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Article

Significance of the Education Strategic Plan in Promoting Quality of Education: A Provincial Case Study of Educational Officers on Planning Formulation and Implementation

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Abstract

This case study investigates the perceptions of educational staff at the sub-national levels on the effectiveness of Education Strategic Plan (ESP) formulation and implementation. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore views and perceptions of 36 education staff at the Provincial Office of Education (POE), District Office of Education (DOE), and schools in Kratie province in northern Cambodia, a location selected representing a region with below-average key educational indicators. Participants were interviewed about their perceptions of planning formulation and implementation, with particular reference to identifying barriers to effective planning and implementation.

The qualitative findings demonstrated three possible areas which are impacting ESP formulation and implementation at the sub-national and school level. Each area is multi-faceted. The three areas are: (i) limited awareness and participation in national policies and planning and education indicators; (ii) issues with planning durations being fit-for-purpose; and (iii) structural barriers, including budget, resources, decentralization and deconcentration (D&D) reform, project-based and external interventions, lack of training and low capacity with statistics.

Key words: *Educational Planning, Education Strategic Plan, Education, School Development Planning, Implementation*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Global perspective on ESP development

Three organizations, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and the International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP) within the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), are the main contributors to this area of development: few guidelines exist besides these, which may indicate a high level of aligned practices globally. According to the Guidelines for Education Sector Plan Preparation and Appraisal (GPE / UNESCO IIEP, 2012), there are three essential elements of the plan preparation process: (1) a participatory process; (2) a well-organized process; and (3) a capacity development process. A participatory process is a process to design the ESP based on political will and technical expertise that can identify the balance between political ambitions and technical constraints in order to raise awareness and gain the commitment of education stakeholders. The process should involve participation from the relevant ministries, especially the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF), and development partners. A well-organized process should design a structure for education sector preparation and organize the roles and responsibilities of actors to coordinate the process with a steering committee, planning committee, and technical working groups. A capacity development process should improve the capacity for educational planning and the motivation of all education planners at all levels to strengthen education sector plan preparation (GPE / UNESCO IIEP, 2012).

According to the GPE/UNESCO IIEP guidelines for education sector plan preparation and appraisal, ESP preparation is an iterative planning process. Targets can be revised after they are tested in a simulation model. Strategies can be set through the program's activities and resources. The ESP formulation process should involve consultation with education administration personnel and development partners. GPE/UNESCO IIEP (2015) also stated that ESP preparation is a process involving seven components of the ESP development process as shown in Figure 1, below.

Based on the author's experiences as an ESP developer, this is applicable to the Cambodian context as during the preparation process of the ESP, a simulation model is used. This model, CANPRO (Cambodia Analysis Projection Model), tests scenarios with strategies and resources requirements, and budgeting with target setting. If a high target is set, for example, the model will show high resources and compare them to the resources available to see if the target is achievable.

