

This chapter provides an overview and analysis of the current status of nonformal education in Lao PDR. In particular, it examines the status of profiles of literacy rates across provinces with special emphasis devoted to differences among gender and ethnicity. This is followed by a review of equivalence programs for primary, lower and upper secondary education. An analysis of nonformal provision follows with particular emphasis on distribution of community learning centers (CLCs). The analysis also examines potential linkages between nonformal education and the formal system, in particular as an alternative route to post-secondary education and as a strategy for reducing dropout in formal primary schooling.

## 6.1 Status

### National Goals and Strategies

Activities and goals for nonformal education have been described in a formal proclamation (MOE, 1998d) from the minister of education. This proclamation reinforces the importance of three major goals for nonformal education in Lao PDR. These are:

- eradicating illiteracy for ethnic groups countrywide, especially for women and disadvantaged populations in remote areas;
- raising the primary and secondary levels of education for staff, military personnel, and police;
- promoting basic vocation for educationally disadvantaged and low-income populations in order to increase income levels and to improve social conditions.

The target groups for nonformal education are: illiterate persons; school-age children who do not have the opportunity to study in the formal school system; students who have dropped out of school before completing the primary cycle; and, those who wish to increase their level of education.

It is targeted at those: between 6 and 14 years of age who do not attend formal schooling; between 15 and 25 years who do not have definitive vocations; and, between 15 and 40 who are illiterate and have not completed primary school. It focuses on persons in mountainous, distant and remote locations, and on people in special, focal or socioeconomic development zones.

The proclamation also identifies important characteristics of nonformal education so that target populations gain the maximum benefit possible including:

- combining it with vocational training;
- target populations assuming some responsibility for the organization of activities;

- responding to the needs of individuals, communities and society with content suitable for social and economic development;
- promoting self-reliance and sufficiency;
- ensuring the organization is well coordinated, to enhance continuity and stability.

### Management and Structure of Nonformal Education

The nature of nonformal education as described above requires an organizational structure that moves from central to local areas and from agencies of the government to those of the community and the private sector. However, the proclamation makes no mention of the role of NGOs in the provision of nonformal education and this issue is discussed later. There are two levels to the administration of nonformal education in Lao PDR, the macro and the micro levels.

Macro-level administration resides within the Department of Nonformal Education (DNFE) of MOE and its responsibilities include:

