

Dr. Khunying Kasama Varavarn na Ayudhya's Interview

Question 1 As a leader in education, could you explain about main challenges you encountered at work and your solutions to cope with such challenges?

Question 2 As a leader in education, could you provide some examples/cases that you initiated or contributed to create changes in education in Thailand, especially in non-formal education/adult learning area?

In answering your questionnaire, I shall combine the two questions: challenges and achievements together as they relate to each other. I shall also focus only on non-formal education as the topic by itself is already too broad and complex to discuss in one or two pages. Please note that all [the activities described were the achievements of non-formal education from 1971-2009, the time of my service in the Ministry of education](#). But they were not my personal achievements rather the work of joint team efforts during this period.

What were the main challenges in non-formal education during the time described?

It is important to understand the evolution of non-formal education in the Thai society during these four decades which were seen as the Golden Age of Non-formal Education in Thailand. Four major types of programs had emerged over these years:

In the early years, the emphases of non-formal education were on compensatory non-formal Education programs to close the gaps between those with and without formal schooling. Even at the present time, the compensatory roles of non-formal education remain important but the levels of education have gradually shifted from literacy programs to various forms of equivalency general education programs at primary, secondary and higher education carried out mostly by educational institutions: schools, community colleges, temples, lifelong learning centers and at present, on-line courses.

Later on, a large number of highly flexible programs loosely classified under Quality of Life Enhancement were organized to provide relevant knowledge and skills to improve the livelihoods of learners. These programs do not offer equivalency certificates but the learners can use the competencies acquired to transfer towards equivalency certificates. These programs are carried out by various development agencies, Ngo's, and various community learning networks.

Within the past two decades, programs to upgrade the productivity of the workforce have become more prevalent in order to reskill, upskill, or equip them with multiskills for new demands in the economy, and various transformations in their lives. These programs are carried out by technical institutions, the industry and the workplaces.

Throughout the years, non-formal education has been instrumental in enriching lifelong learning opportunities through museums, libraries, village newspaper reading centers, parental education, indigenous learning systems and various forms of on-line learning opportunities.

Within the above contexts, the main challenges of non-formal education have centered around:

- 1 How to motivate the learners to participate or make use of the learning opportunities.
- 2 How to achieve the balance between what the learners want to learn, what educators or program organizers identify as essential competencies for the learners to acquire and what they need to learn to receive credits for equivalency certificates.
- 3 How to organize programs that are affordable, accessible, and responsive to the learners from diverse backgrounds particularly the disadvantaged who are in need of non-formal education.

- 4 How to develop critical numbers of educators, teachers, facilitators and supporters to carry out non-formal education.
- 5 How to ignite and sustain strong political/policy supports and adequate financial allocation for non-formal education.
- 6 How to prevent non-formal education networks from being used for political purposes.

From the Thai experiences, we can identify some of the key facilitating factors as follows;

1 Sustained commitment for education and serious concern for disparities in educational opportunities.

For over a century, Thailand has committed to investment in education. These commitments have been continuously intensified and broadened. Non-formal education, in particular, has been recognized and institutionalized in the National Education Act as an integral part of the education system. Around 1970's to 2000's such commitments for non-formal education were quite dominant among top-level educational leaders, academic leaders to operational staff as well as among the local public who had benefitted from opportunities to upgrade their educational levels through non-formal education. At present, such supports for non-formal education are no longer as prevalent among key educational leaders within the Ministry of Education. The leadership roles for different types of non-formal education seem to have shifted to the private sector and the mass media who use non-formal education to upgrade the competencies of their staff and to reach the public through various forms of digital services. It must be noted, however, that during the early years, UNESCO had been most instrumental in supporting non-formal education and for broadening the vision of non-formal education to keep up with emerging demands. The Thai Royal Families have served as role models in providing non-formal education programs in various forms for the disadvantaged population in rural remote areas across the country.

2 The establishment of an agency responsible for Non-formal Education.

For almost a century, the Thai government had set up an agency to be responsible for adult education. Later on, the agency was elevated to Department level in charge of non-formal education with network reaching village level. The roles of the agency have been transformed over the years. At the beginning, the agency was responsible for organizing the programs. But at present, the agency is more involved in policy formulation, coordination and supporting activities organized by various program providers. After the promulgation of the National Education Act and reorganization of the Ministry of Education in 2005, the Department of Non-formal Education was abolished resulting in a nationwide outcry from all sectors and subsequent promulgation of the Non-formal and Informal Education Act to re-establish the Department of Non-formal Education 6 years later.

3 Innovative non-formal education programs

The strengths of the early Thai non-formal education programs lay in the dynamic and innovative nature of the programs offered. The first among these was the Functional Literacy Program, developed in 1970's with the supports from UNESCO. The program reflected several important shifts in the provision of non-formal education which would influence subsequent formal and non-formal programs. Functional Literacy Program was developed to be responsive to the felt needs of the learners. The learning and teaching processes were more dialogue and action oriented. Since then, non-formal education curricula had become models for problem-based approach to curricula development with attempts to serve the felt needs of different types of learners in different localities. Non-formal education had also been most innovative in diversifying the delivery systems to better reach the learners through school-based courses, mobile teachers commuting among hill tribe villages, family volunteers, to transfer of credits from work experiences through the use of distance education.

4 Networking among providers and beneficiaries of non-formal education.

Non-formal education in Thailand had benefitted greatly from the synergy among providers and those who had benefitted from non-formal education. Examples include:

the schools which had served as evening classes and later adopted the experiences to provide alternative education for the school drop-outs;

the armed forces which had upgraded their recruits through non-formal education using military training as additional credits for equivalency certificates;

the local government officers using secondary certificates earned from non-formal education to continue on to higher education which enable them to serve in higher positions in the local governments as well as to enter the national politics;

the Ministry of Public Health which had upgraded their nationwide volunteers through non-formal education;

the minority groups and the disabled who had benefitted from the more responsive and more accessible non-formal education long before the inclusive policy in mainstream education;

These and other recipients had in turn supported and organized non-formal education to their members and their communities, thereby extending the coverage and diversifying the programs far beyond the capability of the Department of Non-formal Education.