

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

Department of Policy

Policy Paper

The Risk and Vulnerability of Pupils at Primary Schools in Cambodia and the Key Mitigation Measure

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Received: July, 2022/ Accepted: October, 2022

Key Messages

- Pupils at primary schools remained seriously affected by dangers and threats of floods, drought, storms, and epidemic diseases. Various reasons were causing their vulnerabilities, but geographical areas and socio-economic conditions were the main factors.
- The disaster risk reduction in education has become a long-term investment of both the Royal Government of Cambodia, development partners, and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) to ensure pupils at primary schools are safe for learning and teaching.
- Disaster risk reduction in education is a significant program to improve the capacity of teachers and principals and pupils for a better understanding of school safety plan or disaster risk reduction action plan related to safe school for disaster risk reduction, incidents, and violations.
- Safe school programs help to build the capacity of principals and teachers in safe schools. Therefore, the Disaster Management Secretariat of the Ministry of Education Youth and

Sports (MoEYS) should continue working with the NGOs partner and PoE to ensure their implementation throughout its agents at sub-national levels.

• As one of the national policies adopted by the MoEYS, the Ministry should consider allocating a budget for some activities or expenditures for schools to carry out disaster risk reduction activities or some key activities to support the safe school framework.

Key Word: Disaster risk reduction, safe school program, hazard, primary school, education continuity, Cambodia

To cite this article: Chen, T., Samath, K., & Thou, P. (2022). The Risk and Vulnerability of Pupils at Primary Schools in Cambodia and the Key Mitigation Measure. *Cambodia Education Review*, *5*(2), 1-16.

1. Introduction

Education is believed to support Cambodia's ambition to transition from a lower-middleincome country to an upper-middle-income country by 2030 and a developed country by 2050 (MoEYS, 2014). The Rectangular Strategy Phase IV has prioritized human resource development, and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) is committed to accomplishing the objectives of quality education, science, and technology (RGoC, 2018). The MoEYS is responsible for the education sector, and basic education contains two levels: (1) primary and (2) secondary education. The primary level covers the first six years, from grades 1 to 6, and the secondary level includes grades 7 to 12 (Khut, 2021). The Education Strategic Plan (2019-2023) was formulated in 2019 to promote the education sector in Cambodia. The ESP has focused on five pillars: (1) Pillar 1: Implementation of the Teacher Policy Action Plan, (2) Pillar 2: Review curriculum and textbooks and improve learning environments, (3) Pillar 3: Enforcement of inspection, (4) Pillar 4: Improve learning evaluation to meet national, regional and international levels; and (5) Pillar 5: Higher education reform (MoEYS, 2021a).

According to the MoEYS (2021), there were 14,522 schools across the country in the 2018-19 school year, including 13,300 public and 1,222 private schools. Approximately 80% of the public schools (994) were located in urban areas. Out of the total 13,300 public schools, 11,529 were primary level, and the rest were secondary level (1,771) (MoEYS, 2021b). Cambodia has achieved an adult literacy rate (15-Above) of 87.8%; the target was 84.8%. However, primary education remained a concern when female enrollment was still off-tracked, and male enrollment in any form of Early Childhood Education Program was constrained.

Primary Education is one of the most direct effects of natural hazards. Flood is a common occurrence and usually causes much more damage than droughts in the education sector. Over the last decades, floods in 2000, 2011, and 2013 are considered the most severe floods. Floods suffered hundreds of human deaths and thousands of animal deaths and damaged a thousand hectares of crops and schools. Thousands of students have disrupted their schooling or could not attend classes with the regular school calendar (MoEYS, 2014a). In late 2013, the MoEYS recorded 1,280 schools were affected by floods. Over 155 schools were suspended for one to nine weeks, preventing at least 50,000 children from starting in 2013. The loss and damage in the education sector from floods in 2013 were estimated to cost \$15 million (MoEYS, 2013).

