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EDITED BY  
Sereyrath Em,  
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University of Thessaly, Greece  
Mardy Serey,  
Svay Rieng University, Cambodia

\*CORRESPONDENCE  
Bunthorn Yem  
✉ ybunthorn@cam-ed.com

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# Discussion and analysis of educational disparities through human capital perspective

Bunthorn Yem<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Tapas R. Dash<sup>1</sup> and Bunhe Harth<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>CamEd Business School, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

This article discusses and analyzes educational disparities perpetuating the out-of-school children issue in Cambodia's primary education through the lens of human capital to offer a context-specific framework for a practical policy action. The article first develops an operational contextualized meaning of the key terminologies of the study such as social disparities, out-of-school children, and human capital. The article utilizes an integrative, narrative review approach, drawing upon the existing literature on the out-of-school issues in Cambodia. The article analyzes the existing strategies and interventions, including the investments in education, through the lens of human capital perspective. In spite of many efforts and subsequent investments in education, educational disparities persist, keeping many children out of school. The complexity of educational disparities in Cambodia necessitates sufficient and targeted investments alongside practical policy actions. The paper significantly contributes to the existing body of knowledge by synthesizing human capital theory with the Cambodian contemporary educational landscape to establish a foundation for practical policy implications and identifies directions for future empirical analysis.

## KEYWORDS

educational disparities, educational policy, human capital perspective, OOSC, out-of-school children, primary education

## Introduction

Education is universally recognized as fundamental to growth. It is generally employed as a means to empower individuals to reach their full potential. Moreover, the principle that economic growth is a consequence of education investment—whether at individual or societal level—is a widely accepted economic theory. Therefore, investing in education is considered fundamentally essential for the sustainable development, well-being, and resilient future of every individual person. Moreover, it is foundational to the enduring progress of the whole society, and ultimately the lasting advancement of the civilization of humanity. Because of that, ensuring education for every individual has been widely endorsed and reinforced by both national and global laws and initiatives. For example, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) emphasizes *free and compulsory* education for everyone in the fundamental stages (United Nations, 1948). Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 ensures all children complete free primary education by 2030, and one of its targets is to particularly eliminate disparities in access to all levels of education for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations by 2030 (United Nations Development Programme, 2015).

Moreover, the “Incheon Declaration Education 2030”, initiated by several key organisations at the World Education Forum 2015 and endorsed by 160 participant countries from all over the world including Cambodia, has the vision to transform lives by means of education (Word Education Forum, 2015). Besides, Article 68 of the *Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia (2008)* affirms that the State shall provide free primary and secondary education to all citizens in public schools, and the citizens shall receive education for at least 9 years (*Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia, 2008; Open Development Cambodia, 2021*). In addition, adopting the SDG 4, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) aims to ensure inclusive, equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all, as highlighted in Cambodia’s Education 2030 Roadmap as well as in Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023 (MoEYS, 2019a, b). Moreover, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has set out the so-called Pentagonal Strategy - Phase 1, focusing on five key priorities, the first of which is *human capital development (RGC, 2023)*. One of the five strategic objectives of the Pentagon 1 is enhancement of education quality, sports, science, and technology (RGC, p. 24). Furthermore, to uphold the Pentagonal Strategy and in pursuit of the SDG 4, the “Education Strategic Plan 2024–2028” continues to concentrate on education reform at all levels and in all areas (MoEYS, 2024).

Following all the efforts, significant progress has been noticed. Nevertheless, persistent challenges in education remain globally. Disparities in education remain severe. Improving the quality of education continues to be a major challenge for all countries at every level of education (*United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2019*). Enrollment in primary education has reached a significantly high percentage, yet hundreds of millions of primary-school-aged children in developing countries remain out of school (UNDP, 2015; *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023*).

