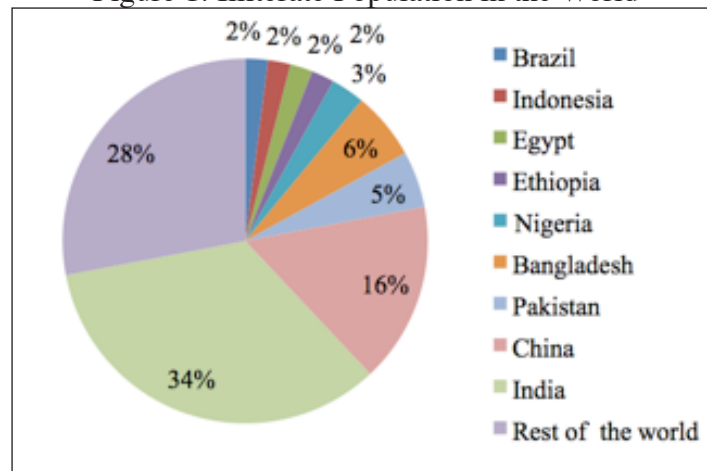


Community Learning Center Programs and Community Literacy Development in Asian and the Pacific Countries: Bangladesh, Iran, Vietnam and Pakistan as Case Studies

By Akbar Zolfaghari, Mohammad Shatar Sabran, and Ali Zolfaghari

Worldwide, 750 million adults are illiterate. It is alarming to note that around 625 million illiterate adults live in Asian and the Pacific Countries, while 113 million children have no chance of attending school. Figure 1 shows the percentages of illiteracy across the world.

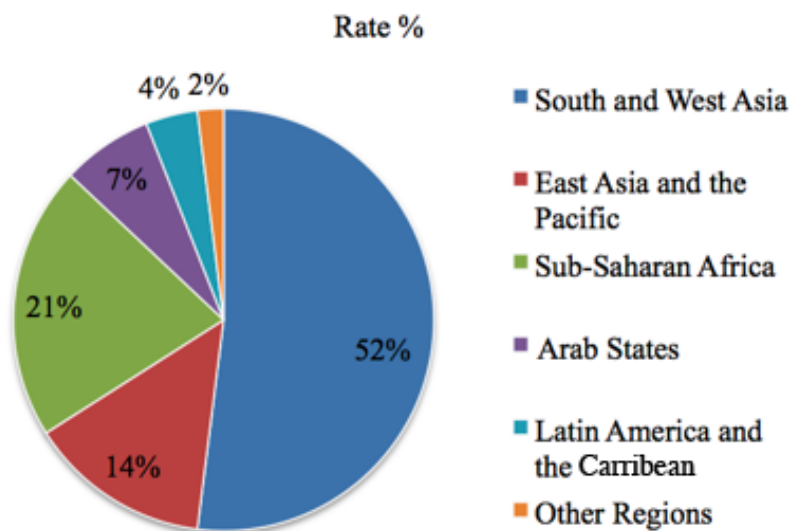
Figure 1: Illiterate Population in the World



Source:(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, January 2009b)

Asian and the Pacific Countries constitute 71% of the world's illiterate population. This reflects a serious situation considering around 66% of the illiterates are women. The illiteracy levels are higher among people living in rural and remote areas. In countries where the overall adult literacy rate is lower, the gap between female and male literacy rate is greater. Countries which have implemented Community Learning Center Program (CLCPs) since 2000 have recorded increases in literacy rates. Figure 2 gives the distribution of global adult (15 years and above) illiterate population by region during 2005-2007.

Figure 2: Distribution of Global Adult Illiterate Population by Region



Source:(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, January 2009b)

The above figure shows that three-fifths of the world's illiterate population lives in six Asian countries. During the 2000s, when countries began to address the problems of adult illiteracy, rates steadily dropped. Literacy and literacy skills were regarded as the most important tools to enable the community to solve their daily problems and enabled them to participate in social, political and economic activities. As literacy developed, literacy skills became a major tool in learning and were partly responsible for the rapid changes in the new century.

