

Effectiveness of Government Interventions to Combat COVID-19 in Cambodia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since early 2020, COVID-19 has threatened our health, social life, and economy globally. The troublesome asymptomatic characteristics of the virus led governments to close schools, restaurants, movie theaters, and other public amenities as safety measures. This, unfortunately, resulted in a slowdown in the economy and a fall in the standard of living. The informal workers, employed on a seasonal, casual, or temporary basis, and lack social protection, suffered badly (Dash & Dash, 2021). However, amidst these challenges, businesses and students have shown remarkable adaptability. Students were forced to adapt to online classes, and businesses had to shift to online sales and delivery. Despite their best efforts, many businesses were forced to close, and students struggled with the transition.

Although the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) distributed vaccines to more than half of the population, the emergence of the COVID-19 Delta variant in a later phase means that the government still needs to close down schools and businesses (Strangio, 2021). As the education system remains vulnerable, many students faced challenges accessing adequate learning, examinations were postponed, and the quality of education was at risk. While some businesses managed to conduct their activities virtually, others faced bankruptcy and liquidation, and most importantly, the small family businesses whose operations were suspended due to the government's restrictive measures had no choice except to look for new opportunities. Therefore, knowing the effectiveness and sustainability of the government's measures and policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic is imperative.

This chapter delves into the profound and pressing challenges that COVID-19 has inflicted upon Cambodia's economy and education system. We also critically assess the efficacy of the Royal Government's measures in combating the far-reaching effects of the pandemic.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Governments generally use legislation, taxation, and subsidies to counteract market inequity. They can also engage in the market to improve economic justice. One of the most prevalent and well-understood justifications for government involvement is to maximize social welfare. For instance, when the threat posed by COVID-19 to the United States became apparent, political leaders and commentators began advocating for large-scale government actions to counter the health and economic consequences. The belief was that COVID-19 requires a stronger, more interventionist government in line with the “national conservative” movement, which argues for government intervention in the economy to achieve various goals (Thomas, 2020). In China, however, while these intervention policies vary by location, they consistently attempt to lower population interaction rates and minimize viral transmission. Although lockdown, school closure, centralized quarantine, and mask-wearing were effective in controlling the virus transmission and put forward by several governments, based on the scenario analysis, governments by enforcing school closures, compulsory mask-wearing, and centralized quarantine could achieve identical viral transmission control results to counteract economic repercussions, and this could be without implementing lockdown policies (Zito & Chen, 2020).

Cambodia’s government’s approach to the pandemic was outstanding. Its COVID-19 Master Plan called for improving the health system, assisting workers and businesses, and distributing cash transfers to disadvantaged households. The government’s reaction reportedly cost \$815.7 million (3.1 percent of GDP), eventually escalating to \$1.36 billion (5.1 percent of GDP). Despite precautions, the outbreak has had a significant social and economic impact. The conventional fields of tourism and garment, textiles, and footwear (GTF) were severely affected. Beginning in March 2020, the construction project halted, and over 119,000 Cambodian migrant laborers were repatriated from Thailand. The economy was predicted to decline by 1.9 percent, from 6.8 percent before COVID-19 to 4.5 percent in 2020 (Thomas, 2020).

Since the community outbreak in February 2021, although the shock of global demand and lockdowns impacted Cambodia’s economic activity, it has slowly recovered due to increased investment in the trade agreement between China and Cambodia (CCFTA). Also, Cambodia’s agricultural sector greatly benefitted from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). The Royal Government of Cambodia also introduced fiscal and monetary support by providing a US\$719 million budget for economic relief and recovery in 2021. However, despite these efforts, there were still significant challenges and risks. These include rising unemployment, inflation, and a potential decrease in foreign investment. Thus, although the government took extreme measures to restore the economy, challenges

continued to persist, as Cambodia's growth model already showed weaknesses even before the pandemic hit the country (World Bank Group, 2021).

