

The Role of Community Learning Centers in Building a Learning Society for Development of SDG4 in Vietnam

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Abstract

It is Vietnam's undertaking to build a learning society to make sure human resources in preparation for the national development. In recent years, community learning centers - CLCs - have developed rapidly and been constructed in nearly all communes/wards whole country. However, so far CLCs' operations have not been able to meet the needs of learning to improve the living standards and productivity, while CLCs are an important foundation for setting up a learning society for development of SDG4 in Vietnam. Therefore, to meet the goal of lifelong learning and building a learning society for SDG4, regarding on real status of CLCs, some effective solutions should be implemented.

Keywords: CLCs, learning society, solutions for developing CLCs, setting up learning society for SDG4.

1. Background

In 1986, Vietnam began to carry out the "Renovation" for the international integration, in which Vietnam education focused on "enhancing people's intellect, training human resources, and developing talents"¹ to rebuild the country after decades of war. After 30 years of implementing this policy, Vietnam education has accomplished many achievements. Before the Independence Day (1945), 90% of the population was illiterate; now 92% (over 15 years old) can read and write. The average number of people's years of education also increased. Secondary school and primary school systems have also been expanded and made accessible to most of the communes. Vietnam has also completed the compulsory primary and secondary education. However, according to the General Statistics Office, in 2010, 150,000 people (from 15 to 35 years old) were illiterate; 90% among which is the youth who come from the mountainous, remote, and isolated areas. This rate reduced to 85% in 2012. According to this source, until the middle of 2014, the labor force in Vietnam (over 15 years old) was nearly 54 million, among of which the number of people in the working age is more than 47.5 million. The rate of workers in agriculture, forestry and fisheries is more than 47%; industrial areas and construction is nearly 21%, the service sector is more than 32%. Vietnam's human resources are young and abundant but their professional and technical skills are low. In 2013, the trained labor force was only less than 18%, and reduced to 12.5% in 2015².

The number of illiterate and untrained people in working age would have the undesirable effect to the strategy of development of Vietnam. In 2016, this situation is even more significant because ASEAN has been established and Vietnam is deeply integrating into the global activities through bilateral trade agreements with many countries, as well as multilateral trade agreements with WTO, EU, TPP, EAEU ...

To ensure that Vietnam's labor force is able to participate and compete in an increasingly open labor market, there needs to be a tremendous improvement upon their professional standards and vocational training. One of the solutions is to construct a learning society. In January 2014, the Vietnamese government has approved the project "Building a Learning Society period 2012-2020". One of these solutions has proposed to strengthen the activities of continuing education and develop CLCs³. Thus, CLCs plays a crucial role in setting up a learning society in Vietnam for SDG4.

¹ Resolution of the 6th Congress of Vietnam Communist Party, 1986.

² Resource: General Statistics Office of Vietnam, Population and Employment Statistics 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015.

³ Decision N^o 89/QĐ-TTg on January 9th, 2013 of Prime Minister on the approval of the project "Building a Learning Society period 2012-2020".

2. Real status of the CLCs in Vietnam

2.1. The development of numbers of CLCs in Vietnam

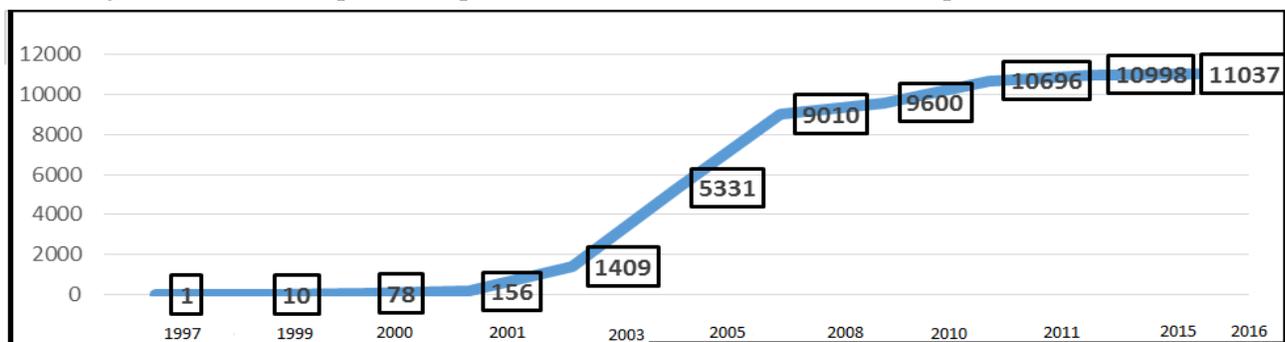
Community learning center (CLC) is an educational institution that is outside the formal education system. It is established and managed by the communal community with a goal of creating opportunities to meet the need of lifelong learning, in order to improve living standards of each person and to accelerate developing speed of the community and the whole country (Nguyen Duc Minh, 2014). CLCs are a kind of continuing education institutions that are organized in communes, wards, and towns. CLCs are truly made accessible to all the people, especially the vulnerable ones who have a small number of learning opportunities and could not afford a formal education due to their circumstances (Pham Tat Dong, 2014; Nguyen Duc Minh, 2017).

