



RETHINKING SUSTAINABILITY:
THE UNINTENDED OUTCOMES OF
SCHOOL BASED MANAGEMENT
REFORMS IN CAMBODIA

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INTRODUCTION

The Lower Secondary School Development Program (LSSDP) is one of four programs run by This Life Cambodia (TLC). LSSDP was adapted from the Primary School Development Program (PSDP) designed by Schools for Children of Cambodia, a non-governmental organization that stopped operations in 2009. As the name suggests, PSDP targeted the primary level (grades 1-6) while LSSDP targeted the lower secondary level (grades 7-9); however, the programs are almost identical in design, and have not been revised to any major extent since being created in 2007/2008. LSSDP began in 2009 and currently operates in two schools.

The overarching goal of LSSDP is “to increase communities’ involvement in schools and improve access to and quality of secondary education in Siem Reap Province, Cambodia” (LSSDP program, 2012, page 3). A phrase that appears in both literatures on PSDP and LSSDP states, “[the program] is focused on community participation and community led solutions, and is designed to be long-term sustainable, rather than create donor-dependency.” Both programs, therefore, focus on connecting schools to their relative communities in a way, process, or outcome that is “sustainable” because there will be no “donor-dependency.” Moreover, these connections between schools and communities are assumed to increase educational access and quality. But what is to be sustained?

This evaluation report is focused on sustainability. Exactly what is to be sustained because of LSSDP will be critically examined followed by an exploration of how various stakeholders envision achieving such sustainability. The impetus for this report comes from the original manual outlining the PSDP that stated, “The Manual is not designed to remain static, and it is intended that it be regularly reviewed and revised by the...field team involved in implementing the program” (SCC, 2009, p. 4). Since the program has remained more-or-less unchanged since 2007/2008 when it was first envisioned by Schools for Children of Cambodia, it is important LSSDP self-reflect on its successes and shortcomings as the program cycle for the first school nears completion.

The main finding is that sustainability is a complex topic that has been limited by a particular conception of school management emanating from the international development partners (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, etc.) and the national Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS). The goals and objectives of both the School Based Management (SBM) logic and the LSSDP have been on vertical sustainability (connecting the various levels of government: school, district, provincial, and national) despite the evidence within the communities that horizontal sustainability (connecting the various people within the community) is being achieved on a greater scale. It is therefore recommended that LSSDP revise its goals and objectives to include horizontal sustainability.

The report first situates the LSSDP within the broader context and history of SBM worldwide. It details the neoliberal logic and assumptions made about schooling that underpin much of the literature on SBM, and then discusses the intentions for educational development by the MoEYS in Cambodia. Following this overview, the goals, objectives, and activities of LSSDP will be deconstructed to inform a discussion on sustainability. Using data collected

through interviews and surveys between July and December 2011, the report will detail the many types of sustainability within the program. The report will end by re-thinking "sustainability" to include both horizontal and vertical conceptions, opening up the program to a revised set of goals and objectives that, although not necessarily within the SBM logic, capitalise on the successes achieved thus far.



SCHOOL BASED MANAGEMENT WORLDWIDE

School Based Management (SBM) is one feature of educational decentralisation that has spread globally since the 1990s. From New Zealand to Cambodia, educational decentralisation has reached nearly every country in the world. Decentralisation is “the transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative authority from the central government to its field organizations, local administrative units, semi-autonomous and parastatal organizations, local governments, or nongovernmental organizations” (Rondinelli and Cheema 1983, p.18). Typically called “packages” that allegedly place countries on linear trajectories towards progress (Silova 2010, p. 5), these reforms have been imposed by such “expert” organisations as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank; in other cases they have been voluntarily borrowed by policymakers in the former socialist states for fear of “falling behind” internationally (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe 2006, p. 189; see also, Silova & Steiner-Khamsi 2008).

SBM is specifically the transfer of decision-making and/or authority over school governance from the national government to the school level (World Bank, 2007). This is typically done in the formation of a committee of parents, teachers, and school administrators who theoretically help manage the school both in line with national government policies while also meeting the needs of the local constituents serviced by individual schools. Although the decisions are supposedly made at the local level, there is meant to be vertical integration between local school committees, sub-national govern-

ing structures, and national education strategies.

