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CLUSTER SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA:

Analysis of Process & Outcomes

PREPARED BY:

Kurt Bredenberg

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KAPE, c/o Provincial Teacher Training College, Kampong Cham Town
Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia; Mailing Address: PO Box 1621 Phnom
Penh (email: kape@kapekh.org/website: www.kapekh.org)

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Executive Summary

1. GENERAL PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Stakeholder consultations conducted by the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports have highlighted the need to improve the articulation of a role for school clusters in the education reform process. The purpose of the present report, therefore, has been to try to inform the process of better articulating the function of clusters in the reform process through a review of previous issues of relevance, cluster potentials and weaknesses, and stakeholder views regarding the future direction of cluster school evolution.

Cluster school development as a process has been found to be highly variable with distinct stages and themes. Currently, the cluster school initiative is regaining a sense of balance after a previous period of rapid expansion that caused some destabilization. Approximately 43% of the 760 clusters in country are presently receiving comprehensive support from donors. This does not include about 100+ clusters which were previously assisted but which agencies have now phased out. This support is now reaching about 40% of primary enrolled children.

At the present time, the cluster school initiative appears to be entering a new paradigm. Emergent development themes in the new paradigm include greater focus on children's rights (e.g., Child Friendly Schools Programs) and on individual schools within clusters, movement away from unitary planning, and a decline in resource sharing functions. The PAP process has imparted some impetus to these changes, particularly with respect to its intent to provide operating budgets to individual schools and to match funds with specific needs identified by schools. In this sense, the current state of cluster school development presents opportunities for convergence with the educational reform process.

2. REVIEW OF EARLIER ISSUES IN CLUSTER SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Earlier issues in the evolution of the cluster school initiative continue to be relevant to modifications in possible cluster roles in the new reform context. These include the need for clear conceptual frameworks that link function to activities and evaluation; management structures that may need to be more convergent with existing structures within the government; the need to address the problem of tokenism in community participation in education; and the human resource constraints that have contributed to a two-tiered structure of supported and unsupported clusters.

The two-tiered character of cluster school development has been a particularly intractable problem and has exacerbated perceptions of inequity in the way educational development has occurred in the past. Because cluster school development tends to be human resource intensive, donors have been unable to support nation-wide efforts to develop all clusters in the country. Most projects have stressed the need for animators and considerable technical support for clusters to become fully operational. Thus, the failure to animate all clusters everywhere is not entirely a matter of inadequate budgetary support but one of constrained human resource availability. There is also the perception in government that these constraints have been aggravated by 'parallel' project management structures that tend to rob government offices of their best staff.

Some cluster school practitioners have stated the belief that unsupported clusters may have very high levels of operational ability in spite of the fact that they have not received donor support. Although still meagre, existing research does not support this observation. Indeed, surveys of unsupported clusters have suggested huge differences in the capacities of these clusters when compared to those supported by donors. This high variability in functionality among clusters is a major obstacle that limits their ability to play a clear role in the reform process as the latter is a nation-wide undertaking. As a country-wide set of interventions, it does not admit of differences in the operational level of clusters. Thus, any decisions on a role for clusters to play in planning or monitoring PAP activities would first have to address the problem of their variable functionality.

3. CLUSTER ASSESSMENTS

Systematic research on the efficacy of clusters has yielded conflicting results. Previous studies of cluster school development *processes* have found 'spotty' results. In particular, *institution building* has not been found to be a strong component of cluster school projects. This has most often been attributed to the failure of the initiative to develop a clear and practical conceptual framework that outlines cluster functions. The most worrying manifestation of this failure has been the significant absence of evaluation instruments specific to the cluster school development process in many cluster projects.

On the other hand, studies of *outputs* relating to internal efficiency have been more positive with significant reductions in repetition and the gender gap. In addition, a formal survey of cluster practitioners in several provinces has indicated relatively strong satisfaction with the initiative, particularly with respect to teacher supervision and teacher training. Nevertheless, the same practitioners have also indicated significant problems such as poor leadership at cluster level, low motivation, and a lack of the necessary prerequisites among cluster personnel to benefit from the training provided.

4. SCHOOL CLUSTERS AND DECENTRALIZATION: CURRENT ISSUES

School clusters have made significant contributions to efforts to decentralize educational development. These contributions include heightened local management of resources, improved local decision-making, localized capacity building, and streamlined absorption of development aid. They have also made tremendous strides in helping school clusters to develop rational plans and to monitor the effectiveness of activities. This is perhaps the greatest contribution that they can make to current reform activities, chiefly with respect to improved utilization and monitoring of school operating budgets under PAP 2. To be sure, there have been problems particularly as they relate to the unitary character of cluster school plans.

While some degree of homogeneity in planning is to be expected given the similarity in problems between schools, there seems to be general agreement that efforts to promote innovative practice will be confounded unless the situation can be rectified. This lesson should not be lost on PAP for if and when, more rationalized planning is achieved in this context, the same slide into unitary planning may also occur, particularly if schools are doing their plans without benefit of collective pooling of human resources.

Current decentralization reforms will also require some modification in the way that clusters are operating. In the past, the primary functions of school clustering have generally been seen to include *resource sharing*, *capacity building*, and *accountability*. Resource sharing has in particular received much emphasis given the tremendous need and limited availability of resources, hence the huge investments in resource center buildings and core school libraries. However, it is the introduction of PAP with its generous provisions for teaching aids as well as the steady expansion of library services within cluster school projects themselves that have made many of the earlier planned resource sharing functions obsolete.

To remain relevant to changing educational needs, it is important that the cluster school initiative re-aligns some of its activities (and resources) to give greater focus to internal functions that do not entail material resource sharing. Capacity building and accountability (or monitoring) functions should be the focus of this re-alignment. For example, where LCSCs and teacher supervision networks have been well organized, they offer a tremendous means to expedite interventions of quality that seek to promote innovation. The Ministry has also reported that direct reports from clusters regarding pass rates and total enrolment have provided a means for rapid data collection and upward accountability to central government structures. Innovative interventions to promote IPM, life skills training, and scholarships to the poor report a similarly high level of facilitation offered by the cluster school network.

The recent institution of commune councils by the government represents another important change in the policy context that may help to increase the participation of communities in the education system. Since the councils and the formal education administrative network are under different line Ministries (Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, respectively), it is probably unlikely that efforts to promote decentralization in the education system through the councils will involve direct governance roles. These will likely continue to adhere to the Provincial and District Offices of Education. A more likely role for the councils is to promote nonbinding oversight of schools through committees that are not part of the formal administrative structure. Because clusters are not an official administrative division, their role in this respect may be crucial.

There may also be other important roles for the councils to play in other cluster-mediated activities. An important example in this regard relates to the emergence of local committees that administer scholarship programs for the poor. A number of pilot scholarship programs working in collaboration with the Ministry rely heavily on cluster school and community networks to administer scholarship funds, particularly with respect to student selection. Activities such as these are likely to be greatly expanded with imminent support to government from the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, Belgian Aid, and the European Union. Because community membership in these cluster-mediated bodies are, as in the case of SSCs, nonelective, the commune councils could again be instrumental in ensuring more solid community representation in their administration. In addition, an informal survey of about 30 commune councils indicate that most have detailed information on poverty indexed data regarding members of their communes. This information could be instrumental in ensuring that need-based scholarships are awarded to the correct recipients.

5. CONCLUSIONS

It has generally been observed that school clusters rarely remain static over time. The experience of the cluster school initiative in Cambodia is largely consistent with this basic precept. A shift in paradigms currently seems to be under way though its exact direction remains uncertain. Although the achievement record of clusters is mixed, it has made significant strides in improving planning at school level, strengthening monitoring and upward accountability to the central level, and fostering provisions for local capacity building. These demonstrated strengths may facilitate more effective local use of resources and assist government in implementing its Monitoring Capacity Building Priorities Program.

To be sure, efforts to increase utilization of clusters in the Ministry's reform program will be hindered by constraints that have been particularly difficult to resolve over the years. These include wide variations across clusters in their technical capacity to run cluster-based institutions; to a large extent, these variations run along a fault line of supported and unsupported clusters. The two-tiered character of cluster school proliferation in Cambodia is itself associated with a wide range of controversial issues such as parallel management structures, localized interventions, and inconsistent approaches between projects. The wide variation in cluster capacities and their close association with localized and discrete project structures is surely one reason why Ministry planners may have found it difficult to incorporate the cluster school network into the PAP reform process. Nevertheless, greater convergence between cluster school development and PAP reform activities would bring benefits to both. Benefits to clusters could include budgetary support for all clusters and a first step towards narrowing the gap between supported and unsupported clusters. Benefits to PAP could include improvements in planning as well as more effective monitoring and improved accountability to local community stakeholders. Realizing these mutual benefits, however, will require greater convergence within the reform process.

Cluster School Development: Analysis of Processes and Outcomes

1. THE CONTEXT

1.1. Background

School clustering was introduced by the MoEYS as a major development strategy to improve the quality of education in primary schools, maximize resource utilization, and promote decentralization. After a period of piloting between 1992 and 1995, they were officially recognized as a national strategy by the MoEYS in 1995. Since that time, numerous studies have been conducted to assess their effectiveness. These assessments have sometimes given conflicting information as to the effectiveness of school clusters and considerable controversy exists in some quarters as to their continued usefulness. Some of these reports were specific to individual programs and focused on improving implementation procedures (e.g., Wheeler, 1998, Bredenberg, 1998); others looked at different models of cluster school implementation across a range of projects (e.g., Geeves, 1999, 2000). Each were timely and gave some indication of progress of the cluster school initiative and lessons learned. While acknowledging that school clustering activities had encountered problems, there was general consensus that the problems lay largely in local design and limitations in the institutional capacity of the government. The merit of the cluster school idea remained sound. In this sense, these reports suggested that a change from project structure implementation modes would be premature, particularly with respect to the lack of accountability and lack of transparency in local decision-making.

The commissioning of the present report is judicious as it appears to mark the end of a distinct period in the evolution of clusters. The current period of flux may, therefore, present opportunities to strengthen the degree of convergence between the cluster school initiative which was one of the first interventions designed to increase decentralization and the current educational reform process. Current reforms include the provision of operating budgets to schools and other special interventions designed to promote access. They also include major changes in the governance landscape such as the election of commune councils earlier in 2002. While providing general recognition of a role for clusters in reform, educational policy documents have so far been rather vague as to the exact nature of this role. Stakeholder consultations by the Ministry during the previous ESSP review highlighted the better articulation of the cluster role in reforms as a high priority. Thus, the purpose of the present report is to try to inform the process of developing a clearer role for clusters in the reform process through a review of previous issues of relevance, cluster potentials and weaknesses, and stakeholder views regarding the future direction of cluster school evolution.

1.2. Extent and Character of Cluster School Development (2001-02)

The MoEYS has determined that there are now 760 clusters in Cambodia. Of these, 325 or 43% are receiving direct support of some sort from external donors. This of course does not include the 100+ clusters that were earlier helped by various donors but which have now been phased out. The current distribution of donor support is shown in Table 1.1 below.

Table 1.1: Extent of Supported and Unsupported School Clusters (as of 2002)

Program/Agency	No. of Clusters	Nature of Assistance	Year support started
1. EQIP/World Bank	157	Technical and Material	1998
2. UNICEF	60	Technical and Material	1993
3. Save the Children /Norway	41	Technical and Material	1992
4. Kampuchean Action for Primary Education	14	Technical and Material	1999
5. World Education	circa 50	Primarily technical	1998
6. CARE	3	Primarily technical	1998
<i>Supported Clusters</i>	325		
<i>Clusters with no external support</i>	435	--	--
TOTAL	760	--	--

Agencies sometimes differ in terms of their support. Some like CARE and World Education rely heavily on clusters to implement specialized programs that seek to improve primary education in specific ways. These programs may include activities focusing on improved access (e.g., for girls, the disabled, etc.) or on pedagogical innovation (such as World Education’s Integrated Pest Management program). Other agencies/projects like EQIP, UNICEF, SCN, and KAPE provide extensive material and technical support to a wide range of quality improvement activities based on local planning.