Attempting to improve countries' literacy levels, the Asia and Pacific Program of Education for All¹ (APPEAL) established the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) to act as a linkage for local institutions to focus on the broader issues of community development. The acceptance of the CLCP was primarily due to historical factors. Governments of the above mentioned countries had found that their own programs were insufficient in responding to the needs of learners at the community level. Several proposals and recommendations made by "experts" from the Asian Development Bank, the UNESCO, the UN, and the Education Ministries in the early 1990s also added to the decision for accepting the programs.

What is the Community Learning Center Program (CLCP)?

The CLCP is the newest program to promote the level of literacy in Asian and the Pacific Countries and was initially set up according to the framework of UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Program of Education For All with the financial assistance of Japan and Norway in 1998 (APPEAL, 2005).

This program was intended for uneducated and unskilled adolescents and youth, unemployed educated youth, child laborers, women, and subsistence farmers. Promotion of literacy was made through basic life skills, non-formal education, and community development activities (UNESCO, 2008b). The key feature of the CLCP is that it does not require new infrastructures.

This meant that it can be operated from existing health centers, temples, mosques, primary schools or other suitable places (UNESCO, 2008a). So far, 25 countries around the globe have joined the CLCP: this includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Maldives (APPEAL, October 2005). This paper presents how the CLCP was carried out in four selected countries: the People's Republic of Bangladesh, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. To begin with, a review of the term "literacy" is made in the following paragraphs.

Literacy and Community Literacy Development (CLD)

Defining literacy is a contentious issue. One way of defining the term is to look at history. Literacy has often been associated with the ability to read and write. Erben and Castaneda (2009, p. 131) showed that being literate means more than just being able to read and write, but being able to achieve an adequate level for communication purposes. Being literate means that an individual is able to communicate with other individuals in society where ideas can be exchanged and behavior can take place. Limage (1993, p. 29) has also classified international meanings of literacy as a set of basic skills, as the foundation for a higher quality of life and as a reflection of political and structural realities. Thus, definitions vary according to countries. In the context of the countries explored in this study, a person is literate if he/she knows how to read, write, and understand simple sentences in his/her national or ethnic language or a foreign language (APPEAL, 1993). The concept "literacy development" is derived from the APPEAL definition: literacy development occurs when a set of reading, writing, reasoning, and oral communication skills develop. Community Literacy Development therefore needs to be understood in

terms of the acquisitions of sets of simple multidimensional skills at the community level (Dickinson & Neuman, 2006, p. 311). These skills also include technological knowledge (Yopp & Singer, 1994). Using the above operational framework, a community that is able to meet the goal of CLD would have developed a literacy community whereby most of the people can read, write and do simple calculating. To achieve this goal some techniques have to be employed. One of them is the CLCP. The focus of this study is to describe role of the CLCP in CLD in the four Asian and the Pacific Countries mentioned earlier.

The CLCP in the People's Republic of Bangladesh

The CLCP in Bangladesh is being implemented by the Ministry of Education. In the 58 districts and 150 cities that adopted the program, reading materials and basic information for daily life are provided. Nearly 64% of the CLCPs are implemented by local support and the remaining 36% by NGOs. On average, 75-100 people are members in every CLCP, of whom 70% are women.

CLCPs in Bangladesh are oriented towards covering the needs of learners and developing their literacy ability in order to solve problems. Specifically, the CLCP objectives are to operate as institutions of continuing education; to address the life-long learning and community development, and to empower individuals and communities through education. With gradual widening of development interventions, the objectives of Bangladesh's CLCPs have incorporated the following objectives:

1. To develop networking with their respective community resource centers, lobby with the government bodies and audio-visual units for IT;
2. To conduct vocational training and to arrange mainstreaming of CLCP learners (Rahman, December 2003).

