

## **EdgF Cameroon features Article 14: Literacy: A tool for Empowerment**

### **1. Introduction**

Literacy is the ability to read and to write; to communicate and be communicated through a community or universally accepted and meaningfully understood written words by one, two or more people. One is said to be literate when they have the freedom to communicate and be communicated without passing through an intermediary. Freedom of expression is limited when one passes on a message and it is translated or coded by a third party before forwarding to the final receiver. A message through third parties may lose its intended flavour as expressed by the original sender. People who have limits in expressing or interpreting messages in a community based or universally accepted language lack a personal tool to do more for themselves and their communities.

Literacy has traditionally been described as the ability to read and write. It is a concept claimed and defined by a range of different theoretical fields. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO define literacy as the "ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society."

### **2. Literacy and the individual**

From these descriptions and definitions of literacy, Illiteracy is a handicap in many respects. Messages may not be the same as intended and the right to freedom of expression is limited. Can you imagine that you are not able to read or understand signs; at bus station, health centers, road signs, read posters, books, government information? Or that as a farmer, you are not able to follow written instructions, for example on growing vegetables, and do calculations for shopping and running a personal business. These are some examples of the troubles which non literate people go through. To say the least, these sad experiences are not to be tolerated in a modern society. They have to be overcome, else non literates suffer in silence and can not freely express themselves, worst still, and they are marginalised by their communities.

### **3. Typical society structure in African states in terms of literacy**

- 1) State authorities
- 2) Literate community (learned individuals and institutions) the ruling class
- 3) Illiterate community (majority of people in this category belongs to the informal economy)

State authorities and power positions are handled by the literate class, drawn from the literate community. The literate community constitutes the society's human resource reserves from which leadership is drawn.

Without this class there will be poor planning systems, there will be no meaningful freedom of expression, and the society is controlled largely by the few literate ones, especially in African communities. Social scientists seem to agree that the future of good community governance and meaningful development belongs to a learning and knowledgeable society. Literacy is therefore a key link that leads to personal and community development.

The non-literate community is an important community of people who for one reason or the other can not read or write. This class has bypassed the Millennium Development Goal (MDG2) - Universal Primary Education (UPE), earlier in life. Normally, there will be varied reasons depending too in the community where one grew up. Whatever excuses they, can be easily redressed. Non-literate people are capable of learning and can do better when given the chance to educate themselves. What matters most are the individual's aims and intentions to move ahead into the literate class? Literacy improves the quality of one's expressions as well as the quality of contributions and participation in community

affairs. There is no doubt that the quality of doing business or carrying out local initiatives improves with acceptable level of literacy.

#### 4. Literacy and African countries

According to the United Nations Development Programme Report for 2009 on country literacy rates, 13 African countries ranking lowest globally with literacy rates below 50% are the following extract:

| <b>Country</b>               | <b>Literacy Rate (%)</b> |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Mail                      | 26.2                     |
| 2. Niger                     | 28.7                     |
| 3. Burkina Faso              | 28.7                     |
| 4. Guinea                    | 29.5                     |
| 5. Chad                      | 31.8                     |
| 6. Ethiopia                  | 35.9                     |
| 7. Sierra Leone              | 38.1                     |
| 8. Benin                     | 40.5                     |
| 9. Senegal                   | 41.9                     |
| 10. Gambia                   | 42.5                     |
| 11. Mozambique               | 44.4                     |
| 12. Central African Republic | 48.6                     |
| 13. Cote d'Ivoire            | 48.7                     |

From these statistics, illiteracy is a problem in African communities and efforts to institute sustainable growth strategies should include literacy programmes. Literacy programmes should be plan and coordinated to improve the quality of expected outcomes of development resources.

A low literacy rate gives the few literates undue advantages, which can lead to various forms of economic and financial mismanagement of the national resources, and dictatorial tendencies in leadership positions. Literacy is therefore a key link to rural development in Africa. It provides appropriate checks and balances of leadership actions, and facilitates the passing of decision making process from the central administration to the local authorities.

#### 4.14 Literacy: a right or a privilege

Literacy is a basic human right, but due to circumstances beyond the individual, parental or community control, some people are not educated. In that case, the few who sailed through the schools systems to be educated become privileged through special efforts. There is no doubt that in view of such vulnerable situations, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were formulated, and with Goal number 2, to achieve universal primary education. MDG 2 emphasises that each child should have a right to education. As a universal concept, irrespective of where one finds himself, they should have a right to be educated, at least to a primary education level. That is the spirit behind the MDG2.