Similarly, Cambodia has gradually been making significant improvements following many efforts and subsequent investments in the education sector. However, educational disparities in Cambodia reflect persistent challenges observed globally. The educational disparities causing dropout, non-completion, and leading to the out-of-school issue are multifaceted and remain a major concern. For example, in the 2022–2023 school year, the overall retention rate was at approximately 70 percent and only 60 percent for girls (MoEYS, 2024). Furthermore, completion rate continues to significantly decline in the lower secondary level, and drops further in the upper secondary level, particularly for boys (Chea et al., 2024; Dabrowski et al., 2024; *National Institute of Statistics, 2022*). The shifting gender dynamic in retention –reversing from girls at the primary level to boys at the secondary level –is driven by distinct socio-economic pressures. Specifically, girls are often vulnerable to domestic expectations and home-school distance barriers exacerbated by geographical disparities. Conversely, boys generally face a higher opportunity cost for their labor as they reach adolescence, when demands for agricultural, construction, or migratory work increase.

Additionally, the progress of education has been hampered and exacerbated by intertwined educational disparities including school-level factors and student-level factors (Hirakawa and Taniguchi, 2020) and other explicit challenges such as

insufficient supply and lack of qualified teachers, inadequate school-operational funding, limited continuous professional development for teachers, and weak management of school directors (Heng and Sol, 2022; Kheang, 2021; Sot et al., 2022).

The perpetual disparities in education can cause adverse consequences to both individuals and society. As posited by Yem (2025a), these issues not only would limit individual life chances to unlock their full potential impacting their socioeconomic well-being, but would also hinder national progress toward achieving the SDGs. Therefore, this has underscored the need for more investments in education and more practical policy actions to address the challenges and relevant disparities, ensuring equal access and quality education for every child across the country (Meas et al., 2024; Tao and Kao, 2024; *World Bank Group, 2024, 2025a; Yem, 2025a*).

This paper discusses and analyzes educational disparities perpetuating the out-of-school children issue in Cambodia’s primary education through the lens of human capital as a context-specific framework. In the preceding stage, the paper also seeks to establish a shared understanding of the key terms such as educational disparities, out-of-school children, and human capital, along with their policy implications, aiming to inspire more effective strategies and inform more practical policy recommendations.

This article significantly contributes to the existing body of knowledge on the intertwined challenges of educational disparities contributing to the out-of-school children issue in Cambodia and their perpetuation cycle. Moreover, by examining the potential implications of human capital theory, the paper offers valuable insights through a targeted theoretical lens, informing practical policy recommendations, potentially inspiring the development of effective strategies to address educational disparities in Cambodia, supporting the attainment of the SDGs and ultimately contributing to the realization of Cambodia’s long-term vision for sustainable growth.

The article begins by providing an overview of the importance of education and the need to invest in it for sustainable growth. Subsequently, it seeks to establish a shared operational definition of the keywords and their policy implications, followed by the critical review of educational disparities through the human capital theoretical lens. Finally, the paper concludes by drawing implications to offer a contextualized framework for practical policy recommendations, before acknowledging the limitations of the paper and suggesting directions for future research.

## Discussion and analysis of educational disparities through human capital perspective

According to dictionaries, the word “disparity” is often used to describe a social or economic condition that is considered unfairly unequal and defined as a noticeable and significant difference or dissimilarity, especially one connected with unfair treatment, or a lack of equality, especially in a way that is not fair, for example: the growing disparity between rich and poor (*Cambridge Dictionary, 2025; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025; Oxford Learners Dictionaries, 2025*). In short, a

dictionary-based definition of the term “disparity” refers to a difference, inequality, or dissimilarity.

Besides, in the context of research, the word “disparity” would generally take a plural form: disparities. The term has various operational definitions depending on different contexts, explaining how the terminology can be measured or observed in a study. Therefore, understanding what “disparities” refer to in a given research context before delving deeper into the related complexities of the disparities is crucial. Given the potential implications of the key term “disparities” on policy, [Hebert et al. \(2008\)](#) claims that developing a shared definition of a disparity can help to focus research and policy on top priority areas for redress. However, definitions vary considerably across institutions.

In health care research, the definitions of “disparities” can have practical implications on policy to determine measurements that are monitored by the government institutions and international agencies as well as resource allocation efforts to address health disparities ([Braveman, 2005](#)). Similarly, as recommended by [McGuire et al. \(2006\)](#), a robust definition of “disparities” is necessary in order to monitor progress against *disparities* and to compare their magnitude across studies. Disparities can then be estimated by adjusting for group differences in models for expenditures and access to mental health services. According to [McGuire et al.](#), therefore, disparities are the unequal treatment of patients on the basis of race or ethnicity or gender or other characteristics of the patients. Based on [Braveman](#), health inequalities or health disparities refer to differences between the most advantaged group, such as the wealthiest, the most powerful racial or ethnic group, and all others. Furthermore, the American Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) definition of disparities refers to any differences among populations that are statistically significant and differ from the reference group by at least 10 percent ([Hebert et al., 2008](#)).

