

How Are Some Asian Countries Addressing the Learning Needs of Rural People?

By [Hameed A. Hakeem](#)

The workshop on Addressing Learning Needs of Rural People held in May 2004 in Bangkok, is the *Education for Rural People Flagship's* most recent effort in Asia to promote action towards meeting the educational needs of rural people.

The workshop brought together two participants from each of the nine participating countries (representing each country's Agriculture and Education ministries), and twenty other participants representing international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and academia. The workshop was organized jointly by FAO (SDRE, Rome and Bangkok Regional Office), UNESCO (IIEP and Bangkok Office) with the support of Italian Development Cooperation (DGCS).

The Seminar had three objectives:

- Review country situations in addressing learning needs of rural people
- Facilitate knowledge sharing among planners and partners of Rural Development and EFA action plans
- Explore ways of promoting partnerships (including inter-sectoral cooperation) at all levels to address concerns of rural people within the framework of Poverty Reduction, Food Security and Rural Development strategies as well as EFA strategies.

These objectives were addressed in 3 ways: country reports, thematic panel discussions, and focused working groups:

Panel presentations were based on the following themes:

- (i) *Promoting Access to Learning with special focus on school feeding programs and community participation in education.*
- (ii) *Promoting Quality and Relevance that focused especially on the role of basic education in achieving food security and sustainable development*
- (iii) *Promoting Equity* focusing on reducing gender disparities and promoting the learning needs of ethnic minorities
- (iv) *Linkages Between Schools and Agricultural Services* with examples from links between schools and

agricultural programmes such as Integrated Pest Management projects in Vietnam and Thailand

- (v) *ICT: Potential for Reaching Rural Learners* with special focus on the use of communication technology targeting rural youth

Particular points highlighted at the workshop included the following:

rural people are not homogenous;

there is no single agenda for education for rural people that is universal to all countries and communities;

Urgent action is required to meet the learning needs of rural people, to reduce their poverty, and to improve their quality of life. These actions need to focus on the following:

- promoting the recognition of “rurality” and an explicit focus on, and analysis of, the specific context or needs of rural people, including skills development challenges;
- building awareness and developing the capacity of Ministry of Education and Agriculture staff around the concerns of education for rural development;
- promoting the need for a holistic approach to rural development that goes beyond the narrow boundaries of traditional agricultural education and training, and places greater emphasis on effective ways of reaching the unreached;
- promoting the utilization of appropriate technologies;
- encouraging the participation of the rural population in the process of policy formulation, and the design, implementation, monitoring and accountability of programmes related to ERP;
- developing indicators to assess the urban-rural divide in education and to evaluate the impact of ERP-related projects and programmes;
- facilitating knowledge sharing and dissemination of lessons learnt from multi-sectoral partnerships that highlight avoidance of duplication, budgetary savings, sharing resources, greater sustainability, complementarity, rather than competition, among ministries, agencies and departments; and

- improving quality by supporting participatory curriculum development and teacher training to respond to rural development requirements.

Country Reports helped not only to take stock of concerns and problems but also to discover and share some promising practices in helping rural people to meet their learning needs. Some key observations from these Reports are mentioned below:

- *All countries address, in varying levels, ERP issues in their EFA plans*
- *Co-operation among Ministries of Education and Agriculture is improving*
- *Community participation in ERD planning is crucial*
- *Rural poverty remains a key issue in spite of economic growth in many countries*
- *Rural-urban disparities are still significant* :Inequities in investments, provisions of social services and quality teachers, and development of basic infrastructure like roads, electricity and water supply were commonly mentioned in Country Reports.
- *Food security considerations remain serious*
- *Ethnic minorities and underserved groups need special attention*
- *Quality education for rural people requires greater spending for more new schools, transportation service, boarding facilities, supplementary feeding programs, scholarships and subsidies, financial incentives for teachers and creation of localized curriculum all demand larger budgets. Yet, Country Reports confirm that investments in education for rural people do make a difference.*

Notwithstanding the overall added costs to ERP in some instances, the Seminar noted that rural schools *can* have a comparative advantage through:

- Teaching and learning that is more context-specific
- Community linkages that help in involving the community in the learning process to make the education process thoroughly participatory
- Innovative practices – limited resources often demand innovative techniques such as multi-grade teaching