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# ALL CHILDREN READING ASIA (ACR-ASIA)

## USAID SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING REVIEW

CASE STUDY - CAMBODIA



November 14, 2022

AID-OAA-TO-16-00017

September 2016 – January 2023

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This document was produced for review by the United States Agency for International Development

The [USAID Systems Strengthening Review](#) documented how Activities funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have helped to strengthen implementation capacity in education systems across Asia. The review gathered evidence via a mixed-methods approach, including a desk review, an online survey and key informant interviews. These sources were supplemented by deep-dive case studies for selected Activities in three countries (Cambodia, Nepal, and the Philippines). This document sets out the findings of the case study in Cambodia.

As part of the deep-dive case study, the Review Team considered additional documentation and conducted additional interviews with individuals from USAID missions, implementing partners and government partners. The Review Team also facilitated self-assessment workshops with key USAID staff and partners, during which participants discussed the cumulative impact of the relevant Activities on system capacity using the review's Analysis Framework. The evidence from this workshop was combined with all the other evidence collected by the Review Team to arrive at a synthesized final set of traffic-light ratings, findings and recommendations.



# CAMBODIA: ALL CHILDREN READING (ACR), ALL CHILDREN LEARNING (ACL), AND INCLUSIVE PRIMARY EDUCATION ACTIVITY (IPEA)

ACR, ACL, and IPEA are a series of USAID-funded activities that began in 2017. They focus on improving early grade reading skills of children in primary schools in Cambodia (Figure 1). The sequence of Activities has been facilitated by RTI International with support from partners, including World Education International, Save the Children, and Room to Read. ACR focused on bringing the relevant implementing partners and development partners together to pilot a national program for early grade reading; ACL built upon ACR and “solidified it as a national program;” and IPEA is focused on supporting the government to scale the program across the country.

FIGURE 1.

Cambodia—ACR, ACL, and IPEA: Overview of Activities

	All Children Reading (ACR)	All Children Learning (ACL)	Inclusive Primary Education Activity (IPEA)
<b>Time Frame</b>	2017—2020	2018—2021*	2022—2026
<b>Geographical Scope**</b>	Kampong Thom, Kep, and Kampot	Kampong Thom, Kep, and Kampot	Kampong Chhnang, Prey Veng, Svay Rieng, Takéo, and Tboung Khmum
<b>Key Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The MoEYS effectively manages, at the national, provincial, district, and school levels, evidence-based EGR programs</li> <li>Partnerships and coherence are strengthened to support EGR objectives in Cambodia</li> <li>Assistance is provided for development of a coordinated and harmonized, evidence-based EGR and writing program endorsed and implemented in grades 1–3 that is feasible, practical, and scalable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>MoEYS has the tools to improve inclusive, evidenced-based early grade literacy instruction</li> <li>Strengthened partnerships that promote collaboration, coordination, and synergies between partners supporting inclusive early grade learning</li> <li>The MoEYS is supported to develop and implement a plan for piloting and scaling up a coordinated and harmonized, inclusive, evidence-based MoEYS national EGL program that is feasible, practical, and scalable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Achieved national rollout of the inclusive EGL program</li> <li>Improved school governance, transparency and accountability</li> </ul>

\*In 2018, additional funding was granted through the USAID/Cambodia–ACL award to scale up the program. Both funding sources (ACR and ACL) were overseen by RTI International and had the same overall goals

\*\*This includes USAID-funded provinces. Other provinces included in the scale-up are being funded by GPE, UNESCO, and Capacity Development Partnership Fund (CDPF)

