

## Research Report

### **Innovative Approach to Meet the Basic Learning Needs of Children and the Demands of Parents/Community**

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#### **Introduction**

Because of the fundamental characteristics of human being, learning of some type is always going on in some contexts-the unorganized/unstructured (informal) learning, or the organized/structured (the formal and the non-formal) learning. The objective of this paper is to describe the innovative nature of the non-formal education in meeting the basic learning needs of children and the demands of parents/community.

Non-formal education, which "has only recently gained popular currency", is loaded with different shades of meanings, which vary according to the context and one's philosophical views of the role of education in general (Courtney and Kutsch, 1978:1; Bock and Papagiannis, 1983:14). Within the variations, however, there are specific characteristics of this sub-sector, inter alia: flexibility and adaptability in terms of organization, schedule, and duration; versatility, intensive instruction using innovative student centered methods, and utilitarian (MOE, 2000: 4). Prakasha (1986) characterizes NFE as being greater and more direct to the learners' learning needs and aspirations; flexibility of organization; capacity to adjust to the time constraints and other circumstances of the participants.

For purposes of further conceptualization of these characteristics as used in this paper, we start from the following definition of NFE by Bishop (1989:131):

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Non-formal education refers to all the organized and semi-organized educational and training activities that operate outside the regular structure and routines of the formal educational system, aimed at serving a great variety of learning needs of different sub-groups of the population, both young and old.

In the same vein, UNESCO (2000:45), taking from Coombs (1973), has defined non-formal education as "...any organized educational activity outside the established formal system-whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity-that is intended to serve identifiable learning clientele and learning objectives".

In explaining the rationales given for paying closer attention to non-formal education, it is logical to start from the assumption that *to educate was to go to school, learning was equated with instruction and by the years of exposure to it*. Formal education was regarded as a panacea for all ills and credited with almost magical powers, which, of course, it didn't have. As a result, massive investments and expenditures were made on it. Yet, the results have not always matched the high expectations. *Poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy, inequality still remains* (Bishop, 1989:24) and few of the children are retained in primary schools particularly in developing countries in which Ethiopia is not an exception. Universal primary education, which has become a target to all nations of the world, is still a long way off for many developing countries including ours. Consequently, a search has been made *for better alternatives than pouring more scarce resources into a small conventional school system that has no chance of becoming universal in any reasonable period of time* (Coombs, Presser, and Ahmed, 1973 in Courtney and Kutsch, 1978:14).

Basically, implementation of Non-Formal Basic Education (NFBE) as an innovative approach implicitly or explicitly entails planning, which, in

turn, is based on appropriate data about program feasibility and meeting the beneficiaries' needs with regard to relevance, quality, equity, and efficiency. These all are briefly discussed in the following sub-sections.

### **Solicitation of Appropriate Data**

Solicitation of appropriate data places the NFBE program on a sound foundation and helps to ensure successful implementation. In this paper, it is taken to be equivalent to needs assessment, which allows us to identify changes that will be welcomed and those that will meet resistance (potential supporters and opponents) during program implementation (Pratt, 1994: 44).

In line with this, Sharma (1984:262) has pointed out that the first requirement for planning implementable NFBE program is the detailed information about the program that exists. This enhances planning and reordering of the existing program or planning a new program. The quality and objectivity of the data and the form in which they are presented to decision-makers deeply influence the systematic planning and subsequent implementation of the program. Thus, attention should be given to appropriate and adequate data, which make possible continuing reformation of sensible objectives and clear deliberation on the best means of implementing them (Ibid.). The sensible objectives of NFBE, according to Mani (1984:53), include: to enable the willing children to get entry into formal schools at multiple points, and to make a better use of their leisure time.

To enhance the successful implementation of these objectives, the planning of NFBE program requires the following data:

- Enrolment figure;
- Percentage of dropouts and repeaters;
- Percentage of school-age population not receiving any education;

- Number of qualified teachers available in the community;
- Professional training facilities available;
- Inventory of school buildings and buildings that could be used for educational purpose in the community, instructional materials estimation of utilization rate;
- Budget available and budgetary constraints;
- Shortage of skilled manpower in the economy (Sharma, 1984: 262-263).