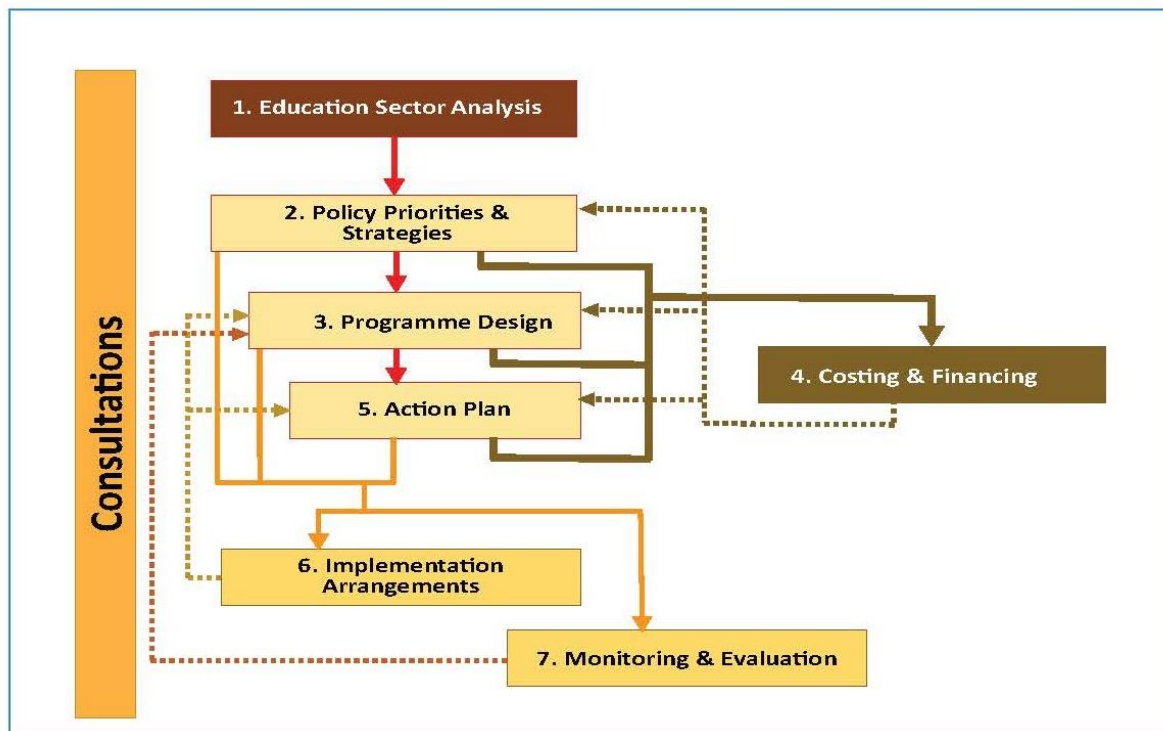


Figure 1. Main components of the ESP development process

Source: IIEP-UNESCO, 2015:13

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) stated that globalization has delivered rapid changes across all sectors, including education, with inputs from areas such as new technology and innovation, a knowledge workforce, and social and population trends. Therefore, the education system is required to improve equity and equality for child and youth development for the future. However, education policy priority reforms often cannot achieve their stated goals due to various reasons, including: a lack of attention to actual implementation; lack of focus and support for reaching goals; poor alignment within and across sectors; and the lack of capacity at the grassroots level (OECD, 2020).

According to these multiple factors, OECD (2020) stated that the nature of education policy implementation is flexible because of the complexity of the environment for implementation. This includes geographical and social issues, such as differing needs for urban and rural education, being specified in unified national policies. Policy processes are moving from top-down structures to horizontal interactions, often built upon negotiation and co-construction between many actors. In this environment, the role of policymakers is increasingly to steer and coordinate different actors to arrive at a common vision for education and ensure that everyone is moving in the same direction to accomplish education change. This is summarized in Figure 2, below.



Figure 2: Framework for effective education policy implementation

Source: OECD, 2020:7

1.2 Cambodian context

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia has been formulating ESPs, policies, policy papers and action plans for the purpose of increasing equitable access to education services, improving the quality of education, and strengthening leadership and management for education officials at all levels. Furthermore, MoEYS has designed the structure of management at the national, provincial, district and school levels for implementing these policies and action plans. Despite these efforts, the Education Congress Report (MoEYS, 2020) showed there are still significant challenges to the ESP implementation year-on-year, due to ineffectiveness and the inability to reach targets set in the planning.

The ESP has been developed over a period of more than 20 years for education system development and reform. From 1980 to 1995, MoEYS developed the Annual Operational Plan. In 1995, the MoEYS developed the education plan for five years (1996-2000) which identified vision, mission, and strategies, but did not estimate the budget resource requirements or teacher deployment numbers (MoEYS, 1995). This five-year plan may be considered the precursor to

the development of the ESP. Since 1999, MoEYS has accelerated reforms in the education sector which are still in progress. The successive ESPs include ESP 2001-2005, 2004-2008, 2006-2010, 2009-2013, 2014-2018, leading to the current ESP 2019-2023 (MoEYS, 2019). The ESP is subject to a Mid-Term Review (MTR) (MoEYS, 2022) to review education indicators and monitor the progress of ESP implementation.

Onn & Hyojin (2019) stated that the challenges to the ESP preparation process at the provincial level are related to a lack of knowledge of the procedures for how to prepare an ESP, a lack of technical support provided from the national level, planning officers having limited capacity in the use of planning concepts and statistics, limited participation from stakeholders involved in ESP preparation (joint steering committees, technical working groups, officers at POE level), and development partners (NGOs at the local level), frequent staff turnover, and some data for minority groups being unreliable, especially in the plateau and mountain areas.

