Education policy between persistence and change: grand transformations processes and cultural spheres in the case of Cambodia

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In this study, we aim to understand how international influences, moderated by cultural spheres, impact the inclusiveness of education and support generosity for individuals' education in the long durée. The two grand and globally significant political transformation processes we focus on are (de)colonization and socialism. We also analyze how current multilateralism exerted through international organizations (IOs) in the post-WW2 order affects national education policies. For this purpose, we exercise a case study on Cambodia, which lived through colonization, socialist ruling, and other internal conflicts. We are interested in how these processes have left their traces in Cambodia's education system. This work is a case study analyzing qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and official documents from governments and other sources. The article argues that today's education system in Cambodia is based on the education model established by the French during its colonial period and later developed to accommodate its cultural and religious traditions. The socialist regime led to heavy losses in Cambodia and damaged most education facilities. In over 30 years, Cambodia's education has recovered with support from the international community, along with the international standards on education inclusion and generosity.

1 Introduction

In today's world, the organization of education systems and policies lies in the hands of states or state subunits. Particularly over the 20th century, public education systems have been established in all countries around the world (Besche-Truthe, 2022). However, education systems and policies do not exist in a vacuum but continuously undergo reform processes. On the one hand, these processes can be internally motivated to reach specific national goals; on the other, education systems are exposed to global political transformation processes and internationally diffused norms that shape national systems

and policies. Moreover, countries belong to different cultural spheres in which education systems are embedded with distinct characteristics as to how education systems should be designed and what goals they should reach. These cultural spheres moderate the effects of global influences on national education policies.

In this article, we are interested in how these international influences shape education policies in the long durée. We therefore focus on two grand and globally significant political transformation processes and their effects, that is, (de)colonization and the imprint of socialism. Furthermore, we analyze how current multilateralism exerted through international organizations (IOs) in the post-WW2 order affects national education policies. Our particular focus in this work lies on how these international influences, moderated by cultural spheres, impact the inclusiveness of education and support generosity for individuals' education. Through inclusiveness, education systems enable participation and social advancement. Generosity implies how long and with what governmental support or funds people in different phases of the life course should be addressed by education policy.

For this endeavor, we exercise a case study on Cambodia, which lived through a diversified history of global and internal transformation processes filtered through distinct cultural factors. We are interested in how these processes left their traces until today in the education system of Cambodia. Over the last two centuries, Cambodia has endured colonization, socialist rule, and internal strife. The country was under French colonial rule from 1863 to 1953, interrupted briefly by the Japanese occupation during WW2. In the 1970s, Cambodia experienced one of history's most extreme massacres under the Khmer Rouge, a socialist regime responsible for the deaths of approximately two million people. Today, Cambodia participates in numerous IOs that promote their norms and standards. These external influences interact with the nation's Buddhist heritage and its unique value system.

How do grand transformation processes of the last two centuries intervene in the development of education systems? And how do cultural factors moderate these global influences on national educational development? Since the 1980s, Cambodia has reconstructed its education system. The state has made notable progress – from almost no schools or teachers after the massacre, the country has 95% of children completing primary education today. In some educational levels, such as primary and lower secondary, Cambodia's female student enrollment rate is higher than males. These achievements are even more remarkable considering the boost of Cambodia's population: from 6 million in 1979 to 16.9 million in 2023, indicating a 166% growth rate in the past four decades (UN Population Fund, 2024), with around 30% of the total population in Cambodia being under the age of 14 (UN Population Fund, 2024). Nevertheless, despite the impressive progress, Cambodia still suffers from its lack of schools, qualified teachers, insufficient resources, and weak governance, which led to unsatisfying education attainment results (USAID, 2019). In 2021, Cambodia attended the large-scale PISA (OECD, 2023) but became listed at the bottom among all the participating countries and economies. Despite impressive improvements in reconstructing its education system, education quality and attainment are still inadequate.

The article begins by establishing a theoretical framework that highlights the enduring impact of political transformations, international influences, and cultural factors. It then provides an overview of Cambodia's current education policies and recent developments. Next, it explores the connections between historical processes—such as decolonization and the collapse of socialism—and contemporary education. Finally, it demonstrates how global actors and external events shape Cambodia's education policy.

This case study draws on qualitative data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis. The dataset comprises 18 government policy documents, eight reports from international organizations, and five additional research studies, all analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Fieldwork was carried out in Cambodia, where five expert interviews were conducted. Among the interviewees, two were representatives from international organizations with over 5 years of experience in Cambodia, while the remaining three were Cambodian nationals: a policy advisor, an NGO project manager, and an independent researcher. They have been contacted separately to ensure that experts in different fields have been reached. All participants provided informed consent prior to the interviews. The field visit also included tours of local schools and museums, offering valuable contextual insights. Additionally, a Cambodian researcher reviewed an early draft of this article to support information verification.

2 Theory frame: on the interplay of global transformation processes, IOs, and cultural spheres on the inclusiveness and generosity of education systems

To map how external factors shape an education system over a long period, we investigate two major global-historical transformations that we consider to be quasi-experiments in social change (Windzio, 2000): decolonization and the end of socialism. Since 1945, decolonization processes have been presenting the independent states with possibilities for action that enabled the social construction of national and cultural identities, while, simultaneously, existing education systems were shaped by colonial structures (Frankema, 2012). Similarly, the imprint of socialism is expected to be found on education systems, especially since their dissolution after 1990 was partly associated with violent conflicts over cultural hegemony between ethnic-cultural or religiously oriented groups. We expect different forms of cultural hybridization as a consequence of these transformations that, in turn, will affect the inclusiveness and scope of benefit toward certain groups (Hauck, 2007). In addition, states are part of the international system of states, and IOs working in education set expectations for their member states and issue recommendations.

First, networks of global trade and the exchange of goods already existed long before modernity (Fukuyama, 1995). In the 20th century, however, the political order became embedded in the global power structure of colonization and, since 1945, political bloc formation. Although the colonizers' main interest was the extraction of natural resources, they often also influenced their colonies with their way of life and their institutions, for example, by institutionalizing and expanding the education systems. Colonizers in this context introduced their own education system, including

its setup and its contents, to their colonies and often ignored or even abolished existing structures. Sometimes, a colonizer's system was introduced in addition to local systems, and both continued in parallel. However, the exposure to Western culture and institutions imposed from the outside sometimes did not end with the decolonization. Cambodia is a particularly interesting case for investigation motivated by the assumption that the country was exposed to the influences of its colonial power and the extent to which French influence is reflected until today in its institutional set-up of the education system (Betts and Collier, 2017).

