These Hollowed Halls:

The Reconstruction of Cambodian Higher-Education Post-Conflict

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Abstract

The terror that swept through the greater Mekong delta in the 1960-70s represents some of the most bitter examples of total destruction of the late twentieth century. The Kingdom of Cambodia, having then only relatively recently gained its independence from France, was involuntarily swept up in the fighting that would become the last shots of the Vietnam War only later to become a staging ground for a massive revolutionary social experiment led by Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge. His bloody reign would effectively cripple the country for generations.

Yet after the dissolution of the Khmer Rouge, plans for reconstruction were initially led by those who believe that education will in fact lead to economic recovery; specifically in the primary and secondary education contexts. It wasn't until the late 90s that investment in higher education became a targeted path towards reconstruction of the still recovering young country's GDP. Despite notable progress since, the question remains: is higher education enrollment an appropriate indicator for measuring economic development, the GDP and ultimately reconstruction?

This paper examines the historically positive relationship between GDP and increased higher-education enrollment, but also speaks of the challenges that face those tasked with reconstructing both the Cambodian higher education system and the Kingdom's economy. It is said that reconstruction not only includes rebuilding physical infrastructure but also replacing the human capital and social framework that makes higher education a viable economic option for citizens. Traditionally, increased bilateral spending on higher education leads to a rising GDP. However, it is argued that this approach is outmoded as the country moves towards increasingly more employment opportunities for its citizens in the formal labor market and in manufacturing. Both private and public Cambodian higher education institutions ultimately compete for the same students with scholarships that are disproportionately awarded by the government to those studying subjects not directly tied to market trends. Cambodian enrollment rates are the lowest in the ASEAN and have been historically low due to cultural biases against what was the haphazard and grudgingly offered higher education system characteristic of the Kingdom's French-colonial period.

With the turn of the century, the World Bank proposed its Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement project in Cambodia with the objective of: producing more highly-skilled university graduates by improving access, quality, market relevance, and systemic capacity of higher education. But many argue that rather than simply increasing higher education enrollment and in turn increasing GDP, that the case for sustainable economic reconstruction is a matter of "studying the right subjects" and it is recommended that the way to make the Cambodian economy more competitive is to better align the demand and supply for human resources.

Introduction

"Reconstruction" was a term coined after World War II by the powers that be at the time. Then, it referred to international aid efforts that characterized the decades after the war all over Europe. In a way, the term has come to carry with it a stigma: one of outside, temporary, hurried help. Without too much cynicism, it can be argued that conflict and, yes, war are opportunities to make money, and in the "development playground" that is Cambodia post-Khmer Rouge genocide social-experiment, development investment too has its own profit margins.

It's been said that if the countries of our present world, and their futures, are so intertwined, then it is imperative to have some knowledge of each other's pasts in order to fully understand what has, is, and will take place (Hook 47). In that respect, this work attempts to analyze the cultural context of the reconstruction of higher education in Cambodia. It will also be important to examine the major players in the game that is international bilateral development investment in the region and discuss both the successes and continual challenges to efforts to improve the sector.

For what is continually becoming the need to compete in a knowledge-based economy, education has universally been seen as a tool for the creation of human capital (Vuth and Dash 41). Cambodia, for many reasons one way or the other, though a world apart from its case two decades prior, continues to lag behind its neighbors both economically and in the development of physically supportive and socially viable infrastructure necessary for the reconstruction of its once

blossoming tertiary education system. It is also generally accepted that there is a positive correlation between increased higher education enrollment and per capita GDP.Given that the labor market has rapidly grown since 1991, the demand for training programs has expanded--particularly in the transport, tourism, and trade sectors. Phnom Penh has become a major intersection for transit trade between Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City (Duggan 16).

Initiatives like Education for All (EFA) pushed for filling seats of primary schools before the turn of the century. Now, although the number of those enrolling in tertiary programs continues to rise, some feel that bubble, one that is highly privatized, is bound to pop sooner rather than later. The question still remains, is higher education enrollment an appropriate indicator for sustainable economic development and reconstruction? This work ventures to find out.