The logic behind SBM is neo-liberal in that the strategy of educational decentralisation by policy makers at the national level hopes to increase local participation by encouraging community stakeholders to help make school decisions and contribute funds to school development, allowing the stakeholders of schools to participate in a marketplace of educational services. Neoliberalism is the, “ideology that advocates the dominance of a competition-driven market model. Within this doctrine, individuals in a society are viewed, if viewed at all, as autonomous, rational producers and consumers whose decisions are motivated primarily by economic or material concerns” (Farmer, 2005, p. 5). The very goal of SBM is to reduce the size of the national government in hopes of providing more autonomy at local levels. Proponents of SBM state such a strategy will “expand access to education and improve its quality” (Shoraku, 2008, p.2), similar to the goal of LSS-DP. Moreover, SBM will foster educational demand in the community; share the financial and human costs of running a school; educate the community about larger educational problems—the disincentives to schooling—rather than the more basic problems like inadequate supply of learning materials.

Critics of SBM have discredited some of the very claims advocated by proponents of decentralisation, and have also challenged the neoliberal logic used to support SBM. In terms of the latter,

one critic labelled the educational environment created by such decentralisation as “aggregated individualism,” (Robertson, 1999 p. 288) and schools that are comprised of a “‘community’ of individual consumers” (Robertson, 1999 p. 293). Viewing a school’s population as a group of individual consumers of educational services alters the very meanings and purpose of education. In this conceptualisation, education becomes a technical process, not something that is to be “understood as a moral and political practice that always presupposes particular renditions of what represents legitimate knowledge, values, citizenships, modes of understanding, and views of the future” (Giroux & Giroux 2006, p. 28). Instead, decentralisation of educational governance has been concerned with the supply and demand of education, often marginalising all conceptions of “quality education.”

Critics of SBM also claim the strategy does not achieve its very goals. First, there is limited evidence that the re-structuring of accountability and management structures actually leads to improved quality of education. Second, introducing teacher autonomy too quickly without adequate training often leads to ineffective reforms. Third, decentralising management to the school level increases variations within the country, thereby widening the gap between rich and poor areas. In the end, there is little evidence that SBM has actually achieved its stated goals, and instead has perhaps increased inequality within and between various locations.

The Cambodian education system is exemplar of global educational reform packages articulated inside international development agencies and then placed into a local system of education. The result has been a system where educational services are individualised and sold to the highest bidder. Education as a commodity is firmly embedded inside mass schooling, and the very purpose of education has already shifted from being a social to individual good (Brehm, forthcoming). This is evidenced by the growing disparities between urban and rural educational experiences as well as the vast system of private tutoring where everything from extra classes to exam papers are sold by teachers to students (Brehm & Silova, 2012). These problems stem most likely from the motives used for decentralisation. As King and Guerra (2005) have pointed out, “One of the reasons [that SBM has not achieved its stated goals] is that educational decentralisation, including SBM in East Asia, has been often introduced for political and fiscal, rather than educational, motives (as cited in Shoraku, 2008, p. 5).

SCHOOL BASED MANAGEMENT IN CAMBODIAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Cambodia first introduced SBM in 1998 (Shoraku, 2008, p. 4). This was the time when Cambodia was perceived by the international community to be “stable” after a contentious period beginning when the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia completed its work in 1993 (Curtis, 1998). Not only were factions of the Khmer Rouge still holding on to power in northern Cambodia, but also the two leading political parties were competing for total control of government after power was split in 1993 when there was no clear electoral winner. By 1998, Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, passed away, and an unsuccessful coup by the FUNCINPEC party resulted in the Cambodia People’s Party, lead by Hun Sen, to take full control of the government. It was stability similar to that of Singapore: a strong government that eliminated opposition and defied most elements of liberal democracy found in its laws and constitution.