Second, after the WW2, the socialist regimes led by the Soviet Union and democratic countries with free markets and capitalist enterprises competed for economic and political influence (Fukuyama, 1995). Socialist ideas focused on the critique of disruptive tendencies of capitalism, such as exploitation and pauperization, but also alienation. In the aftermath of the socialist transformation, a re-organization of society and economy should bring humanity back in: means of production should be controlled by the people themselves, and socio-economic inequality should be drastically reduced. The new society should overcome inequality between genders along with social classes and class-based social inequality. In contrast to the increasing unemployment rates in Western capitalist economies since the late 1960s, most socialist economies relied on labor-intensive modes of production and, therefore, had a high demand for labor force in agricultural and manufacturing industries. Embedded in the post-war political geography, socialist countries in the Global South were encouraged to follow the Soviet model, to weaken the former institutions and cultural values, such as religious and traditional gender roles, and to integrate girls and women into the education system. However, this social change was to some degree imposed from the outside, at least supported by the socialist hegemon, and often not rooted in the countries' mainstream culture or civil society. We therefore expect that a country with a socialist phase, such as Cambodia, leaves a stamp on the set-up of its education system in that it provides for more inclusive and generous education.

Third, multilateral agreements significantly increased after WW2. In particular, IOs have been established as actors in all fields of social policy and attempt to influence national systems with their policies and programs (Martens et al., 2021). Education policy, which has traditionally been understood as an inherent task of the nation-state, has become ingrained into the programmatic missions of a growing number of international organizations like the World Bank (Mundy and Verger, 2015) or the OECD (Niemann and Martens, 2018). Other prominent IOs that are operating on a global level in education policy include UNICEF, UNESCO, and ILO (Niemann, 2022). Through frameworks for the assessment of education quality, like PISA, IOs shape global discourses and ideas of what proper education entails, which goals education policy should achieve, and the means necessary to do so (Sellar and Lingard, 2014). IOs can shape policy by utilizing their technical knowledge and expertise, analytical capabilities, and access to extensive datasets. As guides and best practices for achieving education policies that allow countries to compete in global markets have become coveted goods, IOs have evolved into important providers of these resources. IOs may also act as "norm entrepreneurs" (Finnemore, 1993). Rather than merely reproducing existing educational norms and ideas, they produce new ones, such as the concept of "lifelong learning" (Zapp and

Dahmen, 2017). Indeed, the production and diffusion of ideas have been established as one of the key venues of IO influence in education policy (Nagel et al., 2010) and should also be traceable in the national education system of Cambodia. In particular, we expect the UN-led goals of the SDG for inclusive and generous education to be mirrored in Cambodia's national education policies.

Fourth, education systems are embedded in different cultural spheres. The relevance of global cultural traditions has already been highlighted in Weber's (1972) famous studies on the interrelation between religion, culture, and institutions. Weber's perspective inspired more recent studies on different cultural pathways toward modernity (Knöbl, 2007). Based on the concept of isomorphism anchored in sociological institutionalism (Meyer et al., 1997) and systematically including the effects of global cultural factors in the analysis of the diffusion process, the research identified overlapping fuzzy-set cultural clusters in the world by analyzing two-mode networks as cultural spheres (Martens and Windzio, 2022). Cultural indicators include rights to political freedoms, the rule of law, gender role orientations, dominant religion, language groups, government ideologies, types of civilization, and colonial ties, among others (for a summary, see Windzio and Martens, 2021). Differences were particularly apparent between predominantly Muslim and (Southeast) Asian countries that, in contrast to countries in the Global North, introduced compulsory education later (Seitzer et al., 2022). Cultural sphere affiliations had a meaningful positive impact on compulsory education diffusion, even after controlling for economic development. While interdependencies stemming from the colonial period and trade networks hardly influenced the introduction of compulsory education, the 'breaking effects' of large spatial distance between countries had a comparatively strong effect (Seitzer et al., 2022). We, therefore, assume that belonging to a particular cultural sphere moderates the influence of global transformation such as grand political processes and IO norms.

The case of Cambodia is of particular interest due to its Southeast Asian cultural tradition of Buddhism. Similar to Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, Cambodia has a strong religious tradition in Theravada-Buddhism, which belongs to the oldest and most orthodox ways of Buddhist thinking. Unfortunately, Cambodia is not yet part of the World Values Survey (Schwartz, 2014). Regarding the religious and cultural traditions, Cambodia is similar to Thailand, about which cultural data exists. Unlike other Asian countries, such as Japan or South Korea, people in Thailand have on average considerably lower levels of secular values (Inglehart, 2018), which might be a result of this strong Buddhist tradition. In contrast, the gross domestic product per capita is around three times higher in Thailand[1]. Given that Cambodian people are on average much poorer than the population in Thailand, we expect also higher survival values (versus self-expression) in Cambodia than in Thailand. Accordingly, Cambodia might on average show low individualistic, autonomy-related, and emancipative values and a comparatively high emphasis on hierarchy and social embeddedness. In addition, Cambodia has a short but highly extreme socialist period, resulting in the killing of almost one-fourth of its population. As a result of this experience, it can be expected that the population is highly interested in reviving

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1 www.statista.com

its traditional culture, which was suppressed and even destroyed by the extremely authoritarian Communist regime.

In sum, our theoretical frame outlines the four factors of long-lasting influences we expect to be traceable in the set-up and contents of today's education systems: Colonialism, socialism, multilateralism, and cultural traditions might all have left lasting, persisting footprints in how education and education systems are arranged. We explore how these factors shaped Cambodia's education history and development.

3 The current state of education: overview, cultural Imprints, and inclusiveness and generosity of Cambodia's education system

3.1 Overview of the education system in Cambodia

Presently, Cambodia's education system is built upon the 1993 Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The constitution lays down the right to education for all citizens (Art. 65), which, based on the principles of educational freedom and quality (Art. 66), free primary and secondary education for at least 9 years, is guaranteed by the constitutional document (Art. 68) (UNESCO, 2021). The state declares that it makes a strong commitment to the goal of Education for All (EFA), which is acknowledged in Chapter VI, Articles 65 & 68:

> The State shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools. Citizens shall receive education for at least 9 years. The State shall protect and upgrade citizens' rights to quality education at all levels and shall take necessary steps for quality education to reach all citizens.

Cambodia's formal education system follows a 6 + 3 + 3 structure, comprising 6 years of primary school (Grades 1–6), 3 years of lower secondary school (Grades 7–9), and 3 years of upper secondary school (Grades 10–12). Primary and lower secondary education – totaling 9 years – are compulsory. Additionally, the system includes at least 1 year of preschool (kindergarten) for children aged 3 to under 6, though this is not mandatory. Instruction is conducted in Khmer, the official language of both the country and its education system. Table 1 indicates the crucial education numbers of Cambodian education system.

