



**BROKEN
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United
Nations Human Rights Council 4th Cycle – 46th Session

Right to Education

Country Review: Cambodia

Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK

October 2023

By Ruth Lakica & Enes Gisi

Kingsfordweg 151, 1043 GR

Amsterdam, Netherlands

+31687406567

upr@brokenchalk.org

www.brokenchalk.org

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Broken Chalk is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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I. Introduction: an overview of the Cambodian education system

1. Today, the state controls education in Cambodia through the Ministry of Education at the national level and the Department of Education at the provincial level. The Cambodian education system includes preschool, primary, general secondary, tertiary, and vocational education.
2. After finishing primary school, students move on to three years of compulsory lower secondary education. Students then can continue to upper secondary education or enter secondary-level vocational training programs offered by the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training. After completing upper secondary education, students must take a national high school exam. In 2019, approximately 68% of students passed. Students who pass the exam can enrol in two-year associate degree programs, four-year bachelor's degree programs and seven-year medical degree programs at the university. However, enrolment numbers into tertiary education are low, with only 13% of students entering the university system. All students also can enrol in vocational training programs or associate degrees.
3. In 2017, there were 7,144 primary schools nationwide and an additional ninety-six primary schools for disadvantaged students. In the same period, 46,149 staff members taught 2,022,061 primary school children. Primary education commonly starts at age six and lasts six years.
4. The Secondary Education Improvement Project (SEIP), a World Bank-funded project, has significantly improved lower-secondary education in Cambodia. It has seen increased enrolment in schools, construction of more school buildings, construction of houses for teachers in remote locations, renovation of classrooms, and installation of laboratories.
5. SEIP has trained teachers, community representatives, and people in charge of the management of schools.
6. This review will focus on areas of improvement related to the standard of learning, water and sanitation, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and gender inequality.

II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

7. the UPR working group reviewed Cambodia in January 2019. It received 198 recommendations and supported 173 recommendations in adopting its UPR outcome at Human Rights Council 41 in July 2019.
8. Cambodia supported recommendations related to the legal and general framework of implementation, universal and cross-cutting issues, civil and political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, women's rights, and rights of other vulnerable groups and persons.

9. Cambodia noted recommendations related to cooperation with special procedures, civil and political rights, and criminalisation of the deployment of children in armed conflicts.
10. In its letter to the Cambodian government, the High Commissioner for Foreign Affairs raised issues about child labour and a national action plan going up to 2025 to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.
11. It also encouraged enacting steps to safeguard the democratic sphere and address gender stereotyping, especially within familial contexts, while managing it in schools, communities, workplaces, and the media.

III. Poor Standard of Learning

12. While progress is tangible, children in Cambodia are still failing to reach learning standards appropriate for their age. According to UNICEF, nearly 25% of children in Grade 3 fail to write any words in a dictation test at the primary level. Only 27% of 3- to 5-year-olds are on track in literacy and numeracy development, and by the time they are 17 years old, 55% of adolescents will have dropped out of school.¹
13. Cambodian children continue to fall behind in school for several reasons, including needing to be adequately prepared for school, experiencing poor quality teaching and learning, and attending school irregularly.

IV. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

14. Clean water, proper sanitation system and good hygiene are essential to the survival and development of children.
15. In Cambodia, there is increasing evidence that insufficient sanitation, water, and handwashing facilities pose a barrier to children attending school and performing well, particularly affecting girls and making it more challenging for them to manage menstrual care while at school. Children with disabilities find it particularly difficult to go to school if there are no accessible bathrooms or if they are otherwise inadequate.

V. The Negative Impact of COVID-19

16. After enduring remote learning as schools opened and shut over the two years since the start of the pandemic, students in Cambodia have cautiously made their way back to in-person classes. However, for school-age children who grew up in the countryside, COVID-19 has widened an already deep economic divide that pushes children from low-income families out of the classroom and into manual labour, leading to school dropouts. This was due to the prolonged lockdown measures. Teenage students were pressured to take up jobs working on their families' farms or relocate to find work if they got the chance. For some students, it means the end of their education and the early start of an adult life labouring in the same professions as their parents. Not returning to school can result from the desire to be financially

independent as early as possible and the shame students older than the grade average say they would feel if they returned to school after a long break.

17. 1 in every 10 children who have already dropped out or are at high risk of dropping out is working full-time or part-time.

VI. Gender Inequality in Schools

18. Due to the long-term consequences of the Cambodian Civil War and the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia currently ranks 144 out of 189 countries in the 2020 Gender Inequality Index. In 2014, while 88% of girls transitioned from primary to lower secondary school, only 1 in 5 graduated from upper secondary school.
19. According to UNESCO, girls are affected by harmful social norms. In many rural communities, education is not highly valued, and they often lack the life skills necessary to navigate their challenges. After their education, they may be pressured to work in factories or rice fields to provide immediate income for their families.

VII. Recommendations

20. To ensure that every child learns, Broken Chalk recommends the government of Cambodia focus on equitable and inclusive access to education for children with disabilities, children from ethnic minorities and children living in rural and urban poor areas.
21. Broken Chalk recommends the government of Cambodia allocate a substantial public budget to education and build on the current momentum to reform the education sector.
22. Broken Chalk recommends the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport and other partners in Cambodia to ensure that children go to and stay in school and, most importantly, learn well there.

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**BROKEN
CHALK**

Kingsfordweg 151, 1043 GR

Amsterdam, Netherlands

+31685639758 | info@brokenchalk.org | www.brokenchalk.org

<https://twitter.com/brokenchalk>

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ⁱ <https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/education>