

Reaching the Marginalized Rural Poor: A Study of the Multi-purpose Community Learning Center in Yunnan, China¹

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Abstract

Given the diverse rural contexts, education for rural transformation has to be linked to the specific skills and capacities development needs of the rural community. A multi-sectoral educational approach that integrates formal, non-formal and informal education is necessary. Community learning centers (CLCs), as a bottom-up approach, which emphasize empowerment at the grassroots level, have become popular both in foreign aid programs and in national initiatives. As a poor and agriculture-based province in China, rural development is vital for Yunnan province. Its high ethnic diversity implies diverse learning needs. The CLCs, selected for the case study, have four components: a training center, a library, a development center and a cultural activity center and are designed to fit the local environment. A participatory learning approach and close link between school and community guide the activities of the CLC and are aimed at producing comprehensive benefits for people regardless of gender, age and other personal or group characteristics. This case study shows how an education model that is flexible in delivery becomes a vehicle of rural transformation. The study also investigates the operational aspects of planning and implementation of a model that is responsive to local needs and conditions.

I. Introduction

Education is a key component in fostering rural development. The publication 'Education for Rural Transformation: A Conceptual Framework' (UNESCO-INRULED, 2001), based on an analysis of educational needs in relation to rural development, put education in the centre of the rural transformation process. The report argued that poverty and deprivations in rural areas result from lack of assets, limited economic opportunities and poor education, as well as disadvantages rooted in social and political inequalities. Education and skills, therefore, are particularly important for strengthening the capacities of rural people to take advantage of their opportunities, to access employment with living wages or to be able to start and run their own businesses.

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The discourse on poverty during the recent decades, including the concept of the 'Human Development Index' (HDI) and 'capability deprivation' have brought the role of education into focus, not just in alleviating poverty but also as a core element of development and human well-being (Khan, 2010). Education should not be seen as an objective in and of itself, but also as an important means to transfer relevant knowledge, to develop life-skills, and to bring about changes in peoples' behavior and lifestyles. Educational inequalities should be re-examined from the point of view of the changing rural scenarios (UNESCO-INRULED, 2001).

Given the diverse rural contexts, educational activities for rural development have to be linked to the specific learning needs and socio-economic development of the rural communities. A multi-sectoral educational approach involving formal, non-formal and informal education is necessary (UNESCO-INRULED, 2001). An educational program that deals with the poor and powerless rural people cannot be just top-down initiatives undertaken by the government. As argued by Bhola (2010), accountability should be more than a fancy word but joined with clear incentives and disincentives. There is also a need for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of governance systems, institutions, and policy processes. It was generally felt that there remained a lack of genuine empowerment of the poor in poverty alleviation programs, since the intended beneficiaries were left dependent on a bureaucratic delivery mechanism over which they had no control (Aiyar, 2010).

Rural people and rural areas are not homogeneous, and so for education to be relevant, it needs to respond to the diversity of rural situations. It is clear that the centralized planning apparatus in most countries simply cannot develop effective programs for diverse rural populations. Educational activities have to be linked to the specific needs of the rural community for enhancing skills and capacities to seize economic opportunities, improve livelihood and improve the quality of life. At the same time, the strength and advantages of local community also need to be utilized to ensure sustainability and pertinence of the educational program.

Community-based educational programs are not new to many countries. There have been innovative programs launched by government and NGOs over the years around the world. The community learning center (CLC) is a local educational institution outside the formal education system, usually set up and managed by local people to create various learning opportunities (APPEAL, 1995). Its purpose is to provide equitable educational opportunities to the un-served and marginalized rural poor, utilizing strengths and assets of the local community. The education program is intended to generate grassroots-level interest and participation in literacy and continuing education, especially for the disadvantaged and the poor, including out-of-school youth, women, and illiterate people.

In China, around 713 million people, more than half of the population, live in the rural areas. As a result, rural development has been the first priority of the country. With economic and

social development, changing industrial structure and rapid urbanization, rural China is experiencing dramatic changes. On the one hand, the agriculture sector needs productive workforce equipped with modern agro-technology; on the other hand, huge amounts of surplus workers are migrating from rural to urban areas and seeking work in non-agriculture industries. There are at the same time the challenges of reaching with skill development and educational opportunities the most disadvantaged groups in remote and poverty-stricken rural areas.