In the past, the report on affected schools by flood or other events was unavailable except for the 2009 (typhoon Ketsana), 2011, and 2013 floods which affected 1,169, 1,200, and 1,242 schools, respectively (MoEYS, 2014b). It should be noted that there was a severe drought in 2015-16, but there was no official report on the total drought impact except the exert from the media. Among the many studies on these climatic hazards in Cambodia, few focus on the impacts of drought and flood on students, especially education and protection. The study aims to generate and take stock of knowledge to support the accomplishment of school safety programs in terms of equal opportunity for the participation of girls and boys, promotion of leadership and involvement, and challenges of girls in disaster risk management in Cambodia.

Today, floods and droughts have placed increased pressure and threats on students regarding health concerns such as malaria, diarrhea, undernutrition and social stability, and children's welfare (UNICEF, 2008). The disasters affect unique conditions of physical, cognitive, and physiological immaturity of the children (Save the Children, 2009). Every year floods delay classes and damage schools located in flood-prone areas. Due to bad road conditions, students have problems travelling to schools during the flood. In most cases, students are not safe to travel across rivers. At the same time, parents also hesitate to allow their children to go to school during the flood because children take a long time and have higher costs to reach schools. As a result, students, especially from low-income families, turn to a high absenteeism rate at the beginning of each academic year. Moreover, schools are used as emergency shelters during floods, damaging school structures, especially the school floor (ADPC, 2008).

In this policy paper, we determine the risk faced by pupils at primary school and the positive contribution of safe school programs for pupils' safety. The paper addresses upon (1)

risk and hazard facing by pupils, (2) disaster risk reduction intervention, and (3) impact of safe school program on pupils' education at primary level.

2. Research Methodology

This policy paper was written based on primary and secondary data and information collected at 34 primary schools in in Stung Treng province. Both pupils and teacher's teachers in grades 4, 5, and 6 were contacted for the interviews by using structured questionnaires for quantitative data. Qualitative data was also collected through key informants and in-depth interviews with relevant officers, local authorities, school principals, teachers, school support committee members, and pupils. The survey was carried out with 798 pupils and 173 teachers by two structured questionnaires at 34 primary schools of four districts of Stung Treng Province such as; Siem Pang, Siem Bouk, Borey O'svay Senchey, and Thalaborivath.

3. Result of Finding

3.1 The risk and hazard facing by pupils at primary school

Overall, pupils rated a moderate vulnerability to flooding, storm, and epidemic diseases; other types of risks and hazards were assessed as low and very low degrees, as illustrated in (**Figure1**.). Pupils at study schools were more likely to more serious dangers and threats to floods, storms, and epidemic diseases. Various reasons were causing their vulnerabilities, but geographical areas and socio-economic conditions were the main factors. Hazards and incidents might happen among pupils at school or on the way to school/home if there are no supporting mechanisms. Schools need to have good physical infrastructure and services. Moreover, schools must work with all the key stakeholders [Key Informant Interview with School Director].

Furthermore, cooperation from parents was also essential; parents must follow up and regularly communicate with the school about their schools. When schools provide parents with information about disasters or their children's education, they have to support the school for their children's safety. Some parents did not cooperate with schools at all. While schools worked hard to reduce physical violations, their parents were violated, which was a wrong model for them. Some pupils were too young to walk alone to school or to travel by boat; parents may consider company them or letting them come with other pupils to reduce risk on the way to school/home [In depth interview with school support committee].



Figure 1. Degree of incidents experiencing by pupils



Overall, teachers rated a "very low" degree of effects by dead lighting, deadly diseases, and falling trees; they assessed a "low" degree of impact by flood, drought, storm, traffic accidents, and epidemic disease. According to Plan International, Non-governmental Organizations for example Child Rights Foundation (CRF) selected to work at high-risk schools where pupils were vulnerable [NGO-KII]. Teachers at high-risk schools claimed that their schools were high risk due to their geographical location and capacity to cope with threats to, hazards, and vulnerabilities [FGD with teacher]. Pupils at Onlong Svay "Kor" Primary School confirm that their schools were not ed by natural hazards, but rain caused them much trouble with their studies. However, traveling during heavy rain was not very safe [FGD with children council]. However, the school was not covered by water, but the communities were full of water. Teachers always advised pupils not to come to school if the water level was high. Teachers time cared for pupils' safety and worked with parents and local authorities [FGD with teacher]



