

**“Challenges in Building Equitable and Sustainable Societies in Asia
and the Pacific and the Role of Adult Education
and Learning in Meeting these Challenges”**

*Khunying Kasama Varavarn
Secretary-General,
Office of the Basic Education Commission
Ministry of Education, THAILAND*

In the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education held in Hamburg in July 1997, participants reaffirmed that only human-centered development and a participatory society based on the full respect of human rights will lead to sustainable and equitable development.

Eleven years have elapsed since the Hamburg Declaration, we have witnessed remarkable progress to achieve education for all. In most countries in Asia and the Pacific, greater resources have been allocated to education. Enrolment to basic education have increased significantly. The numbers of out-of-school children and illiterate adult population have dropped sharply. Yet, the problems of disparities in access and quality of education still remain due to barriers related to gender, poverty, disabilities, political and cultural factors.

Amidst the challenges facing education sector and the society at large, there are promising developments that illustrate the potentials of adult and non-formal education as keys to the twenty-first century.

Innovations in Non-formal Education

During the past decade, the concept of non-formal education has greatly expanded. Countries around the world continue to search for and serve the illiterate population and the educationally disadvantaged. But the goals of these educational programs have been transformed from simple literacy skills to functional literacy, to equivalency Basic Education and to empowerment with effective life skills for the 21st Century. Innovations have been introduced to enhance the effectiveness of the learning and teaching processes.

Hill tribes children in communities inaccessible to schools are now benefiting from bilingual teaching based on research on mother tongue language teaching and supported by satellite transmitted educational television programs.

Muslim youths studying in religious schools are acquiring equivalency basic education through learning units integrating life skills with religious teaching.

With specially designed computers and learning aids, *disabled learners* enjoy reading, writing and other learning activities.

Local community leaders who once attended literacy classes and equivalency basic education programs are now entering community colleges and universities in massive numbers, increasing the demands of adult learners at tertiary level.

In Kanchanapisek Home for youth, youngsters with the most serious criminal records engaged in daily analysis of case stories from newspapers practicing critical thinking, dialogues and personal reflections in diary writing. The process has been found to boost their self-esteems, sharpen their critical thinking abilities, foster moral developments and sharply reduced violent incidents.

In prisons, educational provisions are no longer limited to basic education and skill training courses. The inmates have access to a wide range of challenging learning opportunities from well-equipped libraries, advanced courses in computer technology, university education, fashion design, choral singing, to football competitions.

In factories, workers are able to upgrade their basic education and skills qualifications through workplace education which allows for transfer of work experience towards educational certificates.

All across the country, a vast number of *correspondence schools, distance education courses and on-line programs* are offered drawing hundred thousands participants from all walks of life and educational backgrounds to upgrade their skills and pursue personal interests.

The most promising undertaking is perhaps, *the Transform of Life Experience Project* which encourages individuals to bring in their portfolios containing their work and life experiences for transfer of learning credits. The applicant's past experiences will be assessed in 4 areas, namely, Basic Education, Occupation Development, Quality of Life Development and Social and Community Development. Learning programs will be provided for those who are in need of additional training. Over twenty thousands people from all walks of life have applied. Although only 4,000 were able to obtain basic education certificates, the rest formed learning groups and participated in various learning activities.

Synergy with Formal Education

Innovations in non-formal education have penetrated and influenced formal educations.

A vast number of schools have reached agreements with non-formal education units to serve the out-of-school youths, often using the more flexible non-formal education curricula and the better equipped school facilities and personnel. Similar programs are now being initiated for risk groups before they are dropping out of schools.

Action learning and experiential learning commonly employed in non-formal education are now being introduced in schools through community service programs, internships and apprenticeship with local workplace, summer jobs, small scale business enterprise and ordination for novice and monkhoods, all of which can be transferred for credits.

Adult and non-formal education have been organized to assist parents and school boards to develop greater understanding about child rearing practices, new issues facing today's youth and their contribution to the education of their children. Parent networking is now established in every school to serve as mechanism for exchange and mobilization of supports.