These views are consistent with UNESCO's perspective on CLCs, which "are the non-formal education of communes, wards, and communities. They are established and managed to improve living standards and community development through creating lifelong learning opportunities for people in the community" (Pham Tat Dong, 2014). Due to people's demand on learning accessibility at the commune-level, with the support of UNESCO, the first CLC was built in Phu Linh Commune, Soc Son District, Hanoi in 1997 (Thai Xuan Dao, 2000). This model was compatible with working and learning conditions of the people, of which the majority were agricultural and untrained labors. CLCs have developed rapidly ever since.

Owing to fact that the CLCs had developed spontaneously and without a legal operating basis, in 2008 the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training has promulgated regulations to support and guide CLCs' operations. It defines CLCs' role "as a basis for continuing education in the national education system, self-learning centers of communal community, with the management and support of the State; and strongly promote the participation and contributions of the people in the community to build and develop the Centers under the mechanism "State and people work together"⁴. According to this document, CLCs' functions are "creating favorable opportunities for people of all ages to learn regularly and access life-long learning; disseminating knowledge, innovation and experience in production and life, contributing to poverty reduction, increasing labour productivity, job creation; improving the life standards of each person and the community; disseminating of guidelines, policies and regulations to all citizens ". It is mean that CLCs have crucial role of creating learning society for lifelong learning for all and become an important part on developing SDG4 in Vietnam.

In Vietnam, CLCs' activities will be encouraged, supported and facilitated for development by the government. With legal and funding support of the government, CLCs have developed very rapidly. By 2016, CLCs was situated in 11037/11162 (98,88%) communes/wards in all provinces across the country⁵.

The following chart shows the rapid development of number of CLCs in Vietnam in period 1997-2016⁶.



CLCs' activities in recent years includes the following main contents as: eliminating the illiteracy, universalizing education for the elderly, organizing vocational training courses in localities, raising awareness on care, health protection, environmental protection, legal education ... Some localities have their own locations with facilities, materials and funds for CLCs' activities.

⁴ Decision No 09/2008/QĐ-BGDĐT of the MOET to promulgate regulations on organization and operation of community learning centers in communes, wards and townships. [7; P.1]

⁵ Resource: Vietnam Association for Promoting Education, 2016.

⁶ Resources: Annual statistic of MOET and Vietnam Association for Promoting Education

2.2 Activities of the CLCs in Vietnam

The current situation of CLCs was mentioned in project of *Research Center for Education Consulting and Social Issues* on "Research on Setting Standard to Assess Community Learning Center" code VI2.2-2012.08, sponsored by NAFOSTED. It was implemented at 30 CLCs in Thai Binh, Ha Tinh and Can Tho, which represents 3 regions with different conditions of socio-economic development, and culture in Vietnam.

Research sample:

Samples were randomly selected, each province selected a provincial city or urban district and one district at the top of the list of localities in alphabetical order.

The list of all CLCs in the selected localities is also in alphabetical order (CLCs in town district are not in this list because the town district is considered urban). According to the criteria for selecting 05 CLCs per locality, the total number of CLCs is divided into 6 intervals and the CLCs are 5 cut scores, the first CLC is number 1. 15 CLCs in urban areas and 15 CLCs in rural areas have been selected.

The survey has been conducted with questionnaires and face-to-face interviews for managers, teachers and learners at 30 CLCs. At each CLC, about 30 people have been interviewed such as: CLC managers (05), CLC's teachers or guide (10) and learners at CLCs (15). In the total, 911 people were interviewed (Manager: 150, Teacher: 303, Learners: 458).

