

# Lifelong Learning in Nepal: Contexts and Prospects

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## Abstract

*After the declaration of the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by the UN, many countries have adapted lifelong learning as one of their main goals for meeting their educational needs. However, lifelong learning as an educational policy concept is defined differently in various contexts. With the case of the context of Nepal this paper, which builds on my thesis prepared for Master of Philosophy degree (Regmi, 2009), explores some of the fundamental concepts attached with lifelong learning, mainly non-formal and informal modes of learning as key components of lifelong learning.*

**Key words:** formal learning, non-formal learning, informal learning, recognition and validation, indigenous knowledge, education policy

## Lifelong learning

One of the important reasons behind the development of human civilization to today's stage is human curiosity for learning. If we look through the perspective of Social Darwinism (Rogers, 1972) the world appears to be a stage for competition where all individuals are in a race to win others.

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In this respect, living a competitive life requires continuous learning. All individuals should be intellectually, physically and emotionally equipped to survive in this world. Continuous learning is not only the source of knowledge production but also a key for making this world further advanced. While negative learning such as the production of weapons and exploitation of natural environment has put human civilization at risk positive learning such as inventions of new medicines has made a great contribution towards the advancement of human civilization.

Perhaps, the first field to theorize human learning is behavioural psychology, which sees learning as a process of acquiring knowledge or developing the ability to form new behaviours. Behavioral psychology has a strong impact on school education hence learning is associated with educational qualifications achieved by attending educational institutions, often provided by the state. However, much of human learning occurs outside of such institutions, and people continue to learn beyond their school and university education. If we look through the Kuhnian (Kuhn, 1962) perspective of paradigm shift, lifelong learning can be considered as a new educational paradigm, in which learning incorporates both in-school and out-of-school activities.

Though learning and education are mutually inclusive terms they give different meanings when we use them in specific contexts. For example, if we talk about adult learning and adult education, the former refers to the acquisition of knowledge by adults through their own will, which may not need any intervention from an outside agency such as state-controlled education system. The latter concept, adult education, on the other hand, refers to the process of imparting knowledge through some kind of state-controlled system such as establishment of schools, appointment of teachers who have formal qualifications and the use of structured curricula and published learning materials such as textbooks. In this sense, unlike adult learning, formal education is something governed, managed and often imposed by an outside agency such as the government of a particular country (Regmi, 2019).

Different types of learning have been discussed in the literature related to education and learning. In the 1970s, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCE) differentiated three types of learning: formal, non-formal and informal (see UIS, 2012). Depending on the criteria one uses to find learning typologies there could be several other types of learning (e.g. experiential learning). However, all other variants of learning

can be included within the broad spectrum of these three types of learning: formal, non-formal and informal. For example, experiential learning can be taken as a part of informal learning as it comes from the experiences of individuals rather than from formal schooling (Kolb, 2015). Lifelong learning, as a new paradigm of education, includes those three types of learning as the fundamental components.

Formal learning is typically provided by an education or training institution, is structured and leads to certification. It is intentional from the learner's perspective. That is to say a student knows that learning is taking place when s/he is in school. But non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It comprises out-of-school education, on-the-job training and it is mostly structured (UIS, 2012). The third component, informal learning, results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. Unlike non-formal learning, informal learning is voluntary and self-directed. It results from personal exploration and may occur spontaneously in everyday life situations, within the family circle and neighborhood. It is unstructured and does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but, in most cases, it is non-intentional or incidental (UIS, 2012).

Educationists and learning theorists wonder about how real learning takes place. Which mode of education – formal, non-formal, or informal – can optimize peoples' motivation in learning? Some behavioural psychologists carried out a number of lab experiments and propounded many theories of learning (Skinner, 1950). For example, B. F. Skinner and Ivan Pavlov tried to define human learning by exploring the connection between stimulus and response. Those theories were implemented in classroom teaching because, before lifelong learning as a new educational paradigm had emerged in the past, there was almost no recognition of non-formal and informal modes of learning.

Recent changes that have taken place in the field of information delivery, political awareness, and globalization have put a demand to acquire new knowledge to the people of all ages irrespective of their involvement in formal education (Lengrand, 1975). The acceptance of human capital theory as a policy tool for economic prosperity has motivated and also forced people to update their existing levels of knowledge and skills (Regmi, 2015). As the job market is becoming more competitive there is an ascribed need for achieving high skills. In this context, state-funded formal school system is seen as increasingly inadequate for meeting the needs of their citizens. One

of the factors behind pushing the world leaders to make lifelong learning as the Sustainable Development Goal 4 in 2015 UN Summit was such a realization noted above (United Nations, 2015).