Although the majority of school clusters in Cambodia are not supported by external aid, donors are still providing outside assistance to a significantly large number. In this respect, it should be noted that donors who provide both material and technical support tend to locate their projects in the more densely populated areas of the country so that they are reaching about 40% of the children enrolled in primary education. For example, the EQIP program alone estimates that it is providing aid to about 23% of the primary school enrolled population while UNICEF's' cluster school program provides aid to approximately 7%. Thus, occasional statements that external assistance programs are reaching only a small minority of students can be misleading.

The character of cluster school development in Cambodia can only be described as highly variable. Since they were first introduced into the education system, clusters have gone through a number of distinct stages. The pilot stage (1992-5) was characterized by experimentation and cautious optimism. This was followed by a period of rapid expansion but for various methodological reasons, stalled evolution (1996-8). The most recent stage (1999-2001) has been characterized by a period of reform and simultaneous convergence in project designs. In the years immediately after 1998, Geeves (2000) described 5 distinct but convergent themes that marked a significant break with previous practice. These themes could be observed across programs and included the following:

- *Theme 1:* Shifting priority from school construction to quality education issues
- *Theme 2:* Emphasizing children' participation and retention at school and increased levels of achievement
- *Theme 3:* Building partnerships at provincial level
- *Theme 4:* Developing decentralized processes of financial management
- *Theme 5:* Linking in-school programs with out-of-school activities

Important examples of these themes over the last few years include UNICEF's decision to reduce its emphasis on construction activities after 1998 and concentrate more strongly on quality issues (Theme 1); the inception of the Education Quality Improvement Project (EQIP) in 1998 with *no* construction component (Themes 1 and 2); Intensive training of technical grade leaders to animate cluster-based capacity building networks (Theme 1); SCN's decision to incorporate the PoE Directorate of target provinces into its project management structure (Theme 3); UNICEF's and EQIP's decision to introduce direct disbursement to provincial implementation units or working groups in 1998 (Theme 4); and the introduction of out-of-school remedial programs mediated by cluster structures in 1999 (see CARE, KAPE) (Theme 5).

Since 2000, there seems to be a new paradigm emerging with respect to development themes in Cambodia's cluster school initiative. Unlike the old paradigm, however, the new one appears to be characterized by tendencies that are somewhat more *divergent* than in the past. This is to say that it is not clear that all agencies will be moving in the same direction on each of these issues. A primary catalyst in the change relates to the MoEYS' new sector development plan (2001-05) in which the provision of operating budgets to schools plays a major role. In addition, major donors such as UNICEF/Sida and the EQIP have begun their own new planning cycles. Some of the new issues coming to the fore as a result of this shift in the development context include the following:

- *Issue 1 – Possible movement away from an Effective Schools Model to one which focuses more on Children's Rights:* Earlier themes in school clustering emphasized improved retention rates, access, and other indicators of school effectiveness as the bottom line. While this line is certainly not being abandoned, there is some question as to whether it will give schools the *human face* that rights advocates are clamoring for. A shift seems to be in progress though its exact form is not yet clear.
- *Issue 2: Reclaiming the School as the Unit of Development:* Debate on this issue is having the most impact in the area of planning and community engagement. In particular, there is growing dissatisfaction with the development of Local Cluster School Committee Plans as a terminus in local level planning. As the arrival of PAP makes school level planning ever more important, pressure is growing for implementation modes in clusters to make an accommodation.
- *Issue 3: Possible Movement away from Unitary Planning:* This issue relates to the one above. Greater emphasis on decentralization in the current development environment means greater attention to the local needs of individual schools. Yet LCSC plans in many projects are strikingly similar to one another. Even within cluster plans, all schools seem to get the same package with little tailoring to individual needs. While needs are no doubt similar among schools, the dearth of diversity in cluster plans is troubling to many. The same requests for teacher training, teaching aids, and classroom furniture are becoming a tiresome mantra in cluster school development. This situation highlights a growing dissatisfaction with the current situation and increasing pressure to consider the diverse needs within each cluster.
- *Issue 4: Decline in Resource Sharing Functions of Clusters:* The provision of operating budgets to schools through PAP and the generally acknowledged failure of Resource Centers to work as they should threatens the continued relevance of school clusters in what was originally one of their primary functions: resource sharing. Yet, the role of the resource center remains firmly on the map in the Ministry's recent publication of National Cluster School Guidelines. While human resource sharing might still be an important role for clusters to fulfill, its material resource role is increasingly being questioned.

As noted above, the tendencies described above cannot be observed consistently across all programs. For example, the EQIP project is *par excellence* an heir to the best in the Effective Schools Movement. In this respect, the EQIP *Aide Memorie* states that the “aim of the project is to develop a model whereby interventions to improve *school effectiveness* can be clearly identified, costed, reviewed, funded, implemented, and monitored” (EQIP, 2002b, p. 19, italics added). As a World Bank supported project, educational effectiveness is defined generally in terms of the teaching process, classroom learning, and standard educational indicators such as repetition and dropout. On the other hand, among agencies such as UNICEF and Save the Children that have specific child rights mandates, there is a growing focus on child rights issues such as inclusive and gender sensitive education, the absence of bullying, and the involvement of children in local needs assessments. UNICEF’s decision, in collaboration with KAPE, to merge its cluster school development program with its Child Friendly School Initiative implies a decisive change in direction for school clusters in at least 6 provinces.

Similarly, divergent directions in the way development aid is targeted (cluster vs school), the nature of planning (maintaining the *status quo* or aiming for diversity), and alternative views on redefining the role of core institutions such as resource centers all suggest a sense of flux in the current state of cluster school development. Coming on top of significant changes inaugurated by the Ministry’s new sector support program, school clusters appear to be in danger of losing some of their attraction as a development strategy. Given that a clear role for school clusters was largely omitted from the Ministry’s Education Sector Support Plan, this assessment is most certainly not an overstatement of the real situation.

2. THE PAST AS PROLOGUE: REVIEW OF EARLIER ISSUES IN CLUSTER SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Maintaining the continued relevance of cluster schools as a development strategy requires a re-assessment of its possible roles in the new reform context. But it is important to understand where clusters have been before mapping out where they might go in the future. The intention of the present section, therefore, is to provide a brief overview of some of the most important issues that have characterized the development of clusters during the last several years.

2.1. The Search for a Conceptual Framework

Perhaps one of the most important problems in Cambodia’s early attempts to develop clusters was the failure to develop definitional models which could aid in implementation and assessment of discrete cluster school projects. Defining the parameters of one’s assessment at the stage of project design can be very helpful in informing the implementation process. Indeed, the best way to think about defining an implementation process is to start with the expected outcomes to be assessed and the functions clusters must fulfill to realize these outcomes. Surprisingly, this common rule of thumb was frequently ignored in cluster school project design in the early years. The failure to develop a model that defined outcomes and cluster functions in clear operational terms was, therefore, an important omission. As a result, those responsible for animating a cluster school were frequently left with highly simplistic notions of what clustering is all about beyond the very superficial definitions describing its external form as an association of schools. In particular, the external technical inputs provided to the cluster were not clearly linked to the specific functions that clusters were supposed to serve.

The failure to rationalize technical support as described above often led to a confused patchwork of activities within clusters with no clear overriding purpose or link to quality improvement in schools. In the absence of such rationalization, clusters tended to perform various activities in a mechanistic way without clearly understanding the function that the activity was supposed to serve. For example, it was not uncommon to find a cluster operating a resource center with little understanding of its inherent features such as rotation of materials to satellite schools (resource sharing) or tracking materials usage (accountability). Activities were often carried out at cluster level simply because they had been mandated by project staff or by officials higher up in the educational hierarchy. When cluster school personnel do not understand the linkages between activities and a generalized set of cluster functions that should be clearly outlined in a definitional framework, the result is likely to be mechanical clusters with limited capacity for innovation.

To be sure, it must be acknowledged that the National Cluster School Committee (NCSC) tried to develop early on a function-based definition of clustering based on a general typology developed by Bray (1987). Cluster functions were classified as either economic, pedagogic, administrative, or social in character. Although this framework was highly suited for classification of cluster models by educational researchers, it was not specifically designed to guide the implementation of cluster school programs. Thus, the NCSC incorporated many elements of Bray’s classification scheme into the official guidelines governing cluster schools only to find that the intended audience lacked the sophistication to make proper use of them. A survey of cluster practitioners conducted during the course of this study suggests that many see the guidelines to be of limited usefulness (see Table 2.1). In addition, Bray’s framework was designed to be intentionally broad in order to take in a wide range of cluster school types. In the Cambodian context, however, the range of needed functions tended to be much narrower. Using a broad model, therefore, made the task of elaborating relevant cluster functions needlessly complicated. This had major implications given that the audience of such explanations (i.e., LCSCs) were not used to working at high levels of abstraction.

Table 2.1: Adherence to Official Cluster School Guidelines

<i>To what extent does your project adhere to the national cluster school guidelines ?</i>			
Responses	A great deal	Somewhat	Not very much
N=31	49%	49%	2%

Establishing functionally based definitions of school clustering has been an important lesson from past experience because such definitions hold the key to establishing satisfactory mechanisms through which to effectively monitor cluster performance. Better defined models of school clustering in Cambodia have led to clearer linkages between expected outcomes and the functional processes clusters need to perform in order to achieve these outcomes. This has in turn has led to more function-based definitions of school clustering. Depending on local need, cluster functions have typically included *resource sharing*, *capacity building*, and ensuring *accountability* for performance. When performance definitions of various cluster systems were not functionally based, it was very difficult to outline exactly how such systems should operate. Another way of saying this is that functionally based definitions of clustering enable one to work backwards from general statements of purpose to the observable practices needed to fulfill those purposes. Articulating these practices in turn provides the tools needed to carry out evaluation in a valid and consistent manner.

Function-based definitions have helped to mitigate conflicting performance expectations of different cluster systems such as resource centers which in the past led to serious disagreements about their effectiveness. For example, functional descriptions of resource centers have helped clusters to identify observable practices that they should perform. These have included the development of school rotation schedules (implied function: resource sharing) and daily sign out ledgers for teachers when borrowing teaching aids (implied function: accountability). Before the existence of such descriptions, many resource centers never advanced farther than the construction of buildings and the provision of furnishings although some actually held that this constituted "functionality". Recent efforts by MoEYS to support resource center development, however, have resulted in better articulated statements of observable practices based on implicit functions. This has in turn greatly facilitated efforts to evaluate resource centers and other systems inherent in cluster design.

2.2. The Emergence of a Two-Tiered System

A particularly intractable problem during the course of the cluster school initiative has been the emergence of disadvantaged clusters that receive no external support and a "privileged" group that do. Equity concerns make this a particularly sticky problem. Apologists for this situation sometimes argue that some clusters can achieve adequate levels of operation without external support. Others argue that if donors can not provide assistance to all clusters, then the government should take the lead in doing so either through a PAP for clusters or perhaps a national expansion of the EQIP program.

Attempting to clear a path through these conflicting viewpoints is difficult not least because there is a general dearth of information on unsupported clusters. Nevertheless, there is some documentation available in this area (e.g., O'Loinsigh, 2001). For example, an intensive survey¹ of 14 unsupported clusters in 6 districts of Kampong Cham Province in 2001 found consistently low scores on 10 variables (see Table 2.2). Average scores on a scale of 1 to 100 reached above 50% on only 3 variables:

- Variable 2: The ability of infrastructure in satellite schools to support cluster activities (Score = 53.2).
- Variable 9: The ability of directors to prioritize problems in a way that puts children first (Score = 65.1)
- Variable 10: Availability and trainability of human resources (Score = 67.4).

Crucial variables such as the *ability to plan, community engagement, and leadership* showed scores below 30%. A small survey conducted by the present study has found similar results. In this instance, 3 clusters were evaluated in 3 different provinces. Clusters were selected based on high recommendations by Ministry inspectors that these clusters appeared to be working well. Upon close inspection, however, these clusters earned rather low scores in a range from 22% to 33%. Variables evaluated again included planning, frequency of LCSC meetings, and cluster activities involving resource sharing, teacher training, and community engagement. Evaluators found that while Ministry inspectors had been correct in their assessments of individual schools, there was little cooperation together among them as a cluster. Institution building had been negligible. Indeed, evaluators found there to be little understanding of how clusters should work even after 3 cluster concept orientations provided by the NCSC. These findings, while far from

¹ Note: For an explanation of how variables in this study were operationalized, see Annex 1.

exhaustive, shed some doubt on the myth that *kamrong majahkar* (unsupported clusters) can be operational while receiving no technical support.