Definitions and Background

Unfortunately, Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD) has sadly become so relatively common that the field, as a branch of development, has developed its own knowledge-base; its own pool of historically successful strategies for reconstruction. Curiously enough however, Cambodia remains largely resistant, whether intentionally or inadvertently, to attempts at sustainable capacity-building within its own higher education sector. However, this wasn't always the case. As is good practice, it would be beneficial to delve a bit deeper into the Kingdom's past in order to find answers to present questions. The French colonized Cambodia in

1863--and despite the breakneck pace of many things since, this history contains important relevance.

As part of the French empire, the colonial government in Cambodia did not introduce any semblance of a 'modern French' schooling system until the early 1900s. This was mainly targeted to the few Cambodian elite communities who served the colonial powers. As to be expected, the French were reluctant to enhance education in fear that doing so would empower Cambodians and potentially weaken France's grip (Dy 92).

Additionally of note is that Cambodia's traditional 'temple schools' only aimed to sustain Khmer traditional culture. Traditional Cambodian intellectuals, especially the Buddhist monks, resisted who they saw as the French-invaders attempt to Romanize their traditional language scripts in the 1940s as has been successfully done to the Vietnamese (Dy 92). This deep-set and historically cultural aversion could possibly explain why the modernizing of Cambodian higher education has been a dragging-of-feet. In the last few years before the French left Cambodia, a colonial agreement as recommended by UNESCO was grudgingly introduced that mandated a compulsory education for children aged 6-13 years. The effort would later be deemed poorly structured and implemented hastily. (Dy 93)

While Cambodian education was still without a national curriculum, Prince Sihanouk was crowned King of Cambodia by the French colonial power in 1941 when he was still a student at a French Lycee in southern Vietnam. Later, In 1954, Cambodia became an independent nation and in the next 16 years, higher

education in Cambodia developed tremendously under Prince Sihanouk. The nation experienced a growth in the number of modern school buildings, teacher-training centers and universities. Sihanouk drove left-leaning policies aimed at building a nation-state through education. New schools were built in rural and remote areas--something the French refused to offer during its colonial period (Dy 90).

During the 1960s, when Cambodia dedicated 20% of its annual budget to education, a higher-education system was self-established for the first time in Cambodia's 2000 year history (Duggan 1). Prince Sihanouk's ideology, which he called 'Buddhist socialism", lent itself to the belief that formal education would transform his country into an industrialized and technologically advanced modern state. But his reign was plagued with corruption, nepotism, and unemployment. His left-leaning policy agenda and inability to prevent Cambodia from being involved in the neighboring Vietnam conflict eventually led to his ousting. (Ayres 449)

After a coup d'etat in 1970, all the buildings of the nation's colleges were transformed into prisons or factories for manufacturing grenades, shells, and other weapons. Simultaneously, many teachers fled to join the Khmer Rouge movement while student and teacher demonstrations frequently occurred in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. Under the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot, their notorious leader, Cambodia not only lost its educational infrastructure, but almost three-quarters of its educated population (Dy 95). Under the regime, teachers, students, professionals, and intellectuals were targeted as a threat to the idea of a "New Cambodia."The physical structures of education in Cambodia were systematically

torn down or repurposed by the Khmer Rouge, leaving the education system completely destroyed (Le Thac Can 175). It is estimated that between 75 and 80 percent of the teachers and higher education students fled or died between 1975 and 1979. (Dy 90)

According to the Ministry of Education of the State of Cambodia, 75% of the teaching force, 96% of tertiary students and 67% of all elementary and secondary pupils died in Democratic Kampuchea. According to the University of Phnom Penh out of 1000 academics and intellectuals in the university, only 87 survived (Clayton 8). Educated Cambodians were intentionally targeted by the Khmer Rouge. Scholars suggest several reasons, but perhaps most simply, these individuals were products of a feudal-capitalist past and were considered barriers to progress. By eliminating the intellectual class, the Khmer communists were apparently hoping to ensure that the direction of the new social order would be irreversible. As beneficiaries of the previous social order, educated people remained opposed to the Khmer Rouge's theory of change (Clayton 7).

