

Time to formalize daycare in Cambodia ^[1]

Author: My, Sambath

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EXCERPTS

The Cambodian state has taken responsibility for providing preschool education with a two-to-three-hour session per school day to some children aged between three and six years old, but there is no concrete plan or budget for public daycare. The absence of a state role in daycare allows private daycare to proliferate, but the fees are too high for low-income families.

At the same time, some non-profit institutions have initiated affordable daycare services to respond to the needs of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. During my PhD fieldwork in early 2018, I observed these affordable daycare services provided by some non-profit institutions, including preschools and ministries. Drawing on these services, I suggest that preschool and state institutional daycare are a good start for public daycare in Cambodia. But before any discussion on these options, we need to unravel some relevant legal and policy frameworks.

Articles 73 and 16 of the constitution and the 2007 Education Law respectively articulate that the state has a primary role in providing daycare to people, especially “women without support who have many children under their care.” Other relevant policy frameworks are the National Policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (NP-ECCD) of 2010, the Action Plan of NP-ECCD, Goals 4 and 5 embedded in the Cambodian Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs) framework, and the Sustainable Development Goal 4-Education 2030 Roadmap initiated this year. All these policies, except Goal 5 in the CSDGs framework, tend to prioritize one-year preschool education with a three-hour session daily and relinquish the state’s role in care for children under six years old by assigning the family with this childcare.

Target 5.4 as part of Goal 5 in the CSDGs framework emphasizes “legal measures and policies that address and recognize work-life balance (housework and unpaid care) and promote more access to decent work for women” as its indicator. This indicator is a bit vague but has the potential to address the ignored public-daycare issue in Cambodia if it is considered in conjunction with the constitutional and legal provisions on childcare.

In the absence of formal public daycare, I have observed some affordable daycare services provided by some state-detached preschools, community preschools, Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) and some non-governmental organizations, Khemara Cambodia for example.

During my fieldwork, I visited and interviewed the director and two teachers at 8-March preschool in Phnom Penh, which provides affordable full-day childcare in addition to daily routine three-hour preschool sessions. The school’s childcare service runs from 7am to 5pm and accommodates 144 of the 425 children who attend three-hour education sessions daily. Parents of each child under day-long childcare need to pay US\$23 per month for their child’s lunches.

Another fascinating affordable daycare is provided by a community preschool, Prey Tatouch Community Childcare Centre (PTCCC), at Beung Khyang commune in Kandal province. PTCCC was initially established by a non-governmental organization called Caring for Young Khmer (CYK) in 1992 and then transferred to the commune council in 2017.

In 2018, the center was qualified as a standardized community preschool among the 600 SCPSs for their teachers to get an appropriate

monthly salary from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS). This center cares for 30 children aged from three to five years whose parents are from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The official caring hours are from 7am to 3pm, but some parents drop their children at about 6-6:30am at a teacher's house, while others pick up their children as late as about 5pm. Parents of each child are required to pay 2,000 riels (about 50 US cents) per day, equivalent to \$10 per month.

In addition to these preschool childcare, MoWA just initiated daycare for its staff members, maybe the first state institution to do so. At this early stage, this center cares for children aged two to three years; the number of children is up and down from about three to four children for some days to more than 10 for other days. Although the center is at its early stage, it is a positive step for state institutional daycare in Cambodia.

The preceding three case studies reveal promising daycare services that benefit low-income families, such as garment-factory workers, farmers, small street vendors, tuk-tuk drivers, janitors and security officers. Nevertheless, the primary concern lies in their scale and sustainability issues.

To my knowledge, PTCCC may be the only community preschool that provides day-long childcare, while a few state preschools provide such services in Phnom Penh. Sustaining and scaling up such services requires the Cambodian state to formalize daycare at all state institutions from the national to sub-national levels, and at all 186 state-detached preschools and 600 standardized community preschools.

The formalization of these daycare services will require cooperation between relevant institutions and the National Committee on Early Childhood Care and Development (NC-ECCD) that oversees the NP-ECCD. One possible way of formalizing daycare at state institutions is for MoWA and NC-ECCD to work with the Cambodian National Council for Women and the Cambodian National Council for Children on a sub-decree, signed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, to instruct other state institutions to set up daycare centers within their institutions. Concerning preschool childcare, the NC-ECCD could prioritize it under the NP-ECCD and its upcoming Action Plan. This formalization of daycare cannot work without budget allocations.

The suggestion of formalization of daycare is not a fantasy but based on practical experiences on the ground. The proposal does not mean that we need to limit daycare to only a small number of preschools, but it is just a starting point.

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