Table 2.2: Sample Scores of Unsupported Clusters on Assorted Variables (Kampong Cham Province)

Evaluation Variable	Average Percentage Score
1. Cluster's Geographical Viability and Basic Infrastructure (core school only)	49.6
2. Situation in Satellite Schools (availability of offices, vacant classrooms, etc)	53.2
3. Leadership	29.1
4. Human Resource Advantages (e.g., availability of teachers and previously trained individuals such as TGLs, librarians, etc.)	32.5
5. Materials, Aids, and Mobile Resources	23.0
6. Community Engagement	9.4
7. Planning	14.3
8. Level of Activity in Cluster	32.6
9. Directors' Prioritization of Problems (degree to which children appear to be a priority)	65.1
10. Trainability and Availability of Human Resources	67.5
Average Score	37.6

N=14 clusters

Source: KAPE-The Asia Foundation, 2001

Developing a nation-wide cluster school initiative of substance can only be described as a *no win-no win* situation, at least under present conditions. Maintaining the *status quo* is very unpopular because it legitimizes a highly inequitable state of affairs. In addition, the available evidence suggests that unsupported clusters simply can not make it on their own. Going to scale through a PAP type route, however, presents tremendous risks. Given the problems associated with PAP (see for example NGO Statement to the Consultative Group Meeting, 2002) such as tardy disbursement, weak planning, and the apparent lack of capacity at local level to extrapolate from abstract guidelines to sound practice, caution would be highly advised. The EQIP model which seems to have worked somewhat better than PAP, albeit on a smaller scale, has largely done so due to its strategy of pairing technical expertise on the ground with the provision of cluster grants. In this respect, an EQIP report notes that “[g]iving money is necessary but not sufficient in itself. EQIP has shown that personal encouragement and on-going support is as important. . . how resources are given is as important as the giving of the resources themselves” (EQIP *Aide-Memoire*, 2002b, p. 22). In contrast, this element of technical support has been lacking in PAP leaving schools to their own devices when spending government provided funds. But advocates of the EQIP program have also cautioned against a ‘big bang approach to replication’ as well. The technical resources required for such an expansion simply are not available in country. In the possible event that a gradualist approach to expansion wins out, a two tiered cluster system could, therefore, be around for a considerable time longer.

2.3. The Search for an Adequate Management Structure

The development of effective management structures in the cluster school initiative was a long and arduous process made all the more difficult by the frequent lack of project staffing and the highly dispersed nature of cluster sites. The initial management structure originally envisioned by the National Cluster School Committee entrusted direct implementation of projects to Ministry sanctioned bodies called Provincial and District Cluster School Committees (PCSC and DCSC). In most instances, these committees never seemed to live up to the high expectations placed on them. In general, the manner in which the PCSC and DCSC were (and continue to be) staffed greatly limits their effectiveness. The various department heads who comprise the committees both at provincial and district level simply do not have the time, to say nothing of the expertise, needed to implement a cluster school project. It must be remembered that clusters are extremely difficult entities to create. They require high levels of expertise on the part of implementers and long periods of sustained contact with clusters to get them moving. PCSC members often have neither the expertise nor the time for such sustained contact.

The evolution of cluster school projects has, therefore, seen the search for a more effective project management structure that also maintains some deference to Provincial and District Cluster School Committees. This has been a delicate task as these bodies continue to project a high profile in the most current version of MoEYS' cluster school guidelines. Currently, cluster school projects seem to use one of 3 modes in program management:

1. Working groups
2. Project implementation units
3. PoE partnerships

For projects closely associated with the National Cluster School Committee, this search has moved in the direction of designating the PCSC and DCSC as oversight bodies responsible for making cluster school policy in the province as well as interventions in difficult issues which lower level officials can not resolve. This has been the approach adopted by UNICEF supported cluster projects in 5 provinces. In actual practice, both the Ministry and most POEs have agreed to entrust direct implementation of cluster school development to a small *working group*. The members of this working group are generally drawn from the Provincial and District Offices of Education; they tend to be individuals who have the time (and motivation) to be intensively trained and who in turn can work intensively with local cluster school staff. To make this working arrangement compatible with current MoEYS guidelines, the working group has been subsumed under the PCSC as a subcommittee. The working group is required to make regular reports to the PCSC or at least the POE Director on a quarterly basis.

In the case of the EQIP project, separate provincial project implementation units (PPIU) have been set up to orchestrate school development through cluster school structures. Animators seated in this unit are assigned to particular districts in order to provide technical support to LCSCs. SCN and KAPE also make use of separate project management modes but which to varying degrees try to include government counterparts as managers and animators. These arrangements may take in various provisions such as putting members of the PoE Directorate on salary or seconding PoE members to the project on a part-time basis. It is sometimes debated as to whether the project is in the PoE

or whether the PoE is in the project. The bottom line, however, has been to increase involvement of senior government staff in the administration of cluster school projects *without* taking them out of their positions.

The issue of management structures in cluster school projects continues to be a moot point. Growing trends towards more government controlled financial management aside, the current state of cluster projects still leads to frequent criticisms of *parallel structures*, to be discussed in a later section. It relates, too, to decentralization policy and the effort to give local government structures at provincial and district level more direct control of development aid. But the evolution of project management structures along the lines described above has not happened by chance nor does it necessarily reflect an entrenched reluctance among donors to give up "control" of their funding. Rather, it would appear to reflect the assessment by many that the government system at local level does not yet offer a viable vehicle for project control. There are 3 elements to this observation:

1. *Lack of understanding of the way that projects work:* The official vehicle for implementation for the cluster school initiative was, and indeed, continues to be PCSCs and DCSCs. But as noted above, the manner in which these committees have been staffed has ensured that they remain as paper committees only. Maintaining these committees as project implementation bodies implies little understanding about the management requirements in cluster school projects. It is little wonder that reliance on them in the past has led to a period of stalled development in several projects during the late 1990s (Wheeler, 1998; Bredenberg, 1998). Many newer projects do not wish to repeat the experience.
2. *Lack of a service culture:* Cluster school projects put as their priority schools and the children that they serve. But there have been numerous observations over the years that in many provincial education offices, bureaucratic prerogatives usually hold sway. Actions that are often urgent in project implementation are frequently made to wait for the completion of examinations or other priority activities set at a higher level.
3. *Lack of accountability:* Running projects demands scrutiny of performance and adjustments in implementation when performance targets are not met. This usually requires frank discussion and even criticism. The hierarchical management structure of provincial and district education offices often means that there is little internal criticism and by extension little accountability for performance. This situation often leads to mechanistic implementation models where money is spent with little expectation for real change in schools.

The above notwithstanding, it is clear that cluster school projects must eventually give way to more direct government control. The question appears to be whether this will occur through current approaches whereby projects co-opt government or government co-opts the projects or a combination of both.

2.4. Increasing Community Participation in Education

Using cluster school systems to improve the participation of communities in education has had a checkered history of success and failure. In the early stages of cluster school development in Cambodia, efforts to involve communities in education focused largely on generating local funds for the construction of classroom infrastructure and resource centers. By and large, these efforts have been successful. But efforts to involve communities in the *substance* of education have proven more difficult.

From the viewpoint of cluster practitioners, community participation means more than just giving material support to schools. It means participation in organizing activities of importance to children's parents. World Food Program's school breakfast program provides an excellent example of such involvement. If skyrocketing enrolments are any indication, providing food to children in target schools has been enormously popular among parents. According to WFP guidelines, the breakfast program is designed to be a collaborative activity in which communities manage the preparation and serving of breakfasts. Although the degree to which this actually happens varies from place to place, the community aspects of the program provide a useful ideal of community involvement. Other positive examples include activities where communities have a dominant role in selecting and awarding *scholarship* grants to poor students and *life skills* programs where community members volunteer to train upper primary children in pre-vocational skills such as bicycle repair, seamstress skills, and musical instruction.

Overall, however, assessments of community participation in schools have been rather bleak. Geeves (2000) summarizes current practice as largely "unidimensional" with a primary focus on fund raising only. Similarly, EQIP project staff have provided very frank assessments of local planning in which community participation in local planning is described as "token" in nature (EQIP, 2000a). Echoing a trend towards a school based approach to development, Geeves concludes that Local Cluster School Committees are too cumbersome to address community participation concerns and that the latter's involvement in school operation is "best attacked on a school by school rather than a cluster basis (p. 39)." Because the culture of community support for education varies significantly from province to province, it is difficult to generalize why community participation efforts have been problematic during the last several years. Differences between areas notwithstanding, there appear to be basically 4 important factors to consider with respect to this issue:

1. *Disjuncture between bodies that represent the community and parents:* Each school in Cambodia has what is called a "School Support Committee." Sometimes this committee is referred to as a "Parent Teacher Association" or simply a "Parent Association." In most cases, however, the committee usually consists of community elders who volunteer to help the school. Thus, the term Parent Association is really a misnomer. Committee members are not generally elected in any sense but occupy these positions more by merit of their age or status in the locality. In this sense, they form what Turner has described as a "local elite" (2002). Though this may be a somewhat unfair characterization given the amount of unpaid work these committees perform, the point is clear that parent representation in a legalistic sense is sorely missing.
2. *Difficulty of parents to involve themselves in school-community issues:* While School Support Committees are generally very effective in generating income for the school, especially through their close connections with the temple, they often have little understanding of the issues necessary for real parental involvement in education. These include the need for parents to meet with teachers regularly, help children with their homework, or ensure regular student attendance. Although it does sometimes happen that some parents might be sitting on the committee, most parents are frequently too distracted by the grim battle for economic survival to be much involved in school-community issues. Thus, by default, this responsibility generally falls to the elders of the community.
3. *Tasks to improve community participation lack specificity:* In the past, the methodology for increasing community participation in education has not been clear. In many cases, these interventions have consisted of raising funds for construction and/or having meetings with parents once every trimester. Usually the parents who attend these meetings are the ones whose children attend school most regularly while those whose children are at the greatest risk of repeating or dropping out do not or can not come. When LCSCs urge

parents to be more "involved" through what ever community body that exists (School Support Committee, Parent Association, etc.), the specific tasks to be done beyond those related above are neither clear nor explicit.

4. *Limited competence of School Support Committees:* The elders who sit on the School Support Committee can be very diverse in their make-up. Sometimes, they possess a high level of sophistication in their knowledge of management and organization, particularly in urban or semi-urban areas. But in many cases, too, they have failing faculties and are not really able to lead many of the community participation initiatives that clusters frequently try to initiate. They may have difficulty doing detailed accounts, writing reports, or organizing surveys. As a result, these community participation initiatives frequently fall to the school directors to implement which more or less defeats the purpose of involving the community.

Analyzing the obstacles to community participation in Cambodia's education system often requires striking at the heart of dearly held conceptions of what community participation really means. To many, it embodies the current system in which there is deference to cultural concepts of age and merit resulting in the selection of elderly men whom the community trusts. It is also entails tempering unrealistic expectations that desperately poor parents can drop everything to go to a school meeting 5 or 6 times a year. At a different extreme, it has a more expansive meaning that is antithetical to the idea of local elites, more gender-sensitive and inclusive, and which also encompasses more legalistic concepts of representation.

Characterized in this way, efforts to promote community participation through the cluster system imply a clash between traditional society and more modern concepts of local governance. The recent introduction of popularly elected commune councils, however, may help cluster school practitioners to accommodate both worlds. Preserving the current system of School Support Committees is likely to be important in maintaining continuity with the past; on the other hand, introducing legally elected men *and women* to sit on the committees may help to provide a link to the future. The use of Village Development Committees (VDCs), where they exist, has also been used as a bridge between old and new, particularly in UNICEF project sites. In this respect, cluster practitioners in these areas have tried to help clusters establish School Support Committees as an umbrella group for all the VDCs served by a school. This seems highly recommended given that the VDCs are both elective and experienced in community mobilization techniques.