The educational system is run by the Cambodian state under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). The National Education Strategic Plan (ESP), released every 5 years, served as the guidance to the education system. The 2024–2028 ESP, which is currently being implemented, focuses on the enhancement of the quality of education in education, sports, science, and technology through improving school governance, curriculum reforms, and other tactics (MoEYS, 2024). The most significant policy proposed by the current ESP is the aggressive promotion of 'model school', the comprehensive school reform program, which will hold school leadership and administration accountable (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024). The program

TABLE 1 Key indicators of Cambodian education system.

Key indicators	Number (year)
Total population	17.1 million (2024)
Official language	Khmer
Net enrollment rate for primary education (%)	87% (2023)
Net enrollment rate for lower secondary education (%)	95% (2023)
Net enrollment rate for upper secondary education (%)	57% (2023)
Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, primary education	1 (2022)
Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, lower secondary education	1.1 (2022)
Gender parity index, total net enrolment rate, upper secondary education	1.1 (2022)

Source: UN Population Fund, 2024.

includes an evaluation of school education quality and a systematic teacher training program because the MoEYS recognizes that the teacher is the key to promoting education accessibility and quality (Interview 3 on Cambodia, 2024).

While Cambodia's education system remains predominantly centralized under MoEYS authority, recent reforms have initiated a decentralization focus in alignment with the 2014–2018 and 2019–2023 ESPs. This shift involves transferring operational responsibilities from national to sub-national councils. According to ministerial advisors (Interviews 3 & 5, 2024), the 2024 policy progressively delegates local school funding allocations and staff recruitment to provincial authorities. Cambodia has limited public funding for education. Internationally, a benchmark for public education expenditure of 4% of GDP should be the aim to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal for Education (SDG 4), but Cambodia could not reach this standard. Before 2016, the government expenditure on education consisted of only below 2% of the total GDP. Figure 1A indicates the government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP in the past 20 years.

Private education exists at all levels and is run by the private sector. The private school enrollment rate was around 6% in 2019 (World Bank, 2023b). Most private schools offering pre-school education and general education have been operated by communities of ethnic and religious minorities, including Chinese, Muslim, French, English, and Vietnamese (USAID, 2019). In 2021, Cambodia had 1,307 private schools, comprising 1,065 Khmer schools, 51 Chinese schools, and 33 Muslim schools (MoEYS, 2021; translated by NGO Education Partnership, NEP). Elite private schools are primarily concentrated in Phnom Penh, while private education options are still available nationwide (Interview 1, 2023).

Dr. Hangchuon Naron, Cambodia's current Minister of MoEYS since 2013 and former Minister of Economics and Finance, has demonstrated a strong commitment to educational reform. He "projected a strong commitment to offering high-quality educational service to all Cambodians" and took a "bold reform" in increasing the educational budget (UNICEF, 2023). He brought more funds for education and initiated projects such as the anti-corruption movement, teacher professional training improvement, and reallocation of education funds to the regional level (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024). Despite the pandemic causing a suspension to the increase, the funding to MoEYS increased from 2.47%

FIGURE 1
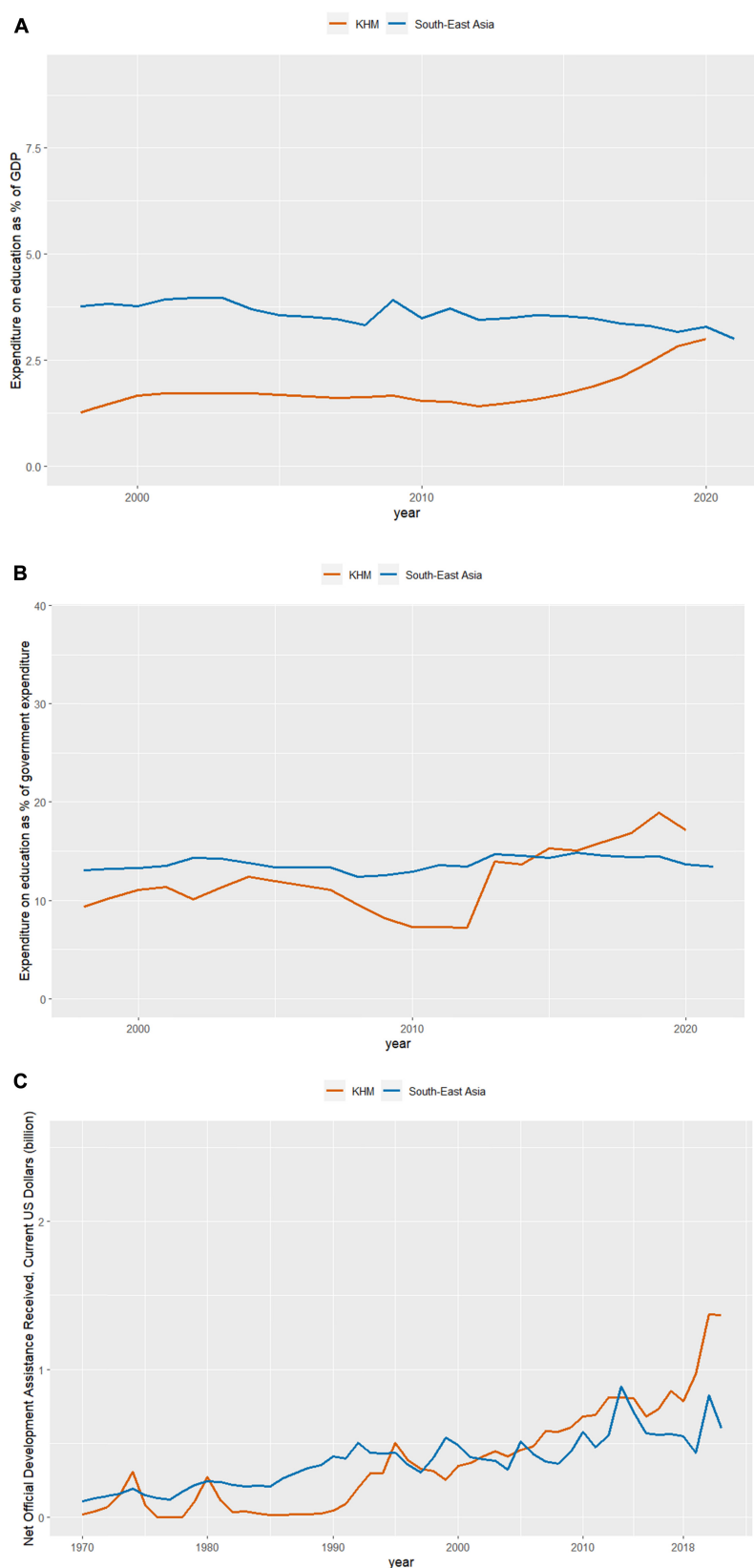**(A)** Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP). **(B)** Government expenditure on education, total (% of government expenditure). **(C)** Net official development assistance received, current US dollars. Source: World Bank (2023b).

of GDP in 2015 to 3.38% in 2020. A similar pattern in the government expenditure on education also indicates a dramatic financial shift, when only 7% of government expenditure went to education, doubling to 14% in 2013 following his appointment. Figure 1B indicates the government expenditure on education (% of government expenditure) in the past 20 years.