Although the global pandemic significantly impacted the world's economy, Cambodia's government was relatively successful in managing health risks and mitigating social and economic consequences. Cambodia was considered one of the Southeast Asian countries with remarkable success in vaccine distribution. As of September 6, 2021, over two-thirds of the country's population had received at least one dose of vaccine, and the highest percentage in Southeast Asia, 53 percent, was fully vaccinated (Strangio, 2021). Cambodia demonstrated the success of this vaccine distribution program due to the country's contained geography and small population. On the other hand, The Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training (MLVT) provided an update on the garment industry to safeguard businesses' survival. The manufacturing sector showed indications of recovery by the end of 2020, with 112 factories opening compared to 129 firms closing throughout the year, which indicates robust growth potential as regional value chains continue to evolve (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2021). In the medium term, however, the chances for tourism to return and fuel growth remained alarmingly doubtful due to nearly half of tourism-related businesses being forced to close. Nevertheless, the government indicated a solid commitment to take proactive measures to support health, social assistance, and economic sectors during the pandemic.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this research, we primarily use data from secondary sources. We collected data virtually from online publications, media articles, organization reports, and research papers to help us achieve our objectives. To improve our research's clarity and credibility, we only used data published in 2020 onward and from trusted sources, including the World Bank and UN organizations. These sources were selected based on their reputation for providing accurate and reliable data on economic development and government interventions. Moreover, we collected press releases of organizations or associations related to the effectiveness of government interventions, expert analysis, and reports or official documents of Cambodian ministries such as the Ministry of Economy and Finance, including the Supreme National Council of Cambodia, to ensure that our findings and discussions are reliable and accurate. Also, we concentrated on discussing the statistics critical to Cambodia's government intervention.

4. IMPACT ON BUSINESS ENTERPRISES AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced how we live, and Cambodians are no exception. This prolonged epidemic has the potential to overwhelm the

interconnections comprising multiple stakeholders. This resulted in a substantial slowdown in Cambodia's primary sectors in the first quarter of 2020.

4.1 Impact on Business Finances and Operations

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted family businesses and enterprises, particularly in terms of their financial and operational management. These firms' most significant financial challenges include sales distributions, rent expenses, payrolls, current liabilities, and bank overdrafts. However, the true extent of the pandemic's impact may only become apparent in the long run, with potential consequences that could significantly affect corporate survival. Operational challenges, such as securing funding, logistics disruptions, system failures, transportation issues, and a lack of protective gear, further exacerbate the situation (United Nations Industrial Development Organization [UNIDO], 2020).

4.2 Impact on Business Revenues

The pandemic significantly impacted firms operating for five to 14 years, resulting in a drastic decline of over 80 percent in revenues. These were primarily large corporations engaged in manufacturing finished items for export. Additionally, there has been a significant decrease in net profits for food and beverage and agricultural food production by 70 percent and 50 percent, respectively. This decline is primarily a result of the government's regulations to combat the outbreak, which included city-wide lockdowns and the temporary closure of food courts, schools, and major events like wedding receptions. These measures have directly impacted the demand for agricultural raw materials and the supply of food products (UNIDO, 2020).

4.3 Impact on the Quality of the Educational System

On March 16, 2020, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) decided to suspend all educational institutions, private and public, from pre-schools to universities. The school closures have affected all 13,482 schools in Cambodia, involving 3,210,285 learners and 93,225 instructors (Chhy, 2021). The most direct consequence for pupils has been the temporary discontinuation of face-to-face school instruction. Teachers, on the other hand, were also greatly influenced in terms of professional teaching. Both students and teachers put their efforts into adapting to the new demanding approach of virtual learning. Since Cambodia has been culturally reliant on physical education, the abrupt transition to e-learning was difficult for them to adhere to. Although MoEYS arranged online class channels such as broadcasting via TV, radio, and YouTube, this technique proved unsuccessful as students from rural areas were unable to access the platforms due to poor technology (Chheang & Khut, 2020). Moreover, the lockdown has also negatively influenced the 2021

National Budget. In response to the ongoing issues, in 2021, the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) published a reduced budget expenditure for all ministries, including the MoEYS, which was necessary to safeguard the routine operation of state institutions and the sustainability of people's daily lives (Long, 2021). With limited financial support, the government needed to work on ensuring the effectiveness and efficiency of providing a standard education.