2.5. Human Resource Development Constraints

The primacy of human resource development as a prerequisite for successful implementation of a cluster school project cannot be overstated. The completion of formative human resource development activities for key personnel in the cluster sets the stage for everything else that comes next, particularly with respect to planning and capacity building functions within the cluster. That is, it enables cluster school personnel to provide effective support services to target beneficiaries comprising high risk students, teachers, poor families, remote schools, etc. Examples of such services might include library rotations to remote schools, increased availability of teaching aids for teachers, administration of scholarship programs for poor students, etc. The completion of formative human resource development activities of this nature, therefore, directly relates to enabling clusters to move on to the next stage of their evolution where stakeholders

receive greater responsibility for planning and identification of needed interventions within the cluster.

Unfortunately, developing the human resources required to make clusters work has itself been a very human resource intensive task. The current approach of employing one animator for 2 to 4 clusters, while effective, creates tremendous strains in the education system. Given the severe human resource constraints in country, this has contributed to the emergence of the two-tiered system of supported and unsupported clusters described earlier. Indeed, where clusters have proven to be effective at all, there has always been a very strong technical support component.

A point of particular vulnerability with respect to the need for technical support has been the planning process within clusters. Assessments of annual plans in unsupported clusters conducted during this study have found a total lack of imagination and thoroughness. Plans in such clusters tend to be scheduling exercises in which routine school activities such as testing, registration, and developing class lists are copied from Ministry guidelines and plugged into a GANT chart (Table 2.3). In so far as a development plan should indicate activities to improve educational quality, such plans fall far short of expectations. Tellingly, planning is where projects such as EQIP and UNICEF have done their best work in supporting clusters. Plans developed in these supported clusters are vastly superior in that they reflect needs assessments and objective-based setting of activities, a point to be discussed further below (see Annex 2 for a sample of an annual plan in a supported cluster). Training documents and standardized planning formats based on Logical Framework Approach (LFA) have greatly facilitated this process. But external technical assistance from district animators is what seems to have made the difference. To be sure, there have been criticisms that these plans often reflect too much input by external animators or working groups and it is not clear to what extent supported clusters can actually do objective-based planning on their own.

Table 2.3: Sample Annual Plan in an Unsupported Cluster	
1.	Do census of children aged 0-15 yrs
2.	Open student registration
3.	Organize end of year exams
4.	Assign teachers to classes
5.	Open schools
6.	Make student lists
7.	Write beginning of year report
8.	Write Term 1 report
9.	Write Term 2 report
10.	Make statistics chart
11.	Do literacy survey adults
12.	Make staff lists
13.	Do situation analysis
14.	Make a construction needs plan
15.	Do needs assessment of staff
16.	Collect monthly student marks
17.	Inspection by DoE/PoE
18.	Technical training of teachers
19.	Make recommendations for promotion
20.	Organize activities for office staff
21.	Sports Activities

There have been attempts to wean clusters from their dependence on outside technical support when developing their plans. The Information-based School Management program (IBSM) implemented by the Planning Dept. with support from UNICEF is one example. Anecdotal evidence from the field (e.g., UNICEF/Svay Rieng, 1999) does suggest that this effort is having some impact on the proficiency of school directors to undertake objective-based planning. The use of *service menus* is another vehicle being used to provide greater freedom to LCSCs to choose the activities that best fit their needs but within a set framework. *Freedom within structure* summarizes this approach. Although some commentators have expressed concern that the use of menus may risk impeding the process of decentralization (e.g., Turner, 2002), its interim employ

seems to fit the circumstances of an educational system that lacks exposure to new ideas. The use of menus is now being adopted in UNICEF and KAPE project sites and Turner has recommended its adoption by EQIP as well.

2.6. Clusters as a Vehicle to Promote Decentralization

One of the primary rationales in starting the cluster school initiative was to promote decentralization. During the early period of cluster school development, efforts to promote decentralization were greatly hampered by the anomaly of a unidimensional framework that was implemented directly from the central Ministry. Since those early years, things have improved and the record of school clusters to promote decentralization, particularly in the period after 1998, appears to be increasingly positive. The most recent version of cluster school guidelines issued by MoEYS in 2002 have helped to ensure a much more flexible approach to cluster school development than past versions. There are numerous provisions to ensure that cluster design can be fitted to local circumstances such as recognition of possible variations in the structure of the LCSC depending on the locality in which a cluster is located (e.g., urban, remote, etc.).

Following from earlier discussions, there appear to be 4 areas where clusters have succeeded in promoting decentralization:

1. Heightened local management of resources

Decentralization in the local use of resources has been achieved through the decision of the MoEYS in collaboration with donors to route funds more directly to schools via cluster school networks. As discussed above, this has come about differently in different places (e.g., PIUs, working groups, etc.). At the cluster level, the utilization of funds has been greatly facilitated by the introduction of objective-based planning (mostly LFA). This reform of the planning process allows each LCSC to analyze its own problems and to determine its own objectives, activities, and budgetary requirements based on this analysis. Planning together as a group of schools helps to ensure that more competent school directors can work with the less competent ones to produce a rationalized plan that benefits everyone. This particular way of facilitating local management of resources offers definite lessons to the PAP process which tends to suffer from very weak planning in individual schools.

2. Local decision-making and empowerment

This facility relates to the one above. With their strong focus on planning, cluster school projects have provided a structured context for schools to collectively make decisions based on rationalized assessments of local need. Because schools are often limited in their exposure to activities to solve problems, cluster school projects have begun to move in the direction of using activity menus to facilitate local decisions by providing choice among a wide variety of possible options. This approach appears far more effective in empowering schools to meet perceived needs than the one employed in PAP with its more limited framework.

3. Localized capacity-building

Another important potential in the cluster context has been its ability to promote locally based modes of teacher supervision and teacher training. This has been approached primarily through intensive training of technical grade leaders (TGLs) who are cluster based. TGLs are master teachers who plan teacher training activities on Thursdays and do follow-up supervisory visits during the month. This system is intended to increase the overall frequency of teacher supervision and to give it more of a supportive focus in contrast to 'check and control' inspections that sometimes characterize district and province based supervision. Because TGLs are teacher peers, their classroom visits are less likely to be threatening and thus can more easily focus on providing help to fellow teachers. In a nod to sustainability,

many projects have begun instituting local income generation activities (e.g., credit schemes) as a way of financing TGL activities through non-external means.

4. *Streamlined absorption of development aid*

Dealing with schools collectively rather than individually has enabled development projects to greatly increase both the amount of aid that can be disbursed and the number of beneficiaries of that aid. Working through an established network of school directors, cluster based master teachers, and community members enables project staff to achieve tremendous savings in their use of time, particularly with respect to training activities and orientations. These networks also expedite communication between schools and with central provincial education offices. One of the best examples of an important activity streamlined through the cluster system is WFP's school breakfast program. With minimum staffing, this program was organized in over 407 schools in a very short time.

To be sure, there are areas where decentralization efforts have fallen short, particularly with respect to accountability. Whereas clusters have achieved a great deal in promoting 'upward accountability' to District and Provincial Offices of Education, their record is less impressive when it comes to 'downward accountability.' Upward accountability refers to requiring clusters to develop performance standards with respect to student learning, classroom practice, etc. and to monitor their own progress towards these explicit standards for reporting upwards. "Downward" accountability of schools to parents, however, has not yet occurred partly for many of the same reasons relating to lower than expected community participation discussed earlier. The failure or inability of parents to be directly involved in their children's education, the lack of concrete institutions representing parents at the school level, etc. make it difficult for schools to report about performance standards even if they had the intention to do so.

3. CLUSTER ASSESSMENTS

3.1. Process Indicators

Perhaps the most fundamental issue relating to the effectiveness of school clusters concerns the difficulties in assessing their success. Measuring the effectiveness of clusters requires clear definitions of outputs, which are sometimes difficult to quantify. It is the author's view that cluster school assessments should focus on the process of institution building since this is the key element underpinning any conceptual framework of a cluster. This has been problematic, however, not least of all because many implementers have not always thought of cluster school development as a process of institution building at all. Indeed, a formal survey of cluster practitioners in this study found that only 21% of respondents chose institution building as the fundamental process of cluster school development. Earlier, it was noted that the weakness of conceptual frameworks underpinning the design of cluster school projects ensured that those responsible for animating them received only a very superficial definition of what this entailed. Usually, this definition focused mainly on the incomplete idea that clusters are simply an association of schools that are supposed to work together. Activities to develop clusters often focused on construction and the provision of furniture and materials based on the assumption that once received, clusters will know what to do with them. Unfortunately, this proved to be a very flawed assumption leading to an extended period of stalled evolution.

In view of the above, it has been difficult to assess clustering as an institution building process since many practitioners have not been using the latter as a major principle in their implementation. Indeed, a survey of practitioners in this study revealed that at the present time, nearly 30% did not even have an evaluation instrument that was specific to the evaluation of clusters (as opposed to the evaluation of individual schools). Such instruments, where they exist, would ideally include some focus on discrete cluster institutions like libraries, cluster school committees and teacher supervisions systems as well as consideration of specific cluster functions such as resource sharing or accountability (see Annex 3 for an example). The fact that 73% of respondents claimed that they did have a cluster specific instrument was somewhat dubious since some individuals in the same agency indicated that such an instrument did *not* exist. This leads one to conclude that even if an agency did have some kind of instrument for evaluating clusters, it is probably not an integral part of project design.

Given the recency of changes in the way that cluster school development projects are conceptualized and the increasing (though not yet dominant) ascendancy of the concept of *institution building* as an overriding theme, there have not yet been many external studies that focus on this particular aspect of cluster functionality. Nevertheless, there are those who take a broader view and who have been able to make assessments based on the existing indicators set by NCSC. For example, a recent assessment of supported clusters by Geeves (2000) reviewed 28 indicators relating to desired outcomes established by the Ministry. These indicators ranged from compliance with guidelines about the distance between core and satellite schools, sharing of material resources, development of resource centers, and cluster generated staff development projects among others. He determined that significant progress had only occurred on 7 out of 28 of these indicators.

In another cluster study, Wheeler (1998) focused on change in teacher practice as a major parameter of success. After observing 212 classes in 5 provinces, he found that only 4% of classes could be classified as exemplifying student-centered learning. 74% of the classes observed exemplified traditional teaching and the remainder a combination of both methodologies. Wheeler also identified significant gaps in institution building within the clusters surveyed and found that most of the improvements recorded related to construction and the provision of materials and furniture.

3.2. Indicators of Educational Effectiveness

Cluster assessments that have looked at indicators of educational effectiveness have provided more favorable though not always convergent conclusions with regards to the success of the cluster school initiative. For example, internal project assessments in the EQIP pilot project have indicated that since the provision of assistance, repetition rates have been dropping significantly, particularly in Grade 1 (EQIP *Aide Memoire*, 2002b). An external assessment of the EQIP project (due in late 2002) should be able to provide more definitive assessments in this regard.

Relying heavily on statistics provided directly by schools, an internal assessment of UNICEF supported clusters also found dramatic improvements in schools' internal efficiency (Bredenberg, 2000). For example, in 1998-9 it was reported that 83% of UNICEF supported school clusters evinced rates of repetition that were lower than rates reported by unsupported clusters in the same district. In addition, the gender gap in

UNICEF supported clusters has narrowed significantly with many clusters now reporting few differences between the performance of boys and girls. This assessment also noted results from achievement tests conducted by the Pedagogical Research Department (PRD) that also confirm a pattern of improved performance in UNICEF clusters as well.

A cross-sectional survey of assisted and unassisted clusters in 5 provinces conducted during the course of this study also found statistically significant differences between supported and unsupported clusters (Table 3.1). In this respect, a comparison of 44 supported clusters and 212 unsupported ones with respect to student repetition across 5 provinces indicated that the average percentage of repeaters was statistically different in favor of the supported clusters. Within province comparisons, however, were less conclusive with only Kampong Cham showing a significant difference. Nevertheless, provinces in which projects had been operating for more than one year were more likely to show some difference than provinces where projects had been operating for only one year. A weakness in this kind of assessment, however, is that it does not address changes in the same cluster over time.

