Increasing Access and Utilization of Eye Health Services in Cambodia through Multi-sector Collaboration

Beatrice Varga, Neath Kong, Savoeun Un, Tokyo Bak, Amanda Davis, May Ho

All authors are employees of The Fred Hollows Foundation

Activity Impact

This SURE Project (Sustainable Universal Refractive Error Services) project is part of a long-term approach to create sustained investment and improvements in the delivery of quality services through a systems-based evidence to inform the development of interventions. Through a series of economic evaluations and multi-level implementation, the intervention has been developed to ensure the maximization of limited resources.

Activity and Implementation

The intervention approach has been adopted as a critical component of the project to ensure active participation and engagement in how services are delivered. This has been achieved through the establishment of a cross-ministerial steering group and the involvement of key stakeholders at all levels of the health system.

Evidence

The school eye health program as part of the SURE Project demonstrated a successful early intervention project to reduce uncorrected vision impairment in children.

Lessons Learned

One of the key lessons is that the project was established by local partnerships in order to ensure ongoing engagement and sustainability. These partnerships have been critical to the success of the project and continue to play a significant role in the ongoing implementation.

Facilitators

In Cambodia there is a well-established and wide-reaching Eye Health Sector Network (EHSN) that consists of 230 NGOs and civil society organizations that are critical in the implementation of the SURE Project. The EHSN has been instrumental in the coordination and facilitation of the SURE Project, ensuring that the project is aligned with the national priorities and objectives.

Challenges

The SURE Project commenced off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2021. At that time local eye services had been closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, and the SURE Project had to be developed quickly in order to meet the urgent need for eye care services. This resulted in significant challenges, including delays in implementation and difficulties in maintaining the momentum of the project.

Context

Uncorrected vision loss has a significant impact on economic productivity and well-being in Cambodia. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 75% of vision impairments are due to refractive errors (RE) and can be easily corrected with appropriate glasses.

The Cambodian government has responded to this challenge through its commitment in the National Strategic Plan on Blindness Prevention and Control 2021-2025, which aims to develop and strengthen all health systems and other programs that are critical in the delivery of primary and secondary vision care services.

Uncorrected vision loss due to refractive error (RE) impacts over a billion people globally. In 2022, a WHA resolution was unanimously supported on the importance of addressing RE, and in particular, the need for comprehensive eye care services.

The Cambodian government has acknowledged the importance of addressing this issue by implementing the National Strategic Plan on Blindness Prevention and Control 2021-2025, which includes a comprehensive strategy to address RE and improve access to vision care services.

There is a significant need for primary and secondary vision care services in Cambodia, with over 1.5 million people estimated to have uncorrected vision loss due to RE. The Cambodian government has responded to this challenge through its commitment in the National Strategic Plan on Blindness Prevention and Control 2021-2025, which aims to develop and strengthen all health systems and other programs that are critical in the delivery of primary and secondary vision care services.

Activity Description

Many components of the health and other sectors impact the accessible and equitable provision of vision services. The research project examined this in-depth through the analysis of various factors such as the availability and quality of services, the affordability of interventions, and the engagement of community stakeholders.

The SURE project has worked in partnership with the National Program for Eye Health (NPEH), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and Ministry of Youth and Sport (MoEYS), Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Province Health Department (PHD) partners in 16 provinces, the Cambodian Disabled Peoples Organization, and other NGOs to assist with the implementation of the project.

At the commencement of the project, the private sector was not engaged. This was identified as a critical factor as it is known that the majority of eye services are provided by the private sector. To address this, the project has engaged with the private sector and developed partnerships to ensure that quality care is accessible to all.

The SURE Project commenced off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2021. At that point local eye services had been closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, and the SURE Project had to be developed quickly in order to meet the urgent need for eye care services. This resulted in significant challenges, including delays in implementation and difficulties in maintaining the momentum of the project.

The SURE project has worked in partnership with the National Program for Eye Health (NPEH), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women’s Affairs, Province Health Department (PHD) partners in 16 provinces, the Cambodian Disabled Peoples Organization, and other NGOs to assist with the implementation of the project. This has resulted in a comprehensive and coordinated approach to improving access to eye care services.

Engagement with the community has been a critical component of the project to ensure active participation and engagement in how services are delivered. This has been achieved through the establishment of a cross-ministerial steering group and the involvement of key stakeholders at all levels of the health system.

The Cambodian government has acknowledged the importance of addressing this issue by implementing the National Strategic Plan on Blindness Prevention and Control 2021-2025, which includes a comprehensive strategy to address RE and improve access to vision care services.

The SURE Project commenced off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2021. At that point local eye services had been closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, and the SURE Project had to be developed quickly in order to meet the urgent need for eye care services. This resulted in significant challenges, including delays in implementation and difficulties in maintaining the momentum of the project.

The SURE Project commenced off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic in June 2021. At that point local eye services had been closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, and the SURE Project had to be developed quickly in order to meet the urgent need for eye care services. This resulted in significant challenges, including delays in implementation and difficulties in maintaining the momentum of the project.