The survey information included: regulatory documents for CLCs' activities; CLC's managers, CLC's teachers and learners at the CLC; CLC's facilities; curriculum and educational activities in CLCs; CLC's products; Funding sources, monitoring and evaluation of CLCs.

In the questionnaire, questions were designed for self-assessment of the achievement level of CLC's activities and the quality of CLC's staff on a 5 points scale, which is categorized into 5 levels. Level 1: Lowest - Failure (below 1); Level 2: Inadequate (1-2 points); Level 3: Minimally satisfactory (2-3 points); Level 4: Satisfactory (3-4 points) and Level 5: Highly satisfactory (4-5 points).

Findings:

i) Current status of CLC's legal documents

All CLCs use the CLC's Regulation issued by MoET.

Legal documents issued by CLCs for CLC's activities include:

- 02 documents that are the CLC's five-year development strategies and five-year development plans have the highest rate 86.7% and 66.7%, respectively.
- 03 essential documents that are the Annual action plan, Rules and Regulations have very low rate 6.7%; 16.7% and 10% respectively.
- Only 01 CLC use other document types such as "Activity Report" or "Demand for learning in community" or "Monthly Activity Plan".

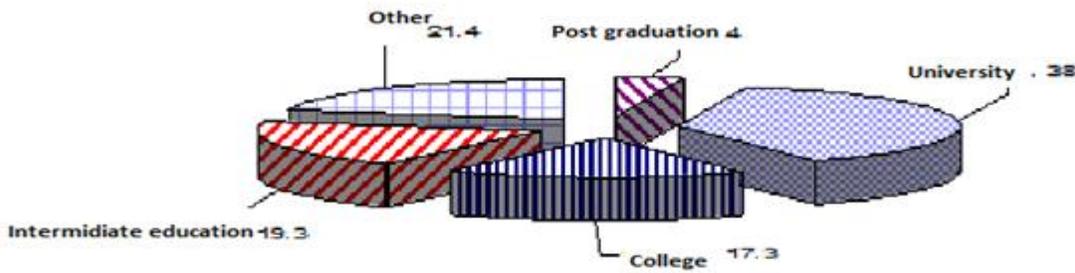
Thus, the legal documents for CLCs' regular and specific activities are almost non-existent.

About the quality of documents, the survey showed that mean score was 3.6 at the "Satisfactory" level. There is no difference between urban and rural areas.

ii) CLC's manager

The CLCs's managers from 46 to 60 years old are of the highest percentage with 40%. The majority are male with 70.7%, 29.3% are female. They are retired experts who have time, knowledge and experience in management, and would be able to help CLCs make use the quality human resources to organize development activities. 59.3% CLC's managers are graduated from college, university and postgraduate. 19.3% and 21.4% managers are intermediate and lower education level, respectively. This shows that CLCs focus on personnel's experience and relevance for the management position, rather than their level of education.

Manager's education level



In accordance with the regulations, Vice Chairman of the Commune People's Committee concurrently holds the position of CLC's director. For this reason, it is indispensable that administrative staff will participate in CLC's management. CLC is a social organization that is established and managed by the people, and fully serve the people's interests. It is necessary to review and to adjust the strict regulation of managerial positions such as directors, deputy directors, accountants, treasurer to suit each stage of development. Currently, the most efficient trend is that people in the community vote for and decide on these management positions with the support of local authorities.

About the CLC's manager quality, it is showed that: The manager do self-assessments with a mean score 3.8 ("Satisfactory" level). In terms of regions, managers in rural area get higher score than urban (3.9 vs. 3.7).

iii) CLCs' trainers / facilitators

CLCs' teachers are 70.2% male and 29.8% female. All teachers were invited to work several times at the CLC, they are not official teachers who teach regularly.