Table 3.1: Difference in the Average Percentage of Repeaters in Supported and Unsupported Clusters

Province N=256	Assisted Clusters			Unassisted Clusters		Difference in Favor of Assisted Clusters	Difference Statistically Significant (p<.05)
	No. of Clusters	Yrs Project Has Been in Operation	Average % of Students Who Are Repeaters	No. of Clusters	Average % of Students Who Are Repeaters		
Svay Rieng	7	6	14.5	24	17.2	Yes	No
Prey Veng	6	1	19.5	69	19.0	No	No
Kampong Speu	7	1	12.0	33	13.0	No	No
Kampong Thom	8	6	15.8	23	20.3	Yes	No*
Kampong Cham	16	9 (SCN) 3 (KAPE)	18.8	63	21.4	Yes	Yes
All 5 Provinces	44	--	16.6	212	18.7	Yes	Yes

* A t-test value for Kampong Thom indicated a significant difference at p<.07.

Raw Data Source: EMIS, 2000-01

3.3. Subjective Assessments by Cluster School Practitioners

Another means of assessing the success of the cluster school initiative in Cambodia has been the present effort to survey a number of cluster school practitioners both in and out of government. In this respect, 48% of respondents identified themselves as working in the directorate of a PoE (e.g., director, vice director) or DoE. The other 52% identified themselves as project staff (e.g., advisors, managers, animators). The composition of the respondent pool was not random and is subject to the biases relating to self-selection of those who opted to return a questionnaire as opposed to those who did not opt to do so. Nevertheless, every province and agency that received a questionnaire returned at least one completed form and most submitted between 3 and 4. This said, responses appear to be diverse and not necessarily flawed by *socially desirable* responding as is often apt to happen in Cambodia.

The overwhelming majority of respondents expressed satisfaction (68%) or partial

satisfaction (29%) with school clustering as a development strategy (Table 3.2). Only 1 respondent indicated that they were ‘dissatisfied.’ Government counterparts seemed to express the strongest satisfaction in this regard with 87% of such respondents indicating that they were ‘very satisfied.’ Only 50% of project staff, project staff, however, expressed the same high level of satisfaction even though it is somewhat of a self-serving opinion to say so.

Table 3.2: Overall Satisfaction with Clusters

<i>What is your personal level of satisfaction with the use of cluster schools as a development strategy ?</i>			
Responses	Very satisfied	Partly satisfied	Dissatisfied
N=31	68%	29%	3%

In view of the above, it is not surprising that most respondents also indicated their opinion that school clustering should not be discontinued as a strategy (Table 3.3). In this particular question, however, more respondents were willing to admit that clustering had encountered problems (58%) but that these problems were due mostly to constraints within the educational context. In their view, the cluster school concept itself still remained sound. Another interesting point in responses to this question is that only 1 respondent felt that PAP had made school clusters irrelevant as a development strategy.

Table 3.3: Continuing or Discontinuing the School Cluster Initiative

<i>Which of the following statements best fits your opinion with regard to the continuation or discontinuation of the cluster school initiative ?</i>					
Responses	A highly successful strategy that should be continued.	A partly successful strategy whose shortcomings have arisen largely from constraints within the implementation environ. but which still has merit and should be continued.	A strategy that has had some success but which should now be discontinued since the gov’t’s introd. of PAP.	A strategy that has largely failed and should be discontinued	None of these
N=31	29%	58%	3%	0%	10%

A noticeable minority of respondents found it difficult to characterize their viewpoint under any of the provided categories (Other: 10%). Some of these viewpoints appeared to distinguish limitations in Ministry policy as against constraints in the local implementation environment. One respondent noted that clusters have not prospered because of a mistaken belief that there should be a 'formula' rather than a 'framework' for cluster school development. Another pointed out that the Ministry initiated a cluster policy in the early 1990s but then left it to donors to implement the policy. These comments seem to suggest that the primary constraint in implementation was not local but embedded in national policy.

The constraints in the implementation environment referred to in the above question were elaborated by respondents in Table 3.4. Poor leadership (84%) and lack of motivation (81%) lead the list. Untrainability of cluster school personnel due to a lack of professional prerequisites also scored rather highly among respondents (58%). Poor leadership and concern for technical competence to implement programs are frequently referred to in other assessments so this is nothing new. Nevertheless, it should still be noted that this view seems to validate a gradualist approach to cluster school expansion using the kind of technical support model espoused by EQIP and others. Some of the comments provided under ‘other’ though in a minority are also insightful. Several of these

comments confirm earlier assertions relating to the lack of readiness of local bureaucracies to implement cluster projects and a reaction against unitary approaches to cluster school development. These include:

- Rigidity in implementation mind sets of PoE/DoE officialdom
- Lack of cluster perspective when thinking about resource sharing
- Mistaken belief that clusters can be packaged under a centralized formulae
- Lack of a service culture
- Clusters are not utilized as an opportunity for change
- Cluster dependency on external aid

Table 3.4: Serious Problems Encountered in Developing School Clusters

<i>Identify the problems or difficulties you have encountered in implementing the Ministry's cluster school development strategy :</i>							
Responses	Poor leadership at cluster school level	Cluster school personnel lack motivation due to low salaries	Cluster school personnel lack the prerequisites that are needed for training to be effective	Accountability	Lack of training documents to facilitate cluster school development activities	Other	Clusters have been formed by the PoE in a way that is not geographically viable.
N=31	84%	81%	58%	32%	29%	23%	13%

One additional area of interest relates to respondents' viewpoint on the one area where clusters have achieved the most (Table 3.5). Possible responses included libraries and resource centers, local planning, local utilization of resources, teacher supervision and training, expediting communication between lower and higher levels in the system, and others. When made to choose the *one* most successful area, most respondents chose teacher supervision and teacher training (44%). Improved planning followed as a distant second (28%) and finally libraries and resource centers (20%). Two important thoughts come to mind when examining these results. One of these relates to the increasing sense of importance that seems to be attaching to the capacity building potential of clusters such as its ability to orchestrate teacher training. This contrasts with an apparent decline in resource sharing potential that is best exemplified by mobile libraries and resource centers. Earlier, the point was made that there appears to be a growing shift in an emerging cluster school paradigm away from resource sharing and increasing ascendancy of others functions such as capacity building. These results provide additional evidence for such an assessment.

Table 3.5: Most Successful Area in Cluster School Development

<i>In what one area, if any, has school clustering really succeeded in your project ?</i>				
Responses	Teacher Supervision & Training	Improved Planning	Libraries and Resource Centers	Other
N=25	44%	28%	20%	8%

The other point to be made about these responses relates to the importance of planning. Although it is surprising that more respondents did not pick planning, the fact that nearly one-third did suggests that it is a tremendous facility that school clusters can

provide. As stated earlier, many cluster school projects have done some of their best work in planning and anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a huge leap of competence in this area among supported clusters. Since decentralization will depend largely on the ability of schools to develop objective-based plans of quality that are activity-based, the ability to promote competent planning capacity may be one area where clusters can make an important contribution.

4. SCHOOL CLUSTERS AND DECENTRALIZATION: CURRENT ISSUES

4.1. Overview

Efforts to promote decentralization in the education system have sometimes been characterized as a choice between 2 approaches which are at the present time receiving simultaneous Ministry support. One approach refers to the EQIP model with its strong reliance on school clusters, design features that couple technical assistance with cluster grants, and its alleged parallel implementation structure. The other approach refers to PAP which bypasses the cluster school network and provides grants directly to schools with little or no technical support.

One of the expectations of this study is that continued efforts to decentralize the education system will not require a difficult choice between either of these approaches or that the fate of school clusters should be tied up with any one approach. Although this is not the place to debate the merits of the EQIP project vs PAP, one would hope that both approaches could be put on a convergent path. Though such convergence may perhaps be difficult to achieve, it is clear that school clusters as a development strategy appear to be deeply entrenched in the minds of many local educators, particularly at provincial level. Perceptions of its waning popularity aside, its abrogation would surely be deeply disruptive to the education system. What is needed, however, is a modification in the design of school clusters to accommodate changes in the educational landscape, particularly with respect to PAP. At the same time, decentralization initiatives such as PAP need to be modified in order to increase their reliance on the cluster network. Utilizing clusters may help PAP to remedy many of its generally acknowledged deficiencies including poor planning, weak accountability, and general bluntness in approach to quality improvement. Indeed, efforts to merge PAP with the cluster system may eventually lead to the convergence required with the EQIP project.

What follows below is a discussion of some of the major issues relating to the current role of school clusters in educational development and efforts to decentralize the education system.

4.2. The Issue of Parallel Implementation Structures

The issue of ‘parallel structures’ seems to be emerging as the center of the maelstrom with respect to advocates of the EQIP approach and those who favor PAP. As noted several times above, parallel implementation structures have been *de rigueur* in nearly all cluster school development projects to date. Assessing the merits or demerits of this mode of implementation depends largely on one’s priorities. Different priorities naturally lead to very different conclusions. As an explanatory tool, it might help to understand the parallel structure controversy through a consideration of two extreme viewpoints: In point of actual fact, most people are more likely to have viewpoints

spanning a wide continuum with few at the extremes. Nevertheless, for purposes of explanation, the parallel structure controversy can be thought of as taking in an *orthodox* and an *iconoclastic* view as follows:

- *An orthodox view:* Opponents of parallel structure modes generally put as their priority sustainable structures of development embedded within the government structure. That is, the priority is to strengthen existing government structures to utilize resources in a way that will achieve broad national objectives. Setting up a parallel structure outside of the official structure, even if it is still within the government, is viewed as highly resource intensive. More importantly, such structures are not sustainable and frequently leave little behind when a project finishes. In addition, many in government see parallelism as actually damaging to the existing structure as it drains personnel of competence away to staff nonpermanent parallel implementation structures in a given project.
- *An iconoclastic view:* Advocates of parallel structures aptly take their name from a period in Byzantine history when religious enthusiasts went about smashing holy images. The rebuttal to the concerns of those antagonized by parallel structures might best be summarized in two words: ‘who cares’. In this view, opposing arguments to parallel structures put educational development on its head since strengthening government seems to become an end unto itself. The priority should be helping children to learn; strengthening government is highly desirable though by no means a *sine qua non*. As for sustainability, iconoclasts are apt to point out that initiatives such as PAP are as equally likely to disappear should the structural adjustment credits upon which they are based be discontinued. But most importantly, adherents of this view stress that the most compelling aspect to the current approach is that it often produces results of a high quality much as the EQIP project has done.

As in most things, the resolution of these opposing viewpoints is likely to end in a compromise if for no other reason than to accommodate the views of local educators. Responding patterns surveyed during the study are again of interest in this regard. For example, when asked whether they agreed with the statement that the implementation structure of cluster school projects tended to be parallel with government, only 17% agreed completely (Table 4.1). The majority only partly agreed (33%), disagreed (37%)

Table 4.1: Response Patterns to the Assertion that Cluster Projects Use Parallel Structures

<i>Cluster school projects in Cambodia have sometimes been described as using “parallel project modalities in their implementation which do little to strengthen existing government systems.” How would you define your own position with respect to this statement ?</i>				
Responses	Agree	Partly Agree	Disagree	Don’t know
N=30	17%	33%	37%	13%

or did not know (13%). Of the 5 persons who agreed, only 2 were government staff. What these views may suggest is that few local educators, even those within government, seem to feel intense antagonism with parallel implementation structures and some reject the assertion outright. At the same time, respondents did not express overwhelming satisfaction with PAP either, even with its nonparallel structure. In this respect, Table 4.2 indicates that only about 13% were ‘very satisfied’ with PAP in its present form. A majority (52%) expressed tentative approval but acknowledged that there were problems. A significant minority of 35% expressed dissatisfaction.

