

Relevance of Adult Literacy and Model of Lifelong Learning for Nepal

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Principles and Models of Lifelong Learning and Continuing Education

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1. Background

1.1. Context of Nepal

Nepal borders the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China in the north and mostly the Indian State of Bihar in the south, relatively less developed parts of the both. With a population of around 28 million, the climatic diversity often coincides with an unparalleled ethno-cultural mosaic reflecting cultures of both neighbors. The Nepali state recognizes some 60 indigenous groups besides 'caste groups' – the shadow of which greatly affects social realities in the country. Many speak their own language. Nepali is the lingua franca. Social indicators also vary greatly across gender and ethnic groups. The country is categorized amongst the least developed in the world. With the value of 0.530, Nepal ranked 145th in the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2006 (UNDP, 2008). Infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest.

Dating back to some 300 centuries the 'modern' state of Nepal was a *terra-incognita* until 1950. Until then, the country was run by two feudal aristocracies based on a Hindu worldview. Gradually opened up, it is still ruled by the elites where caste and class often intertwine. To this day, some 80 percent of the population lives on subsistence agriculture far from basic conveniences. The available benefits are unevenly distributed particularly between the eastern and the western parts of the country. Administratively, it is divided into five developed regions, 14 zones and 75 districts (see Annex I: map of Nepal), and those are further divided into 30 plus municipalities and some four thousand village committees. Since 1950 when aristocratic rule of Ranas was abolished, Nepal has undergone three major political changes. First was the establishment of autocratic rule by the king that lasted for some 30 years. Second was the transformation of king's absolute rule into constitutional monarchy by a popular movement. The third change is the Maoist insurgency that cost several thousand lives to the country. It has temporarily subsided with the parliamentarians and rebellions striking a peace deal forcing king out of his throne in 2006.

1.2. Nepal's Literacy Scenario

Since WCEFA 2000, UNESCO has been monitoring progress closely. The 2009 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) has reckoned Nepal as one of the fast forward towards achieving the goals of EFA amongst the developing countries:

In recent years Nepal has registered rapid progress towards UPE. The NER for 2004 stood at 79% — up from 65% in just five years. Numbers of children out of school have fallen from 1 million to 700,000. And survival to grade 5 has increased from 58% to 79%. The fact that this progress was sustained during a civil conflict that ended only in 2006 points to a remarkable achievement. (UNESCO/GMR, 2009)

However, Nepal ranks 111th amongst 129 countries with an Education for All Development Index (EDI) ¹ value of 0.738. Table 2 presents its rank along with other indicators.

Table 1 EDI and its components (values in parenthesis)

Indicators	Nepal	Belgium
EDI	111 (0.738)	27 (0.979)
Total Primary NER	111 (0.801)	38 (0.975)
Adult Literacy Rate	116 (0.552)	32 (0.990)
Gender Specific EFA Index	113 (0.815)	21 (0.987)
Survival Rate to Grade 5	101 (0.785)	56 (0.964)
EFA=Education for All, EDI=EEA Devevelopment Indicators		
NER= Net Enrolment Ratio		
(UNESCO/GMR, 2009) pp 248-249		

Moreover, despite efforts from several directions, literacy scenario remains rather bleak. This level of literacy is not likely to have been achieved by adult literacy programs as the same periods have seen higher enrolment and retention rates in primary schools. Table 2 shows a gradual progress of literacy and the discrepancy between the two sexes. On average it shows slightly over one percent of growth a year. However, it should be noted that gender gap is growing at much a faster rate.

Table 2 Literacy Rate (6 Years and above)

Year	Male	Female	Total	GPI	Gender gap
1952/54	9.5	0.7	5.3	0.07	8.8
1961	16.3	1.8	8.9	0.11	14.5
1971	23.6	3.9	14	0.17	19.7
1981	34	12	23.3	0.35	22
1991	54.5	25	39.6	0.46	29.5
2001	65.1	42.5	53.7	0.65	22.6
Source: MoES, 2005					

Further, there is a wide discrepancy in between rural-urban, east-west, north-south areas of the country as well as amongst children from different ethnic origins (see table 3). Legally abolished long ago, caste system still plays a significant role in social interactions meaning the 'low castes' have lower scores in literacy. Table 3 shows that most dalit groups have lower rate of literacy. Caste and Ethnic groups have similar tendencies.