In order to provide basic education for all, the government intensified adult literacy campaigns and programs since the 1970s. The 2000 census of China showed that the literacy rate of Chinese adults (age 15 and over) reached 90.9% (UNDP, 2010). In 1986, the 9-year-compulsory tuition-free education regulations were adopted. Favorable policies were carried out to support access to basic education in rural areas. In coping with the complex realities in rural areas, central government and NGOs also have undertaken various kinds of non-formal education programs to disseminate technologies, provide information, organize income generating activities and promote cultural activities. Community education is receiving increasing attention at the policy level as the means of creating lifelong learning opportunities and building the learning society, since a national meeting on the development of community education centers was held in 2001. Currently, there are more than 200 municipal level community training bases, designated as pilot bases by the Ministry of Education, which accounts for a quarter of the total number of such municipal centres. ((Hengyang Lifelong Learning Networking, 2010). This paper, by exploring the success story of CLCs in Yunnan, intends to highlight the significance of the community-based non-formal education approach, especially in serving the goal of rural transformation.

Community Learning Center

The concept

Community Learning Center refers to the local educational institution outside the formal education system. It is usually set up and managed by local people to provide various learning opportunities for community development and improvement of quality of life of people (UNESCO, 1995). This education model emphasizes active participation of learners, who have the chance to be involved in the planning of the education and training program and its modification as needed. With an emphasis on empowerment of the learners and the community, flexibility in delivery, and adaptability in learning content, CLC is potentially a powerful tool for promoting lifelong learning.

Main Objectives and Activities

The objectives of CLCs may differ as they have to be consistent with local learning needs and local socio-economic conditions. CLCs are generally expected to improve quality of life and promote community and economic development by providing opportunities for capacity and skill deployment of people. The functions of CLCs may include the following:

- i. To eliminate illiteracy and provide continuing post-literacy education;
- ii. To disseminate agriculture-related science and technology so as to upgrade the quality of labor force and agricultural production;
- iii. To increase the income of the community members; iv. To empower through knowledge and skills the most disadvantaged groups, such as, women, out-of-school youth, ethnic minorities, and people without economic assets;
- v. To provide life-long learning opportunities, serving as a permanent training institution for rural people and enhancing their ability to participate in sustainable development; and
- vi. To preserve and promote local culture.

In addition to literacy, general basic education and skill training activities, CLCs may also be involved in learning and advocacy in relation to legal rights, healthy life, disease prevention, sanitation and hygiene, and general improvement of the quality of life of rural people (UNESCO, 2004).

Rural Scenario of China

In China, with more than half of the people still living in the countryside, rural development has always been the first priority of the country. As pointed out by C.F. Han (2010), the Minister of Agriculture, China has made considerable progress in rural transformation during the 11th Five-Year Plan (2006-2010). The positive outcomes include: 1) the fundamental position of agriculture in national development has been re-affirmed, 2) agricultural productivity has been significantly improved, and 3) the process of industry modernization has continued smoothly. However, rapid economic, social, demographic, cultural and political changes, domestically and internationally, also have posed several challenges for balanced and sustainable development of rural China.

Firstly, ensuring adequate food supply for the large population and guaranteeing food security remain a major task. It is estimated that during the period of the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), the proportion of the urban population will surpass the rural population; therefore, an increasingly smaller population working on agriculture will have to provide for the needs of the growing majority. Secondly, the income gap between urban and rural areas has widened, creating growing discontent and tension. Although the income of rural people increased 9.5% in 2007, the urban-rural income ratio reached 3.3:1 – one of the largest gaps in the world (Cui, 2010). There is concern that continuation of the present trends will further increase the gap. (Ge, 2008). Thirdly, in China, land holdings per household are very small compared to other developing countries like India. The goal of building an equitable society calls for protecting the welfare of people by establishing social safety nets. Finally, modernization of agriculture will create a large surplus of labour in agriculture; a major rural transformation challenge is to provide appropriate training and create employment opportunities for the new workers (Huang, 2010). According to Messini and Cheng (2009), the migrant workers are educationally deprived – only 10% are high school graduates, 30% have middle school education, another 30% have received only primary education, and

some are even illiterate. Moreover, 80% of migrant workers have received no technical/vocational training at all. Migrant workers, therefore, are largely engaged in unskilled employment.