Table 4.2: Level of Satisfaction with PAP

<i>How would describe the level of satisfaction of your cluster level counterparts</i>
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<i>How would describe the level of satisfaction of your cluster level counterparts with respect to PAP ?</i>					
Responses	Very satisfied	Partly satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know

In addition, those whose projects rely heavily on parallel structures are not so insensitive to sustainability issues as the dichotomy of views described above might suggest. In this respect, about 59% of respondents indicated that their project had an exit strategy. In describing this strategy, respondents included comments such as the following:

- Income generation activities to ensure sustained resources for cluster operation
- Develop minimum competencies for schools to take over project and then evaluate to determine whether they have achieved these minimum competencies
- Human resource development to take place of external technical assistance
- Planned hand over to communities and government
- Planned hand over to PAP supported activities

4.3. The Evolution of Planning in Clusters

Because of the generally low experiential base from which cluster school projects started, implementation methods during the formative years have had to be somewhat prescriptive. This low base refers in particular to the experiential insularity of local schools and communities. As a result, the first stage in cluster school development has usually consisted of a number of fixed interventions relating to the emplacement of cluster institutions such as local cluster school committees, library systems, resource centers, and teacher supervision systems. But there was a risk in this approach in that prescriptive methodologies are often inimical to efforts to strengthen local ownership of a cluster, particularly if they span a long time frame. In addition, this risk has been greatly amplified due to rather formulaic definitions of cluster school development in earlier issues of the National Cluster School Guidelines. Given this background, local planning did not have a high profile in most cluster school development programs during the formative years.

Following the formative period, donors began to change the form of their development assistance from funding for fixed interventions like teacher training and resource center orientations to block grants which could be used to meet local needs identified during newly instituted planning exercises. The cluster school institutions developed during the formative years were used as a conduit to facilitate the implementation of grant funded activities. The idea behind this change in approach was to wean LCSCs from the prescriptive activities of the past to a more stakeholder-driven footing.

A combination of insular ways of thinking, hierarchical professional relationships within clusters, and the early prescriptive approach of cluster school projects themselves have made the above goal very difficult to achieve. Some newer projects such as EQIP started providing assistance to clusters in the form of grants from Year 1 and also found the going to be very difficult. The use of ‘visioning’ exercises to describe stakeholders’ view of an ideal school has helped but still, the process has been slow. Most donor funded projects, and most recently PAP, have encountered what has since come to be known as the ‘flagpole syndrome’ – a dysfunctional approach to development in schools where major expenditures (such as those for flagpoles) have seemingly no relationship to

pressing needs of improving the quality of education. It was these problems that later led to the huge investments in training and technical support to improve the quality of the planning process in cluster schools.

The general consensus is that these investments have more than paid off. The technical support provided through the projects combined with collective brainstorming by school directors and teachers in the cluster school context seem to have made the difference. Though there is still tremendous variation, cluster plans do tend to be more objective-based with more rationalized relationships between activities and identified needs.

An important problem perceived now, however, is that many of these plans tend to be rather unitary in character. Some cluster school practitioners describe them as no more than plans for the core school. In other cases, activities are implemented uniformly across all schools without attention to the possible variation in need in different schools within the cluster. In still other cases, some clusters merely copy their planned activities from those identified by other more experienced clusters. Above all, an over emphasis on basic teacher training and teaching aid production has been a particular *cause celebre* for critics. There is, therefore, a danger that clusters may become stuck in a static, unitary program environment in which there is little diversity in the activities between or even within clusters.

While some degree of homogeneity in planning is to be expected given the similarity in problems between schools, there seems to be general agreement that efforts to promote innovative practice will be confounded unless the situation can be rectified. This lesson should not be lost on PAP for if and when, more rationalized planning is achieved in this context, the same slide into unitary planning may also occur, particularly if schools are doing their plans without benefit of collective pooling of human resources.

The shift to a more diversified approach to planning is still unfolding. As discussed earlier, some agencies are trying to address the situation by merging cluster school development agendas with those of Child Friendly Schools where there may be more focus on the needs of children (as opposed to those of teachers). In other cases, projects have introduced the use of menus as a means to heighten diversity in plans or have placed ceilings on how much of a grant can be spent on a particular expenditure category. The degree to which these measures succeed will have important implications for the quality of decentralization in the future.

4.4. Shift in Cluster Functions

The primary functions of school clustering are generally seen to include resource sharing, capacity building, and accountability. Resource sharing has in particular received much emphasis given the tremendous need and limited availability of resources, hence the huge investments in resource center buildings and core school libraries. Material resource sharing in clusters has largely been mediated by resource rooms (a depository for teaching aids within the resource center) and mobile libraries. Elaborate rotation schedules of books and materials to surrounding schools and the provision of raw materials to teachers during cluster-wide Thursday meetings at the core school are some of the means through which this resource sharing was supposed to occur. How well these systems have worked has always been a matter of some debate, even in clusters where local income generation

activities provided travel money to school directors to pick up and return materials on a regular basis.

Although very positive results have been reported in the operation of mobile libraries, resource centers have been more problematic. The main obstacle has been that making rotation schedules for teaching aids requires considerable forward planning (in order to ascertain which lessons will be taught and what materials will be required to teach them) as well as highly developed communication channels from satellite school teachers to their directors to the LCSC to the resource room manager. In the researcher's assessment, few clusters have been able to achieve these very high levels of coordination.

It is the introduction of PAP with its generous provisions for teaching aids as well as the steady expansion of library services within cluster school projects themselves that have made many of the earlier planned resource sharing functions obsolete. It is, therefore, problematic that many projects continue to make huge investments in setting up expensive resource centers and that they maintain a prominent place in the National Cluster School Guidelines.

It is, of course, important to distinguish between sharing of material resources, which are now increasingly met through other means, and resource sharing with respect to human resources. Given the continuing scarcity of good teachers and school directors in the educational system, the cluster network still offers the best hope for promoting educational quality by encouraging collective use of human resources. As discussed earlier, the significant improvements in planning through collective brainstorming constitute a major achievement of cluster school projects. The network of technical grade leaders who operate teacher training and supervision systems within clusters offers another. In this respect, it should not be forgotten that teacher training/supervision represented an important area which many cluster school practitioners identified as among the most successful achievements of cluster-based interventions.

To remain relevant to changing educational needs, it is important that the cluster school initiative re-aligns some of its activities (and resources) to give greater focus to internal functions that do not entail material resource sharing. Capacity building and accountability (or monitoring) functions should be the focus of this re-alignment. Where LCSCs and teacher supervision networks have been well organized, they offer a tremendous means to expedite interventions of quality that seek to promote innovation. Student remediation programs provide an excellent example of how a quality improvement intervention of wide scope was effectively implemented using the cluster school network. In this respect, LCSCs offered a forum to explain guidelines quickly to schools as well as selection criteria for teachers to teach the classes (capacity building function); community membership on the committee also enabled the goals of the activity to be communicated to communities quickly, especially in areas where remedial sites were set up outside of the school in villages; and the teacher supervision network provided the means to use master teachers to train selected teachers, to do monitoring, and to conduct external testing to ascertain the quality of student learning (capacity building and accountability functions). The Ministry has also reported that direct reports from clusters regarding pass rates and total enrolment provided a means for rapid data collection and upward accountability to central government structures. Innovative interventions to promote IPM, life skills training, and scholarships to the poor report a similarly high level of facilitation offered by the cluster school network.

4.5. Linkages with Commune Councils

The recent institution of commune councils by the government represents an important new opportunity to increase the participation of communities in the education system. Their possible role in School Support Committees has already been noted. Because membership of the councils is elective, councilors can really be understood to *represent* their communities.

Since the councils and the formal education administrative network are under different line Ministries (Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, respectively), it is unlikely that efforts to promote decentralization in the education system through the councils will involve direct governance roles. These will likely continue to adhere to the Provincial and District Offices of Education. A more likely role for the councils is to promote nonbinding oversight of schools through committees that are not part of the formal administrative structure. Because clusters are not an official administrative division, their role in this respect may be crucial.

Active linkages with commune councils via the cluster school network may already be happening. The new National Cluster School Guidelines have mandated the establishment of what are known as Cluster School Councils (CSCs).² The council is

Table 4.3: Current Linkages betw
Commune Councils and Clusters

<i>Has your cluster support program planned or developed any direct linkages to commune councils ?</i>		
Responses	Yes	No
N=30	63%	37%

composed of a wide number of community representatives including the commune councilors, village chiefs, local monks, and members of the School Support Committees. Although it does not possess any direct governance authority over the cluster or schools, its role is to provide a forum for consultation, discussion, and reporting of outcomes of planned activities. In addition, survey responses indicate that a number of projects have already

begun to explore links to the commune councils though associated commentaries identified membership in LCSCs as the primary means (Table 4.3).

Nevertheless, there may also be other important roles for the councils to play in other cluster-mediated activities. An important example in this regard relates to the emergence of local committees that administer scholarship programs for the poor. A number of pilot scholarship programs working in collaboration with the Ministry rely heavily on cluster school and community networks to administer scholarship funds, particularly with respect to student selection. Activities such as these are likely to be greatly expanded with imminent support to government from the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, Belgian Aid, and the European Union. Because community membership in these cluster-mediated bodies are, as in the case of SSCs, nonelective, the commune councils could again be instrumental in ensuring more solid community representation in their administration. In addition, an informal survey of about 30 commune councils indicate that most have detailed information on poverty indexed data regarding members of their communes. This information could be instrumental in ensuring that need-based scholarships are awarded to the correct recipients.

In spite of these potential roles for commune councils in promoting

² See page 19 of National Cluster School Guidelines, 2002 (English Version) (Sections 3.1 and 3.2.)

decentralization, there are still likely to be significant constraints. These include the fact that commune councils can only make nonbonding recommendations to school directors, cluster heads, and district education staff. Ultimate governance authority will continue to rest with the existing line control structure under the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports. In addition, the presence of elected community representatives on consultative bodies associated with clusters is no guarantee that they will be any more articulate than token community representatives have been in the past in the context of previous arrangements.

There is also likely to be a problem with the lack of contiguity between cluster school boundaries and commune boundaries. In many cases, cluster schools take in 2 and sometimes 3 communes. In other cases, some communes find themselves split between the jurisdictions of two or more clusters, a situation that would require multiple memberships by the same councilors in more than one CSC. It should be noted, too, that the government has not yet clearly established commune boundaries. Clear delineation will await a national survey planned for the near future. The councils also vary greatly in their level of competence making tight policy guidelines problematic. For example, one NGO recently tried to increase the involvement of the councils in developing a service referral network, which would help address the causes of dropout. Unfortunately, attempts to enlist the support of the councils in this regard found that the majority had little knowledge of any of the available services available in their communes (KAPE, 2002).

Finally, notwithstanding the confidence expressed by project staff in linking up with commune councils, many cluster school practitioners expressed uncertain knowledge about how this would happen (Table 4.4). In this respect, only 20% of respondents to the study's survey indicated that their understanding of possible modalities for linkage was 'very clear.' But the confidence of those who feel that they understand such things well is undermined by responses to another question in which the same individuals said that there would be 'no' obstacles to such linkage when it is clear that there will be.

Table 4.4: Clarity of Commune-Cluster Linkages

<i>How would you describe your current level of understanding of how commune councils will link up with existing administrative institutions in the education system (e.g., PoE, DoE, clusters, etc.) ?</i>			
Responses	Very clear	Somewhat clear	Not at all clear
N=30	20%	63%	17%

5. CONCLUSIONS

It has generally been observed that school clusters rarely remain static over time. The experience of the cluster school initiative in Cambodia is largely consistent with this basic precept. A shift in paradigms currently seems to be under way though its exact direction remains uncertain. Emergent themes point to nonunitary planning models, greater prominence of children's rights, greater focus on individual schools within the cluster, and a shift away from resource sharing functions towards capacity building and accountability functions. This imminent change presents opportunities to promote the Ministry's education reform program, particularly with respect to decentralization. Although the achievement record of clusters is mixed, it has made significant strides in improving planning at school level, strengthening monitoring and upward accountability to the central level, and fostering provisions for local capacity building. It is no wonder then that its popularity among educational practitioners both in and out of government remains quite strong. These demonstrated strengths can facilitate more effective local use of resources and assist government in implementing its Monitoring Capacity Building Priorities Program.

