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ROLE OF GOVERNMENT, UNIVERSITIES, NON-GOVERNMENT, AND BUSINESS ENTERPRISES IN RURAL EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT IN THAILAND

Abstract

Drawing from the author's experiences working in the field of rural education development, better known as local education in Thailand for approximately 20 years, she had seen strong efforts made by various sectors: Government, NGO, university, and business enterprises that contribute to quite successful rural education development. The author suggested that Thai educators and teachers still face numerous challenges working in the field of rural education, not only the inadequate financial resources, but mainly the lack of clear guidance to develop effective strategic system for rural education. The author argued strongly that to reach the ultimate goal of rural development in any perspective, we needed to develop a comprehensive and well plan policies with consistency and integrative efforts among concern organizations to mobilize resources and quality of rural education.

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To be able to follow the efforts, and collaborative efforts made by these sectors and among these sectors clearly, one needs to have some knowledge concerning organizations responsible for the educational system, inclusive of basic education or formal education, non-formal education, and informal education. The author will elaborate role and involvement of each sector in the rural education development, under the nature and context of each organization.

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The following descriptions are categorized according to each sector, Government sector, university sector, business enterprises and NGOs.

1. Government Sector :

Quite a few Government Organizations, namely the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Energy, and Ministry of Public Health seem to take major parts in rural education development. General speaking, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the formal education. All children of Thai nationality are eligible for free basic education up to 12 years. The Office of Basic Education Commission is to provide these children with the National Curriculum, the standard-based curriculum. (MOE, 2008) This is to assure that all children will receive the same standard knowledge regardless of where they are.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Public Health (Sumlee Thongthew, 2006-7) Science and Technology (Sumlee Thongthew, 1999-2000), and the Ministry of Energy (Sumlee Thongthew, 2004-2008) where the author has been working in the past 5-10 years, argued that the knowledge, skill, and even certain attitudes provided by the “standard” knowledge as of the MOE is not enough for the students to survive productively and sufficiently in their local contexts. In order to carry out their typical rural living, relating to one another and with nature while making a living utilizing self-sufficiency approach, they need other fields of knowledge (for examples: rural knowledge and concerns, Climate Justice, Ethical dimension of climate change, socio ecological system, energy education, economy) not available in the already provided standard contents. (Sumlee Thongthew, 2009)

These other Government Organizations take part in rural education development, offering necessary knowledge in their realm of expertise to students in rural schools. The provision is normally through extra activities (summer camping, science fairs, short-term trainings). It is needed to offer through the extra activities so that to avoid the interfering with the formal and only curriculum legally allowed in every school in Thailand.

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2. University Sector :

There are two examples of University's role in rural education development.

1) Energy Research Institute at Chulalongkorn University, has initiated 'Project Energy Education for Local Schools since 2004, an initiative that reflects the Institute's role as the provision of rural education development. In partnership with experts in the field of teacher education, the school districts (185 Education Service Areas in 76 provinces), and the Ministry of Energy, the Project's mission is to facilitate research and development with a special focus on energy curriculum and appropriate instructional designs to be utilized in rural schools throughout the nation. The ERI also facilitates and supports professional training for teachers in rural areas.

According to the Project, the energy education for rural development cannot be done in schools by teachers and students alone, but through mutual understanding with community at large. It requires the intense expertise of other related professional fields of study, not normally available in the school of education. Ecology, Economy, Energy Education, to name a few are seen as relevant Knowledge Areas. (Berkes, F.; Folke, C. (Eds),1998) Of course students as well as teachers are not expected to be motivated by such high complexity and great diversity of these contents. On the contrary they impose great difficulties on students in remote schools who attempt to understand them all.

With the aim of dealing with the predicament, the ERI team combines a thematic approach (Freire,1981), with reflective thinking strategy (Ausubel,1963; Whitehead,1989), stressing hands-on service learning activities in everyday living context to the benefits in helping the selection of the contents and in motivate students' interest.

