A comparative study of education and development in Cambodia and Uganda from their civil wars to the present

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Summary

This study attempts to compare education and the economic development trajectory of two post-conflict countries, Cambodia and Uganda — from 1993 for Cambodia and 1986 for Uganda. Such an examination involves two aspects of analysis: the relation between education and economic development, and the role of the state in educational development.

The examination of the relationship between education and economic development will not employ any statistical method, but consists of examining the change in educational progress and economic development in both countries. The examination of this relationship is based on the Endogenous Growth Theory which stipulates that economic growth in the long run is driven by the accumulation of knowledge and that human capital has an increasing rate of return while physical capital has a diminishing rate of return. In the context of post-conflict countries such as Cambodia and Uganda where the human capital stock has declined, investment in education is even more important for economic development.

Educational investment in general, however, will not automatically boost economic development. To reap the greatest potential from an investment in education, it is important to ensure that educational provision corresponds to a country's economic and labour market, and level of technological development. If the labour market and economy are unable to absorb graduates, they will remain underutilized or, even worse, unemployed; or if the education system is not able to produce the appropriate mix of qualified human resources for the labour market, the economy will continue to perform below its potential.

Although Cambodian and Ugandan economic development since the end of their respective civil wars improved steadily, their performance remains far from satisfactory as manifested by a high rate of poverty, inequality and narrow economic base. These problems, this dissertation argues, are attributed partly to both countries’ inability to link their education and training policies to the needs of the local labour market and economy. Their current labour markets and economies, on the one hand, is characterized by a rapidly growing urban economy, but they are still small with their
emerging low-tech industry and expanding service sector and on the other hand, by their underdeveloped rural and largely agrarian economies. These characteristics require education that places emphasis on basic education and TVET (technical and vocational education and training) over higher education. Within higher education, improvements in science related fields would provide more positive returns to the economy compared to the social sciences, business, humanities, and arts. However, this dissertation further finds that the overall performance of the educational provisions in Cambodia and Uganda remain poor in terms of the above three aspects. The primary completion rate and quality of education measured in term of pupils’ proficiency in mathematics and literacy are very low in both countries, especially in poor rural areas. The education system at post-basic level could not meet the need for skilled labour forces in TVET and science related fields.

Arguably, Cambodian economic performance in terms of poverty rate and GDP per capita is slightly better than that of Uganda, especially since the mid-2000s. This dissertation emphasizes that a relative better mix of qualified skilled labour force is a key to explaining the different levels of economic development between Cambodia and Uganda, rather than the commonly known factors such as the role of economic institutions, business friendly environment and good governance.

The second issue of this dissertation’s analysis examines the role of the states in reforming their education systems since the end of the civil wars. The finding of this dissertation indicates that in general the states of Cambodia and Uganda are less effective and efficient in designing educational policy, allocating resources accordingly, and in implementing educational policy and resources to provide the appropriate mix of qualified skilled human resources. However, it notes that Cambodia's state is relatively more effective and efficient than Uganda's.

In Cambodia and Uganda, policy design and resource allocation are much influenced by the political struggle to stay in power, and the different political playing fields and their connections to electoral politics will lead to different policy design and resource allocations.
Immediately after the end of their civil wars, Cambodia and Uganda had similar challenges to increase their public spending on education, despite an outcry for educational reform. The end of the civil war did not bring sustained peace as guerrilla groups (Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda) continued to fight against both governments. In Cambodia, the situation was intensified by a competition between the two main political rivals the CPP (Cambodian People’s Party) and FUNCINPEC over state control which resulted in political and social instability. This situation forced both governments and their ruling elites to allocate a large percentage of public expenditures to the military at the expense of social services such as education, not only to ensure security but also to maintain political power.

Since the late 1990s, when peace and security were achieved and regular elections were held, the legitimacy of the ruling elites no longer depended on maintenance of security alone but on the overall improvement of the country which led to an increase of budget allocation to the education sector and the renewal of the role of education in economic development.

In Uganda, in terms of budget allocation, the priority given to the education sector in general and to primary education in particular increased from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, and then started to decline steadily, with increases towards secondary and higher education. It is important to note that in Uganda, despite the recognition of the important role of TVET in economic development, the share of the TVET budget out of the total public spending on the education sector remains low compared to secondary and higher education. It is argued that this shift in focus derives from president Museveni’s strategic political calculation.