To be sure, efforts to increase utilization of clusters in the Ministry's reform program will be hindered by constraints that have been particularly difficult to resolve over the years. These include wide variations across clusters in their technical capacity to run cluster-based institutions; to a large extent, these variations run along a fault line of supported and unsupported clusters. The two-tiered character of cluster school proliferation in Cambodia is itself associated with a wide range of controversial issues such as parallel management structures, localized interventions, and inconsistent approaches between projects. The wide variation in cluster capacities and their close association with localized and discrete project structures is surely one reason why Ministry planners may have found it difficult to incorporate the cluster school network into the PAP reform process. Nevertheless, greater convergence between cluster school development and PAP reform activities would bring benefits to both. Benefits to clusters could include budgetary support for all clusters and a first step towards bridging the gap between supported and unsupported clusters. Benefits to PAP could include improvements in planning as well as more effective monitoring and improved accountability to local community stakeholders. Realizing these mutual benefits, however, will require greater convergence within the reform process.

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Annex 1: Operationalization of Variables in Unsupported Cluster Survey

1. Identification of variables

In the initial design stage of the survey instruments, the survey team identified the various factors that influence the functioning of schools and clusters. These factors were then classified into 10 variable categories that are thought to most influence a cluster's primary functions, namely resource sharing, capacity building, and ensuring accountability for performance. Identifying the following variables helped the team to refine and develop the design of the survey instruments in a way that maintained the focus on what *KAPE needed to know*:

Table 1: List of variables

1. Situation in the cluster (*as it relates to geographical viability and infrastructure*)
2. Situation in the individual schools (*as it relates to infrastructure*)
3. Leadership
4. Human resources - particular advantages
5. Materials, aids, and mobile resources
6. Community support
7. Planning
8. Level of activity
9. School directors' prioritization of problems affecting the quality of education
10. Trainability and availability of human resources

2. Survey items

Survey items (or indicators) attempted to examine the above variables. In designing survey items corresponding to each variable, the team was conscious to include items that took into account the unique features of certain KAPE activities. For example, the location of secondary schools has a bearing on the implementation of KAPE's Secondary School Scholarship Programme for Girls, and the condition of roads and availability of water sources in the schools need to be taken into account with respect to the School Breakfast Programme.

Table 2 summarizes how the various items combine to provide information within the parameters of their respective variables. The reader will note that each survey instrument may measure a number of variables. Many variables are therefore cross-cut by different survey instruments. This occurred as each survey instrument was designed for use with a particular respondent – cluster-head, school director, or teacher. Different respondents may have different perspectives or different information on a particular variable. For example, whereas Local Cluster School activities and monitoring of teaching may both reflect on *Variable 8 - Level of activity*, a cluster-head is best placed to comment on the former, whereas a school director will have greater knowledge of the latter in terms of what is happening in his or her own school.

Note: The code in parentheses after each indicator refers to the survey instrument and item number used to determine this information. Thus "A1" refers to Form A, Item 1 (which can be viewed in Annex A)

Table 2 – Variables and survey items used in the field test

Variable 1: Situation in the cluster

- distance from the core to the satellite schools (A1)
- distance of the core school to the District Education Office (DOE) (A2)
- distance from the individual schools to the nearest Secondary School (D1)
- existence of a library (A19)
- library is in its own room or in a room also serving other functions (B8)
- existence of a Material Resource Room (MRR) (A6)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MRR is in its own room or in a room also serving other functions (B3) - existence of an office (B2) - security (C12)/(D19) - access to the schools/condition of the roads (D3)
<p>Variable 2: Situation in the individual schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - existence of pre-school classes (D2) - number of classrooms (D5) - 1 shift/2 shift (D6) - water source (D7) - number of classrooms where children sit in crowded situations (D8)
<p>Variable 3: Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - widespread participation in planning (A4) - participation of DOE (A14) - Local Cluster School Committee (LCSC) meetings (A15) - Display of information in the office (B1) - Appropriate distribution of textbooks (B4) - Educational aids are organized in a manner that enables teachers to borrow them easily (B7) - Teachers have lesson plans (C1) - Technical Grade Leaders use a standard "class inspection form" (C8) - Awareness by teachers of who was involved in planning process (C9) - Inventory of text-books exists(D9) - Director visits annex schools (if applicable) (D13) - School administration meetings (D15)
<p>Variable 4: Human resources – particular advantages</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - appointment of Resource Centre Manager (A7) - appointment of librarian (A20) - librarian has received previous training (A21) - appropriate number of teachers (D4) - appointment of Cluster Technical Grade Leaders (A11)
<p>Variable 5: Materials, aids and mobile resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teaching aids in the core school (A8) - teaching aids in the individual schools (D10) - library books (A23) - materials/equipment for the production of aids (B5) - furniture in the Resource Centre (B6) - furniture in the Library (B9) - appropriateness of library books for each grade (B10) - teachers interviewed have aids in the classroom (C2)
<p>Variable 6 : Community support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cluster Support Committee activities (A16) - School Support Committee activities (C10) - community fund-raising on behalf of the school (apart from student fees) (D17) - how schools use funds received from community (D18)

Variable 7: Planning

- activities in the cluster plan (A3)
- plan to produce teaching aids (A9)
- cluster plan for Thursday meetings (A12)

Variable 8: Level of activity

- problem identification in implementation of plans (A5)
- satellites borrowing aids from the core school (A10)
- Technical Grade Leaders participate in Thursday Technical Meetings (A13)
- satellite schools send reports to the cluster head (A17)
- LCSC activities (A18)
- satellite schools borrow library books from the core school (A24)
- children actively and regularly use the library (A25)
- teachers call the attendance roll daily (C3)
- teachers compile student exam scores monthly (C4)
- teachers use the "communication book" with parents and/or the "student monitoring book" ¹(C5)
- teachers identify methods to help weak students (C6)
- Technical Grade Leaders monitor teaching (C7)
- teachers provide some detail of the last Thursday Technical Meeting held (C11)
- teachers borrow aids (D11)
- school director monitors teaching (D12)
- system to follow up long-term absent students (D14)
- Thursday Technical meetings take place (D16)

Variable 9: School directors' prioritization of problems affecting the quality of education

- issues surrounding students that affect the quality of their learning (D20)
- issues surrounding teachers that affect the quality of student learning (D21)
- issues in the community that affect the quality of student learning (D22)

Variable 10 – Trainability and availability of human resources

- teachers' professional status (permanent, contracted,) (E1)
- teachers' hours of teaching (1 shift/2 shifts) (E2)
- teachers' level of education (E3)

Annex 2
Sample Cluster School Annual Plan
(Prey Toteung Cluster, Prey Chor District 1999-2000)

<p>Long Term Objective The number of students completing a primary cycle increases.</p>	<p>Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ All schools in Prey Toteung Cluster increase their rate of student completion by 5% for the primary cycle beginning in 1996-7 and ending 2001-2 (in comparison with the previous cycle). 	<p>External Factors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers' difficult living situation does not adversely affect efforts to improve the quality of the cluster's education. • The difficult living situation of students does not adversely affect efforts to improve the quality of their learning. • The shortness of the school day does not adversely affect efforts to improve the quality of education. • Long travel times between students' and teachers' villages and the school do not affect the efforts to improve the quality of educational services.
<p>Short Term Objective The quality of students' learning improves.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The overall rate of student repetition decreases by at least 5% in all schools by the end of the 1999-2000 academic year. 	
<p>Outputs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teachers and the community have good communication together. 2. The number of children dropping out of school is reduced. 3. Teachers actively use teaching and learning aids in their instruction. 4. Teachers understand and use student-centered teaching methodologies in their classrooms. 5. Students engage in self-study outside the classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents increase their response rate to student report cards by 20% over last year's rate of 60% in all schools by the end of the 1999-2000 academic year. • The dropout rate for all schools decreases over last year's rate in all schools by the end of the 1999-2000 academic year. • The number of teaching aids borrowed from the resource center increases by 70% over rates observed last year in all schools by the end of the 1999-2000 academic year. • At least 70% of the classes observed by cluster supervisors (tutors) are found to exhibit student-centered instruction during the 1999-2000 academic year. • At least 75% of the students determined to be at risk of repeating Grade 1 are 	

<p>6. The cluster library can provide adequate support in the form of reading materials to both students and teachers.</p> <p>7. Evaluation practices in the cluster are valid and reliable.</p> <p>8. The resource center is able to support learning activities in the cluster.</p>	<p>enrolled in special tutoring classes by the middle of the 1999-2000 academic year.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rate of library usage averages at least 8000 times per month throughout the cluster during the 1999-2000 academic year. • Cluster-wide testing of students occurs at least once per semester during the 1999-2000 academic year. • The cluster has established a question bank by the middle of the 1999-2000 academic year. • The cluster resource center achieves a score of at least <i>satisfactory</i> during the mid-year assessment by the District Office of Education. 	
<p>Activities</p> <p>1. <u>Teachers and the community have good communication together.</u></p> <p>1.1. The LCSC will organize a meeting at the beginning of the academic year in order to make plans ensuring that all teachers issue report cards during the year.</p> <p>1.2. Each school will meet with its parent association to distribute/ explain documents reminding them of the need to fill out and return student report cards (twice a year: 1st and 2nd Semester).</p> <p>1.3. Purchase report cards for the poorest students in the cluster.</p> <p>1.4. All school directors will be sure to follow up the distribution and recollection of student report cards on a regular basis.</p>	<p>Inputs/Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster income will be used to subsidize travel/buy refreshments. • Documents: 300 R x 90 pers = 27,000 R. • Refreshments for Association Meeting: 10,000 R x 6 schools = 60,000 R. • Report Cards: 300 R x 1300 students = 390,000 R • No budget required. 	
<p>2. <u>The number of children dropping out of school is reduced.</u></p>		

<p>2.1 Set up a committee in each school composed of community members to identify students in need of assistance to stay in school.</p> <p>2.2. Develop criteria for the identification of children in need of financial assistance to stay in school.</p> <p>2.3. Allocate scholarships for children in need of financial assistance to stay in school.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No budget required. • No budget required • Scholarships: 5 schools x 180,000 R per school = 900,000 R 	
<p>3. <u>Teachers actively use teaching and learning aids in their instruction.</u></p> <p>3.1. Organize regular teacher meetings on every 2nd and 4th Thursday of the month at the cluster in order to make teaching aids for use in instruction.</p> <p>3.2. Organize regular teacher meetings on every 1st and 3rd Thursday of the month at each satellite school in order to disseminate how to use the teaching aids constructed earlier for use in instruction.</p> <p>3.3. Organize regular teacher supervision visits to all schools by members of the LCSC and grade leaders to provide technical support to teachers in using teaching aids.</p> <p>3.4. Summarize findings from supervision visits on a regular basis in order to inform future planning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching aid materials: 400,000 R • Teaching aid materials: 800,000 R • Cluster income will be used to subsidize travel • No budget required. 	
<p>4. <u>Teachers understand and use student-centered teaching methodologies in their classrooms.</u></p> <p>4.1 Organize a special workshop on teaching methodology for teachers during the 1st semester.</p> <p>4.2.Meet with grade leaders (tutors) in order to make planning schedule to follow-up workshop.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1500 R/pers x 120 pers x 3 days = 540,000 • Materials: 400,000 R • Refreshments: To be provided for through cluster funds. • No budget required 	

<p>4.3. Organize regular teacher supervision visits to all schools by members of the LCSC and grade leaders to provide technical support to teachers in using teaching aids. (see 3.3 above.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster generated income will be used for this purpose. 	
<p>5. <u>Students engage in self-study</u></p> <p>5.1. Meet with LCSC to organize study clubs for Grade 1 and 2 children in villages (2 hrs/day; 2 days/week).</p> <p>5.2. Meet with parent associations in order to explain the goal and characteristics of the tutoring program to be set up for children.</p> <p>5.3. Meet with Grade 1 and 2 teachers in order to determine the students at the highest risk of repeating.</p> <p>5.4. Organize a supervisory group to follow-up on tutoring classes provided by selected teachers for Grade 1 and 2 children at risk of repeating.</p> <p>5.5. Meet with the LCSC in order to evaluate the progress of self-study clubs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentives for teachers: 2000 R/pers x 15 pers x 80 hrs = 2,400,000 R • Incentives: 1500 R x 47 pers = 70,500 R • Refreshments: 10,000 R x 6 schools = 60,000 R • No budget required. • 2000 R/pers x 7 pers x 10 times = 140,000 R • Cluster income will be used to subsidize travel and pay for refreshments. 	
<p>6. <u>The cluster library can provide adequate support in the form of reading materials to both students and teachers.</u></p> <p>6.1. Meet with LCSC in order to determine the books needed for the library.</p> <p>6.2. Purchase books for library</p> <p>6.3. Organize a workshop on book writing for cluster staff.</p> <p>6.4. Organize support visits by the cluster librarian to all satellite school libraries to help ensure access of children to books.</p> <p>6.5. Organize a committee which will judge/choose and edit the stories written locally in</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No budget required. • Books: 250,000 R • 2000 R/pers x 10 pers x 2 days = 40,000 R • Materials: 100,000 R • Cluster income will be used to subsidize travel • No budget required. 	

