



## *FINAL REPORT*

### RESEARCH PROJECT ON 'PROMOTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURE IN LOCAL EDUCATION' (PEOPLE) IN CAMBODIA

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The Advocacy and Policy Institute (API)

The Cambodia-ASEAN Centre for Human Rights Development (CACHRD)

Phnom Penh, December 2014

# 1. Executive Summary

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Universal education exists in Cambodia and the Government gives priority to education in its national development policies. The Government's Department of Early Childhood Education <sup>1</sup> was established in Cambodia in 2002 and today preschool education is acknowledged as essential for the early development of young Cambodians. While there have been improvements in the Government's early childhood care and development programme, the process of transferring the preschool programme budget for school operations remains a problem due to the lack of information given to schools and no clear procedures and mechanisms<sup>2</sup> for transferring the budget down to the schools. This poses a threat to the quality of services delivered by preschools. Transparency and accountability are further compromised by the lack of community involvement in local schools.

The Advocacy and Policy Institute (API) in collaboration with the Cambodia-ASEAN Centre for Human Rights Development (CACHRD) and short term consultants have implemented a research project 'Promoting the Effectiveness of Public Expenditure in Local Education' (PEOPLE) as a contribution to the project 'Building Bridges for Better Spending in Southeast Asia 2012- 2014' funded by USAID through Result for Development. The (PEOPLE) project's principle objective was to promote public accountability by increasing knowledge and understanding of budget allocation and disbursement and the use of the public budget for early childhood education in Cambodia. The research findings would serve as a clear case study to support advocacy activities for better policies on public spending on preschool education, as well as providing supporting evidence for a public access to public information law. The project was also intended to improve the effectiveness of public expenditure in early childhood education by providing evidence based research to support advocacy activities. The process involved four main activities, three of which involved research using social accountability tools:

- A.** A Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) studied the flow of public funds from the Ministry of Economy and Finance to public preschools.
- B.** Citizen Report Cards (CRCs) investigated preschool services and parent/caretaker perceptions (since the actual users were too young).
- C.** A Social audit addressed the concerns about preschool education and checked the consistency between what institutions say they will do and what they actually do.

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<sup>1</sup> Early childhood/preschool education refers to the formal system of education for children aged 3 to 5 years (IBE/UNESCO, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> 'Public Expenditure Tracking Survey, The Advocacy and Policy Institute, 2012

**D.** The fourth activity produced and published a Tool Kit which brought together valuable and relevant experiences, lessons learned and tips gained from using social accountability initiatives throughout Cambodia including the PEOPLE project.

Apart from these four main activities the PEOPLE project involved such overarching/crosscutting activities as communication, the use of modern technology and international knowledge sharing, sharing learning and training, working with communities and monitoring and evaluation.

The two main accomplishments of the project must be: The successful implementation of the three main research activities (PETS, CRCs, SA) which provided information, facts and opinions, enabling both the Cambodian Government as well as civil society to paint a broad picture to gain some understanding of the current situation of public preschool education in Cambodia. The new improvements in preschool education, which one would like to think have been influenced by project activities and research findings include: an increase in preschool budgets from 2014; all schools receiving an operations budget and schools receiving a meetings' allowance.<sup>3</sup> The Government is also considering changing the way school budget funds are transferred from physical cash exchange to banking orders.

The project also achieved activities to share and spread the skills and knowledge gained by implementing the social accountability tools by publishing and distributing three useful publications<sup>4</sup> and factsheets on implementation of the PETS, CRC survey and SA; publishing and distributing a tool kit: 'Experiences from API on Promoting Social Accountability in Cambodia - a guiding document'<sup>5</sup> and holding three particularly useful workshops: one Paññasastra University of Cambodia and Cambodian Mekong University aimed at students and the other was a concluding workshop aimed at all stakeholders. At the latter the Secretary of State for Education, Youth and Sport showed awareness of the results of the PEOPLE project and emphasised the need for quality education for Cambodia's sustainable development.

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<sup>3</sup>The Government of Cambodia, Ministry of Economy and Finance, inter-ministerial prakas on expenditure for implementing programme based budget, at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, No. 508 SHV.PrK, 20 May 2013.

<sup>4</sup> 'Public Expenditure Tracking Survey in Early Childhood Education', Cambodia, September 2013; The Advocacy and Policy Institute and the Cambodian-ASEAN Centre for Human Rights Development.

