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Potential of Non-Formal Education through Community Learning Centres throughout the World to Encourage Basic Literacy, Personal Development and Societal Inclusion

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While disseminating good quality primary education for all by 2015 has been a worldwide target, over 780 million adults remain illiterate and 77 million primary-school aged children are still out of school. To ensure educational equity of these out of school children and illiterate adults, various forms of non-formal education have been promoted by a large number of stakeholders. UNESCO has also promoted community-based learning centres that are outside the scope of formal education and has provided various types of learning opportunities to encourage community development and thus to improve the quality of life. These non-formal learning centres are called Community Learning Centres (CLCs), Community Education Centres (CECs) and Community Multimedia Centres (CMCs). These institutions have acted as an empowerment gateway connecting illiterate society to literate society and local society to global society.

Due to regional diversity as well as the complexity of different community activities, however, sufficient comprehensive data have not yet been compiled concerning project histories, profiles, or evaluations. Therefore, this paper describes historical background and context for the emergence of UNESCO-related community learning activities followed by various types of activities, the impacts, strengths, and challenges of these community learning activities. A set of recommendations for potential rewarding non-formal education programs will also be described.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS OF COMMUNITY LEARNING ACTIVITIES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRATEGY

Everyone has the right to education—for the attainment of Education for All—

For decades, the right to education has been encouraged by various pieces of legislation. Some representative ones include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which states the right to free compulsory education, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which also recognizes the right

of the child to education. Education has been increasingly promoted, especially after the 1990s when the human-centred development approach started to be highlighted and the world conference on education for all brought momentum with over 1,500 conference participants, including the United Nations, the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, and many civil societies. These organizations adopted the 'World Declaration on Education for All' which promises the following:

All children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term, an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be (The World Declaration on Education for All, Jomtien, 1990).

Moreover, in the year 2000, another progressive step was taken when 164 governments and partner institutions adopted a more concrete framework of action focusing on the achievement of six *Education for All* goals on 1) Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE); 2) Universal Primary Education (UPE); 3) life skill programmes; 4) adult literacy; 5) gender parity; and 6) quality of education. In reality, however, 774 million people remain illiterate, out of which 64% are women, and 72 million children remain out-of-school (37% are in 35 fragile states) (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2008).

Non-formal education was initiated to overcome the limits of formal basic education. In order to address adult literacy problems and to meet the needs of various types of learning opportunities for the improvement of literacy and, thus, quality of life of local people, non-formal education emerged in the late 1990s as a learner-centred educational model. Many UN initiatives have been adopted to encourage literacy and dissemination of universal primary education. Some examples include: the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) to achieve 'locally sustainable environment'; The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE, 2005-2015) to support out-of-school children, adolescents and adults; The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD, 2005-2014) to ultimately aim at poverty alleviation and to support local initiatives.

Over the last decade, UNESCO has also committed itself to community-initiated and community-based learning centres that are outside the scope of formal education. Initiated by APPEAL in 1995 and implemented by the UNESCO Bangkok office in 1998, the main purpose of the CLC project is to provide various types of learning opportunities that meet the local needs of community development and the improvement of quality of life of local people (UNESCO Bangkok, 2003). Concurrently, UNESCO has promoted an information society for marginalized communities by creating multi-faceted community multimedia centres (CMCs). The basic idea of a CMC centre is to also to encourage local development and to promote literacy by making maximum use of the synergies between the radio and tele-centre components under community ownership so that the centre can act as a gateway connecting local to global society and illiterate to literate society (Hughes et al., 2004; UNESCO, 2005).

Both types of community centres (education-based CLC and communication and information based CMC) have similarities; both started quite recently (late 1990s and early 2000s) with the ultimate purpose of poverty alleviation; both were initiated locally with the concept of 'start with what is already there;' both utilize interactive and participatory approaches; both value flexibility, community development, and capacity building; both have been implemented in specific regions by various types of

stakeholders; and both suffer from similar challenges concerning sustainability. Despite this resemblance, due to the complicated nature of the divisions within UNESCO (c.f. Education, Communication and Information, & Culture) and due to regional diversities and the complexities of different community activities, no comprehensive data have been compiled concerning project histories, profiles, or evaluations. Further, although the concept of community-owned and community-administrated activities existed in various forms in various countries (UNESCO, 2001), except for several regions, UNESCO has failed to keep track of these community-oriented projects.

