Regional Workshop on Equivalency Programs and Alternative Certified Learning for Achieving EFA and Promoting Lifelong Learning: Afghanistan Country Review

Literacy and Non-formal Education Department
Ministry of Education, Afghanistan
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I. LOGISTICAL INFORMATION

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The government of Afghanistan is committed to providing education/literacy to all its citizens. However, this is a difficult and challenging task. The current formal education system is too inadequate and fragile to address the educational needs of the Afghan population. To fill the gap, the government has strengthened the existing non-formal education system and initiated several new programs. These NFE programs, further strengthened by various national and international agencies, are offering equivalent and alternative learning opportunities for thousands of citizens especially youths and adults. This report is a review of these programs with special emphasis on the following aspects:

Policy support mechanisms
Networking and partnerships
Assessment, accreditation and quality assurance
Monitoring and evaluation (Le. links to EMIS and national statistics)
II. BACKGROUND

Nearly three decades of conflict in Afghanistan have resulted in the emergence of an illiterate and non-professional generation who have had limited or no access to education. As a result, Afghanistan has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world, with only 26% of the population (above 15 years old) being able to read and write (male: 39%, female: 12%). In rural areas where some 74 per cent of all Afghans reside, the situation is more acute: an estimated 90% of women and 63% of men cannot read and write.

Like many other developing countries, Afghanistan lacks reliable and relevant data on literacy and education of the country. Earlier estimates reveal that there are 5.5 million school-aged children and 11 million illiterate adults. The Afghan government as well as all its development partners believe that providing the illiterate population with relevant educational opportunity is essential to peaceful, democratic and sustainable nation building in Afghanistan.

The prolonged war and conflicts throughout the country left a shattered formal education infrastructure which is unable to take care of the varying educational needs of the people. The government realizes that with its limited capacity and dilapidated infrastructure, the formal education sector alone cannot help the country to achieve national and international commitments and goals with regard to literacy and education. This desperate scenario in the formal sector of education gave way to development of a strong non-formal education sector in Afghanistan.

Equivalent and alternative learning programs in Afghanistan fall into both formal and non-formal sectors of education. Within the formal sector, it includes Islamic education, and technical and vocational education programs. However, programs under NFE are mostly confined to adult literacy programs. These programs are provided mainly through non-formal channels of education. These programs are organized in formal school facilities, in mosques and madrasas, and in private homes and spaces. The programs vary in terms of philosophy, objectives, duration, and target profiles, etc. Most of these programs are offering between grade 3 and grade 4 equivalencies of formal education.

The literacy goals set in the National Education Strategic Plan (NESP II) 2010-2014 are as follows;

- *Literacy rates would be improved to 48%;*
- *60% of the learners would be female;*
- *Minority groups such as Kuchis and persons with disabilities would be specifically targeted.*

Islamic education

Islamic education provides up to grade 12 equivalent program to its students who then can proceed to universities to complete their undergraduate degrees in Islami Shariah. Education at Islamic schools, widely known as madrasas, is divided into primary (grades 1-6), middle (grades 7-9) and higher (grades 10-12) levels. There are also private religious teachers/mullahs who teach students for several years. Based on the long duration of study, students taught by the private teachers can take tests administered by the MoE and may obtain up to grade 14 equivalent certificates.

The government is trying to reform the current Islamic education system by synchronizing its curriculum including pedagogy and subject areas with that of the formal education, and by providing various
in service trainings. Afghan government has plans to establish one Islamic school in each district and one Dar-ul-Ulum and Dar-ul-Huffaz institute in each provincial capital.

**Community Based Schools (CBSs)**

Modern community-based schools (CBSs) are conceived around older mosque-based tradition and receive positive responses from the communities they serve. To an extent, they can be seen as ‘gap filling.’ In practice, they are a key part of the primary education (through to at least grade 3) in underserved and/or rural communities where there is no formal government school. CBSs are implemented by a wide range of International Organizations (IOs) and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Some evidence suggests that CBSs are at par with standard government primary schools. However, this finding deserves further exploration.

CBSs have increased children’s access to educational opportunities. Educational opportunities close to children’s homes have improved school enrolment, particularly for girls. There are now more than 7,000 CBSs, with student enrolments of over 250,000. The schools are not evenly distributed across the country, with security factors pre-eminant.

**Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)**

Technical and vocational education in Afghanistan is served by both formal and non-formal education systems. The total number of TVET schools and institutes is 51 in the country. They provide skills-based programs in 50 fields of study. Twelve provinces do not have any TVET programs. Kabul alone accounts for 58% of all TVET students. Standard curriculum, textbooks and other learning materials do not exist for many fields. Recently established National Qualifications Framework Authority is trying to develop a database and standardize TVET in Afghanistan.

The government has plans to increase the intake capacity of TVET. It is expected that by 2020, 10% of students completing grade 9 will be enrolled in TVET. In recent times, the country also witnessed the involvement of private sector in the provision of TVET. A total of seven private TVET schools are now operating in Kabul and Balkh provinces.

**Key literacy programs in Afghanistan offering equivalency certificates**

**National Literacy Center (NLC)**

NLC manages government-run adult literacy programs. NLC covers approximately 300,000 learners per year. It uses materials developed during the ‘Literacy and Non-formal Education Development in Afghanistan’ (LAND Afghanistan) project which was implemented between 2003 and 2005 jointly by UNESCO and the Ministry of Education. The course duration is nine months and it provides a grade 3 equivalency.

Besides management of basic literacy courses, NLC also manages literacy supplementary schools, labour supplementary schools, and vocational supplementary schools for youth and adults who wish to further continue their studies. The literacy supplementary schools are for learners who completed a basic literacy course or grade 3 in formal education or received private education. These schools run a 9-month
course covering grades 4-9 following a curriculum which is similar to the formal education curriculum but enhanced with vocational studies. Labour supplementary schools provide private and government office employees a combination of formal and profession education and are open to adults who have successfully acquired their grade 3 literacy equivalency certificate. These courses run 2-hour sessions, four times of a day for 11 months of the year covering grades 4 through 6. Successful learners may transition onto night school to complete their grade 12 certificate.

Vocational supplementary schools are made available to learners who are age-inappropriate for the formal education system and who have completed a grade 4 formal education or received an equivalent private education. These schools run a 9-month course covering grades 5-9 following a curriculum which is similar to the formal education curriculum but enhanced with vocational studies. The curriculum consists of 60% formal education and 40% vocational education.

However, due to a lack of capacity (materials and facilities), all literacy and labour supplementary schools act more as formal education schools whereas no vocational supplementary schools are very active.

UNESCO

UNESCO’s Enhancement of Literacy for Afghanistan (ELA) Programme serves 600,000 learners over a span of four years (2008-2012). The program will cover 99 districts of 18 selected provinces. Program duration is nine months and its offers grade 3 equivalency. UNESCO is implementing the program with the help of NLC.

UNICEF

UNICEF Afghanistan is implementing an exclusive program for women participants in all 32 provinces of the country. The program is expected to cover 425,000 illiterate women. The program uses the UNESCO/NLC curriculum and materials. The 9-month course provides grade-3 equivalency.

LCEP-2

Learning for Community Empowerment Programme – 2 (LCEP-2) is a USAID funded and UN-HABITAT managed integrated literacy program combining literacy, micro-finance and productive skills. It serves 312,000 Afghan adult men and women. Geographic coverage of the project includes 20 provinces and the course duration is 18 months followed by two 3-month preparatory and concluding phases. LCEP-2 closely works with the NLC and the program provides a grade 4 equivalency.

Agencies offering equivalency and alternative programs

In Afghanistan, active partners in the NFE sector include the MoE, UN agencies, national and international NGOs, and various community based organizations. Several Afghan ministries have also NFE programs for their illiterate staff members as well as beneficiaries covering a wide range of equivalencies. While most agencies work in partnership with the NLC, some agencies have their own programs. Together these agencies provide equivalency and alternative learning opportunity to approximately 450,000
participants a year. The annual coverage is too small compared to the existing number of illiterate population and is posing a formidable challenge for the MoE to achieve national and international commitments and goals including EFA and MDGs.

Because of limited space in formal schools and age inappropriateness of the participants of various equivalency courses, interested learners can hardly pursue higher studies. It justifies the necessity of the establishment of a comprehensive, strong and well defined NFE system catering to varying needs of learners and offering a range of equivalency programs.

