



# Cambodia: National Safe Back to School Spotlight Brief





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## Introduction

Globally, over 1.5 billion children have had their schools closed due to COVID-19 since early 2020.<sup>1</sup> For the first time in history, an entire generation of children have had their education disrupted.

In Cambodia, more than 3 million children have been out of school for over most of the past year, with two major waves of schools closures since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The loss, on average, of nearly 10% of children's expected total lifetime schooling will not only have caused significant learning losses, but has put many children at risk of dropping out of school entirely.<sup>3</sup>

More than  
**3 million**  
children in **Cambodia**



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**10%**

of children are at risk of **dropping out of school entirely**.

The most marginalised and deprived children, including children from poor families, remote communities, and children with disabilities, are most at risk of losing out on learning during school closures, and not returning to the classroom after they reopen. We know from previous crises that the longer children are out of school, the greater the risk that they do not return to school, and that they will lose out on vital learning.

This emergency comes on top of an existing learning crisis. Globally, UNESCO's most recent projections for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) – a free, quality education for every child – are dire: they predict almost no progress on reducing the number of children who are out of school by 2030.

All of this comes at a time when education budgets are under pressure, as governments have shifted spending towards the health and economic response to the pandemic.

Unless action is taken now, the long-term legacies of the pandemic will be rising inequality and a devastating impact on children's learning and future life chances.

## All children are able to learn

In recent decades, Cambodia has made significant progress on education – particularly in increasing the number of children enrolled in school. For example, the number of children enrolled in primary education increased from 82% in 1997 to over 97% in the 2017-18 school year.<sup>4</sup> However, issues around retention and learning quality remain, particularly for the most marginalised and deprived children. With long-term school closures, these existing issues will be exacerbated, and will result in significant learning losses and high drop out rates, setting back a generation of children.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, on average just 82.14% of children completed primary school.<sup>5</sup> This was much lower for children from marginalised groups; just 51.01% of children living in Kep, 57.43% of children living in Pailin, 64.69% of children living in Koh Kong completed primary school, compared to 79.94% in the

capital region of Phnom Penh, and, compared to children in the poorest households, those in the richest households were twice more likely to have completed primary school.<sup>6</sup>

Cambodia also suffers from high rates of grade repetition, particularly in the early grades. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 7.08% of children in primary school were repeating a grade, with 11.76% of grade one enrollers being repeaters, and 9.13% of grade two enrollers.<sup>7</sup> High rates of grade repetition – particularly in the early years – can increase the risk of drop outs, and impact learning quality. The correlation of this with learning outcomes is evident -almost 25% of children in grade three cannot write a single word in a dictation test.<sup>8</sup>



## School Closures

In 2020, Cambodia had the longest school closure in the region, despite having one of the lowest number of COVID-19 cases in the world.<sup>9</sup> Due to this extended school closure, Cambodia registers the worst regional education score, and a sharper drop of the Human Development Index (HDI) overall score than its neighbours.

Prolonged school closures have a significant impact on children's skills, attainment and earning prospects. While this is a big issue for individual children, collectively, this impact on Cambodian society and economy will be significant.

School closures have also affected children's physical and mental health, with children suffering more loneliness, stress, and depression. School closures have also led to a reduction in physical activity, poor eating habits, and disrupted sleep patterns. The limited capacity of parents and caregivers to take care of

and supervise their children, especially those who experience high economic stress, can result in negative situations, including children being locked up at home. For some children, more time at home has increased the risk of domestic violence, and more screen time due to distanced learning has exacerbated the risks of online harm.

“Due to COVID-19, I feel more stressed and bored. I think that all of us have difficulties with online study. When teacher explains the subject and we have questions we don't know who to ask and sometimes the internet is slow.”  
– Pheary, 12 from Thboug Khmum province

While the evidence that school closures have had an overwhelmingly negative impact on children and the future development of the country, there is little proof that they make a significant contribution to the control of the COVID-19 virus. Evidence since the beginning of the pandemic shows that COVID-19 does not pose a high risk to children, and that schools are not the drivers of transmission within the surrounding community. There is now a wealth of knowledge and evidence from other countries about how to reduce the risks to children, teachers and their families, and ensure that schools remain open.<sup>10</sup>

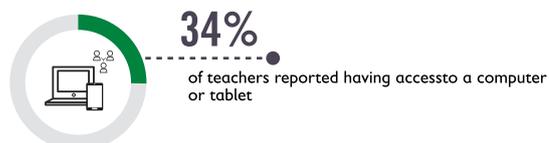
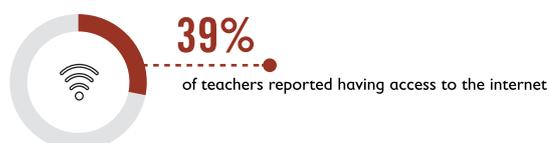
## Distance Learning

In response to the school closures, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, schools, and non-governmental organisations including Save the Children have implemented online distance learning initiatives to support children to learn at home, including pre-recorded lessons and educational videos, and through TV broadcasting.