Figure 2. Degree of incidents experiencing at schools viewed by teacher

Note: WAI = weight average index measured on a five-point scale [Very low (VL) = 0.00-0.20, Low (L) = 0.21-0.40, Moderate (M) = 0.41-0.60, High (H) = 0.61-0.80, Very high (VH) = 0.81-1.00]. OA = Overall assessment. Significance at the 0.05 level.

Teachers rated "very low" and "low" degrees of (1) facilitation for students' travel home by water, crossing river, (2) identification of escape routes for students' evacuation from school or classrooms, (3) preparing lane for disabled students, and (4) regular monitoring and maintenance of lane and exit respectively. Additionally, students considered low-level traffic measures like installing traffic signs and barriers to facilitate students' travel home as well as facilitation for students' travel home on foot. They also assessed a very low degree of facilitation for students' travel home by water, crossing rivers, and preparing lanes for handicapped students. However, they did order stronger traffic control measures, such traffic signs and barriers, to make it easier for students to get home (Figure 3 and Figure 4). An incident of ferry collapse carrying students between 12 and 14 years old has drawn more attention from the public, practices, planners, policymakers, and on the safe school program. On 14 October 2022, eleven students drowned after a river ferry capsized after returning from an English class. Only four people, including two students and two of the boat's crew, were rescued after the accident at 7 pm on the Mekong River south-east of Phnom Penh¹. According to key informants with school principals and group discussions among teachers and pupils, the school did not have sufficient facilities to support disabled students, and pupils were not yet

¹ See detail at https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/14/at-least-9-students-drown-after-ferry-boat-capsizes-in-cambodia

entirely safe on the way to school or back home by water and land. Some schools were located along the national roads; vehicles were driving fast. However, schools have prepared traffic signs and carried measures to facilitate pupils' travel, especially on land; pupils remained unsafe without close follow-up. Pupils at O'svay Primary School described how difficult they faced if they traveled by boat. Some parents did not allow them to travel to schools for safety reasons. Some pupils were absent from classes during heavy rain, storm, and flood if required to travel by boat [FGD with pupils].



Figure 3. Degree of access to facilities to facilitate pupils' transportation by teacher





Note: WAI = weight average index measured on a five-point scale [Very low (VL) = 0.00-0.20, Low (L) = 0.21-0.40, Moderate (M) = 0.41-0.60, High (H) = 0.61-0.80, Very high (VH) = 0.81-1.00]. OA = Overall assessment. Significance at the 0.05 level.

3.2 Disaster risk reduction intervention at primary school

The majority of the teachers (71.7%) maintained school materials and documents during disasters; more than half of them prepared an education continuity plan that is inclusive, free from abuse and violence (60.1%), putting up warning signs at dangerous places (55.5%), document development or slogans for risks deduction in school (54.3%), development of safety signs (53.8%), preparation of emergency materials in responding to disasters (53.2%), Establishment of the committee for disaster management (53.2%), establishment of inclusive, gender-sensitive committee for disaster management (51.4%), development of school safety plan or disaster risk reduction plan (51.4%), practice and improve simulation drills in school to respond to the disaster (50.3%), identification of roles and responsibilities for the committee for disaster management of risks, hazards. Some of the teachers are also involved in vulnerability and capacity inside and outside school (49.1%) and the development of early warning systems for disasters (41.6%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Activities carried out by teachers to support Disaster management at school





Figure 6. Activities carried out by teachers to support disaster risk reduction education at school

In supporting to the disaster risk reduction education to the children student, most teachers (83.2%) regularly transferred information to students about Dose and Don't to be safe during a catastrophe; it was as high as 95.0% of them at target schools (Figure 6). More than half of teachers conducted disaster risk reduction education in extracurricular activities (65.9%) and provided capacity building for teachers on disaster risk reduction (61.3%). Teachers also offered training on first aid, prevention, and response to disasters (48.0%) and coordinated with the community for common key messages on safe school (46.2%). The prepared disaster risk reduction materials in school are gender and culture-sensitive, e.g., using the local language. All pupils can play any role in the school disaster management committee regardless of gender (42.8%).