Though the initiatives towards having lifelong learning as an educational goal seems to be new, the concept itself is not new. Even limiting our analysis only to the Western World, we may find that the concept of lifelong learning existed with different names such as continuing education, recurrent education, adult learning, lifelong education, and distance education. Even though these terms are used interchangeably they give different connotations while they are used in specific contexts. For example, adult learning does not include the type of learning that takes place in K-12 school system and the knowledge and skills acquired before a child goes to school. The notion of lifelong learning includes all forms of learning that occurs between the birth and death of individual human beings. In this sense, learning is understood as a lifelong activity.

With the adaptation of lifelong learning perspective as a major drive for educational policy changes, the educational policies of individual countries are converging towards a common goal: creating human resources to fulfill the human capital needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The major agencies to harmonize educational policies towards lifelong learning not only include the UN and its sister organizations but also the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank and the European Union. Similarly, though lifelong learning has been a new catchword in educational policy dialogue, it is not a uniform or unitary theme within the global policy field. It has emerged at differing times and in different nations over the last few years, with differing emphases. Lifelong learning with its current concern for developing human capital means 'an abandonment of the traditional significance for education of the struggles for personal development, justice and social equality' (Edwards, 2008, p. 21).

According to the European Commission (2000), lifelong learning includes all learning activities undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social, and employment related perspectives. Lifelong learning accommodates the global provision of education and skills on the basis of equality of opportunity, inclusiveness, emphasizing the importance of key qualifications, basic skills and primary knowledge (Rubenson, 2011). The developed countries such as the United States of America, Canada and the member states of the EU have used lifelong learning as an educational tool

to create competitive knowledge economies. The developing countries like Nepal are grappling with the complexity of whether accepting the global goal of lifelong learning could address their local problems. There is also growing fear that it might perpetuate the deficit approach of education that sees their citizens as illiterates in comparison to their Western counterparts (Regmi, 2017).

In light of the above discussion of lifelong learning as a new educational paradigm the following section of this paper explores the contexts and prospects of lifelong learning in Nepal with a special focus on formal, non-formal and informal learning.

### **Contexts of lifelong learning in Nepal**

The complexity in peoples' lives brought by the development in the field of science and technology, population growth, explosion of new knowledge, and market competitiveness have forced Nepali citizens as in other countries to learn new things and update their existing knowledge repertoire. For this, they are expected to keep on learning throughout their lives. In a sense, the importance of lifelong learning is growing in all developing countries including Nepal because of this perceived necessity of individual who are expected to live a modern life (Regmi, 2018). As Nepal is predominantly a rural country with the majority of its people involved in informal economy such as agriculture informal learning is more prevalent than formal learning.

There could be several reasons behind the importance of non-formal and informal learning over formal learning. The heart of lifelong learning lies in the non-formal and informal learning. The field of formal learning shares little portion of lifelong learning continuum – from school to university education. Similarly, formal education system is so structured and rigid that it can be seen as repressive, too costly, generally cognitive and not able to support peoples' attitudes to becoming active lifelong learners. Human learning is not structured as it happens without any plan nor needs curricular contents or behavioral objectives as some of them have become key norms of formal schooling system.

However, the autonomy of formal education in today's knowledge world has made it difficult to use all three modes of learning as equal components of lifelong learning. The possible solution for this problem would be acknowledging the importance of non-formal and informal learning. The system of acknowledging the knowledge and skills acquired in informal

and non-formal setting to the formal schooling system can be understood as 'a formalization of non-formal education and non-formalization of formal education' (Tuschling & Engemann, 2006, p. 460). But the problem is that this rhetoric is hard to be translated into practice. For example, even though non-formal and informal learning are increasingly recognized as the heart of lifelong learning by international organizations at national level no policy exists for the formalization of non-formal and informal learning.

Though tiny in the globe Nepal possesses a great diversity in race, culture, and language. Scads of intangible heritage embedded in the ontologies and epistemologies of these races, cultures and languages are invaluable assets of this diversified country (Regmi, 2017). These diversities are treasures and prerequisites for boosting up educational level in myriad ways. But in the educational history of Nepal this racial mosaic has been understood as a daunting challenge for Nepal's educational development (Regmi, 2019). Moreover, the current education system that aims to focus only on formal education and the vicious circle of poverty are intertwined. Those who have not participated in formal education are also those whose entire generation is in poverty. The UNDP has continuously reported that Nepal made progress in human development over the last 40 years. It's HDI ranking doubled from 0.22 in 1990 to 0.50 in 2010. Among 135 countries Nepal emerged in third position achieving HDI since 1970 (UNDP, 2010). However, it is also widely noted that Nepal is still a poor country with large disparities in school attendance and the quality of education persist, particularly between urban and rural areas and across ethnic groups (UNDP, 2010).