However, many children are unable to access even these distance learning initiatives. According to an Education Needs Assessment conducted by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; UNICEF and Save the Children, just 26% of caregiver and child respondents reported that they had access to the internet, and only 54% of caregiver and child respondents had access to a television.<sup>11</sup> The same study found that 30% of respondents had not been able to utilise any distance learning methods.<sup>12</sup>

The most marginalised and deprived children, including the children from remote areas, lower socio-economic backgrounds, and children with disabilities are most likely to face the greatest obstacles in accessing distance learning. This can be due to issues such as the cost of mobile data, low or no network coverage, no access to appropriate technologies, challenges sharing limited numbers of devices within families, accessibility issues, and a little or no help from their parents and caregivers, something that we know children from poorer households are more likely to face due to a caregivers often having less time and knowledge to support their children with home learning.<sup>13</sup>

Teachers can also lack the capacity to support children with distance learning, often due to a lack of technology themselves. The Education Needs Assessment found that just 39% of teachers reported having access to the internet, and 34% to a computer/ tablet.<sup>14</sup>



Supporting teachers is critical to ensure that all children are able to continue to access good quality learning during school closures, and schemes such as providing technology, network access, budget for developing and sharing paper-based materials, budget for travel around remote areas, and training should be implemented.

“ I want the government to help my school with masks, hand sanitizer, and soap to help us protect ourselves from COVID-19. It’s more comfortable to study at school since it is in-person and the teacher can clearly explain things.”

– Chenda, 11 from Kampong Chhnang province

## Dropping out

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, children, particularly boys, dropped out of primary and secondary school at an alarming rate.<sup>15</sup> Often, this was due to financial factors, including children feeling the need to choose work over schooling, and because of the cost in attending school, including things such as text books, school uniforms, and informal fees required by teachers.<sup>16</sup>

Some children, including children from poor households and indigenous ethnic minority communities, are at particular risk of dropping out. Provinces in which indigenous ethnic minority communities predominantly live have some of the highest numbers of people living in poverty, and children from these communities are at high risk of dropping out of school; for example, in 2009, almost 47% of boys and girls aged 12 to 14 years old from an ethnic minority were out of school, compared to the national average of 11%.<sup>17</sup>

With Cambodia implementing strict lockdown and containment measures to limit the spread of COVID-19, there have been severe socio-economic impacts. The pandemic has hit several of Cambodia’s main economic drivers, including tourism, manufacturing, exports, and construction – which account for around 40% of paid employment in Cambodia.<sup>18</sup> As a result, many people have experienced a reduction in income, even if they have managed to remain in their job.<sup>19</sup>

This reduction in income for many families, along with the closure of schools and lost learning, will result in more drop-outs as children prioritise contributing to their household income rather than education, especially while access to education is curtailed or uncertain.

Targeted interventions and support packages, including initiatives such as cash transfers and scholarship programmes, can support the most marginalised children to return to school once they reopen, and prevent drop out by reducing economic pressures on families that can force children into labour. Interventions should be targeted to those most at risk of dropping out of school, including boys from poor households and ethnic minority communities.

## Financing Education

Investment in education is one of the key actions that governments can take to ensure that all children have access to good quality education. Not only does investment in education help to ensure that all children’s

right to an education is fulfilled, but it is one of the best investments a country can make in the long-term. Investing in education contributes to improved academic achievement, higher future earnings, and improving human capital at the societal level.



At the 2018 Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Financing Conference, the Royal Government of Cambodia pledged to increase their investment in education, increasing from 20% of total public expenditure



in 2017 to 23% in 2020, in line with the Incheon Declaration.<sup>20</sup> Despite this commitment, the education budget in Cambodia has declined in recent years, declining from 18.3% of total public expenditure in 2017 to 17.8% in 2018, 17.5% in 2019, 17.8% in 2020, and 18% in 2021.<sup>21</sup>

As already set out, school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic impact on households has already had a devastating impact on education in Cambodia, impacting the most marginalised and deprived children the hardest. Cuts in government education spending can have a detrimental impact on education; a study of two low-income countries found that a reduction in spending on education led to declines in learning adjusted years of schooling.<sup>22</sup> Unless investment in education is prioritised, an entire generation of children will be left behind.