Literacy is one of the most popular programs for the NGOs to run in Nepal. Government also runs literacy programs increasingly through NGOs now but also runs independently. A number of other line agencies also run literacy programs. There are not found have monitored systematically. In absence of coordination hundreds of classes are known to have

¹ The EFA Development Index (EDI) is a composite using four of the six EFA goals, selected on the basis of data availability: Universal primary education (UPE), Adult literacy, Quality of education and Gender parity. One indicator is used as a proxy measure for each of the four EFA goals, and each those EDI components is assigned equal weight in the overall index in accordance with the principle of considering each goal as being of equal importance. The EDI value for a particular country is thus the arithmetic mean of the observed values for each component. Since these components are all expressed as percentages, the EDI value can vary from 0 to 100% or, when expressed as a ratio, from 0 to 1. The higher the EDI value, the closer the country is to achieving Education for All as a whole. (UNESCO, 2005)

been duplicated. So much so that in some districts, reporting of newly literate adults exceeded the adult population of the district!

Non-formal Education Centre (NFEC) under the Ministry of Education is the national agency for adult literacy and non-formal education. Although, a formal structure exists (See Annex II) up to village level, they are limited in paper or have grossly remained ineffective. For many years, local governments do not exist due to insurgency. This has worsened the situation. Due to the reduction of NFE to adult literacy, interest amongst the concerned is rather limited. Literacy classes often end up as a favour to literacy-facilitator from participants' side. They even help faking as participants. Literacy is taken as a temporary affair. Community Learning Centres (CLC) have been conceived in recent plans as permanent non-formal education support structures in every villages. They have been tried in a few places and the result is positive. They, however, are yet to get a firm shape. There is a strong feeling even amongst the villagers that one cannot do anything better without first mastering literacy and illiterates often shy away from the CLCs despite its broadened scope.

Table 3 Literacy cohort by caste/ethnicity, 2001 (last census)

Cohort (Literacy %)	Hindu Castes	Dalit	Ethnic	Others	Un-identified	Total
1. High (+75)	5	0	4	0	1	10
2. Above average (60-75)	8	0	10	1	1	20
3. Below average (50-60)	1	3	12	1	0	17
4. Low (25-50)	17	7	18	2	0	44
5. Very Low (below 25)	3	5	1	0	0	9
Total No of Groups	34	15	45	4	2	100
					Source: (Gurung, 2003)	

Different shapes and shades of literacy have been tried out. The most used one is the national text book based on keywords approach that others consider adaptation of Freirian 'generative themes' while Freirians as reductionist distortion of Freirian principles. Obviously the text is primarily focused on learning letters rather than change or transformation. Depending on the facilitator, elements of 'active citizenship' can be brought in anyway. In politically oppressed times, campaigners have used the flag of literacy to solicit support to their ideology even underground. When political system was opened up followed by a popular movement in 1990, many 'emancipatory' 'participatory' approaches² have been implemented across the country by the NGOs. These approaches have been criticised by the followers of 'narrow literacy' for not completing the alphabets but hailed by others for its transformative role. This coincides with the liberal political approach and 'the rights perspective' to development and the rise of so called 'enabling statehood'.

² One particular form was called REFLECT where I was involved both in implementation and reviewing. The team found the participants highly articulating ('sharp as razor blade' the term was used) but not completed the alphabets (Adhikari, Sitikhu, Tuladhar, & Bhattarai, 1999). The authorities attributed this kind of literacy to promote 'insurgency' and thus be banned.