Cambodia's GDP per capita remains among the lowest in Southeast Asia, ranking ninth out of ten ASEAN nations, only ahead of Myanmar under constant warfare. This economic constraint has resulted in limited public education funding, creating heavy dependence on international development partners. Consequently, Cambodia's education system has evolved into a predominantly donor-driven model, with external partners significantly influencing policy directions and priorities. (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024).

3.2 International imprints on Cambodia's education

Cambodia's modern history has been shaped by both colonial and socialist governance systems. The country entered its colonial period in 1863 when it fell under French rule, and it continued for nearly a century. While Cambodia was not the primary focus of French colonial ambitions, its strategic position within French Indochina gradually led to increased control. Notably, French authorities adopted a relatively hands-off approach during the initial decades, only intensifying their direct governance of Cambodian internal affairs in the late 1870s.

The French colonial administration's introduction of the '6 + 4 + 2 + 1' education model school (Em et al., 2023) represented Cambodia's first systematic modern schooling framework at the beginning of the 20th century, albeit one restricted to elite circles. This legacy of establishing formal structures while limiting access, nonetheless, broke new ground by including girls, challenging traditional educational exclusion. The system's elitist nature foreshadowed later equity challenges in Cambodian education policy. The Japanese military occupation of French Indochina in 1941 maintained the French colonial administration. Following WWII, France reestablished full authority until Cambodia's independence in 1953 after a sustained nationalist movement. During this period, Cambodia continued developing its education system along French institutional models, extending access to broader populations while establishing four higher education institutions (Em et al., 2023). This educational expansion reflected both the enduring colonial legacy and emerging nationalist aspirations.

Following three decades of independence marked by political instability, Cambodia descended into civil conflict culminating in the Khmer Rouge's capture of Phnom Penh in April 1975. The communist regime's radical policies (1975–1979) precipitated one of the most devastating genocides of the 20th century, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 to 3 million Cambodians (University of Minisoda, (no date)). Vietnam's 1979 intervention overthrew the Khmer Rouge and established the People's Republic of Kampuchea, beginning a period of Vietnamese-backed governance. The 1993 UN-supervised elections marked a pivotal transition, restoring the constitutional monarchy and ushering in an era of international

engagement that facilitated Cambodia's subsequent economic and social recovery.

Cambodia's education system remained structurally unchanged following independence but suffered a catastrophic collapse under Khmer Rouge rule. The regime's policies systematically targeted educators, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 75%–80% of teachers and the shuttering of all universities (Dy, 2007). Subsequent civil conflicts perpetuated this educational devastation until 1996, when the final Khmer Rouge factions dissolved following the 1997 coup that strengthened the current government (Gottesman, 2004). The post-1980s reconstruction process essentially rebuilt Cambodia's education system from scratch, with interviewees describing the challenge as recreating an entire system from "nothing" (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024).

Since its post-conflict reconstruction, Cambodia has actively engaged with the international community in educational development. The country maintains multilateral participation through its ASEAN membership in the region while remaining subject to UN-monitored political frameworks globally. Cambodia's education sector relies significantly on foreign assistance, with funding and technical support provided by international governmental organizations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, and the Asian Development Bank, and development agencies from specific countries such as USAID (USA), JICA (Japan), EC (European Commission), AUF (Austria), and Sida (Sweden). This international engagement reached a new milestone in 2016 when Cambodia joined the OECD's PISA assessment program, marking its commitment to global education standards.

Cambodia's educational traditions trace their cultural origins to the first century CE, emerging from a unique synthesis of Hindu-Buddhist religious influences that reflected the broader cultural interplay between Indian, Chinese, and indigenous Khmer-Mon civilizations (Jin, 2021). For centuries, Buddhist monasteries (wats and pagodas) functioned as the sole centers of learning, providing an exclusively male education that combined religious instruction with practical skills. The curriculum encompassed foundational Buddhist and Hindu texts, basic literacy in ancient Khmer and Sanskrit, and training in crafts like carpentry, artistry, and musical performance. Prospective students were required to complete Brahmanic service before commencing their studies under the guidance of local monks. Unlike modern educational systems, this traditional model operated without standardized curricula or fixed schedules, instead adapting its teaching rhythms to agricultural cycles and religious observances. The monastic schools emphasized spiritual formation and community needs over formal certification, representing an education philosophy deeply embedded in Cambodia's cultural and ecological context (Jin, 2021).

3.3 Inclusiveness and generosity of Cambodia's education system

3.3.1 General inclusion policy

Cambodia's post-1993 education reconstruction has consistently prioritized inclusion and quality across successive reforms. These focus areas remain central today, shaped by the

country's need to rebuild its decimated education sector and address persistent equity challenges.

In 1990, the World Declaration on Education for All (WCEFA) was announced, involving Cambodia as part of the program. Promised at the EFA Conference, UNESCO, UNICEF, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the World Bank assisted Cambodia in national reconstruction and rehabilitation. Dy and Ninomiya (2003, 8) point out:

> Essentially, Cambodia found itself lost in the middle of nowhere while seeking socioeconomic development in the late 1980s. UNESCO's framework in universalizing basic education (with its emphasis on achieving poverty alleviation in the near future) has become a topic of concern at the highest levels since the late 1990s.

Cambodia's foundation for educational inclusion was established through its 1993 Constitution, which guaranteed education as a universal right for all citizens. This legal framework enabled the 2003 EFA National Plan (MoEYS, 2023), which provided a detailed situational analysis featuring enrollment statistics, systemic challenges, and resource requirements while explicitly acknowledging the crucial role of international development partners in both goal-setting and implementation. Since its adoption, the EFA framework has served as Cambodia's primary focus for educational policy.

