

# THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION IN CAMBODIA

## Hybrid Spaces of the “Public” and “Private”

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### Introduction

In September 2014 at the Research Development Forum held in Phnom Penh, Heng Sour, a spokesman for the Cambodian Ministry of Labor encouraged private sector actors to provide educational services in the Kingdom:

I agree that the government must take responsibility to produce skilled workers . . . but it is also [in] the interest of the private sector to acknowledge that if they invest a dollar in a skilled worker or in productivity improvement, the return on their investment is higher. [. . .] So why does the government sector still need to stick to the classic principle that lets government alone do [this]?

*(quoted in Robertson 2014)*

Heng Sour’s rhetorical question about the efficacy of schooling funded, managed, and provided by the government rather than, or in partnership with, the private sector is neither new in the Cambodian context (for example, Bray 1999) nor novel worldwide (for example, Macpherson *et al.* 2014). There has been a global movement for governments to deconcentrate the provision and management of public schooling at least since the 1980s (Zajda 2006).

The statement reiterates the age-old, yet disputed, connection between education and “skilled workers.” It values education based on human capital theory (Schultz 1961; Psacharopoulos 1973). This neoclassical economic theory, which underpins neoliberal subjectivity (Read 2009), argues that future earnings of individuals are correlated to their educational attainment and that, in the aggregate, the highest rate of return for a society in terms of economic growth is the development of primary education followed by secondary education. Education is a means to an economic end, not an end itself.

Notwithstanding its critiques (for example, Bowles and Gintis 1975), human capital theory arrived in Cambodia in the early 1990s through the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and spread through civil society organizations (CSOs) and school-based management techniques advocated by development partners (UNESCO, the World Bank, and so on). This occurred because the institutional logic of UN peace-building operations

evolved from demilitarization and democratization towards socio-economic development at the same historical moment when Cambodia's civil conflict from the 1970s was drawing to a conclusion. UNTAC was thus "influenced largely by the realization that, in order for peace to take root, the military aspects of peacekeeping have to be complemented by effective programmes of humanitarian assistance and sustainable development" (Smoljan 2010, 241). CSOs began to proliferate with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1992 and have since provided many social services throughout the country (Hughes 2009). Indeed, in 2011 "CSOs spent an estimated US\$550 million in the social sector, employed approximately 52,650 Cambodians and benefitted between 2.8 and 4.5 million Cambodians directly" (Bandyopadhyay and Khus 2013, 668). International aid accounted for half of Cambodia's annual budget in the 2000s (Springer 2011, 2561), and 32 percent of the total budget in education in 2013 (MoEYS 2014a).

Despite Cambodia's fast economic growth rate over the past decade, the contemporary education system in Cambodia lags behind neighboring countries across multiple indicators. Cambodia ranks 136 out of 187 countries on the 2013 Human Development Index (HDI), which includes measures such as life expectancy, years of schooling, and per capita income (UNDP 2014). Although Cambodia does slightly better than Lao PDR (rank 139) and Myanmar (rank 150) in the HDI rankings, other school indicators indicate a wider gap. Cambodian public expenditures on education averaged 2.6 percent of GDP between 2006 and 2012, which was lower than both the 2012 East Asian average (3.8 percent) as well as global average (4.8 percent; Edwards 2012, 14). The monthly income of teachers as a percentage of monthly income of other professionals in 2011 was also lower in Cambodia (60 percent) compared to Thailand (144 percent) and Vietnam (88 percent; World Bank 2014, 3). Additionally, student-teacher ratios in school are higher in Cambodia compared to neighboring countries: whereas there were 46 students for every one primary teacher in Cambodia, Lao PDR had 26 students, Thailand had 16 students, and Vietnam had 19 students for every one teacher (World Bank online data, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.ENRL.TC.ZS>).

Since UNTAC, private actors (international donors, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and multinational development institutions) have provided schooling in partnership with the government. The statement by Heng Sour is therefore nothing new to a degree. It does, however, signal a new direction in educational privatization. Whereas in the early 1990s human capital developed through CSOs and multinational development partners because the government was believed not to have the necessary capacity post-Khmer Rouge (Ayres 2000), now it appears government policy will develop human capital through public-private partnerships.

