

Basic Education Reforms in Cambodia and Bangladesh: Expansion of Access and Improvement of Quality

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the Southeast Asian and South Asian countries have been undertaking various education reforms to achieve the goals of Education for All (EFA). Through analyzing the challenges facing education reforms in developing countries this paper attempts to reveal how countries are trying to realize both the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of basic education. To this end, the paper first proposes an analytical perspective that allows us to analyze the different elements relating to the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of education in developing countries. Then, Cambodia and Bangladesh respectively will be taken as cases, and with reference to the analytical perspective, an overview is made of the basic education (mainly both primary and secondary cycles) of these countries, followed by a comparative analysis. By so doing, this paper investigates the challenges generally faced not only by these two countries but also by other developing countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia when they undertake basic education reforms. The paper draws attention to the system and policy of education and also to what is taught at schools, taking a comprehensive look at how the issue of quality is positioned in the education reforms of Southeast Asian and South Asian countries.

Introduction

Globalization is about to unite all countries, it appears, with standardization and homogenization spreading in various sectors throughout the world. At the same time, there are moves to reappraise the importance of individuality and distinctiveness inherent in each society. In this context, many countries seem to be finding it necessary to reconfirm their identity as a “nation state”, and the establishment of national policy ownership is becoming an urgent concern. Recently, in the countries of Southeast Asia and South Asia, the promotion of policy ownership and governance can be observed in various sectors. Education is no exception. The education reforms undertaken in Southeast Asia and South Asia in the 1990s and later signify not only a response to the common challenges of diffusing basic education but also a greater awareness of how best to promote their own individual national education.

Many countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia are still in the process of economic and social

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development. In these countries, a large number of people still lack the opportunity to receive adequate education. One major priority of education reform in such developing countries is to diffuse basic education by raising the enrolment rates at primary and secondary levels. Also recognized as an important task by many countries is the nurturing through education of those citizens who can contribute to national stability and integration. Moreover, those educated citizens can become part of an active labor force and possibly contribute to reducing poverty in their society through their economic as well as political and social activities.

The goals of Education for All (EFA) set by the international community at the World Conference on Education for All (held in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990) and the World Education Forum (held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000) aim at the promotion of basic education across the world and to guarantee everybody access to appropriate “basic education of good quality.” The quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of basic education are serious challenges confronting developing countries in particular, but the achievement of these EFA targets are widely recognized as the responsibility of not only the governments of developing countries but of the international community as a whole.¹

This paper discusses how the Southeast Asian and South Asian countries have been undertaking various education reforms to achieve the EFA goals. Through analyzing the challenges facing education reforms in developing countries this paper attempts to reveal how countries are trying to realize both the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of basic education. To this end, this paper first proposes an analytical perspective on the education reforms in developing countries, a perspective that allows us to analyze the different elements relating to the quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of education. Then, Cambodia and Bangladesh respectively will be taken as cases, and with reference to the analytical perspective, an overview is made of the basic education (mainly both primary and secondary cycles) of these countries, followed by a comparative analysis. By so doing, this paper investigates the challenges generally faced not only by these two countries but also by other developing countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia when they undertake basic education reforms. This paper draws attention to the system and policy of education and also to what is taught at schools, taking a comprehensive look at how the issue of quality is positioned in the education reforms of Southeast Asian and South Asian countries.

1. Improving the Quality of Education in Developing Countries

The international community as a whole has been engaged for many years in attempts to diffuse education in developing countries, chiefly the former colonies and quasi-colonies that gained independence after World War II, to create a foundation for political, economic and social independence. In the 1960s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) led the adoption of education plans by region,² and in 1990 and 2000, international targets

were set for the promotion of basic education based on the aforesaid EFA targets.

The main thrust of the EFA goals can be condensed into the following four points: (1) guarantee of access to basic education, (2) elimination of gender disparity, (3) qualitative improvement of teaching and learning, and (4) development of life skills. What is important is to diffuse basic education as an all-embracing program where all targets mutually correlate rather than being pursued separately. Among the targets thought to be especially difficult is that of improving the quality of education in all countries, the reason being that it is extremely difficult to define “quality” of education in the first place.

To illustrate this, the declaration and the framework for action adopted by the World Conference on Education for All aimed to provide “universal access to, and completion of, primary education (or whatever higher level of education is considered ‘basic’) by the year 2000” (UNESCO 1990). Besides, it has been pointed out that the standard of education is generally low in many developing countries, and therefore, merely expanding access alone is insufficient as an improvement in education per se. Thus the aim is to promote “improvements in learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort ... attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement” and “increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development” (UNESCO 1990). To this end, it is vital to ensure “expansion of provision of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults” (UNESCO 1990). These aims are supported by the principle of EFA goals that regards the guarantee of access to such education of good quality as a basic human right of all people.

