



CIVIL SOCIETY SPOTLIGHT REPORT ON SDG 4

I. COUNTRY CONTEXT

Cambodia, a nation of over 17 million people,¹ is classified as a lower-middle-income country. This classification highlights Cambodia's development progress, while also pointing to ongoing challenges in achieving broad-based prosperity and well-being for its citizens. While Cambodia has made significant strides in economic growth and poverty reduction in recent decades, it still lags behind many other countries in the region in terms of Human Development Indicators. Its Human Development Index (HDI) ranking of 148th out of 193 countries² underscores the need for continued efforts to improve health, education, and living standards.³

As a small, open economy, Cambodia is vulnerable to global trade policy shifts. Export-oriented manufacturing accounts for over 40% of economic growth and 19% of total wage employment in the country. The United States (U.S.) is Cambodia's largest export market, comprising 37.2% of total goods exports and supporting 30.9% of formal manufacturing jobs, while China is the main source of Cambodia's foreign direct investment (FDI), accounting for 65.5% of total net FDI inflows. Faced with global and domestic headwinds, Cambodia's real growth is projected to decelerate to 4.0% in 2025 and 4.5% in 2026. Amid softening external demand and high levels of uncertainty, especially related to trade policy, exports and FDI in the labor-intensive manufacturing export sector-particularly within the GTF industries are expected to slow down.⁴

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) recognizes the importance of education in driving national development and has demonstrated a strong commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG4: Quality Education. The government's **Pentagonal Strategy-Phase I for Growth, Employment, Equity, Efficiency, and Sustainability** emphasizes the importance of

good governance and stakeholder engagement in achieving national development goals. This strategy highlights the RGC's commitment to inclusive and participatory development, recognizing the importance of involving all segments of society in the pursuit of progress.

The Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) plays a central role in translating the government's commitment to education into concrete policies and programs. The MoEYS has been actively working to integrate SDG4 into national education plans, with a particular focus on providing equitable and inclusive education for all children, especially those with disabilities. This focus on inclusivity reflects the RGC's recognition that education is a fundamental human right and that all children, regardless of their background or circumstances, deserve the opportunity to learn and reach their full potential.

Cambodia has made commendable progress in expanding access to education. In the 2023-2024 school year, primary education net admission rate reached an impressive 97.25%, demonstrating the success of efforts to ensure that all children have access to basic education. Cambodia also has a strong commitment to gender equality principles and has established multiple regulatory frameworks to promote social inclusion and protect women and marginalized groups including the Inclusive Education (IE) Policy and the development of the IE Action Plan 2024-2028, which aim to further enhance educational opportunities for all learners, particularly those with disabilities and other marginalized groups, ensuring respect for the rights of person with special needs entitled to an inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning.⁵ These frameworks provide a legal and policy foundation for ensuring that education is accessible and equitable for all.

In 2019, the launch of the Education 2030 Roadmap marked a significant step towards aligning Cambodia's education sector with the international agenda outlined in the Incheon Declaration.

¹Cambodia's population reaches over 17 mill, with 2.1% annual growth rate, December 18, 2024, KHMER TIME

²2023-2024 HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT, BREAKING THE GRIDLOCK: REIMAGINING COOPERATION IN POLARIZED WORLD, UNDP

³HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX: The HDI is a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living.

⁴February 2025, The Education, Youth and Sport Performance in the Academic Year 2023-2024 and Goals for the Academic Year 2024-2025, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

⁵2024, Inclusive Education Action Plan 2024-2028, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

This roadmap, guided by the principle of **"No One Left Behind"**, aims to ensure that all Cambodian children and youth have equal opportunities to access quality education. It provides a comprehensive framework for achieving SDG4 targets and sets ambitious goals for improving learning outcomes, promoting equity and inclusion, and strengthening the education system.

Through its ongoing Education Strategic Plans, the MoEYS is working tirelessly to fulfill the RGC's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and ensure that every child has the right to education. This commitment is reflected in the MoEYS's ongoing efforts to improve the quality of education, expand access to early childhood education, strengthen teacher training, and promote inclusive education practices.