Moreover, MoEYS utilized the ESPs every 5 years to present action plans in detail, which cover various aspects of education inclusion, such as gender disparity, minorities, and disadvantaged families. In the Education Strategic Plan 2006–2010, 2011–2014, 2014–2018, 2019–2023, and 2024–2028, the inclusion of education has been continuously listed as a primary task (MoEYS, 2005, 2018, 2014, 2019, 2024).

Considering Cambodia's post-conflict status, the first action by the government was to rebuild schools and provide sufficient classrooms to ensure children have access to education. The focus of national policy shifted from building education capacity and providing education infrastructure in the 1990s and 2000s to promoting education quality and equal opportunities in the 2010s and beyond.

Furthermore, education policies with specific targets are designated for education inclusion. For example, the 2007 Child-Friendly School Policy grants schooling access to children affected by difficult circumstances, including children with lower socioeconomic backgrounds, girls, orphans, victims of domestic violence, children belonging to ethnic minorities, children affected by HIV/AIDS, and other disadvantaged children.

3.3.2 On gender and ethnicity

Cambodia has systematically integrated gender into its education policy framework. The Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Plan (2011–2015) and Strategy for Gender Equity in TVET (2014–2018) established dedicated mechanisms for addressing gender disparities. Subsequent policies such as the Gender Strategic Plan (2014–2018) targeted marginalized female populations - including the aged, economically disadvantaged, disabled, minorities, and people living with HIV- through comprehensive interventions combining financial support (scholarships) with societal attitude transformation programs. This gender-sensitive approach was

further institutionalized through the 2018 Policy on Inclusive Education, which emphasizes equitable quality education for girls and women with special needs. The policy implements retention strategies encompassing targeted scholarships, awareness campaigns, and enhanced safety protocols to create enabling learning environments for vulnerable female students.

At least statistically, Cambodia has made significant progress in reducing gender disparities in basic education. At primary and lower secondary levels, female students outperform their male counterparts, with youth female literacy reaching 96.5% compared to 95.4% among males and lower secondary completion rates standing at 67% for girls versus 57% for boys (World Bank, 2023a). However, this trend reverses in advanced education stages, revealing persistent gender gaps. Female representation declines in upper secondary and tertiary education, where women constitute only 40% of students, resulting in a tertiary gross enrollment gender parity index of 0.88. The disparity is particularly pronounced in vocational training and management programs, where male students continue to dominate enrollment figures.

3.3.3 On linguistic inclusion and indigenous groups

In addition, Cambodia has systematically pursued literacy and language education improvements through legal and policy frameworks, beginning with the 2007 Education Law, which enshrines lifelong learning and cultural-linguistic preservation (Article 2). While mandating Khmer as the primary language of instruction, the law grants MoEYS authority to determine appropriate mediums of instruction for ethnic minorities (Article 24). To operationalize these provisions, the government established a Bilingual Education Commission, which developed implementation guidelines in 2010 for indigenous highland communities and in 2013 for learners of Khmer and minority-language backgrounds.

Building on a 2002 pilot initiative, MoEYS, with support from UNICEF and Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) International, expanded multilingual education (MLE) programs from primary to pre-primary levels. This effort gained further momentum through the 2008 National Policy for Ethnic Minorities Development, which informed the 2014–18 Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP). MENAP prioritized inclusive access for ethnic minority children by enhancing educator capacity, developing mother-tongue teaching materials, expanding school infrastructure, and integrating community schools into the state system.

The program specifically targeted five highland provinces (Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, Mondulkiri, Preah Vihear, and Kratie), offering early childhood and primary education (Grades 1–3) in nine indigenous languages, including Tumpoun, Kroeng, and Kouy. By 2016, MENAP had been implemented across 18 districts, encompassing 80 community preschools and 4 state-run preschools, marking significant progress in linguistic inclusion while highlighting ongoing challenges in scalability and resource allocation.

3.3.4 Continuous challenges in practice

Despite data suggesting significant progress in educational inclusion, Cambodia continues to face substantial challenges in ensuring quality education due to systemic constraints, including

teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and resource limitations. While MoEYS has implemented comprehensive reforms targeting curriculum development, teacher capacity building, and institutional governance, persistent disparities in learning outcomes remain evident. National assessments reveal concerning proficiency gaps, with only 32% of male third-grade students demonstrating Khmer literacy competence compared to 48% of female students. At the secondary level, merely 8% of 15-year-olds meet minimum reading standards, while just 10% attain basic mathematics proficiency. Drop-out rates in secondary schools remain high (USAID, 2022).

Weak governance hinders the development of education. Corruption, one form of weak governance in the public system, leads to cheating in education. "The cheating system was developed for the Grade 12 exam (the college entrance examination): people paid the teachers. Teachers got paid. It was a win-win. Teachers, students, and parents did not take teaching seriously" (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024). It has been a long-lasting issue, a pain to the entire public institution, not merely in education. Another aspect of weak governance is that no one is held accountable for the unsatisfactory educational outcome. "School principals, even teachers, will not be fired if they are not doing their jobs" (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024). The potential reasons for this phenomenon are complex, including party politics, lack of an evaluation system, and lack of transparency. Consequently, people lost trust in government policies. MoEYS has several initiatives to promote education inclusion and quality; the result of these programs is unclear – the situation seems to be improving, but not efficiently (Interviews 4 and 5 on Cambodia, 2024).

A lack of qualified teachers is another challenge. Again, it is linked to corruption, since people hold negative perceptions of teaching as a profession. "It is very difficult to change senior teachers. In their mind, teaching is an easy job. Many of them have several jobs... They are supposed to work 8 h a day, but they indeed only work for 4 h" (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024). Some Cambodian teachers believe they don't need to be fully engaged in teaching because teaching a lesson doesn't require much effort.

Furthermore, poverty poses significant barriers to educational access in Cambodia, particularly affecting secondary enrollment and completion. Geographic isolation exacerbates these challenges in rural areas, where long distances to schools disproportionately affect disadvantaged students. "It was easier to get primary education, but [enrollment is] worse getting secondary... the distances [are] a challenge... The poorer the student and the household the student came from, the fewer chances" (Interview 1 on Cambodia, 2023). The financial burden of schooling increases substantially at the secondary level, as another interviewee explained: "Secondary education is a bigger problem because of the private payment. You know, in elementary school, one teacher can teach many subjects. But since secondary school, each subject has a teacher." (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024). These economic pressures often lead families to prioritize immediate income over continued education, a reality succinctly captured by a third respondent: "You just stay at school until you can work" (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024). However, the study by No et al. (2016, 215) found that there is no significant relationship between economic status, child labor, and parents' aspirations and the school dropout rate in basic education in rural areas of Cambodia. On the contrary, the dropout rate increases with the divorce of parents, closeness

with friends, and late school entry of students in grades 1–4, and with grade repetition and relative academic achievement of those in grades 4–9. Hence, the relevance of poverty to education inclusion requires further evidence.

