Chapter 13
Community Learning Centers in Vietnam

A Delivery System for Non-formal Education or a Platform for Local Wisdom?

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Introduction

In 2000, I was appointed at Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, a historical battle field between Viet Minh and the French army. Except for a certain number of monuments testifying the fierce combat which had taken place six decades before, it was so beautiful a place surrounded by rich natural forests that I would easily forget its grievous history. However, the beauty of nature was preserved, in a sense, at the price of the fact that Dien Bien Phu and its neighboring areas were one of the least developed places in Vietnam in terms of social and economic infrastructures. There was virtually no large-scale industry. Public services, including electricity, water supply, and telecommunication, were far from adequate. Condition of even major national roads demanded unyielding patience. It was an “unexplored frontier” in the far Northwest with over 20 ethnic minority groups living in their respective traditional cultures. The education sector was not an exception. Many indicators relative to pre-primary through adult learning pointed to the low level of development. Lai Chau Province, of which Dien Bien Phu was the capital, was the last to be recognized as a “literacy province” of all the 61 throughout the nation.

At that time, I was staff of the National Federation of UNESCO Associations in Japan (NFUAJ), a non-governmental organization working with UNESCO. We were engaged in promoting literacy and continuing education through community-based institutions for non-formal education, called Community Learning Centers (CLCs). After a three-year implementation period of the project in Lai Chau, we expanded the project area to eight other provinces in the northern mountainous region in 2003. The state government of Vietnam has officially adopted CLC as a delivery system of continuing education at the grassroots. Its aim is to establish a CLC in every commune and town all over the country, amounting to more than 10,000, by 2015. The purpose of that nationwide expansion of CLCs is to equip
the entire nation with advanced knowledge and skills. Vietnam has set the goal to become “basically an industrialized, modernized nation by 2020” (Ministry of Education and Training, 2006). People are expected to contribute to and benefit from its rapidly growing economy.

However, careful exploration of grassroots practice during and after our project implementation has revealed CLC’s high potential as a mechanism to encourage and coordinate local people’s initiatives, rather than being only a system to deliver “useful” knowledge predetermined by authorities or outsiders.

Background

While provision of literacy education for youth and adults has been a longtime concern for many countries, a historical landmark was the year 1990, recognized as the International Literacy Year, when UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF, and the World Bank jointly organized the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) at Jomtien, Thailand. The delegates from 155 countries adopted the World Declaration on Education for All, associated with the Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs. Then, providing everyone, including children, youth, and adults, with basic education has become a common concern for the global society. In the Framework for Action, six goals that the participant states and international organizations committed themselves to attain by 2000 were set, including reduction of the adult illiteracy rate to a half of its 1990 level (UNESCO, 1990).

It was in that context that, in the late 1990s, the Government of Vietnam was seeking to achieve the total eradication of illiteracy. In fact, since its independence, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (named the Democratic Republic of Vietnam at the time of independence) laid great emphasis on the importance of acquisition of literacy skills by the entire nation. President Ho Chi Minh issued a famous appeal in October 1945 to command all the people to learn how to read and write their national language (Biddington and Biddington, 1997):

In order to preserve our independence, to make our people strong, our country ever prosperous, every Vietnamese should know his own interests and duty, should obtain his own knowledge aimed at being able to make his own contribution to the country’s construction. First and foremost, he should know how to read and write in the national language (para 1).

Nationwide literacy campaigns were repeatedly carried out during the 1940s through 1970s and made much success: While 95% of Vietnam’s population was illiterate before its independence (UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific [PROAP], 1991), the literacy rate in the 15–35 age group increased to 86.1% in 1990 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam National Committee for EFA Assessment [Vietnam EFA Committee], 1999, Part 2). However, there still remained challenging tasks for the state especially in the remote areas where education services hardly reached.

The enthusiasm for literacy education was renewed with the international enterprise for EFA in the 1990s. The target to be achieved by 2000 was virtually