It is evident that the term “disparities” and “inequalities” are used interchangeably. In the context of education research, the term is used to refer to the unfair treatment in the education system, for example, in the UNESCO document on “Regional Disparities in Educational Development” ([Carron and Chau, 1980](#)). According to the American Psychological Association (APA), a broad definition of educational disparities is recommended to include differences such as those that overlap with social class, those that reflect bias and differential treatment in the educational system, and those that are based on different responses to the educational system ([APA, 2012](#)). When discussing educational disparities, [Maruyama \(2003\)](#) highlights significant differences in educational outcomes and access to quality education. Moreover, [Cochran-Smith et al. \(2016\)](#) refers to educational inequalities as disparities, or discrepancies or gaps, in educational opportunities and outcomes, including differences in academic achievement, learning experiences, and chances in life. Additionally, [Yem \(2025a\)](#) highlights educational disparities as multidimensional, including inequalities in access, quality, outcomes, and resources.

In summary, educational disparities are multifaceted. Research around them may investigate one or multiple key aspects such as inequalities in access, quality, learning outcomes, resources, ethnicity, health, gender, and geographical dynamics ([Buchmann et al., 2008](#); [Orfield and Lee, 2005](#); [Zajacova and Lawrence, 2018](#)). Each aspect influences the other and may include

multiple other dimensions. Access is related to opportunities. Quality encompasses curriculum and instruction. Learning outcomes are related to achievements and attainments. Resources include human, time, materials, financial, and physical resources (including facilities and infrastructure). Ethnicity involves socio-economic and socio-cultural factors influencing population groups, subgroups, or minorities. Health involves mental and physical health including disabilities. Gender encompasses male, females and other identified or unidentified sexes. Geographical dynamics include rural-urban divides, distance and proximity, transportation, safety and security.

To recapitulate, educational disparities fundamentally refer to the unfair treatment in the education system, causing significant inequalities across various aspects such as access, quality, outcomes, resources, and so on.

Fundamentally, the word “disparities” is generally used to refer to the issue of inequalities or differences. Establishing a shared definition of “educational disparities” can provide more practical policy implications and shape educational practices more effectively.

## Out-of-school: definition and implications

Developing a shared meaning of “out-of-school” is crucial for ensuring data consistency and transparency. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) has highlighted the problem of inconsistent out-of-school statistics arising from varying definitions ([UIS, 2005](#)). The UIS’s definition of “out of school” refers to the number of children, adolescents and youth within the official age range who are not enrolled in any formal or non-formal education program at the primary, secondary, or higher levels of education. However, the UIS operational definition of out-of-school children highlighted in [Yem, \(2025b\)](#) may not be contextualized enough in Cambodia due to the exclusion of children at risk of dropping out. According to [World Vision Cambodia \(2024\)](#), out-of-school children in Cambodia are categorized into five groups: (1) children without access to school, (2) children in emergencies or crisis, (3) children who have dropped out of school, (4) children with access to school but are not enrolled, and (5) children who are enrolled but do not attend regularly. While the UIS definition of out-of-school children (OOSC) excludes children who are enrolled but at risk of dropping out (see [UNESCO, 2014](#); the World Vision Cambodia’s definition of OOSC does include them.

Essentially, in the Cambodian context, out-of-school children or OOSC include these two groups of primary-school-age children: (1) those who are not enrolled, including those with and without access to school and (2) those who are enrolled but who have poor attendance, are at risk of dropping out, or who have dropped out.

