



News

The Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) has worked with the Child Rights Foundation (CRF) to put Research Findings into Policy Implications and Actions

The question ‘Why are universities engaging in the conduct of research?’ has been widely asked by practitioners. This question is attached with doubts and the university’s key role in putting the research findings into policy, planning, and action processes. Most people have only learned that universities conduct academic research, use results for knowledge advancement, and create concepts and theories. Some people even seriously say that the publication of university research work is only displayed on library shelves. As Cambodia’s oldest public university and leading higher education institution, the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) promotes high-quality teaching and research practices to serve the community. The Policy on Research Development and Innovation (2020-2024)



Pupil participation in the comprehensive school safety framework at primary schools in Stung Treng province, Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

More than 60 nations worldwide have endorsed the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF) to promote education quality and ensure a safe learning environment. The CSSF aims to take a participatory approach to inform risk and protect educators and learners from harm, violation, injury, and death in schools and other learning spaces. This article adopts the CSSF to analyze pupil participation in interventions at Cambodia's primary schools. The study focuses on exposure, awareness and knowledge, interventions, and the engagement of girls and boys in safe schools. We conducted a survey with 760 pupils at 34 primary schools in Cambodia's Stung Treng province for quantitative data and case studies with key stakeholders for qualitative data. The study reveals that (1) primary school pupils remain exposed to natural and man-made hazards; insufficient infrastructure and limited interventions are the cause of exposure leading to vulnerability for pupils; (2) school infrastructure and awareness-raising to increase pupils' knowledge and attitudes significantly promote safe school interventions. Whole school safety and educational continuity management help increase pupils' knowledge and positive attitude, schools do not have the financial resources to carry out interventions; (3) Girls play more of a role as leaders and deliverers, but boys actively carry out activities for interventions. Girls need more instruction to participate in school talks and have unequal access to resources. This first empirical study explores the implications of gendered participation in CSSF implementation and addresses a literature gap related to safe school intervention in developing countries like Cambodia.

1. Background

In recent decades, Cambodia's education system has experienced dynamic reforms anchored in decentralization and deconcentration [1]. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) has made a significant effort, following the 1990 Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), to increase access to primary education nationwide [2]. Since the 2000s, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) have prioritized access to education to ensure that all boys and girls complete at least 9 years of basic education [3]. Between 1990 and 2015, Cambodia achieved the UN-based primary Universal Education-related Millennium

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Development Goal (MDG2) with a 94% net enrollment rate in primary schools [4]. Cambodia has adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) to achieve quality education between 2015 and 2030 [5]. Key education SDG targets 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunity for all' are in line with Cambodia's Rectangular Strategy Phase IV (2019–2023) [6] and National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2019–2023 [7]. The MoEYS also developed the Education Strategic Plan (2019–2023) to improve the quality of education, science, and technology [8].

The Ministry has implemented policies and delivered interventions to eradicate national illiteracy. As a result, Cambodia has achieved an adult literacy rate (15 and above) of 84.7% in 2022–2023 [9]. In particular, the MoEYS has paid great attention to primary education because this level is fundamentally required to achieve self-development. In addition, primary schools cannot provide high-quality educational outcomes for most pupils [10]. In 2019, there were 13,300 public schools, including 11,529 primary (66.7%) and 1771 lower and secondary levels, with an average pupil-teacher ratio of 34 pupils [11]. The number of pupils enrolled in primary education increased from 52.0% in 1997 to over 90.0% (90.5% of girls) in 2022–2023. The latest data shows that 86.5% of pupils completed primary school in 2022–2023, including 89.4% of girls and 85.3% of boys [9]. The MoEYS has put strong efforts into increasing enrollment by allowing all children to access free education. Only 33% of 12-year-old children finished their primary education between 1995 and 2000 [12].

However, pupils at primary school still demonstrate low academic performance based on national assessments [13], and some are in need of grade repetition [14]. Students' education remains a concern as their enrollment in early childhood education are limited, and it was still off-track in achieving education-related Goal 4 by 2030 [11]. In December 2017, Cambodia organized the International Student Assessment (PISA)-D with more than 5000 15-year-old students in grade 7 or above from different parts of Cambodia to take a 2-h science, mathematics, and reading test. The assessment reports Cambodia has a high percentage of pupils performing below the baseline level of proficiency in reading, mathematics, and science [15]. There is also evidence of substantial learning loss for grade six students, as average achievement levels in 2021 are 0.30–0.75 standard deviations lower than the 2016 averages. The estimated learning loss is more pronounced in math than in Khmer [16]. Comparatively, girls are significantly better than boys in reading. However, in mathematics, gender does not significantly affect student performance [13].

