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Skills and Literacy Training for Better Livelihoods¹

A review of approaches and experiences

Findings

Discussions of Education for All tend to neglect the question of vocational education for illiterate adults, younger and older. Organizations that specialize in vocational training — FAO, ILO — recognize that literacy and numeracy are essential for workers to increase their productivity and incomes. This applies to people who have waged jobs, as well as to the large majorities of men and women in Africa, who farm and pursue varieties of self-employment.² Most of them have either not acquired the skills of literacy at all, or have mastered them insufficiently to be able to use them in daily life. They are among the poorest and some two-thirds are women. In effect, the lack of literacy is not only a gap in Education for All, it is also obstructs the reduction of poverty.

Many countries do have literacy programs and even skills training programs for poor people. Yet their institutions of vocational and technical education (VTE) tend not to be involved. Most require their entrants to have earned at least a

primary school certificate, and are therefore not open to the unschooled. In effect, there is no policy for VTE for non-literate people.

If this were to change, one key question would be whether people should become literate, before taking up VTE, or be enrolled in VTE programs that incorporate literacy and numeracy. With the support of the Norwegian government, AFTHD (Human Development Department, Africa Region, World Bank) therefore commissioned a study³ of two approaches: literacy programs that have incorporated some form of VTE, and VTE programs that have incorporated literacy education as a helpful supplement.

The study addressed four main questions:

1. What approaches have been used?
2. What are the documented outcomes and impacts of these approaches?
3. What are the lessons regarding management, implementation and resource requirements?

4. What approaches are likely to be most effective under conditions prevailing in Sub-Saharan Africa, and what are the pitfalls to avoid?

Methods

Constraints restricted the study to documentary reviews. However, in four countries — Guinea, Kenya, Senegal and Uganda — interviews and field observations supplemented the documentary sources. For more general experiences, the study scanned published literature, plus the archives of eighteen bilateral, multilateral and nongovernmental agencies in Europe and North America.

Quality of available information

Between 1965 and 1975, UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Programme pioneered both combining VTE with literacy and systematically evaluating processes and outcomes. Unhappily, its global evaluation (UNDP/UNESCO, 1976) produced only hypotheses rather than conclusions, largely because measurement and recording had proved exceedingly difficult. The subsequent quarter of a century has produced little improvement. What the study encountered in 2001 echoed an OED (Operations Evaluation Department, World Bank) observation in 1993: "After 30 years of lending, the Bank still knows little about the impact of its education projects on output measures such as quality, access, and internal efficiency, let alone development." (IBRD-OED 1993)

The study was then able only to follow UNESCO's example and offer its conclusions more as probabilities than certainties.

Q.1: What approaches have been used?

Programs could, as Rogers (1997: 47) pointed out, be divided into five groups:

Literacy-led approaches

1. Literacy as a prerequisite for livelihood. Training in a livelihood is the main aim, but people are required first to master literacy sufficiently to cope with the livelihood's operating and development requirements.
2. Literacy followed by separate livelihood training. Here, learning literacy is regarded as a self-standing and worthwhile aim in itself and is undertaken first. Thereafter, training is offered in either livelihoods or some form of income-generating activity. There is no systematic connection between the two.

Livelihood-led approaches

3. Livelihood training leading to literacy. Here, groups start out learning a business, but come to recognize that their progress will be frustrated, unless they master literacy sufficiently.
4. Livelihood and literacy integrated. Here, training in a livelihood and instruction in literacy begin simultaneously, often with the content of literacy derived from or influenced by the livelihood.
5. Literacy and livelihood training in parallel but separately. Programs in this group recognize the importance of both components, start both at the same time, but omit to develop any systematic connections between them.

Almost all the programs examined addressed people in self-employment, or 'livelihoods'. The learners were very poor, mostly

rural and mostly women. Just two very small programs catered for people in waged employment.

Q.2: What are the documented outcomes and impacts of these approaches?

All five types had examples of effective efforts. Success in both livelihood and literacy is likely, if two conditions are satisfied: first, the program is well run with competent, reliable and adequately supported instructors, and, second, the program is well adapted to the interests and conditions of its participants.

Hard data were not available on the impacts of livelihood training on production, productivity and standards of living. However, individual interviews and focus group discussions were virtually unanimous that people who had completed literacy courses tended to be more willing to take initiatives in developing their livelihoods or in taking an active interest in the operations of their cooperatives. For example, SODEFITEX (Society for the Development of Textile Fibers) in Senegal reports that cotton farmers, who had succeeded in their combined livelihood/literacy course, were 6 per cent more productive than those who remained illiterate. Even more important in the view of SODEFITEX, such farmers were more energetic in forming organizations capable of (a) managing the commercialization of the cotton crops; (b) managing agricultural credit; and (c) serving the public interest through assuring food security and organizing village stores for veterinary medicines, agricultural inputs and other supplies.

Similarly, in the other three case countries, claims by successful learners that they had adopted

more productive agricultural or livestock practices were common, as were claims that people felt they could no longer be easily cheated when they bought inputs or sold produce.

These psychosocial aspects and outcomes are not normally considered in designing VTE policy. Nonetheless, as they do impinge on the productivity of current livelihoods and on the willingness to seek opportunities to develop new livelihoods, they should be taken into account as likely effects of VTE training with literacy.

Q.3 What are the lessons regarding management, implementation and resource requirements?

A first important impression is that organizations more concerned with livelihoods seem to be better at designing and delivering effective combinations of livelihoods and literacy than organizations that are more focused on education. FAO with Farmer Field Schools, ILO with its West African ACOPAM work and IFAD with a number of loans for primarily agricultural projects seem to have supported effective combinations of livelihood and literacy training. Projects run by NGOs like World Education and PACT, that integrate livelihood, social development and literacy appear particularly effective. The implication would be that policy for VTE with literacy should consider operating through agencies, both governmental and nongovernmental, that work with people in their actual livelihoods and employment.

A second impression is that NGOs seem on average to be more flexible than governmental agencies in responding to local and changing needs. Policy makers for VTE should then consider both (a) stronger partnerships with NGOs and (b)

forms of governmental organization that would allow local offices to develop the required flexibility.

As regards the design of projects, eight points emerge. First, as the SODEFITEX case suggests, programs that start from livelihood skills seem to stand a stronger chance of success. Corroborating evidence comes from Kenya, where the national program is literacy-led, but encourages income-generating projects. The Vihiga District had a total of 110 literacy centres, only 10 of which had income generating projects. These 10 had average attendance rates of 80 per cent, while the remainder had rates of only 20 per cent. Clearly, very poor adults, younger or older, do appreciate concrete reasons to justify their setting aside time over several months to learn new skills and information.

Second, deriving literacy/numeracy content from livelihood skills and integrating it with the livelihood training from the very start seems more promising than either running the two components parallel or using standard literacy materials to prepare people to train for livelihoods. This does not mean that the literacy content must be limited to the livelihood. Indeed, PACT in Nepal shows that a combination of livelihood with social and local political action can be a powerful motivator of sustained learning.

Third, livelihood-plus-literacy programs seem to improve their chances of success, if they incorporate training in savings, credit and business management, along with actual access to credit. Two organizations, SODEFITEX in Senegal and ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) in Uganda, use their own funds to make small loans available to suc-

cessful participants. In contrast, two other organizations, World Education and PACT, both working with poor rural women in Nepal, do without external sources of credit. Instead, they train their participants first to build up and manage a group's savings, then use the savings to make small loans to their members. Both organizations note that even the poorest women find it possible to save a coin or two during a month.

Fourth, programs that work with established groups of people seem to be more successful than programs that invite independent individual applicants. ADRA, SODEFITEX, PACT, World Education and the Rukungiri Women's Groups in Uganda offer examples. In the absence of such groups, it would probably still be worth taking the time to identify promising common purposes and to work on forming purpose-driven groups.

Fifth, there is a strengthening consensus that programs that are well-negotiated with their prospective learners in association with local authorities and leaders are likely to be more effective than those that are simply put on offer.

Sixth, planners would be prudent to allow for some 360 hours of class tuition and practice to enable average learners to achieve adequate mastery of literacy. Some languages with small and reliably phonetic alphabets could well require fewer hours, while others, which use more expansive and complex codes, could demand more. However, constraints have often pressured designers into allocating too few hours for tuition and practice, with disappointing outcomes. In addition to these 360 hours, planners would of course have to provide for sufficient time for the livelihood and business training.

Seventh, SODEFITEX suggests that, if at all possible, a livelihood/literacy course should be taken in a single session. Breaks of a month or two seem to increase dropout rates.

Eighth, two cadres of instructors are necessary, one to teach the livelihood and business skills, the other to teach literacy and numeracy. Most people with sufficient literacy can readily learn how to teach literacy to others. It is less easy for nonspecialists to learn how to teach specialized livelihood skills. Also, instructors of both kinds work more reliably when they receive not only moral recognition, but some material reward as well.

On the financial resources needed for livelihood/literacy programs, scarcely any data were available. Sums mentioned ranged from US\$63 per participant in a program supported by FAO in 1989 down to US\$4 per person enrolled in Uganda in 1999. The study then can offer no guidance here. The only observations possible are that (a) the costs of programs that combine livelihood, business and literacy skills are likely to be higher than those of simple literacy programs; and (b) even so, the costs would not be inordinate.

Q.4 What approaches are likely to be most effective under conditions prevailing in Sub-Saharan Africa, and what are the pitfalls to avoid?

Overall, the study suggests that policies for VTE with literacy for very poor non-literate people would be worthwhile. However, VTE policy in the countries of Africa would need to take a long view. The issues of supporting environments, catering for diversity, institutional norms, flexible response to changing demands, relatively complex curricula and capacity building counsel that gradualism, decentralization and partnerships should be the key words of any strategy. The kinds of literacy crusades undertaken by Cuba, Nicaragua and Ecuador in Latin America, or by the Total Literacy Mission of India would be quite inappropriate. On the contrary, patient assessments of the environments and potentials of particular localities and patient negotiations with the likely users of VTE with literacy and their leaders are more likely to pave the way for successful efforts in both education and poverty reduction.

This article was written by John Oxenham and is based on the study referred to in footnote 1. For more information, please e-mail john_oxenham@yahoo.co.uk

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- 1 The full text of the study summarized here is in the Africa Region Human Development Working Paper Series, *Skills and Literacy Training for Better Livelihoods: a Review of Approaches and Experiences*, March 2002.
- 2 For brevity, the term 'livelihoods' will be used, for most of the people in view do not have single jobs in the sense of wage employment, but construct relatively poor livelihoods out of combinations of subsistence agriculture, petty production, casual labor and other services.
- 3 The contractor was the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association (Institut fuer Internationale Zusammenarbeit/Deutsche Volkshochschule Verband, IIZ/DVV).