CONCEPT NOTE

FLS in Action: Regional Planning Workshop to Expand Flexible Learning Strategies for Out-of-School Children in ASEAN

11-12 June 2015
Bangkok, Thailand

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Despite the commitment to providing basic education in developing countries and the substantial strides made towards achieving universal primary education, data show that progress towards providing Education for All (EFA) has stalled in the past decade. The latest data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reveal that globally 58 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 years are being denied the right to an education.

In Southeast Asia, more than 3.3 million primary-aged children\(^1\) and 3.6 million lower secondary-aged adolescents remain out of school, and many more are at risk of dropping out (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014). Factors jeopardising school access and attendance include poverty, child labour, disability, conflict and disasters, geography, gender, displacement and marginalisation.

A key challenge for governments in the region therefore is to ensure that these out-of-school children (OOSC), who often cannot be served by formal school systems, are provided with learning opportunities through innovative and flexible approaches. Successful ASEAN integration will also require education systems in Southeast Asia to equip individuals with requisite skills for a rapidly evolving labour market.

In response to this challenge, UNESCO Bangkok has launched the project, “Strengthening Education Systems for Out of School Children”, with the support of Educate a Child (EAC), a global initiative that aims to ensure all children have access to basic education. The project seeks to assist Southeast Asian countries that continue to face challenges in addressing the educational needs of OOSC. The project's implementation strategy will leverage analytical work, advocacy,

\(^1\) This number does not include out-of-school children in Myanmar since official figures are unavailable. In addition, large numbers of stateless, migrant and undocumented children are not included in this estimation.
capacity development and networking. UNESCO Bangkok has substantial expertise and experience in each of these four areas.

As the project recognises that reducing the number of OOSC should be placed high on the education agenda of ASEAN countries, its objectives are geared towards fostering an enabling policy atmosphere for educating OOSC through robust and sustainable flexible learning strategies (FLS) and consistent programme delivery.

This project is aligned with Priority 2 of the Post-2015 Education Agenda in Southeast Asia (SEAMEO College Strategic Dialogue for Education Ministers, September 2014):

“Addressing barriers to inclusion and access to basic learning opportunities of all learners, with particular attention to over-aged children in primary schools, those belonging to linguistic and ethnic minority groups, people with special learning needs, and other related causes of exclusion. These barriers may be addressed through the development of innovations in delivery and management in order to reach as many learners and support as many communities as possible. In addressing the most vulnerable sectors, these interventions can be enhanced by adopting and learning from the existing framework for education of indigenous peoples that celebrate their diversity and help enrich their culture.”

The first component of the project involves analytical work to support evidence-based policy making through a desk review of current legislation, policies, systems and programmes for OOSC.

Meanwhile, the project’s second component seeks a joint commitment and collective action from ASEAN countries to address OOSC, through the drafting and endorsement of an ASEAN Declaration ensuring learning opportunities for all children regardless of their nationality or citizenship.

The development of the capacity of governments and NGOs is the focus of the third component. This will be achieved through capacity building activities such as regional networking, seminars, workshops and online training courses. An annual regional summit will also be organised to showcase and disseminate innovative programmes on OOSC.

**FLEXIBLE LEARNING STRATEGIES: Making Learning a Reality for All Children**

At the heart of the project lie the implementation and expansion of FLS catering to OOSC.

FLS represent a shift away from a piecemeal approach to provision for the educationally excluded towards more systematic, flexible and rights-based inclusive interventions, appropriately designed to match their needs and circumstances. The objective of FLS is that, regardless of mode, duration and place of study, excluded children can acquire solid basic literacy and numeracy skills as well as the competencies and life skills required to live safe and dignified lives.
FLS overarches non-formal education, accelerated learning, equivalency programmes, flexible schooling, alternative learning/education, and complementary education and can be developed at any level and respective subsector of education. FLS aim to provide a return route to conventional schooling at age-appropriate points or offer schooling of recognised equivalence to it.

One key lesson from past EFA initiatives is the need to plan for interventions for excluded groups on the basis of a broader understanding of access and exclusion beyond the narrow indicators of school enrolment rates. Patterns for non-enrolment, drop-out, low attendance and low achievement of children are complex, and have implications for the design of initiatives to meet their needs. These patterns also reveal that barriers for these children are partly a question of school supply, partly of school quality, and partly for some, the inappropriate and inflexible nature of the formal school model itself.

Typically, it is the marginalised, poor and remote rural populations, and those affected by conflict and discrimination, who are denied access to school. Poverty and vulnerable livelihoods are overarching, cross-cutting factors in exclusion from school. Most poor and vulnerable children come from identified groups but often belong to more than one category, resulting in multiple disadvantage and marginalisation. There are factors within society that create differential demand for education and differential ability to take advantage of educational opportunities.

REGIONAL PLANNING WORKSHOP
Cognizant of the need to expand the provision of FLS in the ASEAN region, UNESCO Bangkok will organise a two-day regional planning workshop inviting Ministry of Education representatives. The meeting will take place on 11-12 June 2015 in Bangkok, Thailand.

It should be noted that the focus of the workshop is on the primary education level.

The objective of the workshop is threefold:

a) To facilitate a sharing of country experiences in developing, implementing and scaling up FLS;

b) To support Ministries of Education in drafting a three-year national FLS action plan, and;

c) To identify potential areas requiring UNESCO Bangkok’s and/or other ASEAN countries’ technical support.

The sharing of the country cases as well as the presence of government representatives from other countries in the ASEAN region will allow for critical consideration of the applicability and feasibility of FLS in other country contexts. The workshop will also provide the participants with the opportunity for peer learning and networking. Most importantly, it will allow for a dialogue on how UNESCO Bangkok and governments of neighbouring ASEAN countries can support them in expanding FLS at the primary level.
Additionally, the workshop will also offer a platform for a detailed discussion of the emerging issues and challenges in FLS implementation and expansion, including issues of access and participation, delivery mechanism, quality, policy advocacy and financing.

The workshop will commence with a brief overview of the UNESCO-EAC regional project on OOSC. This will be followed by a presentation on the key findings of a new report which estimates the economic costs associated with OOSC in Southeast Asia, to provide hard evidence that continued efforts to enrol the region’s remaining OOSC is urgently needed. An exchange of national policies, practices and lessons learnt in FLS provision will provide context and set the stage for the drafting of three-year national action plans on implementing and scaling up FLS.

Given the topic of the event, participation will be sought from Ministry of Education officials at Director-General level with responsibility for primary-level FLS, basic education, non-formal education and related areas. Heads of UNESCO Country Offices operating in the target countries will also be invited to ensure their involvement in the technical backstopping of government-led FLS.

This workshop is the first in a series of events to support ASEAN countries in increasing and widening FLS. Subsequent meetings will be organised on a regular basis for the next three years to review progress and share best practices and lessons learnt.