## Ensuring accuracy of OOSC data

Ensuring OOSC data accuracy and consistency is crucial, particularly when data are collected from multiple sources and a

shared definition is not established. A shared definition of OOSC, established by a policy document within a given context, can help clarify the scope of data to be covered, ensuring appropriate exclusion and inclusion in the calculation process. The calculation can be a simple subtraction and addition. For example, the UIS's existing method of calculating the OOSC statistics includes subtracting the number of primary-school-age children enrolled in primary school (as in the administrative data), from the total population of the same age group (as in the household survey data). However, several challenges can complicate the enumeration of OOSC data. The UIS, for instance, warns of two potential issues. First, discrepancies between the population data and administrative enrollment data can result in participation rates exceeding 100 percent. Second, household surveys conducted late in the school year can overestimate the children's ages if the ages are recorded on the day of the survey (also highlighted in Yem, 2025b). This warning underscores the need for high attention during data collection, requiring both awareness of the UIS-highlighted potential risks and the inclusion and exclusion criteria determined by an established policy document.

## Human capital: definition and implications

The concept of “human capital” can be traced back to Adam Smith in his idea of “fixed capital”. In his book entitled “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations”, Smith asserted that investing in the skills of a person is akin to investing in a new tool for more efficient work, which eventually leads to a profit (Smith, 1776, p. 335). Later, it can be linked to an influential figure in British economics Alfred Marshall, who said this “The most valuable of all capital is that invested in human beings” (Marshall, 1930, p. 564). However, the “human capital” concept was popularized in the 1960s by two American economists and Nobel laureates Theodore W. Schultz and his student Gary S. Becker. Aligned with the idea of Adam Smith and Alfred Marshall, Schultz (1961) contended that human capital investment has the potential to resolve the economic paradoxes. Moreover, Becker (1964) highlighted the positive relationship between inequality in income and inequality of education.

Schultz and his student Becker, therefore, can be considered the pioneers, who laid down the foundational theoretical and empirical groundwork for the field of human capital. Since then, the concept has been widely attributed to them, and research around it has extensively explored its operational definition and economic implications.

In a business management context, for example, Huselid et al. (1997) define human capital as collective knowledge, skills, and abilities of employees, contributing to the achievement of business goals. Similarly, Hitt et al. (2001) refer to education, experience, and skills as human capital attributes possessed by managers, which directly link to the company's performance. Likewise, Youndt and Snell (2004, 2020) define human capital as knowledge, skills, and expertise of individual employees, which are crucial for an organization's performance. Furthermore, Kor and Leblebici (2005) define human capital as knowledge, skills,

health or values that individual employees can provide to the company, serving as a key source of competitive advantage that can determine the success of the company. Also, Somaya et al. (2008) refer to cumulative knowledge, skills, talent, and know-how of individual employees as human capital, having the potential to generate performance benefits for the company. Moreover, Crook et al. (2011) define human capital as knowledge, skills, and abilities—both explicit and tacit—embodied in employees. It is an unevenly distributed resource within business organizations, which not only makes it difficult for competitors to replicate but also explains why some outperform others.

In a general context that encompasses business management, human capital refers to knowledge, information, ideas, skills, and health, showing that how people invest in themselves determine their economic success as well as the success of the whole economy (Becker, 2002). Similarly, Goldin (2016) refers to knowledge, skills, and health that individuals possess as the stock of assets, which in return enhance their productivity and economic value.

In simple terms, human refers to people, and capital refers to assets. Together, it means people's assets. However, the term “assets” here should not be understood as general monetary values, but it refers to people's competencies, which consist of knowledge, skills, and attitude. Additionally, the word “assets” here should encompass character and health, including physical and mental health. To elaborate further by building upon existing literature, therefore, human capital should cover three aspects of assets or qualities that individual people possess: education, health, and character.

- Education refers to competencies comprising knowledge, skills, and attitude.
- Health includes physical health and mental health.
- Character involves fundamental qualities of being honest, kind, and resilient.

Essentially, individual people possessing the three qualities will enhance their productivity, yielding direct benefits to their own well-being and contributing to the overall well-being and sustainable advancement towards a resilient future for society at large. Overall, cultivating human capital is crucial for sustainable growth and well-being, encompassing personal, national, and global levels.

