Partners for Healthier Cambodian Youth

In December 2011, GIZ partnered with the Cambodian School Health Department of the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to implement an innovative school health concept using evidence-based and cost-effective interventions.

The Regional Fit for School Programme will be a three-year research and development initiative by GIZ in partnership with the Southeast Asian Ministries of Education Organisation and its Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO INNOTECH).

The programme adapts the Fit for School approach, which has been widely successful in the Philippines, to the specific national situations in Cambodia, Indonesia and Lao PDR. Its simple templates can be implemented in a variety of settings allowing for relatively simple scale-up and expanded programme reach.

Improving Health Improves Education and Expands Opportunities

Hygiene-related diseases, such as diarrhea and respiratory infections, are the leading cause of death for children in Cambodia. By the time Cambodian children enter school, more than half have intestinal worms and a vast majority have dental caries, virtually all untreated. Students suffering from pain and disease are frequently absent from school, sleep less and show an overall lower academic performance compared to healthy pupils.

As everywhere in the world, health status and school performance are closely related.

The Regional Fit for School Programme integrates school health activities, addressing multiple high-impact diseases with simple interventions. Healthier boys and girls achieve greater educational attainment, which will lead to greater opportunities for the next generation of Cambodians.

Simple, Sustainable and Scalable

To achieve high health impacts, the programme focuses on the most prevalent diseases in school-age children, such as hygiene-deficiency-related illnesses, dental caries and worm infections. The interventions are simple and evidence-based: hand-washing with soap and tooth-brushing with fluoride toothpaste are daily group activities coupled with biannual deworming.

The programme goes beyond traditional curriculum-based health education supporting children in acquiring healthy habits and promoting sustainable behavior change through daily...
These interventions are easy to execute and simple implementation templates allow school principals and teachers to run the programme with minimal supervision and effort. The group setting encourages participation and helps to ensure that no child “falls through the cracks” if the interventions are neglected at home.

The materials for this programme’s implementation — soap, toothpaste and toothbrushes — are very cheap (about US$0.50 per child for the entire school year). This makes the programme affordable, even in resource-poor settings.

To be sustainable, the programme must function independently of external funding. Therefore, the Fit for School concept covers the initial start-up costs and then works with government partners to make the programme costs an ongoing element of their budgets.

The community and parents are involved in the construction of the required group washing facilities and they engage in monitoring and evaluation of the programme. This ensures accountability and transparency, strengthens local ownership and promotes community empowerment. Empowerment leads to community investment in the programme, which is key to its sustainability.

The programme is able to operate “on a shoestring” since it is integrated in existing educational structures. It provides standardised and pre-packed supplies to ensure quality and minimise procurement issues. It follows a modular structure and uses uniform templates to facilitate implementation and scale-up, so that what works for one child can work for thousands.

The programme grows more effective as its reach expands: the more children reached, the lower the risk of infectious disease in school settings, and the more boys and girls act as positive role models for one another in good hygiene and academic performance.

Fit for School – a National Flagship Programme

In the Philippines, Fit for School has become the national flagship school health programme of the Department of Education. More than 2.5 million public elementary school and preschool children in 36 provinces are targeted by the daily activities.

A longitudinal study started in 2009 is measuring the programme’s impact and has shown positive health effects after just one year: 20 % reduction in below-normal body mass index (BMI), 30 % reduction in absenteeism, 40 % lower increase in infections from decayed teeth and a reduction by 50 % in heavy worm infections.

The successful model used in the Philippines is now being tested in Cambodia. In the upcoming year, the impact of Cambodia’s Fit for School programme will become more evident as target schools are reached.