2. Lifelong Learning and Literacy

Literacy was considered as the natural choice for those who could not go to school to learn reading and writing as 'compensation' broadening educational opportunities for adults. Especially if not exclusively, lifelong learning is an economically oriented discourse as Baert (2003) has correctly put. Literacy loses its importance as an aspect of lifelong learning when peoples' lives are not connected to a single economy. People living on subsistence are minimally affected by the economy and the vice versa. There is no stronger drive to acquire neither literacy skills nor interest for investment for literacy both by individuals and the state. This is not even 'continuing education' in the case of Nepal as people living in the villages had any opportunity to learn earlier. (I have excluded formal life-long learning from this discussion).

Given the short life expectancy (60+ years), it does not hold much importance to get people who are older than around 50 to get literate. Moreover, life expectancy of illiterate people is even below than the average. Further, adults have little opportunity to make use of the literacy in their lives. Can we call literacy as lifelong learning if people learn but are not able to use it? From Table 2, it has been learnt that there is one percent annual growth of literacy in nearly 50 years. Formal schools are producing young literate people in large numbers. If this fact is taken into account, contribution of adult literacy to overall literacy becomes minimal. So, does it make sense to emphasize on adult literacy? Further, reading and writing skills are related to 'motor skills' and memorization that is done best when young. When literacy cannot be utilized at later life, learning becomes a burden.

Relating to comparative advantages from the point of view of investment to returns, even the welfare economists such as Esping-Anderson (1990) would go in favour of investing at earliest possible age. However, in this earliest investment they go so far back that they find high returns even in investing on pregnancy. This gives the whole economic justification for adult education. Further, economic isolation does not always mean political isolation. Extreme poverty situation flare up and destabilize the whole community, a whole nation. Personal growth and wellbeing is not confined to an individual but is in the interest of the whole humanity. Community thrives on an individual's prosperity. From rights perspective illiteracy is a violation of the fundamental human right to education (Archer & Fry, 2005).

From Nepal's experience, it can be said that while earlier literacy efforts concentrated on 'narrow literacy', post-popular movement efforts focused on 'broad literacies' including the concepts such as that of 'community literacy' (Most of the tensions identified by Baert (ibid, p. 10-12) are applicable to literacy debate too. Perhaps the second and the third tension fields (the motivators and the rights and duties dichotomies) can be elaborated or interpreted slightly in a different light. Motivation of the learner appears to have been channelized or promoted to claim the share of a pie but not so much in making the size of the pie larger. The latter form of wider literacy does not seem to have imparted adequate skills and sense of responsibility. Of course, people can have a share of their pie but it becomes so small that it is not worth anybody having it. This can be collectively expressed in the current political upheavals of the country. Further, haphazard delivery of the 'narrow literacy' particularly by NGOs in absence of coordination has caused significant wastage of resources. Any benefit it has caused at all is the residual effect it provided for articulation and exposure.

3. A Lifelong Learning Model for Nepal

In the above backdrop of Nepal's background and theoretical reflection, I wish to consider a new model for Nepal's lifelong learning for widest complexity regarding production, social and cultural life (Gilpi, 1985). However, Nepal may be one of the least developing countries – it is not homogenous. Demands for lifelong learning are not the same to all the population. Perhaps, differences amongst population groups sometimes are much heterogeneous than even in a country of the North.

3.1. Three Worlds

There are at least three categories of lifelong learning niches to be created. The urban middle class that thrives on knowledge-based economy needs special kind of lifelong learning. It needs to align itself with information technology and the new developments in different disciplines.

The second is the literate rural population that needs skills for income enhancement, application of new technology – so called functional literacy, claiming rights and interpreting the reality for them and for their children.

The third group has the same requirements as the second but it is not yet literate. It requires literacy options and alternatives.

3.2. Four Pillars

One of the major problems of Nepal's adult education is that it's too much literacy concentrated. Projecting literacy as the main problem 'it implicitly denies the notions of objective structural problems' as Coffield (1999, p. 488) quoted Tavistock Research Team in relation to investment in human capital. Literacy was/is considered as the prerequisite to advance further for anybody on anything. While alternative promoters while didn't regard literacy as the entry requisite do not seem to have stressed on productive skills.