Information on the past and future (projections for some years ahead) to reflect population trends, rural-urban mobility, and changing economic and social requirements are also useful to make available and manage resources. This calls for the identification and quantification of program needs, which will determine viability of the program implementation. An important filter of needs is the program parameters from which quantifiable data for the purpose of making supportable and justifiable decisions can be obtained. For realization of needs, adequacy of resources and supportive policy contexts should be examined. Need identification, thus, requires a survey of the universe of the participants.

Facilitators are most likely to be able to reflect the needs of learners because of their training and contact with them. NFBE learners would be able to tell about their immediate needs and needs of their fellow citizens in the community. Community representatives would be able to give their assessment towards total needs of the community. All of the needs identified are analyzed for preparing a detailed need-inventory and prioritized.

In general, much to the success of a NFBE program implementation can be predicted on the basis of identification and quantification of beneficiaries' needs and resources. Cost-free location, local talents, and community resources allow extending program budget. Thus,

every possible need and effort must be made to get information that can be quantified by numbers, money, time and the like. This goes with Pratt's (1994: 45) words: *design implementable* program, rather than *first design...then implement it*.

### **Meeting the Basic Learning Needs of Children**

*Give people a handout or a tool, and they will live a little better.*

*Give them an education, and they will change the world. (World Bank, 1999)*

The long-term goal in education is nothing less than to ensure everyone completes a basic education of adequate quality which would enable him/her meet basic learning needs-the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for survival, to improve the quality of his/her life, and to continue learning (World Bank, 1999:vii, 6; WCEFA, 1990: ix). Basic education can help meet the intrinsic needs of the learners, assist them to meet other basic human needs, and promote social and economic development. In line with this, two reasons for basic education to claim public resources can be mentioned. First, a sound basic education lays the base for the subsequent learning. Second, deterioration at this level of learning strongly affects the incidence of poverty (Vandycke, 2001: 27). Increasing relevance, improving quality, promoting equity, and enhancing efficiency, which are said to be applicable to both in-school and out-of-school settings can, thus, be ascertained as the basic learning needs of children.

#### *Increasing Relevance*

Research findings demonstrate that basic education can improve labor productivity and entrepreneurial skills, help develop appropriate values, attitudes, and behavior, and have positive intergenerational effects on families and communities. These results justify the importance attached to the relevance of basic education (WCEFA, 1990: 46). Basically, the relevance of curriculum/program is determined by the extent it meets the educational objectives, which at

a basic level are to impart essential cognitive skills and knowledge, and to prepare students for further learning. The key to relevance is, thus, the identification of needs (MOE/ICDR, 1999:7)

Research on needs identification has confirmed that the content of basic learning should focus on literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem-solving - general skills and essential learning tools that are applicable across locations and over time. An implementation of NFBE program that graduates learners who do not have these core contents has failed as a program regardless of how effective it may have been in meeting other cultural, social, or political needs. Basic education is said to be relevant when it can prepare learners to be better farmers or craftsmen without precluding other possibilities for them (WCEFA, 1990: 48, 49). Practically, however, the relevance and usefulness of the educational system to the objective situations in many countries including Ethiopia remain contentious (TGE/ESS, 1994: 1). When the beneficiaries are not consulted and involved in planning, the relevance of NFBE program implementation is usually affected; and the courses offered in most cases remain irrelevant to the beneficiaries (FAWE, 2001: 51).

Since the relevance of learning changes as individuals change their locations and as the characteristics of communities change over time, implementation of NFBE should be able to develop the inquisitive and adaptability of the learners' mind. Therefore, the implementation of NFBE program should make appropriate use of local materials, local examples, local languages, and local personnel to create relevant and efficient learning experiences that can stand the change of time and place.

### *Improving Quality*

Of the three pillars of a good education system (access, quality, and delivery), quality is the key (*World Bank, 1999: 7*). Virtually, the quality and standard of education in a given country is mainly determined by the essence of its curriculum and the process of its implementation

(TGE/ESS, 1994: 3). NFBE program implementation practices must enhance the quality of education that children have access to. Currently, high on the agenda of many governments are activities aimed at improving quality in basic education. For two reasons, however, quality at implementation level is rarely achieved. First, implementation is a forgotten area; all talk about the planned, not the implemented program. Second, quality itself is difficult to measure and define. More over, the quality of learning outcomes influences and is influenced by factors outside the education system such as the home environment and perceptions of the future labor market (World Bank, 1999: 7-8, 46). As a result, attempts in developing countries like Ethiopia are being made to increase enrollment "at the expense of quality and without commensurate growth in the economy" (TGE/ESS, 1994: 1).

