiness skills are clearly a demand-side factor because they potentially represent an area of great concern not only among parents but also among young people themselves. This is particularly true at the lower secondary school level and upper primary where over-age enrolment is a wide spread phenomenon (i.e., among children who are already old enough to start thinking about work). The perception that school is not relevant to the world of work by many young people is clearly an issue that depresses educational demand. On the other hand, the fact that schools are not offering a curricular program that is relevant to work place preparedness is also a supply-side issue since it is the schools that must make the needed changes to meet student needs and interests.

A review of dropout patterns in the basic education sector indicates that the decision to leave school tends to intensify at the upper primary level and in lower secondary school. Net enrolment and dropout rates at lower secondary school level in the target provinces are well below the national average, either in total or among females. Even more surprisingly, survival rates for the Basic Education Cycle (Grades 1-9) are well below 30% at both national level and in the target provinces. Recent tracer studies of vulnerable children who leave school at secondary school level indicate that by far the most important reason for leaving school is to search for work in factories or to seek local employment due to financial need.

These patterns in enrolment, drop out, and survival suggest that there should be a strategic shift in programming to focus on children at upper primary and lower secondary school levels. Such interventions may stress the need to keep children in school or failing that, to ensure that they are prepared to succeed in the work place after they leave school. These interventions will need to address not only basic numeracy and literacy issues but also more practical skills that may include work place readiness, agricultural techniques, Information Technology (IT) skills, health messages, and various prevocational skills.

2. The Need for Improved School Governance

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has identified “enabling environments” as an important dimension under its Child Friendly School (CFS) programming framework, which now includes the lower secondary school subsector. This refers to the need to ensure that the management of schools supports and facilitates school improvement planning and implementation. When management capacity is lacking, investments in development are at serious risk due to misuse of funds, inadequate transparency, poor communication with communities, teachers, and students, and generally poor understanding of why interventions might be needed. Based on its experience in earlier programming, World Education has found that management capacity among secondary schools is highly variable, which requires careful assessment of prospective schools before site identification as well as the implementation of properly designed capacity building activities aimed at improving management potential (where such potential exists). There is also a need to heighten the awareness of officials at all levels that development assistance may be denied when poor governance standards are not addressed.

3. The Need for Certain Prerequisites as a Precondition for Effective Development

One of the important experiences of earlier programming in education has been the need to modulate assistance based on a school’s readiness to receive development aid. Interventions focusing on quality in particular require certain prerequisites to be in place before such interventions can have any impact. For example, widespread teacher shortages at both secondary and primary level and the resulting high Pupil Teacher Ratios (PTR) in classrooms usually undermine interventions to promote child-centered learning. Similarly, high drop-out rates, minority disaffection, access issues for the physically challenged and the poor, run down infrastructure, and/or poorly defined roles for communities in education can all undermine interventions to improve quality. At the same time, limitations in access will likely ensure that only the most well off members of the community will benefit from quality-focused interventions if no measures are undertaken to boost inclusiveness. This is particularly true in remote areas with high rates of overage enrolment. Thus, there is a need for programming to focus on establishing certain pre-requisites before further assistance is provided. These prerequisites include: (i) reasonable class sizes and an adequate supply of teachers; (ii) community engagement; (iii) equal access for marginalized groups including minorities, girls, and/or the physically challenged; (iv) cultural sensitivity to minority needs where such minority

groups exist; and (v) basic infrastructure (e.g., increased availability of clean water through water and sanitation interventions, etc.).

4. The Need for a Multi-Tiered Approach to Development

The idea of classifying schools based on their management potential is one which is gaining growing circulation in the education sector. This approach is strongly related to the idea of variable management capacity described above. Thus, programming interventions need to be modulated to match these different operating conditions. Some schools may demonstrate a high level of readiness to receive interventions designed to promote 'excellence' in learning and teaching. While others may still be struggling with certain basic needs and may not be ready for some of the interventions proposed under the IBEC Project. At the same time, these schools may still have the potential to be excellent schools but need some help with these very basic requirements first. This situation suggests the need for a multi-tiered approach to development that addresses school needs based on where they are along a continuum of development readiness.

5. The Need to Increase Information and Capacity Sharing between Secondary Schools

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport has been very successful in establishing a facility for information sharing and mutual capacity building between primary schools through the cluster school system, which was promulgated as a national policy in 1994. At that time, secondary schools were too few in number to figure very prominently in such a scheme. However, with the recent expansion in secondary school coverage, this need has now become acute. Thus, there is a requirement to put in place a system whereby schools with advanced educational service provision can assist those that are lower down on a development continuum. This suggests the need for a system of Beacon or Resource Schools that can provide technical assistance as a means of leveraging best practices.