The World Education Forum of 2000 reviewed the EFA goal agreed at Jomtien in 1990. While basically still upholding the Jomtien targets, several of the issues were examined further and a new set of EFA goals were adopted. In comparison to the 1990 targets, it is notable that a clear reference was made to the quality of education, reflecting the rise in international interest in this regard. The new EFA goals agreed at Dakar pledge to ensure “that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality” and stress the necessity of “improving all aspects of the quality of education” (UNESCO 2000). Also, what the Jomtien goals referred to simply as “essential skills” was clarified by the goal that aims to ensure “equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes” (UNESCO 2000). Such clarification of what the skills entail is vital to improving the quality of education. That is to say, by subdividing quality of education into the learning of skills and issues relating to qualitative improvement of the content of education and the educational environment for the acquisition of these skills, the relevant concepts became better organized. The EFA goals set at Dakar furthermore stress gender equality in educational opportunities. They state emphatically that elimination of the gender gap is necessary in both access and quality of education.

As these EFA goals demonstrate, the purpose of basic education reforms in many developing countries is designed to improve the current situation with regard to the four areas of access, equity, quality, and efficiency. In short, in addition to guaranteeing equitable access to basic education to all people, reforms must ensure that the quality and efficiency of education is high. In particular, due to recent improvements in access achieved in many countries, more attention is being focused on improving the quality of education. In line with such a background, international organizations are attempting to define components of quality of education. For example, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) classifies aspects of quality of education into the following five areas: (1) learners, (2) environments, (3) content, (4) processes, and (5) outcomes (UNICEF 2000). That is to say, in order to deliver education of good quality, it is important that, first, the learners are ready to learn, being in good health, highly motivated and enjoying the support of family and community. Then a safe and pleasant environment that ensures considerations toward gender must be available in school facilities.

With regard to the content of education, it is essential to have curriculum and teaching materials appropriate for the acquisition of basic skills (i.e., literacy and numeracy) and knowledge (e.g., gender, health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS prevention, human rights, peace, etc.) required for the daily lives of learners. Also, fully trained teachers who have properly learned child-centered teaching methods and appropriate classroom management are necessary to promote learning and to diminish the gaps between learners. Finally, it is desirable that the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired by the learners should be in line with the nation's educational goals and that the learners should put to use what they have learned in active social participation.

Education reforms have to create a new education system that would take heed of the political, cultural and economic contexts of each country to make realization of the above possible. This means that an investigation of the qualitative improvement of education involves analysis from two different levels, that of (1) the learners and of (2) the learning system. Bearing this in mind, this paper divides the issue of the quality of education into three: educational environment (e.g., school buildings, infrastructure such as water and roads), education system (e.g., educational administration, pre-service and in-service teacher training) and educational content (e.g., curriculum, textbooks and teaching materials, teaching methods).

2. The State of Education in Southeast Asia and South Asia

As Table 1 shows, the state of education in these countries of Southeast Asia and South Asia is varied.

Although Vietnam is an exception, the table shows that the enrolment rate and internal efficiency of primary education in these countries basically correspond to the size of their economies. This implies that the diffusion of basic education is linked with national economic growth and ultimately contributes to reduce poverty in the society.

This paper takes up primary education as an illustration but a similar trend is seen in secondary and higher education. That is, even with the exclusion of Singapore, a country which has an outstandingly powerful economy in the region, there is still a clear disparity between countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines which have over 75% enrolment rate in secondary education and roughly 30% in higher education, and countries such as Cambodia and Lao PDR which have 30 to 40% at secondary level and well below 10% at tertiary level.

Compared to Southeast Asia, the lack of educational diffusion in South Asia is clearly highlighted. In South Asian countries, economic, social and cultural aspects tended to put a strong brake on educational opportunities for girls, but more recently, the gender gap has been closing in some countries. Against this background, the survival rate to the final year of primary school is higher for girls than for boys. This is indicative of the difference in attitudes towards learning between the sexes, and is worth noting.

An overview of Southeast Asian and South Asian countries reveals the following inter-regional disparities. There is a huge gap between the two groups of (1) the original 1967 signatories to ASEAN (i.e., Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) and (2) the other countries that joined ASEAN after the 1990s, (i.e., Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar (Burma) and Vietnam). The countries that belong to the first group have basically recovered from the effects of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and have achieved a significant level of economic development. Despite facing a variety of uncertainties, politically and socially, they are relatively stable. By contrast, the countries in the second group, remarkable though they may be in regard to their recent economic growth, still require a vast amount of aid from donor countries and international agencies. Politically and socially, they remain unstable. Such being the social background, education poses different challenges to these two groups.

These intra-regional disparities are not as great in South Asia if compared to Southeast Asia. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh are undergoing varying degrees of economic growth despite the many problems they face. Sri Lanka is delivering a certain level of economic success in the face of civil strife; in Bhutan where King Wangchuck is upholding the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), a stable though closed society is operating; Nepal has fallen into a mire of political and economic instabilities. All the countries, within different political, economic and social environments, consider progress in education to be an important part of their social development.

Dynamic diversity is evident in all countries of Southeast Asia and South Asia. Nevertheless, owing to the author's limited capacity, a discussion of all the countries of the two regions is not possible. Therefore, this paper focuses on Cambodia and Bangladesh as cases of countries still facing difficulties to promote basic education in these two regions. The paper takes a brief look at what educational issues each country is facing and what reforms are being undertaken to address the issues.

