



Source: UNICEF

# Early Development and Learning in Cambodia

## Background

Despite rapid economic growth in recent years, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in Asia, and faces a number of challenges in promoting child development and learning.

About 11.3% of Cambodia's 15.2 million people are less than 5 years old. The country has an under-5 mortality rate of 69 deaths per 1,000 live births, and about 40% of children under five are stunted (UNESCO, 2014).

Early childhood education in Cambodia is provided in state (public), private, and community pre-schools and through home-based parenting programmes.

The gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education was 13 according to UNESCO, (2014) but the Royal Government of Cambodia's estimate for 2013-14 was 33. The latter figure takes into account enrollment in public, private and community-based preschool and in home-based programmes. There are significant urban/rural disparities in the availability of services and enrolment. Contributory factors are a lack of funding, poor facilities, poverty, and poorly educated parents.

The Royal Government of Cambodia has developed plans to expand access for children to early childhood education and community-based pre-schools, especially in remote areas. That stated, progress has not been as fast as hoped for.

## Objectives

Cambodia was one of six countries that participated in the East Asia-Pacific Early Child Development Scales (EAP-ECDS) project, supported by UNICEF- East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), the Open Society Foundations, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC).

The main objective of this project was to equip stakeholders across East Asia and the Pacific with a common measurement tool to assess the holistic developmental progress of children ranging in age from three to five years. It was felt that stakeholders in Cambodia including governments, universities, research institutions and donor partners, would be able to utilise the data garnered from this project to promote early development and learning, and prevent the loss of human potential by investing in the early years.

## Methodology

As part of this project, direct assessments of the holistic development and learning of 3- to 5-year-old children residing in urban and rural settings were carried out in 2013-2014. Children were administered the EAP-ECDS. The items on these Scales were developed based on the Early Learning and Development Standards (ELDS) from countries in the East Asia and Pacific Region (including Cambodia) through an iterative process. The EAP-ECDS includes seven domains and 85 items. Caregivers were also interviewed in individual sessions to obtain: (i) standard demographic data; (ii) reports on the child's early learning and development; and (iii) information about the child's health and habits.



Cambodian children learning at school

## Conclusions

- The EAP-ECDS are valid and reliable measures of developmental functioning in Cambodia. Older children performed better than younger children in all domains of the Scales.
- Participation in early childhood programmes had a significant positive effect on the EAP-ECDS. Children who attended such programmes scored about 9 percentage points higher than other children.
- Rural early childhood education should be enhanced to improve the performance of children in rural areas.
- Caregivers should be provided education and support to encourage them to be more involved in the early development of their wards.

## Sample

| Country         | Age          | Rural      |            | Urban      |            | Total       |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
|                 |              | Girls      | Boys       | Girls      | Boys       |             |
| Ethnic Majority | 3Y           | 88         | 85         | 110        | 104        | 387         |
|                 | 4Y           | 89         | 89         | 105        | 107        | 390         |
|                 | 5Y           | 88         | 92         | 106        | 106        | 392         |
|                 | <b>Total</b> | <b>265</b> | <b>266</b> | <b>321</b> | <b>317</b> | <b>1169</b> |

The EAP-ECDS was administered to 1,500 children in Cambodia. The data from 1,465 children (including a special case of 296 children from ethnic minority families) were included in the analyses. The ethnicity status of 35 children was missing, and therefore data from them were excluded from the analyses. Caregivers were interviewed in individual sessions. The majority of the interviewees were mothers (65.9%), while 13.7% and 20.4% of the caregivers interviewed were fathers and other family members, respectively.

Tests confirmed that the EAP-ECDS as a whole and the different sub-scales (domains) were valid and reliable measures of the early development and learning of children from Cambodia.

## Early Child Development

Comparisons of average scores on each domain were made across age, sex, and urban/rural settings. Further, the relationship between findings from direct assessments of children's performance and parent reports were also compared. Predictors of child development and learning, participation in early childhood programmes, home learning environments, children's health condition and health-related practices were also examined.

There were significant developmental differences in the EAP-ECDS. Older children performed better than younger children in all domains of the Scales. This finding was not unexpected as the EAP-ECDS is a developmental scale with adequate validity and reliability.

### Cognitive Development

- The performance of urban children was significantly better than that of rural children.

### Socio-emotional Development

- Urban girls did significantly better than the urban boys, but rural boys and girls did not differ.

### Motor Development

- Children from urban areas did significantly better than rural children.
- 5-year-old boys did significantly better than 5-year-old girls but there were no gender differences across 3- and 4-year-olds.

### Language and Emergent Literacy

- Girls performed significantly better than boys.
- Urban children did significantly better than rural children across all age groups, and differences in performance increased as children matured.

### Health, Hygiene, and Safety

- Urban children did significantly better than rural children across all age groups, and these differences increased as children matured.

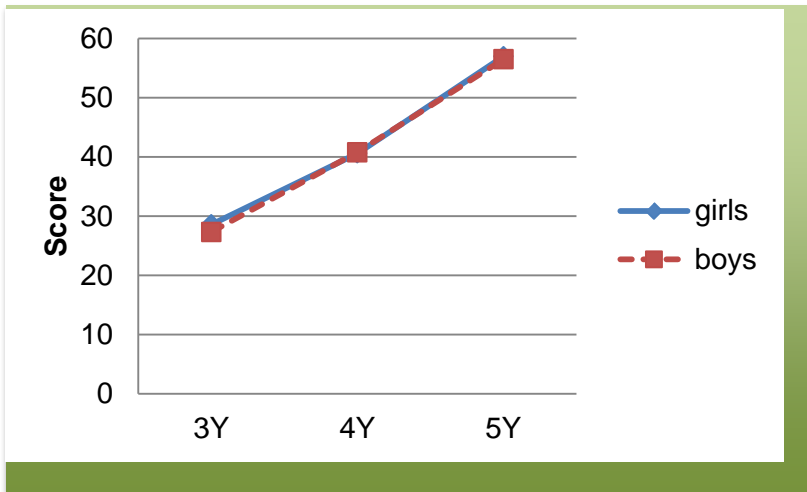
### Cultural Knowledge and Participation

- Girls demonstrated significantly better performance than boys.
- Urban children did significantly better than rural children.