To meet these objectives, several programs under the CLCP in Bangladesh have been implemented. These include Gender, Sanitation, Environmental Conservation, Income Generation Activity, Health Awareness, Water, Sanitation and other Socio-Cultural Development Programs (Rahman, December 2003). In the context of Bangladesh, a person who is able to write a letter in any language has been considered literate. With the hope of decreasing levels of illiteracy, the CLCP has implemented several programs to develop writing skills, two being basic literacy and post-literacy.

A. Basic literacy

The CLCP offers facilities to teach reading and writing, as well as simple calculating. It also enables participants to read story books, monthly magazines, daily newspapers, letters, write at least ten simple sentences and complete all common forms (Rahman, December 2003).

B. Post-Literacy Program

Under this program, the CLCP targets neo-literates and literates to improve their level of literacy, as well as to increase their social awareness, especially concerning their role in community development (The International Labor Organization, 2008b). The main goals of the program are the retention of already acquired literacy skills and improvement of literacy skills (Dhaka Ahsania Mission & Department of Non-Formal Education, 2008).

The CLCP and CLD in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh

Results of the study showed that not only had levels of literacy improved, but that the quality of life of the community had improved. Table 1 illustrates the changes during 2000-2007.

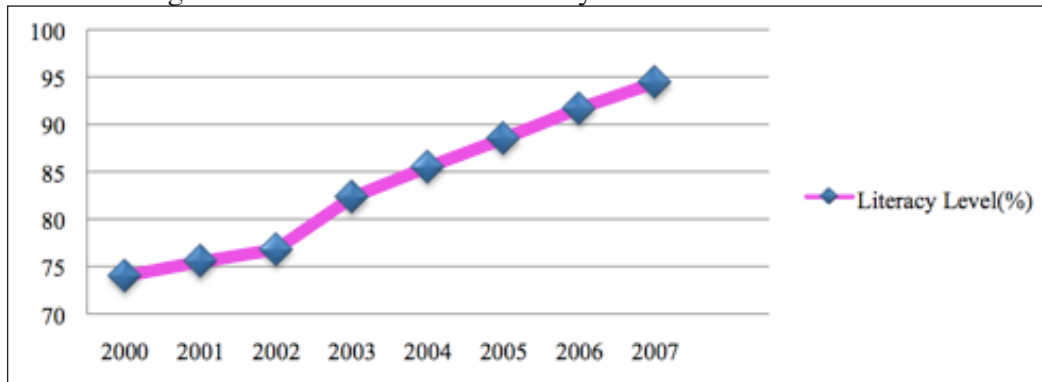
Table 1: Literacy level in Bangladesh after CLCP

Year	Literacy Level (%)	Illiteracy Level (%)
2000	26.1	73.9
2001	30	70
2002	34	66
2003	35	65
2004	37	63
2005	39	61
2006	44	56
2007	49	51

Source:(The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2008)

The literacy level in Bangladesh before the implementation of CLCPs was 26.1%. Seven years after that, the percentage, increased to 49% (Dhaka Ahsania Mission & Department of Non-Formal Education, 2008; The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2008). This goes to show that the various methods adopted through CLCPs had made an impact on the level of literacy. Figure 3 shows the rising trend over the seven years, i.e. 2000-2007.

Figure 4: The Trend of the Literacy Level in Iran after CLCP



Source: (LMO, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c)

According to current educational statistics of Iran, the percentage of the literate population has continually increased. Doubtless, the CLCs have played a very important role in providing learning opportunities for women. After the establishment of CLCs, a large number of community people have participated in the CLCP. Examination of the activities implemented by CLCs showed that 79% of the participants were women. Men preferred their wives and daughters to go to the CLCP, where women and girls were exclusively taught by women literacy teachers, particularly in cases where the village elementary school was for both boys and girls who were taught by male as well as female teachers. Moreover, women and girls could go freely to CLCP classes unlike an earlier situation where the classes were held at rented houses or villagers' homes. Men did not allow their wives and daughters to attend those classes.

