

Effect of Quality and Innovation on Rural Transformation in Education: A Case of Nepal

Narayan Prasad Kafle, PhD

Nir Prasad Dahal

Abstract

Education is the first and foremost priority for national development primarily because of its returns to the nation, to the society and to the individuals. Nepal and her underdevelopment is often attributed to the relative low indicators in reference to education. Considering the hands in economic resources, it does not seem practically possible for the state alone to take the sole responsibility of driving the campaign of education improvement. Therefore, Nepal has been taking support from development organizations to contribute in the priority areas. Save the Children is one of them. Save the children Nepal (SC Nepal) has been working in educational development of rural Nepal for almost three decades. Primary focus of SC Nepal's education has been always rural area and access as well as quality education of marginalized population. Currently, education program has been implemented in 23 districts of Nepal. In 2013, education program has reached 825,701 children of rural areas. Out of 825,701 total reached children, 412,343 were reached through SC Nepal's direct intervention whereas remaining 413,358 were reached through indirect way. These long and expanded experiences of working in the education sector of Nepal with focus to rural areas have provided SC Nepal with many opportunities as well as many learning experiences. This paper highlights three approaches that SC Nepal has been practicing reflecting the successes and lessons learnt. This paper claims Community-based Education Information System (CEMIS), Literacy Boost (LB) and Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability & Learning (MEAL) as three unique measures out of many others that substantially contributed in bringing change in the lives of targeted people and

communities. At the center of all these initiatives there is the common intent of changing the lives of rural people, especially the children, by providing them with the benefits of educational opportunities.

This paper is informed by a mixed method design utilizing information that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature. It takes into account and exhibits the facts and figures in reference to different three approaches to establish the reach and to estimate the effect these approaches have in the lives of people. At the same time, this paper attempts to highlight impression statements reflecting perceptions of different stakeholders about these approaches. Data will mainly come from the secondary sources utilizing the archive of SC Nepal, the reports both internally generated and researched by independent evaluators. Some first-hand live responses also come directly from the program areas where SC Nepal has been working these days.

This paper ultimately unfolds the instrumentality CEMIS, LB and MEAL have on the lives of people. The lens of interpretation used to make meaning is the development theory of change. Theory of change as a guiding principle of development intervention considers input, output, outcome, and impact in alignment with the innovation of the approach, partnership the approach establishes with the stakeholders and advocacy of the approach for rolling it out to the larger recipients as possible. The paper concludes that data quality right at the foundational level is very critical to trace and identify the actuality of situation. CEMIS as a tool of data collection at the grassroots level has exhibited high potential of a quality tool and has been very instrumental in identifying the out of school children and design programs that cater their needs. Literacy Boost (LB) has given a new hope justifying the significance of reading in early grades and linking the community with the educational endeavors of children by extending reading at home and at communities. It has filled the young children and community adults with the very

encouraging 'I can learn' confidence. MEAL, as an innovative approach of tracking the progress, enhancing the accountability and promoting learning, has emerged as a strong quality back up to the programs with documented evidence for improving the program design and delivery.

Key Words: *Quality education, innovation, data quality, program quality and transformation*

Preamble

Through this paper we endeavor to showcase three innovative approaches Save the Children has been using in the community schools of rural Nepal with an ambition of changing the lives of children in the program areas. While analyzing the notion of quality and innovation for the transformation of lives of children in the most marginalized and unreached communities, we use Theory of Change (ToC) as a logical premise. ToC is a development theory with four guiding components that emphasize on working together with multiple stakeholders for generating synergetic effect termed as 'partnership'. ToC is a blended approach of development that aims for creating impact for the children as depicted in the exhibit below;

Exhibit: 1 Theory of Change

THEORY OF CHANGE: how we work to create impact for children

We will...