Based on this, we conclude that the lockdown measures, school suspensions, and the new budget restraint policies adversely influence the effectiveness of learning outcomes in Cambodia. Specifically, we have observed a decline in academic performance, decreased student engagement, and a widening educational gap between urban and rural areas.

4.4 Impact on the Mental Health of Students

The COVID-19 in the Kingdom has hit the children's education hard. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), many pupils in Cambodia experienced threats to their well-being. The risk of violence, parental abuse, and exploitation increased moderately due to the extended school closures. Consequently, these students were confirmed to have struggled mentally and psychologically, including loneliness, anxiety, or depression. The study further indicates that the rate of students dropping out was higher than the one when schools were in session. E-learning was a completely new experience for the majority of students in Cambodia. During online study, students easily lose focus due to an inappropriate environment for studying, as some households can be noisy and uncomfortable. Also, home is not a suitable environment for most of them to concentrate. Under these circumstances, it is understandable that the students were not mentally and psychologically prepared for the new challenges (UNICEF, 2021).

4.5 Impact on the Implementation of the Education Strategic Plan (ESP)

The pandemic has significantly impacted the quality of education in Cambodia and hindered the progress of the Education Strategic Plan 2019-2023. This strategic plan, which includes two medium-term policies, aims to ensure inclusive and equal education, promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, and ensure effective leadership and administration of education officials at all levels. However, the government's response to the pandemic has hindered the progress of this plan (MoEYS, 2020).

5. GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION MEASURES

The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) took extreme measures to combat the economic immobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The stimulus packages, which include a \$815.7 million package, equivalent to 3.2 percent of the country's

GDP, could lead to an increase in real GDP of \$1.2 billion after a year and \$1.3 billion after two years. The government entrusted the Committee on Financial and Economic Policy to create four working groups to implement the COVID-19 measures (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

1. Budget preparation, finance, and social relief policies: The government is committed to managing finances to fight the pandemic, providing substantial aid to poor and vulnerable households, and supporting businesses in these challenging times.
2. Organize the social relief policies: The Royal Government of Cambodia has established clear criteria for identifying poor and vulnerable households that need funding.
3. Proactive management of supplies and logistics: The government is taking decisive steps to manage the quantity, quality, and pricing of certain goods, such as medical supplies and food, ensuring availability and affordability.
4. Monetary and fiscal policy to pitch into the effect of COVID-19 and the withdrawal of the everything but Arms (EBA): Prepare a budget for financing and maintain countrywide stability under the impact of the global pandemic.

5.1 Business Enterprises

Recognizing the challenges faced by our workforce in the current environment, the government is stepping up to provide support. We encourage new startup companies to explore the digital world, offering them a chance to thrive in these uncertain times. We provide technological and soft skills training for our unemployed workers in the tourism sector and the garment, textile, and footwear (GTF) industry. We also offer a more advanced technical course for non-GTF industry workers, accompanied by a \$120 monthly cash incentive for six months. Our response plan also includes tax relief for sectors affected by the pandemic. We have exempted \$97.6 million worth of tax up until December 2020. Hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants in seven provinces were exempted from all taxes for up to six months. Registered airlines were also not required to pay tax until July 2020, and factories that suspended operations were exempted from their National Social Security Fund (NSSF) (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

In a move to bolster the economy, the Government has extended the tax exemption for businesses, including hotels, guesthouses, and restaurants, until the end of September 2021. This measure, coupled with the exemption of NSSF contribution based on socioeconomic factors until the end of December 2021, is expected to provide significant relief to affected businesses. Additionally, the support for the aviation sector, which includes the suspension of minimum tax payments until the end of September 2021, aims to alleviate financial pressures (O'Connell, 2021).