## Human capital as a causal chain

The human capital theory in this article is operationalized as a causal mechanism wherein educational disparities link to reduced human capital accumulation, thereby leading to diminished productivity and ultimately manifesting as systematic economic constraints. To elaborate further, unequal access to quality primary education in Cambodia creates an initial gap in the stock of assets (also see Becker, 1964; Goldin, 2016; Schultz, 1961). Therefore, children who are out of school miss the opportunity in their most primary years to accumulate the fundamental stock. With low educational attainment, these children consequently lack competencies demanded by labor markets and finally perpetuate poverty, which further hinders

the government's goal to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth (also see, Deming, 2022; Hitt et al., 2001; Sahlberg and Cobbold, 2021; World Bank Group, 2024).

In addition to the human capital lens of the article, complementary concepts such as the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Robeyns and Byskov, 2025; Sen, 1999) and the institutional economics (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; North, 1990) can also deepen insights into the Cambodian education landscape. Based on the capability approach, education is not only an economic asset but also a means of empowerment. Furthermore, the concept of institutional economics relates the accumulation of human capital to school management and efficient execution of the public budget. These perspectives underscore the requirement of both financial investment and systematic reform when redressing educational disparities.

## Critique of human capital

Despite its profound impact, critics of human capital argue that it treats students as economic inputs rather than individuals with intrinsic rights and holistic well-being (Choudhury, 2021; Tan, 2014). Accordingly, focusing exclusively on productivity may marginalize social, cultural, and democratic purposes of education. However, this article primarily adopts an economic perspective given the current Cambodian context, where human capital development is explicitly prioritized in the government's Pentagonal Strategy to achieve upper-middle income and high-income status. Articulating educational disparities as economic constraints is, therefore, a strategic necessity for policy advocacy. Nevertheless, this article acknowledges that a child's education extends beyond traditional cognitive labor; thus, to mitigate the narrow economic focus, the conceptualization of human capital used here encompasses health and character alongside academic attainment.

## Continuing commitments, ongoing progress and persistent disparities

Cambodia has been striving to revive its education system after the complete destruction during Pol Pot's regime in the 1970s. According to literature, general education began in the 1980s with only 10 years of schooling, 4 years in primary, 3 years lower-secondary, and 3 years in upper-secondary (4 + 3 + 3), before later on increasing to 11 years (5 + 3 + 3) in the 1990s, and further increasing to 12 years (6 + 3 + 3) in early 2000s until the present time (Dy and Ninomiya, 2003; United Nations International Childrens Emergency Fund, 2020; Yem, 2025a).

Subsequently, many initiatives and strategies have been taken and implemented to address educational disparities, primarily to respond to the SDG 4: "Ensure equitable, quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Subsequently, educational reforms have been undertaken in four successive phases (MoEYS, 2024), as the following:

- Phase 1: Reform at the national level in 2014. Key priorities relevant to primary education include (without limitation)

efficiency improvement, and staff and financial management.

- Phase 2: The five-pillar reform in 2015–2018. Key priorities relevant to primary education include (without limitation) management, teacher training and development, quality assurance inspection, learning outcome assessment framework, improvement of course syllabi, establishment of New Generation Schools, and training and development for school principals.
- Phase 3: School reform in 2019–2022. Key priorities include (without limitation) increase of New Generation Schools, improvement of teacher training curriculum, and introduction of Early Grade Learning for primary school teachers.
- Phase 4: Model school standard implementation in 2023 to the present. Key areas of focus include student learning outcomes, teaching and learning, community participation, and school administration and accountability.

Consequently, Cambodia has made significant strides in primary education, nearly achieving universal coverage with a significant increase in the net enrollment rate (MoEYS, 2024). However, major concerns persist. According to the General Population Census of Cambodia, while the enrollment for primary school children was above 90 percent, more than 40 percent among the population ages 7–24 did not complete primary education. The completion rate further dwindled in lower and upper secondary levels (Chea et al., 2024; Dabrowski et al., 2024; National Institute of Statistics, 2022).

Furthermore, studies have found that educational disparities contributing to the dropout issue are major concerns. They intertwine various factors including, but not limited to: socio-economic situation, socio-cultural perception, and geographical dynamics, class size or ratio, teacher shortages, teacher quality, repetition, late school entry, parent and community involvement, parental education, educational aspiration and so on (Brocker, 2021; Chea et al., 2024; Dabrowski et al., 2024; Evans, 2019; Hangchuon, 2018; Heng et al., 2016; Hirakawa and Taniguchi, 2020; Idei et al., 2020; Johnson, 2023; MoEYS, 2024; Nair, 2019; Tao and Kao, 2024; UNICEF, 2018).