Policies for Rural Transformation

In 2006, the 11th 5-year Plan had specially designed a framework for rural development and the concept of “building a new socialist countryside” was initiated. As a strategic guideline, the concept of “constructing the new countryside” - incorporating development in infrastructure, health, education, and socio-economic conditions and a grassroots democratization process – influenced all tasks (Guo, Yu, Todd, Henahan, & Li, 2009). Activities that aimed to promote rural transformation were launched within this strategy. Over these years, China’s rural development policies mainly have focused on three aspects: 1) increasing income of rural people; 2) building a new socialist countryside; and 3) narrowing gaps between urban and rural areas.

In the strategy for development in the 12th Five-Year (2010-2015) period, industrialization, urbanization and agricultural modernization are perceived as one integrated and interactive process. It is anticipated that the focus in relation to rural transformation, would be on accelerating the modernization of agriculture, ensuring national food security, increasing income of farmers by improving productivity, enhancing rural people’s risk-prevention capability and strengthening market competitiveness of rural products (Han, 2010). This proposed strategy pursues not only economic growth, but also comprehensive, balanced and sustainable development in political, cultural, social and ecological dimensions (Han, 2010).

Rural Education

In relation to the notion of “building a new socialist countryside”, researchers in the education field initiated the concept of “new rural education.” Its main elements consisted of universalized compulsory education, technical and vocational education with high relevance, and functional and efficient adult education. Researchers have noted that rural education in China has three different functions : First, preparation for further education - promoting social mobility for rural youth; second, preparing for the urbanization trend - training surplus rural labor force for non-agricultural jobs; and third, education to take advantage of agricultural modernization - cultivating the skills and capacities for advanced agriculture in the local community (Wang, 2006; Geng, 2007).

While these strategies have generally guided educational development, progress has not been even across the provinces for historical, geographical, and economic reasons and differences in capacity to implement policy. . In some instances, the curricula in rural school lacked relevance to local conditions which undermined student motivation. Variation in quality of teachers and infrastructures, especially in remote areas and among ethnic populations is a concern. Obviously, ensuring access with, quality and equity in education is a big challenge for the government.

The Way Forward: Education Reform Guideline (2010-2020)

In 2010, the Chinese government released the “Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development” (2010-2020). In this guideline, there are several items on policies related to rural areas as highlighted below:

- 1) Making equal access to education a reality: giving preference to rural impoverished and border areas and ethnic autonomous areas.
- 2) Strengthening preschool education in rural areas: making sure that all the children left behind by parents working away from their home villages are sent to kindergartens.
- 3) Improving infrastructure and promoting quality of rural compulsory education.
- 4) Attention to developing vocational education to meet rural learning needs.
- 5) Accelerating development of continuing education: moving towards a system of lifelong learning.
- 6) Devolving administrative power to provincial government, and making the local government more autonomous in planning education in line with local conditions.
- 7) Improving quality of teaching staff.
- 8) Providing greater financial inputs for rural education.
- 9) Promoting use of ICT in rural education.

This policy guidance reflects the commitment of the Chinese government to promoting equity, equality and quality in rural education and bringing about necessary changes, both in formal and non-formal sectors.

II. The Case Study

Profile of Yunnan Province

Yunnan has the highest number of ethnic groups among all provinces and autonomous regions in China. Twenty-five minority groups account for one-third of the population of Yunnan². It is also one of the poorest provinces of the country, behind only Tibet and Guizhou. In 2002, per capita GDP of Yunnan was US \$627, and rural per capita income was US \$195. Of the total population, 74% lived in rural areas and 33% of the rural people lived below the national poverty line (around 0.31 US \$ per day). Yunnan’s economic pillars include the industries of tobacco, animal products, minerals and tourism. It is mainly an agriculture-based province.

As one of the poorest provinces with high level of ethnic diversity, Yunnan has attracted foreign aid in development projects, such as those supported by UNDP. It is also a target

²<http://www.yn.gov.cn/yunnan,china/72057594037927936/index.html>, retrieved Sept. 4, 2010,

province in the national development plan, as indicated in the 11th Five Year Plan for National Economy and Social Development (2006-2010).

Besides universal 9-year-comporsory education, various non-formal programs were aimed at increasing income and empowering the marginalized rural poor and ethnic minorities in the province. The investigation of a bottom-up model of CLC is intended to explore how community-based local imitative is planned and implemented in order to meet diverse learning needs and improve quality of life of rural people.

