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LIFELONG LEARNING IN THAILAND: POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

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Introduction

Lifelong Learning or Lifelong Education is a process of learning throughout people's lives from early childhood stage to elderly stage. It composes all kinds and all forms of education: formal education, non-formal education or informal education. At different periods of life, people can learn from different kinds of education. For example at early childhood stage, people usually learn through informal education while at the school age period, people usually learn through formal education and at after school age period, people will learn through non-formal or informal education. The combination of all kinds of education is lifelong learning. Lifelong Learning aims at fully developing people's capacity with sufficient basic knowledge and skills for living, working and adjusting themselves properly to the rapid changes of social and environment at every period of their lives.

The development of lifelong learning in Thailand

Lifelong Learning has existed in Thailand since the old days. At that time education for people was mainly in the form of Informal Education. That was, people gained knowledge and experience from their day to day living, their occupations, their older generations, from people in their communities and their social and environment. For example, people learned some vocational skills from their parents or their older generations. They learned the way of lives, tradition and culture from their families and their society. There existed also some kinds of non-formal education activities at that time. For example, boys learned languages and religion from the abbots at their local temples, young men learned Thai boxing or handicrafts or other skills from the local wisdom in their areas.

For formal education, the first school was established for the public in the year 1884. Since then, formal education has been developing continuously. Formal education is provided for school age people from pre-school level to primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. Schools and Universities are established to serve people in every part of the country, even in rural areas.

For non-formal and informal education, the Adult Education Division was established in 1940 to provide and develop non-formal and informal education. Non-formal and informal education have been developed and extended continuously to serve all of out of school people. The number of out of school people is about 80 percent of the whole population of the country. Since then, Adult Education Division has taken more and more responsibility. It was upgraded to be the Department of Non-formal Education in the year 1979.

Non-formal education activities which are made available by the Department of Non-formal Education at present can be categorized into 3 main groups. They are:

1. Basic Non-formal education.

Non-formal education in this group includes:

- Literacy programme;
- General non-formal education equivalent to primary school education;
- General non-formal education equivalent to lower secondary education;
- General non-formal education equivalent to upper secondary education.

2. Vocational Skills training.

Vocational skills training activities is aimed at providing people with vocational knowledge and skills which will enable them to improve their present occupations or create new occupations in their areas. Vocational knowledge and skills training provided serve the needs and relate to living situation of people in each area. They are in various fields such as silk weaving, cooking, fruits preservation, basket weaving, mechanic, motorcycle repairing, mushroom growing, fish raising, several kinds of agriculture, etc.

3. Knowledge and information for quality of life development.

Different kinds of knowledge and information which are useful for improving quality of life are provided for people in every area. For example, knowledge and information about health, about foods for good health, about how to protect themselves from illness, about the role of citizen in democratic society, about religion, politic, etc. This knowledge and information are provided to people by various forms, such as, organizing of meetings or work-shops and inviting resource persons to give knowledge, disseminating knowledge by different kinds of media, e.g., radio, television, local newspapers, village news towers, posters, video tapes.

For informal education, the Department of Non-formal Education establishes several kinds of information and resource centres such as Village Information Centres, Village News Towers, Local Libraries, Community Learning centres, etc. These centres are the places for people in each local area to come to search for information and knowledge that they are interested in or to talk and exchange ideas and experiences. Moreover, the Department also provides up-to-date information for people throughout the country through several kinds of media.

Non-formal and informal education have been developed year after year and extended to reach overall target groups by the Department of Non-formal Education and related agencies. The Department of Non-formal Education is called now The Commission of Non-formal and Informal Education and it has the head quarter at the national level at the Ministry of Education. It has networks from regional level to sub-district level. There are 5 regional centres, 76 provincial centres, and about 500 sub-district centres.

Lifelong Learning Policy

The importance of lifelong learning was recognized in Thailand a long time ago, even though at that time education activities available were not called lifelong learning yet. Even though the word lifelong learning was not directly used but the education policies and plans in the old days rather focused on letting every Thai people have an opportunity to learn in order to improve their quality of live. Until the adoption of the National Education Plan, issued in 1987, the word lifelong learning appeared. This plan directly focused on lifelong learning. It set the objective that “education should be a lifelong learning process.” By the end of the 20th century, lifelong learning concept has been recognized and paid more and more attention to by most countries in the world. This was because every society faced rapid changes of social and economic situation. People need proper knowledge and skills to cope with those changes which occurred in every period of their lives. Therefore education or learning is necessary throughout their lives. Thailand also realizes the necessity of lifelong learning like other countries. Therefore the National Education Act was declared in the year 1999. This act has proposed lifelong education philosophy as the principle of organizing the whole

education system of the country. Through this act, a number of strategies and plans for promoting lifelong learning among Thai people have been developed. Moreover, all sectors whether government or non-government agencies, local organizations and people in each community were encouraged to take part in providing and promoting lifelong learning.

