

## **Adult Literacy in the Third World - A Review of Trends a Decade Later**

**by Agneta Lind**

Our book *Adult Literacy in the Third World - A Review of Objectives and Strategies*, (Lind & Johnston, SIDA, 1990) was the result of up-dating and drawing conclusions from a literature review from 1986. The book examined adult literacy approaches that had been adopted in the Third World as from around 1945 and onwards, as well as the conditions under which the state would be willing and able to commit itself seriously to spread literacy on a large scale among adults. The political, social, economic and operational issues involved were analysed, as well as the relative successes and failures. The book was widely read and acknowledged by adult literacy workers and researchers from all over the world to be a useful and relevant state of the art review.

Our concern with the issue of how to reduce illiteracy significantly was based on the firm conviction that literacy is a human right and a need in our time. We observed that even the most impressive selective small-scale projects though achieving some important results, were still only reaching a small proportion of all illiterate women and men, and making literate an even smaller number. We identified the problems involved as being rather less of a pedagogical nature than of a contextual, motivational, mobilisational and organisational nature.

From the point of view of achieving large-scale literacy results, the following critical factors were identified:

- the state as the prime mover;
- political will or national commitment, including the capacity to organise and mobilise the people around a literacy project;
- a favourable development context i.e. other on-going social, economic and political changes benefiting poor people;
- continuous mobilisation activities aiming at sustaining collective motivation (initial individual motivation is necessary but not enough);
- a broad conception of literacy;
- a broad collaborative involvement and resource mobilisation from all sectors of the state and the civil society e.g. mass media, NGOs, private companies, trade unions, women's movements;
- central co-ordination of all major stakeholders and actors, combined with local responsibility and flexibility;
- "post-literacy" and other follow-up opportunities, such as the development of literate environments;
- a dual strategy, combining UPE and adult literacy.

Other identified key issues, needing careful planning and consideration in each context, were:

- timing and duration of instruction;
- the choice of language of literacy instruction;
- mobilisation and support at local level, i.e. community participation and strongly committed local leaders;

- motivation and training of teachers, including in-service training and a network of pedagogical and organisational support services;
- a curriculum adapted to a realistic learning process, avoiding too many and too heavy and technical themes or topics;
- methods within the reach of the teachers, the most important being to treat the adult learners with respect and patience;
- the allocation of sufficient resources to minimise the problems of inefficiency of all longer-term literacy activities, e.g. irregular attendance, drop-out among teachers and learners, relapse, too high expectations in the literacy objectives.

### **What has happened since?**

Have any major adult literacy initiatives been taken? What are the new trends and what new lessons have been learnt? Some striking and influential trends are briefly listed below.

1. The activities around the International Literacy Year and the WCEFA in 1990 gave impetus to documentation, analysis, research, and evaluation on adult literacy.

The systematic evaluation and documentation of some new programmes is impressive. Very interesting publications and research have been produced. Adult literacy is still under-researched, but it is much better documented than it was in 1985. Some recurrent themes of new publications have been the impact of literacy programmes, the uses of literacy in different contexts, women and literacy, and “post-literacy”. However, comprehensive and in-depth research, involving longitudinal studies are still very rare. Nelly Stromquist’s recently published *Literacy for Citizenship: Gender and Grassroots Dynamics in Brazil* (1997) is a very welcome contribution.

2. While literacy for children through formal primary education, and to some extent non-formal primary education, was boosted by the EFA conference in Jomtien, adult literacy programmes were de facto set back by the EFA context and agenda.

The context of economic crisis, growing national debt, structural adjustment programmes, deteriorating social services, globalisation of markets and technology, privatisation, increasing poverty, and growing unemployment meant that deprived and illiterate people had to prioritise more basic survival needs, and that governments became even less interested in adult literacy than before.

In addition, the World Bank became the major player in education policy-making in countries undergoing structural adjustment, and removed adult literacy from the area of state responsibility. This meant that existing budgets and departments of non-formal adult education and literacy mostly disappeared from Education Ministries.