Table 1. Primary Education in Southeast and South Asia

Country	Per Capita GNP in US\$ (2002)	Net Enrolment Rate in Primary Education: Total (Male/Female)		Internal Efficiency of Primary Education (Survival Rate to Final Year*): Total (Male/Female)		Adult Literacy: Total (Male/Female)
		1998/1999	2002/2003	1998/1999	2001/2002	
Southeast Asia						2000–2004
Singapore	20,690	97 (—/—) (a)	95 (—/—) (b)	— (—/—)	— (—/—)	92.5 (96.6/88.6)
Malaysia	3,540	97.4 (97.4/97.4)	93.1 (93.1/93.1)	— (—/—)	84.3 (84.1/84.5)	88.7 (92.0/85.4)
Thailand	2,000	79.6 (81.6/77.6)	85.4 (86.6/84.1)	91.9 (89.7/94.2)	— (—/—)	92.6 (94.9/90.5)
Philippines	1,030	— (—/—)	93.7 (92.9/94.6)	— (—/—)	73.4 (68.8/78.5)	92.6 (92.5/92.7)
Indonesia	710	— (—/—)	92.4 (93.3/91.5)	— (—/—)	86.4 (85.7/87.1)	87.9 (92.5/83.4)
Vietnam	430	96.1 (—/—)	94.0 (—/—) (c)	82.8 (79.9/86.2)	87.1 (87.4/86.7)	90.3 (93.9/86.9)
Lao PDR	310	80.2 (83.6/76.6)	85.0 (88.2/81.6)	54.3 (54.9/53.6)	64.1 (63.6/64.7)	68.7 (77.0/60.9)
Cambodia	300	82.5 (86.5/78.4)	93.3 (95.5/90.9)	48.6 (51.9/45.0)	55.0 (54.2/55.9)	73.6 (84.7/64.1)
Myanmar (Burma)	—	82.5 (83.1/81.8)	84.2 (83.8/84.5)	— (—/—)	64.6 (63.7/65.6)	89.7 (93.7/86.2)
South Asia						
Sri Lanka	850	— (—/—)	— (—/—)	— (—/—)	98.4 (97.9/98.9) (e)	90.4 (92.2/88.6)
Bhutan	600	— (—/—)	— (—/—)	76.4 (74.4/78.9)	81.3 (78.0/85.1) (d)	— (—/—)
India	470	— (—/—)	87.5 (90.0/84.8)	62.0 (63.3/60.4)	61.4 (59.7/63.5) (d)	61.0 (73.4/47.8)
Pakistan	420	— (—/—)	59.1 (67.5/50.0) (d)	— (—/—)	— (—/—)	48.7 (61.7/35.2)
Bangladesh	380	84.8 (85.6/83.9)	84.0 (82.4/85.7) (d)	54.7 (50.1/60.0)	53.9 (49.3/59.0)	41.1 (50.3/31.4)
Nepal	230	68.5 (76.1/60.3)	70.5 (74.6/66.0)	— (—/—)	64.9 (63.3/66.9)	48.6 (62.7/34.9)

*In Southeast Asia, primary education is five years in Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam but six years in other countries; in South Asia, it is seven years in Bhutan but five years in other countries.
(a) Enrolment rate in 2000, (b) Enrolment rate in 2003, (c) Data for 2001/2002, (d) Data for 2000/2001, (e) Data for 2002/2003

Source: Table compiled by the author based on data from UNESCO (2005) *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006* and the website of Ministry of Education of Singapore [www.moe.gov.sg/](retrieved in October 2006).

3. Education Reforms in Cambodia

The Kingdom of Cambodia, which won independence from France in 1953, went into a twenty-year period of civil war after the coup d'état of 1970, experiencing the tragic genocide conducted by the Pol Pot regime and the military intervention of the Vietnamese army. Peace, though partial, finally returned in 1991, when the Paris Peace Agreement was signed. During these years of strife, the country's name was changed by the government in power, first to the "Khmer Republic" after the 1970 coup d'état by General Lon Nol, followed by "Democratic Kampuchea" in the Khmer Rouge era of the Pol Pot regime in the late 1970s. Looking at the recent decades of Cambodian history, we see a distressing amount of blood and tears, but the country remains a highly attractive place, with its rich cultural heritage exemplified by the historic ruins of Angkor Wat and elegant classical dancing, as well as the rich blessings of its land thanks to the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap Lake.

After peace was concluded in 1991, although there was still some conflict during the 1990s, with the aid of the international community, national reconstruction went into full swing. The country managed to overcome the ill effects of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and is now on the path of steady economic growth. Having said that, a wider view of the socio-economic development of Cambodia undeniably reveals the dark shadows of the damage inflicted by the turmoil of civil war. To illustrate, the economic infrastructure and the legal system are still inadequately developed and the country has not succeeded in attracting sufficient overseas investment. Furthermore, taxes are not being collected properly, leaving the government finances in a fragile state. In addition, the civil war took its toll on the population structure, leading to a shortage of human resources, a problem manifesting itself in all aspects of society. Such is the situation that the Cambodian government confronts as it struggles to improve the serious state of national poverty and promote socio-economic development while receiving vast amounts of aid from donor countries and international agencies. Above all, educational development is one of the most important areas for the improvement of social infrastructure and is a priority task for the Cambodian government.