Heng Sour's statement is a notable change in the direction and possible pace of educational privatization in the country. It is therefore worthwhile to take stock of the types of privatization in the education system in order to understand the possible future directions of for-profit and/or non-profit privatization advocated by the Phnom Penh government.

This chapter details the various aspects of privatization in education since the 2000s by drawing on a range of secondary data and my own ongoing research projects. Expanding the work of Walford (1991; 2011), privatization is categorized into three different ongoing processes in relation to the public: willful, forced, and reluctant privatization of public spaces. By looking across a broad spectrum of education activities, from higher education to elite private schools, to shadow education, this chapter gives an overview of the contemporary trends in the provision, funding, and outputs of education. The chapter is organized around the three types of privatization, and followed by a conclusion.

## Reluctant privatization

Reluctant privatization emerges when certain communities feel government services are not adequate. In these cases, community members pay for private services that better meet their needs, however defined. This can occur because the government does not provide services, which Tooley and Dixon (2006) labeled "de facto privatization" in the case of some Indian and sub-Saharan African communities, or because a community disagrees with the government on ideological or religious grounds, which was the focus of Walford's (1991) study on certain Christian communities in England. Walford (2011, 410) defined reluctant privatization this way: "It is simply that the alternatives available in the state-maintained sector did not meet the parents' requirements and local people stepped in to provide schools more in line with these requirements." The beginning of reluctant privatization in contemporary Cambodia dates from the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge. After decades of armed conflict, which resulted in the death or migration of an estimated 80 percent of teachers by 1979 and a disproportionate youth demographic, "thousands of schools arose throughout the country, often built by members of the community served by the facility" (Clayton 2000, 113). Today, reluctant privatization takes both forms: inadequate supply by the government causes households to seek out private alternatives and certain communities feel government schools do not provide the type of education demanded. Reluctant privatization manifests in two ways: through private tutoring and NGO schools.

## Reluctant private tutoring

Private tutoring is generally called *rien kuo* (Brehm et al. 2012). There are three types of *rien kuo* that comprise reluctant privatization. The first type is regular private tutoring (*rien kuo thoeumda*), or fee-based tutoring classes taught by mainstream schoolteachers. *Rien kuo* is "an extension of the regular curriculum offered by the same teachers in the same large group setting, but with a fee attached" (Nguon 2012, 220–221). These teachers—*cum*—tutors conduct private tutoring lessons with their own students after school hours either in school buildings or in their home. The focus of these extra classes is the national curriculum and has been found to cause and exacerbate socio-economic inequality (Brehm et al. 2012). A less common form of *rien kuo* is special private tutoring (*rien kuo pises*), whereby individual or small group classes are taught by a tutor who may happen to be (but not necessarily) a student's mainstream school teacher. These classes cost much more than regular private tutoring classes (for one subject, approximately US\$25 instead of US\$5 per student per month). Some students also have the option of attending and paying for private tutoring during holidays (*rien kuo pel vissmakka*), where classes are conducted in school or at a teacher's home and are held by a student's current or future teacher. *Rien kuo* fills the gap felt by families (and some teachers) who perceive that government schooling is inadequate for a proper education. The reasons for such a feeling mainly have to do with structural issues, such as limited teaching time, crowded classrooms, and low teacher salary. One teacher quoted in Brehm et al.'s (2012, 25) study on private tutoring captured this reluctance to use private tutoring as a way to complement government school:

We rush to keep up with the curriculum. [During official school hours], we teach only theory and give only a few examples. If students go to private tutoring, they can practice [at the board] because there are fewer students who go . . . We cannot get all students to practice [at the board] in government school. It requires a lot of time.

The practice of *rien kuo* indicates a lack of government funding in education. As the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) increases or decreases annual expenditures on education, household expenditures on *rien kuo* make up the difference. Figure 23.1 provides education recurrent expenditures by the government between 2000 and 2014. For some of the years, there are data for actual compared to budgeted expenditures. The expenditures are given as a percentage of total government expenditures for the year. This figure does not include non-recurrent expenditures like school buildings or non-government expenditures like household costs.

Figure 23.1 shows that government funding steadily increased from 2000 until 2008, at which point a decrease occurred through 2013 (looking at actual expenditures). In 2014, education expenditures again increased. Although this data cannot be compared to household expenditures on private tutoring because such studies do not exist across the same period, it is possible to put government expenditures in the context of the larger political economy and compare them to private tutoring attendance, which has been irregularly recorded by researchers since 1998.