Success in promoting community participation in the programs has been due to various factors. These included responsibility for very young or handicapped children, preoccupation with household chores, the narrow-mindedness of male family members, illness or disability among community people, and nomadic lifestyles. Apart from the development of literacy level, several other perceptible changes have also happened in the communities after the implementation of the CLCP. Positive changes among the people had occurred. They were more aware of their rights, greater participation in village council meetings and other social affairs, a readiness to participate in elections, greater involvement in family decision-making in matters related to number of children, children's education and marriage, increased earnings from selling hand-made garments, greater self-confidence, and better knowledge of matters related to hygiene and sanitation.

The CLCP in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Vietnam participated in the CLCP by promoting literacy through community-based institutions for non-formal education (Hiroshi, 2008, p. 191). The program started in 1998 with the establishment of two pilot centers in the states of Hoa Binh and Lai Chau, and was expanded in 1999 to include two new centers in Thai Binh and Bac Giang. The program is the responsibility of the Research Center for Literacy and Continuing Education under the National Institute for Educational Sciences, Ministry of Education and Training, in collaboration with the Vietnamese National Commission (APPEAL, 2001). By the year 2015, it was expected that around 90% of all communities would have a CLCP (Hiroshi, 2008, p. 191). At present, there are 8,000 CLCs distributed throughout the country (The Continuing Education Department, 18-20 April 2007, 2004).

The main objectives of CLCs in Vietnam are to represent a new integrated approach to improve the quality of life of Vietnamese. These would be achieved through providing information, making continuing education available to anyone, providing community meeting places, offering access to computers and software training, providing safe places to study away from home, providing books and periodicals, helping villagers to increase their income through various training on agriculture and animal raising and introducing alternative income-generating activities, reducing illiteracy and maintaining literacy by organizing literacy and post-literacy classes, establishing and upgrading libraries of CLCs, improving the villager's quality of life through the organizations of seminars, group discussions and talks on various topics related to the needs of the villagers, preserving and enriching the village's life through the promotion of socio-cultural and sport activities; and developing and preserving local culture and traditional ways of life (Research Centre for Literacy and Continuing Education of Vietnam, 1999; The Vietnam Learning Association, 2008).

The CLCP has implemented several programs to benefit everyone. The programs consist of education programs equivalent to both lower and upper secondary education and higher education, ICT and vocational training program (The Continuing Education Department, 2004). The CLCP has varied participants, ranging from illiterate people and those who have just been out of illiteracy, to those who dropped out of the formal education (Chau, 2007). However, priority is given to adult people especially women and disadvantaged groups such as farmers and ethnic minorities (Brouwer, 2006; Government of Vietnam, 2003).

According to the Vietnam Population and Housing Census a surrogate measure of literacy was as follows: persons were literate if they had completed grade 5 or higher or if they were head of their household (or the representative of the house-

hold who was interviewed by the census collector believed that they were currently able to read and write) (Tram, Ayse, Ann, & Pamela, 2004). The focus of literacy activities in Vietnam was on continuing education and also oriented to cover the needs of learners and to develop their ability in making use of the literacy skills to solve their problems.

The implementation of the CLCP in Vietnam was seen as a means of contributing to the equitable and sustainable development of different groups of people in disadvantaged areas by improving the level of literacy among communities. Accordingly, the CLCP implemented several literacy programs, with the purpose of achieving and then maintaining community literacy. The short-term course was to help learners catch up with rapid scientific and technical changes required by the family. The programs were to apply to both rural and urban populations (The Continuing Education Department, 2004). Vietnam has close cooperation with international organizations, local NGOs working for literacy promotion, and various organizations. Through the CLCs, more than 725 personnel from NGOs and government and donor agencies received training and shared their knowledge and experiences with other participants from different regions in Vietnam.

The CLCP and CLD in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

Vietnamese CLCs had improved the level of literacy through various activities such as materials and curriculum development, training, networking, information sharing and advocacy. The main aim of most CLCPs in Vietnam was to promote the community's reading, writing and calculating skills ability. Evidence showed that the programs were very successful. Table 3 provides more details of the situation.