The push for universal access to primary education accompanied the call for School Based Management. Not only was the management of schools supposed to be decentralised, but also the new managers of school administration were charged with enrolling more students and providing a “high quality education.” This international plan was codified in the Education for All Cambodian National Plan written in 2003. The main objectives of the plan were (UNESCO 2003, p.1):

1. Ensuring equitable access to basic education;
2. Enabling quality and efficiency improvement;
3. Capacity building for decentralization through enabling operational autonomy of schools and institutions.

The main feature of decentralisation at the school level was the creation of School Support Committees (SSC). These committees, originally designed for primary schools, are comprised of elected stakeholders in a commune or village, such as the Village Chief, the Commune Chief, Laymen, teachers, principals and also villagers. The responsibilities of SSCs include stimulating the schooling of children, especially girls and disadvantaged children; motivating parents to enrol children in school; preventing pupil repetition and dropout; establishing a pro-education community environment; and trying to make the school development plan relevant to children’s basic learning needs (MoEYS 2002). Moreover, the SSC was the organisation that connected the community to the school. Theoretically, the SSC established the last link in the vertical integration of educational decentralisation: national ministry of education, provincial office of education, district office of education, school administration, school support committee, and local community.

One of the main functions of the SSC in the beginning was to be a financial contributor to the school.

This happened because education expenditures in Cambodia, particularly for teacher salaries, have decreased as a percentage of GDP since the World Bank's interventions in the late 1990s (Engle, 2011). Despite the small budget allocated to education recurrent expenditures compared to other South East Asian nations (see Benveniste, et al., 2008), the MoEYS under spent its 2011 budget by \$29 million, a pattern that has existed since 2009 (personal communication, John C. Friend-Pereira,

Advocacy Management Adviser for the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association, 17 February 2012). More recently, however, the SSC has been used to help plan and support school development activities (MoEYS and UNICEF 2005). Shoraku (2008) reports that the SSC has partial authority over the PAP, which are grants provided by the MoEYS to individual schools to meet the local development needs. The effectiveness and transparency of this new authority to administer PAPs is still debated and accomplished unevenly throughout Cambodia.

Despite the mechanisms (i.e., PAP grants) put in place within a theoretically integrated decentralisation plan from the ministry to the community, issues have emerged regarding the effectiveness of the SSC to meet of the rationale behind SBM. For instance, SBM suggests as more people participate in the management of schools through committees like the SSC, their awareness of low enrolment

rates, attendance rates, and academic performance will go up. A study conducted by Shoraku (2008) reports findings to the opposite effect:

The findings of the study show that the parents have little participation in school decision-making. The parents are not motivated enough to participate in school management. Decision-making power still remains in the hands of few who have already been in positions of authority in the communities. In spite of the recent reforms, the style of school management maintains the status quo (p.13).

The introduction of SSCs was intended to create the space for SBM to function at the school level. Yet some of the management of schools has been found to remain the same as before the introduction of the SSCs. This may suggest on one level that SBM has failed to achieve its intended outcomes. But, as other educational development interventions have shown, unintended outputs often result from programs, and have profound outcomes for society. Does SBM—and specifically the SSC—produce outcomes other than the increase in knowledge among the SSC members about school operations and decision-making? In the next section, the goals, objectives, and activities of the LSSDP are explored to determine if they share similar characteristics with Shoraku's (2008) findings as well the possibility for any unintended outputs.



UNPACKING THE GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND ACTIVITIES OF LSSDP

Various TLC publications have used different words to describe the goal of LSSDP (see LSSDP evaluation report, 2011). For the purpose of this report, the version that captures two aforementioned quotes will be used: "The ultimate goal of school development is to work with the community and to build capacity for long-term, sustainable self-sufficiency and improved access to and quality of secondary education in Siem Reap, Cambodia" (TLC website). The objectives of LSSDP are as follows:

1. Mobilise a School Support Committee to identify the needs of the participating communities and schools.
2. Assess the specialised teacher training and curriculum development needs of each school.
3. Assist School Support Committees in developing and implementing school development plans to address the educational needs of each village.