Therefore, it is critically important to grasp the whole picture of these two types of community learning activities and to understand the successful activities as well as the unsuccessful ones and comprehend why they are considered as such. It is also advantageous to understand the big picture for the future projects in order to avoid potential overlap of the project and to implement another excellent learning centre in other countries where such community facilities have not yet been carried out. With these rationales, this study explores UNESCO-related community learning centres throughout the world. Concrete objectives and a strategy are described below.

Objectives

Given the lack of a comprehensive inventory concerning UNESCO's effort in promoting community learning activities, the objectives of this study are to:

- Map out community-based learning activities of UNESCO since 1990 in their respective regions.
- Identify various types of community-based learning activities and analyse their impacts and strengths as well as their challenges, and make recommendations for potential future improvements.

Strategy

This study is composed of four stages:

1. Reviewing existing studies on community-based learning activities in various regions and preparing a set of relevant questions regarding the experiences of such projects
2. Distributed the questionnaire form¹ below to 51 worldwide UNESCO field offices.
3. Asked about the profiles and results of the projects including strengths and challenges.
4. Collected the forms (from 50 field offices) and analyzed the results.

II. OVERALL RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Since the major purpose of community learning centres is to empower impoverished local people through the delivery of necessary educational packages, these centres have been more or less likely built in the same countries in which high rates of illiteracy exist (c.f. Egypt, Morocco, China, Indonesia, Brazil, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Pakistan, Ethiopia and Nigeria) (LIFE Vision and Strategy Paper, 2005, UNESCO). UNESCO has 51 field offices throughout the world. The table below indicates overall worldwide CLC/CMC project profiles.

There are several characteristics that are worth attention. First, while there are differences in the types of community learning activities—community learning centres and community multi-media centres, literacy is key for both types of activities. Second, some of the major regional content differences are that in both Latin America and the Caribbean and African region, community multimedia centres (CMC) are more popular than community learning centres (CLC). Conversely, community learning centres are more prominent in Asia. Third, as for the UNESCO-related community learning activities as described in this study, national governments as well as international organizations have supported the projects, yet some regional differences can be observed; Asian projects are more or less have been supported by Japan and the USAID, UN; Latin American projects have been supported more by European governments, especially the Swiss and Netherlands governments. The next section explores the specific community learning activities in Nigeria, Jordan and Pakistan.

Worldwide CLC/CMC Project Overview

	Number of Project	Type of Project	Main Activities	Major target group	Implemented by	Financially supported by
AFRICA 15 FOs	12 in 11FOs	Mostly (85%) CMC	Most project centres are in Nigeria. Literacy, income generation, ICT	Illiterates, out-of-school Children	UNESCO, NGO, University	UNESCO National Govt, Swiss Govt, UNICEF
ARAB 6 FOs	5 in 4FOs	Mostly (80%) CMC	Literacy, ICT, Community development	Illiterates, children, Women	UNESCO, NGO, UNIV. Government	UNESCO, National Govt, University
ASIA 14 FOs	42 in 11FOs	Mostly (88%) CMC	Literacy(almost all) ICT, Life Skill, Income generation	Illiterates, out-of-school children, Women	NGO 45%, UNESCO 45%, National Gov 10%	UNESCO 40%, National govt 35%, Other govts 35%
L.A. and Caribbean 11 FOs	11 in 7FOs	Half CLC & Half CMC	Literacy Income generation, ICT, ECCE	Illiterates, ECCE, indigenous	UNESCO National gov, NGO	UNESCO National gov, Euro govts
Europe and North America 6	1 in 1FO	CLC only	CLC only	Children under 7	UNESCO in cooperation with UNICEF, and National Government	UNESCO Local municipality

III. SOME CASES FROM JORDAN, PAKISTAN AND NIGERIA

One of the major purposes of community learning activities lies in empowering local people and thus reducing poverty through literacy acquisition. This objective has been

observed overall in most CMC as well as CLC activities. The most frequently observed case is the community learning activity that combines literacy acquisition training with other activities, such as vocational training or income generating activities since these activities are directly linked to improving quality of life.

In Jordan, for instance, in the project titled, *Community Multi-Purpose Centres* (2003-2006) implemented by UNESCO and managed by local non-governmental organisations; the main activity was integration of a literacy class with income generating activities, awareness raising and vocational skill training. According to the person who answered the questionnaire form for this project, the project has contributed to re-realizing the importance of education and thus, more and more parents have started to encourage their children to attend school. This will in the long run strengthen self-reliance and hopefully therefore poverty reduction. On the other hand, long-term financial sustainability was described as a challenge.