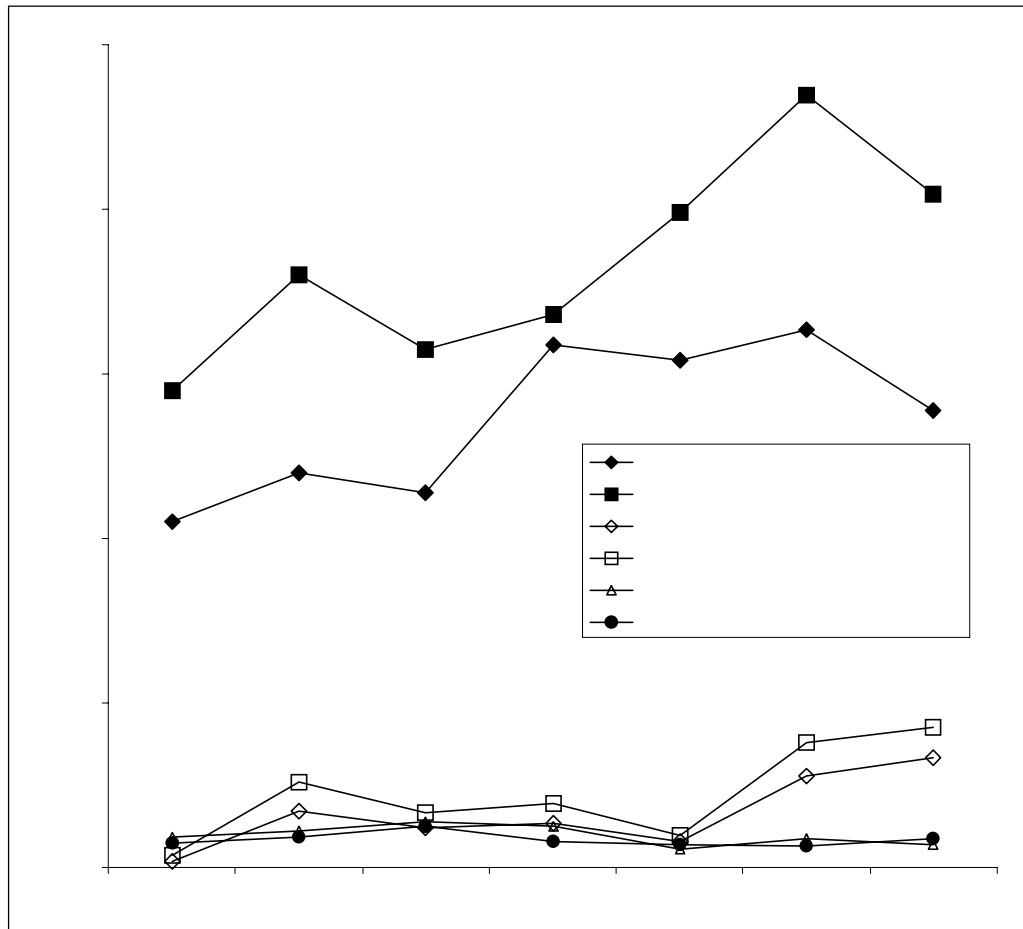
- analysis of various approaches, policies, laws, resolutions, directives, programs and regulations of MOE concerning nonformal education;
- collection, collation, and analysis of data for planning of development of nonformal education;
- development of modalities, curricula, textbooks, teacher manuals, and learning materials that are appropriate to national economic and social development;
- development and training of nonformal education personnel;
- establishment of nonformal basic education in conjunction with vocational education and people's life quality development;
- demonstration of leadership, management, evaluation, and motivation for nonformal education;
- leadership and management of the Center for Nonformal Education Development and the three (northern, central, and southern) regional nonformal education centers.

PES offices at the province, prefecture and special zone level also have some responsibility. These include: organization and implementation of nonformal education activity plans as authorized at the macro level; control, supervision, motivation, and provision of advice for plans at the district level; and, organization of nonformal education committees.

DEBs have responsibility for: organization and implementation of nonformal education activity plans as authorized at provincial (or prefecture or special zone) levels; control, supervision, motivation, and provision of advice for activities of CLC committees and implementation units; and, establishment of CLCs and various implementation units.

The CLC is the implementation unit for community nonformal education activities. Activities implemented at this level include: organization of both formal and nonformal instruction; organization of resident's training such as vocational training, health training, agricultural training, etc.; provision of a meeting place for local authorities, Lao Women's Union, etc.; and, organization of exhibitions, sale of community products or other activities of a collective nature.

Figure 6.1  
Illiteracy and Outcomes of DNFE Programs



Source: MOE (1998f)