The goals and objectives fit within the logic of School Based Management (SBM) and the various MoEYS strategic plans since 1998. The School Support Committee (SSC), which is mandated at the primary level but not the secondary level, is the main feature of the program and aims to have School Development Work Plans created to ad-

dress local community needs. These plans would then be passed to the district and provincial levels, integrating each school into sub-national governing structures. Moreover, these interventions not only focus on school management through the SSC but also by increasing the quality of education through teacher training and curriculum development.

The outputs of the program between October 2011 and February 2012 also align with the logic of SBM:

1. Tile the floors of three classrooms, pave the school grounds, and build a school fence.
2. Provide study materials and textbooks for the school and libraries.
3. Train the SSC members on various skills like communication and monitoring and evaluation.
4. Help the SSC members create School Development Work Plans.
5. Provide teacher training through the Provincial Teacher Training College.

These activities make clear that LSSDP is achieving its stated objectives and is also in line with the broader logic of SBM as articulated by the MoEYS. But have these interventions actually

achieved vertical integration, deconcentration of decision-making, an increase in student enrolment, and an improvement in educational quality—all the intended outcomes of SBM? Moreover, how will these interventions be sustained as suggested in the literature on the LSSDP? w

servations, interviews, and surveys were used to collect data on various aspects of the SSC's work. LSSDP program staff members collected the observations after each SSC monthly meeting; interviews were conducted with LSSDP staff members; and a survey was given to all SSC members (see appendix for data collection tools).

To determine the effectiveness of the SSC in regards to the intended outcomes of SBM, ob-



The findings presented here suggest the SSCs are not meeting the intended outcomes of SBM. First, although the attendance rates between October 2011 and January 2012 for SSC meetings were 8 people (3 women) and 11 people (5 women) respectively, it was observed that both schools had a difficult time discussing curricular issues. By contrast, both SSCs were observed to have full participation by the committee members, always used an agenda, and were conducted in an orderly manner. This suggests that despite the effectiveness of conducting meetings as an organized committee, meaningful conversations about the actual process of education—the curriculum and pedagogy—eluded the members of the SSC.

Although curriculum and pedagogy were rarely discussed during SSC meetings, the School Development Work Plan was typically addressed. Moreover, there were times when the SSC discussed the rate of dropouts. When the issue of dropout students did arise, SSC members discussed ways to approach the family to reintegrate the student in school or the larger reasons why there is a high dropout rate (one answer being that moving to Thailand to work is an attractive option for some families). Yet, in one of the schools where the LSSDP intervention has occurred, it is found that there has actually been an increase in dropouts since the program began, from 5 dropouts in 2008 to 12 dropouts in 2009, and to 39 dropouts in 2010. Notwithstanding the likely population increases in this school

between 2008-2010, this suggests that the SSC itself cannot prevent dropouts from occurring, perhaps because the larger socio-economic factors involved in parental decisions about child labour in lieu of schooling is beyond the reach of the SSC.

The interviews with LSSDP staff members revealed another interesting finding. One LSSDP staff member opined many SSC members either did not have time or did not feel comfortable monitoring teachers work inside the school. This was because coming to school often takes time away from farming, as well as causes some stress within villages where teachers live (i.e., in rural schools, teachers often live with families, causing complicated relationships between villagers and teachers, especially when trying to hold a teacher accountable). This suggests that although school committees are supposed to increase education quality, it is difficult to create change inside classrooms.

By contrast, it is abundantly clear that the school environment is the easiest piece of development the SSC members feel comfortable working on. The School Development Work Plans highlight this finding: in almost all cases, tangible “brick-and-mortar” projects are picked as the most pressing issues inside the school. Thus, the SSC focuses on fundraising for these projects. This is similar to Shoraku’s (2008) findings that suggest SSCs remain focused on fundraising, not necessarily developmental changes to the curriculum or teaching.

Instead, materials such as books were provided and teachers received one-off trainings that are typically determined by the teacher trainers, not in response to a need within the school. Additionally, the “brick-and-mortar” development activities are justified using the logic of Child Friendly Schools, an international policy adopted by MoEYS, that suggest school environments are one of the six dimensions needed to achieve quality education.