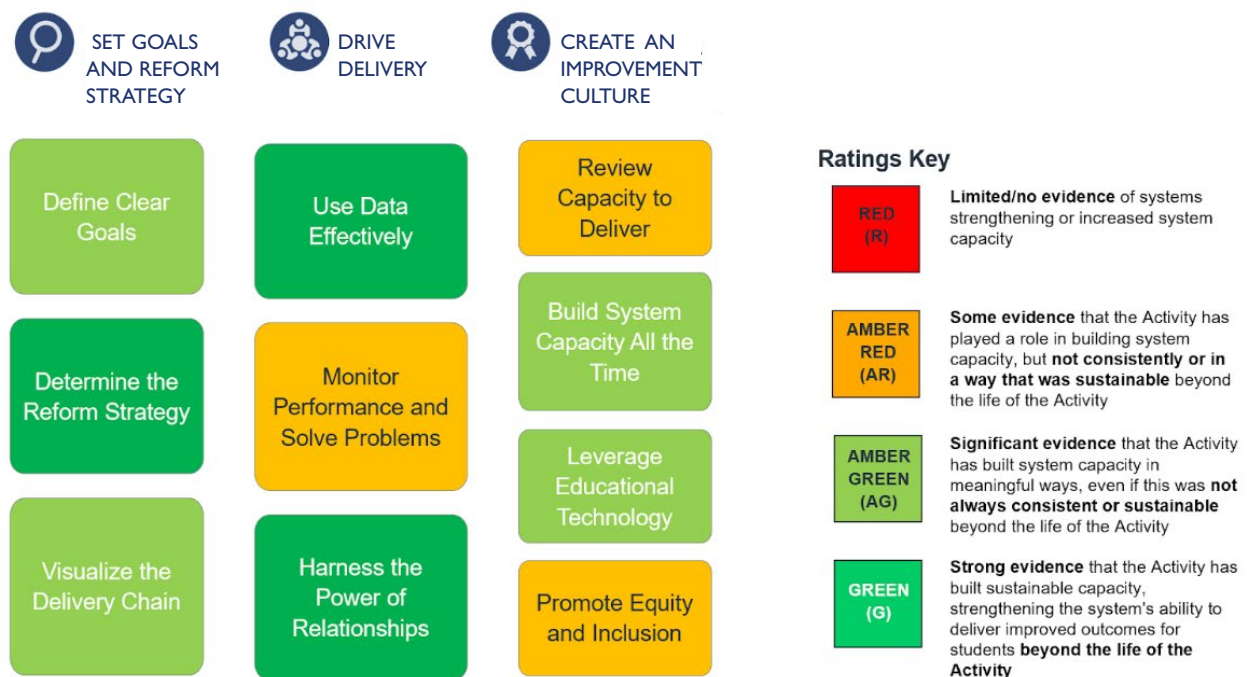
EGR=early grade reading; EGL=early grade learning

## How did the Activities strengthen the capacity of the education system in Cambodia to implement effective reform?

We have synthesized the evidence collected for the review to rate the cumulative impact of the Activities on a four-point traffic-light scale against the 10 elements of our Analysis Framework. Below we share ratings (Figure 2) and identify strengths and challenges against each of the elements.

FIGURE 2.

Cambodia—ACR, ACL, and IPEA: Cumulative impact of the Activities traffic-light rated against the 10 elements of the systems strengthening review Analysis Framework





## SET GOALS AND REFORM STRATEGY

### DEFINE CLEAR GOALS

The sequence of Activities has contributed to a shift in how the system approaches education reforms, moving beyond counting inputs and outputs towards an increasing focus on student reading outcomes. This shift is evidenced by the system's use of the EGRA and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) to test the efficacy of classroom materials and development of fluency targets by grade level. The aspiration of improving learning outcomes for students across Cambodia and implementing the model of early grade reading reform across the country, is enshrined in the Education Strategic Plan 2019–2023 of the MoEYS. Although the strategic plan articulates certain metrics and targets for student learning outcome goals, most stakeholders we spoke to did not directly reference these goals, so it is not clear that actors at all levels of the system are able to readily articulate these goals and keep them at the forefront of reform decisions.

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**

### DETERMINE THE REFORM STRATEGY

As well as helping MoEYS identify and adopt evidence-based strategies, the Activities also supported the ministry to harmonize the approach to early grade reading in Cambodia, bringing key donor and NGO players to the table and aligning them behind a national strategy to scale the reforms. Stakeholders described how the Activities had supported system leaders to make significant evolutions in their strategic thinking, for example, internalizing an understanding that teacher training is more effective if it is accompanied by ongoing monitoring and support, rather than being a “one-off.” IPEA has also supported MoEYS to make a case for and negotiate for the necessary funding for its early grade reading reform with the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

**(Rating: Green)**



“When the program started out, there were a lot of fragmented approaches being used for early grade reading. We consolidated best practices and introduced a harmonized reading package in consultation with the ministry.”