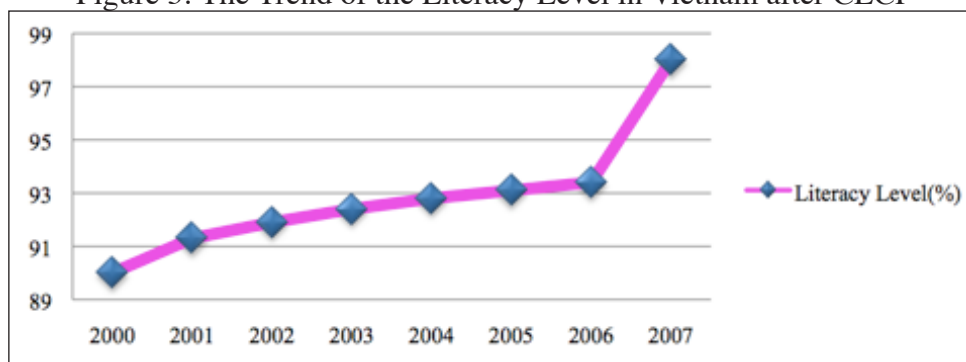
Table 3: Literacy level in Vietnam after the CLCP

Year	Literacy Level (%)	Illiteracy Level (%)
2000	90	10
2001	91.9	8.1
2002	93	7
2003	94.4	5.6
2004	95.5	4.5
2005	96.5	3.5
2006	97	3
2007	98	2

Source: (GSO of Vietnam, 2008; MET of Vietnam, 2006)

Before the CLCP, the country's literacy level was 90%. After seven years of CLCP implementation, the percentage had increased to 98 (GSO of Vietnam, 2008; MET of Vietnam, 2006). The trend of the literacy level in Vietnam after the CLCP is delineated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: The Trend of the Literacy Level in Vietnam after CLCP



Source: (GSO of Vietnam, 2008; MET of Vietnam, 2006)

The priority and efforts done during seven years have led Vietnam to achieve the high level of success in literacy development. Through the CLCP, it was possible to achieve success on NFE in the areas of illiteracy eradication, post-literacy programs, equivalency/complementary education, life skills and community development programs. The learning needs and skills of the working people were met and they could increase their productivity and income and thus were able to make career changes (MET of Vietnam, 2004). To promote the level of literacy in communities, the CLCP obtained help from universities and companies in Vietnam. Through various educational programs based on community needs, structural development, and evaluation program activities it was possible for CLCP to meet the desired impact.

Incorporating grassroots-level CLCs proved to be an appropriate model of education and as such the programs were gradually established and operated in mountainous rural areas in Vietnam (MET of Vietnam, 2004). Since February 2002 many CLCs were established in many remote communities of the country. These CLCs have used the meeting halls of the communities, cultural houses of the wards, temples, and primary schools as places in which their educational programs were conducted. With the support from the education service at the community level, and People's Committee at grassroots level, these CLCPs have provided more educational opportunities to a wider variety of people in the communities, almost all of whom are adults between the ages of 15-35 (Brouwer, 2006). Based on the success,

the Continuing Education Department of Vietnam has found that the CLCP model is useful to expand the literacy activities for developing the level of literacy among people in the country. This sets the next goal for Education For All (EFA), i.e. to achieve a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy through the CLCP by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults (Government of Vietnam, 2003).

The CLCP in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

In Pakistan, the government works closely with APPEAL to help NGOs implement the CLCP. The government felt that the Non-Formal Education classes, usually conducted for six or nine months and then stopped, were not effective and were not based on the needs of the community.

The CLCP, on the other hand, began with the purpose of helping the people, and so attempted to identify their real problems. With the aim of enabling communities to learn new knowledge and literacy skills, the CLCP initiated a multipurpose program. Pakistan's CLC is defined as a place, institution, or center for accessing knowledge, information, and literacy skills (Shaheen, 2004).