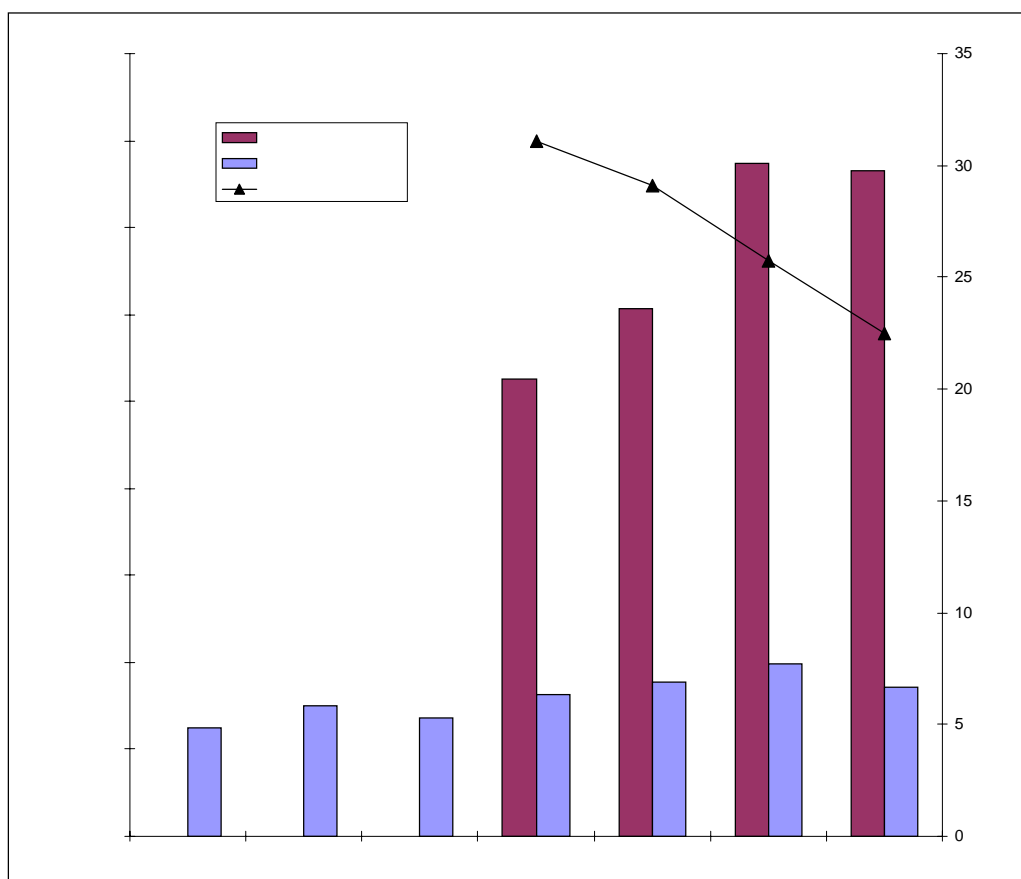
### Illiteracy

An MOE summary of illiteracy and outcomes of nonformal education programs is illustrated in Figure 6.1. A number of caveats must be placed on these data. The “large decrease” in the number of illiterates has been calculated on the basis of a decrease in the size of the 15- to 40-year-old population group over the period 1996/97 to 1997/98 although census population projections do not indicate such a decrease.

The data shown in Figure 6.2 indicate a significant improvement in reducing illiteracy, however, it is likely that the population data used by MOE are not accurate. Table 6.1 provides a comparison of population projections according to both MOE and the 1995 census report.

The 1995 census data provide a picture of population growth at a higher level than that used in MOE estimates. It is likely that the literacy rates provided in the 1998 Evaluation Report are overestimates of the real figure. Figure 6.1 does indicate that the number of newly literate people has increased significantly since

Figure 6.2  
Population and Illiteracy



Source: MOE (1998f)

Table 6.1  
Projected Adult Population

MOE estimates	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98		
15-40 years	1,052,125	1,211,850	1,546,799	1,529,671		
Census estimates	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
15-39 years	1,708,510	1,765,620	1,824,651	1,885,668	1,948,737	1,994,062

Source: MOE and Census, 1995

the 1995/96 period while the number of learners gaining primary equivalence has remained steady. Thus, the DNFE has made substantial gains in its programs since 1995/96.