(Save the Children)

The exhibit above elaborates the notion of ToC as a holistic approach that believes in being the innovator through evidence based solutions that can bring meaningful change in the lives of children. The innovative solutions are meant to be representing the voice of children or it encourages using such evidence for advocating the rights of children and then ultimately creating a platform for the evidence based solutions to be applied in larger scale. And ToC is grounded in the assumption that all these (innovation, advocacy and scaling up) are possible only when there is the strong partnership base with the widest possible stakeholders. Save the Children's work is founded on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Child Rights Programming (CRP) was developed to ensure that Save the Children's practice is guided by child rights principles. The Theory of Change describes in practical terms how we achieve change in children's lives. Three anecdotal reflective notes of different stakeholders presented in the textbox are selected live data and they represent the opinion of participants about the issue we proposed to discuss.

This paper is basically a theoretical one based on desktop studies with the use of few secondary data to substantiate some arguments. The explicit purpose of the paper is to showcase efforts of Save the Children in bringing meaningful change in the lives of children from the most marginalized communities or living in dire poverty. Sticking to the perspective and practices of Save the Children alone is the delimitation of this paper and the conclusions drawn off this paper is not meant for making any generalization.

The paper is divided in six segments beginning with preamble for specifying the method, the theoretical premise and purpose, data quality for entering into the discussion, then elaborates CEMIS, LB and MEAL to come to a conclusion that the practices of Save the Children have positively contributed in generating evidences and bringing the change in the lives of children.

Data Quality

Quality in education is an elusive term understood differently by different individuals. The term ‘quality’ is related with range of variables including classroom quality, economic goal of the community and with other broader social criteria like culture and values. In reference to education development tradition (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nikel, & Ukpo, 2006) synthesize two dominant traditions that underpin the concept of quality in education discourses. They are; a) the economist view and b) progressive / humanist view. The economist view emphasizes on measurement of education quality as manifested through different indicators like enrolment, retention, dropouts, pass rate and other measurable outputs whereas the progressive / humanist view tends to place more emphasis on educational processes. This difference is similar to the positivist and post positivist world views of looking at the things. Save the Children’s (SC) stance on ‘quality’ draws from both these traditions yet there is bit more inclination towards the economist view that sees the data quality as the center of thrust to improve the lives of children in particular through education interventions.

In its most basic sense data quality means the adequate representation of information collected for designing and implementing a program intervention. Adequate representation refers to accuracy and reliability of the information. More specifically, a program’s information system adequately represents a program’s activities if, along with accuracy and reliability, the data have qualities of completeness, precision, timeliness and integrity (USAID, 2007, p. 2). Given the context of data quality in the Nepalese education management, it has been a huge issue. Though there has occurred substantive change in the way we receive education data, there are still many areas that are either unattended or deliberately overlooked. Flash Reports bi-annually collected, compiled and published by Department of Education (DoE) has been improved over the years and provides the most extensive data information assuming schools as the most basic units of data collection.

However, while compared with other sources of information like national census reports and household survey reports, there seem many inconsistencies in the information. An example of this can be the number of out of school children in a specific area. Flash Report 2013 reports the NER to be 95.3 meaning 4.7% of school going age children are still out of school whereas the household surveys indicate this figure to be as high as 22%. The quality of data is one of the issues frequently raised in different forums by different stakeholders. Right in this connection we argue that CEMIS is one of the effective tools developed and used by SC to collect information about children reaching to the households.

Community- based Education Management Information System (CEMIS)

Realizing this inconsistencies with education data quality and recognizing the need to collect the most accurate and reliable data, Save the Children has developed Community-based Education Management Information System (CEMIS) has been proved to be very comprehensive household survey instrument and is administered in active participation of community members to track the status of children by reaching at households. CEMIS survey has been established as a mandatory process right at the initial phase of education program implementation in Save the Children. The information generated through CEMIS surveys have been very illuminating in tracking the hidden cases of exclusion like the children with disability (CWD) who are not exposed to the outer world and kept aloof from education opportunities. The time of administering CEMIS in itself has been a very productive event to sensitize the community members for their active engagement in school management. CEMIS is an easy to use two pager information collection instrument with three different forms within a single document that takes information from the households and from the community and compiles that together to assess comprehensive information about the children's status, their household level social and

economic indicators and relates that with their regularity in schools, repetition, dropouts and learning achievements. Once this comprehensive tool is used to collect information from the households, it can be updated for the consecutive years. Our argument is that CEMIS has proved to be very instrumental in locating the children in their actual status and thus ensuring the data quality for education intervention. Moreover, the information collected through CEMIS has proved to be very useful for schools, Village Education Committees (VECs) in their planning process.