Most teachers (87.9%) provided the worksheet for children's study, followed by preparing the temporary learning center for children (63.0%). Teachers developed the Education in Emergency (EIE) plan and standard operation procedure (SOP) for children's continued learning (40.5%). They also carried out online knowledge (39.9%), developed the understanding and teaching materials for EIE (38.7%), and prepared Massager group learning by Telegram and Facebook Massager (35.8%) (Figure7). The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has taught schools about other types of hazards, such as floods, heavy rain, and storm. Online has been one of the most effective and appropriate options for teaching and learning during the disaster [KII with School Director]. However, it has been difficult for schools to order online because teachers and pupils do not have sufficient access to smart devices and the internet. The entrance to EIE materials and posters may be accessible with the

distribution from NGOs, they have prepared various types of EIE to raise awareness about safe

schools or DRR [KII with commune Council].





3.3 Impact of safe school program on pupils' education

Table 1 analyses the impact on safe school programs from a student perspective. Pupils confirm that the project impacted their knowledge regarding disaster risk reduction (DRR) management and safe school, but it did not change their mindset and actions during the disaster. The program did not address the gender transformative approach in the DRR task among students and girls' participation in disaster risk reduction tasks as leaders. The model reveals that teachers transferred what they earned from the program after participating in capacity-building-related activities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, program moved from face-to-face to online training and workshops because physical gathering was restricted. This pandemic did not affect the capacity building of teachers, but teachers could not carry out activities with pupils as planned. The MoEYS announced the reopening public and private schools nationwide on November 1, 2021. All schools must adhere strictly to the COVID-19 measures laid out by the Ministry of Health to prevent classroom infections while studying [KII with school director]. Pupils at Ou Trael Primary School learned safe school and disaster risk management from their teachers; they started to share among pupils when schools opened after the COVID-19 pandemic restriction [FGD with student].

Attribute (pupils)	В	SE	Odds ratio	<i>p-</i> value
Knowledge (disaster risk management)	0.488	0.176	1.629	0.006
Knowledge (Safe school)	0.885	0.159	2.423	0.000
Attitude (disaster risk management)	-0.186	0.154	.225	0.830
Practice (activities taken during disaster risk)	0.145	0.158	1.156	0.358
Practice (activities taken to support the safe school)	0.457	0.157	1.579	0.004
Addressing gender transformative approach in disaster risk	-0.091	0.189	0.913	0.629
reduction task among student				
Girls' participation in disaster risk reduction tasks as leaders.	0.122	0.163	1.129	0.455
Constant	-0.873	0.168	0.418	0.000

Table 1. Student perspective on the impact of the safe school program implemented

Logistic regression confirms that the safe school initiative program has made a significant and positive impact on knowledge of DRR management and safe schools (Table 1). The program also supported DRR management, teaching and learning activities during the disaster, and girls' involvement in disaster risk reduction tasks as leaders. But the program has not impacted on attitudes and practices of the teachers to sustainably promote safe schools to DRR. The program did not also impact DRR awareness-raising activities and integration and addressing gender transformative approach in DRR tasks among students. Teachers at O'run Primary School were agreed that their knowledge regarding safe schools was good enough to support their schools. Before participating in the workshop and training organized by program support by NGO such Child Rights Foundation, Plan International and World Vision, teachers explain what they learned from their colleagues. After the knowledge transfer from the program, teachers were able to provide definitions, lessons learned, and best practices regarding the safe school to DRR [FGD with teacher]. All knowledge and documents supplied by program have been integrated into teaching and learning by teachers. Moreover, that knowledge and framework assisted improve DRR management of the O'svay Primary School [KII with school director]. During the harvest workshop, the officers from the MoEYS raised about improvement knowledge from the program. Pupils started to clean themselves and wash their hands all the time. This reflects their change in attitudes and practice. But there should be more investigation regarding food consumption at school; pupils remain eating prohibited food [Harvest-Workshop].