One of the main lifelong learning strategies has been is the policy developed by The Office of Non-formal Education Commission, which is the main agency for non-formal and informal education. It is called NFE road-map. In order to develop the roadmap, the commission has conducted the situational analysis before setting new missions. The road-map is composed of 5 strategies. They are as follows:

Strategy 1. Get to the target: Directly approach various target groups of all areas.

The main target groups of non-formal and informal education are all out of school people throughout the country. They can be classified into various groups. For example, workforce in the industry, farmers, local community leaders, conscripts, public health volunteers, village fund members, Inmates, underprivileged people, hilltribes, etc.

The following approaches are employed for this strategy:

1) Provoke the public on the significance and demands of education by employing various methods. For example “local sport, local forum, presentation of new brand “NFE: A Real Life University”, conduct campaigns via public media.

2) Approach learners by each district / target group.

3) Develop database system which can identify and connect every target group and link with learning account and learning coupon.

4) Coupon for learning for those who have not yet finished basic education.

5) Set up information service centres in various forms which have easy access by learners.

Strategy 2. Find solutions to learners’ questions: Put the emphasis on problem solving skills and life quality enhancement.

The following approaches are employed for implementing this strategy:

- 1) Develop integrated curriculum in accordance with the way of life of target groups.
- 2) Develop NFE curriculum and learning material banks.
- 3) Introduce various teaching and learning methods.
- 4) Develop NFE personnel and partnership networks on providing learning activities.
- 5) Set up NFE guidance counseling centres and system.
- 6) Develop measurement and evaluation system in the line with various learning methods.
- 7) Develop quality and standard system for knowledge and experience transfer or accreditation system.
- 8) Develop quality assurance system for non-formal education provision.

Strategy 3. Expansion and development of various learning sources: Provide more channels for all people to access learning opportunities.

The following approaches are employed for this strategy:

- 1) Expand and establish various kinds of learning sources covering all areas across the country, such as, local learning centres, public libraries, community learning centres, village reading centres, etc.
- 2) Provide and expand various kinds of learning activities to serve target groups throughout the country. For example, provide various kinds of activities in each education group whether Basic education, Vocational and skill training or Informal education.
- 3) Publicize the provision of learning activities.

Strategy 4. Strengthening cooperation among partnership networks: Promote and support partnership networks to provide NFE programmes and activities.

The Following approaches are employed for this strategy:

- 1) Search for partnership network form all Ministries (such as Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour, etc.) and other government agencies, non-government agencies, private companies, factories, private schools, commercial banks, etc.

2) Coordinate and promote cooperation, such as, create understanding among the partnership networks in providing non-formal education.

3) Create incentives, such as, offering privileges to NFE service recipients or providing capacity development of the partnership networks.

Strategy 5. Quality services: Improve management system to place the emphasis on quality service provision.

The Following approaches are employed for this strategy:

1) Restructuring of organizational and administrative systems at central / regional levels.

2) Personnel development to be professional performers.

3) Revise the rules, regulations and practices, as well as decentralization of authority.

Expected outcomes from the road-map

The office of Non-formal Education Commission expected to receive the following outcomes at the end of the year 2008:

1) The service users will be increased from 2 millions per year to 13.59 millions by the end of the year 2008.

2) Non-formal education activities provided will be emphasized on problem solving skills and life quality enhancement instead of only basic education.

3) The organizers will take proactive role to reach the target groups at sub-district and community levels instead of waiting for the target groups to come to them.

4) Approximately 80% of NFE activities will be organized by the partnership network instead of organizing by ONFEC itself.

5) Budget allocation will be moved from allocating of ONFEC's mechanism to be in from of distributing coupon to the learners.

Conclusion

Lifelong learning is all kinds of learning, whether it has existed through formal education, non-formal education or informal education. Lifelong learning had existed in Thailand for a long time, firstly in the form of informal education. The main policies which reflected the recognition of lifelong learning in Thailand were, for example, the National Education plan in 1987 and the National Education Act in 1999. Through the present National Education Act, a number of strategies and plans for promoting lifelong learning have been developed. All sectors in Thai society, government and non-government agencies, institutions, local organizations and the people have been encouraged to take part in providing and promoting lifelong learning. With the awareness and the participation of all sectors, various kinds of lifelong learning projects and activities have been made available to people in every part of the country. The government has tried every effort to maintain this cooperation and participation happen in order to make lifelong learning opportunity continuously reach every age group of people in every area. The ultimate goal of the country is lifelong learning for everyone.

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