#### Enrollments in Literacy and Equivalence Programs

Between 1991/92–1997/98, there were about 344,000 people enrolled in literacy programs of whom 60 percent were female. The number of people gaining equiva-

Table 6.2  
Enrollments in Equivalence Programs

Graduates	Primary		Lower Secondary		Upper Secondary	
	Total	Female	Total	Female	Total	Female
Vientiane Municipality	1,813	1,302	13	7	621	178
Phongsaly	565	139	44	2	20	1
LuangNamtha	106	30	109	27	128	23
Oudomxay	1,463	559	49	6	34	2
Bokeo	480	96	52	8	35	1
Luangprabang	1,602	755	98	14	238	77
Houaphan	240	120	101	26	135	18
Sayaboury	392	218	25	0	20	0
Xiang Khouang	1,863	1,127	37	3	47	7
Vientiane Province	314	225				
Bolikhamxay	710	478	81	11	59	6
Khammouane	15	0	7	1	30	4
Savannakhet	2,682	1,485	69	2	104	22
Saravan			9	2	83	14
Sekong	45	13	23	2	25	1
Champassack	2,936	1,924	13	2	94	14
Attapeu	41	28	40	17	26	3
Saysomboune	414	274			32	0
Total	15,681	8,773	770	130	1,731	371

Source: MOE (1998f)

lency to the formal education system is provided in Table 6.2. The large numbers of people gaining upper secondary equivalency is interesting and is consistent with the large growth rates in formal secondary enrollments described elsewhere in this report. Expansion of secondary education in the formal system appears to be demand-driven rather than planned and a similar situation seems to be occurring in nonformal education. This situation may lead to an oversupply of upper secondary graduates relative to other levels. Given the higher economic rate of return of primary over secondary, the higher unit cost of secondary education, and the limited resources available to nonformal education, consideration should be given to establishing separate targets for each level of equivalency to be determined on the basis of a planned expansion of formal secondary education.

#### Enrollments in Vocational Programs

The numbers of learners enrolled in vocational and English language courses is provided in Table 6.3. A small program such as this, spread across almost all provinces, is costly, particularly given the very small student size in some provinces. Payments for volunteer staff, facilities and materials costs required for these programs cannot be cost effective with such small numbers of enrolled students.

Table 6.3 Enrollments in Vocational Programs

	Vocational training		English training	
	Total	Female	Total	Female
Vientiane Municipality	24	24		
Phongsaly	30	10		
LuangNamtha	139	121		
Oudomxay	51	34		
Bokeo	30	20		
Luangprabang	177	170	25	2
Houaphan	200	187		
Sayaboury	962	602	24	0
Xiang Khouang	160	160	233	50
Vientiane Province	540	394		
Bolikhamxay				
Khammouane	140	18		
Savannakhet	10	0		
Saravan	63	63	40	4
Sekong	15	0		
Champassack	337	226		
Attapeu	30	30		
Saysomboune	18	18		
Total	2,926	2,077	322	56

Source: MOE (1998f)