Primarily, these factors all amount to the out-of-school issue. Even though the number of OOSC positively decreased in 2012 (MoEYS, 2019a; World Bank Group, 2025b), the number kept increasing after that until 2022 (see World Bank Group, 2025b). Fortunately, the significant decrease was observed again in 2023, with a large proportion of OOSC in 10 provinces being enrolled (Nhek, 2024; World Vision Cambodia, 2024). While the significant number of OOSC enrolled is commendable, practical policy actions are imperative to ensure their primary education attainment amidst various pressing factors that could lead to their dropout. Nonetheless, the statistics as of April 2025 show that approximately 80,000 children remained out of school (World Bank Group, 2025b).

## The costs of educational disparities

Fundamentally, despite improvement in access to education, educational achievement and attainment of children has

remained a challenge, as disparities in education persist as critical impediments (World Bank Group, 2024). Educational disparities can cost a lot to society. As highlighted by Sahlberg and Cobbold (2021), the lack of education, or inadequate education among children can negatively impact society in several ways including productivity and sustainable growth. Furthermore, according to Sahlberg & Cobbold, while all children have talents that can be realized and advanced through the process of education, failing to ensure the process will cause inequalities in society to grow. Sufficient investments are, therefore, needed to tackle the ongoing inequalities within the education system to foster productivity and long-term growth. Moreover, such investments should not be treated as expenditure, since it is the only way to ensure competitive workforce and future economic growth (Honda, 2013; McKinsey and Company, 2009). That is particularly relevant for developing countries, including Cambodia, where redressing disparities in education in general and the OOSC issue in primary education in particular, remain a significant challenge.

Both enrolling and at the same time keeping all children in school are really important. That is considered a productive investment beyond a moral obligation (Thomas and Burnett, 2015). Similarly, from a human capital perspective, every child has their future earning potential to contribute to the growth of society, and individuals with knowledge and skills drive innovation and progress (Goldin, 2016). Besides, the United Nations (UN) claims that the effects that education has on growth and poverty reduction in developing countries can be really high, stating that millions of people could have escaped poverty had they received just two more years of schooling (UN, 2017). Therefore, investing in human capital yields significant economic returns throughout childhood and young adulthood (Deming, 2022). In essence, the issue of out-of-school children has socioeconomic implications in that children lacking education would be placed at high risk of the perpetuation of poverty, while at the same time it would hinder the government's efforts to promote inclusive growth and ensure sustainable development for future generations. From a human capital perspective, this really reinforces the strategy and continuing commitment of the RGC and MoEYS to invest in education to achieve sustainable growth and enhance overall well-being. Investing to eliminate remaining disparities in education is, therefore, fundamentally essential to ensure a fair treatment in the education system.

## Overview of Cambodia education budget

Education has consistently been one of the key priorities for public investment in all successive Rectangular Strategies, as indicated in the National Strategic Development Plan 2019–2023 (RGC, 2019) and re-emphasized in the first strategic pentagon “Human capital development” of the Pentagonal Strategic Plan, in which quality education is the first priority (RGC, 2023). Resulting from the firm implementation of the Rectangular Strategy - Phase 2, Cambodia achieved sustainable progress (RGC, 2013). As a result, blossoming economically for over two decades before the COVID-19, Cambodia graduated from a low-

income country status and reached a lower-middle income status (RGC, 2019; World Bank Group, 2024). With these achievements, the RGC has set the goal to attain an upper middle-income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050.