III. PRIORITY AREAS

In Afghanistan, educational and equivalency needs are so urgent and varied that it is difficult to make a priority list of relevant areas. However, the following constitutes some of the critical areas.

Policy support mechanism for EPs and alternative learning in Afghanistan

The policy support mechanism for equivalency programs and alternative learning in Afghanistan is rooted in various laws, rules and key documents. The following are some of these sources:

The Constitution of Afghanistan

The Constitution of Afghanistan provides the legal base for non-formal education and equivalency programs in the country. It established education as a right of citizens, explained the national commitment to eradicate illiteracy through an inclusive service with special emphasis on women and nomadic populations, and described the need for production and skills based education through upholding national heritages.

Articles 13, 14, 43 and 44 of the constitution are directly related to the provision of NFE and equivalency programs. For example, article 43 reads: “Education is the right of all Afghan citizens and it is provided free of charge by the state covering up to the level of Bachelor's Degree”. Similarly, articles 13 and 14 stipulate needs of: “design and implement effective programs for developing industries, expanding production as well as protecting activities of craftsmen to raise the standard of living of the people” … and “effective programs to develop agriculture and animal husbandry, improve economic social and living conditions of farmers, herders and settlers as well as the nomads’ livelihood”.

The Education Law

Various articles of this important law provide contexts for formulating literacy policies and programs. For example, article 36 identified the objectives of literacy and basic practical education:

(1) Observe the orders of the religion of Islam related to literacy and knowledge.
(2) Provide grounds for reading, writing, counting and acquiring knowledge in basic practical and vocational skills for illiterate and less literate and prepare them for continuing education.
(3) Provide the opportunity for continuing education stated in this law for adult and children who are left behind from education.
High Commission for Literacy (HCfL)

In September 2009, the High Commission for Literacy was officially established through the decree of the president of Afghanistan. The body headed by the second Vice President of Afghanistan is expected to formulate and provide all policy support needed for the spread of literacy in the country. The formation of the HCfL is seen by all as a strong commitment of the Afghan government towards literacy.

Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS)

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) presents human and institutional capacity as a cross-cutting issue and identifies low capacity as a major constraint for development. In order to support capacity development, the public sector has primary responsibility but the strong involvement of the private sector is also seen as a necessity pre-requisite.

National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) and National Literacy Action Plan (NLAP)

The NESP II (2010-2014) broadly describes the national policies and priorities for education including literacy. Through its strategic components, the NESP created several relevant policy contexts. The policy domains included the following:

- Development of a national strategy for literacy
- Development of teaching and learning materials
- Delivery of a national literacy program
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Management and coordination

Literacy is one of NESP II’s five program areas with a Deputy Ministry devoted entirely to the achievement of national literacy goals. A total of 4,576 people are employed across Afghanistan under the MoE/ Deputy Ministry for Literacy, with a presence in every province.

Based on provisions for literacy and NFE as described in various key documents including in the NESP, and government goals with respect to EFA and MDGs, the NLAP (2010-2014) has been developed. The objectives of the NLAP are as follows:

- Provide illiterate youth and adults across all 34 provinces with access to basic literacy and lifelong learning.
- Enable at least 3.6 million Afghan adults by 2014 to attain functional literacy.
- Provide opportunities for comprehensive literacy development integrating vocational skills, income generation, agriculture, and health components.
- Ensure that females, language minority groups, isolated communities, Kuchis and people with disabilities are targeted and prioritized.
- Reduce the number of existing illiterates nationwide by at least 55% before 2020.
Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation of EPs are done by different ministries. Accordingly, NLC of the MoE is responsible for conducting M&E of the courses and programs offered by the agency and its partner agencies. The M&E activities include regular monitoring by the field staffs as well as headquarters staffs, and occasional joint field visits with staff members from partner agencies including UN agencies. Nevertheless, NLC lacks sufficient resources to manage the task effectively and efficiently. The agency is yet to develop a comprehensive literacy database.