It is also required that the students must cooperatively design and implement at least one learning project at the end of the study. The project is to allow them to explore the possibility of utilizing knowledge on energy education to the well being of their community at large.

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2) The Division of Elementary Education, Faculty of Education, Chulalongkorn University with collaboration of the Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Science and Technology has initiated the 'Project Health Education for Rural Schools'. The mission is currently underway into the training of effective teachers, into efficient teaching and into the production of teaching materials on Health Education. The application of information communication technology (ICT) has considerable potential for providing new teaching and learning opportunities for teachers as well as students in such remote areas.

From the two example cases, it is clear that University has at least three roles in rural education development, one is to conduct research and develop projects focusing on specific knowledge area (energy education, and health education), another role is to link or coordinate rural schools, school districts, local community, experts in selected field of study, and most of all the subsidy organization to support the project, and the last role is to provide necessary professional training for school teachers.

3. NGO sector :

Learning from experience working with TASC (The Alliance for Safe Children) during the Tsunami crisis in 2004-5, the author classified educational development in the affected area of Pang-nga Province into two models: the quasi-public model, and the non-formal educational model.

The quasi-public model is utilized when TASC and other Foreign NGOs essentially replace what would be the role of Government. They provided immediately needed educational programs as well as the general basic education, including the construction of new schools, instructional materials and office supplies, and teacher training. Safety School Program was one of the educational program needed by teachers, and students at that time. Funding by TASC, the author with her team from Chulalongkorn University helped providing technical assistance focusing on training, supervision, and monitoring teachers and school administrators during the program.

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Another model is non-formal education. TASC worked closely with the local community, providing them with necessary information on health education.

It is worthwhile mentioning that financial support from TASC is on the short term basis. TASC faded out to more needed areas in other Asian countries.

4. Business Enterprises Sector :

Ad more financial resources are needed to support rural education development, local business enterprises have recently encouraged to take part in the developmental process. Demand for substantial resources, both in term of financial and necessary skills beneficial for local economic improvement and competitiveness has initiated linkage between local community people and local government and business enterprises. Up to present, the author has witnessed various models of schools and private partnership in rural education development. CPF, one of the biggest business enterprises specialized in food production and retail supermarket plays a crucial role not only in supporting school lunch programs and training projects on farming skills for students, but also on providing workshops for local people. KFC is currently sponsored physical education program for selected schools in every province where it franchised restaurants are located. The Ancient City Group's Training Center and Urban Resort working cooperatively with local government allocates partial but generous resources inclusive of financial support and educational advisors to urban and local schools. It is worthwhile mentioning that under Thailand Revenue Code, all private organizations including registered NGOs that contribute services to local schools and for local education development are to be taxed at 10 % and in the case of NGOs are entitled to tax exemption on income from donations, membership fees and registration fee for members.

Conclusion :

Although the rural educational development has been an eminent issue and concerns of various organizations in Thailand, its meaning and goals are still unclear to those involved. To some the concern is on the well being of people under the self-sufficiency

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concept, and on better balanced environment, which is of the humanistic perspective. Meanwhile most people focus mainly on economic-centric aspect. Considering both perspectives, rural education seems to underline the effective education that can improve rural economy yet yield better humanistic characters in local people. One remark is that the two approaches stem from two different philosophy, and aim at different goals.

It seems that we still face numerous challenges working in the field of rural education, not only the inadequate financial resources, but mainly the lack of clear guidance to develop effective strategic system for rural education. The author argues strongly that to reach the ultimate goal of rural development in any perspective, we need to develop a comprehensive and well plan policies with consistency and integrative efforts among concern organizations to mobilize resources and quality of rural education.

Another challenge that needs to be tackled on is to encourage organizations outside OBEC to be able to participate more in educational development. Such concept seems to shift the emphasis away from the Ministry of Education bearing the sole authority, and to delegate and legitimize other organizations particularly those business enterprises and NGOs to take part in providing knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for rural development other than those prescribed in the standard based school curriculum.

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