Sporadically, there was some functional literacy that did not have much coverage. And, those who stressed on emancipation and rights of different kinds, tended to overlook the need for skills development. Structural problems are often universal and important but that is not the only problem. If the production-base does not increase, 'you cannot eat your liberation'. I am proposing that adult education broadly addresses all the components from four pillars as a foundation course. I attempt to specify the components (time, content, actor and the process) under these four broad categories. I think it particularly important in this post-insurgency period where living together is at high stake. However, as I have argued elsewhere, it is important that literacy is not equated with non-formal or lifelong or continuing education (Archer & Fry, 2005, p. 75).

3.3. The Model

Table 4 presents a model incorporating the three worlds and the four pillars as well as corresponding cultures and the responsibility of delivery. I found cultures useful to indicate the emphasis of the content. Although in terms of understanding the learning to do and the learning to know have distinct features, in terms of delivery, learning to know is associated with all other modes of learning. Being the closest, I have merged them (Row 4, Column 3&4) together. Similarly, Columns 5&6 are also merged as they are quite overlapping for delivery purposes. These subtle differences have to be addressed through curriculum and the learning material. They are also merged in Row 5. Major difference between this and the 6th Row is that it contains literacy additionally. This is important because overwhelmingly

adult literacy so far has equated with adult learning or non-formal education. Making literacy as the prerequisite for everything is not fair to those adults who have difficulty in learning letters at the later age. Still they need and deserve 'normal' adult education provided to them. Both empirical evidence and experience shows that with exposure, people are able to make difference even without literacy (Bhattarai, 2004)³. Audio-visual technology and the skill of the facilitator should adequately compensate literacy shortage. However, CLCs should provide the opportunity whoever wishes to learn letters. Experience says that internally motivated adults master literacy in a very short time.

Table 4 Model for Lifelong Learning for Nepal

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Cultures ⇨ Pillar ⇨ Target Groups ⇩	Expert	Engineer	Communicator	Prophet	Delivery Responsibility
3		Learning to Know	Learning to Do	Learning to Live Together	Leaning to Be	
4	Group 1	Update to respective fields, Emerging Sectors, ICTS Languages		Multi-culturism, Tolerance (the others' perspective), Environmental Concerns, Active Citizenship; Living with contradictions; spiritual/ religious education	Municipal Community Learning Centres, Private Providers	
5	Group 2	Production/ Vocational skills Life skills ICTs		As above		Village Community Learning Centres, NGOs
6	Group 3	Literacy + as above		As above		

3.4. The Structure

It has rested high hopes for expansion and mobilization for the Community Learning Centres. While the private and volunteer sector can also deliver services in urban areas, NGOs can play important role in vitalizing CLCs. Nepal's EFA National Plan of Action already envisions making use of school premises (MoES/Unesco, 2003). Grossly, existing structure (Annex II), particularly the role envisaged for National Non-formal Education Centre (NFEC) acceptable, it does not give the feeling of being the facilitator of the lifelong learning process in the country. As the Plan already envisioned – curriculum can be developed by non-state sectors and the NFEC requires gearing up being a full-fledged coordinator. I have simplified the structure in Annex IV. By focusing adult learning, I have not mixed out-of-school education requirements in the structures. Main emphasis here is to reduced bureaucracy and increase effectiveness. CLCs need to be independent entities such as schools.

3.5. The Cost

This entails additional cost. However, with proper coordination and facilitation and the mobilization of NGOs and the private sector, higher effectiveness can be achieved. There are better prospects when CLC can also form as an information centre for the Village