- KEY INFORMANT FOR ACR, ACL, AND IPEA

## VISUALIZE THE DELIVERY CHAIN

Analysis facilitated by the Activities, particularly IPEA, has been invaluable in supporting system leaders to better understand the chain of actors involved in implementation, and identify and address weaknesses and capacity challenges along the chain. For example, IPEA supported MoEYS to identify the need for, advocate for, and secure a change in education financing, which enables funds to be earmarked for specific use by districts for teacher mentoring support, thus mitigating the risk of funds being diverted for other purposes. Stakeholders identified this type of analysis as a strength to build on, for example, by using systematic tools to assess progress in the field and further clarify the roles and responsibilities of different actors, especially as the program scales up nationally.

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**



## DRIVE DELIVERY

### USE DATA EFFECTIVELY

The Activities have supported the system to establish new sources of assessment data and to bolster monitoring efforts. This includes integrating the use of EGRA to test different models and approaches. Based on needs identified during ACR and ACL, the Activities trained staff in the Education Quality Assurance Department (EQAD) to analyze national assessment data; IPEA is now in the process of training EQAD staff to analyze EGRA and EGMA data. Tools introduced by the Activities, such as KoBo Toolbox, have also been integrated into the MoEYS' own monitoring efforts. We heard that some of the skills developed by the Activities may also have the potential to support robust M&E outside the realm of early grade reading, for example, the enhancement of EQAD staff capabilities to develop and maintain servers for storing assessment data. As IPEA progresses, strengthening the link between EQAD and policymaking, and greater disaggregation of trends at the provincial and district level, would further improve the system's use of data.

**(Rating: Green)**



### MONITOR PERFORMANCE AND SOLVE PROBLEMS

Data-informed conversations with system leaders, supported by the Activities, have strengthened the system's capacity to review implementation progress. IPEA has worked with EQAD to build a data dashboard, key findings from which are presented in biannual steering committee meetings, chaired by the minister. These conversations are valued by stakeholders and provide a high-level platform for identifying and addressing challenges. For example, a presentation of data showing relatively weak performance of Grade 3 students' learning of foundational consonants enabled a discussion that identified a missing component in the teacher training curriculum. We heard that the system could benefit from more frequent meetings with system leaders to monitor progress and swiftly resolve roadblocks, as well as supporting leaders at the provincial and district levels to hold similar conversations.

**(Rating: Amber-Red)**

### HARNESS THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

Prior to the Activities, multiple NGOs were working on disconnected, and sometimes conflicting, reform agendas throughout the country. The Activities have supported the system to move to the harmonized approach being used today, whereby MoEYS is empowered to set the national reform agenda under which key stakeholders are working toward the roll out of the national reading package across the country (Figure 3). The Activities have been successful in engaging donors, NGOs, and civil society members, including GPE, Capacity Development Partnership Fund, and UNESCO, to adopt and scale-up the national reading package. Moreover, the steering committee and other forums that were created have been institutionalized as coordination mechanisms for the MoEYS to use going forward, potentially beyond the life of the Activities.