Prior to the developing the MDGs, many children especially in the African communities had grown into adulthood without acquiring basic education of a primary school level, the reasons for these may include:

- *My parents*, in most cases the father who is the family bread winner and decision maker did not see why he should sent children to school
- *My parents*, in most cases and for the girl child did not see why they should sent a girl to school who should instead be given out to marriage
- There was *no money* to pay school fees
- There is *farm labour* that the child should be used to as our fathers did etc

These reasons give way to why; illiteracy rates are high in Africa. At the early stages, governments' efforts were either less or not enough to offer free primary education, and even if they did, some parents in the past were not just willing to send their children to school. In some families, children of school going age from one family had to be selected, so that few went to school while the rest assisted with farm work, hunting, babysitting, and attending to errands, etc. The girl child in some communities, even today are still not consider as good for schooling.

## 5. Literacy: a Human Right

Literacy is a Human Right, which equip people to be capable of contributing fully towards economic, social and cultural rights of their society. Writing about **illiterate adults**, Jenny Matthews/ActionAid, referred to the works of experts on the subject here cited as follows:

“The Committee for the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CECSR), in their General Comment 13, has also made this authoritative interpretation of the existing international law on the matter”:

Art.13 §1 “education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized **adults** and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities.”

Art 13 (2) (d): §24 “It should be emphasised that enjoyment of the right to fundamental education is **not limited by age** or gender; it extends to children, youth and adults, including older persons. Fundamental education, therefore, is an integral component of **adult education** and life-long learning. Because fundamental education is a right of all age groups, curricula and delivery systems must be devised which are suitable for students of all ages.”

## 6. Literacy programmes

Paulo Pierre in his writings suggested that education is never neutral. When a teacher teaches, Paula went on, “it either leads to people conforming to society, or to liberation”. Paula concluded that people learn more by critically thinking through their own situation than by soaking up the knowledge of experts.

Adult learners are focused people who learn with clear personal learning objectives. In most cases, adults desire to codify or better understand past experiences, through learning methods. With these categories of learners, Learning Needs Assessment (LNAs) is carried out and targeted trainings delivered. Adults learn with the aims of applying the acquired knowledge to practical situations. Since each individual is unique in their behaviour, attitudes, initiatives, expectations and personal values; adult literacy programme planning is a complex matter, which requires the skills of a specialist to design those focused delivery methodologies. It has been studied, analysed and established that in learning there are four categories of learners identified as follows:

1. *Activist* who enjoy new experiences and opportunities from which they can learn. They enjoyed being involved, are happy to be in the limelight and prefer to be active rather than sitting and listening
2. *Reflectors* who prefer to observe, think and assimilate information before starting. They like to review what has happen, what they have learnt. They prefer to reach decisions in their own time and do not like to feel under pressure
3. *Theorists* who like to explore methodologically; they think problems through in a step-by-step logical way and ask questions. They tend to be detached and analytical. They like to be intellectually stretched and feel uncomfortable with literal thinking, preferring models and systems

4. *Pragmatists* who like practical solutions and want to get on and try things. They dislike too much theory. They like to experiment and search out new ideas that they want to try out. They act quickly and confidently, are very down to earth and respond to problems as a challenge.

In his own classification of how people learn, Kolb came out with a model that is stated here as follows:

### **7. Kolb's experiential learning model**

Concrete experience  
Reflective observation  
Active experimentation  
Abstract conceptualisation

By understanding how people learn from the works of these specialists, one will be able to structure learning materials that allow the learner to progress through different stages and to maximise their potentials to learn.

### **8. Designing Adult literacy programmes**

Learning models and theories are guiding procedures that provide clear strategies in designing and implementing good literacy programmes. Adults are results oriented people; they work better to achieve preset personal standards. So their programme of study should be focused. In which case adult training needs should be:

- *Learner centered*; and to consider the interest, needs, expectations, experiences, challenges and environment of the learners
- *Problem posing*; focusing on situations and problems which the trainees experience with a view to stimulating thinking and analysing the situation
- *Self-Discovery*; remember the Chinese saying "when I hear, I forget. When I see, I remember. When I do, I understand". This helps the trainees to discover things for themselves
- *Action oriented*; motivating participants to practice what was learnt.