This tool CEMIS is a unique innovation in devising the way to minutely capture the ground realities that promotes or inhibits the children in being to the school, locating the children and their actual socio economic status is what we consider the best rights based option to raise their voice and bring them fore. This tool is very simple and can be

A Participatory Approach

The development of SIP based on CEMIS information has made it more realistic and participatory. CEMIS has provided an opportunity to reach to the deep and make a more workable SIP than before.

A Resource Person, June 2014

administered by any school to find the actuality of children in their catchment area thus has a high potential to be replicated by others and in the year 2014 Kalikot District Education Office has used this tool to find the status of children in the district. More importantly, CEMIS is conducted by the local community members and this provides the opportunity for the partnership at the very grassroots levels of program intervention promoting synergetic relationship between the schools and the community. This quality of CEMIS is best reflected in action to what theory of change assumes to achieve i.e. innovation, be the voice, and scale up a program intervention in partnership with wider stakeholders. Thus we argue CEMIS best translates the underlying notion of theory of change in action. And this has been very effective in tracking the actuality of

children and bringing them in schools which paves the way for them to be benefited by the benefits of education opportunities.

Literacy Boost (LB)

Literacy Boost (LB) is another initiative that we argue Save the Children has been successfully intervening with a remarkable achievement in the reading, writing and literacy skills of children of the public schools. While more children are in school today than ever before, many are not learning basic skills like reading once they get there. Literacy Boost is helping to change that by creating a culture of reading both inside and outside the classroom. Over the past decade, there has been a large investment in improving children's access to education. However, the resultant expansion in children's school enrolment has strained the capacity of education systems to ensure quality learning. Globally, 250 million children including many of the most vulnerable communities and the most marginalized segments of society are not learning basic literacy and numeracy skills even though half have attended school for at least four years (UNESCO, 2014). The situation of Nepal is no exception to it. A recent study on early grade reading skills of children in Nepal depicts that 37% of children in grade II are not able to read a single word (RTI International, 2014). Amid such a distressing context of reading skills of children right in our context, there has come a significant improvement in the reading abilities of children where the LB program has been implemented. Contrary to what the USAID / RTI survey indicates, it is worth noting that the reading abilities of children in the LB program area is significantly high as one of the operational researches on effectiveness of LB and multilingual education depicts;

Reading assessments demonstrate that many students, especially at MLE schools but also at LB schools, had not gained fundamental literacy skills, such as recognizing letters or commonly used words. However, comparing these results to the 2014 Nepal EGRA study (RTI International, 2014), both MLE and LB schools had much lower proportions of students unable to read a single word than the national or regional averages. (Weinberg, 2014).

This note informs to the practicality of LB as an education program targeting the improvement of reading among children with support at school, at home and at community. Literacy Boost is a proven literacy programme that supports the development of reading skills in young children.

There are three steps in the Literacy Boost programme:

Reading Assessments: Baseline and end line reading assessments measure children's reading levels, evaluate their literacy learning needs, and help schools track student progress. This systematic evaluation is carried out applying the special reading assessment tools customized to suit the context and measures children's reading abilities, comprehension skills and reading speed as well.

Teacher Training: Training teachers to incorporate the five core reading skills into their regularly scheduled curricula in order to ensure that children are learning to read and remain motivated to learn while in the classroom. The training program helps teachers more effectively implement the national curriculum and teach children to read through in-service training opportunities. Monthly workshops promote a peer-support model where teachers share best practices and learn to use classroom materials. The program also conducts classroom visits and provides one-on-one support for teachers. This develops the level of confidence among teachers about their own skills and provides to learn from each other, thus promoting the collaborative learning.