Teachers have also greatly benefited from innovations first piloted in non-formal education. On-line training programs are now widely available. One noteworthy effort was initiated by HRH Princess Sirindhorn to assist teachers from ethnic backgrounds who work with preschool children in the mountainous ranges to obtain university degree and teaching certificates through distance education. Teachers are also organized into professional learning communities and upgrade their competencies through knowledge management techniques.

Non-formal education as means to transform the society.

Through the inspiration and the innovative approaches of non-formal education, new and exciting learning opportunities have emerged across the country, shifting the focus from education to learning and bringing new players outside the realm of the Ministry of Education.

OPPY : Old People Playing Young was set up eight years ago by a business woman at the age of 70 with the aims to encourage and assist people older than 45 to learn to use the internet. The project has grown into a club with over 3,000 active members who joined to pursue other learning activities such as photography, water painting. The project was among the first to recognize and try to bridge the gap between the older generation and the skills required to function effectively in the future.

Coming from vastly different background, *Auntie Noy Sanid Tipnangrong's* experiences have also influenced communities across the country. Coming from a poor family with alcoholic husband and heavy debts resulting from gambling, Auntie Noy decided to keep her spending in line by learning to keep account of family spending. She was shocked to learn how much money was spent on alcohol and lottery tickets. As a result, she vowed to stop gambling and supported her husband to stop drinking. The family began to have some savings and served as examples for the community. Within a few years, the entire community learned to keep track on their spending, cut down unnecessary expenses and saved enough to set up a community grocery store. Auntie Noy, in the meantime learned to use the computer through the Sub-district internet center and increased the effectiveness of her record keeping and management. The community gradually mobilized their efforts to construct check dams to keep water for use during the dry seasons and to operate profitable garbage bank.

Dhamma Delivery represents new approaches to teaching of Buddhism. As the land of Buddhism, the early educational efforts in Thailand began in temple grounds where monks imparted teaching of moral principles to the public along with literacy and other necessary life skills. Over the years, the school system and the mass media gradually took over the prominent roles in educating the Thai public.

Within the past few years, however, new and exciting movements in religious teaching have emerged and proved to be highly successful in renewing public interest in studying Buddhism. These approaches include, inter alia.

Production of attractive publications with colorful illustrations and simple, down to earth writings, dealing with topics close to the concerns of youths and the public.

The use of animation, SMS, music to present Buddhist concepts.

Linking Buddhism to current issues of interests to the new generation and the public.

Training of monks to teach in schools and to teach to the public more effectively.

Campaign to ordain youngsters as novices and to serve as volunteers for community service.

Learning centers established across the country have played important roles in promoting *Self-sufficiency Communities*. Throughout his reign, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej has guided the Thai people towards a balanced and sustainable approach to development which is now known as the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy. The philosophy stresses the principles of moderation, reasonableness and resilience to change with knowledge and morality as the key underlying conditions.

During the time of economic crisis, inspired by the King, a large number of communities adopted the philosophy and used the knowledge generated from the King's development projects to keep track of their spending, cut down unnecessary consumption, enrich their soil, diversify their agriculture production, and restore the ecology of their communities. The learning centers set up by the Department of Non-formal Education which once offered literacy classes and served as reading centers became meeting places where villagers gathered to exchange experiences and to learn new techniques to change their livelihood and transform their communities.

The above examples have amply illustrated the enormous potentials of adult and non-formal education in imparting new knowledge and skills, in complementing the school system and in bringing about transformations in the lives of the individuals as well as the communities. Adult and non-formal education has encompassed the learning needs of people from all ages and all walks of lives. But these examples, promising as they may seem, are but isolated examples. If adult and non-formal education is to serve as the key to unleash human potentials for the twenty first century, it is important that the following issues be addressed.

1. Firm commitment to serve the educationally disadvantaged.

In our celebrations of progress made thus far, we must reaffirm our commitment to the educationally disadvantaged. With increased enrolment rates and progress towards achieving education for all targets, pressures towards searching for and serving the educationally disadvantaged are vastly reduced. Furthermore, with recognition and demand for adult and non-formal education from the general public, it is quite likely that the needs of the educationally disadvantaged will once again be sacrificed in favor of the better endowed and high profile learners.

