Quality Education for All in Cambodia, What and How?

1. The SDGs and Quality Education for All

Fifteen years after the statement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), work began on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). International meetings including the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012 and A Million Voices: The World We Want in 2013 convened to discuss which development goals would be targeted in the years after 2015. The resulting 17 goals were ultimately contained in the SDGs via the UN Sustainable Development Summit in 2015. In these statements, sustainable development means “improving human and planetary well-being.” Continuing the unfinished targets in the MDGs, the SDGs promise growth and development extending to future generations. Most of all, the process of realizing the development goals, as well as results in the process, are explicitly stated.

The education goal is listed fourth in the SDGs stated as “[E]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Impressively, every aspect related to education and learning is included for sustainable development. All stages of education during the lifelong period including early childhood care and education (ECCE), nine years of basic education including primary and lower secondary schooling and technical vocational education and training (TVET), tertiary education, and non-formal education for both youth and adults are considered for development; every aspect of unequal, unjust, discriminatory, violent, inefficient, and ineffective approaches are to be eliminated; furthermore, each country should make every effort to mobilize strong support administratively and financially. More importantly, skills development fit for job opportunity and learning outcomes through school education are pinpointed as major accountable indicators to relate educational

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Interventions and changes for development.

The targets for education development in the SDGs have been challenged in various ways. Are there any specific strategies to secure quality education beyond access to school education? What target should be prioritized among the areas of education listed in the SDGs? What is the role of education in relation to development? How would non-formal education be considered relative to the formal education that currently prevails in ODA for developing countries? Are there any good measures of efficient global governance for education development, cooperation, and effective evaluation? These are not only the legitimate concerns as to how to implement the targets in the field, but also the challenges academia must struggle with in the coming years.

In the era of the SDGs, quality assurance than access is given more attention in the realization of education goals. As education development should be holistic (ecological, cultural, economic, moral and aesthetic), quality education is being prioritized in developing countries such as Cambodia. Because developing countries under the MDGs mainly adopted measures for more equitable chances for school-aged children to acquire school education, access to formal education through schooling has seen improvement in numerical terms. However, how to ensure the quality of learning, along with equitable learning opportunities, has not been thoroughly grasped. As access to school education has been clearly identified, quality education needs to be discussed in relation to apparent chances for school education.

2. The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia

Cambodia is one of the developing countries which heavily depend upon foreign aid for national development. Together with Laos and Vietnam in the region, it has struggled to actively accommodate the international agenda of sustainable development and has become an impressive model of national development under the SDGs stated in 2015. Education, as well as other sectors in Cambodia, needs to make progress in alignment with development policies. Even though the target toward full access to primary school education was almost reached, there remain many challenges to be tackled in order to establish better education in Cambodia.

For this, The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia: Issues of Quality and Equity aims at the following objectives; 1) to place the progress of the Cambodian education system in long-term context, 2) to trace the development of Cambodian education from the time of the Khmer Rouge to the present, 3) to illuminate the developments in education-related civil society organizations and their influences, 4) to shed light on current practices and challenges within the classroom, 5) to problematize the widespread practice of private tutoring, 6) to characterize and explain the phenomena of student dropout, repetition, and continuation between primary school and the lower secondary school, and 7) to elucidate the challenges facing the Cambodian education system in preparing new teachers to meet the demands of growing education sector (pp.6-7). The book is composed of six parts. Excluding the introductory Part 1 and the concluding Part 6, the issues of education in Cambodia are discussed in sections on context, schools, drop-out, and higher education. Employing mixed research methods of qualitative, quantitative, and document analysis, the work provides both a big picture as well as the details of the educational situation in Cambodia.
I believe that *The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia-Issues of Quality and Equity* is perfectly timed, informative, and argumentative. It is timely because the SDGs announced in 2015 emphasize both quality and equity in education development; it is informative because every aspect of education in Cambodia is intensively treated; it is argumentative because school education of Cambodia is critically reviewed in political-economic perspective. While technical support to school education in Cambodia is scarcely treated, each chapter of the book is dedicated to a better understanding of the educational system in Cambodia and to spark further discussions about quality and equity in education in developing countries.