3.1 Quantity and Quality in Education

As Table 1 shows, the state of primary education in Cambodia is undergoing a remarkable improvement. For example, the enrolment rate in primary education, which was 82.5% in 1998/1999 leapt to 93.3% in 2002/2003. Nevertheless, regarding the survival rate of children remaining in school until their final year (Grade 6), we see that almost half left school without completing their education.

The transition rate to lower secondary education is 25% or so and upper secondary education has not even reached 10%. In particular, these rates are low for girls. These data on school attendance have an impact on a wide range of age groups. It is the reason for nearly 40% of adults aged 15 or older being illiterate (MoEYS 2005a).

Thus, even if the enrolment rate is of a certain level, if there are a large number of pupils who leave school halfway through, internal efficiency becomes low. Normally in such a case, the problem is thought to arise from the quality of education provided. Yet, in the case of Cambodia, not only must the quality issue be discussed but also attention must be directed towards how best to improve access to education (which means the issue of quantity). In other words, economic development is still insufficiently advanced in large areas of Cambodia, impeding children from continuing at school. For instance, when children reach a certain age, they are considered to be part of the domestic labor force, so boys have to help with farm work and girls have to help with domestic chores or childcare. For poor families to send their children to school not only entails expenses (e.g., purchase of stationery and uniforms, costs for transportation), but also, it means the loss of remuneration that could have been earned if the child had worked instead of going to school (such potential benefit is called “opportunity cost”). To solve this problem, there is a need to change parental perceptions about getting their children educated, alongside a need to solve the fundamental problem of poverty.

Therefore, the challenge confronting the education sector in Cambodia today (especially primary education and lower secondary education) is how to achieve both quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement in education simultaneously. Here the paper focuses on the basic education reform measures adopted since 2000, thereby investigating how Cambodia’s Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) has approached this challenge.

Firstly, the basic strategy in Cambodia’s education sector is a five-year plan called the Education Strategic Plan (ESP). After 2000, three 5-year plans have been adopted: (1) 2001–2005, (2) 2004–2008, and (3) 2006–2010. As the implementation plan to realize these ESPs, 5-year programs called the Education Sector Support Program (ESSP) have been developed (the 5-year span coincides with the ESP). Linking with these education sector strategies, the EFA National Action Plan 2003–2015 was adopted to address the issues in basic education.

All the policy documents stress that the top priority is to achieve “equal access to education of good quality” in basic education and to this end it is vital for the education administration system to be strengthened and government administrators, principals and teachers to undergo capacity development, with decentralization actively promoted. In the context of these policies, the major role of the MoEYS is the formation of national policy. Educational administrators at the provincial level or below are charged with the task of realizing centrally adopted policies in a manner suited to regional conditions. This is the principle that is becoming widely accepted. But even if an administrative system is created to promote such decentralization, the bureaucrats that support it and the principals and teachers that manage schools and deliver their educational services at classroom level are often unable to take full action because of lack of capacity or shortage of funding. Therefore, what is needed is for the MoEYS and the provincial offices of education to provide regular training in regard to the local government system and school management, both of which are becoming increasingly complex

due to decentralization.

The specific education policy targets named in these policies are the following four:

- ① To provide 9 years of general education across the country and to improve the opportunity to acquire functional literacy
- ② To modernize the education system and to improve its quality through effective reforms
- ③ To link vocational training required by the Cambodian socio-economic and labor market conditions with education
- ④ To strengthen youth and sports sectors through formal and non-formal education

Looking at these targets, it can be seen that together with the promotion of basic education, the government is emphasizing the development of abilities that can be used in the practical world (e.g., vocational skills training).

In this way, effort is being made to achieve both quantitative expansion and qualitative improvement of education by introducing various policies; however, as explained in the following section, financial constraints are severe, and consequently the desired results have not been achieved. For example, the ESSP (2006–2010) has the objective that in all villages a complete primary school will be set up to teach children from Grade 1 to Grade 6. Yet, such an objective is difficult to achieve in the current economic climate of Cambodia, and in view of this, it says that even if there is no primary school in a village, it would be acceptable to set up a primary school in a village at a reasonable distance (within about 3 km) from the viewpoint of the location of the village and cost effectiveness. Despite the condition being eased in this way, the poorer the province, the harder it is to satisfy such geographical criteria, and there are still many villages that can only set up incomplete schools that can accommodate only some of the primary school years. The significant challenge for the Cambodian government in educational terms is whether or not it is possible for the MoEYS to provide appropriate assistance to such provinces that are suffering economic hardship while promoting decentralization,

3.2 Effort at Promoting Effective Educational Funding

The Cambodian education sector needs to create infrastructure including the repair of schools that were destroyed in the civil war and the building of new schools as well as the development and supply of textbooks and teaching materials and the training of properly qualified teachers. However, the financial basis of the Cambodian government is far too weak to carry these things out and, as was pointed out earlier, the human resources who would implement reforms are in short supply.