Community Action: This involves mobilizing parents and communities to support children as they learn to read through fun out-of-school literacy activities and through the creation of locally relevant reading materials. Literacy Boost actively promotes reading at the local and national levels. Within communities, weekly reading camps serve as extracurricular activities for students or out-of-school children to practice reading and allow those without access to a reading adult or

older sibling at home a place to be read to and read with others. Book banks, or mini-libraries, contain more than 200 engaging books in the local language (either purchased or created by Save the Children) for children to borrow and continue reading at home. Literacy Boost also organizes specific activities and

An Exceptional School

Students unanimously say that going to Saturday class (Reading Camp) and going to school is more fun than staying at home. One mother told us that one of her sons used to have trouble learning, and would rarely talk. After attending reading camp, he opened up and started telling her stories that he'd learned in school or at reading camp. Now he sings songs, tells stories, and learns more successfully. As the chair of the PTA noted, the reading camp has reversed roles in families: before, children would ask their parents to tell them a story. Now, if parents feel lazy they can ask the children to tell them a story. "Now we're learning from the children," he summarized.

(Extracted from OR, Weinberg, 2014)

workshops for parents to teach them how to support their children, whether or not they can read.

This approach uses the innovative 'Reading Camps' where the children get the opportunity to further enhance their reading habits in the Reading Camps during weekends and school holidays and these camps are facilitated by trained facilitators and managed by the community themselves.

These steps address the ways children learn to read, how teachers and parents can help, and create an environment for that to happen anywhere: in school, in the community and at home.

This interventions of LB are innovative approaches and provide the opportunities for the children to raise their voices, and have the potential to be scaled up easily in every Nepali schools and more than that these activities are carried out in closer partnership with the local communities and the government officials. From this perspective it best utilizes the inherent notion of theory of change that believes on innovation, advocacy, scaling up the approach in the wider population by building partnership. We thus argue that LB has been though seemingly small but very powerful education program intervention that has really supported in bringing change in the lives

of those children from most marginalized communities and we think this to be a true transformation of lives through education.

Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning (MEAL)

Like CMIS and LB discussed above, MEAL is yet another innovative approach Save the Children has established as an integral part of its programs and this also has proved very practical in transforming the lives of the children living in the most difficult and vulnerable communities. Monitoring and evaluation are age long jargons in the field of development and academia valued by both with some differences in approaches and methodologies. Ensuring the quality delivery of the deliverables, measuring the progress made, suggesting for possible way outs for improvement, documenting the practices to improve the system's capacity to deliver are some fundamental thrusts of any M&E department within an organization. But this is more than the traditional roles of M&E, MEAL department of Save the Children has been performing. Save the Children Nepal has started MEAL approach with five partners since June 2013. After having enthusiastic results on quality enhancement in program and positive feedback from the beneficiaries, it has been expanded to all projects/programs across the country.

MEAL is the expansion of conventional monitoring and evaluation into more quality and participation orientated accountability and learning system. Apart from traditional indicator tracking and evaluation on the basis of the project logic (output-outcome-impact), this approach focuses on quality benchmarks of each activities and community engagement in monitoring process. The uniqueness of Save the Children MEAL system can be highlighted through quality benchmark, complain and feedback mechanism, and operational research.

Quality Benchmark (QB): Known as minimum standard earlier, QB in terms of step, processes, duration, community involvement etc has been defined, agreed and planned before the