In Cambodia, education staff have roles and responsibilities for planning that relate to their levels within the administrative system.

Provincial Offices of Education (POE) are responsible for creating a Provincial ESP (P-ESP) based on the national plan. Likewise, at the next level, District Offices of Education (DOE) are responsible for creating a District ESP (D-ESP). All entities are expected to produce an Annual Operational Plan (AOP) and schools are expected to create a School Development Plan (SDP) which covers a five-year period (MoEYS, 2023).

The formulation and implementation of strategic educational planning is still a priority for Cambodia. Equity and inclusive access to education remain problematic with differences between the city and remote areas. The quality of education is still low, with only 50.5% of students at Grade 3 level in primary education achieving expected reading levels and only 40.9% achieving expected levels in mathematics (MoEYS, 2019). At the global level, only 10% of Cambodian students at the age of 15 performed well in reading, mathematics, and science (MoEYS, 2018). In Grade 5, 11% and 19% of students met minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics respectively, for the end of primary education as set out in the goal of SDG 4 (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2021).

This research investigates how the stakeholders in these positions perceive their roles as being effective or otherwise, the effectiveness of the planning formulation and implementation and how participants generally perceive whether the system is enabling them to achieve fulfilment of their roles.

2. Research Method

This study was conducted using a qualitative method which was classified into four categories: document review, observational methods, in-depth interviews, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Research took place with the main stakeholders in charge of the provincial, district and school strategic plan formulation process and its implementation at each level.

Instruments were designed under three main question headings, which were given slight adaptations for use with different respondent groups. The three questions were:

1. What are the perceptions of education strategic plan implementers regarding the Education Strategic Plan and its implementation at provincial, district and school levels?

2. How do any significant differences in perceptions of education strategic plan implementers influence the Education Strategic Plan implementation at provincial, district and school level?
3. Can any disparities be identified between Education Strategic Plan formulation and implementation? What might account for these disparities?

The researcher undertook a field visit to Kratie Province in February 2023, employing a team of four researchers. This province was selected as one having low achievement levels on key education indicators, including below average student enrolment and retention. Research was conducted in a qualitative manner using a pre-prepared questionnaire. Questions were used as a ‘guide’ to the interview; the interviews may therefore be considered ‘semi-structured’, as the interviewer had the freedom to expand on points or to skip questions when it was felt that a question had been covered in previous discussions. This was to manage the overall interview time and reduce repetition as far as possible. All interviews took 2-3 hours. The senior education officials at POE and DOE were interviewed as individual 1:1 interview. Other representative members were interviewed as a Focus Group Discussion (FGD). The interviews and FGDs implemented are shown in Table 1, below:

Table 1: Participants for Interview and FGD

Interview	FGD
1 Deputy Director of POE 1 Chief of Planning Office of POE	10 POE Officers
1 School principal of lower secondary	9 Lower Secondary School Staff
1 School principal of primary school	8 Primary School Staff
1 Director of DOE	9 DOE Officers
5 Individual Interviews	4 groups of FGD = 36 participants

Data was recorded by contemporaneous note-taking and audio recording of each interview. Each interview was assigned a lead questioner and two note-takers shared duties to enable cross-checking of notes as well. Each interview therefore had a fully-recorded transcript.

The researcher analyzed data using a check for key vocabulary, based on the content of each question, and in cases where answers contained details deemed directly relevant to this report, checks were made to see if any or all participants agreed. In the section below, the word ‘endorsed’ is used to emphasize where a group had a common perception.

Results were filtered to examine common themes, and relevant data points and quotations were selected for inclusion. Minimal disagreement amongst groups was seen, and the author found that focusing on the differences in perceptions between sub-national levels (including schools) was the most productive way to establish where findings might lead to areas for further investigation, including future research. From this analysis, the research was able to group the analysis into four categories, outlined in the next section.