Attribute (teachers)	В	SE	Odds ratio	<i>p-</i> value
Knowledge (DRR management)	1.760	0.504	5.813	0.000***
Knowledge (Safe school)	1.360	0.672	3.898	0.043*
Attitude (DRRM management)	0.374	0.766	1.454	0.625
Practice (activities taken during a disaster)	0.120	0.456	1.128	0.792
Practice (activities taken to support a safe school)	0.759	0.492	2.137	0.123
Support for teaching and learning during the disaster	-1.251	0.495	0.286	0.012**
DRR awareness-raising activities and integration	-0.004	0.561	0.996	0.994
DRR management	1.557	0.576	4.743	0.007**
Addressing gender transformative approach in DRR task	0.629	0.633	1.876	0.320
among student				
Girl's participation in disaster risk reduction tasks as leaders.	0.942	0.448	2.565	0.035*
Constant	-4.344	1.022	0.013	0.000

Table 2. Teacher perspective on the impact of the safe school program implementation

School principals reveal that the program safe school had an impact on raising awareness of disaster risk reduction during the program implementation, but it did not impact disaster management in the long run. In general, schools did not have the budget to continue the activities after the completion of the development project (**Table 3**). A school principal at O'svay Primary School agreed that knowledge and support from safe school program have created space for schools to implement safe schools. The school principals also admitted that they could only carry out activities with the program budget because the school was challenged to cover the expenditure. During the program implementation, school received the supported in organizing events, to inviting teachers for training and workshop; all those activities were helpful to raise raising awareness at school. The main concern was the program completion; the school could not continue the activities, especially training and workshop. Moreover, the school management team could not make any decision or prepare a clear plan for DRR-related activities [KII with school director].

Indicator (principals)	В	SE	Odds ratio	p-value
DRR management	-0.598	1.241	0.550	0.630
Awareness raising on DRR	3.091	1.357	22.000	0.023*

 Table 3. School principals on the impact of safe school program implemented

4. Planning and Policy Implication

• To the possible extent, the NGOs should pursue implementing a safe school project; the development project is essential to reduce pupils' vulnerabilities from natural hazards,

incidents, and violations contributing to MoEYS's National Strategic Plan or ESP (2019-2023). In the same time, the NGO should continue to support the Provincial Office of Education (PoE) and District Office of Education (DoE), and schools by providing occasional training or workshop to update and refresh their understanding and knowledge of education officers, teachers, and management staff regarding safe schools and DRR management.

- The PoE, through DoE, needs to closely monitor the implementation of safe school programs in coverage school. The research shows that schools have started carrying out activities to support safe schools. Therefore, the PoE S or DoE should regularly visit schools and provide them with feedback to support safe school programs. The PoE and DoEYS need to consolidate the experiences gained with the safe school project and make it available to reach other schools where they are now working. The PoE, DoE, and schools should mainstream safe schools and DRR management in the activities of their existing and new projects. They can integrate some possible activities into the current activities. Therefore, they may not require a budget. For example, there is a sharing session like Thursday. Teachers can also share about safe schools with newcomers or discuss unclear issues or points.
- The program intervention should combine capacity building and facility provision at the school level. For example, hand washing was given to improve hygiene, but it has helped prevent the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, those facilities provided by the NGOs could probably use for multiple purposes. Moreover, the safe school program should always be made carried out at three levels: (1) sub-national level (PoE, DoE, and CoCs), (2) schools; and (3) communities. Safe school programs cannot be successfully implemented if the three levels are missed.
- The Disaster Management Secretariat (DMS) of the MoEYS has to adopt the updated version of safe school guidelines and is endorsed and operationalized by Diaster Management System (DMS)/MoEYS for work or capacity building to support the safe school at primary school. Safe school programs helped to build the capacity of principals and teachers in safe schools. Therefore, DMS of the MoEYS should continue to work with the PoE to ensure their implementation throughout its agents at sub-national levels.
- The safe school implementation should focus on mainstreaming safe schools need to include pupils and parents in the communities as a direct target group to raise awareness and change pupils' and parents' attitudes to safe school programs. Moreover, the project