When people take literacy courses they are empowered to do what they were not able to do. Some common practices are taking minutes in meetings, keeping personal agendas, keeping personal records, writing letters or text messages, recording cell phone numbers and names, and exploiting the cell phone menu to maximise their use, etc.

Learning empowers the learner to increase their output. A good learning process is a learner facilitated rather than a teaching oriented process. Literacy improves the individual's outlook both on personal, business or skills development and community contribution / participations as follows:

#### **8.1 Literacy and personal empowerment**

Communication is vital and for it to be effective, it must be transmitted as intended by the transferor. Third party involvement without the information being validated may lead to distortion of facts. Note taking, writing letters or SMS, jotting down events dates and timing are critical in the life of an individual, if they must keep to datelines and meet set objectives.

#### **8.2 Literacy and business activities of trading**

Trading activities are made up of complicated processes and transactions, which needs record keeping, jotting down schedules and customer/suppliers relationships. If one has to move to a bigger business activity, they must be able to develop numeracy skills to determine transactions and activity operational levels at predetermine periods.

### *8.3 Literacy and group/community participation and contributions*

The community or groups forms bigger power structures for decision-making purposes and meaningful developmental activities. Beyond person level, information for group or community purposes is recorded. This means that non-literate members of the community may not be elected into positions or lack literacy capacity to take certain actions. From experiences, literate groups have skills and the know-how, and do perform better than non-literate groups. Literacy improves the process and quality of the community decision-making process.

### *8.4 Literacy and the knowledge community*

The Universal Primary Education, the MDG2 is being implemented, to ensure that education as a basic human right is acquired at the early stages of one's life, the adults too need to catch up with delayed rights. "It is never too late", they say, to learn. Literacy is the future and continuing education is a key link to building a strong knowledge base for a future oriented community. The learned societies and the professional institutions have realised the potentials of education, hence the emphasis on Continuing Professional Education (CPE).

The key to the future is knowledge and literate skills enhance one's ability to acquire knowledge, which is continuously updated to cope with; emerging technologies, emerging environmental issues, emerging health issues, etc.

## **9. Conclusion**

Literacy is a personal empowerment tool to the individual as well as a community resource enhancement support facility. Those who can read and write are better equipped to face the ever-changing dynamic challenges of our times. Literacy gives the individual the status to overcome the inferiority complex usually associated with illiterates by their communities. Literate people can contribute confidently, and their contributions valued by other community members. The quality of community participation and contributions to issues of community concern is improved with literate participants. Literacy empowers people to be able to challenge their leaders, pointing out what was decided or what is good for the community, without the kind of fear generally associated with illiterates, whom in their communities are considered and looked upon as voiceless people who have nothing to offer.

Leaders usually expressed their reports in writing to ensure accountability for their actions, and set policies. Accountability breeds trust and a leeway to transparency of leaders' stewardship. Literacy is therefore a key tool to understanding and interpreting others' action, be they verbal or written formats. Literacy is a tool that checks out leaders' excesses; without which, the few literate ones can easily manipulate and mismanage community resources, with no one to challenge them.

Literacy is a human right, and everyone should be able to read and write. It is good for personal improvement and human development. Literacy creates room for continuous improvements in one's life and the community. Literacy is a civil liberty that should not be taken for granted by those in decision-making positions. The great potentials of literacy for personal and community development should be fully exploited. The governments, assisted by development concern charities and other civil society actors should boost development efforts by building literacy programmes to improve on human resources and the development efforts. Literacy facilitates the implementation of national development programmes of decentralisation. It creates room for learning as a continuous process for progressive people, to better manage their livelihoods and the future of their communities.

**Gideon Njini**

## References

Ageways Issue No. 75 of July 2010: Jamie Pugh page 7

Encouraging change and learning; Footsteps No.43 page 12, of June 2000

Participatory Learning: Adult Education; Footsteps No. 29 of December 1996

Literacy- A Moving Target; Footsteps No.62 of March 2005

Meeting the Millennium Development Goals; Footsteps No. 63 of June 2005

The Millennium Development Goals-the challenge to faith and action; Footsteps No.83

Njini, GY; Business Management and Society, unpublished book

Link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literacy>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sub-Saharan Africa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sub-Saharan_Africa)

Link: <http://www.right-to-education.org/node/704>