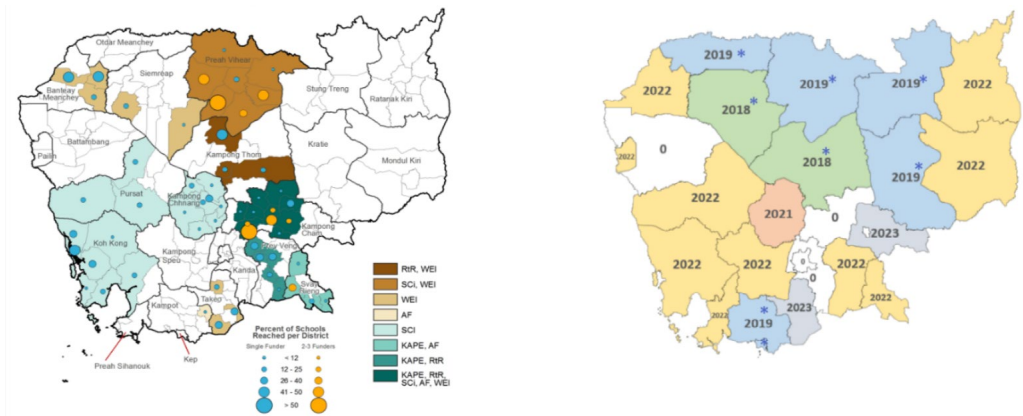
**(Rating: Green)**

“The Early Grade Steering Committee, chaired by the Minister, is part of the Ministry's structure that brings together the right departments to discuss, make decisions, and [grant] approvals. This becomes a coordination mechanism on the implementation and scaling up the national early grade learning program to ensure that decisions can be made, approvals are in place, and agreement or discussion is taking place, so it's an early win. We were able to bring donors, civil society groups, and the MoEYS together to make decisions.”

- USAID KEY INFORMANT FOR ACR AND ACL

FIGURE 3.

Early grade reading reforms in Cambodia 2015 vs. 2021<sup>1</sup>



2015: Map of NGO-supported schools before the start of ACR, ACL, and IPEA, by province and district

2021: Map of the rollout of the national Khmer reading package, by province (labels denote the year each province begins the rollout of the early grade reading package)



CREATE AN IMPROVEMENT CULTURE

**REVIEW CAPACITY TO DELIVER**

Periodic reviews of the system’s capacity to deliver have informed design and implementation of all three Activities, for example, a formal sectoral assessment of early grade reading, shared via a consultation workshop in 2015. Within MoEYS, the Activities have supported some key departments to move toward identifying their own capacity gaps in relation to implementation, for example, the Primary Education and Teacher Education Departments, although other departments were identified by stakeholders as needing additional support in this regard. However, stakeholders noted that most capacity assessments were externally prompted, and the system needs additional support to effectively diagnose and address its capacity gaps.

**(Rating: Amber-Red)**

**BUILD SYSTEM CAPACITY ALL THE TIME**

The Activities have been working closely with MoEYS officials from the beginning of the engagement to enhance their capacity and gradually transition more responsibilities to them. Going forward, the challenge, and IPEA’s stated aim, will be to gradually transition ownership of reforms to government counterparts from each level. A key example of this is the ongoing effort to institutionalize the school-based mentoring system, with external instructional coaches from World Education International building the skills of subnational staff so that they can lead coaching on a long-term sustainable basis.

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**

1. SOURCES: UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID), (2015, AUGUST), SECTOR ASSESSMENT OF EARLY GRADE READING IN CAMBODIA.



## LEVERAGE EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

There are clear examples of how the Activities helped the system enhance the impact of reforms using EdTech. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Activities supported the system to introduce a blended approach for teacher training (including home learning and videos), create free digital libraries for learning materials, and broadcast video lessons on TV. These innovations were well received and seen as cost-effective by stakeholders. The Activities also supported MoEYS to make strategic decisions on the use of EdTech that were appropriate to the context and capabilities of the system. For example, the Activity supported the system to use evidence from the rapid assessment on learning, which showed that the use of technology was not having a strong impact on learning, to deprioritize the scale up of EdTech interventions.

**(Rating: Amber-Green)**

## PROMOTE EQUITY AND INCLUSION

The Activities have enabled the system to start the journey of incorporating equity and inclusion into its reform efforts. For example, the Activities targeted areas with low learning outcomes and high dropout rates. IPEA also includes many interventions that account for equity considerations. For example, the EGRA has been adapted for students with disabilities, and the teacher trainings have guided teachers on teaching children with special needs. In addition, inclusive education tenets have been included in the design of the early grade reading package, which includes teacher guides, student supplemental books, and story books for mainstream schools. Despite being described by stakeholders as *“catalytic in moving [these] conversations forward”* and *“providing evidence for teachers to see that children with disabilities could learn with the proper support,”* implementing partners identified this as an area where they are still making progress.

**(Rating: Amber-Red)**

“The project provided evidence for inclusive education in Cambodia and helped teachers see children can learn despite having a disability. It has really been catalytic in moving those conversations forward.”