While poverty contributes to educational attrition, motivational and perceptual challenges are also significant. As an NGO director emphasized, "Money is a significant reason leading to drop-outs at the lower secondary level, but we can find solutions. People's commitment and motivation to send their children to school is more important" (Interview 3, 2024). This observation underscores that sustainable retention requires not just economic interventions, but cultural and pedagogical reforms that make schooling irreplaceable in families' survival strategies.

In conclusion, despite Cambodia having achieved progress in education inclusion, the state is facing challenges caused by interconnected material realities, cultural perceptions, and governance trust issues. Lasting improvement requires addressing not just whether children can attend school, but whether families believe they should.

4 Influences of global transformation

4.1 Impact of Buddhist culture

Buddhism has been central to Cambodia's ancient and contemporary education. Even today, the Buddhist schools are still supplementary to modern education. Ancient education was purely religious – even at the peak of the empire, education was still under religion, as if education could only be realized religiously (Jin, 2021). A distinct feature of Cambodia's traditional education is that teachers are monks from various religions. At different times, people converted to different streams of Buddhism, but the organizational form of education has not changed. Teachers are monks, and the students are also monks (Jin, 2021). In the early centuries, monks were not trained professionally as teachers, but in recent centuries, standardized requirements were developed. Throughout Cambodia's educational history, ancient temples were the center of learning, culture, and art. For years, regardless of war or peace or changing regimes, temples have inherited the Khmer culture and education, ensuring the Khmer art and culture were passed down to generations (Jin, 2021).

In modern education, Buddhist schools still exist, serving as a supplementary to formal education. For children from modest backgrounds, they can work part-time and go to temples during their free time to receive informal education (Wang, 2021). As of March 2020, there were 974 Buddhist elementary schools, 116 Buddhist junior schools, 18 Buddhist high schools, and five Buddhist universities (Wang, 2021). Considering there were 14,522 schools in the total of Cambodia in 2019 (OpenDevelopment, 2021), religious schools consist of roughly 7% of the total schools, the same size as private schools. The degree from Buddhist schools is certified by MoEYS. 97 of the Buddhist schools are in the cities, while 1,011 schools are in the rural areas, mostly in the temples (Wang, 2021). Most of the temple schools do not require tuition; students only need to work at the temple in exchange for education, board, and food (Wang, 2021). But overall, the

influence of Buddhist schools has diminished in recent decades, as people realize that modern schools are significantly outnumbering Buddhist schools (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024).

Additionally, Buddhist thoughts have an influence on Cambodia's educational system. For instance, the Buddhist belief is that man should treat all men equally, including the ones with illnesses or body disadvantages. Such a thought is reflected in Cambodian education. Buddhism also believes that school education should be more caring and gentler, as Buddha cares for all (Wang, 2021). The Buddha also values morality and kindness, and hence, the Buddhist school highlights moral requirements. Buddhist value is also related to nationalism. A local development officer said that in many rural areas, the monks are the spiritual leaders of the local community, who won the respect of people in the local village (Interview 3 on Cambodia, 2024). As a result, the regional government and development organizations usually work jointly with the temples, seeking support and understanding from these spiritual leaders. "Their opinions are highly valued in the village: if they encourage the children to pursue higher education, it would greatly improve local education accessibility and attainment" (Interview 3 on Cambodia, 2024).

4.2 Impact of French (De)colonialization

The French colonial impact on Cambodian education remained confined. While the French established the first technically "modern" schools, these served primarily French and elite Cambodian children, leaving traditional monastic education dominant for the general population (Clayton, 1995). For the first two decades post-1863 protectorate establishment, France exercised minimal educational intervention (Chandler, 1991). This may be because the French government only established a protectorate over Cambodia, whereas in 483 Napoleon III established French rule directly in Cochinchina (today's part of Vietnam). This hands-off approach reflected Cambodia's protectorate status, which preserved indigenous governance structures while installing French oversight. During this period, as under prior Thai suzerainty, education persisted primarily through decentralized temple schools funded by local communities (Jin, 2021).

The French colonial education system introduced the "French Modern Education System" at the beginning of the 20th century. Colonial administrators deliberately restricted access to French nationals and aristocratic Cambodians—a policy scholars interpret as the deliberate suppression of mass education to maintain colonial control (Chandler, 1991; Clayton, 1995). The French attempted cautious reforms of Buddhist education to create a hybrid system but avoided radical changes that might provoke religious opposition—reflected in Jin (2021) on Cambodia's educational history.

Cambodia declared independence in 1953, and this elite-focused education had lasting political consequences after independence. King Sihanouk's post-1953 government and subsequent Cambodia People's Party (CPP) leadership perpetuated an education hierarchy where descendants of independence-era "meritorious families" dominated ministerial positions. As one ministry insider noted, these legacy appointees often resist rapid reform: "They are in higher positions but relatively slow in work"

compared to younger technocrats (Interview 3 on Cambodia, 2024). This generational divide exemplifies how privileged education access passes down through generations.

4.3 Impact of the socialist phase

The socialist regime had a destructive effect, which caused massive loss of lives and wealth. Education is not an exception. The Khmer Rouge caused significant damage, including destroying education infrastructure, killing teachers during the genocide, and closing down the universities. During the civil war afterward, the education system suffered a chronic crisis. The civil war ended in 1979, and fighting persisted until 1996, when the remnants of the Khmer Rouge fell apart (Gottesman, 2004).

The Khmer Rouge's targeting of educators created a higher education crisis with lasting development consequences. An interviewee recalls:

> The tragedy of the Khmer Rouge definitely had an impact on education. Education is a cumulated social function. Students become adults, and it takes time. Think about that... 90% of resources vanished, and everything needs to be built from scratch. Damage was severe. Particularly in the higher education program, in which I worked with. There was no research capacity for years. There was a World Bank conference last year, and all the experts from China, Hong Kong, Thailand, and the Philippines, more than 50% are senior researchers. But the Cambodian scholars are 30–35 years old from universities in Europe, Japan, and America (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024).

The transformation of Phnom Penh's Tuol Svay Prey High School into the S-21 (Tuol Sleng) prison epitomizes the Khmer Rouge's systematic dismantling of Cambodia's education system. Classrooms became interrogation cells, and sports fields turned into execution grounds. This physical repurposing of educational infrastructure mirrored the broader destruction of Cambodia's academic institutions. The scale of this devastation prolonged post-conflict justice: the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), established in 1997, required 13 years to adjudicate key cases - a timeline reflecting both the regime's exhaustive crimes and the profound institutional voids they created (UN News, 2022). Nevertheless, little literature can be found on the influence of the Khmer Rouge on education. According to Jin (2021), the state was busy with reconstruction, and discussion of the period was not encouraged.