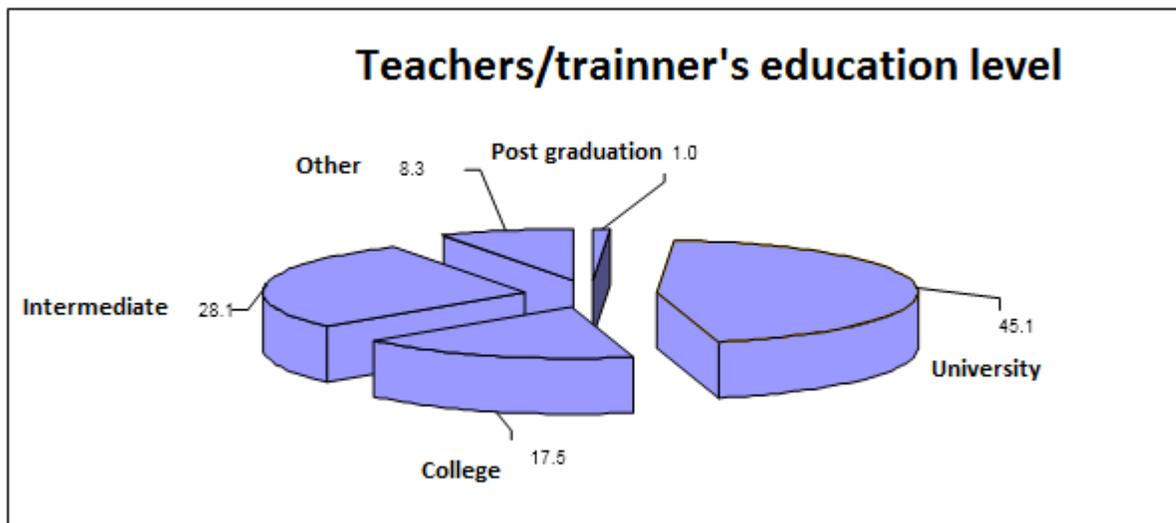
Most of teachers are over 50 years old (36.7%). It is a good condition for the development and improvement of the quality of CLC's activities because retired teachers have knowledge, experience to contribute to CLC activities. There are only 23 teachers from 20 to 30 years old (5.6%) in the CLCs. 108 teachers are from 30-40 years old (26.4%). There are not any teacher under 20 years old.

About education level:

- 63.6% teachers completed college, university and post-graduate education.
- 36.4% teachers completed intermediate and other levels of education

The number of teachers who graduated at intermediate level and do not have pedagogical certification show that, at present, CLCs conduct a number of activities according to the people's needs "Teach what people need to learn", people teach each other.

Managers evaluates teachers at 3.7 points ("Satisfactory" level) and teachers self-assessments are a little lower at 3.6 points.



iv) Current status of learners in CLCs

93.9% of learners in CLCs stated that "Everyone in the community can participate in CLCs activities." Thus, it can be said that the CLC has ensured a suitable place for people with learning needs in the community.

There were 409 people (89.1%) answered that they participated in CLCs. However, during 5 years, the number of participants in CLCs for only 01 to 05 times is 57.8%, for at least 20 times or more is 2.9%. It can be seen that CLCs did not create the necessarily engaging environment for learners. 51.5% CLCs' teachers believed that CLC's activities should focus on "Developing educational knowledge" (51.5%). It is difficult to explain that only 39.2% of teachers agreed and 60.8% teachers did not agree that "adults want to participate in vocational training" are the target of CLCs, whereas vocational training is one of the main functions of CLCs.

v) Current status of CLCs' facilities

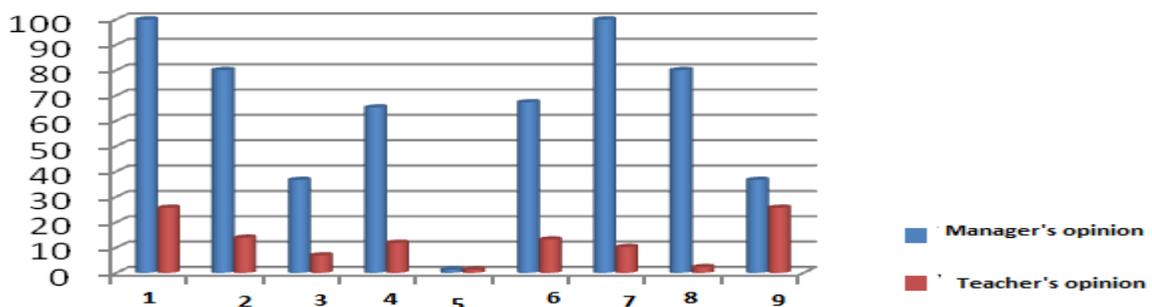
50% CLCs located in commune/ward People Committee's place and 40% at village / commune culture houses. The remainder is located in both People Committee and the Culture House. It means that 100% CLCs do not have their own locations. 18/30 CLCs have classrooms which are borrowed from the People Committee or the Culture House or secondary schools. The remaining CLCs do not have classrooms. CLCs do not have their own libraries, among which 14 CLCs share libraries with the commune. 12 CLCs share computer rooms with commune/ward People Committee. The government offices themselves also have not enough computers. Therefore, this information indicates that CLCs can borrow computers when they are really needed.