One of the major reasons for a decrease in educational expenditures in 2008 had to do with the combined effect of the global food and financial crises of 2007–2008. Food prices rose in the early 2000s, peaking in 2007–2008 (Johnston *et al.* 2010; Sombilla *et al.* 2011). Rice in Cambodia doubled in price between 2007 and 2008 (UN n.d.). As food prices increased, the household effect was devastating, particularly on urban families (and teachers) who did not own farmland and therefore had to spend more money on food. Combined with this, the appreciation of the US dollar because of the global financial crisis caused high interest rates in Cambodia, which uses its currency, the riel, and the US dollar. The interest rate in Cambodia, as measured by the consumer price index, jumped from 5.9 in 2007 to 19.7 in 2008 (CIA World Factbook 2011). High interest rates slow the economy, partially causing the government to spend less on social services. This was the case in education, when actual expenditures were less than budgeted (see 2007 to 2009 in Figure 23.1). Households likely had to fill the gap in educational expenditures during these precarious economic times.

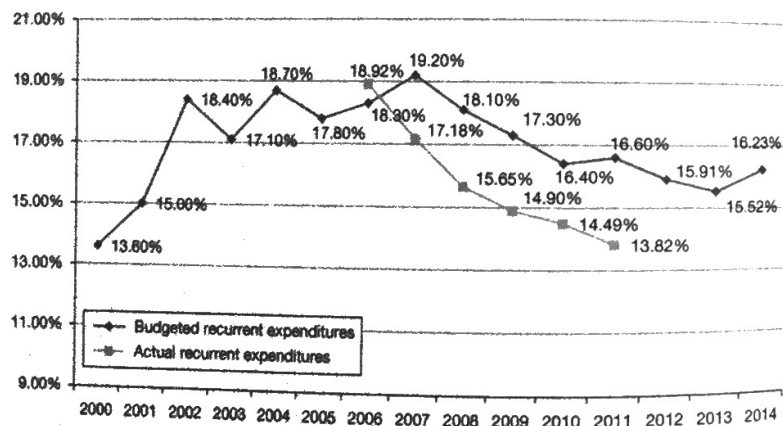


Figure 23.1 Government education recurrent expenditures, budgeted versus actual (2000–2014)

Sources: MoEYS (2014a, 4); Brehm *et al.* (2012, 13).

This context helps explain the attendance rates in private tutoring recorded by various researchers since 1998, which have generally increased over time. The median participation rate in primary school across three studies reveals a clear upward trend. In Bray (1999), the median rate of private tutoring participation was 36.5 percent; in Bray and Bunly (2005), the median rate was 52.5 percent; and in Dawson (2009) the median rate was 71 percent. This trend stopped in a study completed in 2012. Brehm *et al.* (2012) found that 41 percent of grade 6 students attended private tutoring, which signaled a decrease from previous studies.

Notwithstanding the methodological dissimilarities across the studies, the differences observed in Dawson (2009) and Brehm *et al.* (2012) coincided with a decrease in actual government expenditures in education in 2008 (Figure 23.1). The decrease in expenditures likely had shocked the education system and perhaps had encouraged parents to seek out alternative pathways to maintain levels of educational service provision that they had become accustomed to in the early 2000s.

In terms of household expenditures on education, Bray and Bunly (2005, 67) found that the gap between household expenditures and government expenditures narrowed between 1998 and 2004. Whereas in 1998, households financed nearly 80 percent of total education costs per student, in 2004 that number had fallen below 60 percent. This inversely mirrors the increase in government recurrent expenditures over the same time. There are no similar studies since 2004, so it is impossible to know if the balance between household and government financing has widened or narrowed since the 2007–2008 global food and financial crises.

Although no study has compiled and compared the real costs to education across time, snapshots of particular moments highlight the different ways households finance schooling beyond tutoring. It has been found that households pay school fees and tuition, finance textbooks, supplies and transportation, and provide allowances to children, mostly used for buying snacks at school. These costs are found at all levels of schooling, from preschool to upper secondary school (grades 10–12). The Cambodian Socio-Economic Survey (2014) estimated that households in 2014 would pay US\$141.60 per student in preschool, US\$87.50 per student in primary school, US\$202.90 per student in lower secondary school, and US\$324.00 per student in upper secondary school. By contrast, the government spent US\$95 per child across all levels of schooling in 2013 (MoEYS 2014a). It is clear that households still contribute a large share of educational expenses.

