

Creation of Community Learning Spaces and Centers

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Introduction

A Community Learning Centre (CLC) supports empowerment, social transformation and improvement of the quality of life of people in the community it serves by providing non-formal education (NFE) and lifelong learning. CLCs in Mongolia are known as NFE Enlightenment Centres (Gegeerel Centres in Mongolian).

NFE Enlightenment Centres were first established in Mongolia in 1997 to respond to a pressing need to provide literacy and equivalency program (EP) training for out-of-school and drop-out children and youths whose education was affected by the socio-economic transition period of the early 1990s, the centres were initially set up with the support of the UNESCO project “Learning for Life”. The policy and legislative framework for non-formal education and the NFE Enlightenment Centres was also put in place in 1997 in the “National Program on NFE Development”. NFE Enlightenment Centres have been increasingly recognized and incorporated in national policies and legislation concerning education, with funding and service delivery becoming a core responsibility of national and sub national administrations.

Policy and Legal Environment

The “Education Law” of 2002 specified that NFE Enlightenment Centres are responsible for delivering non-formal training at aimag, UB city, soum and district level and for assisting independent learners. Centres could operate either as an independent centre or an affiliate to other educational organizations¹. This led to a significant expansion of the number of NFE Enlightenment Centres.

When the “National Program on NFE Development” was approved in 1997, 56 centers were established. Between 1998 and 2002 this number grew to 326². In order to ensure more consistency in structure and activities, the “Model Regulation for NFE Enlightenment Centres” was approved by the 169th order of Minister of Education, Culture and Science in 2003. These regulations defined NFE Enlightenment Centres as educational organizations whose goal is to provide non-formal educational services to local communities, to deliver training, to advocate, to distribute information, and to actively participate in community local development activities. It also specified that Centre services should be “open, continuous and sufficient”³.

¹ Mongolian parliament. (2002) Mongolian law: Education law, 17.2, UB

² NCFDE (2005), Implementation report of national program on NFE development(1997-2004), pg 8, UB

³ MECS (2003) Minister’s 169th decree on Model regulation of NFE Enlightenment Center, UB

In 2010, this regulation was revised by the 556th order of the Minister of Education, Culture and Science⁴ enabling NFE Enlightenment Centres to be established with the status of an affiliate to secondary schools in soums with population of less than 6,000 residents, to be established as an independent center affiliated to the Secretariat of the Soum Governor in towns with a larger population, and to be established independently or as an affiliate to the Secretariat of the district governor in Ulaanbaatar.

Current Situation

There are currently 374 active NFE Enlightenment Centres throughout the nation. When they were first established, NFE Enlightenment Centres served mainly to provide literacy and equivalency program (EP) training for primary and basic education for out-of-school and dropout children and youths whose education was affected by the socio-economic transition period. NFE Enlightenment Centres are recognized for effectively addressing the challenges faced by school drop-outs and illiterate populations through EP and literacy training in recent years.

Today, new needs and demands for training and activities for adults have arisen, particularly for adults living in rural areas, such as nomad peoples who herd in remote areas with seasonal movements. Providing these people with socio-cultural services and helping them participate in local development has been increasingly recognized as contributing to improved quality of life. It is considered that NFE Enlightenment Centres can play an important role in meeting these new needs and demands.

Funding levels are insufficient to meet the growing needs of learners, particularly adult learners seeking to improve their income generation skills. Funding for non-formal education as a proportion of overall education spending has risen but is still significantly lower than that for other countries with similar levels of development. Funding is also overwhelmingly directed at only literacy and equivalency programs rather than the full scope of Centre responsibilities, which include adult life skills training and community development. Learning venues, materials and equipment are limited and inadequate and suffer from lack of investment. Even more problematic, there is no secure national source of funding for teachers' training and ongoing professional development, which is currently supported on an ad-hoc basis through different donor driven programs.

Here is emphasized one of good experience/examples on CLC which had been reestablished within the project "Comprehensive Community Services to Improve Human Security for the Rural Disadvantaged Population in Mongolia" (2009–2012) implemented by the Government of Mongolia and UN agencies led by UNESCO supported NFE Enlightenment Centres in 20 soums in Bayan-Ulgii, Dornod, Uvs, Khovd, Khuvsgul aimags. Under the project, centres were transformed into "model" centres, with renovated facilities and capacity building for teachers and staff to better serve the local communities.

Improving access to and quality of non-formal education in rural areas is one of the goals of this three year project, coordinated by UNESCO with the Government of Mongolia, implemented

together with three other participating UN agencies (UNICEF, WHO and UNDP) and local partners⁵. In twenty soums in remote areas of the five project aimags (Bayan-Ulgii, Dornod, Uvs, Khovd, and Khuvsgul) where a large percentage of ethnic/linguistic minorities and herders reside, twenty NFE Enlightenment Centres were established or rehabilitated. The project introduced new and strengthened approaches to literacy and life-skills training and management of these services, thus significantly enhancing the centres' capacity. The project addressed a number of issues discussed here, and there is much that other NFE Enlightenment Centres can learn from this rich experience. Some of the key elements are discussed below.

Synergies with other sectors: One of the strengths of the activities undertaken by the NFE Enlightenment Centres under the project stems from their close collaboration and synergies with other sectors. The project employed a multi-sectoral approach, covering four sectors, education, communication, health and local business development. The synergies created between these different sectors helped widen the scope and improve the quality and relevance of the NFE Enlightenment Centre offerings. For example, under the component related to communication, community-run radios were established and housed in the same buildings as the NFE Enlightenment Centres. These community radios helped disseminate information on training and other activities held at the centres. The soums' hospitals in the project used the centres to sensitize community people on health related issues and the centres and the National Chamber of Commerce collaborated to improve small business training and enhance business opportunities.

