

# **Cambodian Students Association in Japan**

**(CSAJ)**

## **ESSAY COMPETITION 2010**

Topic: “What are the main problems in Cambodian Education system? What should we do to solve those problems?”

Name: Poeu Vannarath

Age: 16

School: Preah Sisowat High School

Address: No. WI95, Street 7, Sangkat Toul Sangke, Khan Roussey Keo, Phnom Penh Cambodia

Telephone: 092 898 663

Email: vannarath\_poeu@yahoo.com

## **Summary:**

Education refers to the process which knowledge, ideas and concepts are being passed down through generations. If we look at the past, we would see that education has been an invaluable weapon for mankind. It has played a major role in the development of any country and thus, people would say that prosperity of a country depends on the level of the education system used in that country.

After regaining the independence from the French colonists, Cambodia used to have an impressive education system. However, during the civil wars and the Khmer Rouge period, many great educators and educated people got killed and many valuable materials were destroyed. As a result, after the Khmer Rouge period, Cambodia was left with a few professional teachers and learning materials. Therefore, we now lack resources for our education system. Combine with the problem of poverty and corruption, Cambodia nowadays possess a very low-standard education system with lots of problems. These problems have bad influences on the education system.

However, I believe that we can overcome these obstacles to improve our education system. We need to face the challenging tasks of eradicating extreme poverty, clearing corruption, enforcements of rules and laws and spread out high quality education. All of Cambodian people including government and people must unite to deal with these problems so that our country can continue to develop further.

## **Introduction:**

“In its technical sense, education is the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another.” (Wikipedia, 2010, internet). It has been used to transfer concepts and knowledge to the next generation so that they can improve the society. We can express that education has been an invaluable weapon for mankind. It has played a major role in the development of any country or society and thus, people would say that prosperity of a country depends on the level of the education system used in that country. If we take developed countries like America, Australia, British and Japan into consideration, we could see that one of the main reason that they became developed countries is because of advance education systems. On the other hand, Cambodia does not possess advanced education system so, we are still being considered a developing country. Why do we have low quality education system and why can't we update our education system to a higher level similar to the highly developed countries? The reason is that we are still having major problems with our education system. What are those problems and what can be done to stop it? This essay will analyze the main problems in Cambodian education system and provide some possible solutions so that we can cope with this tough situation.

## **History:**

Turning back the pages in the history books, we can clearly see that, in the 1960's, Cambodia used to have a very good education system. Under the reign of King Sihanouk, schools were built all over the country and education was spread far and wide to rural areas which the French colonists refused to do (Dy, 2004, Internet). Even, people from other ASEAN countries like Singapore, used to come to study here. However, during the civil wars and the Khmer Rouge period, many educated people were killed and countless documents were destroyed. As a result, after the Khmer Rouge period, Cambodia was left with a few professional teachers and learning materials. Therefore, all that Cambodia possesses nowadays is a very low-standard education system with lots of problems. These problems include poverty of the population, lack of budget and resources and finally, corruption.

## **Problems:**

To begin, since Cambodia is still a developing country, poverty plays a vital role in the education system. Most people would agree that poverty is one of the major problems in Cambodian education, which affects not only the students, but also the teachers. First, with financial problems in mind, students cannot focus on their studies thus; they only receive a small proportion of it. Also, poverty might force students to drop out of school to be workers, so that they can support their family. From the statistics, it said “Dropout rates ranged between 10% and

16%, with significantly higher rates in remote rural areas” (USAID, 2008, Internet). This percentage is too high thus, not many people can get education properly.

Meanwhile, teachers in Cambodia only receive low salaries, which make them fall into poverty. They need to make money or else their family will die of starvation. In order to do that, they sell papers for students and those who do not buy, will have lower scores on their exams. Students are forced to make a decision, either buying or getting lower marks. Usually, students would want to pass, so they just pay the money, keep the paper and have fun. They do not have to care about revising or reading and those students graduate with no ability at all. Moreover, due to the fact that teachers earn less money than some other jobs, people who have the potential to become great educators changed their minds to search for those careers.

Another point is that, Cambodia has insufficient professional educators, teaching materials due to the low budget that the government offers for education sector. During the Khmer Rouge period, more than three-quarters of expert teachers were eradicated through harsh punishment, starvation or overwork, while a huge amount of books and other education sources were deliberately destroyed (Ledgerwood, 2002, Internet). As a result, education here is not widely spread and thus weakens the education system. In addition, although the government is trying its best to renovate the education system, it is still not enough. The update processes are slow and the outcomes are not good as expected. For example, the recently published version of 11 grade’s books was written approximately eight years after the previous one. Learners in eight generations have nearly the exact knowledge with no new features and updates. This prevents students from receiving new versions of education and thus, there can be no improvement for the education system for a long period. One more thing is that, we do not have enough schools and classrooms for learning. In my case, I studied with 44 other students. It is really hard for the teacher to provide education to them because, when the number of students is high, it is hard to keep silent. Noises will spread out and disturb everybody and one by one, we shall lose focus and join the fun. Besides, the classrooms are just a combination of desks, chairs, a whiteboard and some decorative stuff. There is no equipments for researching or any labs for analyzing. Students only hear the concepts but not practice.