Education is a powerful political tool for ideological development. From Sihanouk's nation-building to Pol Pot's indoctrination. Education not only existed during the Khmer Rouge regime, but served an important purpose. Foreign languages were banned in education in an attempt to mitigate the disadvantages faced by those without prior exposure to them and to limit contact with outsiders and potentially inflammatory ideas (Clayton 16).

The “new Cambodia” lasted exactly three years, eight months, and twenty days, during which the time the people of Cambodia were subjected to a cataclysmic social experiment as part of what one historian has termed “the world’s most radical…revolution.” (Clayton 1) Education is a means by which social and cultural values are transmitted from generation to generation: including Cambodia’s scarred cultural memory. This could be a reason why attitudes towards higher education have plateaued. (Smith 376). The emphasis on agriculture correlated with the valorization of worker-peasants and thus supported the Khmer Rouge agenda for social change at a national level. (Clayton 4)

Directly following the conflict, the first schools to reopen were language schools that produced the translators the Kingdom would need to facilitate foreign reconstruction aid. “Early education response” was characteristic of the years shortly afterward. Humanitarian aid went into primary school education development and while higher-education went largely ignored. Much of the social action was described as ad hoc and improvised to meet needs that could have been “foreseen, intelligently discussed, and planned for” (Hook 48).

Types & Theories of Education

In the 90s, higher education could be summed up as too much demand for its supply. Universities’ mediocre programs riddled with unofficial fees meant that externally financed programs were largely focused on foreign language training (Ayres 13). The period saw $70 million USD committed for retraining and capacity

building programs but the results have been inconclusive because of a reluctance of bilateral agencies to invest in higher education based on then-held views that socio-economic returns are poorer than that of basic education (Duggan 2).

Since then, as belief in the development of higher education as a valuable investment continues to rise, enrollment has grown rapidly from a little over 10,000 students in 1992 to 116,108 in 2007 (World Bank 2008). Of these, approximately 60% is still accounted for by the private sector. The high-quality training of the English language teachers at the University of Phnom Penh means that graduates increasingly enter the private sector to sell their skills. This is arguably a “direct consequence of Australia's investment in Cambodian education” (Duggan 373). But more on that later in this work.

For now, the apparent theory behind investment in the rebuilding of the Cambodian higher education system is clear: it’s a case of human capitalism. In fact, there is a direct correlation between higher education development investment and per capita GDP--in fact a steady GDP has a positive impact on the gross enrollment ratio (GER) (Viracheat and Dash 60). But naturally the issue is more complex than the answer to one question of correlation. Because the spike has been only relatively recent, it is yet to be seen whether or not the GER is an appropriate indicator to measure the *sustainable* reconstruction of higher education infrastructure in Cambodia.

Evidence suggests that “higher education suffers a more rapid decline during conflict and a more gradual recovery from it.” Progress in re-establishing secondary

and tertiary educational opportunities is historically significantly slower in comparison to primary education (Buckland 7). One of the indicators necessary to understanding the growth of education in the country is in examining 'expenditure on education as a percentage of total government expenditure'--which has fallen from 11.08 in 2000 to 9.91 in 2013 (Vuth and Dash 47). Though enrollment and GDP continue to climb, government spending on the development area has actually *decreased.* This sends signals that not only is the sector continually privatizing, but that there may be a 'kink in the hose' so to speak when it comes to the flow of funding.

Two of the biggest ministries of the government of Cambodia are the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MOEYS) and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MOLVT). Cambodia's laws on education layout a purpose for the MOEYS in that it is responsible for general, higher and vocational education, however, it does no such thing when speaking of the role of the MOLVT. The two are related in that each plays a part in financing the programs necessary for tertiary education, but there remains mismanagement and competition between the two (OECD 9).