Local government's commitment and support: Another positive feature for NFE Enlightenment Centres was the active involvement of the local government in particular the soum governor's office and the mechanisms set up to support and monitor the activities of the centres. Under the project, the NFE Enlightenment Centre no longer operated in isolation but was recognized for its value by the community leaders and various stakeholders who supported their activities. It became evident that NFE Enlightenment Centres were particularly successful where the local governments recognized the value of non-formal education for community development and were actively involved in promotion of the centres' activities.

Enhancing the capacity of NFE teachers: In the target soums, all in remote areas, there was usually only one NFE teacher in each centre. Centres were still expected to provide a wide range of services, Equivalency Programs, literacy and life skills training. The project emphasized development of the NFE teachers through training and technical backstopping by the NCFDE and the aimag education departments. The NFE teachers were trained and equipped with materials and tools to deliver new life skills training that better responded to community needs. Teachers were also given training to help them to improve their management of the centres. These capacity development activities, together with enhanced recognition of the role of NFE teachers by the local government and the community, have contributed significantly to improving the confidence and professionalism of the teachers. The project fostered the

⁵ The project focused on four main components. The one related to education addressed learning needs of disadvantaged rural populations through the NFE Enlightenment Centres, supported jointly by UNESCO and UNICEF. The other three components related to communication, health and small business development, supported by UNESCO, WHO and UNDP, respectively. The national counterpart for the education component was the Mongolian Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, with the NCFDE as the implementing partner.

emergence of new initiatives and model teachers. For example, some NFE teachers took the initiative during the summer time to travel out to those living in remote areas and to conduct literacy and life skills training for herders and their drop-out children.

Responding to adult learners needs: To facilitate access for adult learners, NFE Enlightenment Centres were set up in new premises provided by the soum governments outside schools, or where centres continued in schools, separate entrances were created. NFE teachers responded to the diverse learning needs of adults by identifying and mobilizing other members of the local community to conduct training in specific skills, acting as learning coordinators as well as teachers.

Overall, the project raised renewed interest in the NFE Enlightenment Centres among adult learners and succeeded in mobilizing widespread community engagement. They became recognized as “hubs for socializing, sharing experiences and ideas” and for being able to “support the development of self-esteem, self-confidence and hope for the future among the rural disadvantaged populations” as the external evaluator of the project noted in the evaluation report⁶.

With due reference to the Baseline Survey and national statistics on illiteracy and referring to the established needs for enhanced life-skills among disadvantaged populations the project, with UNESCO as the implementing agency, embarked on renewing and strengthening approaches to literacy and life-skills training.

A new national ‘literacy training curriculum based on life skills’ was developed and approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in December 2010. The curriculum was published in Mongolian and Kazakh languages, distributed and put to use for literacy classes and life-skills training in the 20 target *soums*. The curriculum is used on a national scale.

New literacy-training materials in print and audio-visual form were produced and distributed to the *soums*. Materials included a newly translated textbook for literacy training as well as supplementary materials to be used by NFE facilitators.

NFE methodologists and NFE facilitators of the five *aimags* and the 20 *soums* were trained. NFE Enlightenment Centers/CLCs were established or rehabilitated and their capacity improved significantly. In addition to print and audio-visual training materials the community learning centers were equipped with equipment and tools to support life-skills training in e.g. wool processing, sewing and baking.

By the end of the project cycle a total of 4,700 herders have been enrolled in literacy and life-skills training of 30 hours and 60 hours, respectively. This achievement is impressive against the stated project output of 2,000 herders.

The NFE Enlightenment Centers/CLCs were well equipped and operating very effectively. The work being done by NFE facilitators is truly impressive and is highly appreciated by people involved in the training activities.

Some NFE facilitators take their activities beyond the physical space of the NFE Enlightenment Centers/CLCs and thus enhance the operations of the centers. In Ulaankhus *soum*/Bayan-Ulgii *aimag*, for example, the NFE facilitator utilizes the summer period (June-August) to go around to the herders on his motorbike and conduct training on location so to say. When possible the *mobile gers* provided for reaching out to school dropouts serve as venue for training of herders.

NFE facilitators have also established close collaboration with the community radios announcing training and airing literacy and life-skills training information. When required NFE facilitators invite other members of the local community with particular skills in demand to conduct training, e.g. people knowledgeable of producing halters and reins (from locally available leather material) for horses, or people with specific knowledge about legal issues.

The capacity building of NFE trainers in multi-grade teaching and the provision of equivalency training program as well as the actual enrolment of dropout children in equivalency training and the completion rates of primary, secondary and upper-secondary education are indeed recognizable. The provision of *mobile gers* have proved effective in enhancing outreach not only to dropout children but also to herders requesting engagement in literacy and life-skills training.

In some cases trainees have used new skills to establish their own income-generating activities, selling wool products, halters/reins and embroidered textiles.

In addition to providing local population with literacy and new life-skills the NFE Enlightenment Centers/CLCs add new dimensions to a sense of community. The community centers are hubs for socializing, sharing experiences and ideas and support the development of self-esteem, self-confidence and hope for the future among the rural disadvantaged populations.

Community centers of the kind enhanced under the project are a new phenomenon in Mongolia but have within a short period of time proved their relevance and capacity to enhance literacy and life-skills of disadvantaged populations.