The formal education system of the Western world, which was transferred to the developing countries during the colonial period, has roots in the development of modern science, which neglected indigenous epistemologies as the characteristics of traditional societies (Regmi, 2018). The formal school curricula were designed for a mainstream and largely urban populace. It became a very limited utility for remote rural communities where the majority of the people lived and still live (Regmi, 2017). The majority of rural children failed to adapt these systems and, as a result, rural communities endured high illiteracy rates and poor educational achievement.

Since the 1990s the expansion of education became a global movement. Nepal's commitment for Education for All and Education 2030 including various conventions and declarations can be seen as its desire for having educated citizens. As a consequence, Nepal has achieved some notable results in the form of increased Net Enrollment Rate, however, such

progress has been overshadowed by low retention and completion rates. For example, UNESCO in 2006 had found that 1.4 million school age children and adolescents were out of school in Nepal. The actual numbers might have reduced in recent years but the disparity remains among different groups of people in terms of gender (Acharya, 2004), caste (Koirala, 1996), and geographical locations.

In Nepal, caste disparities are even larger than wealth and gender disparities. Census reports continuously show that literacy among low caste people such as Dalits is lower in both K-12 and higher education. There are also great disparities among different ecological belts with Kathmandu Valley having one of the highest enrollment rates. The federal administrative structures recently introduced might change this regional disparity, however, it is hard to reduce the disparities in terms of gender and caste unless a consecrated effort is made to implement policies and plans. A large part of rural populace lacks access to formal education and the goal of mass schooling has been almost unachievable for some people living in the remote parts of the country. The homogeneous type of education followed by Nepal has not been fruitful for addressing the need of multicultural Nepal. A multicultural and multilingual approach to lifelong learning becomes a key and a changing issue, deeply related to context, culture, and ideology for a country like Nepal.

If we go back to the history of Nepal, in the ancient, medieval and even during the Rana periods, education was almost non-formal and informal. But due to the introduction of the Western education system mainly after the 1950s (Regmi, 2019), non-formal education remained an inferior complement of formal education and informal learning was not even regarded as the part of learning. The history of non-formal education is about half a century old in Nepal. The activities related to educational expansion were conducted as a strategy in 1951 for the national development, nevertheless, all these initiatives got policy back up only with the introduction of the First Five-Year Plan in 1956. These activities which were initiated by the Ministry of Education remained limited to literacy programmes until the 1960s. Other ministries like those of Agriculture and Health as well as the Panchayat and Local Development carried out various non-formal education programmes with literacy as one of the important components. In 1971, the National Education System Plan (NESP, 1971) stated that adult education would be launched in mainly two forms; (a) literacy extension programme and (b) functional adult education programme (Chitrakar & Maddox, 2008).

Some adult education and functional adult literacy programmes launched in the past focused on rural development. A pilot project known as *Education for Rural Development* in Seti Zone had included a major component on functional literacy. This project left a number of legacies such as out-of-school program, flexible schooling programme, women's literacy programme, and community learning center. These programmes are often offered in different forms and names as complementary programmes of formal schooling system and are targeted to those who have failed to participate in schooling.

Since the implementation of *Seti Project*, a number of national and international organizations have been supporting Nepal government to establish and operate various literacy and non-formal education programs including Community Learning Centres (CLCs). Since 1982 CLC have been a regional agenda in the Asia-Pacific region along with the initiation of Community Learning Centre Project in 1982 within the framework of the Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All. As far as the status of informal learning is concerned, no provision of recognizing informal learning exists in Nepal (see Regmi, 2009); neither the Government of Nepal has made any systematic efforts to enhance informal learning including indigenous knowledge and skills.

With the introduction of lifelong learning as a global goal of education non-formal and informal modes of learning has re-emerged in the education system of modern Nepal, which is discussed in the of the following section.

### **Prospects of lifelong learning in Nepal**

The recognition of non-formal and informal modes of learning can be considered as an important approach towards the promotion of lifelong learning. Recognition or validation of learning means giving an equivalent parity to all three modes of learning (Lamichhane & Wagley, 2006) . When informal and non-formal learning outcomes are validated it opens up the ways forward for encouraging people to be involved in making learning a lifelong activity. Creation of an environment conducive for lifelong learning may have the following prospects for developing countries, particularly in the case of Nepal.