It is important to stress that our priority must lie with our primary beneficiaries who still exist every where and who are in even greater needs but unfortunately they may become less visible and less vocal. Across the region, there remain over 500 millions illiterates and more than 26 millions children out-of-school. Studies show that children whose mothers have little or no education continue to lack access to schooling and perform poorly academically. New marginalized groups are also emerging, especially, those who are unable to catch up with the advancement of technology, those who suffer from armed and political conflicts and those who are affected by the widespread social and economic crisis.

Renewed commitment must be guaranteed along with development of new strategy, new mechanism and new approaches to ensure that adult and non-formal education remain the tools to bridge and not to further widen the gaps.

2. Use of technology to increase the effectiveness of adult and non-formal education.

Over the past decade, we have seen promising efforts to introduce innovations in adult and non-formal education. Some programs attempt to graft new technology on indigenous practices, others improve on existing knowledge with outside inputs or adapt new knowledge to local conditions. But these examples are still limited in number.

As such undertakings are generally not considered profitable nor commercially viable, the enormous potentials of technology have not been fully harnessed to serve the educationally disadvantaged nor the adult learners. It is the task of adult and non-formal education organizations to guide, provide incentives and support research and development to generate, to adapt and to share knowledge and technology for improving the effectiveness of adult and non-formal education.

3. In search for a more appropriate concept of quality

A common challenge facing non-formal education is the pressure to evaluate the learners with formal school standards especially in transferring of credits and providing equivalency certificates. Often, programs aiming to serve diverse groups of learners have to conform to one set of standards which may not be relevant to the learners. With strong emphasis on the contents of the curriculum, many strengths of non-formal education such as the learning process and spiritual development are overlooked and not included in the assessments.

It is important that international organizations such as UNESCO assist members countries in developing operational definition of quality that will be meaningful to the learners and at the same time, facilitate transfer of experiences between formal and non-formal education as well as between education and the world of works.

4. Preparing the new players for adult and non-formal education.

Over the past decade, the organizers of adult and non-formal education are no longer limited to those in the field of literacy and basic education. University professors have to learn to cope with the needs of adult learners who are changing the profiles of university student body. Active participations have arisen from communities, business cooperations, mass media, artists, movie stars, athletes or religious leaders. These new players brought with them new resources and new approaches which have enriched and diversified non-formal education provisions.

In most cases, however, the new players do not consider their work to be adult or non-formal education. Coming from different backgrounds from the original adult educators, the new players often do not share the ideology nor the goals of the adult and non-formal education movement. Furthermore, they may lack knowledge about working with the adult learners and the educationally disadvantaged.

Synergy between the diverse groups of adult and non-formal workers is vital so that the rich experiences and resources can be mobilized towards the goals of equitable and sustainable society.

5. The changing roles of government agencies

The roles of government in non-formal education have changed over the years from primary organizers to the roles of promoters, coordinators, and supporters. Often the expansions of non-formal education and the involvement of various agencies have misled many policy makers to dismiss the important functions of the government.

In the case of Thailand, during the educational reform resulting from the Education Act of 1999, the original plan was to abolish the Office of Non-formal Education and subsumed under the Office of Basic Education. Only through protests and struggles by students and the non-formal education networks, the office was reestablished to serve as central agency for operation, support, promotion and coordination. The effectiveness of the Office was greatly enhanced by the Promotion of Non-formal and Informal Education Act which endorses the function of the office, set up mechanisms for coordinating, recognizes the participations of other agencies, and provides incentives for their contributions.

Adult education has tremendous potentials in bringing about equitable and sustainable societies. But to harness such potentials, concerted efforts must be made to reaffirm our commitments to the educationally disadvantaged, fully utilize advancements in knowledge and technology to improve the effectiveness of programs offered, strive to achieve more meaningful definitions of quality, work closely with the new generation of adult educators to instill the ideology of adult education and to learn from their professional expertise and continually search for the appropriate roles of the government in facilitating adult education to serve as keys to an equitable and sustainable future.