- USAID KEY INFORMANT FOR ACR AND ACL



## ***What conditions contributed to the Activities' impact on systems strengthening?***

**The project was set up as three successive Activities that built on each other.** This allowed the sequence of Activities to work closely with government counterparts over several years to build their capacity, pilot, test and embed approaches with the system, and engage in long-term financial planning (and collaborative work to make the case for sustainable funding, as described above). The national scope of the Activities also helped influence central government at a strategic level, culminating in the influence the Activities were able to have on the MoEYS 5-year strategy.

**There was an explicit focus on systems strengthening in the Activities' objectives from the outset.**

We heard that USAID approached its programmatic role differently in this context from previous activities, placing a greater emphasis on institutional capacity-building than on implementing specific reform interventions. For example, by working alongside MoEYS as a convener and coordinator, the Activities were able to effectively implement and incentivize the formation of the sectoral coordination mechanism.

“USAID’s role wasn’t about implementing a project successfully, but [it was] more about influencing the sector in a way that it moves closer to a coherent approach to institutional capacity.”

- IMPLEMENTING PARTNER FOR ACR, ACL, AND IPEA

**The Activities benefited from and cultivated government buy-in.** USAID’s approach, positioning itself as a convener and coordinator, was complemented by MoEYS’ willingness and interest to engage with this new way of working. In particular, the political willingness of the senior leadership of the ministry was cited by many stakeholders as instrumental. The Activities cultivated close relationships with key officials in MoEYS, for example, leveraging co-creation of curriculum materials with Primary Education Department colleagues and collaborative data analysis with EQAD colleagues to establish the implementing partner’s credibility while building officials’ capacity to co-lead the work. MoEYS ownership was further established by the rebranding of the program as *Komar Rien Komar Cheh*, a deliberate part of the Activities’ institutionalization strategy, and MoEYS providing its own funding for scale-up in selected provinces. In addition, ministry staff in key leadership and technical positions have been stable throughout the sequence of Activities, contributing to the cumulative systems strengthening impact of the succession of Activities.

“The minister and other leadership are at the forefront of advocating for and owning the process and decisions. It came to be a ministry-owned program with support from USAID.”

- KEY INFORMANT FOR ACR, ACL, AND IPEA

**The need to align donor activities was identified early and acted upon.** The harmonized approach adopted by the Activities allowed strong coordination between different NGOs and development partners in the early grade learning sector; including the Capacity Development Partnership Fund and GPE, for instance in designing learning materials and teacher training, which contributed to joint ownership of the harmonized early grade reading package. ACR was able to bring key stakeholders and other implementing partners together by incentivizing them through the setting up of grants and the reduced fragmentation of efforts enabled a *“laser focus on learning outcomes.”*

### *How can IPEA build on the systems strengthening impact of the Activities?*

- Advocate to set **system-wide outcome goals for early grade reading** and support the system to **align stakeholders at all levels behind these targets**, so that the system and its partners can work toward a shared definition of success for student performance.
- Continue **support to Primary Education Department** to lead the pilot and scale-up of the national early grade reading program, by **identifying “owners”** of the reform workstreams within the department who take the lead in coordinating and driving implementation.
- Continue **support to EQAD** to regularly **collect, analyze, and share student outcomes data**, including **disaggregated data at the subnational level**. This can enable a clearer picture of progress across the system and help identify “bright spots” to learn from and target support for provinces and districts making the slowest progress.
- Embed **frequent and regular “delivery routines” for system actors at all levels, including senior leaders**—structured conversations to review data on implementation progress and outcomes, diagnose problems, and make decisions.
- Develop **“feedback loops,”** such as tools to monitor on-the-ground progress, to test assumptions about implementation and to further clarify the roles of system actors and their readiness to take on greater responsibility for driving reforms.
- Encourage a **culture of self-reflection** within the system to review capacity gaps at different levels of the system frequently, by embedding routine capacity assessments in the system, and modeling how to address identified challenges systematically, for example, by using tools that specifically consider implementation capacity (such as the delivery capacity framework) to structure reflection workshops and identify priorities for external advice and support.