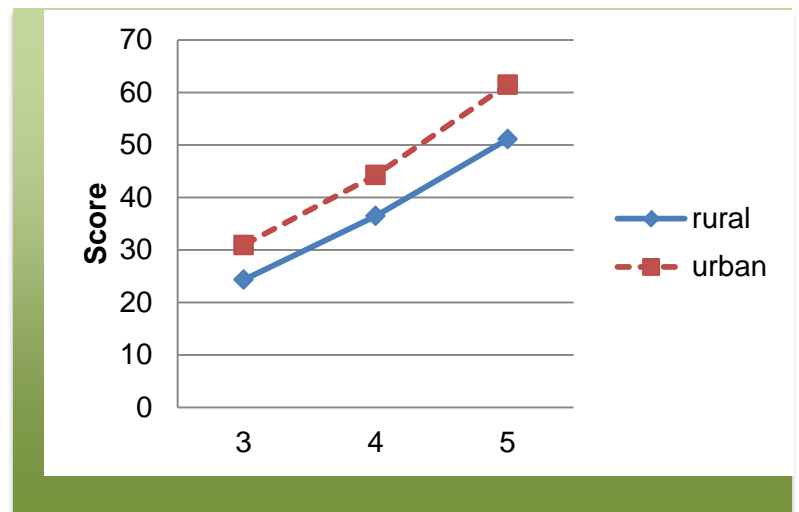
### Approaches to Learning

- Urban children did significantly better than rural children.

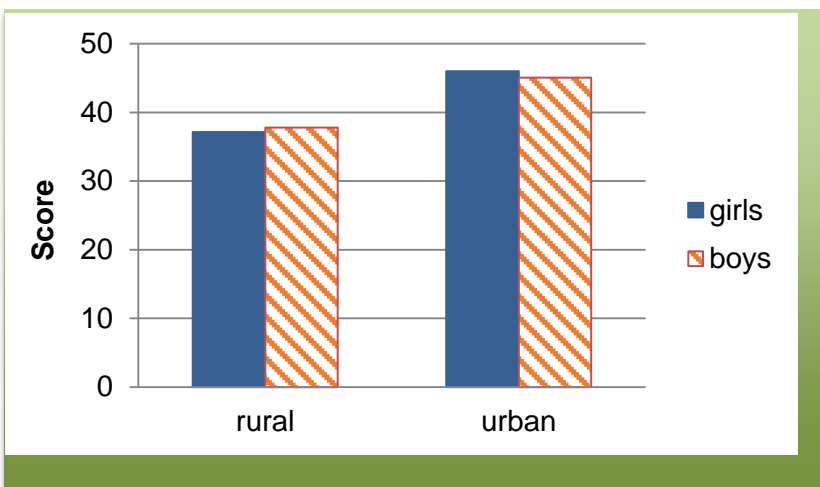
Age and Gender differences in Cognitive Development (Cambodia)



Age differences in Cognitive Development in children living in rural and urban areas (Cambodia)



Gender differences in Cognitive Development in children living in rural and urban areas (Cambodia)



## Early Learning and Development

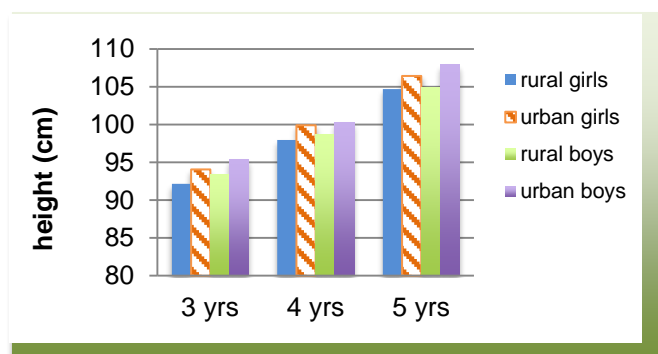
- Less than half (41.8%) of the participating children attended some form of early education programme, and two thirds of these children were from urban areas.
- The children who were older or of better-educated parents were more likely enrolled in an early learning programme than other children. Almost all the children who attended an early childhood programme went to state pre-schools, and most of them spent 10 to 20 hours a week in the kindergarten.
- Urban, better-educated parents thought that their children were more competent in basic literacy and numeracy skills than other children. Indeed, results across the domains of the EAP-ECDS indicated an advantage for urban, older children.
- Less than half of Cambodian parents and other family members reported having involvement in early learning-related activities at home. However, mothers were more involved in early learning activities than other family members, and urban educated mothers were more likely to support early learning at home than other mothers.

## Health and Hygiene

- Almost all children (98.1%) had had their vaccinations, however approximately 92% of the families did not take their child for a regular health check-up to a clinic/hospital.
- Child's age was the best predictor of health facilitation practices.
- Parents reported on basic health-related habits such as always washing hands after using the toilet and before meals without adults' directions, and eating vegetables without adults' directions. Regression results indicated that older children, girls, and those with more educated fathers tended to have better health and hygiene habits than other children.

## Height and Weight

Age and Gender differences in Height in urban and rural areas (Cambodia)



Age and Gender differences in Weight in urban and rural areas (Cambodia)