The Case: Community Learning Center in Yunnan³

Background: In order to explore a way that fully utilizes the power of schools and local community in order to promote socio-economic development and empower rural people, a CLC as an experimental program was founded in 2001 in Liushao County and Lianhe County (both minority inhabited areas) of Yunnan province. Through practical experience and trial, a structure has developed in the CLC, which consists of four components (or pillars as they are called), namely, a training center, a library, a development center and a cultural activity center. The principles of participatory-learning and close link between educational activities and community are taken as the guide in the CLC to produce comprehensive benefits for all in the community.

Implementation: The CLC was designed by a research group of Yunnan Normal University. A unique local model was attempted to be developed according to education and social situation of Liushao County and Lianhe County. Local primary schools and community committees were directly involved in establishing the CLC with the support of local government and technical guidance from higher education institutions. The aim was to fulfill learning needs of teachers, students, parents and villagers of the county. The four components or pillars, noted above, represent different and somewhat independent functions of CLC; but they serve a shared goal, which is to improve overall quality of the local human resources, facilitate economic growth, and preserve and promote minority cultural heritage in the area.

The training center provides three kinds of education and training: a) training for rural teachers; b) courses for community members (including literacy and basic “life skills”); and c), training in modern agro-technologies. The library was set up in 2005 in order to “enrich knowledge and spiritual development” of local people. The development center offers opportunity for trainees to put knowledge learnt from the CLC into practice and help trainees undertake income-earning activities. New and advanced agro-technologies are also demonstrated and promoted by the development center. The cultural activity center of the CLC is a unique feature of the two CLCs. Being located in an area of ethnic minorities, preserving and promoting local culture have been seen as one of the functions of the CLC.

³Source: Wang L. (2008) Practical Exploration on Constructing Community Learning Centers Based on Schools in Rural Ethnic Areas - A Case Study of Liushao and Lianhe Towns in Xundian County, Yunnan Province. Educational Research.No.12, pp.91-94.

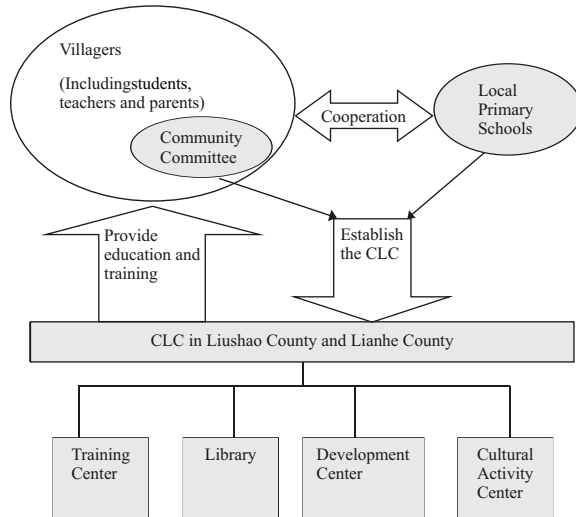


Figure 1. Organizational Structure of CLC in Yunnan

By adding knowledge of traditional culture in the learning content and holding various traditional cultural activities, trainees are encouraged to learn about and be proud of their ethnic identity. The organizational structure including the four “pillars” and how they interact with each other and promote the objectives of the CLC in Liushao and Lianhe County are shown in Figure 1 below.

The CLC represents a bottom-up model, where learners from the local community are closely involved in establishing the center and in implementing its activities. The emphasis is on empowering people to help themselves through learning and development activities including skill development, income generation and well-rounded development of human resources.

Quality control and supervision: The CLC was part of a research program in National Education Science under the national Eleventh Five-Year Development plan. An assessment of the CLC in Yunnan was prepared by Yunnan Normal University. This report, documenting the progress of CLC, was handed over to the National Office for Education Science Planning as an outcome of the CLC as a “research” project.

Outcomes: Since their establishment, over a period of seven years, about 1500 people directly benefited from training provided by the centers. The library “enriches spiritual life of training recipients, and strengthens their connection with outside world.” The CLCs took advantage of geographic condition in Liushao and Lianhe County to establish a potato growing laboratory. After four years of research and practice, growing potatoes became a

competitive industry for the two counties. Besides, numerous cultural promotion activities were undertaken to enhance appreciation and respect for ethnic cultural identity and tradition.