CLC administrators evaluate the CLC's facilities at 2.2 points ("Inadequate" level). None of the provinces is evaluated at level 3, the minimum satisfactory level. In terms of location, the difference in facilities quality of all samples was relatively high (2.4 for urban and 1.9 for rural area). If the standard deviation is 0.5, it can be said that all CLCs in rural areas meet many difficulties in terms of facilities.

There are 17 types of facilities in CLCs. In general, CLC's facilities conditions are extremely poor at the moment. There is a huge difference between provinces and regions in the province in terms of number and type of facilities. Some of them are unusable yet counted in the survey. Moreover, it can be found that CLCs also listed equipment what they borrow from People Committee and Culture House (hall, computer and desks, etc.). However, these borrowed equipment cannot guarantee the minimal level of activity. The quality of CLCs' infrastructure and facilities is evaluated at low level with a medium score of 2.5/5 and 2.3/5 points, respectively. There is no significant difference in ensuring CLC's activities in rural and urban areas.

vi) Current practice of developing CLC's action plans

CLCs do not have a specific action plan for achieving their goals. Managers and teachers present 9 main thematic categories of CLCs' activities. However, there is a considerable divergence between the opinion of managers and teachers on these activities that have been implemented at CLCs. Managers said that there are a lot of activities but teachers said that these are insignificant.



Raising awareness
 Disseminating on science- technology
 Vocational training
 Disseminating knowledge on health
 Education policies

Thematic issue on culture and society
 Universal education
 Defense education
 Fostering on curriculum

The statistics show that CLCs organized 266 training courses that covered all 9 main thematic categories. On average, there are 8.9 courses/01 CLC in the last 5 years. The difference between urban and rural areas is negligible. The activities identified by both CLC’s managers and teachers showed that these programs coincided with national movement on raising awareness in localities. This comment is based on training courses for education knowledge, vocational training and science and technology knowledge. In fact, these courses were rarely organized in the CLCs. These are the main characteristics of the CLC that meet the learning needs and social development in the community.

This is confirmed when teachers greatly underrated the dissemination of knowledge for technical science, universal education and vocational training (8.9%, 7.4% and 6.4% respectively).

vii) Financial resources for CLCs’ activities

Income

According to income data provided by the CLCs’ managers, 18/30 CLCs receive 100% state’s budget; 10/30 CLCs receive the sponsorship from either the state or social organizations and from the local authorities; 02/30 CLCs have no information on income.