NLC is currently working with several UN and international agencies (UN-HABITAT and JICA etc.) on improving its existing M&E system. JICA has recently launched a literacy program in two provinces aimed at enhancing the monitoring and supervision of literacy programming. With the help of UNESCO and other agencies such as JICA, UN-Habitat and UNICEF, the Ministry of Education’s also developing a Literacy/NFE Management Information System (LNMIS). It is expected that the LNMIS will be useful to collect and collate literacy/NFE related data from various parts of the country and will help literacy managers to take informed decisions.

Networking and partnership

Currently NLC has linkages with various literacy-implementing ministries, and national and international agencies. However, it is not always effective. NLC has limited control over literacy programs managed by other agencies. NLC cannot provide any effective forum for maintaining and strengthening cooperation and collaboration among all agencies. However, LIFE coordination meeting of UNESCO is the only exception. LIFE includes members from various national and international literacy agencies active in Afghanistan. In LIFE monthly coordination meetings, participants share information and learn from each other. NLC recently developed a LIFE action plan which included key activities of prominent literacy providers. It is expected that through regular monitoring of activities under the LIFE action plan NLC will be able to enhance cooperation and collaboration among member literacy agencies.

NLC also works in partnership with UN-HABITAT on its Learning for Community Empowerment Program-2 (LCEP-2). As mandated by the Memorandum of Understanding between UN-HABITAT and MoE, the integrated literacy program of LCEP-2 will be handed over to NLC when the former phases out in 2012. Meanwhile, LCEP-2 is working and providing technical support to enhance the capacity of NLC in various areas so that NLC emerges out as a more competent and capable agency to lead and manage literacy activities throughout the country. As part of the process, LCEP-2 has developed several key documents for NLC.

Another active partner of NLC is Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). JICA’s Literacy Education Management in Afghanistan (LEAF-2) project aims at providing on-the-job training in literacy class management, data management and education management to provincial and district level officials in the Literacy Department. The pilot phase of this project has already been launched in two provinces. A feature of this work will be the development of standardized tools for the assessment of learners’ achievement.
NLC also closely works with fora such as the Human Resource Development Board (HRDB) -- that serves as a platform for policy dialogue between MoE, MoHE, MoLSA (including the National Skills Development Program-NSDP), MoWA and education development partners.

Assessment, accreditation and quality assurance

Learner assessment

Since 2003, the assessment system practiced by NLC was mostly summative in nature; three tests were administered in the 9-month course. After the new national curriculum developed by UNESCO in 2003, the testing system was replaced by an assessment system based on competencies which is predominantly formative in nature.

NLC uses diagnostic, continuous, and cumulative assessment in its program presently. However, the different adult literacy education programs operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Education use different approaches to learner assessment. UN-HABITAT uses a learner portfolio assessment system which is formative in nature. Facilitators and learners do the assessment together as the participants progress from one module to the other. A working group comprising members from NLC and UN-HABITAT recently drafted a progressive learner assessment system which can assess learners’ achievements up to grade 4.

Learner certification

Different agencies use different learner certification processes in Afghanistan. While most agencies including the NLC certify learners at the end of a 9-month course, UN-HABITAT certifies after an 18-month integrated literacy course. UNESCO’s ELA program assesses learners at the completion of each of the six levels in the program. Each learner has an assessment form in which the teacher records assessment information. Teachers administer an assessment after the completion of each level in the basic and post literacy books which amounts to six assessments altogether. The final result is determined based on the marks the six assessments. The learner is eligible to receive a certificate indicating that the final results are excellent, very good or good, based on the cumulative scores.

NLC has a system by which international and national NGOs that have registered with the Ministry of Education can administer their own learner certification system. NGOs that have protocols with the MoE have the authority to award their learners certificates of third grade equivalency with the concurrence of NLC.

Facilitator accreditation

The educational level for literacy facilitators as set by most literacy agencies is grade 12 in Afghanistan. Facilitators engaged in various equivalency programs within the NFE sector in Afghanistan receive training of various durations. It is also difficult, especially in rural areas to find adequately qualified persons to become literacy facilitators. Most of them start with a short pre-service training. Based on the program design and available resources of concerned implementing agency, literacy facilitators may receive
few days of refresher training. Provision for continuous professional development of facilitators is almost non-existent. A career pathway for facilitators simply does not exist.