II. PROGRESS TOWARD THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SDG 4

Cambodia has made notable progress towards achieving SDG 4, which focuses on building and upgrading inclusive and safe schools. This progress is evident in several key areas:

- Increased access to education:** The expansion of free primary education has significantly increased enrolment, particularly among disadvantaged children. The MoEYS has achieved significant accomplishments in implementing the Education Strategic Plan (ESP,) including increased enrolments for primary education school-age children (99.6% FY2023-2024) and focusing on improving education quality services, autonomy, responsiveness, teacher professionalism, accountability, and leadership in the past decade. This achievement has been driven by a combination of policy measures, including the abolition of school fees, the provision of scholarships, and the construction of new schools in underserved areas.
- Improved infrastructure:** The government has invested in constructing and upgrading school buildings, providing access to basic services like electricity and water, and improving sanitation facilities. These investments have helped to create more conducive learning environments for students and improve the overall quality of education.

- Policy development:** Several key policies have been developed to promote inclusive education, school safety, and gender equality in education. For example, Cambodia has started resolving the problem of gender disparity in education, with a 99.6% enrolment rate for primary school-age children and 284,599 students (52.27% female) in higher education for the 2023-2024 school year. Building upon this foundation, the Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2024–2028 was developed, focusing on enhancing education quality, promoting equity, and ensuring inclusivity. The ESP outlines strategies to support vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities, by improving school governance, revising curricula, and promoting community participation in education. To operationalize these strategies, the MoEYS launched the Inclusive Education Action Plan 2024–2028, which aims to: Change societal attitudes to promote inclusiveness and prevent stigma and discrimination; provide necessary tools and support, ensuring access to assistive technology and services; and enhance the quality of education for children with disabilities through teacher training and curriculum development. These policies provide a framework for ensuring that all children have access to quality education, regardless of their background or circumstances.

- Teacher training:** Efforts have been made to enhance teacher training programs, with a focus on inclusive education practices, child protection, and gender-responsive pedagogy. These training programs aim to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

- CSO engagement:** The government has increasingly engaged CSOs in consultations and collaborative projects aimed at improving education outcomes. This engagement recognizes the valuable role that CSOs play in advocating for education, providing services to children and schools, and monitoring the implementation of education policies and programs.

Despite the progress, significant challenges remain in achieving SDG 4:

- Hidden costs of education:** As highlighted by CSOs, hidden costs associated with schooling, such as uniforms, transportation, and extra classes, continue to pose a barrier to access for many children. These costs can be particularly burdensome for families living in poverty and can lead to children dropping out of school or not attending at all. The MoEYS received a share of 2.83% of GDP or 11.75% of national expenditure. As outlined in its Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023, the government aims to increase its share to 19.1% of the entire national budget by 2023, which is equivalent to 3.1% of GDP. And the 2030 Education Framework for Action, which Cambodia is a signatory, recommends that governments allocate 4%-6% of their GDP and/or 15%-20% of the total public expenditure to education.



- Quality of education:** Concerns remain about the quality of education, particularly in rural areas, where

infrastructure is often inadequate, teacher shortages persist, and access to technology is limited. These factors can negatively impact learning outcomes and perpetuate inequalities in access to quality education. The MoEYS produced and disseminated 250 digital learning materials through official platforms and trained 1,455 teachers and education staff in ICT, exceeding the initial training target. However, only one school out of the 50 targeted received the necessary IT infrastructure and equipment, representing a major shortfall that limits the practical application of both the content and training. This mismatch highlights a critical gap between capacity-building and infrastructure readiness, especially in rural or under-resourced schools.