Following a significant spike in COVID-19 cases, Cambodia announced a two-week lockdown on April 14, 2021, in Phnom Penh, two months after the February 20, 2021, event. The RGC promptly classified the city into three zones: red, dark yellow, and yellow. The lockdown was lifted on May 5, 2021, with the red zone remaining locked (DCA *et al.*, 2021). To combat the spread of the highly contagious delta strain, the RGC implemented several measures. This included a lockdown in provinces bordering Thailand, the closure of the Cambodia-Thailand border, and the enforcement of a curfew in Phnom Penh and other towns from 9:00 PM to 3:00 AM (U.S. Mission Cambodia, 2021).

Cambodia is one of the fastest countries to implement vaccination programs since February 2021. Data shows (as of today) that 27.4 million vaccine doses were given, with 13 million people fully vaccinated, equivalent to 77.8 percent of the total population (Our World in Data, 2021). In the World Health Organization (WHO) Western Pacific Region, Cambodia has the highest rate of people who got two doses of the coronavirus vaccine. The requirement for citizens to show their vaccination cards is a smart and time-saving approach to ensure that businesses can operate and that the macroeconomic situation will prosper again (United Nations Country Team [UNCT] Cambodia, 2021).

5.2 Educational System

The Government allocated a budget of \$6.8 million to implement strategic plans for the educational sector. In response to the threat of COVID-19, MoEYS took early initiatives and procedures to ensure continuous learning for students. Comprehensive instructions, guidelines, and directives were developed and distributed nationwide. MoEYS also distributed documents promoting proper hygiene. The ministry suspended schools in some provinces in mid-March and subsequently issued a statewide shutdown of all educational institutions. In a move to ensure the continuity of education, the Government announced teleworking arrangements for all education sector employees. This decision allowed for the seamless operation of the sector, despite the physical closure of educational institutions. In April 2021, MoEYS issued a directive about implementing remote learning and online classes for all levels of education. To support the introduction of distance learning, MoEYS developed an operational guideline. This guideline plays a crucial role in implementing the directive at the national, subnational, and educational institution levels and in developing remote learning programs (MoEYS, 2020).

The major component of the strategic measure is to develop remote learning for students from early childhood education (ECE) to higher education. Since students in these grades appeared on yearly countrywide tests, MoEYS prepared online classes for Grade 9 and 12 pupils in March 2020. MoEYS created remote lessons for pupils

from lower to higher educational levels, including those from ethnic minority communities and children with hearing difficulties. These programs were available on Facebook, YouTube, and the U-Learning portal (MoEYS, 2020).

MoEYS is resolutely dedicated to achieving the U.N. educational goal from 2019 to 2050, guided by the principles of comprehensiveness and the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. The ESP, a key instrument in this pursuit, is set to undergo assessment in two stages. The first stage, a mid-term assessment in 2021, will be followed by a comprehensive evaluation in 2023. These assessments are designed to scrutinize the program's impact on education sector improvements, in perfect harmony with the Royal Government's goal for Cambodia's socioeconomic growth and reform programs (The Phnom Penh Post, 2021).

5.3 Evaluations on the Effectiveness of the Government Measures

During the first outbreak of COVID-19, it was unimaginable to think the world would survive the pandemic. Like any natural disaster or crisis that has struck unexpectedly and suddenly, the lockdown shocked all (Mehta, 2020). Given the rapid spread of this contagious virus, governments have started to implement and enforce many social restrictions, with lockdowns being at the forefront of those measures that aim to assist in lowering overall transmissions and deaths. Even though the lockdown was demonstrated to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic successfully and indicated that this preventive measure could considerably reduce the virus's transmission, it had a long-term and disproportionate impact on all businesses and educational systems, particularly the poor and vulnerable. Not only that, it significantly influenced their daily life but also businesses that were forced to cease or suspend operations. However, due to the fast-growing youth population and better accessibility to the Internet, businesses are now using digital marketing to sell and market their products. This shift to digital platforms has not only helped businesses survive during the pandemic but also opened up new opportunities for growth and expansion. For instance, new social media platforms and apps are constantly being introduced to the market, and COVID-19 has accelerated the uptake of these technologies in Cambodia (B2B, 2021).