Chen et al. (2021) and [17] reveal that primary schools are unsafe. Pupils' schooling is affected by both natural hazards and man-made hazards. The Emergency Preparedness and Response Plan for the Education Sector (2019) has considered education one of the most directly affected by natural hazards. This plan has identified different risks students face, such as floods, storms, droughts, lightning strikes, fires, and epidemics [5]. Natural hazards have disrupted schooling, so students cannot attend classes per the regular school calendar [18]. Natural hazards have placed pressure on pupils and threatened them, especially due to their unique physical, cognitive, and physiological immaturity [19]. The study by the MoEYS in 2013 shows that 1280 schools were affected by floods. Over 155 schools were suspended, preventing at least 50,000 children from attending school for a period of one to nine weeks [20]. It has been found that pupils' vulnerability depends upon geographical areas and the socioeconomic conditions of their families [21] and that girls are more vulnerable to floods [22]. Moreover, floods caused pupils from low-income families to be absent at high rates at the beginning of each academic year [23].

Pupils are also exposed to man-made hazards. A survey on school-related gender-based violence of 1194 pupils, including 602 girls and 592 boys, confirms the high rate of incidences of emotional and physical abuse at school or on the way to school from grade 4 to grade 9. Students experienced emotional abuse (60%–70%), physical abuse (45%–50%), and sexual abuse (20%–30%). Boys experienced a higher rate of physical violence than girls, but both genders suffered similar emotional abuse [24]. Moreover, 45% of teachers perceived that boys and girls should get a different disciplinary measure for the same misbehavior. They opined boys played more, leading to more emotional and physical violations [25]. According to Ref. [26], Cambodian girls' schooling is influenced by a Cambodian code of conduct for women or the Chhbar Srei, and their freedom can be inferred from the expression 'Don't go for a walk to somebody's house'. Families still prefer sending boys over girls, making it even more challenging for girls to complete 9-year basic education levels. Also, girls may need to drop out of school before completing it to materially and financially support their family's income [27].

Since the 2000s, Cambodia has adopted safe schools through curriculum integration and interventions to protect students and teachers from death, injury, and harm. Over time, safe school interventions have developed through policies and frameworks to ensure students' safety before, during, and after hazards [18]. This paper analyzes pupil participation and gender integration in the CSSF at primary schools in Cambodia's Stung Treng province. The article examines (a) exposure to natural and man-made hazards; (b) awareness and knowledge of pupils on safe schools; (c) safe learning infrastructure and facilities; and (d) the participation of girls and boys in safe school interventions. The research adopts the Comprehensive School Safety Framework (CSSF) to address the core issues of school interventions and focuses on practical applications to improve the quality of education in Cambodia. This paper also contributes to strategies or knowledge needed to implement the SDGs, particularly SDG4: Quality Education, SDG5: Gender Equality,

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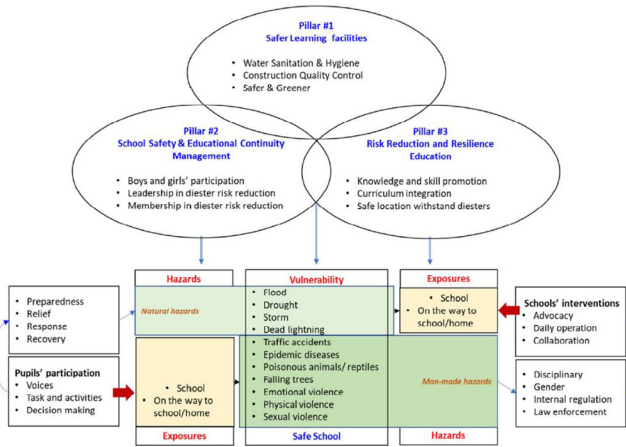
¹ Emotional abuse (by teacher): teacher is shouting or cursing at you; calling you names; deduct marks from tests/homework, making you buy things, pay fine to teacher, stand in the front of the classroom or in the school grounds, making you do chores.

² Physical abuse (by teacher): teacher is making you hurt yourself (sit your knuckles on the table, make you stand on one leg for a long time); teacher is hitting you (punch your arm, hit you with hand, ruler, stick, rolled up paper).

³ Sexual abuse (by anyone): someone says things to you or shows you images that were related to sex that you did not like; someone has tried to touch a part of your body that you do not like to be touched on. The research does not specify the perpetrator as being the teacher, because this could be considered a very sensitive question to answer during an interview at school. Therefore, the perpetrator can virtually be anyone.

⁴ In 2007, the MoEYS and Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) took out of the mandatory curriculum at public schools. But, a short version of Chhbar Srei was replaced for students from grade 7 to 9 in Khmer literature subject.