Firstly, professionals who have a great deal of understanding and experiences in their specific fields need an environment to update their expertise, mainly new research findings of their fields. For example, a professor of psychology who has been teaching for several years needs getting acquainted with



new frontiers in the field. This will enable him/her to be a better teacher as per the need of 21<sup>st</sup> century and involve himself/herself in the cutting edge of research and innovation. The teachers, both teaching in schools and universities of Nepal, who are often blamed as old-fashioned for their reliance on old and outdated teaching strategies, need such an environment that not only provides opportunities to update their knowledge but also a strong mechanism to recognize and validate their workplace learning and experiences.

Secondly, because of economic and family problems many youths leave schools and are forced to pursue jobs that they could never be satisfied with. If an environment conducive for learning at their workplace and at home is provided, then they can re-enter into formal education with work experience and the knowledge and skill acquired non-formally and informally. For this, the country needs a mechanism that provides recognition and validation to such learning so that they can be admitted to the higher level than the level at which they had dropped off.

Thirdly, professional development could be enhanced through lifelong learning. Even though employees are big assets for any company, because of their outdated knowledge, they are often understood as old employees waiting for gratuity and pension. The only best possible means to revitalize their strength and make good use of their experiential learning is to provide an environment for lifelong learning. It will have twofold advantages: on the one hand it will improve the company's performance with the revitalized strengths of experienced employees; on the other hand, it will provide economic gain by reducing the amount of money that goes for pension.

Fourthly, the environment of lifelong learning will be a benefit for young graduates hunting for jobs in the market. Along with passing time, some forms of knowledge become obsolete. Opportunities to refresh their knowledge and skills help them to have better employment prospects in the job market. It might also decrease some of the social problems that are caused due to unemployment among youths in Nepal. Finally, though learning is a lifelong activity and may happen without conscious efforts of individuals, learning achievements remain invisible, implicit, unsystematic and non-transferable until they are recognized and validated (Regmi, 2009). The environment of lifelong learning can make learning visible, explicit, systematic and transferable. Moreover, it becomes functional not only to an individual but also for the entire human community.

Some of the educational policies of Nepal such as the School Sector Reform Plan, the School Sector Development Programme, Non-Formal Education Policy, Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework and periodic plans made by the National Planning Commission have noted the importance of non-formal and informal learning. For example, the School Sector Reform Programme brought an issue of mainstreaming the students who have acquired knowledge through non-formal means into a formal system. This provision, though not fully implemented in practice, can be a milestone to foster the chances of providing lifelong learning environment to Nepali people.

Similarly, the Three-Year Interim Education Plan 2007-2010 (NPC Nepal, 2007) also made the provision that 'entering into formal education from non-formal and vocational and technical education and vice versa will be made through equivalency test'. The Plan also aimed to certify indigenous skills and provide an opportunity for higher education. However, despite several policy initiatives such as the ones noted above implementation failure is one of the barriers towards increasing peoples' participation in lifelong learning in Nepal.

### **Concluding notes**

In this paper, I argued that learning is both lifelong (because it stretches from cradle to grave) and life-wide as it takes place in formal, non-formal and informal modes. Because of the increasing demand to achieve competitiveness at individual, national and international the desire of developing countries and also the urge from their donors have increased in recent decades. Introduction of lifelong learning as one of the Sustainable Development Goals can be understood as the outcome of both the desire and the urge. With this change in the international policy landscape the concept of lifelong learning and the importance of recognising the non-formal and informal learning modes of learning has increased.

The dominant means of educational attainment in Nepal is formal schooling. Nepal has made some progresses in terms of increased enrolment rate and decreased dropout rate during the Millennium Development Goals period 2000-2015. However, there was and still is a very low investment in non-formal education and the achievement is far below than expectations. There is no adequate provision towards recognizing informal learning including indigenous knowledge and skill which are the most important component of lifelong learning for the culturally diversified country like Nepal. The

provision of lifelong learning may have several benefits for a country like Nepal but it cannot be realised without understanding its contexts.

The paper argued that lifelong could create an environment to update the knowledge and understanding of professionals so as to make their performance more effective. It will provide opportunities to re-enter into formal education for the youths who once had to terminate their studies due to family or economic problems. It will also increase their employability by updating and widening their knowledge and skills. Learning is a lifelong process but without developing appropriate mechanism to provide learning opportunities for all irrespective of their caste, gender, language and age Nepal cannot achieve development and prosperity.

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