### Reluctant NGO schools

Schooling that began in the community has evolved into an elaborate web of schools operated by NGOs. These schools hire their own teachers, have their own customs and norms, and build their own school buildings apart from the public school system. These schools are typically—but not always—fee-free and provide lessons supplementary to mainstream public schooling. Curricula often focus on languages (for example, English, Chinese, and so on), computer, or business skills.

NGO schools allow households to decide in which educational spaces to send their children in addition to, or instead of, the public school system. In this way NGO schools offer parents educational choices of content that are not (or are inadequately) taught in public schools. They are considered private because they are managed, funded, and serviced without government regulation, subsidies, or teachers. Sometimes “volunteer tourism” (Wearing 2001; Sin 2010) is used to fund and staff NGO schools. This is the practice where international tourists not only sightsee while traveling abroad, but also spend time volunteering. NGOs pursue volunteer tourism as a strategy in hopes of building their international donor networks to fund their operations.

### Willful privatization

Willful privatization is perhaps the largest and most diverse category of privatization. It can occur in multiple directions. Households can choose to exit the public school system entirely and send their children to private schools that offer a unique curriculum. This will typically depend on household money available to spend on education, and happens mostly in the tertiary education sector. Willful privatization also occurs at the discretion of the government. The government at times advocates and creates policies mandating privatization inside public schools. This occurs mainly in the form of school-based management regulations and the encouragement of NGOs to work inside (rather than outside, as in the case above) public schools. Theoretically, Ball and Youdell (2008, 13) differentiated "willful privatization" into two types: exogenous and endogenous privatization. The former is when the private sector moves into the public sector and the latter is when the public sector behaves more like the private sector.

### Willful private schools

There are numerous private schools in Cambodia. They range from medium-fee (approximately US\$100 per month) to elite private schools (with fees as high as US\$20,000 per year). These schools offer a complete educational experience outside the public school system and do not rely on government support. On average, private school enrollment accounts for 8 percent of total student enrollment across all levels (see Table 23.1). Broken down by level, data reveal a large range: over 60 percent in higher education but less than 3 percent in lower secondary school (MoEYS 2014a).

With private schools come private industries of supplementary tutoring. This type of tutoring is a growing phenomenon in city centers and is called *nen kuo nov sala akehoan* (private tutoring at private school). This type of *nen kuo* involves tutoring classes of various sorts, held by non-mainstream schoolteachers outside public school buildings and for some cost. It is common to find advertisements for these enterprises in urban areas.

Although low in numbers, elite private schools are becoming popular among the wealthy in Cambodia. The most famous is the International School of Phnom Penh, which offers the International Baccalaureate curriculum. The school is private and charges user fees. The Prime Minister's grandchildren attend this school, as do other children from wealthy Cambodian and expatriate families. A new trend in elite schools is the management by large for-profit companies. In July 2014, Nord Angelia Education Incorporated bought Northbridge International School. Nord Angelia Education is a publicly traded education company listed on the London Stock Exchange. Nord Angelia operates or owns 27 schools around the world, with 17,000 students. Tuition fees are over US\$10,000 (Nasdaq online). The acquisition of Northbridge by Nord is

Table 23.1 Public versus private schools, 2013

Level of schooling	Public schools	Private schools	Other schools	Total schools	Percent private
Preschool	3,184	403	2,220	5,807	6.94
Primary	6,993	243	0	73,236	3.36
Lower secondary	1,244	35	0	1,279	2.74
Upper secondary	444	87	0	531	16.38
Higher education	39	66	0	105	62.86

Source: MoEYS (2014a).

indicative of Phnom Penh's rising upper class. With tuition cost ranging from US\$12,000 to US\$14,000 in primary school, Northbridge costs five times the GDP per capita, which was US\$2,395 in purchasing power parity adjusted dollars in 2013. This means that the school is out of reach for the vast majority of Cambodians.