To maintain power, president Museveni has been seen as moving from rational inclusive growth policies directed at winning popular support in order to maintain power to exclusive and at times ethnic-based growth politics directed at winning elections and keeping control. This situation negatively affects policy design and resource allocation to the public sector including education, as it no longer depends on real needs and situational analysis, but is influenced by political factors as politicians
attempt to use public resources to maintain their power. Consequently, public expenditure for general public administration increased steadily, while the budget for social services like education experienced a steady decline.

In contrast to Uganda, the result of the past three general elections in Cambodia indicates that the electoral support to CPP has increased over time. This legitimacy, this dissertation argues, was achieved through performance-based evaluations rather than enforced through political violence and intimidation. This is reflected in the fact that Cambodia recently moved away from pure politics as a means to maintain power to potential long-term development policies. This situation encourages the withdrawal of political influence over policy design and resource allocation. In cases where politicians are going to influence the policy design and resource allocation, their actions are usually in line with, rather than against, the local needs and serve to respond to the demands made by local communities represented by NGOs. The outcome has been the steady increase of budget for social services such as education, while the budget for military expenses experienced a steady decline.

The implementation of Cambodia’s shift from politics to policy, i.e. the emergence of policy priorities and resource allocations in response to local needs, however, is constrained by the persistence of a (neo)traditional system of governance and administration based on culturally entrenched notions of hierarchy and power found in patron-client relations. Uganda has experienced a similar political trajectory. But as this dissertation demonstrates, the differences in political realities in the two countries produce differences outcomes.

Under this patron-client politics, recruitment processes are not based on merit but on tests of loyalty, nepotism, and corruption, conditions that lead to rising bureaucratic incompetence, misuse of resources, corruption and misbehaviour among school teachers and administrators as well as a piece-meal reform process. These challenges form barriers to implement a policy and achieve a desirable outcome.

This study stresses that once patron-client politics is embedded in a decentralized mode of service delivery, it has more negative consequences than when it is
embedded in a centralized mode. This is another reason that contributes to the different educational outcomes in Cambodia and Uganda. In Uganda basic services such as primary education are delivered within this changing context of governance, from centralization to high decentralization through a council system of local government with its district as the main unit of sub-national government. In Cambodia all social services delivered are still mainly in the hands of the central government delivered through its local administration, even after the recent introduction of a decentralization process.

The move from politics to policy and the centralization of service delivery in Cambodia enabled the government to limit the growth of civil servants, thereby reducing the wage share of the spending on education. This in turn allows Cambodia to have more resources for capital development such as schools and classrooms, and teaching and learning materials. In contrast, the move back from policy to politics and the decentralization of service delivery in Uganda led to an increase in civil servants and in the wage share of the spending on education because of the increased number of its administrative units — the district. This in turn decreased the budget for capital development.

The centralized mode of governance in Cambodia limits the volume of corruption in the hands of fewer people than the decentralized mode of governance in Uganda. Here the volume of corruption can increase as it involves tenders and people at many different levels of administration who affect school construction and textbook purchase.

At the same time, this move from politics to policy and performance in order to win elections in Cambodia also gives a greater incentive to ruling elites to accelerate the development of the education sector, such as the additional construction of schools. On the contrary, in Uganda, the performance-based strategy that president Museveni adopted so far has not enhanced his legitimacy because of other factors such as ethnic divisions and inter and intra party challenge to his leadership. This situation does not provide any incentives for president Museveni and the NRM members to launch a school construction campaign, as was the case for the CPP and Prime Minister Hun
Sen in Cambodia. Consequently, the shortage of schools and classrooms in Uganda remains unresolved, which hinders its ability to expand educational provision.

The centralized mode of governance in Cambodia also allows Cambodian elites to easily collect corruption money and channel part of it to development projects. While in Uganda, corruption is decentralized due to its decentralized mode of governance, a pattern that prevented Museveni from having access to large amounts of slash funds that could be used for such political development projects.

The centralized and planned system of teacher recruitment and placement in Cambodia also allows it to solve teacher accommodation problems as it posts teachers in or near their hometowns. This leads to lower teacher absenteeism and guarantees teacher qualifications, which causes a better quality of teaching. In contrast, the decentralized and unplanned system of teacher recruitment in Uganda leads to a higher teacher absenteeism. The government is unable to provide sufficient accommodations for teachers who are recruited from every part of the country and lack qualifications due to corruption in the recruitment process, which significantly negatively impacts the quality of teaching.