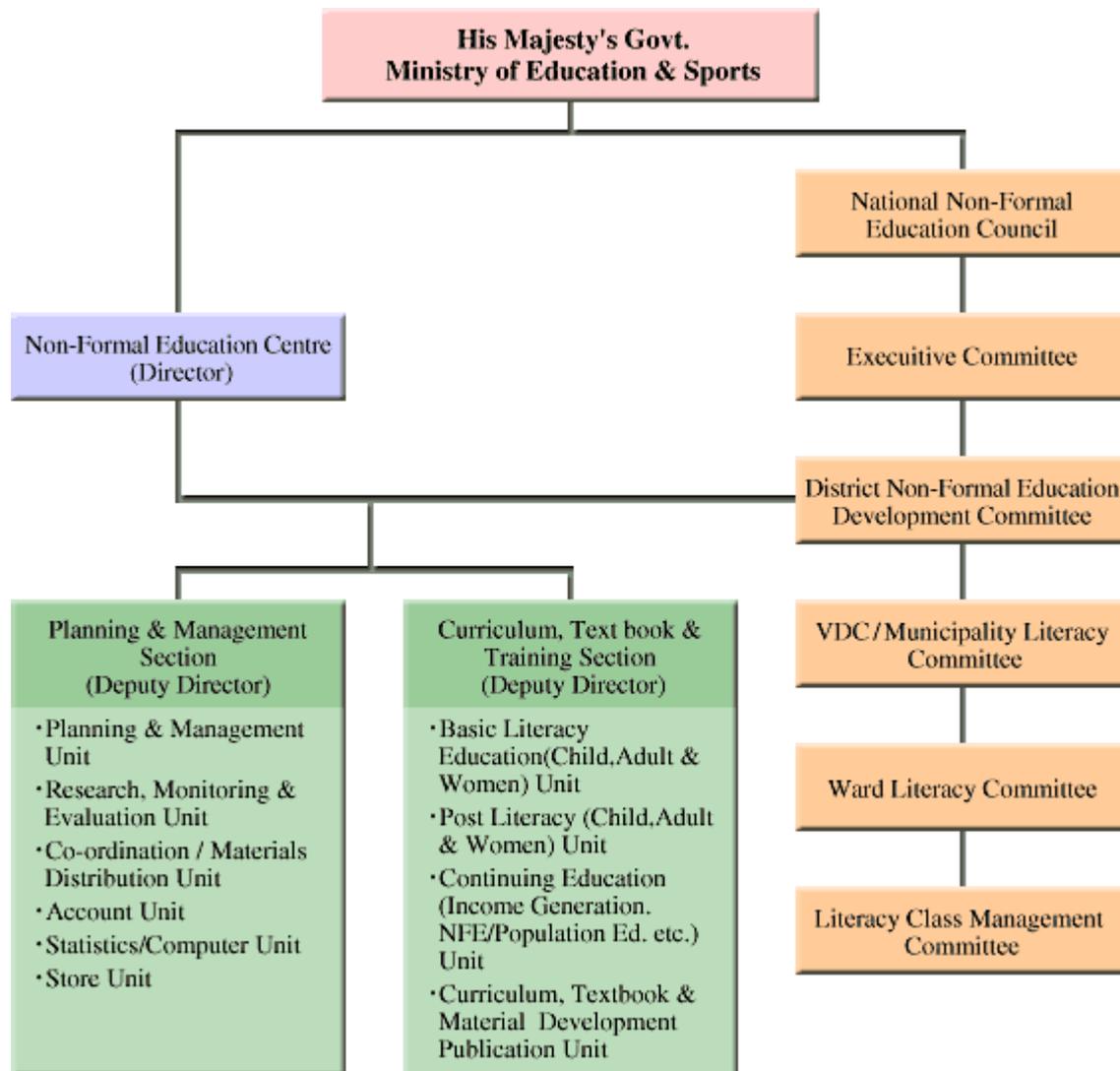
³ It includes a project report of UNDP's Micro Enterprise Development Project (MEDEP) run in 10 districts where over 60% successful entrepreneurs were illiterate.

Committee. The main challenge lies in training the staff. This person requires being dynamic and respectable so that he or she can mobilize volunteers significantly. For literacy school children can be mobilized and it can be made a part of their project.

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Annex II: Existing Structure of Nepal's Non-formal Education System



Source: (ACCU, n.d.)

Annex IV: Proposed New Structure