The country needs specific facilitator accreditation policy in literacy and NFE. The experience of the government in establishing an accreditation system in the country is limited. Examples from neighbouring countries are also inadequate. Credentialing of literacy facilitators, especially the establishment of an accreditation system in literacy is not as popular as in the formal sector of education. Like other countries in this region, literacy facilitators are widely viewed as temporary and paraprofessionals in Afghanistan.

The MoE is considering whether the under-qualified facilitators can be made professionally competent and effective by inducting them in to an accreditation program. The government is also considering establishment of a Literacy Teacher Training Institute (LTTI), an exclusive agency to manage facilitator accreditation. Development of an accreditation system is one of the key areas where UN-HABITAT is supporting NLC. Various key documents including facilitator ToR, facilitator guide and minimum program standards have been developed. LCEP-2/UN-HABITAT is now developing a comprehensive guideline for NLC on facilitator accreditation.

IV. IMPACTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

NLC has years of experience in the implementation and management of adult literacy that provides equivalency and alternative educational opportunity in Afghanistan. During these years and especially in recent times, NLC achieved many objectives and established itself as an agency with considerable potential to lead a large scale national literacy program with a wide range of equivalency and alternative education programs.

The following are key achievements of NLC on various aspects of literacy in relation to EPs and alternative learning opportunities:

**Access**
- Literacy needs have increased manifolds over the last few years.

**Equivalency**
- There is an increasing demand to introduce multi-grade equivalent programs. NLC is actively exploring the possibility of introducing literacy/NFE courses up to grade 9 equivalency.

**Gender parity**
- Approximately 60% of program participants are females.

**Material development**
- Various manuals, literacy primers and supplementary materials have been developed with financial and technical assistance from UNESCO.

**Research**
- Research on nomad’s life and a needs assessment of Kuchis was conducted in February 2009.

**Advocacy**
- There is the publication of a quarterly literacy magazine.
Networking

- LIFE coordination meetings represented by a wide range of national and international agencies are held regularly.

Partnership with rural communities

- Many CLCs have been establishment and there is demand for establishing more CLCs.

V. CORE CHALLENGES

The following are the core challenges in promoting EPs and alternative learning in Afghanistan:
- Absence of comprehensive EPs and alternative learning policy and programs
- Inadequate coordination among literacy agencies
- Absence of a community cost-sharing mechanism
- Poor advocacy in EPs and alternative learning opportunities, and limited involvement of civil society organizations
- Low priority of EPs and alternative learning opportunities
- Poor understanding of the role of EPs in the economic growth and development of the country
- Security situation
- Inadequate funding

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF EQUIVALENCY PROGRAMS

The country review on EPs and alternative learning opportunities suggests the following:
- Conduct and document a thorough review of the existing provisions of EPs and alternative learning programs.
- Conduct effective English language learning courses for NLC staff so that they can act effectively with international counterpart staffs and benefit from research studies and literature available in English.
- Develop a comprehensive policy on EPs and certifiable alternative learning opportunities.
- Develop a clearly defined equivalency and alternative learning program structure.
- Develop an effective accreditation system for facilitators and explore the feasibility of a career path for them.
- Organize exposure visits for selected NLC staff members to countries with effective EPs and alternative learning programs.
- Enhance the capacity of selected NLC members through in-country and overseas training on management of EPs and alternative learning programs.
- Conduct a study of the local labour market and design TVET programs accordingly.
- Introduce special incentives for women and participants from minority groups.
• Explore the possibility of working with or using the facilities of 38 Teacher Training Centers (TTCs) and 47 TTC branches.
• Improve coordination among agencies so as to ensure optimum use of resources.
• Explore and if feasible, establish a literacy trust fund to initiate small scale programs and conduct action research, etc.
• Develop and implement targeted advocacy activities.
• Focus on capacity building at community levels.

VII. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE NEEDS

Technical assistance is needed to do the following:
• Conduct a comprehensive survey on existing policies and programs related to EPs and certified alternative learning opportunities
• Study the feasibility of establishing a literacy/EP trust fund
• Local capacity building on planning and management of effective EPs and certifiable alternative learning programs
• Development of a comprehensive NFE system with a wide range of EPs and alternative learning programs
REFERENCE