Practically, the provision of education of acceptable quality depends on two determining factors: (i) an adequate system of school management, and (ii) a reliable information system enabling the operation of the education system at the local level to be monitored (World Bank, 1999: 9; taking as a foot note from [www.education.unesco.org/unesco/educ.prog/iiep/res1.htm](http://www.education.unesco.org/unesco/educ.prog/iiep/res1.htm)).

In essence, learning quality is determined by four factors of school inputs and process (curriculum, instructional materials, learning time, and teaching) and by the child's teachability (Lockheed, Verspoor, and associates, 1991:41). With different terminologies, WCEFA (1990:49) indicates that discussions on learning quality depend on four sets of indicators - learner characteristics, educational inputs, educational processes, and educational outputs and outcomes.

A systematic effort to improve learning quality in the implementation process of NEBE program requires specification and measurement of the desired learning outputs and identification of how the multiple inputs of the system interact within the learning process to produce the desired outputs. The current understanding of these relationships suggests the following priorities for NFBE reform:

- improving the availability and use of instructional materials;
- enhancing teacher/facilitator effectiveness by emphasizing subject mastery, communication skills, and motivation;
- improving managerial skills, community and institutional structures, and individual and organizational incentives;
- increasing the time actually spent on learning (WCEFA, 1990: 53).

When these properties are linked with improved preconditions for learning that enhance pupils' initial capacities, and with community environments that reinforce learning, true gains can be made in learning quality of the NFBE program.

### **Promoting Equity**

Inequities most commonly relate to gender, poverty, location, religious, linguistic, or ethnic identification, and physical or mental disability. As World Bank (1995: 45) depicts, *girls, the rural poor, children from linguistic and ethnic minorities, nomads, refugees, street and working children, and children with special needs, go to school less than others.*

Practically, poverty affects both the ability of the family to support schooling and its willingness to bear the costs. Their children, thus, rarely receive an education appropriate to their needs and accurate information about the probable benefits of basic education.

Gender difference in participation is a persistent concern. WCEFA (1990: 54) has indicated that with the exception of Latin America, female rates of enrolment in primary schooling continue to lag behind those of males: the rates for 6-11 year-olds in Africa were 69 percent for males and 56.5 percent for females; in Asia the respective rates were 77.4 and 59.3 percent in the early 1990s. The gap has actually widened since 1970 in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Pakistan, and in many



other nations where female enrolments remain very sensitive to economic or social disturbances.

The unequal distribution of schooling in a nation causes unequal access. According to one estimate, only half the rural children in most countries (and as few as 10 percent in some others) have the opportunity to complete four years or more of schooling. The barriers to learning attainment in rural areas include the limited quantity and poor quality of schools, poor reinforcement from the non-school environment, irrelevance of the curriculum, high opportunity costs for children whose labor is needed at home, and long distances between the home and the school. Another disadvantage is that the language of instruction used in schools often differs from that used in the home. These disadvantages translate into differences in learning achievement.

By the same token, in order to tackle inequity with regard to ethnic and religious disparities, disabled children and adults, and the dislocation and deprivation of the refugee population (WCEFA, 1990:55-56), there is still need for collaborative actions of pertinent stakeholders.

Practically, equity in meeting basic learning needs may come at a cost, but in the long run it will be a lower cost to society than the price paid in the continuation of inequity. Closing the persistent historical gap requires concerted, compensatory efforts, not simply an expansion of access. Thus, all should seek complementary programs, which are "different but equal" programs, to fulfill the learning needs of out-of-school children.

### *Enhancing Efficiency*

By definition, efficiency is production of output relative to input of energy and other resources. Efficiency rates, thus, help us to understand how the education system works in terms of using available resources (Pratt, 1994: 343; FAWE, 2001: 4). Efforts to improve efficiency in today's basic education programs emphasize

reducing costs without significantly altering the desired effects, or enhancing effectiveness without increasing costs. For example, the introduction of split shifts to increase the utilization of facilities is an appropriate way to enhance efficiency in locations with sufficient pupils to justify extra shifts. Similarly, literacy, NFBE for out-of-school children and other basic skill programs can make use of primary school teachers, facilities, and appropriate materials when school is not in session and thus reduce the proportion of the cost of these resources that must be charged to basic primary schooling (WCEFA, 1990:60; ESSSR, 1998:50-51).