## 6.2 Analysis

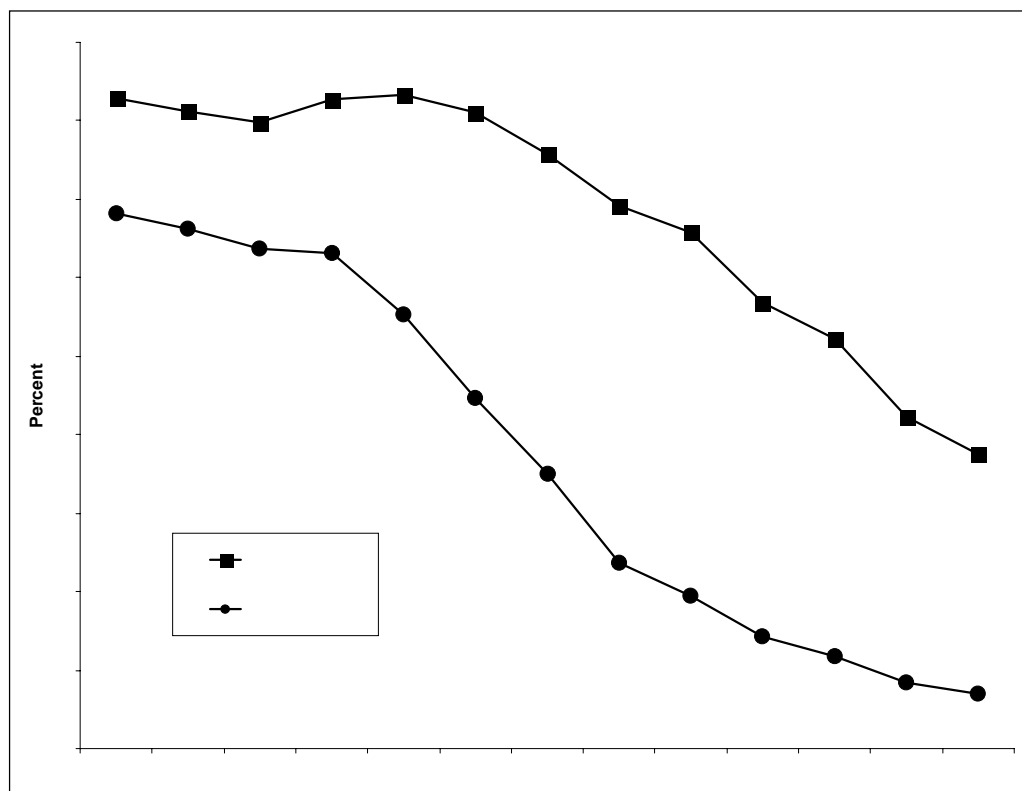
### Literacy

The profile of literacy across ages is shown in Figure 6.3. The rates for females are lower than males and this difference increases with age. Of interest is the "hump" in male literacy that occurs between the ages of 30 and 49 along with a significant decline for female literacy among women from age 30 to 34. These peculiarities are not statistical aberrations but are reflected in the majority of provincial profiles. They indicate that literacy levels as reported in the 1995 census are higher among males aged 30 to 40 than those for 20- to 30-year-olds. In a system that has a lack of resources, this would suggest a need for a focus on the 15- to 30-year-old age group. Given the high dropout rate in the formal system of primary education, this age group will continue to have low levels of literacy for the short-term future.

The profile of this literacy data also indicates that greater attention needs to be paid to female literacy. Given the high birth rates of Lao PDR, a high priority should be given to improving literacy and general education, among the 15- to 35-year-old female population.

It is suggested that the current policy of providing literacy on a priority basis to 15- to 40-year-old adults may need refining. The analysis above suggests priority

Figure 6.3  
Literacy Rates by Age



Source: 1995 Census.

target groups for males aged 15 to 30 and for females aged 15 to 35. This would provide a more equitable basis for provision of literacy skills. An affirmative strategy for female literacy should also be introduced since this is likely to provide significant short-term benefits.

The achievement of literacy is important for improving the living standards of Lao people. Increasing literacy rates are associated with increasing cash income. This is a powerful rationale for further expansion of literacy and education programs of DNFE.

#### Enrollments in Nonformal Education Programs

The variability in literacy across provinces, districts, and minority ethnic groups requires that planning targets be developed at the district level. This variability is demonstrated in Table 6.4. This table describes literacy rates (as defined by the 1995 census) across different provinces. In addition to the average literacy rates for a province, the chart also provides an indication of the variability within each province. The “high” represents the district of each province with the highest reported literacy rate and the “low” value comes from the lowest district literacy rate reported in the same census. These data are reported separately for both male and females.

Table: 6.4  
Variability in Male and Female Literacy Rates

	Male			Female		
	Average	Low	High	Average	Low	High
Vientiane Municipality	92	85	95	79	64	87
Champassack	85	78	93	59	46	76
Vientiane Province	84	78	89	61	47	74
Bolikhamxay	78	65	89	53	32	75
Sayaboury	75	59	88	55	24	69
Xiang Khouang	74	48	86	47	13	64
Houaphan	71	65	82	41	28	49
Khammouane	71	46	84	43	12	60
Savannakhet	70	26	87	44	5	67
Saysomboune	69	65	74	31	20	44
Attapeu	69	44	84	37	15	62
Luangprabang	68	57	87	38	17	69
Saravan	66	24	79	35	3	52
Oudomxay	60	52	70	24	13	38
Bokeo	57	22	70	27	7	39
Sekong	56	40	75	24	8	48
LuangNamtha	47	17	70	20	5	41
Phongsaly	45	27	62	25	17	33