Last but certainly not least, another problem that occurs in the Cambodian education system is corruption. In 2009, Cambodia ranked 158 out of 180 in the Corruption Perceptions Index table, which makes Cambodia one of the world’s most corrupted countries. (Transparency International, 2009, Internet). In this case, we can say that in the current state of Cambodian society, money talks. In other words, we can say that corruption and bribery are also the main problems in Cambodian education system. With corruption students can pass school exams and national exams even if they stay out of school the whole year. The only thing they need to pass is money

and they use it to bribe the teachers to let them pass exams without even learning anything. For example, many students at the public schools are truants who do not go to class and lied to their own parents. Instead of studying, they would use that time to play computer games, shopping or just riding motorcycles everywhere. Afterwards, they give the teachers some money to erase their absent in the register so that their parents would not even realize that they did not go to school and to give them marks so they can pass. All that is left for them to do is to show their parents that they have passed. At the exams, they would rely themselves on pre-written answer sheets which might be the same as the test papers. The rules and policies at the exam centre state clearly that there shall be no answer sheets allowed and students cannot look and copy from them. However, the candidates bribe money to the teacher to overlook their mistakes and allow them to cheat. It was mentioned in the newspaper article that in order to use an answer sheet, a student paid 25,000 riel to his examiners (Chhorn and Foster, 2010, 24). So, we can clearly see that corruption alone has lowered the quality of Cambodian education greatly.

### **Solutions:**

As mentioned above, we could see that Cambodian education system faces terrible problems that need to be solved quickly and these problems can only be solved by certain methods. Initially, we can see that many Cambodians especially in the countryside are living hand to mouth. We can start by taking this problem into consideration and follow the first Cambodian Millennium Development Goal. It states that we need to wipe out poverty and starvation (Ministry of Planning, 2003, Internet). There are many ways to achieve this goal, and it should make sure that people are above the poverty line and have enough budgets to survive so that they can focus on their studies. To begin with, the government should lower taxes rate so that the number of foreign investments can rise. As a result, many companies will rise and plenty of jobs will be available. Then, adults should try as hard as they can so that they can find employment to earn money to jump out of poverty, and use the salaries to support the members in their family who are studying, so that the latter would not drop out to work. Another yet, simpler way to renovate our education system is to lift teachers' wages so that they can stop selling papers and increase their efforts in teaching. Then, students would not have to pay money for education and start to focus on their studies.

From another perspective, we can follow CMDG 2, which states that we have to “ Achieve universal nine years basic education” (Ministry of Planning, 2003, Internet). We should make sure that nearly all of the teenagers, ranging from 6 to 14 years old, are in school rather than being child labour. Meanwhile, administrators consisting of front line teachers and official workers must do their best to clear out corruption. Without corruption, students are willing to study hard to pass exams, and this dramatically heightens the literacy rate while proving that graduate students have the ability to work. These three reasons combined can ensure that more people can access education and other people who already have medium literacy rate can pursue

higher education. After this, all of these people can join hands and contribute to the society by further improving the education system.

Finally, the government should increase the budgets that are spent on education sector. First, they should increase teachers' salaries so that they would change their minds about bribery and encourage them to be put much more effort in teaching. They can then put a strict policy on marks and thus, learners would realize that they need to work hard to earn the grades they want. Simultaneously, this should convince students, who have the potential of becoming great educators but choose not to follow it because of low salaries, to restate their goals in the future and some may even choose to be professional educators. Then we can ensure that the education system will grow in a short period of time. Moving on, the next version of books should be updated much faster with what we have learned while we are using the current ones. Then the next generations can improve it further and some time after, we shall have very good published books, which can help our education system. Third, there should be more schools available so that it would be easier for teachers to spread education. Also, schools should have more research facilities so that students could understand the concepts and theories at the same time that they practice.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, I would like to re-emphasize that Cambodian education system is weakened by poverty, lack of resources and corruption. As mentioned above, we still have many challenging tasks to tackle. However, I also believe that we can solve these problems using the methods I have given above. To accomplish this, the government and the people must unite as one to solve these problems for the next generations. In addition, we must do it now because we do not have time to waste. We have already wasted a lot of time during the civil wars. We must do it quickly or else our education system will not advance and we will be a developing country for much longer period.

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