- **Equity and inclusion:** While policies promoting inclusive education exist, implementation gaps remain, and learners with disabilities, children from poor family conditions, ethnic minorities, indigenous children, and other marginalised groups still face barriers to accessing quality education. These barriers include physical inaccessibility of schools, lack of trained teachers and support staff, and social stigma and discrimination.
- **School safety:** Limited data on school safety and security hinders efforts to address violence against children in schools and create safe learning environments. Violence, bullying, and harassment can have a devastating impact on children's physical and mental health and can negatively affect their learning and development.
- **Policy implementation:** Weak implementation and monitoring of education policies, coupled with limited resources and capacity constraints, impede progress towards SDG4 targets. Effective implementation of policies requires adequate resources, strong leadership, and effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

III. CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN SDG 4

CSOs play a crucial role in implementation, follow-up, and monitoring SDG 4 in Cambodia. They offer valuable expertise, practical experience, and deep insight into education sector challenges. Their contributions help ensure policies and programs are effective and meet learners' needs.

A. CSO Contributions

- **Advocacy:** CSOs advocate for increased investment in education, improved policy implementation, and greater attention to equity and inclusion. They raise awareness of the importance of education, mobilize public support for education reforms, and hold the government accountable for SDG4 commitments.
- **Service delivery:** Many CSOs provide direct services to children and schools, including teacher training, material support, and community mobilization. These services complement government efforts and help to fill gaps in provision, particularly in underserved areas.

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** CSOs monitor the implementation of education policies and programs, providing feedback and recommendations to the government. They conduct research, collect data, and analyze trends to assess the impact of education interventions and identify areas for improvement.
- **Community engagement:** CSOs work closely with communities to promote education and ensure that local voices are heard in decision-making processes. They mobilize communities to support education initiatives, participate in school governance, and advocate for their children's right to education.

B. Challenges to CSO Engagement

- **Limited access to information:** CSOs often struggle to access government data and information related to education, hindering their ability to effectively monitor progress and advocate for change. This lack of access can be due to bureaucratic hurdles, lack of transparency, or simply the absence of readily available data.
- **Restricted participation in decision-making:** While the government has made efforts to engage CSOs in consultations, their participation in policy development and decision-making processes remains limited. This can be due to a lack of trust, a perception that CSOs are not "experts" in education, or a reluctance to share power and decision-making authority.
- **Lack of technical expertise:** Some CSOs lack the technical expertise and capacity needed to effectively monitor and evaluate education policies and programs. This can limit their ability to provide constructive feedback and evidence-based recommendations to policymakers.
- **Time constraints:** When engaged in consultations, CSOs are often given insufficient time to provide meaningful input and feedback on policy drafts. This can be due to tight deadlines, a lack of prioritization of CSO input, or simply a lack of awareness of the importance of allowing sufficient time for consultation.

C. Recommendations for Strengthening CSO Engagement

- **Improve information sharing:** The government should establish clear mechanisms for sharing information and data related to education with CSOs, ensuring transparency and accountability. This could include creating online platforms for data sharing, establishing regular briefings for CSOs, and involving CSOs in data collection and analysis.
- **Enhance participation in decision-making:** CSOs should be given greater opportunities to participate in policy development and decision-making processes to ensure their voices and perspectives are heard. This could include establishing formal mechanisms for CSO representation in policy-making bodies, providing training to CSOs on policy development and advocacy, and creating a culture of openness and collaboration between government and CSOs.
- **Build capacity:** Support CSOs to strengthen their technical expertise and capacity to monitor and evaluate education policies and programs. This could include providing training on research methodologies, data analysis, and advocacy strategies, as well as supporting CSOs to develop their own monitoring and evaluation frameworks.
- **Provide adequate time for consultations:** Ensure that CSOs are given sufficient time to review policy drafts and provide meaningful feedback during consultations. This could include providing advance notice of consultations, sharing draft documents on time, and allowing sufficient time for CSOs to discuss and analyze the documents before providing feedback.

