Scarcity affects operation of UNESCO's learning centers in Laos

By Rojana Tea

VIENTIANE, Nov. 21 (Xinhua) -- The main entrance of the Simmano Community Learning Center (CLC) in Vientiane Province in Laos is partly flooded and it is covered with high grass.

To gain access, visitors have to go to a community clinic next door and duck through a gap in the fence to get inside.

"We receive no annual fund from the government to run the center, not at all," said Somphong Keosavang, head of the Simmano CLC.

"Teachers have to pay the utility bills from our own pockets, and obviously we don't have money for the center's maintenance, or to buy soil for the main entrance to level the land and make it high," Keosavang added.

The only way the center could generate money to pay bills was to sell snacks such as banana chips to raise minimal funds. But since the material costs are now far more costly, this income-generating activity is futile.

"We need to advance our own money for the investment costs. But these days everything is so expensive. Banana, charcoal and cooking oil are all expensive," said Kongsanith Voriabouda, a teacher at the center.

For two decades, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Bangkok has been promoting CLCs in the Asia-Pacific region to provide learning skills to ensure the inclusion of the excluded, including non-formal basic education, skills training and income generation programs, and quality of life improvement activities to strengthen and develop individual capacity to survive in a challenging society.

The CLC concept was first introduced to Laos in 1992. Its major aim is to provide non-formal basic education for adults aged 15-40 who cannot read and write, or for those who have not yet completed primary education.

The 20-year (2001-2020) Education Strategic Vision of Laos stated that the main challenge is to achieve a reported literacy rate of over 90 percent for adults aged 15-40.

Lamphoune Luangxay, head of the Literacy Division of the Department of Non-Formal Education (NFE) at the Lao Ministry of Education (MOE), said that "the present objective of a CLC in Laos is only to achieve literacy and universal primary education as it is the main priority of the government.

"Don't mention continuing education and lifelong learning. People only talk about it but don't really understand what it is," he said.

It is therefore often the case that CLCs in Laos are underused and left empty after the literacy goal is achieved in a community, including the case of the CLC in Simmano.
According to the head of the village Salong Keodoungshi, the Simmano CLC started at one of the villager's houses and at the time of inception, about 30 percent, or around 800 village members were illiterate.

"It was the poverty and the remote location of the village that forced a number of school drop outs," said Keodoungshi.

In 2002, the present CLC building was built and financed by a non-profit organization. It included a kitchen for teaching cooking skills. Ten sewing machines were also donated for income-generating activities.

However, since the literacy goal in Simmano was achieved and support from Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) withdrawn, the center has become rundown and ineffective.

There are around 300 CLCs in Laos, but less than 20 centers supported by NGOs remain active, said Hieng Singhatalat, deputy Head of Literacy Division of the Department of NFE at the Lao MOE.

"Most CLCs do not organize any activity unless they receive extra funds from the government, international agencies or NGOs," he said.

The government provides two million kip (around 250 U.S. dollars) annually to the Simmano CLC to conduct an "One-Time" training program, but this money cannot be used for other purposes and the training is not popular with villagers.

Simmano villagers grow tomatoes, chilli peppers and cantaloupes and collectively make between three to four million Kip per day. Others are rice farmers, work at factories or as laborers.

"They have enough to live and eat," said the village head, "but when they take any training course even though it is free, they would need an initial investment fund to start with and a market to sell the product to end with."

Previous training activities organized at Simmano include frog farming, bio-fertiliser production, cooking banana chips and sewing. However, these production activities have not been successful enough to continue.

"There's no market for frog farming as here people can just catch frogs in nature (like in a rice field). For the bio-fertiliser, the raw materials such as treacle are quite expensive as you have to import them from Thailand," said Keosavang.

CLC teacher Voriabouda added that "for the banana chips, the local villagers have stopped growing bananas as the sale price is less than other economic crops like tomatoes or chillies. We cannot just pick bananas from the trees in our backyard like in the old times. We have to buy them from other communities."

"For sewing lessons, learners would need to buy their own sewing machine. Out of 10 sewing machines we have at the center, only two can be used. Once there was a request from a secondary school nearby to have its students learn to sew, but we didn't have enough machines," she said.
Like in other countries, CLC's basic vocational training programs in Laos suffer from a combination of underinvestment and unclear connections to the needs of learners and employment markets.

CLCs in Laos will be difficult to be sustained if the government does not provide support in terms of policy and finance.