Source: 1995 Census

Apart from the enormous variation that is found among literacy rates, both between and within provinces, the other significant finding is the very low literacy rates among women in many provinces and in certain districts. While the average male literacy rate is above 50 percent in all provinces except Phongsaly and LuangNamtha, average female literacy reaches that rate only in Bolikhamxay, Champassack, Sayaboury, and Vientiane. In Bokeo, LuangNamtha, Oudomxay, Phongsaly and Sekong the average female literacy rate is less than 30 percent. (For male and female literacy rates by provinces, also see Appendix 1.) Given the significant social and economic rates of return for literacy among women, female literacy should be a priority.

#### Ethnic Minorities and Literacy Programs

Literacy rates vary considerably across ethnic minority groups and within a single group, the rate varies considerably depending upon the province in which they are located. Among males, literacy rates for Lao are significantly higher than for other ethnic groups, although the difference between literacy rates for most ethnic groups varies significantly across provinces. For example, Hmong male literacy is 60 percent in Saysomboune but only 30 percent in Oudomxay.

The situation of variability of female literacy among ethnic groups is similar to that of males. However, in all cases female literacy rates are significantly below

those for males. Among 10 ethnic groups, female literacy does not rise above 20 percent and among six of these, average female literacy rates do not exceed 12 percent. These include Hmong, Katang, Makong, Kor, Katou and Nge ethnic groups. It is suggested that special programs be implemented to improve female literacy for those ethnic groups where female literacy continues to be below 20 percent.

There are suggestions that literacy rates among some ethnic minorities are low due to reasons of society and culture rather than lack of access. But the 1995 census data indicate that success in achieving literacy among various ethnic groups varies considerably across provinces. For example, nationally Hmong women have generally very low levels (less than 10 percent) of literacy but in Saysomboune they are almost double the figure of other provinces. Likewise, female literacy rates among Kmuu are higher in Saysomboune than in other provinces. Conversely, literacy rates among Phoutai women are relatively low in Phongsaly compared with other provinces. It is suggested that special attention be paid to those provinces and districts where minority literacy levels are above average to determine the reasons underlying these higher levels. This information should then be used in designing special intervention programs.

### Community Learning Centers

A major intervention strategy for improving nonformal education has been the introduction of CLCs which are built in villages nominated by provinces or districts. Communities are expected to provide materials and labor while the government provides funding for books and a trainer. A CLC will contain a room for classes, a small library and a meeting room for village activities. In some centers vocational training for basic skills is also provided. The first CLC to be constructed was supported by UNESCO and cost US\$3,000. The distribution of centers across provinces is shown in Table 6.5. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this model is very effective for promoting nonformal education.

However, the data show that provision of CLCs has not been determined on the basis of need. To some extent this may be due to different motivation on the part of communities to support such initiatives. The policy for nonformal education quite correctly insists on local involvement and support so the centers are likely to be sited where there is greater local demand and support. However, there is a need for greater advocacy for CLCs to be provided in communities. It is suggested that a public awareness campaign be implemented to explain the advantages of having a CLC in villages. Such an advocacy campaign will be critical to the further introduction of such centers and to subsequent improvement in literacy and skills development.

Even within provinces, the location of CLCs is uneven. It is suggested that an expansion plan for CLC provision be developed, and that this plan be based on criteria of need and equitable provision. Special affirmative action should be part of this plan to improve the very low levels of female literacy among certain ethnic minority groups.