In addition to privileging construction projects instead of curriculum/pedagogical reforms in School Development Work Plans, SSCs also displayed a relative lack of knowledge or interest in connecting with the sub-national levels of educational governance. One finding from the SSC survey revealed that there is a limited connection between the SSC and the Provincial and District Offices of Education. SSC members on average did not feel comfortable to communicate with the POE or DOE using any mode. By contrast, the SSC members felt very comfortable speaking with other community members. These findings suggest that vertical integration envisioned by SBM is not occurring as intended. The SSC does not hold teachers accountable and the SSCs do not communicate with the POE or DOE. Yet, the SSCs feel comfortable communicating with the communities and working as a group, or what can be called “horizontal integration.”

These findings complicate the intended outcome of the LSSDP interventions. The SSCs are not verti-

cally integrated with the sub-national level; decision-making includes the community’s voice, but the PAP and other financial elements are still managed by the principals¹ ; there has actually been an increase in student dropout; and improvements to educational quality have focused on tangible projects, not interventions into teaching or learning strategies (beyond sporadic training from the Provincial Teacher Training College). This suggests the SBM intended outcomes are not occurring as originally envisioned. This being the case, what is possible for LSSDP to achieve that can be considered “long-term, sustainable self-sufficiency”?



¹ In fact, it has been impossible to record monthly financial records of the SSC at least since January 2011.

SUSTAINABILITY FOR WHAT?

Sustainability has been an important concept in development work worldwide. Yet, there has been a lack of consistency in the term's interpretation. Moreover, issues of sustainability often have an incomplete perception of the problems of poverty (Lélé, 2002). Within the outputs of the objectives of LSSDP, sustainability could refer to (1) the technical skills needed for a functional SSC; (2) the construction of school infrastructure; (3) capacity building and training of teachers; or (4) the financial support of a school by the community (to reduce donor dependency).

However, these four areas neither can be sustained for practical reasons nor have been adequately developed during the three-year program. First, the technical skills needed for a functional SSC have been identified as (1) the ability to conduct PRAs; (2) the ability to communicate as a team, with the

community and with the POE; (3) the ability to design and implement a school development work plan; (4) the ability to fundraise money from inside and outside of the community and (5) the ability to monitor and evaluate the school development work plan. Yet the survey revealed that for every capacity identified, the SSC members desire more training because they do not feel capable performing these tasks individually. It is therefore hypothesised that if the LSSDP interventions stopped after the self-prescribed three-year timeline, so too would the functioning of an SSC. This is high-

lighted in the average number of additional years SSC members perceive the LSSDP interventions will continue: 4 years. This is worrisome for a program that is designed to be three years in length and will complete the first cycle in its first school by August 2012. Second, infrastructure, although requiring large, upfront capital expenditures, which LSSDP provides, requires maintenance and repairs for long-term sustainability. This means no matter how long a building will last, there will be future financial costs to keep the buildings running. This aspect has not been included in the LSSDP activities, so therefore it is unclear if the community or school will continue to have enough financial support to keep up the various new buildings and renovations. Third, the capacity building and training of teachers is one-off and does not build on previous trainings provided over the three-year program cycle. This type of one-off training in lieu of capacity building as a creative process rarely leads to sustainability (Pearson, 2011). Fourth, the financial support of the community, although impressive for impoverished communities, pales in comparison to the needed money to implement development work plans (see LSSDP monitoring report, 2011). This suggests that although the community is able to raise some money, the actual development activities as articulated by the LSSDP in the School Development Work Plan cannot be maintained once the LSSDP exits a school.

In addition to the difficulties of each LSSDP activity being sustained, there is a larger problem of national education policies and strategies being altered that would make all of the LSSDP interventions obsolete and thus un-sustained. Sustainability is difficult to achieve because what is to be sustained—school based management—can change as new international standards or best practices emerge and travel worldwide. School Based Man-

agement (SBM) was not always the standard way to manage a school. It therefore should not be seen as a static management style for the future of education systems in Cambodia. Management systems will change, and when they do the importance of school committees may wane. Thus, focusing on the sustainability of a committee that may cease to exist once the government changes policies may not be the best goal for a program.