the cluster.		
<p>7. <u>Evaluation practices in the cluster are valid and reliable.</u></p> <p>7.1. Develop testing plans (tables of specifications) with special cluster committee.</p> <p>7.2. Train teachers about how to analyze questions for placement in a question bank.</p> <p>7.3. Visit teachers in their classrooms to assess what kinds of questions they are asking their students.</p> <p>7.4. Develop cluster wide tests for administration at the end of each semester.</p> <p>7.5. Set a testing schedule for each semester.</p> <p>7.6. Set up a testing committee which will administer semester tests in each school.</p> <p>7.7. Set up a committee which can correct all student test papers from semester tests.</p> <p>7.8 Analyze questions and add to question bank..</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Materials: 50,000 R • 1500 R/pers x 120 pers x 1 day = 180,000 • Materials: 50,000 R • Internal cluster income to be used. • Incentives: 1500/R pers x 7 pers x 3 days x 2 semesters = 63,000 R • Photocopying: 800,000 R/ semester x 2 times = 1,600,000 R • No budget required. • No budget required. • Internal cluster income to be used. • No budget required 	
<p>8. <u>The resource center is able to support learning activities in the cluster.</u></p> <p>8.1. Visit each satellite school to assist them in organizing their teaching aids so that they are easily accessible.</p> <p>8.2. Distribute basic materials to satellite schools so that schools can make their own teaching aids.</p> <p>8.3. Make a rotation schedule of teaching aids from the resource center to satellite schools every month.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster income will be used to subsidize travel • Internal cluster income to be used. • See 3.1 and 3.2. • Internal cluster income to be used. 	
GRAND TOTAL	8,480,500 Riels	

Annex 3: Sample Cluster Evaluation Instrument

Cluster School Evaluation Instrument	
Name of Cluster/District: _____ / _____	Date: _____
Name of Evaluator: _____	TOTAL SCORE: <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> %
Evaluation Key: Over 65% = Very Good; 50-64% = Satisfactory; Under 49% = Needs Improvement	

Rating Scale				<i>Directions</i> Score each item according to the scale shown in the left hand column. Use the following guidelines in assigning a score for each criteria: Very Good = 2 Pts M Means that the activity or product in question demonstrates a high degree of creativity and self-directed work Satisfactory = 1 Pt M Means that the activity or product in question has been done to a minimum but adequate standard Needs Improvement = 0 Pts M Means that the activity or product in question has not been done or has been done to a quality below that expected by the evaluator <i>A Calculation Area has been provided at the end of each section to total the points in each column. Add the points for each column and enter the total score at top of the section. Convert this to a percentage by dividing by the number in the lower part of the box. When you have finished scoring all sections, add up the section subtotals and enter the TOTAL SCORE in the space provided above. Convert this score to a percentage by dividing by 116. Please note that starred criteria (*) have been weighted twice as heavily as other criteria</i>
Very Good (VG) 2 Pts	Satisfactory (S) 1 Pt	Needs Improvement 0 Pts	Total	
28	%	Section 1 : Resource Cent		
A. Organization and Maintenance				
			1. A system for managing keys to the RC is in place so that the Ctr is not locked during teaching.	
			2. Materials are easily accessible (Possible Evidence: Materials are easily found when requested; Materials in bags are labelled and sorted by set; Maps and posters are <u>not</u> nailed down).	
			3. Older materials which have been lost or damaged have been replaced.	
			4. There is an updated inventory of materials and teaching aids available in the Resource Center as well as a listing of materials received from donors like CAPE.	
B. Research and Planning				
			5. A Teaching Aids Planning Chart which indicates the materials to be made or acquired, the quantity needed, to whom they are to be provided, and how they are to be acquired has been developed for each grade.	
			6. The Resource Center Manager can tell the evaluator how specific teaching aids are used as well as the grade and lessons for which they are relevant.	
			7. Resource Center staff have produced new materials for instruction as a result of their own creativity and discussions with teachers.	
C. Dissemination and Usage of Materials				
			8.* Resource Center materials are found to be used in the core school (Possible Evidence: Teaching Aid Borrowing Booklet or actual observation of classes). [Multiply Score by 2]	
			9.* Resource Center materials are used in surrounding schools (Possible Evidence: Teaching Aid Borrowing Booklet; actual observation of classes; service schedules). [Multiply Score by 2]	
			10. A Teaching Aid Borrowing Schedule has been made by the LCSC.	
			11. A list of the materials available in RC has been posted in each school office.	
			12. Use of teaching aids has been discussed in Thursday Mtgs (see Training Plan)	
Calculation Area (Enter Total Score for This Section Above)				

**Annex 4:
Key Informants (Cluster Study)**

1. Mr. Leang Nguon Ly, Deputy DG, General Education
2. Mr. Sam Sereyrath, Director, DoP
3. Mr. Chon Cheang Ly, Vice Director, DoPP
4. Mr. So Yen, Office Head, DoPP
5. Mr. Nhean Saroeun, Deputy Director, Office of Special Education
6. Ms. Huon Chon Hong, Inspector, DoPP
7. Mr. Ou Eng, Project Director, EQIP
8. Mr. Vin McNamara, Senior Technical Advisor, EQIP
9. Ms. Lynn Dudley, Technical Advisor, EQIP
10. Mr. Nabendra Dahal, Education Officer, UNICEF
11. Mr. Richard Geeves, Advisor, World Education
12. Mr. Bob MacLaughlin, Project Officer, WFP
13. Mr. Kou Bun Keang, Advisor, Save the Children/Norway
14. Mr. Kath Sim Onn, Project Officer, Save the Children/Norway
15. Mr. Nyeuan Sira Nyeuan, Vice Director, KAPE
16. Mr. Pech Darong, Local Capacity Building Advisor, Seila (Kampong Cham)
17. Mr. Phung Sila, Deputy Provincial Program Advisor, Seila (Kampong Cham)

Annex 5: Composition of Questionnaire Respondents

1. Position of respondents

○ PoE Staff:	9 (29%)
○ DoE Staff:	5 (16%)
○ Project Managers:	4 (13%)
○ Advisors:	6 (19%)
○ Animators:	<u>7 (23%)</u>
○ Total	31 (100%)

2. Agencies Surveyed

- EQIP
- UNICEF
- Save the Children/Norway (SCN0)
- KAPE
- CARE
- World Education

3. Provinces Surveyed

- Kampong Thom
- Prey Veng
- Kampong Speu
- Kampong Cham
- Svay Rieng
- Takeo
- Phnom Penh
- Kampong Chnang
- Siem Reap

**Annex 6:
Survey Instruments Used for the Study**

Cluster School Development and Linkage to Decentralization Initiatives

(If you are returning by mail courier, pls send to Kurt Bredenberg, c/o UNICEF Educ Section, Phnom Penh)

Name of Agency/Government Office: _____

Position of Respondent: Advisor
 Project Animator
 Project Mgr
 Ministry Staff
 PoE Staff

Location of Project _____
(If working in main office, indicate “nonspecific”)

Name of Respondent: _____
(Optional)

Date: _____

Cluster Specific Data

1. How would you or your agency define the *primary* characteristic of the process (as opposed to the functional abilities afforded by clusters, e.g., capacity building, resource sharing) of cluster school development ? (limit your response to only one of these)

- _____ Institution building (resource centers, teacher supervision systems, etc.)
_____ Grouping schools together for administrative purposes
_____ A means of doing construction
_____ Re-organizing schools in order to facilitate decentralization
_____ Re-organizing schools in order to increase the absorptive capacity of an area to utilize resources
_____ Other (Please specify)

2. To what extent does your project rely on school clusters to facilitate quality improvement in schools ?

_____ a great deal _____ somewhat _____ not very much

3. What is your personal level of satisfaction with the use of cluster schools as a development strategy ?

_____ very satisfied _____ partly satisfied _____ dissatisfied

4. In what areas, if any, has school clustering really succeeded in your project ? (check as many as might apply)

- resource centers
- libraries
- teacher supervision/teacher training
- community involvement
- construction
- improved local management of resources
- improved planning, needs assessments, etc.
- increasing accountability/transparency
- empowerment of stakeholders
- expediting communication from central to school level
- other (Pls. Specify)

5. Of the areas of success, indicate the *one* most successful area:

6. To what extent does your project adhere to the national cluster school guidelines ?

- a great deal somewhat not very much

7. If you answered “somewhat” or “not very much”, what is the reason ?

- guidelines not very clear
- guidelines don't fit the circumstances of the clusters in which I work
- guidelines keep on changing
- other (Pls. Specify)

8. Cluster school projects in Cambodia have sometimes been described as using “parallel project modalities in their implementation which do little to strengthen existing government systems.” How would you define your own position with respect to this statement ?

- agree partly agree disagree don't know

Comments:

9. Which of the following statements best fits your opinion with regard to the continuation or discontinuation of the cluster school initiative ?

- A highly successful strategy that should be continued.
- A partly successful strategy whose shortcomings have arisen largely from constraints within the implementation environment but which still has merit and should be continued.
- A strategy that has had some success but which should now be discontinued since the government's introduction of PAP.
- A strategy that has largely failed and should be discontinued.
- None of these (Pls. Explain):

10. Does your agency have a formalized instrument that is *specific* to the evaluation of school cluster performance (as opposed to the performance of individual schools) ?

yes no

Comments:

11. Does your agency have a documented *exit strategy* that it uses when it phases out assistance to a cluster ? yes no

12. If yes, please describe this strategy:

13. Identify the problems or difficulties you have encountered in implementing the Ministry's cluster school development strategy :

- poor leadership at cluster school level
- cluster school personnel lack the prerequisites that are needed for training to be effective
- clusters have been formed by the PoE in a way that is not geographically viable.
- lack of training documents to facilitate cluster school development activities
- cluster school personnel lack motivation due to low salaries
- lack of accountability for performance/nonperformance among cluster personnel
- others (Please specify)

14. If you had to prioritize these problems, how would you do so ? List the 3 biggest problems in order of difficulty below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Decentralization Initiatives

1. How would describe the level of satisfaction of your cluster level counterparts with respect to PAP ?

_____ very satisfied _____ partly satisfied _____ dissatisfied _____ very dissatisfied
_____ don't know

2. If you answered "dissatisfied", what are the reasons (check all that apply)

- _____ late disbursement
_____ lack of transparency
_____ overly rigid guidelines in resource utilization
_____ lack of clarity with respect to the way it works
_____ too much paper work
_____ other (Pls. Specify)

3. If you answered Item #2, which one reason is most commonly cited ?

4. How has PAP affected the operation of the clusters in which you work ?

- _____ impeded it
_____ complemented it
_____ no effect
_____ don't know

Comments:

5. Would you recommend the allocation of a PAP disbursement specifically to school clusters ?
_____ yes (Explain why)

_____ no (Explain why not)

6. Has your cluster support program planned or developed any direct linkages to commune councils ?

_____ yes, (Pls specify)

_____ not yet

7. If you answered “not yet” to Item #6 above, what thoughts do you have about how commune councils can link up with school clusters ?
-
-
-

8. How would you describe your current level of understanding of how commune councils will link up with existing administrative institutions in the education system (e.g., PoE, DoE, clusters, etc.) ?

_____ very clear _____ somewhat clear _____ not at all clear

9. What obstacles, if any, do you expect will impede linking school clusters to the operation of the commune council ?

_____ overlapping jurisdictions

_____ cluster and commune borders are not geographically contiguous

_____ no official provisions for commune members in LCSC

_____ other (Pls specify)