### Willful privatization in higher education

Privatization of higher education first appeared in 1997, when public universities were given semi-autonomous status and allowed private capital in university management services (Chamnanand and Ford 2004). Norton University was the first private university (Chealy 2009). As of 2013, over 60 percent of higher education institutions in Cambodia were privately operated and controlled (Table 23.1). Enrollment in private higher education institutions quadrupled from 41,000 students in 2003 to 160,000 students in 2013 (World Bank 2012). The World Bank (2012, 2) found that there has also been a concentration of majors:

Cambodia's institutions of higher education supply a relatively large amount of graduates in accounting, finance, and management (one-half of all bachelor students in 2009/10), compared to civil engineering (1.5 percent of students), and science and technology (0.1 percent of students). Despite agriculture and off-farm rural activities being Cambodia's main industries in need of improvement, only 2.3 percent of students study related disciplines.

The privatization of higher education has also occurred through the introduction of user fees in public universities. Williams *et al.* (2012, 19) found that "over the past 15 years there has been a growth in the number of fee-paying students in public institutions alongside regular scholarships students – over 95 percent of that growth has been among private or fee-paying students." This finding highlights a process of endogenous privatization initiated by public institutions.

As a result of the fast pace of privatization in higher education, the Minister of Education, Hang Chuon Naron, halted the approval of new private universities in 2014. This indicates that the government recognizes the difficulty of allowing private actors to proliferate in an unregulated market. It will be interesting to see if such lessons guide policy at other levels of education.

### Willful privatization from private actors

A legacy of reluctant privatization brought on by limited government capacity is the reliance on private actors to provide resources. This happens particularly in the NGO sector that first appeared in the early 1990s and has since grown into a mature sector with its own interests and logics. Today it is part of willful privatization because both the government and the NGOs deem private support necessary, even though government capacity has improved.

Bray (1999, 26–27) found that assistance to schools from NGOs expanded from US\$1 million in 1992 to US\$36 million in 1996. Initially, NGOs built school buildings and provided needed materials to schools such as textbooks and furniture. Other NGOs took on the role of capacity development. These NGOs did not provide direct material assistance to schools but rather provided training to teachers, principals, and community members. Today, NGOs are found in many public schools and have been encouraged to expand by the government.

In 2014, Hang Chuon Naron captured the government's approval of willful privatization at the opening of a new upper secondary school built and managed by an international NGO. The Minister of Education commended the NGO, which will remain anonymous, for its work inside public schools:



[This NGO] is the standard of education in Cambodia. All the things we have on our education roadmap are implemented in [this NGO's] schools. I am humbled by what [this NGO's] team has accomplished. We are designating [the NGO's] schools as the model schools for all Cambodia. We need to learn from what has been done here and spread the best practices across the country.

This NGO spent over US\$1.2 million dollars in 2013. It works in schools that serve 6,400 students across all levels. This equates to US\$188 spent per student in 2013. MoEYS, by contrast, serves over 29 million students and spent approximately US\$280 million for the 2012–2013 school year. This equates to US\$95 per student. In order for MoEYS to “spread the best practices” learned from this NGO “across the country” it would effectively mean a doubling of the national education budget. That would require the national government to allocate approximately 30 percent of the 2013 budget to education. Such an allocation has never occurred, coming closest during the Sihanouk era, when over 20 percent of the annual budget was allocated to education (Dy and Ninomiya 2003).

Private actors have political intentions that often interconnect with school financing. It is common practice for public school buildings to be built by wealthy politicians or business people who are looking for favors from the ruling party (Hughes 2006). Such schools are built and then named after a leading politician. In 2013, 3,705 school buildings were built “by the precious assistance from” Prime Minister Hun Sen (MoEYS 2014b). These schools were not funded by public funds and likely not funded by Hun Sen himself. Instead, Cambodian business tycoons (*Olenha*) likely made private contributions to construct schools in hopes of gaining political favor. For instance, one construction company, Samnang Khmeng Wat, owned by Neak Oknha Mong Reththy, “built hundreds of schools and pagodas on request by and in the name of Hun Sen” (Verver and Dahles 2014, 10).

### **School-based management as willful privatization**

School-based management is the transfer of decision-making and authority over school governance from the national government to the school level (World Bank 2007). Local committees, comprising a group of parents, teachers, and school administrators, are tasked with managing schools. The committees are believed to meet the needs of the local community better than the national government. In Cambodia, school-based management takes the form of School Support Committees (SSCs) and is believed to “expand access to education and improve its quality” (Shoraku 2008, 2). In particular, SSCs are supposed to encourage school enrollment, raise money, and act as a bridge between community and school.