Recognising the importance of education for sustainable growth, and reflecting the priority in national strategic plans, Cambodia has made substantial investments in this sector since the last decade. According to the Open Development Cambodia, USD 915 million was allocated to education in 2019, yet later decreased to approximately USD 825 million in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (ODC, 2021). Then, the education budget in 2022 was only comparable to that in 2018. However, from a big picture, investment in education from 2013 to 2023 increased by more than 200 percent, from USD 273 million to USD 820 million (Khmer Times, 2023). Given the remarkable increase, the significant portion of the 2023 budget was allocated to personnel costs and operational expenses, leaving a very small percentage for capital expenditure, raising concerns about the commitment to improving educational infrastructure and facilities (MoEYS, 2024). Thereupon, the budget rose to USD 990 million in 2024, yet an education expert considered it still modest and required effective use to be efficient (Ton, 2023). Furthermore, compared to other developing lower-middle income countries, the expenditures are relatively low (World Bank Group, 2025a). The budget allocated for education has been known to be only a small percentage of the Growth Domestic Product (GDP). In 2020, for example, to support the commitment in improving the quality of and access to education, the budget allocation was only at 3.4 percent of the GDP (UNICEF, 2020) and at approximately 3 percent in 2023 (World Bank Group, 2025). Hence, continued and more substantial investments in the education sector are crucial for Cambodia, particularly since human capital development is a key priority within the current RGC's agenda. In the meantime, redressing related disparities in education require sufficient investments.

## Conclusion

Education is an invaluable means to developing human capital, acknowledging it is an irreplaceable resource of a viable future for every nation. For sustainable growth and resilience, every nation relies on its individual people, particularly every citizen who is fundamentally equipped with these three qualities: education or competencies (comprising knowledge, skills, and attitudes), health (encompassing both physical and mental health), and character (including honesty, kindness, and resilience). Recognizing the importance of cultivating such indispensable qualities within individual citizens, Cambodia has been continually and consistently making substantial investments in education since more than the last decade. As a result, Cambodia has made significant improvements in education, remarkably increasing educational access and achieving a particularly high enrollment rate in primary education. Given the noticeable progress, however, the intended goal of success in education, reinforced by relevant universal and constitutional initiatives and laws with regard to the human right to education, including the global SDG 4 by 2030 as well

as the government's long-term vision, remains distant. As studies have found, the persistent educational disparities still mirror the significant challenges observed both nationally and globally, stemming from the multifaceted nature of the disparities, particularly those perpetuating the high non-completion rate, dropout rate, poor attendance rate, and out-of-school statistics. Furthermore, despite the substantial investments made by the RGC, the perpetual challenges in education signify the need for more investments in education to address the remaining hindrances, encompassing access, quality, outcome, resources, and other socio-economic and socio-cultural factors.

The persistent disparities within education, which have continued to hinder the success of education in Cambodia, despite decades of reform efforts, underscore the stronger need for more practical policy actions, strategically directing sufficient investments and prioritising efforts to address the most pressing disparities.

Drawing upon the discussions and implications, and guided by its established operational definitions of educational disparities, human capital, and OOSC in Cambodia, the paper proposes prioritising practical policy actions on the most urgent issues while allowing other important priorities to be phased in over time. All these efforts need sustained investments. These investments include:

- First, invest in establishing a national open access digital database for OOSC statistics to ensure data accuracy, consistency, and transparency.
- Second, invest in ensuring all OOSC are enrolled in formal education.
- Third, invest in securing the educational attainment of all enrolled OOSC.

In essence, given the complexity of educational disparities, it is crucial for policy to focus on the investment in the most urgent priorities. In specific circumstances, the "first things first" concept can prove particularly valuable. While enrollment is one of the first things to be ensured, attainment is also one of the most urgent priorities that must be secured. It is more than arguable that investments to transition from mere enrollment to sustainable attainment require a multi-pronged approach. This approach must encompass the financial and nutritional support (e.g., school feeding and conditional cash transfers), pedagogical improvements (e.g., remedial fast-track programs), and geographical solutions (e.g., targeted teacher incentives, rural housing and special medical support programs).

Recognizing that primary education is very fundamental to further education, therefore, ensuring sufficient investments in this foundational stage for children would maintain educational momentum and positively impact their aspirations for subsequent levels.

This paper acknowledges the lack of original, empirical data of its own, relying solely on existing literature. However, with the strong conceptual foundation established by the paper, the limitation provides a clear path for future empirical studies to offer more analytical and in-depth understanding of aspects of educational disparities, particularly ones directly impacting the OOSC issue in Cambodia.

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BY: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. TD: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. BH: Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

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