A look at Cambodia's national finances shows that in the 1990s military spending was cut to increase the social development sector budget. In particular, the education budget has grown in

recent years to comprise nearly 20% of the government's regular budget (MoEYS 2004a). However, because a large proportion is spent on regular expenditure such as recurrent costs including teachers' salaries, it has been impossible to secure an adequate budget for projects that diffuse education or improve its quality. This has meant that the government has to rely on financial aid from donors or on internationally provided technical cooperation. There is also the problem that, even if budget allocation is made, its execution rate is low (on the provincial level, the rate is 80~90% but on the central government level, it is only around 50%) (MoEYS 2004a).

Such being the situation, in October 2000, as part of the financial reform in Cambodia, the Priority Action Program (PAP) was introduced. PAP is a program introduced to improve budget execution and its timing. Apart from the MoEYS, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Ministry of Rural Development have introduced PAP. The PAP fund of the education sector is an educational support budget that is granted upon the approval of the MoEYS when the education bureau of each province applies to have budget appropriation from the MoEYS. The introduction of this program led to the change in budget execution from a pre-approval system to a post-audit system. In other words, money is sent directly from the National Treasury to the province without first going through the MoEYS, so the financial flexibility of regional governments increased. In this sense, it became a significant turning point in the promotion of decentralization.

In the education sector, the ESSP (2006–2010) requires the implementation of PAP in 12 priority areas. Each priority area has been given its own achievement target, strategy and eligible areas, main program content, management and monitoring system, and budget proposal. The issues for PAP are: improvement of access and quality in each level of education, training for teachers, non-formal education, early childhood care and development, scholarships for children of low income families, and improvement of the education administration system (MoEYS 2005b). These are basically areas that ESP and ESSP list as priorities. PAP is therefore a framework with which to tackle these priority issues.

The reason the government introduced PAP is that in the eyes of many the former system had far too little transparency in budget allocation and execution.³ Because of this, the Cambodian government changed its budget execution system with support from donors such as the European Union (EU). Ironically, although several years have passed since PAP was introduced, the non-transparency of execution has increased because of the shortage of treasury funds and confusion in clerical processing. In the current PAP of the education sector therefore, to prevent any non-transparent flow of money, each year's budget is strictly laid down for each PAP priority area. This means that if the budget runs out mid-year under one priority area (for example, primary education, which requires the largest budget), even if there is surplus under another priority area (for example, non-formal education where action is not often forthcoming from the administrative side), it is basically not possible to re-allocate the budget from the surplus priority area to where there is a

shortfall. In this way, adverse consequences that were totally unpredictable when the reform was made seem to have emerged in many areas of practical application. Therefore, efforts for improvement must continue.

As a remedy to resolve such adverse effects, the MoEYS has reorganized the 12 priority areas of PAP into 5 program areas and from FY 2007 Program Budgeting has been introduced to appropriate a budget to each of these programs.⁴

3.3 Curriculum Development

As seen so far, the task facing the education sector in Cambodia is to expand education quantitatively and to improve it qualitatively. To this end, the government has taken various policy initiatives. Regrettably though, the reality is that proper access to basic education is not yet guaranteed to all children. Given this situation, the MoEYS is directing efforts into access improvement measures as well as quality improvement measures. In the Policy for Curriculum Development 2005–2009 announced in 2004, there is sincere admission that the core curriculum created in 1996 was not necessarily adequate, and an attempt is being made to amend and improve (MoEYS 2004b).⁵

For instance, in primary education, the newly introduced curriculum focuses more than before on the Khmer language and arithmetic. Thus, in Khmer and arithmetic, the attainment targets are clearly indicated for the end of Grade 3 and Grade 6 respectively. The learning of foreign languages is another point of focus. The curriculum requires schools to start teaching a foreign language (English or French) from Grade 5; however, the government recognizes the fact that not all schools may be able to implement this due to financial and/or personnel constraints. Another lesson learned from the failure of the old curriculum is the inadequate use made of the results of the national tests (conducted at the end of Grade 9) in Khmer, maths, science, social science and foreign language. These tests were used to measure the standards of pupils' achievement. They should have also been used to improve the curriculum. Thus the new policy stresses that detailed analyses will be made of the results in order to achieve qualitative improvement of education, particularly regarding the academic standards. This is a policy also clearly stated in ESSP 2006–2010. To achieve this qualitative improvement in academic standards, in upper secondary education, the decision was taken to reduce the number of subjects that have to be taken so that more lesson time could be allocated to the core subjects of Khmer, foreign language (English or French), and maths.

In addition to these subjects, from Grade 1 to Grade 10, a new subject called Local Life Skill Program (LLSP) was introduced to nurture citizens able to contribute to the creation of a sound and productive society. The policy defines “life skills” as skills to make decisions based on information, effective communication, intellectual, personal, interpersonal and vocational skills that make cooperation with others possible, and self-management skills that are essential for leading a healthy and productive life. These skills conform to the EFA goals described at the beginning of this paper.

