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I. Logistical Information

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The following are the priority areas to enhance equivalency programme in Bhutan.

I. Policy Support Mechanisms  
II. Curriculum and materials development  
III. Modes of Delivery  
IV. Capacity Building and Training  
V. Financing and Resource Mobilization
II. Background

Bhutan at the moment does not have a certified equivalency programme in place. However, the NFE adult literacy programme introduced since 1990 continue to serve as the one and only alternative learning opportunity for illiterate population, particularly rural women and early school dropouts. The literacy programme provides literacy and numeracy skills in Dzongkha (National Language). The Basic Literacy Course (BLC) and Post Literacy Course (PLC) consist of 12 months and 9 months respectively of two hours of classes every day. The BLC focuses on developing literacy skills such as reading, writing and speaking Dzongkha so that they become functionally literate. The PLC helps the learners to strengthen their literacy skills and at the same time imparts life skills and livelihood skills in them so that they are able to overcome the challenges of their day to day life in a more comfortable manner.

Despite numerous resource constraints, the RGoB recognizes the importance of supporting lifelong learning opportunities. Thus, a continuing education (CE) programme was introduced in 2006 for the benefit of those who have not completed basic and higher secondary education. In this programme, the learners follow formal school curriculum and write the same examinations with formal students. The programme currently covers only from Class IX to XII, but is expected to include tertiary education with university colleges. While there is an annual fee to pay, text books are provided free by the government. This program has greatly benefitted those who need to be employed and yet wish to upgrade their level of education. It is administered by the respective schools, but the overall coordination and professional support are being provided by the Ministry of Education.

While undertaking the process of establishing NFE-Monitoring Information System (NFE-MIS), the Ministry of Education has revised the definition of NFE which now provides a scope beyond adult literacy. ‘NFE includes all educational activities that are organized and systematic. They are undertaken outside the formal education system and target populations of all ages. Such activities usually have clear learning objectives, but vary in duration, occurrence, delivery modes, in providing certification for acquired learning. They are marked by a diversity and flexibility of contents and learning/teaching methods. NFE covers educational programmes such as youth and adult literacy; early childhood care and development (ECCD); life skills and income generation; vocational trainings and rural development’.  

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) is committed to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG), and intends to achieve universal literacy by 2015; with NFE programme to play a significant role. A formal impact assessment of the NFE programme was carried out in 2008. The study has affirmed that 'NFE graduates are empowered through achieving functional levels of literacy and increased knowledge and appropriate behaviours'. However, it has also revealed many significant issues based on the genuine needs of learners with changing times that need to be addressed during the following years. The recommendations of the assessment, which has been accepted by the 17th NFE Board Meeting, amongst others were revision of BLC and PLC curriculum and the introduction of functional English literacy course for the PLC learners.

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1 NFE-MIS Conceptual Framework
The Ministry of Education has revised BLC and PLC curriculum in 2009 making it more learner-centered and aligning them to the level of grades 6 and 8 in Dzongkha in the formal system. The development of English literacy course that is equivalent/parallel to primary level in the formal education system is yet to be undertaken. While being literate contributes to improving the quality of life, the level of education has more impact on the socio-economic development and wellbeing of the people. In the context of a lifelong learning goal that the Education For All (EFA) 2015 envisions, it is important that a well designed equivalency/certified program in English supporting adults (15 years and above) who did not have a chance to continue primary education in the formal system to do so in the NFE system. The proposed equivalency programme in English, up to the level of primary education (Class VI) should consider different conditions and environment for different types of learners while maintaining the level of standard that is parallel and comparable to the formal education. This programme is expected to ensure that both youths and adults, who are out of formal education system, have access to an alternative education and improve their chances in life. Particularly for the disadvantaged women, it will pave a way to acquire equal and greater opportunities in their lives.

As for the provider of NFE, the Ministry of Education is the main provider in the country. However, the implementation of the programme is decentralized to the districts. At the district level, the District Education Officers (DEOs) are responsible for planning, budgeting, recruiting NFE Instructors, training, supplying teaching and learning materials (TLM), monitoring and evaluation, and reporting progress to the education headquarters. Since most of the NFE centres are located in schools and in community buildings, the implementation of the programme is further decentralized to the school principals. These school principals provide necessary guidance and professional support to clusters of NFE centres within their reach and ensure proper learning at the centres; and they report to the DEOs.