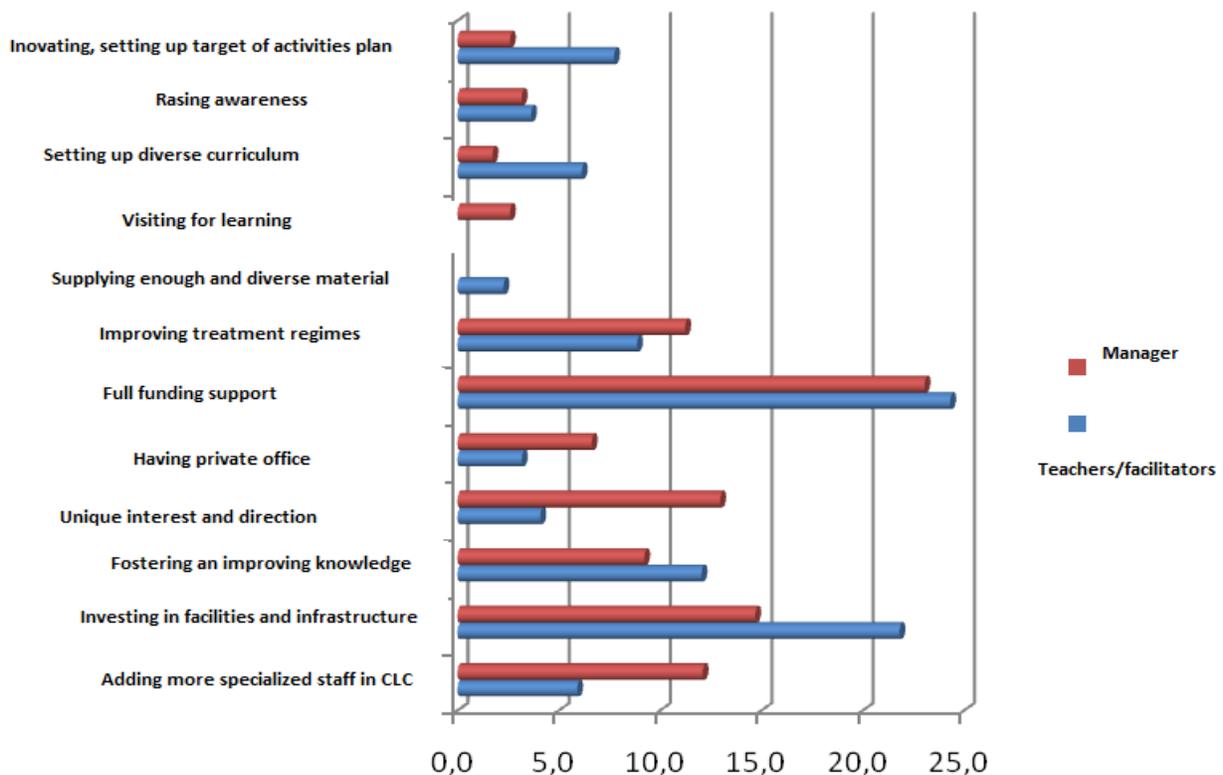
It can be seen that the income for CLCs’ self-development is unstable . This is the evidence for underactive and ineffective activities of CLCs.

Expenditure

CLCs’ expenses are mainly spent on regular activities and staff’s allowances (90%). A small percentage of expenses is for instructional and promotional materials (10%). However, there is no library, awareness-promotion materials, making it difficult to support future activities. In other words, there is no budget for the sustainable development of CLCs.

viii) Suggestions to improve the CLCs’ performance

In order to improve the quality and effectivef CLC’s activities, managers and teachers proposed following ideas:



The main opinions focus on the need for funding, facilities, equipment, professional development and compensation.

The expectations of teachers and trainers for CLCs

329 people talked about the expectations of teachers/ trainers for CLCs: 32.2% of them expected "*curriculum is more diverse to meet the needs of the people, and learning material to be supplied enough*" and 26.4% expected that "*more vocational training courses are opened, science and technology is transferred, Party's policies are disseminated, knowledge of law and social culture is improved.*"

Thus, local people's urgent need is vocational training and the transference of science and technology. The expectations of teachers/ trainers are closer to the CLC's function and mission that develop people's knowledge and support vocational training to improve people's life.

People's expectations for CLCs

766 learners suggested 12 groups of issues on the ability to better meet the local people's learning needs in CLCs. Statistics show that: highest percentage of learners (31.7%) suggested "*Developing a diverse, innovative and engaging learning curriculum that meets the people's need*". The lowest percentage of learners (2.3%) had the opinion that "*All levels, sectors need to pay attention, to have united direction, to coordinate departments, mass organizations, and educational institutions*".

The priority for CLCs' effective activities, CLC's managers agreed with group of issues such as "*Investing in facilities and equipment*", "*Raising awareness of the community on learning, attracting more participants*" and "*Strengthening the observation of people's learning needs for responsive programs*" (15.5% -12.9% -12.3%, respectively).

In summary, the people's expectations in the CLCs are not high with the small number of raised issues, which is also the evidence that CLCs have not engaged with people and was inefficient in helping them in learning and seeking information to improve knowledge and skills in their daily work and life.

Commenting on the current situation: CLCs have grown quickly in the number but largely stagnant in terms the quality, and could not meet people's needs and expectations. CLCs' structure, staff, headquarters, facilities and operating funds are extremely poor. The programs for improving professional and living standards for the community are limited and not based on the learners' needs. CLCs' manager and teacher work concurrently and sometimes overlap, depending on very little fund from the government. It contradicts with CLCs' self-regulation which stated that CLCs is organized by people, and for the people. Therefore, it is in dire need of a system of compatible solutions to develop CLCs into the core factor that help build up a learning society.