This introduction of the new life skills program shows that quality issues featuring large in the education policy targets of Cambodia are the nurturing of public-minded citizens and the development of abilities that are useful to society and the world of work.

As discussed in this section, the improvement of access to education is still a key issue in Cambodia but at the same time, efforts are steadily being made to improve the quality of education as well. The life skills program, especially, is a manifestation of the importance of human resource development in the pursuit of economic development and of the importance of nurturing citizens who understand public interest and ethical behavior in view of the unfortunate history of the country once torn apart by civil strife.

4. Education Reforms in Bangladesh

The People's Republic of Bangladesh has a homeland rich in natural resources, as described by the poet and first Asian Nobel laureate in literature, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), as “*shonar bangla* (golden Bengal).”⁶ As a modern state, it can be called a young nation, having won independence from British India in 1947 and from Pakistan in 1971. When the country was first created, Bangladesh was called an “international basket case” by the Executive of the US State Department because of its grave problem of hunger and its political chaos (Sachs 2005: 10).

Yet, that afflicted country today in the 21st century is achieving roughly 5% economic growth per year with the aid of donor countries and international agencies, despite some political turmoil caused by conflicts between political parties. Having said that, with per capita GNP still around 400 US dollars, financial difficulties are severe and problems abound in the social development sector including education. In such a context, the importance of promoting basic education for the development of the nation has been continuously expounded ever since the country's birth in 1971. This section focuses on primary education in Bangladesh while taking an overview of education reforms undertaken by the country chiefly since 1990 when the first EFA goals were set.

4.1 Education Reforms and Development Aid

The current state of basic education in Bangladesh is reflected in the adult literacy of those aged 15 and over, which stands at 49.7% (male 57.8%/female 41.1%) in 2002. Notable is the significant gap between the sexes. This is a problem common to all South Asian countries. As Table 1 shows, enrolment rate at primary level can hardly be called satisfactory, though a certain degree of success has been achieved (for example, the enrolment rate of around 60% in early 1990 has now climbed to over 80%). Yet, only about half the children survive up to Grade 5, the final year of primary education.

The enrolment rate at secondary level halts at 44.5% (male 42.1%/female 46.9%) in 2002/3, indicating the problem that exists regarding access to education (UNESCO 2005).

What has the Bangladeshi government been doing to tackle this situation? To cite an example, the national constitution that was adopted in 1972, the year after independence, already included the pledge to provide free and compulsory primary education (five years from age 6 to 10). Nevertheless, for the pledge to be laid down in actual legislation, the nation had to wait nearly two decades until the Compulsory Primary Education Law was passed in 1990. Moreover, although primary education was made compulsory by law, the fact is that due to economic and social reasons, many families were unable to send their children to school.⁷ In view of this, the General Education Project was implemented between 1991 and 1996, introducing the Compulsory Primary Education Programme (1992-93) and the Food for Education Programme in 1993 in order to promote school attendance by children. The Food for Education Programme provides children who come to school with highly nourishing food through school meals. The Programme is led by the World Food Programme (WFP) and is promoted in many countries.⁸ In administrative terms, the Primary and Mass Education Division was instituted within the Ministry of Education in 1992. This has resulted in the clear identification of administrative responsibility for the promotion of compulsory free primary education.

The General Education Project was succeeded by the Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP). The first phase of PEDP ran from 1998 to 2003 and is now in its second phase (2004-2009). The prominent feature of PEDP is the clear positioning of primary education development as a priority area in the education sector. The development is being undertaken as a sector program under a consultative body comprising the Bangladeshi government and aid donors and organizations. With the establishment of a framework for aid and cooperation thus proceeding, the sharing of developmental challenges in the education sector, information exchange and coordination in the implementation of actual projects are underway between the government and donors. For example, in the second phase of PEDP (PEDP II), the consultative body operates a pool fund⁹ set up by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other donors and liaises between these donors. In 2002, the EFA National Action Plan was adopted, even more clearly identifying the importance of basic education (especially primary education) in the education sector.

In this way, since primary education was made compulsory in 1990, the Bangladeshi government has been cooperating with donors such as the World Bank, the ADB and UNICEF and continuing in its efforts to achieve the EFA goals including the universalization of primary education. The fruits of this labor are evident in the form of improving enrolment rates in primary education as mentioned earlier. In addition, in the flow of primary education reforms in Bangladesh briefly described here, especially noteworthy is that the Ministry of Education is basically the prime mover in policy formation and implementation, albeit with assistance from various donors. Since independence, Bangladesh has been the recipient of heaps of aid money, even being ascribed the epithet “experimental ground for development aid.” It is true that no reform can be effectively promoted without cooperation with donors and civil society, but at the same time, a certain level of ownership is being maintained by the

Bangladeshi government. Such ownership can also be seen in the reforms aimed at qualitative improvement in education, which is discussed next.