Fig. 1: International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction 96 (2023) 103932.



Source: Chet et al., 2023

Fig. 2: Conceptualizing the comprehensive school safety framework¹.

aims to be Cambodia’s leading university in applied and academic research. Moreover, RUPP’s vision is to be Cambodia’s flagship university, with a national standing in teaching and learning, research and innovation, and social engagement. RUPP is working towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and making contributions nationally, nationally, and globally. This institution wishes to promote Cambodia’s national cultural and natural heritage by providing high-quality research and innovation that actively engages society. The RUPP has made significant efforts to demonstrate best-practice research and social engagement in the Cambodian higher education sector. This has led to national and international organizations’ recognition as a national leader in this endeavor. The research findings provided by the RUPP have comprehensively contributed to knowledge advancement, policy, and planning implications. In recent years, the RUPP has prioritized promoting the research findings in planning, policy implications, and action. For example, in cooperation with the Child Rights Foundation Organization (CRF), the RUPP has conducted fieldwork in four districts of Stung Treng: Siem Pang, Siem Bouk, Borey O’svay Senchey, and Thalaborivath between September 2022 and January 2023. The study interviewed 768 students at primary school for quantitative data at 34 primary schools in Stung Treng province. Also, participatory tools were used to collect qualitative data after getting preliminary findings from the survey, including key informants, group discussions, in-depth interviews, harvest workshops, and consultative meetings.

Providing a large sample size has enabled its results and findings to be better generalized to the context of Stung Treg province. The result of the research was

published in the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction (IJDRR)² by Professor CHET Chealy [Rector of RUPP], Professor SOK Serey [Vice Head of Research Office, RUPP], Mr. CHEN Tepsam Ol [Executive Director of CRF], and Professor CHEY Chan Ourn Chey [Head, Graduate School of Science, RUPP] (Figs. 1 and 2). IJDRR, with CiteScore of 7.4 and Impact Factor of 5, publishes fundamental and applied research, critical reviews, policy papers, and case studies focusing on multi-disciplinary research that aims to reduce the impact of natural, technological, social, and intentional disasters. IJDRR stimulates the exchange of ideas and knowledge transfer on disaster research, mitigation, adaptation, prevention, and risk reduction at all local, national, and international geographical scales.

The publication at the IJDR, along with local publishers, including Cambodia Journal of Basic and Applied Research (CJBAR) and Cambodia Education Review of the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoEYS), are important scientific-based evidence and case studies to support the revision of guideline for School Safety Framework. His Excellency Academician Dr. HANG Chuon Naron, Minister of MoEYS, endorsed the new version of the Guideline for School Safety Framework on 21st September 2023 to promote child rights and resilience in the education sector. On 24th October 2023, the National Launching Workshop on The Document of “Child-Friendly School Program” Guideline for School Safety Framework was organized at Sokha Hotel, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. His Excellency Academician Dr. Nat Bunroeun, Secretary of State of the MoEYS, presided over the workshop, which had 110 participants (Fig. 3).

RUPP is widely considered the nation’s leading higher education institution in research output. In addition, the RUPP Strategic Plan (2019–2023) places special attention on both academic and applied research across the Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), social science, and humanities disciplines. The university works closely with government agencies, NGOs, and research institutions to conduct academic and applied research. RUPP scholars’ research findings in Cambodia have been widely used for policy, planning, and actions. For example, the “Child-Friendly School Program” Guideline for School Safety Framework” product developed by MoEYS and CRF with financial support from Plan International Cambodia and Prudence Foundation was based on scientific evidence of research conducted by the Research Office of the RUPP. In recent years, NGOs have shifted to more work with academic scholars because the universities are enriched with experts and scientists in diversified fields. This guideline, developed by MoEYS and CRF, is a footprint for government agencies, NGOs, and schools to carry out program interventions to reduce

1 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212420923004120>

2 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/international-journal-of-disaster-risk-reduction/about/aims-and-scope>



Fig. 3: National Launching workshop on The Document of “Child-Friendly School Program” Guideline for School Safety Framework” presided by and held on 24th October 2023 at Sokha Hotel, Phnom Penh, Cambodia. by His Excellency Academician Dr. Nat Bunroeun, Secretary of State of the MoEYS.

exposure to hazards and reduce pupils’ vulnerability to hazards where exposure cannot be eliminated. The guideline has well recognized the importance of the revised Guideline for School Safety Framework (GSSF),

which consists of Pillar 1: Safe Learning Environment, Pillar 2: Disaster Management and Education Continuity, and Pillar 3: Risk Reduction and Resilience Education and Foundation: Enabling Environment and Policy.