The government is committed to achieve 70% adult literacy rate during the 10th five year plan period (2008 – 2013) to progress towards achieving the EFA/MDG goals on time. Despite its committed efforts, due to scattered villages and households, reaching to the last woman and man is a major challenge. Transportation of teaching and learning materials to the most remote NFE centers, where it takes 3 - 7 days on foot remains a great challenge. These challenges then pose a greater challenge for timely support and monitoring of the programme in those centres. Lack of adequate financial resources is another constraint since the NFE programme is run mostly on international assistance, which confronts the long term sustainability of the programme.
III. Priority Areas

a. Policy Support Mechanisms

Currently there is no policy on equivalency programme. The NFE Policy Guidelines that was developed in the early 90s is under review. By the end of 10th Five Year Plan (2008-2013), the government aims to achieve 70% adult literacy rate to progress towards achieving EFA/MDG goals on time; with NFE programme to play a significant role with special focus on empowerment of girls and women especially in the rural areas. The 10th Plan objectives and targets are based on an analysis of the current situation, and in consideration of the future challenges including the MDGs, SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) and the requirement of the Constitution of the Kingdom Bhutan. A total of Nu. 55.43 million was allocated for the 10th FYP to execute activities related to NFE programme out of the total outlay of Nu.10,249.12 million.

The Constitution of the Kingdom, an initiative from the throne, signed on July 18, 2008 guarantees free education to all children of Bhutan of school going age up to tenth standard. Section 16 of Article 9: Principles of State Policy states

“The State shall provide free education to all children of school going age up to tenth standard and ensure that technical and professional education shall be made generally available and that higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.”

Section 15 of the same article provides

“The State shall endeavour to provide education for the purpose of improving and increasing knowledge, values and skills of the entire population with education being directed towards the full development of the human personality.”

While section 16 guarantees free education to children, section 15 covers all sections of the population and is an important responsibility of the state in terms of imparting education to the citizens of Bhutan through various alternative learning approaches. The country has no formal education act and educational issues are decided by the parliament, cabinet and ministries within the framework of development plans.

In May 1999, the Planning Commission of the Royal Government issued a development strategy document entitled Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, Prosperity and Happiness. This document, a statement of vision for different sectors of governance, provides the strategies to reach Bhutan to a defined state in the year 2020. While this document is not a law, it has continued to serve as a guide to our legislators and bureaucrats in the formulation of policies. In the education sector, the document stipulates:

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2 South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
3 PPD/Ministry of Education
• Achieving full high school enrolment by 2012
• Achieving full adult literacy by 2017
• Adoption of new technologies and innovation in education
• Initiation and expansion of distance and continuing education programs
• Increasing private participation in education to offer choices to those who can afford
• Providing appropriate incentives and training to teachers
• Preparing the young for work; inculcating dignity of labor
• Improving applied and practical studies in the curriculum of vocational institutes
• Preparation of Education Master Plan
• Establishment of a University

Some of the visions have already been realized, some in progress and yet those to be fulfilled serve as milestones to be reached.

Since many emerging cross-sectoral issues are addressed in the NFE curriculum, inter-ministerial collaboration usually takes place during the time of curriculum and material development. Some significant issues that are addressed through Life Skills approach in the NFE curriculum are in the areas of HIV/AIDS, Reproductive Health, Gender Based Violence, Substance Use and Abuse, Disaster Management, Democracy and Rights, Waste Management, Environment Protection/Conservation, etc. Livelihood skills like weaving, tailoring, agriculture, health care, early childhood care, etc. are also addressed through life skills based education. Relevant agencies like Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Health, Home and Cultural Affairs, National Environment Commission, etc. are involved. At the programme implementation level, technical inputs are provided by relevant experts by visiting NFE classes. The inter-ministerial support will continue to grow when the equivalency programmes are introduced in different fields in the future.

Very recently, NFE-MIS has been initiated under a joint UNICEF & UNESCO funding. This project is mainly aimed to capture all NFE programmes across all agencies. Once the pilot phase is complete, the project will be implemented across the country. This will provide data for the Ministry of Education and relevant agencies for policy decisions on non formal education programme.