4.2 Qualitative Improvement in Education

The purpose of education reforms in many developing countries is to turn around shortcomings in the four areas of access, equity, quality and efficiency, as explained in the analytical perspective of this paper. The same applies to Bangladesh, where not all children are as yet guaranteed access to primary education. Naturally, the major challenge in education reforms in Bangladesh is to improve access and equity, but interest has emerged lately in improving the quality and efficiency of education.

As shown in Table 1, the survival rate to Grade 5 is low, and so is the transition rate to secondary education after completing primary education. These are the results not only of the socio-economic factors surrounding the children but also of the poor quality of education provided in primary education. In short, because the content and teaching methods of school education are not appropriate, children might feel that what is taught at school is far detached from their daily life or find difficulty in understanding the lesson content, thereby losing interest and motivation in learning, often leading them to drop out of school. The poor quality of education becoming an impediment to the continuation of learning signifies that the investment into primary education is not being used effectively and that efficiency is poor.

To address this situation, that is, to improve the quality of school education, the Bangladesh National Textbook Board, later renamed the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), was set up in 1982. Although under the wings of the Ministry of Education, this NCTB is basically an independent organization, conducting curriculum development and compiling/distributing textbooks in all three levels of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education. In the latter half of the 1980s, the NCTB started reviewing the school curriculum and in 1990, introduced the competency-based curriculum. By confirming the academic achievement for each area of learning, it aimed to ensure the pupils' understanding of knowledge in that area and the acquisition of pertinent skills. For example, by the time children finish their five years of primary education, they need to have acquired knowledge and skills in 53 areas of learning (Hossain and Jahan 2000). The NCTB, having carried out reforms in primary education in this manner, is currently undertaking curriculum reforms in secondary education with the assistance of the ADB.

To boost the children's motivation to learn and to prevent them from dropping out of school, the Bangladeshi government and donors led by UNICEF have been collaborating in the Intensive District Approach to Education for All (IDEAL) Project since 1996. This is a District level (there are 64 Districts altogether in the country) education improvement project and as of August 2007, 35 Districts out of the 64 are implementing it. The IDEAL Project aims to improve the quality of education at the frontline, in schools and villages. Its main activities are (1) improvement in the quality of lessons, (2)

thorough monitoring of the outcome of learning, (3) promotion of planning/management at classroom level, and (4) social participation and coordination with the local community.

With particular respect to improving lesson quality, the IDEAL Project gives training to in-service teachers in the Multiple Ways of Teaching and Learning (MWTL) to develop Multiple Intelligence.¹⁰ In classrooms where MWTL is used, lessons are based on participatory activities, such as singing, dancing and acting, as opposed to the traditional teaching and learning methods adopted in Bangladesh, that of teachers one-sidedly drumming in facts or with the emphasis on rote learning. The teachers in the classroom highly appraise the method as excellent in teaching children who have grown up in environments where they have not known reading or writing, easing them into the learning of basic subjects in a natural and enjoyable manner. The IDEAL Project expects the children to acquire an active attitude towards learning through taking an interest in real objects and phenomena that they can find in their daily life and actually testing those things out. In fact, teachers are said to be really feeling that children are tackling the process of learning by thinking up ideas themselves and initiating interest.¹¹

4.3 Ownership of the Government of Bangladesh

It is worth paying attention here to the fact that these education reform processes are not necessarily being promoted in a consistent manner under some large policy direction. For example, curriculum development in Bangladesh has often met with the criticism that it tends to be influenced by individual capacities of educational administrators and wishes of aid agencies (Molla 2005). When the NCTB decides the direction of new curriculum development, a team of experts does not necessarily consider it first. Rather, the situation had been that it could be determined by the personal decision of individuals that occupy influential posts within the organization. The reasons for this are the shortage of experts in curriculum development and insufficient research being conducted to aid curriculum evaluation (Hossain and Jahan 2000). Another phenomenon that is often encountered is that the views of foreign experts dispatched by aid agencies are blindly accepted.

Nevertheless, compared to Cambodia, which was described previously, curriculum reform and other policy decisions in the education sector are conducted in line with what Bangladeshi experts and government administrators basically want. The same is true of the IDEAL Project. While receiving aid from donors (especially UNICEF, ADB and the Department for International Development (DFID) of U.K., the Bangladeshi Ministry of Education is promoting projects under its own initiative.

In this way, although within certain confines, the reason why the Bangladesh government has managed to retain this ownership is the use of English as an official language by way of colonial heritage. Moreover, along with human resources returning from studying abroad mainly in industrialized countries of the West as well as some of Asian countries including Japan and Singapore, human resources development is underway in higher education institutions within Bangladesh.¹²

Conclusion: From the Perspective of Comparative Analysis

As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, Southeast Asian countries are attempting to rebuild their national identity through education reforms while being subject to the impact of globalization. These attempts can be seen in the education reforms being undertaken in countries of Southeast Asia and South Asia. Meanwhile, though still unable to shake off reliance on aid, Cambodia and Bangladesh are both undertaking diverse measures aimed at achieving not only quantitative expansion of education but also qualitative improvement. There, interest is growing considerably regarding the question of what children actually study at school. The situation that confronts the two countries in common signify that in each of their societies a foundation is being built for the devising of an ideal national education in the midst of a slowly improving socio-economic environment.