3. Results and Findings

This section presents short summaries based on the three categories identified and listed in the abstract, with sub-headings in bold: (i) **Planning awareness and participation:** sub-national levels appear to have limited awareness of national planning and indicators, and participation in planning processes varies at different levels within the system; (ii) **Planning duration:** this study questions the expected duration of educational planning structures and considers possible alternatives to improve efficiency; and (iii) **Structural barriers** to implementation are present and include: budget, resources, deconcentration and decentralisation (D&D) reform, project-based and external interventions, lack of training and low capacity in statistics.

3.1 Planning Awareness and Participation

The results found that awareness of national planning and key education indicators (those listed within the ESP) is highest at POE level where officials are aware of most key ESP content, especially relating to their own specific sub-sectors or areas. Awareness of national planning and indicators at DOE level is fairly low: DOE officials have some awareness of documentation, such as ESP, but make minimal reference to national or provincial planning, except on occasions where they are specifically mandated to do so. Interviews with DOE staff provided a clear indication that day-to-day requirements would often take priority over annual or multi-year plans. For example, from one DOE officer: *‘The workload is very heavy. We use the plan as a ‘skeleton’ to plan with, but in actual fact our day-to-day activities have to take precedence,’* which was endorsed by the group, as well as the statement from another officer that: *‘If a school or someone needs support, we need to respond regardless of the plan’.*

Awareness of planning at school level is very low for national, sub-national and school planning, and use of key education indicators is minimal. One school principal expressed that: *‘there are many difficulties in planning, and we have to make annual adjustments – for example, to change indicators.* However, even at POE, the level with the highest awareness of policy and planning, the group endorsed the statement from one member that: *‘MoEYS does not invite POE staff to trainings – so POE doesn’t understand the latest policies and methods.’*

It was found that while schools are the units within the system that are expected to take part in the wider consultation with planning, the participation of schools in the ESP development process is minimal. This lack of participation and low awareness of higher-level planning structures means that the involvement of schools and the actual generation of necessary data and evidence for planning purposes does not meet minimum standards.

3.2 Planning durations

POE showed a clear awareness of the necessity of long-term and medium-term planning and how this relates to national planning. In many instances, POE monitoring of schools and districts cannot take place over an annual plan. For example, school inspection (not covered here) uses a five-year plan to visit schools across a whole province. POE leadership stated that they tried to *‘monitor schools over a three-year period – two districts per year’.*

DOE showed some awareness of the necessity of long-term planning but was clear that this did not greatly influence their actual activities. Note that for DOEs, the 2019-2023

D-ESP was their *first* instance of creating a long-term plan.

Schools are quite clear that they plan on a short-term basis with little input from other sources, although they *do* have a five-year plan in place. Schools listed the reasons as: *‘Planning capacity is quite low. ICT capacity is quite low and expectations to use MS Excel (for example) create barriers.’* School staff, although showing high awareness of their own school situation (indicators, etc.), find using forms and formulae difficult, both on ICT resources or on paper. Budget support is not guaranteed from one year to the next. Teachers are generally most focused on their lesson planning and having enough resources: their focus is on ensuring teaching over the next day/week/month. One school secretary said that: *‘Annual planning is much more realistic’*, compared to long-term (multi-year) planning.

Schools cannot plan for ‘long-term’ projects without reliable funding, but are fully aware that they have issues that cannot be fully addressed in an annual plan. Examples where multi-year planning may be required are mostly related to infrastructure such as classroom renovations. School fences (expensive), library development (expensive if infrastructure is required), etc. Schools were clear that they did not always follow plans, where immediate needs were in place, with a teacher saying: *‘Each class writes their requests, but we work from this rather than refer back to planning.’* Another teacher said: *‘We have to make too many estimates in our planning; it’s also difficult for us to estimate areas like community funding as we cannot make assumptions.’*

Schools noted that reliable supplies of essential resources were necessary, with the recent addition of QR codes for textbook delivery and the centralization of this system has improved schools’ planning by reducing the number of controlled variables.