Table 6.5  
Distribution of Community Learning Centers (CLCs)

Province	CLCs
Vientiane Municipality	2
Saysomboune	1
Phongsaly	1
LuangNamtha	18
Oudomxay	8
Luangprabang	4
Sayaboury	12
Houaphan	6
Xiang Khouang	18
Vientiane Province	17
Khammouane	7
Savannakhet	27
Saravan	22
Sekong	6
Attapeu	2
Champassack	17
Total	168

Source: MOE figures

#### Literacy, Cash Income and Primary School Dropout

Since low levels of literacy are associated with low levels of cash income, those communities with low levels of literacy are less able to raise excess cash to support the establishment of a CLC. Their low cash income levels will also imply a lower ability to provide labor since their labor is more important to personal survival. However, these same groups are in greater need of education since their low literacy rate has an impact on formal primary education. Adult literacy is related to promotion and dropout rates in primary education.

The relationship between parental literacy and dropout is important and would seem to suggest a self-perpetuating cycle of low educational value. That is, in communities with low adult literacy, children are more likely to drop out of school and thus remain illiterate. This would suggest a need for special intervention programs to break this cycle. It also indicates that in areas of low educational status among adults, formal primary education will continue to fail many children unless other nonformal programs of adult education are also implemented. However, it is these same communities which do not have an excess of cash income to assist in the implementation of CLCs. To break this cycle, provision of adult education will need to complement improvements in formal primary education, however, inputs from local communities should not necessarily be expected.

### Efficiency of Literacy Programs

Efficiency of literacy programs can be examined by an analysis of graduation rates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that relapse is a problem in some provinces of Lao PDR; however, there is no comparative data on which to quantify the extent of this problem. Graduation rates for literacy programs during the period 1997/98 vary from almost 50 percent in Vientiane Province to less than 10 percent in Attapeu for males. For females, the rate in those two provinces is slightly lower. The efficiency of literacy programs varies considerably and, apart from Vientiane Municipality, is quite low. While differences in male and female graduation rates vary across provinces, the relatively low rate for females in Bokeo, Savannakhet, and LuangNamtha seem unusual when compared to other provinces. It is not clear why this is the case.

Data are not readily available to determine if efficiency is higher among those learners who have access to CLCs. However, it is clear that efficiency of literacy courses must be increased since current graduation rates suggest that the return on the investment in literacy programs must be very low among the vast majority of provinces.

### Linkages between Literacy and Alternative Income Generation

The most obvious method for improving literacy efficiency is through a demonstration of improved social and economic conditions as a direct result of literacy. The literature provides evidence for social and economic rates of return for literacy and indicates the different benefits that literacy brings to men and women. However, such returns are usually not immediate and some may run counter to some cultural beliefs. For example, it is generally agreed that literate women have fewer children and marry later than illiterate women do, but in some cultures this is opposite to local values. Literate mothers generally provide better nutrition and health care for their babies; yet, there is no direct and observable link between this and literacy. An added problem in Lao PDR is that many communities have not yet reached critical mass in education and a recurring cycle of educational failure is in place.

In many provinces for literacy to be valued and sought a visible link between literacy and improved income needs to be made. This can only be achieved by providing literacy and skills development in tandem, and among poor communities with limited cash incomes this will need to occur without local contributions for facilities and trainers. While a policy of insisting on local contributions has merit, there are some provinces where this is simply not possible and, for reasons of equity, special interventions are necessary. A mechanism must be developed to allow a suitable interaction between DNFE and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA). Such a mechanism needs to overcome the problems of coordinating between two separate ministries. Development of a coordination mechanism will maximize the benefits of DNFE's efforts in vocational training and will facilitate the linkages between literacy and income generation skills.

### Decentralization and Nonformal Education Resource Centers

There are three regional nonformal education resource centers: Luangprabang, Vientiane Municipality and Champassack. The functions of these centers are to: assist in the development of curriculum; develop textbooks and learning materials; and, train nonformal education personnel and volunteer teachers.

In reality, curriculum development and textbook design are carried out in the resource center at Vientiane Municipality with staff from other resource centers being involved in training of trainers. Thus, the structure of nonformal education is highly centralized despite regional experience (UNESCO, 1998) indicating that successful implementation of nonformal education requires a decentralized approach. Staff of DNFE recognize the need for decentralization and see various benefits to this, including better (and more durable) materials production and distribution. It is suggested that assistance be provided to DNFE to identify mechanisms for implementation of a more decentralized system for nonformal education. This process should examine implications of decentralization for staff redeployment, staff development, and resource requirements.