Similarly, in Islamabad, Pakistan, the project titled *Breaking the Poverty Cycle of Women: Empowering Adolescent Girls (Boys) to Become Agents of Social Transformation*, implemented jointly by an academic and research institute called Institute for Development Studies and Practices (IDSP), Pakistan and four other partner organizations also combined literacy activities with income generating activities. The project was targeted towards illiterates, neo-illiterates, out-of-school children, nomads and other adults owning small business. The successful example from this project increased understanding towards girls' education and raised awareness of health, thus empowering the local community and effecting poverty reduction. This suggests that literacy activities with income-generating or life skill-based activities enhanced peoples' quality of life. However, even for those needs-based local learning activities, some cultural aspects, such as the tradition that young girls have to take care of their younger siblings was described as a 'hindrance' toward project continuation.

Community learning activities include not only those for illiterate or neo-illiterate participants but also literacy training facilitators. An example is the project in Abuja, Nigeria titled, *Improving Access to Community Education and Literacy Using the Radio*. Radio centres were built in 774 communities throughout Nigeria, and successful centres were described as centres contributing not only to literacy acquisition but also to the health and hygiene conditions of the community, increasing the awareness toward education and self-reliance, and thereby reducing poverty. The project was implemented by the Nigerian National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non-Formal Education as well as UNESCO and funded by the national government and UNICEF. In terms of the number of centres, this project represents most of the community learning centres in the African region. Financial problems were also described as its challenges.

In the talk at the symposium, these three cases were introduced by the author, but even if all the other projects were considered, literacy improvement activity combined with life skill or income generating activities are most likely to succeed regardless of regional differences. Conversely, financial backing for the continuity of the project was most often described as the major problem, whether the project is targeted for the participants, such as illiterate or neo-illiterates, or for the facilitators of the project.

IV. IMPACTS, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From a wide variety of the project profiles throughout the world, what are the major impacts of the community learning activities especially from the aspects of

inter-linkage of literacy, personal development and societal inclusion raised most often? And what are the challenges that need to be overcome?

Thanks to its flexibility, one of the most often described advantages of the community learning activities is that the activities could easily meet with the specific needs of the community requested by the local participants. Specifically, since most projects are based on literacy combined with some income-generating activities, the learners have become more self-reliant as they acquire literacy skill, enabling them to improve their quality of life, such as improved health and hygiene, and thus have contributed to poverty reduction, an important aspect of the Millennium Development Goals. Furthermore, adequate literacy competencies in reading, writing and numeracy also contributed to strengthening partnerships with the local community, which, as a result, has attributed to empowerment of the local society.

Conversely, the most often raised challenging aspects are sustainability problems, especially from the financial and administrative aspects. It has often been described that the motivation of volunteered staff is much lower than that of paid staff, given that the former may not feel as professional. Similarly, while cooperation from the local government was often described as a 'must', ensuring stakeholder cooperation still remained challenging. In addition, cultural constraints such as providing girls with education, remains another challenge in some traditional local societies. Other common problems at the classroom level are 1) preparing better learning environments; 2) stabilizing internet connection and removing other computer-related problems; 3) and solving the problem of lack of adequate teaching staff.

Given these challenges, some of the recommendations noted by most of the UNESCO field offices are summarized as policy level, classroom level, partnership, monitoring and evaluation. First, at the policy level, the need for the community center to be bottom-up and giving voice to local people, better utilization of local teacher and local facilitators are often recommended. Giving legal status to CLC as well as to CMC with clear guidelines for implementation and management are also recommended. At the classroom level, material development for the trainers as well as learners that suits the reality of local community and better internet connection and providing sufficient infrastructure are advised. In terms of partnership, collaboration, cooperation, the need for networking and dialogue among implementation agencies and stakeholders in national, district and community levels are suggested. Advocacy and support from the local governments are described as essential. Finally, it was discussed that project duration should continue long enough to see significant impacts on socio-economic conditions. Concurrently, adequate follow-ups, monitoring and external evaluation are also strongly suggested by many offices.

In the context of this study, UNESCO-related Community learning activities have clearly been evaluated positively despite some challenges. It certainly appears that this new form of education meets the learners' needs. The time has come that more and more attention should be devoted to non-formal education, which can promote self-reliance of local people and thus can contribute to education for all and poverty alleviation.

NOTE

1. Questionnaire requests the following information:

- Organization profile: Name of the project implementation institutions, nature, job title
- Project profiles: Project title, year of implementation, number of community activity centres, main target group, main financial supporters
- Most successful project centre example: activities, venue, staff, managers, activities, targeted group, impacts, strength, challenges of the project

- The least successful project centre example: activities, venue, staff, managers, activities, targeted group, impacts, strengths, challenges of the project
- Recommendations

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