4.4 Excurse: the impact of COVID-19 and distanced learning

The pandemic, another form of a crucial historic period in the most recent decade that left a global imprint, also affected Cambodia's education system. The progress the state achieved was too fragile for such a global crisis. Digitalization in education was too heavy a duty, and it was too sudden. As one NGO director explained,

> People were scared, no one knew what to do... Honestly, there is no one to blame to. We just didn't have the capacity. The families do not have enough devices, and the teachers were unable to use online teaching tools, the internet coverage was insufficient for many reasons... too many obstacles... (Interview 4 on Cambodia, 2024).

The *Cambodia Digital Landscape Report* also indicates how challenging it was to promote the use of e-learning devices in Cambodia:

> Across our qualitative and quantitative research methods, several key challenges and barriers emerged in advancing digital education in Cambodia across five main areas: digital infrastructure and access to the Internet, digital literacy levels of teachers, students, and parents, teachers' capacity for effective ICT integration, support needed for teachers' CPD and coordination across providers and stakeholders. The following sections will explore some of these top challenges in detail as well as existing assets, emerging initiatives, and/or promising practices to address them (World Education EdTech Center, 2023, 15–20).

Every ESP has a mid-term report, and the one during the pandemic illustrates the severe situation the state was facing (MoEYS, 2021). MoEYS failed to meet the objectives of ESP, and most education performance indicators dropped because of lacking education resources. As one expert explains,

> "The ministry tried to implement distanced learning, but I'd say, the government cannot do much. There were too many problems. Cannot have enough access, and people have to adapt themselves. There are some areas shifted to alternative learning. But most areas cannot." (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024)

It is noteworthy that IOs were helpful during the pandemic. UNESCO adopted a threefold strategy - strengthening digital resources, constructing a learning platform, and creating digital monitoring programs to facilitate education intervention (Yin and Ma, 2021). UNESCO and other development partners also provided learning resources to ensure the availability of basic education, to provide continuous education via informal learning circumstances, and to improve the learning conditions of the disadvantaged group. Still, such assistance was limited. The government, the Cambodian society, the educators, and the families had to learn to adapt to this new situation.

5 Influence of international actors/IOs

Since reconstruction, Cambodia has worked closely with the international community. The interaction happens "at all levels, ministry, provincial, district, and even schools," and Cambodia's education policy is "donor-driven", "they sent us documents and asked us to learn" (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024).

5.1 Institutional setting: the education sector working group (ESWG)

In 1999, donor agencies and NGOs established the Education Sector Working Group (ESWG), which serves as the primary mechanism that coordinates international donors. Organizations are referred to as "development partners" or "donors," and their opinions are highly valued by the government at all levels. IOs actively participate in drafting the national policy documents by MoEYS, which include EFA, ESP, and other evaluation and summary reports.

The ESWG operates through a structured governance framework that balances efficiency with policy alignment (Dy, 2004). Monthly ESWG meetings facilitate: (1) information exchange (project documents, needs assessments), (2) thematic division of labor (e.g., the World Bank focusing on primary education while ADB shifted to upper secondary), and (3) conflict mitigation between overlapping mandates (Samith, 2008; Interviews 1 & 2 on Cambodia, 2024). This operational synergy is institutionalized through a sector-wide approach (SWAp) that minimizes redundancy—exemplified by grade-level task partitioning in some schools (Grades 1–3: UNICEF; Grades 4–6: World Bank) (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024).

Complementing this, the bimonthly Joint Technical Working Group (JTWG) elevates discussions to strategic policymaking, co-chaired by MoEYS leadership and donor representatives (Sitha and Dy, 2009). The JTWG's governance structure—where development partners directly shape national policy—explains Cambodian education policy documents' bilingual (Khmer-English) nature (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024).

5.2 Donor-driven policymaking: reliance on international financing

Funding by international partners is significant to Cambodia, which explains why the ESWG and the IOs have a voice in Cambodia's education affairs. Cambodia has insufficient public funding for education, so external funding is crucial. Samith wrote that "nearly half of the budget comes from the external support for the construction and development of the country" (Samith, 2008, 5). One former UNESCO staff member in Cambodia interviewed also said that the funds from external sources would consist of roughly 40%–50% of Cambodia's educational funding in the 2010s (interview 1 on Cambodia, 2023).

Except for the COVID-19 period, Cambodia's reliance on external financial sources has decreased in the past decade. As indicated before, the government and MoEYS gradually increased the education budget. A budget of 990 million dollars would be added to the education budget for further education reforms in 2024 (The Khmer Times, 2023). At the same time, however, the international donors are retrenching their input in Cambodia (Interviews 2, 3, 4 & 5 on Cambodia, 2024). It was heard the budget from development agencies would decrease due to the global economic recession and the new crises in other regions of the world, such as the Ukraine War (Interview 4 on Cambodia, 2024). Currently, international funding makes up 10%–15% of the

education funds, as estimated by a WB staff member (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024).

Nevertheless, despite the amount of international funding is decreasing overall, the importance of development partners has not declined. They continue to play an influential role in Cambodia's educational affairs. One reason is that the funding decline seems significant from the IOs' perspective but less obvious from the Cambodian perspective. "Yes, they are giving less money from their perspective. But generally, they don't know" (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024). In other words, the current number is still substantial to the Cambodian government, so crucial that the decreased amount seems less obvious to the Cambodians. More importantly, Cambodia relies on the knowledge and techniques of the IOs. For instance, the World Bank works closely with the industry, analyzes the development of education, and discusses with the MoEYS to provide advisory support (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024). Improving human capital and providing related training have been the top priorities in its Pentagonal Strategy (The Khmer Times, 2023).

Indeed, external aid and support have been pivotal for Cambodia to sustain the government, and education is only part of the larger agenda. Besides educational aid, Cambodia received a tremendous amount of foreign aid. Figure 1C indicates the net official development assistance received by Cambodia in the past five decades. According to the World Bank (2023a), in 2022, the net development assistance Cambodia received reached 1.55 billion US dollars. Cambodia's government spending in 2023 was 9.4 billion (The Khmer Times, 2023). IOs' funding, therefore, comprises a major source of funding for public expenditure. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the above statistic does not include aid from China. Although the amount of aid from China to Cambodia is not publicly revealed, the Chinese government declared itself to be the "biggest aid-providing country" of Cambodia, especially after Chinese President Xi announced the "Belt and Road Initiative" (Zhao, 2023). Thus, the total aid received by Cambodia is even larger than the open data. International financing from external partners is so important to Cambodia that policymaking in Cambodia can be described as "donor-driven". Education is not an exception.

