

## **Educational Needs Assessment Relating to Cham Children**

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This is a study done two years ago, prompted by the emergence of Islamic schools catering to Chams, a Muslim ethnic minority in Cambodia. These schools are operating in parallel to the state school system with little supervision or oversight, a situation of some concern to civil society and local government. Research methods involved a review of secondary data sources, such as William Collins' *The Chams of Cambodia*, as well as primary data collections methods such as focus groups with Cham community members and one-on-one interviews with Islamic schools.

Recent policy shifts by the government currently require all Cambodians to list their nationality as Khmer, conflating nationality with ethnicity and equating being Cambodian with being Khmer. These legal changes have made minority outreach efforts to the Cham community somewhat problematic because they imply that the Chams are not technically a minority anymore, even though they have quite different language and customs. In practice, however, the government has been very flexible in the interpretation of the policy and has not interfered in the building of Islamic schools, though in public schools, the use of Cham language is officially prohibited. This study took place in Kampong Cham province, which has the highest Cham population in Cambodia and also higher than national average rates of drop-outs and repeaters at primary level. Researchers compared enrollment, drop-out and repetition rates among the districts in the province and found that those with higher Cham populations performed the worst.

Chams live in semi-isolation, though their villages are in close proximity to Khmer ones, with some interaction between the two communities, particularly in the state school system. Relations are primarily peaceful though there are some latent tensions. Surveys of Chams show that although they prefer to be called Khmer Islam, buying into government guidelines, they largely speak Cham, not Khmer, at home, and feel it is very important for their children to learn the Cham language and Islam at school, which is at odds with government policy. Understanding of Khmer at state schools for very young Cham children is sometimes low, and the number of Cham teachers in the state schools does not reflect the proportion of the general population that they comprise. On the other hand, it isn't uncommon for Cham children who attend Islamic school to also attend state school in the morning, suggesting a complex picture about the role of the Chams in Cambodian society. That is, the Chams wish to retain their cultural identity but also to be integrated into Cambodian society. At this point there is little to suggest radicalization of Chams, though the fear is present.

A small pilot outreach program implemented by a local NGO in close cooperation with local government is attempting to bridge the two schools systems, as Islamic schools have previously been faceless and delinked from the state schools. Other programmatic areas include working with the government to promote the recruitment of Cham teachers to increase their representation in state schools, and funding of bilingual education in a way that is acceptable to the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport.