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Education for Everyone. Worldwide. Lifelong. / Adult Education and Development / Editions / AED 71/2008 / NATIONAL AND REGIONAL REFLECTIONS ON OPERATIONALISING THE BENCHMARKS / Tanzania and Vietnam: Comparing Policy and Practice in the Light of the International Benchmarks for Adult Literacy

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The International Adult Literacy Benchmarks emerged from the larg est ever global consultation of its kind and show that adult literacy programmes can be affordable and effective. However, the ways in which they are interpreted, prioritised and applied will differ somewhat according to the context. As a means of substantiating the benchmarks, follow-up research was conducted in the United Republic of Tanzania and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in collaboration with ActionAid and the Ministries of Education in each country. In exploring two very distinct literacy policy environments, the research aimed to establish the extent to which the benchmarks apply in each country and are in fact desirable. Focusing on the use of the Reflect approach to adult literacy by both governmental and non-governmental institutions around the countries, the research also examined the compatibility of Reflect with the benchmarks and the broader policy environment. The author is a doctoral researcher at the Institute of Education of the University of London.

Tanzania and Vietnam: Comparing Policy and Practice in the Light of the International Benchmarks for Adult Literacy

Key Findings

The literacy challenge is far greater than reported: In Vietnam, the research revealed serious inadequacies in official literacy statistics, which mask significant inequalities and even exclude data on certain groups altogether. Moreover, evidence of participation, completion and achievement rates in both countries shows that schooling alone is not solving the literacy deficit. There are still a considerable number of children who drop out before completing the first five years of primary school and, even more alarming, of those who do complete, many do not acquire the necessary competencies in literacy and numeracy. Many studies in both Tanzania and Vietnam also stress that the "relapse-rate" is high and this is exacerbated by the lack of a sustaining literacy environment. Unsurprisingly, the literacy deficit is particularly prominent amongst the most excluded and vulnerable groups – wom en, the elderly, ethnic and linguistic minorities, people with disabilities, people affected by HIV/AIDS and people living in remote rural areas. Unfortunately, both governmental and non-governmental programmes often fail to respond to demand from these vulnerable groups and to mitigate obstacles that are likely to impede participation.

The benchmarks provide a sound framework but in reality are a long way from being met. Greater political will and resources are imperative: although there is overwhelming agreement to most of the benchmarks in principle, areas such as the pay and profes sionalisation of adult literacy facilitators, a culture of evaluation and needs-assessment and the development of a literate environment fall seriously short of the targets and are realistically unlikely to be met in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the status accorded to adult literacy within Ministries of Education and in the agendas of donor agencies and even NGOs is low and ever decreasing. If political will is not enhanced, the substantial advances made in adult literacy in both Tanzania and Vietnam since the 1960s are likely to be severely undermined. Key inconsistencies include:

Understanding and evaluating literacy: While both countries are moving towards a broader and less dichotomous definition of literacy (embracing lifelong learning and functional skills) the national data fails to reflect this definition and neither country benefits from a sat isfactory culture of evaluation – though claims that this is underway have been made in both Tanzania and Vietnam.

Governing and financing literacy: The trend towards greater de centralisation and civil society-government partnerships is apparent in both Tanzania and Vietnam. However, there remains a tendency to see CSOs as service deliverers rather than advocates of rights. Cross-sectoral collaboration is also low. Adult literacy does not re ceive anything near to 3 % of the education budget in either country and donors are not filling the gap. Even traditionally supportive agen cies like SIDA, CIDA and NORAD have terminated their adult literacy projects in the shift to targeted budget support.



Reflect circle in Tanzania Source: ActionAid

Teaching and learning literacy: There is a wide diversity of pedagogical approaches in each country ranging from "chalk-n-talk" reproductions of primary classes to genuinely active, participatory and relevant learning. Training also differs significantly but examples of good practice were seen in both governmental and non-governmental programmes. Though learning groups are usually organised with ratios similar to the benchmarks, facilitators are severely under compensated. In Vietnam *Reflect* facilitators are (non-local) primary teachers paid overtime. In Tanzania they are local people but since responsibility was handed to the Government, they have thus far received no payment. The locality of facilitators also has implications for the language of instruction. In Tanzania, all stakeholders argue that Kiswahili is the language of national cohesion and that since the vast majority of people have a good mastery of it, efforts should be made to strengthen its use. Though very occasionally, learners lapse into local languages in order to better express themselves in certain discussions, all literacy groups claim to use almost exclusively Kiswahili. In Vietnam literacy is traditionally taught in the national Kinh language but this excludes many ethno-linguistic minorities who are often unable to participate. The key trade-off here is the issue of upward mobility (people desire the national language to enable them to move out of their local positions and access national institutions) versus relevance, easier learning and cultural preservation. An ideal would be multi-lingual education but achieving this is no easy matter.

Sustaining literacy: For Vietnam and Tanzania as with most countries, this is the toughest benchmark to meet as it means working with policy areas outside the realms of the education sector (in printing and publishing, with the media etc.). And yet, it is also debatably the most crucial of the benchmarks. What is the motivation to develop literacy skills if there is nothing available to read? Books, newspapers and magazines are largely unavailable in Tanzania and unaffordable in Vietnam. There is little desire to invest in book collections over and above, for example, computers, radios and TVs. Innovative strategies such as mobile libraries or locally produced newsletters have been underused.

Reflect

Reflect is a powerful tool to meet the benchmarks but still faces challenges. Because *Reflect* operates in the most disadvantaged areas, the programmes in both Tanzania and Vietnam are optimally placed to respond to learning needs in a number of ways. Firstly, *Reflect* networks might be used to fathom the true extent of illiteracy and the real learning priorities of the most excluded around the country through community-based needs assessments. Secondly, since *Reflect* circles are community-based and relatively low-cost they can be based in more remote locations, reaching people who would not have the time or resources to attend further-away classes. Thirdly, since the teaching and learning topics of each circle respond directly to the development needs of the community, *Reflect* helps to mobilise participants to launch community-development initiatives such as building small roads or vegetable gardens. Knowledge accumulated during circles also has a more far-reaching impact than to participants alone since learners share the information with friends and family. And finally, *Reflect* is one of the few adult literacy initiatives that work towards developing a professionalised and sustainable cadre of adult literacy facilitators. A gradual movement towards training local facilitators instead of relying on external primary teachers (Vietnam) or local government officials (Tanzania) has been put in place, to ensure sustainability of the programmes and genuine relevance to the needs and priorities of the community.

Reflect is also a means of improving governance of adult literacy. Since *Reflect* is a methodology that promotes more collaborative decision-making it can act as a useful device for local governance; the development and implementation of Action Plans, for example, is an excellent opportunity to bring sectors and organisations together. Training grassroots officials and other community leaders in *Reflect* is a useful way to link the value of education with other areas of community development, to share knowledge and resources across sectors and institutions and to ensure that local views are effectively scaled up to inform central policy processes.

However, challenges exist. First and foremost, the success of *Reflect* relies on meticulous training of facilitators and supervisors/trainers. On visiting a *Reflect* circle it is immediately clear whether or not a facilitator understands and uses the methodology appropriately. Where it works, a welcoming, dynamic and stimulating environment can be created. Where it doesn't, a facilitator may be reduced to imitating a primary teacher but without the professional experience. It is vital that trainers are carefully selected and monitored. An additional challenge is the recent movement away from a service-delivery and towards a rights-based approach, which has serious implications for the payment of facilitators, partnerships with government, training policy and the provision of assistance to programmes. There is a general assumption by governments that civil society should foot the bill for adult literacy. *Reflect* cannot be mainstreamed in a sustainable way without government support and financing. Finally, (in the case of Tanzania) a critical tension exists, between the relative priority accorded to the literacy and empowerment/development components of *Reflect*. Literacy is clearly not the priority for *Reflect* circles and promotion of *Reflect* seems to advertise other benefits over literacy outcomes. Perhaps the *Reflect* methodology for acquiring literacy can also be called into question. Although it builds on locally identified issues, culminating in a selection of generative words, it nevertheless often results in rather passive "copying from the blackboard" activities rather than more active alternatives such as creative writing (journals, stories etc.) or functional writing (letters, filling out forms etc.).

Mutual Learning, Moving Forward

Though challenges exist and resource constraints taint every solution, there are clearly strong adult literacy initiatives underway in both Vietnam and Tanzania and real evidence of impact on everyday lives. While the benchmarks are perhaps something of a dream in a context such as Tanzania, they might still act as useful guidelines to help to reformulate strategies for better coherence in policy and practice and are largely compatible with the Government's Integrated Community Based Adult Education (ICBAE) programme and the national *Reflect* programme from which it draws much of its methodology. In Vietnam, while current provision fails to meet the needs of the poorest and most excluded, the *Reflect* methodology goes further than most in targeting these particularly vulnerable groups. At the same time, the Government's recent commitment to establish Community Learning Centres (CLCs) across the country provides a potentially inclusive infrastructure for access to lifelong learning opportunities for all adults. It is therefore suggested that the institutionalisation of *Reflect* within CLCs across Vietnam (as has been done through ICBAE across Tanzania) is a potentially effective and sustainable means of ensuring relevant ongoing literacy opportunities for all ages within a complementary "*literate environment*".



Participant in the Integrated Community Based Adult Education Programme in Tanzania, Source: ActionAid

Conversely, the establishment of something akin to CLCs in Tanzania would significantly enhance the country's own literate environment and improve the motivation for learning to read and write.

Re-visiting the Benchmarks

In the light of these findings, the benchmarks themselves might benefit from greater contextualisation, stressing the need to fully recognise the policy environment in which they will operate and the need for a higher prioritisation of literacy within Ministries of Education (some countries even have autonomous Ministries of Adult and Non-Formal Education but a department with a vote on the budget is the absolute minimum). The literacy situation in the country must also be appreciated: understanding and responding to demand, and particularly to that of the poorest and most excluded.

More practically, there needs to be greater prioritisation of the benchmarks. As they stand they read as something of an unrealistic "wish list". National governments might be encouraged to develop their own prioritisations on the basis of national needs, but it is somewhat self-defeating to aim to meet all the benchmarks simultaneously.

Greater effort might be made to tie the benchmarks for adult literacy into the EFA agenda since this is the priority of most education sectors and the bulk of budgetary support from bi- and multi-lateral donors is channelled through EFA activities. This can be easily achieved by highlighting wherever possible the links between adult literacy and more support for child education and life-skills training opportunities for adolescents.

More attention might also be given to gendered strategies within literacy policy and practice (and not just as an equitable outcome or a topic for discussion though this is also important). Examples might include careful consideration of whether same or mixed-sex groups are appropriate, the impact that the gender of facilitators may have on learning groups, and assurance that women have the same opportunities as men to participate fully in literacy activities.

Finally, there should be a far greater emphasis on the development of a sustainable literate environment. This serves children and young people as well as adults and is one of the greatest incentives for motivation of learners and inspiration of facilitators. Since this is reliant on policies which fall outside the domain of Ministries of Education (for example language policies, book publishing policies, media policies and other policies centred on providing access to information) it is therefore critical to adopt a cross-sectoral approach, bearing in mind that the benefits of adult literacy are also widely cross-sectoral.