Providing education for all children lies first and foremost with national governments, and domestic public spending on education is by far the most important and sustainable source of finance for education.<sup>23</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has limited the fiscal space of many countries, and the overwhelming need to prioritise the health response has lessened the availability of funds for other public investments, including education.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore essential that the Royal Government of Cambodia take steps to increase their domestic revenue.

One of the key steps that the Royal Government of Cambodia should take is to expand their tax base, and increase their tax-to-GDP ratio to 20%.<sup>25</sup> This can be done in various ways; closing tax loopholes, targeting illicit financial flows and preventing corruption. In 2017, it was found that illicit financial flows in and out of Cambodia resulted in at least \$360 million lost taxes between 2005 and 2014 – money that could be used to invest in education for children.<sup>26</sup>

It is essential that any tax policies implemented are progressive, gender-responsive, transparent and redistributive. Regressive financing, such as value added tax (VAT) on essential goods should be minimised as they place a greater burden on poorer and vulnerable families. The highest burden should instead fall on those most able to contribute – such as corporations and wealthier individuals, and the tax burden on lower-income families should be reduced.

## How can we protect the education of a generation?

The Royal Government of Cambodia must commit to realising the right to quality education for all children, in line with SDG 4. The COVID-19 crisis has put education in more jeopardy than ever before, but there are actions that can be taken to make progress to ensure that all children have access to good quality education.

### Recommendations

#### Commit to investing in education to ensure all children have access to good quality learning

- At the Global Partnership for Education Replenishment Summit 2021, the Royal Government of Cambodia should commit to allocating a higher percentage of the total public expenditure to education, in line with the Government's 2018 commitment of 23%
- The Royal Government of Cambodia should seek to increase their domestic revenue by expanding their tax base, with the purpose of increasing their investments in children, including in education. This should be done by progressive taxes, removing harmful tax incentives and loopholes, and acting to avoid illicit financial flows and corruption.
- The Royal Government of Cambodia should maintain its commitment to ensuring that all children are provided with at least 9 years of basic education

#### Commit to ensuring that all children are able to learn whilst schools are closed

- The Royal Government of Cambodia should ensure that quality, inclusive, affordable distance learning is available for all children to access, focusing on the most marginalised and deprived children that cannot access online learning initiatives. This should include establishing educational television, radio, and paper-based programmes
- The Royal Government of Cambodia should strengthen the capacity of teachers to support distance learning, including through appropriate trainings and aiding with access to technology
- Acknowledging that distance learning has limits especially for the most marginalised children, the Royal Government of Cambodia should support the implementation of alternative solutions such as the organisation of study groups and the distribution of materials i.e. textbooks, paper-based assignments
- Acknowledging that current and post COVID-19 impacts may continue to disturb regular schooling for a prolonged period, and as a result exploring community-based education as an alternative mechanism for learning. This could continue in a post-COVID-19 scenario to support children to recover their lost education, provide additional support to low-performing children, and provide access to education for children with disabilities that is easy to access

## **Commit to the development and implementation of an education catch up strategy and plan**

- This plan should include a mix of accelerated learning, remedial classes, re-entry classes, increased class time, and strengthened distance learning. To succeed, the plan will need to involve all relevant stakeholders starting with strong support from parents and teachers that will need to implement the plan
- The Royal Government of Cambodia should finalise such a plan as soon as possible, and commit to financing it fully
- The Royal Government of Cambodia should facilitate the promotion of inclusive partnerships and resource mobilisation from all stakeholders, including civil society organisations, to move the plan forward

## **Ensure that all children are able to return to school when it is safe to do so**

- The Royal Government of Cambodia should implement targeted interventions and support packages to prevent the most marginalised children dropping out of school. These support packages should include initiatives including conditional cash transfers and scholarship programmes, and be targeted to those most at risk of dropping out of school, including boys from poor households and ethnic minority communities.
- The Royal Government of Cambodia should ensure that all children are able to return to school as soon as it is safe to do so, especially for preschools and primary schools. In this context, the Royal Government of Cambodia should effectively implement its existing guidelines for the Safe Operation of Schools in the Context of COVID-19 which was developed in late 2020.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, the Covid-19 Traffic Light System should be carefully applied for the school reopening.

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Photo: Save the Children in Cambodia