3. Solutions for developing CLCs to setting up learning society for SDG4

With a socio-economic and cultural development that rely primarily on agriculture in Vietnam, and the majority of labor force is still agricultural workers, a learning society needs to be built in rural area to improve the quality of the workforce. Moreover, in fact, non-formal education institutions, vocational training centers, and major cultural institutions in Vietnam are usually in cities, not in rural areas. There exists the paradox that in the areas where many people have a high demand of learning, there is a small number of educational facilities and services. For this reason, the development of CLCs, which organize learning activities for people in the community, will reap suitable and practical benefits for the current conditions of Vietnam. In this context, the notion that "Takes to the learner learning, learning as an activity, not a place" and "Learners learn new knowledge, principles, and concepts for themselves through dialogue and interaction with others, and through experimentation and risk-taking in safe environments. Indeed, learners can only develop meaningful knowledge through their interactions with each other, with teachers (if any), and with their learning environment"⁷ would be the optimal solution. According to the above perspective, it is clear that the weaknesses in CLCs' infrastructure would not be the main factors affecting CLCs' efficiency. Based on the government's policy, CLCs' current situation, CLCs' activities would need to carry out the following developmental solutions to ensure the goal of lifelong learning for people's needs:

The first solution: Adjusting and perfecting CLCs' operational regulation in open direction to ensure that CLCs belongs to the people, are organized, managed, operated by the people and serve the people's interests (Nguyen

⁷ http://www.cisco.com/web/about/citizenship/socio-economic/docs/LearningSociety_WhitePaper.pdf

Duc Minh, 2017). Regulation needs to be adjusted to be increasingly flexible, without a clear appointment of positions such as manager, lecturers, and learner, etc. in CLCs, which must be decided by the local people.

CLCs' general operational regulations need to be promulgated. However, each community has its own characteristics; hence people's needs in different communities change accordingly. For this reason, CLCs will be the basis to help all people in the community with diverse traits, circumstances, academic levels to have the opportunity to study regularly and to achieve lifelong learning, to improve living standards. If the documents regarding CLCs' activities can be refined, the whole community will be developed. These documents should be based on the actual learning needs of all people and have a clear developmental orientation to mobilize the participation on learning and contribution of subjects in interests, either person or organizations.

The second solution: Decentralization is necessary to help authorities to implement their own functions without being a substitute for the public; Ensuring the government's support on establishing the initial foundation (according to the current regulations), promulgating policies for CLCs' development on human resources, and assigning a number of tasks, which involve CLCs' activities on socio-economic, cultural development to build up learning.

Step-by-step decentralization on the direct management of CLCs from the work of government officials; transferring the autonomy of CLCs' management to people who have capacity and experience on managing and building learning movement. Besides the authorities' supervision, there should be a promotion of people's role on supervision regarding CLCs to help the activities satisfy the learning participation of all citizens in the most efficient and practical way.

The third solution: CLC model is built to be the basis for a learning society that is suitable with different local traditions and characteristics of socio-economic-cultural development; at the same time creating CLCs network and facilitating CLCs to cooperate, share experience and apply into the development of CLCs.

A small number of CLCs have operated effectively and satisfied learning demands of local people. Activities are organized by CLCs that meet people's needs such as now collecting tuition fees to generate fund, to keep up the operations and to accumulate gradually to develop CLCs' human resources for sustainable development. If these models are studied and provided adequate support by the experts, they will become a model for other localities with similar characteristics to build a learning society on the foundation of CLCs.

The Fourth solution: Raising public awareness on the media about the policies of developing a learning society and CLCs' role in building a learning society in the locality.

Despite CLCs have been developed across the country, their function in setting up learning society is not propagated widely to all citizens to be able to attract resources for CLCs as well as enlist the involvement of all people on the CLCs' activities. A wide-spread dissemination on the mass media and the local media will be able to discuss both objectives of raising resources and meeting people's learning needs. With these essential solutions, CLCs would be able to attract the support and generate cooperation of concerned person and organizations to carry out activities efficiently, in order to meet lifelong learning needs of all people in the community. In other words, CLCs will become the major foundation to build up learning society in each locality and become an important part for implementation the role of SDG4.

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