The CLCP in Pakistan was started in collaboration with the NGOs, GOs, UN agencies and the community. The community was made to understand that they could help improve their own lives through knowledge and skills. Using the success of pilot CLCs in the country, a number of CLCPs were implemented in many communities in an effort to improve the level of literacy. So far, around 50,000 CLCs have been implemented in 114 districts of the country. Most of them were implemented in rural areas where around 145,000 people were literate (Abid & Saleem, 24-29 October 2005; Bukhari, 2007; Ghauri, 2006).

By identifying the needs of the community, information was obtained with regards to fields of interest. Having such information it was possible to strengthen their capacities to carry out activities to educate and improve the quality of their life. Given the community needs and empowerment, individuals could involve themselves without gender bias. That was the purpose of the CLCP in Pakistan. To achieve the stated goals of the Literacy, Social and Community Awareness, Active Participation of Women Members Programs have been implemented through the CLCP. One of the major programs is the CLD program.

In Pakistan's definition of literacy, a person is literate if he or she can read and write a short sentence and understand a simple statement in everyday life. To encourage as many people in the literacy programs as possible, there are adult literacy centers, skill development programs, as well as the 10-year United Nations Literacy Decade program, National Commission for Human Development literacy

program, a literacy campaign and the program on Addressing Child Labor through Quality Education for All were implemented. The programs were conducted for six months a year, two hours a day, and six days a week (Ministry of Education of Pakistan, 2004). The basic programs were to develop writing, reading, and calculating skills and were targeted especially for illiterate persons.

The CLCP and CLD in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Based on reports it has been shown that the CLCP has played an encouraging role in CLD in Pakistan. It taught learners how to read, write, and do simple calculating, and the literacy level in the country has improved after the CLCP. The average increase in literacy level between year 2000 and 2007 was 1.8%, which means roughly a 12.5 percentile point increase was achieved in seven years. The present projected literacy level in Pakistan is around 55.5%. The pattern of increase in literacy and illiteracy level from 2000 to 2007 is illustrated in Table 4.

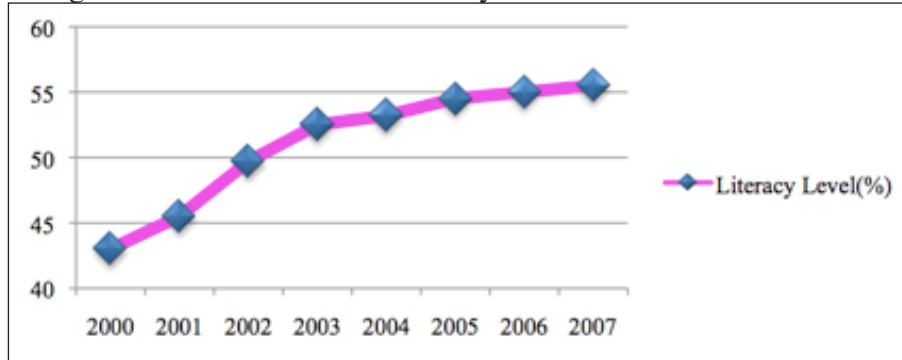
Table 4: Literacy level in Pakistan after CLCP

Year	Literacy Level (%)	Illiteracy Level (%)
2000	43	47
2001	45.5	54.5
2002	49.7	40.3
2003	52.5	47.5
2004	53.2	46.8
2006	54.5	45.5
2005	55	45
2007	55.5	44.5

Source: (Abid & Saleem, 24-29 October 2005; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, January 2009a)

Prior to the CLCP in Pakistan, the literacy level was 43%. It increased to 55.5% seven years after the CLCP (Abid & Saleem, 24-29 October 2005; Ghauri, 2006; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, January 2009a). The trend of the literacy level in Pakistan after CLCP is as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: The Trend of the Literacy Level in Pakistan after CLCP