implementation of each and every activity/intervention of project. These quality benchmarks serve as the guidelines for the project implementation team and also, contribute to make standard and uniform implementation of the activity across the country. Quality benchmarks for programme activities help to ensure they are carried out following agreed processes and result in quality outputs and outcomes. Furthermore, these quality benchmarks are semi-annually reviewed and updated regularly. A key element of the MEAL approach is monitoring quality benchmarks for programming quality. Quality Benchmarks specifically monitor programme activities to ensure they are carried out as agreed and planned. MEAL team goes to the field to monitor whether these quality benchmarks are met or not met, independent monitoring reports has been generated and seat with the program implementation team to discuss with the strengths and gaps in terms of quality benchmarks, and they discuss particularly focusing on the gaps and make action plan to fulfill that gaps and agree deadline. Afterwards, MEAL team follows it consistently and shares the major findings with senior management using simple monitoring, reporting and tracking formats. The development of project and event specific QBs have provided additional strength for program quality monitoring. However, there come certain issues like the practicality of a single benchmarking over projects at multiple locations with multiple contexts demanding for either new QB or demanding for different process and results based QB. Nevertheless, the QBs have been very useful tools for both program designers and implementers to take care about while performing their roles. Benchmarking as an important strategic tool of total quality management contributes in enhancing transparency and performance (Sajjad & Amjad, 2012) has been a quality indicator of service delivery. The inclusion of QB also indicates to the process and commitment of Save the Children of continuous improvement and symbolizes the identity of the organization as a learning organization as elaborated by (Senge, 1990).

Complain Response Mechanism

(CRM): CRM is another hallmark for quality service delivery for Save the Children. The beauty of CRM is its strong community engagement element in program implementation and monitoring of MEAL approach. Information on organizational core values, code of conduct, relevant quality benchmarks and community involvement in the project is shared with the

Responding to beneficiaries through CRM

I received a six months training from ..., organized by ..., financially supported by Save the Children way back in 2011 ... I was supposed to receive my certificate after the completion of the training ... I tried a lot, ... however I could not receive it till 2013 ... finally one day I observed a hoarding board regarding MEAL information as well as toll free number to lodge in complains and dissatisfactions regarding the service offered to its beneficiaries ... upon having the toll free number I directly phoned at Save the Children's MEAL system ... Save the Children lodged in my complain in their MEAL system and responded promptly over my problem ... it was only after that response that I received my certificate which I had not received it for so long ... now I am very happy and would like to thank Save the Children for establishing such a wonderful system where one can lodge in their dissatisfactions and problems to be resolved.

Project Beneficiary, July 2014 (Extracted from MEAL Archive)

beneficiaries using different medium such as community orientation, radio message, leaflet and posters so that community get enough details about the project implemented in their areas. Also, they are informed about complaint response mechanism (CRM) through which they could lodge their feedback and complaint (CRM). Many options such as toll-free number, complaint box, face to face, etc. have been given to the community to provide feedback/complaints. All feedback/complaints have to be kept confidential and need to resolve and respond to the complaint provider. Complaint response mechanism protocols/guidelines have been developed which clearly define which complain goes to whom and how it is solved. MEAL team follows the feedback/complaint until the end of the process. The digitalization of entire MEAL components including CRM through Online Program Management Information System (OPMIS)

has improved the efficiency of the entire system to perform with unique features like dashboards where the concerned authorities can quickly monitor the performance, categorize the urgency and severity of the information and make management decisions immediately. Moreover, the provision of CRM has positively contributed in promoting accountability of both the service providers and recipients. As depicted in the text book above, the CRM has been a point of trust to the service recipients and has enhanced the accountability of system and persons responsible along with keeping the top level management informed about each complain categorized based on the severity.

Operational Research (OR): Operational Research is another significant component of MEAL system. The intent behind the notion of OR is improving the management decisions by probing the issues in depth to push for corrective measures and strategic decision-making in programs based on sound evidence (Save the Children, 2014). Thus OR fundamentally seeks to improve program quality and learning during a given project cycle. OR of Save the Children comprises of demand side assessment, supply side assessment and model comparison and testing. Thus OR contributes to the learning aspect through MEAL approach.

Besides OR learning is promoted by capturing the lessons learnt, documenting the best practices, compiling the evaluation studies with their key findings and recommendations summarized, sharing the reports, progress to relevant authorities as and when appropriate. All the findings of indicator tracking and variance, monitoring against quality benchmarks, complaint/feedback are reviewed, analyzed, shared and used for the adjustment of existing projects and also for new project designs.