Despite the difficulties of achieving sustainability of the various outlined objectives of the LSSDP, there is an unintended outcome that has the possibility of actually being sustained post-LSSDP intervention and post-SBM. The SSCs undergoing the LSSDP interventions exhibit a high level of connection to individual families. On the survey that asked how confident SSC members felt speaking about education to community members, the average between two SSCs was 3.4 on a scale of 5. By contrast, when asked if the SSC was able to get children to re-enrol, the SSC members ranked their ability, on average, at 2.5 out of 5. This is a noticeable difference, and one that indicates the SSC members understand their own value: communicating with the community, not preventing dropouts or encouraging enrolment because of the complicated socio-economic realities of those decisions.

Communication with the community is an important output of the SSC that falls outside of the goals and objectives of the program. Yet, research has shown that quality education increases when families are more involved in the education of their children (Epstein, 1995). Involved parents—either through encouraging learning at home or instilling positive attitudes about schooling—contribute to the personal growth of children as well as their academic success. There are various ways to garner parental involvement beyond shared decision-making or advocacy campaigns, such as focusing on parenting skills, home learning environments, communication between home and school

and volunteering. (Bauch, 1994; Davies, 1991). What would happen if LSSDP focused on building the capacities of the SSC members (as individuals) and the SSC (as an institution) to strengthen the connection between school and home?

TOWARDS A NEW SUSTAINABILITY

The LSSDP set out noble goals and objectives to meet the government requirements in terms of school based management. It filled a noticeable hole: the lack of community voice in the creation of School Development Work Plans. But after three years of operation, it is clear that many of the outcomes are not sustainable in and of themselves, and moreover the SSC had a difficult time vertically integrating into the POE and DOE sub-national governance structures. Similar to previous research, the schools undergoing the LSSDP interventions continue to experience a level of decision-making concentrated at levels above the community. The intended vertical sustainability of school based management strategies, in other words, has not materialised in Cambodia just like it has not in other countries.

Despite these shortcomings, there has been a noticeable unintended outcome of the LSSDP interventions that has the potential of being sustained beyond LSSDP or the current “best practice” of School Based Management. That is the ability to



get individual households more involved with their children's education. This does not necessarily mean simply by contributing more money to a fundraising campaign or by attending a meeting inside the school, but by actually engaging their children about school issues at home. This capacity development requires committed community members like those on the School Support Committees who are able to have informal and formal conversations and discussions with families throughout the village and commune. These sorts of activities create horizontal sustainability where the individual members of a community and village are connected through knowledge about, and values of education. In one sense, this goal moves away from schools providing educational services for a community of individual consumers and instead towards communities deeply involved and interested in the education of their children and their neighbour's children.

Focusing on horizontal rather than vertical sustainability requires new goals and objectives to be created for LSSDP. The goal would have to centre not on increasing access to education—an output SSC members claim they are not confident pursuing—but on the ability for a committee of concerned individuals to raise the general awareness of schooling inside homes; to start a community conversation about the values and purposes of education, which most likely will have the bi-product of increasing educational quality through more engaged students. The objectives would have to balance meeting current government educational

strategies while also recognising that those very objectives could change at any moment, depending on the development partners' educational agenda. Moreover, altering the goals and objectives of the program will make it possible to measure the success of the program differently: no longer would the program have to ask if the SSC is functioning five years after the intervention stopped; rather the summative evaluation question would be "Does the community continuously discuss educational ideas at home and with neighbours?"

School Based Management is one way to organise a school. It is based in neoliberal logic that turns education into a commodity. Cambodia is an exemplar of this global reform package being implemented by Development Partners. NGOs have developed many programs to work within this framework to increase community participation in the creation of School Development Work Plans. These programs have been successful as far as the activities that meet the broad goals and objectives outlined prior to the intervention. However, unintended outcomes have emerged that seem more important for long-term sustainability of community participation in schools than School Based Management. By changing the goals and objectives of these programs, horizontal sustainability can be embraced, which will start a new conversation about the values and purpose of education.

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