would be best if it also includes activities regarding Disaster Risk Management (DRM) in the community because most natural hazards, for example, floods, affect the communities; schools are mainly safe due to their location in higher part. As a result, awareness of safe schools is not yet enough and must be added up with a safe community.

- The MoEYS should to allocate a budget for some activities or expenditures when NGOs and CSOs implement projects to carry out activities or some key activities to support the safe school. The contribution covering refreshments and transportation fees of teachers, lecturers, and principals would help establish ownership. In addition, the assistance of some essential expenditures during the project implementation by NGOs also improves its efficiency.
- The primary schools must keep protecting pupils at their primary schools from the risks of natural hazards, incidents and violations by ensuring all related activities support safe school program implementation. Knowledge and facilities obtained from the NGOs are very helpful for principals and teachers to continue implementing the plans. By doing so, teachers and principals should work closely with the local authorities to prevent outsiders from entering the school campus who may cause a violation. Through student council, principals and teachers should put assign tasks and responsibilities based on (1) an Early warning, and Information disseminating team, (2) Evacuation Team, (3) a Search and Rescue Team, (4) a First aid Team and (5) Security Team to promote the safe school to DRR.
- The PoE, DoEYS, CSOs, or NGOs need to continue to organize activities, meetings, or workshops and meetings which help principals and teachers refresh their knowledge and change their attitudes where all activities into actions. If available, the PoE, DoE, and NGOs should allocate annual budgets for the primary schools to organize campaigns for community outreach and small-scale events at schools and conduct simulation drills. These events are beneficial to change the behavior of teachers and principals through discussing and sharing opinions in promoting safe school.
- NGOs, PoE, and DoE toned to mobilize the established committee and pupils to work as their roles and responsibilities assigned. The project already initiated safe school-related activities, the provision of first-aid kits, equip basic facilities and envelopments such as gardens. Therefore, principals, teachers, and pupils at least used them with maximum outcomes. In addition, schools should not only depend on external resources; they can carry out any activities or organize events that are very helpful for safe schools.

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5. Conclusion

The safe school project was highly relevant to Cambodia's national policy and priorities. The Safe school program contributed to the implementation of the Education Sector Emergency Preparedness Response Plan (EPRP), Climate Change Strategic Plan for Education, National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction (2014-2018), child-friendly school policy, Guidelines on the Curriculum Development for Integrating the Concepts of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Resilience to Climate Change, back to school booklet and Safe School Guideline. As a result, the safe school project informed policy and guidelines on safe school and contributed to implementing the MoEYS's ESP (2019-2023). The safe school has become a long-term investment of both government and NGOs to ensure pupils at primary schools are safe for learning and teaching. The safe school program was very importance to capacity of teachers and principal; a better understanding of schools' school safety plan or disaster risk reduction action plan related to safe school for disaster risk reduction, incidents, and violation. Moreover, the safe school framework focused on primary schools in combination with community outreach to protect boys and girls from hazards, happenings, and violations of safe teaching and learning environment. The knowledge obtained has been used for their daily work to improve education and to learn to promote a safe school. But more time is required to realize tangible results of establishing safe schools where boys and girls are safe from all forms of natural hazards, incidents, and violations at school and on the way to schools/homes.

Acknowledgement: My deep appreciation and sincere thanks to late Mr. Pel Piseth, [Program and Partnership Manager -Lifelong Learning Program, Plan International Cambodia], for his strong contribute and support during the research study. Even Though, he is passed away, but his excellent contributions to the promoting disaster risk reduction in education sector and safety for children in Cambodia will be remembered and honored. May the soul of Mr. Pel Piseth Rest in Peace.

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