Add to the mix the fact that most private higher education institutions (HEI) are smaller in scale and operate with limited resources only to survive on student-fees, and you've got yourself a ticking time bomb of unsustainability. HEIs continue to focus solely on enrollment rather than spending money to develop the necessary infrastructure to support programmes that offer skills required by the

economy. Nor can they diversify course offerings. Despite a greater demand for STEM careers, the government continues to allot an equal proportion of scholarships to traditionally less market-driven subjects like those in the social sciences--leaving the system equal but not equitable--and institutions to compete for students (Development Research Forum 4).

In terms of using the positive relationship between GDP and GER to measure and justify further reconstruction efforts--both of the higher education sector and of the economy overall--there remains little evidence that the growth will be sustainable should the external funding disappear.

Analysis

The Australian government has considered a joint UNESCO/UNICEF sector review to create a single university. Yet the Royal Government cannot finance reforms in higher education, and although the Australian proposition sounds appealing, there still remains little infrastructure strong enough for that capacity. As such, the Australian government intended to provide technical assistance to the MoEYS within the area of human resource management. In this way, bilateral input into the higher education institutions has too often been confined to the financing of foreign language training programs (Ayres 15)

According to most, In order to finance such reforms, accepting large loans for education like Vietnam did may not necessarily strengthen the nation's economy. But of course, both bilateral and multilateral investments like these would help

increase Cambodia's capacity for consumption and its over cash volume--simply because the government wouldn't have to pay them back (Duggan 373). However, one major player in Cambodia, The World Bank, who has made such offers, has an approach to education's role in development that is surprisingly straightforward. Yet some criticize it as "a celebration of human capital theory" (Ayres 447).

Education development, and currently the higher education sector in particular in Cambodia, is still mainly driven by external support--a strategy carry-over from the 90s (Development Research Forum 3). The National Education Seminar and the World Bank reports of 1994 argued for early progress on a Higher Education Master Plan--aiming to give higher-education development a scaffolded longitudinal action plan (Duggan 19).

Relatively soon after, The World Bank then proposed the Higher Education Quality and Capacity Improvement project meant to "produce more highly skilled university graduates by improving the access, quality, market relevance, and systemic capacity of higher education," including capacity building, competitive research grants, scholarships for the disadvantaged, and quantifiable monitoring and evaluation.

Discussion

Between 1999 and 2009, there was a tremendous increase in the number of higher education providers in the country. Due to the privatization of higher education, since the year 2000, many higher education providers have entered the

market. The number of higher education institutions has gone from 13 to 103, representing an annual compound growth rate of 28.9% (Viracheat and Dash 55). Higher education in Cambodia is heavily under funded by the government and external financiers yet virtually privatized in terms of day to day operations. (Duggan 20).

One the demand side is an unwillingness or inability to attend school, while on the supply side lies the inefficiency of the Cambodian government and education system to deliver quality educational resources (OECD 10).

Education is expected to contribute significantly to rebuilding shattered societies. Policymakers assert that it can heal the psychosocial wounds of war, solve youth unemployment, deliver decentralization and democracy, buildy peace and promote economic and social development. Evaluations routinely fail to test whether these expectations are realistic (Buckland 7). Inability of recovering states to fund other capital or recurrent expenditure: few states have access to domestic revenue sufficient to keep systems running. In short, some key development issues remain:

- **Equity:** HEIs charge fees that limit enrollments of economically disadvantaged, female, and rural students
- **Supply:** While there has been a growth in the demand for skilled labor, wages have plateaued, leaving potential ‘stranded’ between markets and education

- **Demand:** As enrollments still increase there is a growing shortage of skilled, well-qualified professors.
- **Incentive:** low returns on education give little reason to continue tertiary schooling

The Cambodian economy historically by nature has high numbers of the labor force working in informal economic activities through self-employment or as unpaid family-supported workers. There is only an 0.82 USD difference between three years of secondary schooling. In fact, Cambodia's overall education enrolment rates are the lowest in ASEAN (OECD 7).