The alternative learning programme however requires government support in:

• Gaining equal importance of NFE with that of school education.
• Creating a separate budget and allocating adequate funds to facilitate the implementation of NFE programmes at the district levels more efficiently and effectively.
• Improving the NFE Instructor’s employment and remuneration status.
• Revising the NFE policy.
b. Curriculum and Materials Development

The 12 month long BLC introduced to develop literacy and numeracy skills in Dzongkha since its formulation in 1992 – 1994 has not seen revision until 2009. The 9 month long PLC introduced in 1996 in an effort to help the neo-literates to retain and enhance their literacy skills was reviewed and made life skills-based in 2008. As a result of NFE impact assessment carried out in 2008, these 2 courses are aligned in parallel to grades 6 and 8 in Dzongkha in the formal education system. Accreditation of these courses is yet to be endorsed by the NFE Board.

While the accepted wisdom in international literature on developing literacy skills is that people learn to read and write best in their own language, before learning to do so in other languages, the NFE impact study report reveals “…question was raised on how appropriate learners felt Dzongkha language learning is. Without exception all stakeholders including learners themselves in different Dzongkhags, more or less close to roads, and from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds overwhelmingly maintained they wanted to learn Dzongkha first and foremost.”4 The report also revealed that English was overwhelmingly demanded by the NFE learners.

If 2 changes are to be brought into the alternative learning programme, accreditation of the BLC and PLC courses at par with grades 6 and 8 (in Dzongkha) in the formal education system, and introducing equivalency programme in English for PLC learners. This will enhance access for the disadvantaged populations to an alternative education that will improve their chances in life. English is one of the official languages in Bhutan and learning English has become inevitable for Bhutanese also because of modernization. Modern technology and products have reached remote areas of the country, improving the lives of rural population. Use of mobile telephone sets, for example requires knowledge of English to use its multiple functions. Similarly, other products like popular rice cookers, water boilers, radio, etc have product manuals in English. Instructions on medicine packing and food packages are also available in English. With a small population and hardly any domestic production of these products, introduction of English literacy course in the NFE programme becomes vital for people to use products safely since development of production instructions and information in Dzongkha would not be viable. Particularly for the disadvantaged women, it will pave a way to acquire equal and greater opportunities in their lives.

c. Modes of Delivery

Public facilities such as schools and health centres; and community buildings such as monasteries and community learning centres are used to conduct NFE classes. The community schools in particular provide an enabling environment for learning. Currently, 90%5 of the NFE programme is delivered through schools. Communities, who do not have easy access to common public facilities, build shacks to house the NFE classes. The curriculum is delivered by trained NFE Instructors and the classes are conducted in the evenings, while in some places the learners opt to attend classes in the mornings before the schools began their day. The learning is currently in the national language Dzongkha. While there are many languages and dialects in the country, because almost all don’t have written forms and the small population of about 650,000 sees the national language as one of the unifying force, learning would continue in Dzongkha, and soon in English, without endangering the rich variety of other languages and dialects. In order to sustain the programme, the alternative learning programmes will continue to use the existing facilities in the communities.

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4 An Impact Assessment of the Non-formal Education Programme in Bhutan, 2008, [p.12]
5 As per information from NFCED
d. Capacity Building and Training

The minimum qualification requirement of the NFE Instructors is grade 10. They are recruited through open competition. The recruits must be proficient in Dzongkha with a minimum of 60% score in Dzongkha in their national level Class X examination. To overcome the shortage of NFE Instructors in some places and also to ensure sustainability of the programme, interested formal school teachers are recruited on a part time basis.

The NFE Instructors are inducted in NFE policies and adult teaching methodologies through conducting 10 – 12 days training program before they are posted to the learning centers. They are also provided refresher courses whenever there are new developments in the curriculum and learning materials. Some of them also receive opportunities for exchange visits outside the country through external support. All trainings are conducted and facilitated by DEOs who are trained as trainers at the national level. The Non-formal Education and Continuing Education Division (NFced) at the Ministry of Education however, collaborate, coordinate and support the training programmes across the country.

With the Ministry of Education’s plan to expand both the scope and scale of alternative certified learning programme, there is a genuine need to develop national capacity for effective development and implementation of the programme.

e. Financing and Resource Mobilization

NFE programme in Bhutan is mostly donor dependent. While the Royal Government of Bhutan supports the salary of NFE Instructors, the development of curriculum, supply of teaching learning materials (TLM) and capacity building are mainly supported by UNICEF and UNESCO. Allocation of a separate budget with adequate funds from the government is critical for sustainability and rapid growth of NFE programme in the country.