This uniqueness of MEAL system at Save the Children while interpreted from the lens of ToC makes it evident that it is innovative because of its adaptation of contextual reality, it has really

been helpful to bring the voice of service recipients to the forefront acting as the watchdog to promote accountability of the duty bearers and MEAL system has been expanded to all program and project areas with established MEAL unit even in Partner Non-Government Offices (PNGO). MEAL functions in closer harmony with all the stakeholders including the program designers, program implementers, PNGOs and the beneficiaries. We argue that given this perfect harmony of MEAL with ToC and its focus in improving the program quality in overall has contributed in reaching the resources to the beneficiaries (children) to the maximum extent possible. This has resulted into the improved quality of service delivery and hereby supported Save the Children's vision of enabling the children to attain their rights to survival, protection, development and participation (Save the Children).

Conclusion

One of the major inequalities affecting the rural poor is their unequal access to quality education and this is a pertinent concern in the context of Nepal. We borrowed from (Chinapah, 2011) who mentioned that any attempt to readdress the gaps within and between nations and the existing disparities, challenges of increasing inequity, poverty and widening human development gaps is possible through access to relevant, equitable and effective education of our rural people.

Education for Rural Transformation (ERT) is the only way to reduce this widening gap. Our argument is for strengthening the quality of education service delivery that actually reaches to the target group and contributes in bringing substantive change in the way the children lived before and getting exposed to education opportunities. Taking three transformative approaches of Save the Children viz. CEMIS, LB and MEAL we argued how these are contributing in bringing the meaningful change in the lives of those children who are being served. We propositioned that CEMIS has been very practical in enhancing the data quality by reaching to

the households in a participatory approach and elaborated its significance in collecting the real time data from the household and its applicability in designing education program intervention that can change the lives of the children who otherwise would have been left unnoticed with the existing data collection mechanism. Then we profiled the contribution of LB in improving the learning achievement of children especially in reading (literacy) and mentioned how important it is to be able to read and comprehend. Finally, we presented MEAL as an important addition to Save the Children's focus of improving the program design and delivery and its interest in converging SC as knowledge based learning organization. All these arguments and evidences we provided here have contributed in bringing the change in the lives of those children from the most marginalized segments of societies where Save the Children has been tirelessly working for last thirty years. The interpretation of each approach of these three unique program interventions through ToC further supported in understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of change in particular. Since transforming the lives of individuals with education support is a kind of long term investment and requires patience to see its full-fledged influence and impact, if there is anything that can in true spirit change quality of life of rural people, it can be none other than education.

References

- Barrett, A. M., Chawla-Duggan, R., Lowe, J., Nikel, J., & Ukpo, E. (2006). The concept of quality in education: A review of the international literature on the concept of quality in education. *EdQual Working Paper*(3), pp. 1-16.
- Chinapah, V. (2011). Education for Rural Transformation (ERT): National, International and Comparative Perspectives. In V. Chinapah (Ed.). Stockholm.
- RTI International. (2014). *Nepal education sector early grade reading assessment report*. NC: Reserach Triangle Park.
- Sajjad, F., & Amjad, S. (2012). Role of benchmarking in total quality management: Case of telecom service sector of Pakistan. *Business Management Dynamics*, 1(8), 33-44.
- Save the Children. (2014). *Operational research guidelines*. Kathmandu: Save the Children.
- Save the Children. (n.d.). *Save the Children*. Retrieved from <http://www.savethechildren.net/about-us/our-vision-mission-and-values>.
- Save the Children. (n.d.). *Save the Children*. Retrieved 09 01, 2014, from <https://onenet.savethechildren.net>
- Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline*. London: Century Business.
- UNESCO. (2014). *Global Monitoring Report*. Paris: UNESCO.
- USAID / RTI. (2014). *Nepal Early Grade Reading Survey*. Washington: USAID.
- USAID. (2007). *Data quality assurance tool for program level indicators*. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).
- Weinberg, M. (2014). *Operational research on literacy boost and multilingual education* . Kathmandu Nepal: Save the Children.