There is a need for more curriculum materials, particularly materials related to the new curriculum. DNFE staff suggest that about 50 percent of all learners are still using materials from the old curriculum. Learners studying at CLCs receive a package of learning materials (learner books, posters, booklets, regular newspaper, etc.) while other learners share a limited number of outdated learner books. However, it is suggested that an investigation of the benefits and costs of decentralization be implemented before further production of learning materials. Part of this investigation should be the piloting of alternative forms of materials production since the life span of current paper-based materials is quite low.

## 6.3 Suggested Priorities and Recommendations

### Priority 1 Improvement in Rates of Literacy

#### Recommendations

1. **Redefine Target Age-Groupings for Literacy Training:** The current policy of providing literacy on a priority basis to 15- to 40-year old adults should be refined. The analysis here suggests priority target groups of 15 to 30 years for males and 15 to 35 years for females. This would provide a more equitable basis for provision of literacy skills. An affirmative strategy for female literacy should also be introduced since this is likely to provide significant short-term benefits. It is suggested that districts with female literacy rates below 10 percent should receive priority attention from nonformal education programs, particularly with the establishment of CLCs. This will involve five different provinces: Savannakhet, Saravan, Bokeo, Sekong, and LuangNamtha. Second priority should be given to those provinces where female literacy is between 10 percent and 20

percent. The second tier will include Xiang Khouang, Khammouane, Attapeu, Luangprabang, Oudomxay and Phongsaly.

2. Develop Special Literacy Programs for Hard-to-Reach Groups: Special programs should be implemented to improve female literacy for those ethnic groups where female literacy continues to be below 20 percent. Special attention should be paid to those provinces and districts where minority literacy levels are above average to determine the reasons underlying these higher levels. This information should then be used in designing the special intervention programs suggested above.

## Priority 2 Extension of Nonformal Education Equivalence

### Recommendation

1. Target Equivalency by Educational Level: Separate targets should be set for the different levels (primary, lower and upper secondary) of equivalency nonformal education and these targets should be determined on the basis of equity across provinces and within the planned expansion or capping of formal secondary education.

## Priority 3 Mobilize Support for Expansion of CLCs

### Recommendations

1. Develop Public Awareness of Potential of CLCs: It is suggested that a public awareness campaign involving governmental and NGOs be implemented to explain the advantages of having a CLC in villages. Such an advocacy campaign will be critical to the further introduction of CLCs and subsequent improvement in literacy and skills development.
2. Target and Coordinate Planning of CLCs: It is suggested that an expansion plan for provision of CLCs be developed and that this plan be based on criteria of need and equitable provision. This report suggests that special affirmative action should be part of this plan to improve the very low levels of female literacy among certain ethnic minority groups.

The relationship between parental literacy and dropout is important and would seem to suggest a self-perpetuating cycle of low educational value. This would suggest a need for special intervention programs in order to break this cycle. It also indicates that in areas of low educational status among adults, formal primary education will continue to fail many children unless other nonformal programs of adult education are also implemented. However, it is these same communities which do not have an excess of cash income to assist in the implementation of CLCs. To break this cycle, provision of adult education through CLCs will need to complement improvements in

formal primary education, however inputs from local communities should not necessarily be expected.

#### Priority 4 Decentralization of Nonformal Education

##### Recommendations

1. **Provide Technical Assistance to DNFE in Decentralizing Nonformal Education:** It is suggested that assistance be provided to DNFE to identify mechanisms for implementation of a more decentralized system for nonformal education. This process should examine implications of decentralization for staff redeployment, staff development, and resource requirements.
2. **Coordinate Production of Learning Materials with Decentralization Process:** It is suggested that an investigation of the benefits and costs of decentralization be implemented before further production of learning materials. Part of this investigation should be the piloting of alternative forms of materials production since the life span of current paper-based materials is quite low.