Unfortunately, education systems in developing countries have difficulty in improving efficiency for three reasons:

- inadequate knowledge about the importance of inputs,
- inadequate knowledge about the cost of inputs, and
- difficulty obtaining appropriate information (Lockheed, Verspoor, and associates, 1991: 39; taking from Lockheed and Hanushek, 1988).

A special form of educational inefficiency is that which is described as *wastage*. This normally refers to the effect of pupils repeating a grade or dropping out of school. Since both actions increase the number of years of schooling provided relative to the number of graduates produced, such wastage is seen as synonymous with inefficiency. A special endeavor should, thus, be made to minimize, if not avoid, wastage and enhance efficiency.

Overall, NFBE program implementation should be able to prepare learners for meaningful and productive life in the community (TGE/ESS, 1994: 3). Career guidance and consulting services for all learners need strengthening so as to avoid both attrition and repetition. They need to be encouraged to play crucial roles in the implementation of the NFE programs, either individually or in groups. This leads to true gain in meeting the basic learning needs of children.

## **Meeting the Demands of Parents/Community**

The discussions about meeting the demands of parents/community are not completely different from the discussions so far made under the preceding sub-section. Nonetheless, some peculiar points are worth pinpointing here.

Virtually, considerations of the demands of parents/community are almost invariably essential for successful NFBE program implementation to take place. To be meaningfully supported, NFBE program implementation should be well communicated to and understood by the community and/ or parents. This is because appeals to national or international donors do not seem to be very effective in building support for implementation. There must be people within the community and the learning center that perceive the implementation meeting local needs (Pratt, 1994: 328). NFBE centers, thus, should be linked with the community, which are the users of its products.

As Skager and Dave (1977:117) indicate, the home and the community play the most subtle and crucial role in initiating the process of lifelong learning, which continues throughout the entire life span of their children. This calls for the determination of the immediate and long-range needs of the community/parents before NFBE program can be established for implementation. If not, resistance and/or rejection of the program by the implementers and beneficiaries is unavoidable. For example, youth clubs in Benin, rural education centers in Burkina Faso, and Koranic schools in Mauritania, which the respective countries experimented with, alternatives to formal primary school education proved to be unacceptable to the local communities and/or the beneficiaries (Lockheed, Verspoor, and associates, 1991:31), for none of them had addressed the immediate and long-range demands of the beneficiaries.

To be more specific, parents wish that their children get basic education of reasonable quality so as to be active participants in the socio-cultural life of their community. Tietjen (1991: 71-72) has confirmed, *creating culturally appropriate facilities appear key in increasing parental demand*. Parents also feel comfortable when NFE centers are near to their homes and the learning times are flexible. When learning centers are tailored to meet parental concerns for their children's, particularly daughters' safety and chastity, other parental biases seem to be eroded. This relieves them from fear of their daughters' sexual abuse and abduction. If not, they do not feel comfortable to send their daughters to the learning centers especially for the night shift (FAWE, 2001: 48).

In the same vein, costs associated with schooling seem to be the single most important factor in depressing parental demand. Incentives and subsidies, which outweigh both direct and opportunity costs, seem to overcome the difficulties in this regard.

The flexibility of the NFBE program promotes parental needs to have their children at least for some parts of a day in domestic activities. Therefore, recognition of the vital role of parents and community is particularly important. They should have the possibility to express the difficulties that hinder the educational success of their children and to take part in the definition of solutions so as to achieve success. This implies that the NFBE program implementation practices should be community-based. Implementation activities that guarantee greater decentralization, which place more authority in the hands of the community and local education officials, can make an individual learning center/school more relevant and efficient through increasing its accountability to improve quality.

Overall, thus, participation of the parents and the community in the program needs to be encouraged and enhanced. This can be achieved by implementing realistic and relevant NFBE program, which cater to their needs and aspirations. By implication, NFBE centers

should be made responsive to the local needs and requirements and should act as a center for all educational activities of the community (TGE/ESS, 1994: 16-17). Its effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability can be maintained when the community ownership of the program is ascertained. In so doing, analyzing and diagnosing community needs with the intention to identify existing needs; fashion new ones so as to meet them and involve the beneficiaries in the implementation of the program-as well pave the way to meet the basic learning needs of children.

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