'Citizen Report Card Survey in Early Childhood Education', Cambodia November 2013; The Advocacy and Policy Institute and the Cambodian-ASEAN Centre for Human Rights Development.

'Social Audit Report in Early Childhood Education', Cambodia August 2014. The Advocacy and Policy Institute and the Cambodian-ASEAN Centre for Human Rights Development.

<sup>5</sup> 'Experiences from API on Promoting Social Accountability in Cambodia - a guiding document', The Advocacy and Policy Institute, Cambodia, 2014.

It was a hard blow to the project and a serious challenge when the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport did not provide official permission for the PET survey. The effects on data collection could have been disastrous but were minimised by project staff building on existing good relations with local and national government staff to build good will for the project. Later in the project meetings were arranged with the Director and Deputy Director of Department of Early Childhood Education to introduce the project and obtain an acknowledgment of the research findings and to use the findings and recommendations to advocate for change.

Both API and CACHRD improved their knowledge and gained many new useful skills during this project. The implementation of the project was unique because of a) the learning concepts, knowledge and skills, b) the designing of PETS, CRC and SA tools and putting them into practice and c) the technical support from the Indonesian team throughout the project: designing, implementing and writing the reports. The project brought to the fore such practical learning as the need to simplify social audits to fit knowledge and resources at the local level; the need for more communication with communities prior to using social accountability tools; the need to spend time checking and cross checking data and proof reading in order to save time and improve professional standards and the need to ensure important and influential people are formally invited to SAs to bring about better cooperation.

Using all three tools together allowed learning to be transferred from tool to tool which enabled API and CACHRD to construct a comprehensive picture of public expenditure and services in preschool education which will be used as practical evidence for advocacy action in the future. Information from the different tools often covered the same aspect of preschool education but because the information was acquired by different methods, different facts/impressions of the same item were obtained. Some information supported other information while other research findings were used to checks and counterbalance.

The sustainability of this project is without question. Not only will the publications spread the knowledge and skills to the Government and civil society, but API will use all the acquired skills and tools for its future work monitoring commune and district council budgets and for its advocacy work. Additionally now caretakers and parents have an awareness of what to expect for their children's education and will continue to push for high standards. Stakeholders' participation, during the SA in particular, means that in future planning, implementing and monitoring of preschools will continue along with support for further local improvements.

Importantly it seems that the Government are reacting to the project results and have already put forward measures to improve preschool funds and budget allocation. API

will continue its meetings with government officials<sup>6</sup> and politicians at the policy level to ensure that preschool improvement continues and the results of this project enable advocacy action for further improvements.

The research findings serve as clear factual evidence to support API's future advocacy activities for better policies on public spending on education, particularly pre-school education. The research findings also make an important contribution to support the campaign for a public access to public information law.

## 2. Introduction

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### 2.1 Background

Cambodia today is at peace after decades of civil war. It is becoming increasingly integrated into South East Asia and the rest of the world and has enjoyed macro-economic stability and economic growth for a number of years. However, despite a decade of peace, social stability and economic growth, significant gaps in human rights and living conditions continue to exist and a number of key constraints remain for long term development. Cambodian democracy, human rights, sustainable development and good governance processes are complicated and still fragile. There is limited and shrinking democratic space for citizens and civil society to hold the Government liable. Accountability mechanisms are deeply criticised and sensitive issues like corruption and human rights violation cannot be publicly debated. The institutions in place to implement democratisation are inadequate and lack the capacity to be effective, independent and impartial.<sup>3</sup> The Government, international donor community, private sector and Cambodian civil society organisations are facing multiple challenges in developing the economy, improving governance and reducing poverty: Cambodia's national average poverty rate in 2012 was 22.70 %. Approximately 4 million people live on less than \$1.25 per day and 37% of Cambodian children under the age of 5 suffer from chronic malnutrition which is a hurdle for preschool learning without the conditions noted in this report.

Universal education has been adopted into Cambodia's education policies and strategies and the Royal Government of Cambodia gives priority to education in its national development policies. The Government's Department of Early Childhood Education<sup>7</sup> was established in Cambodia in 2002 and today preschool education is acknowledged as essential for the early development of young Cambodians enabling them to 'have a good start in life'. Education, apart from being a universal human right, is also recognised as the 'key' to breaking the poverty cycle and to Cambodia's

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<sup>6</sup> API's strategic plan (2014-2018), pp.16,20,21.