5.3 Forms of collaboration: financing and expertise

Financing and expertise are the two major forms of support offered by the IOs to Cambodia. The organizations collaborate with the Cambodians at all levels. At the central level, the projects initiated by IOs will be co-signed with MoEYS and another ministry, usually the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Civil Servants (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024). Besides the ministerial level of exchanges, the development partners have their form of collaboration with local organizations, districts, and schools.

The first channel where the donors provide their technical and financial support is through NGOs. Many local and international organizations form an alliance called the NGO Education Partnership (NEP). NEP operates as Cambodia's critical bridging mechanism between IOs and grassroots implementers, coordinating a network of 128 member organizations (72 local and 52 international NGOs), according to its official website. NEP's mandate is to provide coordination and capacity development on sub-national and local levels and representation for its members on national platforms such as ESWG, sub-sector/thematic working groups (Early Childhood Care and Development, Primary Education, Non-Formal Education, and Inclusive Education), The COVID-19 Response and Continuous Learning Working Group, and the Budget Working Group (education financing). NEP serves as the platform and connects the IOs with local organizations in similar fields of interest (Interview 4 on Cambodia, 2024). This structure enables multilateral alignment—where global education strategies are adapted to local administrative tiers (province, district, commune)—while ensuring community-level actors influence national policymaking.

Second, organizations, including UNICEF, JICA, and USAID, have implementation capacities in Cambodia, whereas some others, such as the World Bank and ADB, don't have many local staff and work with regional governments. IOs implementing projects themselves is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, these organizations usually have better outcomes since the projects' processes and results are directly controlled and closely monitored. On the other hand, however, these projects usually lack local sustainability because the institutions on the ground are not engaged and passively accept what is given (Interview 2 on Cambodia, 2024).

In addition, ASEAN, the regional IO in Southeast Asia, is not involved in these development projects. It is "ceremonial" and "symbolic," which facilitates governmental-level exchanges and serves as a platform for diplomatic events (Interview 5 on Cambodia, 2024). When the World Bank and ADB propose joint projects that engage other Southeast Asian countries, such as Laos and Myanmar, ASEAN would occasionally join and work as the coordinator among the states.

6 Discussion

6.1 Synthesis of results

Cambodia recovered after the socialist regime, the Khmer Rouge. The mass killings led to countless deaths and destroyed over 90% of the nation's schools. 2023 celebrated three decades since Cambodia's initial democratic vote post-conflict. Over these years, the nation has seen notable advances in education inclusion and equality. From nearly no institutions or educators in the late 1980s, literacy reached 84%, and primary enrollment hit 110% by 2022.

The schooling framework was restored during the 1990s. The 1993 Constitution revised the structure to 6 + 3 + 3–6 years primary, three lower secondary, and three upper secondary. By 2003, authorities launched Education for All, pledging to enhance fairness and standards. Furthermore, equity remained a core focus in each 5-year Education Strategic Plan (ESP). Targeted measures also addressed gaps in gender balance, minority access, and other areas. Girls now learn at equal rates as boys, even exceeding them in primary and lower secondary attendance. Initiatives were introduced for indigenous language learners, and specialized programs catered to students with disabilities (Interview 4 on Cambodia, 2024). Despite limited funds, the government has

prioritized this issue, with NGOs and civic groups collaborating to expand opportunities.

Nevertheless, despite rising enrollment, literacy, and completion figures, universal education remains challenging. The biggest hurdles emerge at the secondary level. Completion rates are unsatisfying, and quality is inconsistent. The causes are complex: financial hardship, weak governance, and cultural attitudes. Poverty prevents disadvantaged families from affording higher schooling costs. Weak governing fuels graft. Meanwhile, shifting mindsets takes time – many families undervalue schooling, while others dispute its universal necessity.

Colonial impacts were milder in Cambodia compared to neighboring countries. Although France has ruled for nearly 100 years, its focus was stronger elsewhere. The French founded Cambodia's first contemporary school, but access was restricted to French students and Cambodian elites and royalty. It also partnered with Buddhists to update temple-based learning, yet efforts were narrow in scope.

Buddhist customs remain culturally vital. Pre-19th century, teaching occurred solely in pagodas. Monks instructed local communities in reading and reasoning. Now, while most youth attend modern institutions, temple schools persist, particularly in rural areas. Monks are still revered as moral guides and advocates for learning access.

Globally, Cambodia's strides over 30 years tie closely to "development partners"— such as UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, and ADB, plus agencies such as USAID, JICA, and Sida. These groups form the Educational Sector Working Group (ESWG), aligning efforts, consulting ministries, and supplying policy guidance. They also fund programs, contributing heavily to the education budget, granting ESWG policymaking clout. Recently, however, MoEYS has grown more self-directed; while cooperation continues, the state now drives a clearer plan for teacher development and outcomes.

7 Conclusion

This study explored the development of Cambodia's education, analyzing how historical global transformation and international influences shaped national education policies. It emphasized the inclusiveness and accessibility of marginalized groups in education. We contend that Cambodia's education system today blends a French-colonial foundation with local cultural and religious traditions. The socialist era inflicted severe damage, erasing nearly all educational infrastructure. Over the last 30 years, international aid has helped rebuild Cambodia's system in line with global inclusion norms.

Few countries have endured devastation like Cambodia's. Thus, constructing an inclusive education framework required starting from zero. With global support, inclusive policies were swiftly embedded in the 1993 constitution. Guided by IOs, Cambodia adopted high inclusion standards, showing statistical progress post-socialism—though gaps remain. Enrollment and literacy gains remain precarious; during the pandemic, rates plummeted as the system struggled to adapt.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize that this research has limitations in capturing local nuances, relying on English and Chinese documents and interviews. Cambodian scholars publishing on education policy often share elite backgrounds, collaborating closely with IOs. These elites act as intermediaries and the "brokers" who link global actors and local realities. They shape narratives for both international and domestic audiences, often portraying Cambodia favorably to secure external support.

Cambodia's educational rebuilding continues amid ongoing global influences. Recent participation in PISA tests reflects its commitment to global dialogues, but its poor results have sparked domestic reform debates. Younger generations, born after socialism, are now assuming key roles in government, schools, and society. As future educators, researchers, and leaders, they represent hope for progress. Global forces remain a persistent factor in Cambodia's educational trajectory.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

FB: Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. KM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. MW: Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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