In particular, there are many benefits to those who want to understand the reality of education systems in developing countries. The study of Cambodia provides an intensive and detailed map of systematic challenges in education for development and helpful lessons to other nations under similar circumstances. For example chapter 3 describes how the civil society organizations (CSOs) in Cambodia recently emerged to influence the decision-making process in educational governance. This contrasts the traditional power relations in the nation. I believe that the mode of student dropout from schools in developing countries is very similar to that of Cambodia. Chapter 8 titled “The Complexity of Continuation” gives a qualitative description of the complex process of student transition from primary school to lower secondary school. The challenge of student transition is not only an issue of school dropouts but also involves fragmentation of family structure. The authors articulate this vicious cycle of school education in Cambodia in this way:

[A] lack of economic opportunities in many communities combines with poor schools and a lack of access in the education sector, particularly in more rural and remote areas, which contribute to student dropout and immigration to urban areas, which in turn places more stress on city schools over time. ... a lack of economic opportunities can lead students’ parents to migrate to other countries in search of employment, which can affect students’ mental and emotional state and, thus, their ability to perform well in school (p. 157).

In chapter 5, Hayashi and Edwards turn to recent, ongoing international discussions on the post-2015 agenda related to educational equity and inclusion. This chapter examines the level of policy commitment of the government of Cambodia to achieving equity and inclusion for marginalized children, considering five areas of systemic and/or cultural disadvantage: gender, ethnicity, disability, poverty, and rural/urban location. In contrast to the policy orientation toward full inclusive education in Cambodia student-centered pedagogical approach conflicts with teaching norms. Chapter 5 provides a contextualized understanding of local actors engaged in pedagogical reform which implicates bottom-up, local driven and participatory approaches to improve quality.

In chapter 6, shadow education is examined as one of the prominent features of Cambodian schooling. Shadow education is frequently observed in many developing countries with issue of corruption which public school teachers and school officials are involved in providing private tutoring to students for preparing examination. In Cambodia, this shadow education, Rean Kua, is quite complicated because the main purpose of it is not for students to prepare examinations by complementing the formal education. Majority of Cambodian stu-
dents pass the national examinations since they can easily get the answer guides; therefore, shadow education is not a demand for preparing examination. Nevertheless, high-stakes examination commercializes the education and induces corruption, privatization and shadow education in Cambodia. In this chapter, those issues are examined in relation to the culture of high-stakes examination. One interesting point here should be made that the Cambodian case of education reform has shown a tendency toward commodification of education as in most developing countries.

**Issues and Challenges for Future Discussions**

Considering that the book offers academic discussions on issues of education in Cambodia toward sustainable development, additional questions may be asked on behalf of improving measures toward the goal of attaining quality education for all in Cambodia. For this purpose, I would like to add several comments based upon my understanding of *The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia: Issues of Quality and Equity*.

First, the objective of this book is not quite clear. Page 6 states, “[T]he overarching goal of the volume is to offer the most in-depth look at education in Cambodia to date. In so doing, the volume seeks to unpack a variety of key issues of high relevance to Cambodia and other developing countries as they expand their education systems and grapple with challenges to provide a quality and equitable education, from primary school to higher education”. I believe it is overly ambitious to deal with both general introductions to education as well as development issues in education in Cambodia. Because this book in fact, tries for both neither objective seems to be fully achieved for readers who may not be well informed about Cambodia. If the authors aim to provide a full understanding of the complicated contexts of the education system in Cambodia, additional and deeper explanations should be presented. For example, the historical context before the new millennium is hardly touched. The historical background is critical to understanding the reason behind the people’s relatively low motivation for education (Chapter 1, 2, 4), how the official system of school education evolved until now (Chapter 3, 5, 6), and why teaching jobs have scarcely been regarded as respected in the society (Chapter 10). Meanwhile, if it aims to present challenging arguments for education development and cooperation in Cambodia for the coming years under SDGs, the exposition of the unfinished tasks after the MDGs and new perspectives on “better education” in Cambodia is inadequate.