For this reason, more businesses shifted their strategies and adapted to the pandemic by creating better online content, implementing various online payment methods, and developing apps. On the contrary, while digital marketing is incredibly advantageous to most businesses, smaller and less fortunate local enterprises cannot access the Internet. While everything is forced to shut down, the Government has also implemented a tax relief plan that allows businesses to postpone paying taxes until COVID-19 disappears. Without a doubt, we feel that this implementation has mitigated the issues of bankruptcy and closure of most firms. On the other hand,

classifying different zone restrictions and enforcing curfews were also critical in combating the spread of this virus. Operation of certain businesses such as nightclubs, karaoke, gyms, and cinemas were all prohibited by the Government of Cambodia. In the same way, children were also forced to adapt to sudden lockdowns and limited availability of learning material. However, only some students have access to the Internet. Even though it effectively reduces the number of COVID-19 cases, we believe the school shutdown will lead to more school dropouts and psychological discomfort among children. The potential long-term effects on children's education and well-being are a matter of great concern, as most children have never experienced or been familiar with e-learning before, and now they must learn to adjust to this new environment, which requires strong self-motivation and time management abilities. Furthermore, it is self-evident that the lack of social interaction in online learning can result in emotions of isolation, stress, and demotivation.

However, until now, the World Health Organization has been working relentlessly with partners to discover, manufacture, and distribute safe and effective vaccines that can protect against disease, infection, and transmission. To illustrate, while COVID-19 vaccinations have yet to be proven successful in preventing transmission, studies suggest that they are beneficial in reducing significant disease and death (National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (U.S.) Division of Viral Diseases, 2021). Today, more than 11.5 million people over 12 have been vaccinated by the Royal Government (UNICEF, 2021). Even though most Cambodians have received their third dose of vaccination, for the foreseeable future, we must continue to wear masks, wash our hands, ensure good ventilation indoors, and physically distance ourselves from crowds. Recently, the Government introduced a new measure requiring all citizens to show their vaccination cards before entering any place. We believe that this is an excellent approach to ensure that businesses can operate safely and that the economy can begin to recover.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, COVID-19 has harmful effects on business and education. Several studies conducted by individual experts and organizations focused on the critical role of Government measures and their impact on business operations, companies' growth, market development, education delivery, student mental well-being, and others. In addition, government initiatives in budgeting, finance, welfare spending, social relief policies, and logistics are critical. We intend to explore several measures implemented by the Royal Government to counteract the spread of the pandemic, including certain limitations.

Even though the pandemic was unavoidable, prioritizing citizens' welfare is the key to good physical and mental health. The Government should extend its support

to educational, technical, and vocational institutions to provide market-oriented education and training for skills development based on the job market and broaden employment opportunities for the people. The pandemic has worsened the current economy and created critical problems for families and individuals. As such, solid short-term and long-term measures should be taken targeting people who are economically weak and need special attention for their vulnerabilities. Building a supportive ecosystem for businesses can encourage growth in the public and private sectors. This can lead to achieving sustainable development goals and creating a more resilient and safe business environment for new and existing entrepreneurs.

When it comes to educational reform, it is paramount that the Government ensures all students have equal learning opportunities. This includes access to available resources, particularly technological support, such as laptops, tablets, and IT technicians. The Government should pay special attention to the needs of pupils from economically disadvantaged families, who often have limited resources and are at risk of dropping out. It is also crucial for stakeholders such as parents, local authorities, teachers, community, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to collaborate with these policies. This collective effort is necessary to ensure the effective delivery of education and prevent students' mental ill health. It requires open and effective communication among all parties - ministries, the private sector, and Government units.

This research is not free from certain limitations. Our study is entirely based on secondary data, and its reliability depends on data accuracy. Future researchers might consider the opportunities to conduct research during the COVID-19 pandemic on industrial growth, digital economy transformation, and online classes and curricula development. Notably, COVID-19 created a platform for academics, business owners, employees, consumers, and others to adapt to the digital transformation in conducting activities.

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