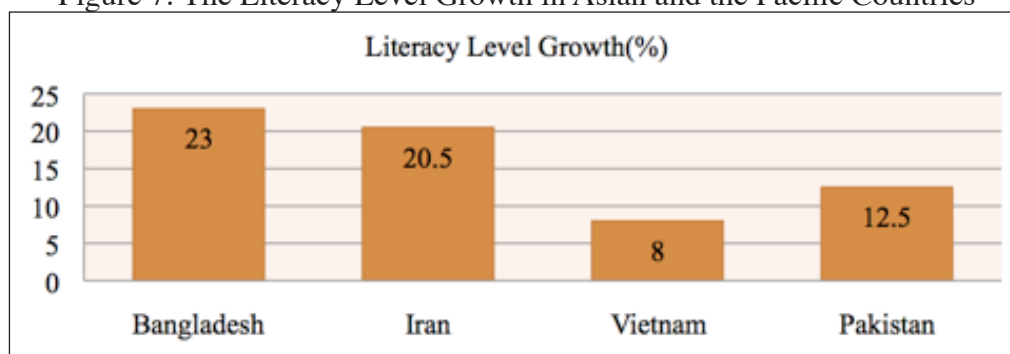
Source:(Abid & Saleem, 24-29 October 2005; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, January 2009b)

The success of the CLCP can be attributed to several factors. The people found it to be a practical and reasonable approach to help their problems. The major contributing factor seemed to be their collective effort in making the program a success. Through increasing their literacy level, the CLCP helped to create opportunities for the people to be more enterprising and earn better incomes. According to the Pakistani National Plan of Action for Education For All 2001-2015, the country should achieve a 50% improvement in level of literacy through the CLCP by the end of 2015, especially for women, equitable access to basic and CE for all adults will be the EFA goals and targets in the country (The International Labour Organization, 2008a).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the CLCP as an educational tool had played a very encouraging role in CLD in Asian and the Pacific Countries. On the average, the level of literacy in the countries increased roughly 16% through the CLCP during seven years. The detail of the literacy level growth in the four abovementioned countries is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: The Literacy Level Growth in Asian and the Pacific Countries



On the average, the annual growth level of literacy in the countries is around 2.3%. Among selected countries of the study, Vietnam with an 8% growth had the lowest literacy level and Bangladesh with a 23% growth had the highest literacy level.

After reviewing the analysis, it becomes clear that what makes the CLCP famous and important is not merely the successful roles that the program has implemented, but the fact that success of the program depended more on the presence of effective activities and their relationship with other factors. This argument was supported by the data that has been gathered from four selected countries that participated in the CLCP. In these countries, local leaders, community participation, international organizations, good educators, government, bazaars, market fairs, cultural and sports events, international agencies, NGOs, and commercial institutions had helped the CLCP in this process. All of the factors worked together to the success of the CLCP. Each factor has its own advantages and strengths. Removing one factor will retard the process of achieving success. One factor is no more or less important than the others. All of the literacy programs and activities in the CLCP in these countries have been implemented effectively with cooperation of these factors. Otherwise, the CLCP alone was not able to achieve this success.

Based on the statements above, we offer the following recommendations to best promote the level of community literacy among people in Asian and the Pacific Countries:

1. Financial Supports
2. Change of the Community Perception towards Literacy
3. Decentralization
4. Effective Policy-Making
5. Localization of Textbooks
6. Capacity Building of the CLCP's Organizers

7. Exchange the experiences among participating countries to strengthen the CLCP in CLD.

It is hoped that these recommendations will become significant guidelines for the Ministries of Education for future CLD programs in these countries.

Notes:

¹ APPEAL is a regional cooperative program designed to promote basic education for all in the Asia and Pacific region. It was launched in New Delhi on 23 February 1987. The overall aim of APPEAL is to promote lifelong learning through the integration of all aspects of educational planning including literacy, universal primary education and continuing education. Although APPEAL focused mainly on non-formal adult education during the 1990s, its coverage has expanded to include formal primary education in view of the Dakar Framework for Action adopted at the World Education Forum (Senegal, 2000).

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