The purpose of basic education reforms is to guarantee equal access to educational opportunities and to improve various qualitative aspects (educational environment, education system, education content, etc.). Nevertheless, as can be seen in the cases of Cambodia and Bangladesh, in developing countries in general, the top priority is to tackle the access issue. Then, as education becomes more diffused, room emerges for qualitative considerations, as in those Southeast Asian countries which were the original 1967 signatories to ASEAN. Still, for much of the population in Cambodia and Bangladesh the guarantee of educational opportunity is not yet properly assured. The need remains to step up efforts for quantitative expansion so that more people can enjoy the opportunity of receiving basic education, while pursuing qualitative improvement.

This paper has given a brief account of how Cambodia and Bangladesh are undertaking reforms with the support of aid organizations of donors and NGOs so as to improve their country's education, especially basic education. Both Cambodia and Bangladesh do receive a wide range of support.

In Bangladesh, the setting of EFA goals became a propellant in the 1990s when reforms in the education sector gathered momentum. Although support was given by aid agencies including UNICEF, ADB and DFID, the Bangladeshi government maintained a certain degree of independence and made their own decisions on the introduction of new policies. This has been possible because resources for carrying out reform can be secured to some degree, even though the government's financial and human resource capacities are limited.

Compared to such a situation in Bangladesh, Cambodia still remains a heavily aid dependent country. This is clear from the fact that many important policy documents (e.g., ESP, ESSP, EFA National Action Plan) are *de facto* written by foreign specialists and that a fair proportion of the education sector funding has to rely on direct aid. Nevertheless, there is no cause for despair. For example, after more than two decades since full independence was achieved, Bangladesh has just managed to reach the point where it can implement fully fledged education reforms. The road whereby this point was reached was in no way a smooth one. Nor can we say that everything is

proceeding smoothly at present. Much harder has been the case for Cambodia, where real peace was finally achieved in the late 1990s and only about a decade has passed since. Thus it is no surprise that the government's capacity is weak. Having said that, there are glimmers of hope for future development albeit gradual, seen in the numerous appointments within the government of young people who have returned from studying abroad.

This paper is strictly speaking an essay on the questions of the access and quality of education in Cambodia and Bangladesh based on limited data. Therefore, the remaining future tasks are to make deeper analyses of these two countries, and to further conduct a careful demonstrative study of each country of Southeast Asia and South Asia, which cannot be simply categorized under one entity, "developing countries." In conducting such research and thereby thinking about the ways forward for national education in the rapidly globalizing world of today, we may well reap the reward of many insights into the educational situation in other parts of the world as well.

Notes

1. See UNESCO (2000) for details on the background and details of the introduction of EFA goals.
2. These are the Karachi Plan (1961) in Asia, the Addis Ababa Plan (1961) in Africa, Santiago Plan (1962) in Latin America and the Tripoli Plan (1966) in Arab States. In particular, the universalization of primary education by 1980 was named as the most important target.
3. Many people have pointed this problem out in the interview surveys that author has been conducting since 2003 with higher officials of the MoEYS and education officers of the donor countries and agencies stationed in Cambodia.
4. Descriptions about the introduction and current condition of PAP are based on a series of interview with officials at Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, which were conducted by the author in October 2006 and August 2007.
5. See MoYES (2004b) for more details about the curriculum reforms explained in this section.
6. This poem has become the national anthem of Bangladesh.
7. One of the reasons for children being out-of school is basically an economic one, namely of having to engage in some form of labor (i.e., help with farm work for boys and domestic or childcare chores for girls). This is particularly prevalent among children of poor families. Moreover, there is a social and cultural reason of a negative attitude seen among many parents towards giving education to girls whom they assume will marry into other families in future. In Bangladesh, which is an Islamic country, religious reasons also compound to form an impediment to educational opportunities for girls.
8. This program sometimes gives incentives to parents so as to enable children from poor families to attend school. In other words, if children go to school, food for one household (e.g., a bag of rice or a can of cooking oil) can be obtained: this is a device used to encourage parents to make children go to school. Such a method is effective in encouraging school attendance by girls, whose schooling opportunities tend to be obstructed within the family.
9. A pool fund is the pooling of aid from multiple donors by opening a special account in the recipient government. This fund should be used for tackling commonly agreed problems through the streamlined procedures for procurement, monitoring and evaluation.
10. The cognitive psychologist Howard Gardner expounds the Multiple Intelligence Theory, saying that human intelligence is not a single entity but exists in multiple layers. According to Gardner, humans have seven kinds of intelligence at work in cognition and learning: linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, and interpersonal

- intelligence. For details about the Multiple Intelligence Theory, see Gardner (2006) and Gardner's website [www.howardgardner.com] (retrieved in September 2007).
11. The reaction of teachers to the IDEAL Project and MWTL can be found on the UNICEF homepage [www.unicef.org/teachers/forum/0301.htm] (retrieved in September 2007) and Ellison and Rothenberger (1999).
 12. See Kitamura (2006) for recent trends in higher education in Bangladesh.

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