

Incorporating Literacy into Community Development Projects

BALID ILD 16 April 2nd 2014

Feed the Minds (FTM) is a Christian ecumenical organisation, founded 50 years ago in 1964 and currently working in 15 countries in Africa and Asia with between 20 and 30 active projects each year. Literacy has always been an important aspect of our work supporting some projects where the primary aim was for beneficiary groups to gain literacy and numeracy skills. However, in 2007 FTM took a strategic decision to re-focus on literacy but with a slightly different emphasis. FTM now sees literacy as an essential element of all our work. Literacy and numeracy are embedded into each and every one of our community development projects. Feed the Minds supports locally led projects in vocational training, health, civic education, peacebuilding and practical theology.

As part of the process of embedding literacy Feed the Minds developed a Five Point Literacy Plan (see box) which was presented at the BALID Family Learning Conference in 2010 and is central in how we support partners in incorporating literacy into their work.

This Five Point Plan is for partners to examine the role of literacy and numeracy in their project. This will include carrying out a literacy survey of the ways in which the different stakeholders involved in the project use literacy, discussing ways of adapting their materials and being aware of the tendency for organisations and individuals to discriminate against those with few or no literacy skills. This then leads on to using literacy-friendly approaches, for example selecting which language and style to write minutes from Project Advisory Group meetings so that they are accessible to most group members. Other literacy-friendly techniques would include writing key words clearly in mixed case on a blackboard, rather than long complex sentences in cursive script etc. The purpose of adopting such practices is that this encourages community members to use the literacy skills they have and to develop these skills further.

Five Point Literacy Plan

1. Know the **literacy practices** of stakeholders
2. **Avoiding discrimination** against those with limited literacy skills stakeholders
3. **Adapt materials** to suit the literacy levels of stakeholders
4. Use **'literacy-friendly' approaches**
5. **Share good practices** within organisations and externally



Education makes a world of difference 

In the last year we have been reviewing the impact of our approach of embedding literacy using the Feed the Minds Five Point Plan. The strongest impact has been where there has been a partner visit and specific workshops have been facilitated to discuss the role of literacy in the project and to develop a literacy action plan. One of the strongest examples of this approach strengthening the whole project has been the work with Human Rights First Rwanda (HRFRA) on land rights.

Land rights in Rwanda

At the beginning of the project Human Rights First Rwanda (HRFRA) were not aware of the significance of literacy in their work. Most of the HRFRA project team were lawyers wanting to use their skills and knowledge to support community women. They knew, or rather assumed, that a large proportion of their beneficiaries were non-literate, however, they had no plans to adapt their approach to take this into account.

The project set up included a week of literacy awareness raising activities with the project team which included assessing the literacy practices of the various groups, the languages they used and the challenges this posed. The team learnt how to simplify 'legalese' into straightforward sentences (see table) and considered the literacy levels of the paralegals when designing the log book for their cases.

Organic Law determining the use and management of land in Rwanda. (14.07/2007 Law no. 08/2005) Article 3:	
<p>Land is part of the public domain of all Rwandans: ancestors, present and future generations. With exceptions of the rights given to people, the state has supreme powers to manage all the national land, and this is done in public interest aimed at sustainable development, economic development and social welfare, in accordance with procedures provided for by the law. In that regard it is the state that guarantees the right to own and use the land. The state also has rights to expropriation due to public interest, settlement and general land management through procedures provided by law and prior to appropriate compensation.</p>	<p>Land is for the benefit of all Rwandans: past, present and future.</p> <p>The state has overall powers to manage all the national land, except when people own the title deeds. If there is a public interest, the state can use its overall powers to take control of the land. This must be done following the law and giving compensation in advance.</p>

At the end of the induction period the project team had completely revised their understanding of literacy and summed up their learning as follows:

<p>Impact – at the organisational level.....</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understood the role of literacy in land rights registration and awareness-raising • recognised their own complex literacy practices and the different literacy levels of the project stakeholders • gained awareness of a range of literacy techniques which could be incorporated into Your Land Your Rights • recognised the role of language, Kinyarwanda, English and French in community communications • identified the literacy skills and abilities which HRFRA are looking for in potential paralegals • incorporated the new awareness in literacy into the 1st draft of the logbook for paralegals • gained skills in text simplification and applied these to legal land rights documentation
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As we approach the end of the second year of the project it is clear that taking literacy into account during the initial stages of the project has had a profound effect on the impact, for example

- HFRA has produced 'simple' land rights handbook in Kinyarwanda with cartoons and straightforward text which other NGOs involved in land rights work are using. The result is that NGOs staff, paralegals and community members understand the law more clearly and are able to be active in the process of claiming their land rights, rather than

having to rely on those who can understand legalese. This has helped to demystify the process and increase the confidence of local women to engage in the process.

- The paralegals are able to keep records in a useful format which has supported the securing of land rights and fed into the monitoring and evaluation processes.
- The paralegals have reported increases in literacy and the use of these literacy skills in other areas of their lives.

Additional challenges

We recognise that literacy and numeracy are not seen by most donors as important in their own right (and indeed we do not see them as particularly useful in isolation, either). Consequently they do not appear as prominent features in project frameworks and proposals. However, FTM is being increasingly explicit about the need for literacy to be embedded into each of our projects (a) to support the development of a set of functional tools to carry out specific literacy or numeracy tasks and (b) as an empowerment tool to enable people to 'join the literate society' and increase the control they have in their lives.

Project reporting inevitably focuses most on the aspects in which the donor is most interested (the outcomes and indicators). Literacy or numeracy is rarely mentioned in the outcomes or indicators; whereas community women having increased control of their own finances could be. It is not easy to 'quantify' the increase in literacy practices as they emerge through the project and the impact is often closely linked to other activities with the literacy aspect being just one of many. For example a woman in Rwanda obtaining her land registration form might result in her not being evicted but remaining and using her land for productive cultivation which results in increased income which in turn might lead to more of her children attending school. The increase in her literacy skills might be quite limited; being able to sign her name, recognise her village name and a few words on the land registration form. Her literacy practices might now include keeping a record of her income, being able to recognise words on some public notices, understanding that text is something which has meaning and relevance for her and therefore taking more notice of new posters in public places. Yet literacy played a significant role in the change in her circumstances as above firstly, in developing a few literacy skills and perhaps more importantly as part of her empowerment to take more control of her life.

This case study demonstrates the effectiveness of incorporating literacy into our work, especially where there are specific resources to support organisations in doing this. One of the challenges we face as an organisation is to promote this approach more widely among our partners and embed it more fully into our own capacity building.

Katy Newell-Jones, Programme Director, Feed the Minds
www.feedtheminds.org

*Dr Katy Newell-Jones joined Feed the Minds as Programme Director in 2007. She is also a freelance consultant in learning and facilitation. Her interest in literacy as a social practice dates from her time as a basic skills tutor and trainer of trainers in the UK in the early 1980s. Since 1992, Katy has been involved in supporting capacity building of a range of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) overseas including Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Egypt, South Africa, India and Pakistan during which she has developed a strong interest in the role of literacy in post-conflict and other challenging contexts. Recent publications include *Storytelling: a tool for peacebuilding* (2012) and *Education and Rights: a toolkit for facilitators* (2013) both developed in partnership with colleagues in Feed the Minds and SEM, South Sudan. Nowadays most of her work does not involve literacy provision per se, but encourages NGOs and CBOs (community based organisations) to consider the literacy aspect of all projects, whether mother and child health in Pakistan, Land Rights in Rwanda or Female Genital Mutilation in Kenya.*