3. An ideology that the state should limit its services to formal education was globalised.

NGOs and the civil society were romanticised for their capacity to adapt to local circumstances and initiate decentralised programmes. Adult literacy was, if at all discussed, pronounced to be inefficient. There was much more behind this negative attitude, not least politically, seeing that adult literacy activities were often associated with revolutions, socialism, awareness-raising and social action by the poor against oppression and exploitation.

Other arguments against large-scale adult literacy programmes or campaigns which were often forwarded by intellectuals and NGOs, as well as powerful international actors, included:

- the old economic functionality argument, based on the view that literacy must be a direct part of income-generation, other development activities or practical skill training;
- the claim that literacy is an imposition of the modern world which damages traditional culture;
- the claim that centrally designed programs and materials are inefficient and irrelevant.

The impact of the new global paradigm is reflected in the decentralised and low profile of adult literacy which emerged in new South Africa in spite of its expected political priority.

4. Although adult literacy has not been very high on the agenda of most NGOs, a few NGO programmes have been highlighted and well documented, such as:

- “TOSTAN” piloted in Senegal from 1989 to 1992, working closely with the government and UNICEF; and
- “REFLECT” (Regenerated Freirean Literacy Through Empowering Techniques) piloted in Uganda, Bangladesh and El Salvador from 1993 to 1996 by ActionAid, funded by ODA and the World Bank.

After successful pilot project results, both of these participatory approaches are now being extended. In Senegal the demand for TOSTAN is much bigger than resources and supply. ActionAid is actively “selling” REFLECT as an “only solution” package, misleadingly referring to the general “failures” and “bogus claims” of other approaches.

5. A few exceptional cases of well resourced and planned large-scale national adult literacy initiatives have taken place, in particular:

- a one-off national literacy campaign in Ecuador in 1989;
- a district based national literacy campaign in India, since its start in 1989 spreading all over the country;
- a national literacy programme in Namibia starting in 1992;

Other less spectacular large-scale national programmes are going on, e.g. in Ghana and Egypt. Others are planned, e.g. in Eritrea.

In all cases, the state has been the prime mover, but with the organised involvement and collaboration of multiple partners.

Some new lessons from these experiences which unfortunately have often been ignored by the *small is beautiful and safe* trend, are:

- Literacy campaigns are quite possible to organise in non-revolutionary contexts;
- In India and Ecuador the formal education sector was the major partner, i.a. contributing volunteers from among teachers and students, and back-up from local education committees etc. The impact was reciprocal, revitalising and boosting the formal system for children.
- In Namibia, lessons from other long-term programmes were considered already in the planning phase: literacy teachers need to be paid, trained and guided through regular in-service support; follow-up stages need to be prepared from the beginning, in this case a second mother tongue stage followed by a basic English stage; systematic and continuous monitoring and evaluation is needed.
- The Ecuador campaign showed that Human Rights was a highly relevant overriding theme and motivating factor.
- The experiences of both Namibia and India show very large internal regional differences in motivation, participation and results, with, for example, better results in rural regions where social and political movements have been active than in urban areas and deprived rural areas without such a history.

6. The key factors we identified a decade ago were, in general, reconfirmed by available new documentation on adult literacy. The above mentioned NGO pilot projects and national programmes, which all had good results and comparatively low drop-out rates (not more than 37%) revealed some common features, such as:

- The majority of participants are women, often above 35. More men than women drop out (Ecuador and Namibia). A neglected gender issue is how to motivate illiterate men, who are often too shy to join literacy classes. The Senegal experience of organising separate classes is promising, and also makes women feel less inhibited during lessons.
- The individual empowering impact of participation in adult literacy classes has been strongly manifested and well documented, all over.
- The powerful inter-active links between literacy for adults and children have been highlighted and recognised as a critical issue.
- External funding is often crucial to begin with, but internal resource mobilisation and state budget allocations for adult literacy programmes are necessary for sustainability. This is especially the case of small-scale pilot projects which often result in innovative and positive results, but do not have realistic plans for wider extension.
- Literacy is a continuum, and the provision of multiple levels and programmes satisfying a diversity of continuing needs remains a major challenge to all adult literacy programmes.

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#### **A selection of sources:**

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