IV. KEY FINDINGS FROM CSO CONSULTATIONS

The consultations with CSOs revealed valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities related to achieving SDG 4 in Cambodia, including:

- **Hidden costs of education:** CSOs emphasized the burden of hidden costs on families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, hindering access to education. These costs include uniforms, transportation, extra classes, and informal payments, and can be a significant barrier to school attendance and completion.
- **Quality of education:** Concerns were raised about the quality of education, particularly in rural areas, where infrastructure is often inadequate, teacher shortages persist, and access to technology is limited. These factors can negatively impact learning outcomes and inequalities in access to quality education.
- **Equity and inclusion:** Implementation gaps in inclusive education policies and limited support for learners with disabilities remain significant challenges. Learners with disabilities often face barriers to accessing education, including physical inaccessibility of schools, lack of trained teachers and support staff, and social stigma and discrimination.
- **School safety:** Limited data on school safety and security hinders efforts to address violence against children in schools and create safe learning environments. Violence, bullying, and harassment can have a devastating impact on children's physical and mental health and can negatively affect their learning and development.
- **Government investment and policy implementation:** While acknowledging government efforts, CSOs expressed concerns about the adequacy and effectiveness of investment, as well as challenges in policy implementation and monitoring. Limited resources, capacity constraints, and weak monitoring mechanisms can hinder the effective implementation of education policies and programs.

- **CSO involvement and collaboration:** CSOs highlighted the need for improved information sharing, greater participation in decision-making, and strengthened collaboration between government, CSOs, and other stakeholders. Effective collaboration requires trust, open communication, and a shared commitment to achieving SDG4 targets.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Based on insights from CSOs, Education stakeholders, and the country context analysis, the following recommendations aim to accelerate progress on SDG 4 in Cambodia:

1. Increase Investment:

- **Increase budget allocations:** The government should significantly increase the budget allocated to education, prioritizing investment in infrastructure development, teacher training, and resources for disadvantaged learners. This increased investment should be accompanied by measures to ensure that resources are used effectively and efficiently.
- **Prioritize equitable resource allocation:** Ensure that resources are allocated equitably to address disparities between regions and schools, with a particular focus on disadvantaged areas and marginalized groups. This requires a needs-based approach to resource allocation, taking into account the specific challenges faced by different communities and schools.

2. Strengthen Policy Implementation:

- **Improve monitoring and evaluation:** Strengthen monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress towards SDG4 targets and ensure that policies are being implemented effectively. This requires developing clear indicators, collecting reliable data, and using the data to inform policy and program adjustments.
- **Build capacity for implementation:** Provide training and support to school management committees, local

authorities, and other stakeholders to strengthen their capacity to implement education policies effectively. This could include training in leadership, management, financial planning, and inclusive education practices.

- **Enhance dissemination and communication:** Improve dissemination of policies and guidelines to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities. This could include translating policies into local languages, conducting awareness-raising campaigns, and using various communication channels to reach different audiences.

3. Enhance Collaboration and Partnerships:

- **Establish regular platforms for dialogue:** Create regular platforms for dialogue and joint action planning between the government, CSOs, communities, and other stakeholders. These platforms should provide a space for open communication, sharing of information, and collaborative problem-solving.
- **Improve information sharing and transparency:** Improve information sharing and transparency to facilitate effective collaboration and informed decision-making. This could include establishing online platforms for data sharing, conducting regular briefings for stakeholders, and involving CSOs in data collection and analysis.
- **Support CSO participation:** Support CSOs to play a greater role in policy development, implementation, and monitoring, recognizing their expertise and valuable perspectives. This could include providing funding and technical support to CSOs, involving them in policy consultations, and creating opportunities for them to share their knowledge and experience with policymakers.

4. Promote Equity and Inclusion:

- **Strengthen inclusive education:** Strengthen implementation of inclusive education policies and provide adequate resources and support for learners with disabilities, including assistive devices, specialized teaching materials, and trained support staff. This requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both the physical and social barriers faced by learners with disabilities.
- **Promote gender equality:** Promote gender equality in education through targeted interventions, such as scholarships for girls, gender-sensitive teaching materials, and awareness-raising campaigns to address gender stereotypes. This requires challenging discriminatory attitudes and practices and creating a supportive environment for girls to succeed in education.
- **Address disparities in access:** Address disparities in access to quality education based on location, socio-economic status, disability, and other factors, ensuring that all learners have equal opportunities. This requires targeted interventions to reach marginalized groups,

such as providing scholarships, building schools in underserved areas, and developing culturally appropriate teaching materials.