It can be seen that the four components of the CLC were directed at serving multiple purposes of the CLC - to empower rural people, cultivate human resources, improve livelihood, and promote ethnic culture. A participatory approach was followed in planning of the program and managing it.

III. Discussion

It is noteworthy that the CLCs were established as a “research and development (R&D)” initiative under the eleventh Five Year Development Plan of the country to seek answers to a critical development concern about the role of education and skills in rural transformation. Resources were allocated and a collaborative mechanism was established for bringing together the local educational institutions, the community, the local government and provincial academic and research institutions to design and carry out the R&D project under a national research focus on education sciences. True to the purpose of empowering local community and providing learning and capacity development opportunities appropriate for local conditions, planning and management of the project was decentralized and flexible, without a detailed blueprint in advance from the central level. With flexibility to take decisions at the project evolved, there was no requirement to refer to the central level and have approval for all implementation steps, which is often the case in centrally supported research and development activities.

With hindsight, it may be argued that for a research initiative, the indicators and benchmarks for progress and measures for assessing progress should have been formulated, at least provisionally. Empowerment of people and well-rounded development of human resources can be vague in definition, difficult to assess, and it may be difficult to have a common agreement on what actually has been achieved. With the multiple goals of CLC, without tangible indicators for assessment, to what extent and in what time the vague concept of empowerment is being realised may be difficult to ascertain.

On the other hand, some have argued that what matters is the process at the micro level, for instance, the motivation of people, the effectiveness of teaching-learning, commitment to change and so on at the level of people and communities (Fullan, 1994).

Obviously, there is no-one-size-for-all program that can fulfill all the learning needs in rural areas. Non-formal education, with the advantages of flexibility in teaching content and delivery models, can offer an array of learning opportunities for rural people, complementing formal general education with its common content and curricular objectives.

The CLC appears to be an appropriate institutional model to offer NFE programs to meet diverse learning and skill development needs of rural people, mobilizing local resources and involving local people. As the case study shows, flexible and responsive education and training can be provided by the CLC to serve specific learning needs and promote the broader goal of empowerment of people, contributing to rural transformation in line with the development strategy of the 11th Five Year Plan of China. Research and technological development concerning agriculture were adapted to local conditions and needs; cooperation between education institutions and labor market enterprises were given attention to improve the relevance of education; and effective coordination among different government departments and non-governmental agencies was emphasized in carrying out the work of the CLC. The development strategy promoted by central government is thus successfully implemented at the local level through coordination and cooperation among various bodies involved in rural development.

The Minister of Agriculture, C.F. Han, said at the National Conference on Human Resource for Agriculture and Rural Areas, “ [besides coordination between government and non-governmental agencies,] network should also be established so that technology, research, education, and organization can mutually reinforce each other during the developmental process”(Han, 2010). The CLC in Yunnan illustrates the effort to link research and planning with market needs in order to achieve a balanced and integrated agricultural education geared to real life conditions. The connection between higher educational institutions and the local community in order to adapt and respond to variability in local geographical conditions is evident in the activities of the CLC. The potato growing center, the related research and their contribution to promoting potato growing industry in Liushao and Lianhe county is an example of the linkages between research, training, market and community organizations.

IV. Concluding Remarks

If investment in education in general is justified, investment in rural education is even more so. Many countries still continue with an urban bias in the allocation of resources. While the majority of the population including the most disadvantaged groups lives in the rural areas, unbalanced allocations further aggravate disparities between urban and rural populations and disharmonious development of the country.

In the era of the knowledge society, education can no longer be a time-bound endeavor, but rather a continuous activity throughout one's life. In the same vein, education for rural development has to provide opportunities for the disadvantaged groups to cope with the changing reality and exercise choices to improve their lives. The CLC can be the institutional vehicle for making education a continuing activity. It can thus be a flexible and permanent mechanism for transforming, renewing and upgrading skills and capacities. The merits and potentials of such non-formal and life-long learning should be deeply explored and seriously

promoted for the benefit of rural people. Nevertheless, it has to be kept in view that education is not a magic bullet; there has to be cooperation, coordination and linkages among complementary and supportive educational and non-educational components of the total development effort, as CLCs in Yunnan illustrate.

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