3.3 Structural Barriers

3.3.1 Budget

All respondent group levels (POE, DOE and school) cited lack of centrally-allocated available budget allocation as a barrier to implementing workplans effectively and according to existing legislation. A POE Office Chief stated clearly that: *‘Everything is present in the plan, so can be done if the money arrives.’* All levels also acknowledged that over recent years, the impact of COVID-19 had a negative effect on budgets. At POE and DOE level, respondents all noted that funding was allocated at an insufficient level to enable these sub-national bodies to implement their workplans, and the change in the academic year dates creates extra pressure for reporting. One POE Office Chief said: *‘There is a lack of data ... the time pressure is much greater with the change in the academic year.’* Budgets and reporting pressure are especially important for M&E, where all departments interviewed were unable to meet the required targets for M&E. Budget delivery is also a barrier at DOE level. The switch to increased D&D at district level appears to have reduced the budget availability, and there may be problems ensuring that District Offices receive their correct allocation according to the regulations under decentralized administrative procedures.

Schools have a particular problem with budgetary planning in that they cannot accurately plan for ‘additional contributions’ (e.g. from community, philanthropists, NGOs, etc.). In the schools questioned for this study, this accounted for about 40% of their annual income which cannot be forecast in advance.

The budget for field visits (school monitoring) is not aligned at POE and DOE sub-national levels. At POE level, budget support is distributed according to the harmonized Daily Subsistence Allowance (DSA) rates: i.e. if the distance is >40km, then the full DSA (\$34) can be claimed. For DOEs, the allocation is 40,000riel (≈\$10) regardless of the distance involved. This is a handicap for DOE personnel visiting distant schools, as the rate they receive is much lower than the POE equivalent rate for the same work and was reported by DOEs as being *'unfair'*.

All levels (POE, DOE, and schools) considered that reducing the number of steps of budget delivery (simplification and direct sending of funds to end recipient) was a priority and would *'accelerate delivery'*.

3.3.2 D&D; Project-based and DP/NGOs interventions

Most comments on the effects on planning of project-based interventions and DP or other external interventions (such as NGO local-level projects) were disappointingly negative. Specifically: a 'target schools' approach, whereby schools are selected according to externally developed criteria, is reported at school-level to *'produce inequalities and a feeling of injustice'* (school principal). Much of the DP work is not seen to show measurable benefits. DPs are reluctant to allow 'local ownership' within the projects or interventions. This statement is endorsed by POE Office Chiefs stating that: *'DPs approach with 'may we do this activity?' and is hard to refuse'* and endorsing the statement that *'DPs should increase local ownership and improve alignment.'*

In the opinion of the author, having DP interventions in the barriers category should be a strong message to partners in planning and implementation of their support. A secondary teacher stated that: *'Some of the project-based work makes things more difficult'*, and this statement was endorsed by the teacher group.

Based on this small sample size, D&D reform may be having a negative impact on funding delivery and on ensuring that funding earmarked for education is actually used for the required purposes. This comment should be read in the context of the earlier remarks on budgeting and the need for simplification of systems and direct delivery of funds whenever possible.

POE interviews reported that officers found the planning process *'difficult and complex'*, and this was a barrier for both planning and implementation.

3.3.3 Resources and capacity

There was a specific issue noted relating to ICT capacity. All respondent groups considered that POE and DOE officers lack capacity in ICT work, something that became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. POE has the highest ICT capacity of the groups, but there are more demands to use ICT effectively; schools have the lowest ICT capacity, but there are fewer demands on their ICT work, so they have less experience; DOEs are somewhere between these two levels. All levels likewise consider that they have received inadequate training in this area to date. The author notes that ICT skills and required training are a constantly changing area to address, with technological advances happening at great speed.

An interesting paradox was reported at school level where school staff were uncertain of how to use their new computer systems (provided by MoEYS in 2019) and used ICT that

they were familiar with to address this problem: specifically, smartphone and Telegram messages were used to address ICT issues. DOE officials noted that: *'Schools do a lot of sharing on Telegram and asking questions about areas such as Telegram'*, showing that some ICT tools are being used. School teachers said that: *'The computer is a new system and we have wi-fi. Prices have increased, but most teachers rely on their own phones as there is a weak signal'*. All teachers reported that ICT resources were *'difficult to maintain.'*

Within this case study, participants reported low awareness of online resources, showing there may be a problem with school-level stakeholders not accessing MoEYS online resources, including stakeholders who are unaware of the presence of such documents that are there for school-level support. ESP, for example, is simple to locate online using either Khmer or Latin script. School leadership, in individual interviews, note this as a problem; this is possibly because they have primary responsibility for ICT tasks, with the school computer being located in the school principal's office. One school principal noted that: *'During COVID we had a lot of problems with unequal ICT access relating to ICT capability and lack of signal in rural areas.'* This was endorsed by the teacher group.