5. Ensure School Safety and Security:

- **Strengthen child protection:** Strengthen child protection policies and mechanisms to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children in schools, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. This requires developing clear policies and procedures, providing training to teachers and staff, and establishing reporting and referral mechanisms.
- **Provide training and support:** Provide training and support to teachers, school staff, and students on child protection policies and procedures, and conduct awareness-raising campaigns to promote a culture of safety and respect. This could include training in identifying and responding to signs of abuse, providing psychosocial support to victims, and creating a safe and supportive school environment.
- **Improve data collection:** Improve data collection on school safety and security to inform policy and interventions, and establish clear and accessible reporting and referral mechanisms to address cases of violence promptly. This requires developing a system for collecting and analyzing data on violence against children in schools and ensuring that this data is used to inform policy and program development.



Achieving SDG 4 requires a collective and sustained effort from all stakeholders. The insights shared by CSOs in this report provide valuable guidance for strengthening efforts to build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools in Cambodia. By prioritizing investment, strengthening implementation, enhancing collaboration, and promoting equity and safety, Cambodia can ensure that all learners have access to quality education and reach their full potential.

CALLS FOR ACTION

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS).

The MoEYS should prioritize the implementation of the recommendations outlined in this report, strengthen its collaboration with CSOs and other stakeholders, and ensure that education policies and programs are responsive to the needs of all learners. This requires strong leadership, effective coordination, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Development partners.

Development partners should align their support with national priorities and provide technical and financial assistance to strengthen the education system, with a focus on promoting equity, inclusion, and quality. This requires a coordinated approach among development partners and a willingness to support government leadership in the education sector.

Civil Society Organizations.

CSOs should continue to play their vital role in advocacy, monitoring, and service delivery, while also strengthening their capacity to engage in policy dialogue and partnership building. This requires building strong networks, developing technical expertise, and maintaining a constructive and collaborative approach with the government and other stakeholders.

Communities.

Communities should actively participate in school development, contribute to creating safe and supportive learning environments, and work together with schools and government to ensure that all children have access to quality education. This requires empowering communities to take ownership of their children's education and providing them with the resources and support they need to contribute effectively.



CAMBODIAN YOUTH VOICES

In Cambodia, we know that education through the use of technology is extremely important. However, the use of technology faces a number of challenges that affect the students in various ways. Specifically, I observe that **many families living in remote areas are unable to afford devices or pay for internet access. As for women and girls, we see that they do not receive equal opportunities in the field of technology education and face discrimination.** Youths should participate in online learning programs and share their skills with peers. In addition, I think that students should strive to study and conduct more research related to technology.

NEP Education Champion, 24-year-old male, Year 1 student, from MondulKiri province, Indigenous group, studying Computer Science major at Preah Sihamoniraja Buddhist University.

In the Cambodian context, I think increasing the use of technology in education is the most challenging for Cambodian students, including limited access to devices and the internet, a lack of digital skills, and constant distraction from social media, particularly in rural areas. Most of the students may not have a personal computer, tablet, or smartphone, and were not well-trained to use digital tools, in contrast to urban areas. **Gender, location, and socioeconomic status are also main challenges.** In some communities, girls have less access to technology than boys due to cultural expectations that prioritize boys' education and assign domestic responsibilities to girls. I suggest improving the use of technology in education by enhancing accessibility, inclusion, and providing free or affordable internet access and digital devices to students in need. **The learning content should be available in local languages and accessible for students with disabilities, while digital capacity is needed.**

NEP Education Champion, 21-year-old female, Year 3 student, studying Public Administration major at the Royal University of Law and Economic.



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The **NGO Education Partnership (NEP)** is a membership organisation that fosters a strong civil society network. NEP has more than 78 members and promotes active collaboration between NGOs working in education and work to represent their views and voices to government and development partners to achieve our vision of equal and timely access to the high quality of education for all Cambodian people. Its mandate is to provide coordination and capacity development on sub-national and local levels and representation for its members on national platforms. NEP is a member organisation of the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE).

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