<sup>7</sup> Early childhood/preschool education refers to the formal system of education for children aged 3 to 5 years (IBE/UNESCO, 2006).

development. Recently the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (possibly influenced by current research and also by the looming date for the millennium goals<sup>8</sup>), has reformed some important educational factors such as improving the school curriculum, increasing expenditure and collaborating with development partners and relevant stakeholders to increase pupil enrollment and completion rates and the overall quality of education.

Although the Government's early childhood care and development programme is improving, the process of transferring the Programme Budget for preschool operations remains a problem due to the lack of information given to schools and no clear procedures and mechanisms<sup>9</sup> for transferring the budget down to the schools: this poses a threat to the quality of services delivered by preschools. Transparency and accountability are further compromised by the lack of community involvement in local schools.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport is the leading ministry for implementing and coordinating early childhood care and education and currently receives just over 15% of the Government's annual budget. This is an improvement from 2011 when it was only 12.4% of which a mere 1% was spent on preschool education.<sup>10</sup> The lack of investment in preschool education is reflected in the low school enrolment rate which although increasing in recent years still lags behind neighbouring countries<sup>11</sup>.

The early education sector has received an increased amount of public revenue, though this does not appear to have brought the corresponding positive changes to preschool education: the link between public spending in Cambodia on early childhood education and educational outcomes is very tenuous. Without a law on public access to public information people are 'in the dark': they have no idea what funds are available, what funds and quality services they should expect or if the lack of school budget is the result of its inefficient use and/or failure in the disbursement of the allocated funds.

An abundance of academic and empirical research shows that better public expenditure ensures effective and efficient delivery of quality public services to the benefit of recipients. An assortment of research has identified weaknesses in Cambodia's public expenditure management system including, but not limited to, difficulties in channeling funds down to service providers due to problems of rigidities and delays and uncertainties created by an over centralised budget system. Research indicates a lack of clarity over allocation and timely disbursement facing government programme based

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<sup>8</sup> The Royal Government of Cambodia's 'A Progress Report 2013, Achieving Cambodia's Millennium Development Goals' <http://www.mop.gov.kh/Home/CMDGs/tabid/156/Default.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> The Advocacy and Policy Institute, 'Public Expenditure Tracking Survey', 2012.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCOUIS, 2013

<sup>11</sup> The gross enrolment rate in pre-primary school in Cambodia was 13% in 2011, considerably lower than the regional (South East Asia) average of 62% (UNESCO-UIS, 2013).

budgets<sup>12</sup>. This mismanagement is intensified by inadequate social accountability mechanisms and minimum involvement and knowledge of stakeholders about programme based budgets.<sup>13</sup>.

The Advocacy and Policy Institute (API) in collaboration with the Cambodia-ASEAN Centre for Human Rights Development (CACHRD) and short term consultants decided to implement a project 'Promoting the Effectiveness of Public Expenditure in Local Education' (PEOPLE) as a contribution to the project 'Building Bridges for Better Spending in Southeast Asia 2012- 2014' funded by USAID through Result for Development. API greatly appreciates the financial support and project co-lead of Bandung Institute of Government Studies and the project technical lead PerkumpulanINISIATIF for technical assistance to the research entity.

API works to promote evidence based advocacy actions in partnership with issue based organisations and networks. It promotes pro-poor policy development and dialogue, access to public information and information disclosure and advocacy development.

CACHRD is a non profit and non government organisation responding to the needs for training and research in human rights in Cambodia.

The PEOPLE project's research was aimed at providing new knowledge and understanding about public budget allocation and disbursement and use for early childhood and nonformal education in Cambodia. The research findings serve as a clear case study to support advocacy activities for better policies on public spending on education, particularly in preschool education, as well as providing supporting evidence for a public access to public information law.

Access to public information, especially associated with the public budget and expenditure at all levels of public institutions is a critical and sensitive issue in Cambodia. The PEOPLE research findings provide evidence based information for use in policy advocacy and actions.

## **2.2 Summary of project objectives**

**The principle objective of the PEOPLE project** was to promote public accountability by increasing knowledge and understanding of budget allocation and disbursement and the use of the public budget for early childhood education in Cambodia. The project was intended to improve the effectiveness of public expenditure in early childhood education by providing evidence based research to support advocacy activities.

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<sup>12</sup> NGO Forum (2009)

<sup>13</sup> WB Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (WB, 2005), looked at social accountability mechanisms and found that involvement and knowledge of stakeholders about programme budgets were inadequate.