Secondly, I may ask “why is higher education included in the book?” The last three chapters on higher education do not seem to properly fit into the whole. As the title of the book indicates, it is on “schooling in Cambodia” rather than “the education system” in Cambodia. I think it is a critical to consider that “schooling” has been widely understood as school education from kindergarten to secondary education. Even though policies of higher education are closely related to policies on school education in primary and secondary levels, higher education requires a far different approach to systematic development from primary and secondary school education. In this sense, only chapter 10 “Who Wants to Teach in Cambodia?” is adequately connected to the whole context of the book. If educational issues in higher education are to be included, they should be discussed in the context of the development issues of school education at the primary and secondary levels.
Thirdly, there is hardly any analytical framework to handle the academic discussions on quality and equity of education. I believe that this book’s target readers are researchers who are interested in assuring quality and equity in the education systems in developing countries. This means the book should be academically critical and challenging in pursuing both goals of quality and equity of education development. I believe that authors should provide their own academic perspective to the following questions: what do they mean by “quality of education”, what government policy efforts for “better education” in developing countries are challenged in the era of the SDGs and why, and how does quality education have anything to do with providing equitable chances to school education. Regarding the issue of quality education, several points are made in chapter 2 (pp. 24-26) and chapter 12 (pp. 222-223). However, it certainly seems the authors take for granted that quality education as a concept is well-defined in the policy documents by the government. This is the result of an attempt at education development policy analysis when there is only limited amount of data that treats issues of educational quality while most of the available resources provide information only on equal provision of access to education. I believe it is little problematic to depend heavily upon official documentations particularly that produced by the government.

Conclusion

The discussions leading up to the World Education Forum in 2015 in and out of academia were so wide that various educational aspects were put on the table for active argumentation. The following questions may refer to such interests in education development for the next 15 years. What targets for education development should to be set in the years post 2015? What obstacles need to be overcome in order to realize the goals for education development? How should education be evaluated and monitored to provide equal chances to education and to assure a quality education? What governing structure and financial assistance should be established in alignment with the global agenda for education development? I have witnessed debates and discussions on these questions turned into spectacles in which serious actions and practices rarely follow. Education has just now arrived in discussions on international development but without any theoretical framework to assert its presence. Education has been used as means to achieve other dimensions of international development particularly of economic growth.

In this sense, equitable access to school education in developing countries could be a significant goal for the national governments because it relates well to the traditional development discourse. However, the other dimension of education development—quality education—has hardly been dealt with beyond the continuing rhetorical gestures. The educators discussing education development have never given up on the importance of quality education. However, such discussions have not reached any decisive agreement on what the aim of development and cooperation should be for quality education or what the aim of quality education should be for development and cooperation and how such level of quality education can be achieved. Then what are some topics that must be discussed in the SDGs? What should be asked to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education” and advance beyond discussing education only as international spectacle? I believe equitable access to school education is definitely a prerequisite condition to ensure quality education for all. As discussed
above, quality education will be the most popularized concept in the era of the SDGs. In this context, two areas of discussions on quality education need to be emphasized: learning outcomes and quality teachers! These are significant routes to understand what quality education means. Although those are fully accepted as key factors to achieve quality education, it is necessary to talk about what learning outcomes and what qualification of teachers must be pursued. Cultural, social, economic, and political theories can be employed to argue for and against those issues.

There will be no doubt that this volume titled *The Political Economy of Schooling in Cambodia: Issues of Quality and Equity* will provide some understanding of the complicated context under which school education has been posited in Cambodia. Many authors in the book suggest that schooling in Cambodia has been under more challenges than generally imagined. However, they also provide readers with a basis to read education critically. As a scholar of education sociology, I believe that Cambodia stands between two different worlds, between frustration and hope. On one hand, education in Cambodia has been in frustration under outdated traditions of social structure, while on the other hand, there is much hope in the possibility of creating an innovative space for freedom of choice through education. Even though the book does not conclude as such, I would say that the destiny of the nation of Cambodia depends on the continuous choices they make to ensure quality and inclusive education for all.