The Cambodian experience is a prime example of the interplay between local and global demands and imperatives. Politicians rely on education to establish legitimacy and fail to balance the competing demands of both tradition and modernity (Ayres 448). There exists a continuing discrepancy between the skill-sets of the Kingdom's college graduates and the demanded competencies needed to become a viable member of what is emerging as its largely manufacturing and labor-centered market-economy.

Recommendations

When the fighting stops, systems of education must be reconstructed in a world of weakened political authority and civil administration. Society is compromised in a way that often leaves it in opposition with both the government

that once was and the one to come. Sources of wealth are unpredictable--it is then when a grand opportunity for possibilities arises.

New politicians are more likely on the move toward education reform as a way of instilling authority--something that weakened administrations are also less able to resist. The public eye is often then raring to inject resources to kick start progress (Buckland 7). And yet in terms of the Cambodian higher education sector, any organization that would truly begin to uncover the mess would have to be locally supported. In Cambodia especially, where mistrust of the government is still high, a grassroots initiative of sorts that advocates for the equitable distribution of wealth and resources in education would be a start. HEIs are centered mostly in and around the capital of Phnom Penh--leaving fringe cities and communities to fend for themselves in terms of a lot of things--education included.

The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) asserts that "there is a need for acknowledgement that creating an equitable system able to deliver quality education is an incremental and ongoing process that takes decades and will require national consensus around a wider development vision of where a country is heading" (Buckland 7). To make sure that the benefits of higher education are apparent in all levels of society, a coordinated effort of both government and any international aid stakeholder would be necessary to bridge the gaps in access that still lie between the provinces (Viracheat and Dash 61). A successful attempt at the restructuring and reconstruction of a more sustainable higher education system for the Kingdom would mean that any player in its

development would have to have close contact with the government and strict accountability for where and how the funds are not only spent but also distributed.

Yet the Cambodian economy keeps growing and is diversifying toward manufacturing. With this trend in mind, the gross enrollment ratio that only measures numbers of students attending traditional HEIs wouldn't serve as an adequate indicator for sustainable GDP growth and reconstruction. The way forward, then, is to make the economy more competitive by aligning "the demand and supply for human resources." Advanced vocational training rather than other more traditional higher education might be a better investment in that students will "study the right subjects" (Development Research Forum 5). But either way, without intentionally informed design, the higher education system will in all probability soon be deemed unsustainable. Or, if left to the private investment "wolves," the system will likely rapidly develop into a completely privatized system beyond the control of the Royal Government (Duggan 21).

Conclusion

"Education does not cause wars, nor does it end them. It does, however,... contribute to the potential for building peace, restoring countries to a positive development path and reversing the damage wrought by civil war" (Buckland 8).

The scars of Cambodia's past can heal--but only with continued focused support. Otherwise, the underlying problem threatens to go misdiagnosed; treatment it seems, for symptoms of the wrong problem. Cambodia is a place

where what has worked in the past doesn't seem to be working--at least not within the realm of higher education. Though reconstruction is of course a gradual process, potential progress continues to be hindered by infrastructure or the lack thereof. If the development goal in reconstruction is to rebuild an economy so that it is self-sustainably maintaining, among other things, a GDP comparable to that of pre-conflict, then early investment in education is paramount to sustainability (Buckland 7). Is simply focusing on GDP the proper metric? In frank conclusion: no.

Rebuilding human relations and inclusive education systems means that reconstruction is not just a simple restoration of the physical infrastructure of schools. "[People] do not lose the right to education simply because they live in the midst of conflict…" (Smith 387). Sustainable development and post-conflict reconstruction of the Cambodian higher education system will come when reforms are made so that both the metaphorical "medicine" that is international aid--and the government in charge of it--first commit to remedying the dysfunction's root cause.

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