School-based management is considered willful privatization because the government dictates it under the assumption that it produces positive outcomes. It is, in effect, endogenous privatization because public institutions begin to operate more like private institutions. School-based management policies have been implemented worldwide and have been criticized for creating a “community” of individual consumers” rather than a society of educated persons (Robertson 1999, 293).

### **Forced privatization**

Forced privatization occurs when individual actors create a situation where they can profit from public service provision by imposing a fee or rent where there should not be one. This type of privatization is similar to educational corruption, where people in positions of power abuse

their role in order to profit financially in systems of limited accountability (Bray 2003). In Cambodia, forced privatization manifests in two ways: through private tutoring and examinations.

### **Forced private tutoring**

Some teachers have been known to artificially create demand for private tutoring lessons as a way to supplement their salaries. Dawson (2009) labeled these instances “tricks,” because there are myriad ways for teachers to encourage students to attend extra classes, usually under the veiled threat of lower grades.

A 17-year-old student quoted in the *Phnom Penh Post* captured the practice of forced private tutoring: “Because we are too poor to pay for extra lessons, we did not do well” (Channyda 2014a). This student implied that she was punished with lower grades because she did not attend private tutoring. Since teachers tutor their own students and also grade the monthly and semester public school exams, they have undue power over students’ scores.

### **Forced to pay examination fees**

Fees during examinations are a common feature of the Cambodian education system. Students typically have to pay for the paper on which the examination is written/typed. Other fees include bribes paid to proctors that allow students to work in groups or receive individual help from the proctor during the examination. In addition, many students buy answer guides from local photocopy centers days or weeks before the examination. Some of the guides are smuggled into the examination room.

Most students who take national examinations at the conclusion of grade 9 and 12 understand that a certain amount of money is required to pass. Last year an estimated half million US dollars was spent on various bribes and cheat-sheets by students (Channyda 2014b). When forced privatization goes unchecked, the pass rate is high (*Phnom Penh Post* 1994). When rules are implemented outlawing forced privatization, the pass rate plummets. In 1998, a reported 79 percent of students passed the grade 12 examination (UNESCO 2008). In 2002, after anti-cheating reforms were implemented, the pass rate fell to 40 percent (Sine 2002). Between 2002 and 2013, after the anti-cheating reforms were relaxed, the pass rate reached between 80 and 90 percent (Shelton 2007; Dara and Kaner 2013). Another reform effort in 2014 resulted in a similar plummet of the pass rate in 2002. After being allowed two attempts to take the national grade 12 examinations, only 40 percent of students passed (Barron and Channyda 2014).

### **Conclusion**

The contemporary landscape of Cambodian education is a collage of public and private spaces. Privatization began in the early 1990s out of necessity post conflict. The efforts by citizens to educate their children through locally organized schools converged with the neoliberal logic of schooling as a means to employment. Eventually human capital theory became a common refrain from policymakers to students and today underpins the direction of development outlined by MoEYS. This sentiment was captured by Heng Sour’s statement at the beginning of this chapter and deserves greater scrutiny.

Taking stock of the various types and manifestations of privatization, it appears there is an overwhelming amount of educational choice in the Kingdom. Students can attend multiple forms of private tutoring, go to public school or a variety of private schools, receive scholarships from NGOs, attend NGO schools to learn additional content, and pay different amounts of

money during the examination process. The amount of choice depends on location and wealth, and the quality of each space remains unknown.

A cacophony of choice is a neoliberal ideal; the "perfect" educational environment unencumbered by government intervention. However, the contemporary landscape of Cambodia suggests that too much choice in an unregulated market can cause social injustice. The different spaces of education outlined in this chapter are not available to every child, and children from the elite classes receive a far different educational experience than those from working classes.

The insights from this chapter point to areas in need of further research. First, it is important to understand how and to what effect parents can effectively navigate a diverse educational landscape. Having full knowledge of each educational space is likely differentiated along socio-economic lines and could contribute to divisions in society. Second, the academic impact of educational privatization is unknown. Before the Phnom Penh government advances a pro-privatization educational agenda, it is important it conducts a cost-benefit analysis of currently existing practices of privatization throughout the country. Third, academic researchers should challenge the assumed connection between education and human capital development. Looking at how education can be an end in itself instead of a means to employment could produce different directions in education policy.

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