The administrative structure for planning also shows reduced human resource capacity from central to sub-national and school levels. For example, MoEYS Department of Planning (DoP) currently has 28 staff; POE Planning Offices usually have four to five staff; DOEs have only one or two planning staff members; even large schools may only have one individual with any planning experience or training. All levels consider that they require additional staff to work effectively and, particularly at school level, they face the problem of low teacher deployment and the need to hire contract teachers.

School Management Committees (SMC) have limited capacity to support implementation of planning, but schools report that SMCs *do* help mobilize local resources. Aside from this, schools use other means available to them. One interesting example from a secondary school teacher was: *'We ... track down and ask successful alumni: if they are Excellencies or Oknhas, they can often give a lot of help'*.

3.3.4 Training and capacity

Training budgets were rated as insufficient at all levels and all levels expressed a preference for face-to-face training rather than online training. All levels were willing to make a concession to hybridized training, but were clear that 'solely online' training was a strong negative factor for them, which in many instances related to the problems of reliable internet access.

POEs reported the specific problem that MoEYS central level *'did not sufficiently invite POE staff to relevant training, meaning that their staff was disadvantaged, especially in the area of monitoring.'*

4. Planning and Policy Recommendations

Based on the case study and the author's experience, the following areas are offered for further consideration.

- **Active involvement of sub-national levels, especially school level, in ESP development process**

The low level of awareness of ESP activity, decreasing from central, to sub-national to school level can be increased by more active involvement in planning formulation. Effective ESP formulation for effective implementation should engage all stakeholders (community, parents, authorities, teachers, school management committee, NGOs and development partners) to participate in the ESP formulation process (as recommended by (GPE / UNESCO IIEP, 2012). Stakeholders involved from the start of the process have a much higher level of ownership of the process.

- **Providing technical support from central levels to sub-national levels**

To ensure the effectiveness of the ESP formulation and implementation, MoEYS central staff could provide technical support to POE, DOE officers and school principals on ESP formulation and implementation through orientation, mentoring, and coaching programmes to improve their capacity to develop and implement plans and meet targets. At the first stage, this training would focus on awareness of national plans and how these should affect sub-national planning.

All stages should include easily accessible ICT resources, e.g. by using the proven method of QR code document access.

- **Provide budget support based on equity principles**

Implementation with insufficient budget allocation can never be fully effective. Firstly, an alignment of travel/expenses funding for fieldwork between POE and DOE levels should be implemented. MoEYS should consider the equity principle for budget allocation to Provincial and District Offices and schools, whereby those schools most in need of resources are also the schools which may be least likely to achieve target levels.

- **Review the D&D implementation mechanism to improve ESP implementation**

MoEYS should review, together with other relevant stakeholders (MoI and UNDP), the mechanism of management and organization of D&D implementation in Cambodia through conducting studies on D&D implementation. This would serve to evaluate the quality of education services under the management and implementation of education functions of the municipal administration.

MoEYS should also prepare final technical instructions on procedures on the implementation of educational functions transferred to district administrations. To review the procedures for using the budget, especially the allocation to support the operation of DOEs, in order to ensure that they have sufficient resources to carry out work effectively, and in particular an adequate and equitable monitoring and evaluation allowance.

MoEYS should establish a mechanism for the thorough management and capacity-building of education units in the provinces. This requires support to provinces and districts that assign education functions to the municipal administration. This will enable those sub-national entities to ensure adequate teacher deployment and strengthen the human resource

capacity of the municipal administration through training in administration, financial procedures and management.

5. Conclusion

The author has presented some initial findings as a case study based on a province with poor educational outcomes, showing how the perceptions of sub-national and school-level stakeholders relate to planning formulation and implementation. The paper also outlines some of the structural barriers present and how these affect different stakeholder groups and their ability to plan and implement planning effectively.

Based on these perceptions, some recommendations are provided for MoEYS to investigate further. The author notes that the qualitative nature of the study leaves room for further research in this area to see if the conclusions are applicable to the wider situation in Cambodia, or if there are regional variations.

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