IV. Impacts and Achievements

The NFE impact assessment study conducted in 2008 has affirmed that ‘NFE graduates are empowered through achieving functional levels of literacy and increased knowledge and appropriate behaviours.’ However, it has also revealed many significant issues based on the genuine needs of learners with changing times that need to be addressed during the following years.

The NFE programme has significantly contributed in progressing towards realizing the 10th Five Year target of 70% adult literacy rate by 2013 and subsequently achieving the EFA goals by 2015. Between1990 – 2010, the NFE programme has contributed with 37% of Bhutan’s literate adult population from which 70% are women. This has been possible with government’s strong support in expanding NFE centres even in the remotest corners of the country. It was also due to social mobilization and awareness campaigns at the community level to attract more learners into the programme. And of course, commitment of the stakeholders at the implementation level and the learners themselves was unavoidable. In 2010, there are 714 NFE Centres with 12,901 learners (3,966 males and 8,935 females).

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6 As per information from NFCED/MoE
The introduction of the continuing education program in 2006 has been a boon to the school drop outs and those who need to remain employed but wish to continue their education to open more avenues of opportunities in life. While such a program is not a “discovery’, this has been a novelty in Bhutan. This year, there are 20 CE Centres with 1,518 learners out of which 730 are men and 788 are women. This program is expected to grow and benefit a lot more Bhutanese.

Since the earlier PLC texts contained a lot of knowledge in livelihood skills, the incorporation of life skills approach in the PLC materials has provided a right mixture of the essentials of facing the challenges of one’s day to day life in a more comfortable manner.

V. Core Challenges

Because of the rugged terrains, scattered villages and households in the rural communities, access is one of the major challenges to reach out to the last person in the country. Nevertheless, the government’s unwavering support in expanding the learning centres in the most remote areas including communities which have few households has played a vital role in progressing towards the set goal. Regardless of all possible support from the government, reaching to the ‘hard to reach’ communities like the migrant communities remains a challenge. While such communities are few, as His Majesty the Fifth King says, every single woman/man in Bhutan is important. Thus, strategies for reaching the ‘hard to reach’ communities will have to be developed.

A well defined policy and quality assurance strategies is essential to the enhancement of quality of the programmes. Since the process for NFE policy revision is underway, it is most apt to address the limitations and challenges discussed above.

Although many things can be initiated and implemented even before the policy is in place, the quality of the programmes may not be as good without proper focus and direction. A good policy will also ensure efficient and effective utilization of resources. Therefore, the first and foremost priority as discussed under the priority areas is the formulation of a well defined policy and strategies for equivalency and alternative certified learning programmes.

a. Recommendations for Equivalency Programme Improvement

Although the concept of equivalency programme is new in Bhutan, the success of adult literacy programme has provided enough opportunity to support for a certified equivalency programme under the umbrella of the NFE. The time cannot be more appropriate than now when the NFE policy is under review to incorporate equivalency and alternative certified learning programmes as a part of the expanded definition of NFE. It is also felt most appropriate to develop a national strategy framework alongside policy development.

Considering the lack of human capacity in the area of equivalency programme, having a well defined policy and strategy framework in place first is critical for Bhutan to gear towards establishing a most effective alternative learning option for the disadvantaged populations, particularly women and out of school youths. Once the policy and strategy frameworks are in place, issues and challenges related to access and quality can be addressed.

Since the target group for the existing continuing education programme is different from the school children, possibilities of diversifying the curriculum and different ways of providing continuing education at the secondary level (grade IX – XII) should be explored to make it more learner-centered.
b. Technical Assistance Needed

Given the fact that the concept of equivalency programme is new in Bhutan and that the country lacks human capacity in it, there is a need for technical assistance in the following areas:

a. To develop a well designed equivalency/certified program in English supporting adults (15 years and above) who did not have a chance to continue primary education in the formal system to do so in the NFE system. The proposed equivalency programme in English, up to the level of primary education (Class VI) should consider different conditions and environment for different types of learners while maintaining the level of standard that is parallel and comparable to the formal education.

b. To formulate policy on equivalency and certified alternative learning programmes as a part of NFE.

c. To explore possibilities of diversifying the continuing education curriculum and different ways of providing continuing education.

d. While in the process of carrying out the above mentioned, building local capacity.
VI. Bibliography


