



## Enhancing community development projects through supporting the literacy dimension

Katy Newell-Jones, October 2018

### The challenge

This paper focuses on community development programmes which do not, in their design, have a component to explicitly build capacity in literacy and numeracy practices. The aims of such programmes are wide-ranging and could include health, rights, livelihoods and agricultural programmes, to name just a few.

In resource-poor contexts, literacy and numeracy practices are increasingly beneficial in carrying out a whole range of community-based activities including income generation, securing rights, supporting families or protecting the environment. Being able to sign one's name and to understand and use written text often carries with it a social status which can be internally as well as externally perceived; for example we may hear women in communities say, 'I can write my name now, so I can speak in the community meetings.' Being able to speak in public meetings has less to do with the kind of literacy practices someone uses and more to do with the status with which the community perceives them and they perceive themselves.

Community development projects often explicitly target the most marginalised in a community who are frequently those with less exposure to, and experience in, a range of literacy, numeracy and oral practices.

Over the years, I have noticed that civil society organisations frequently identify 'limited literacy and numeracy skills' as a challenge in the implementation of community development programmes. These statements come from a position of defining literacy as an autonomous set of skills, as opposed to literacy as social practice, which develops alongside roles, responsibilities and felt needs. Organisations tend to describe this challenge as having two distinct elements: firstly, difficulties in appointing community-based programme staff and volunteers with the 'right' skill sets, and secondly, difficulties in working directly with the communities, who might be unable to read health information or complete documentation to access their land rights.

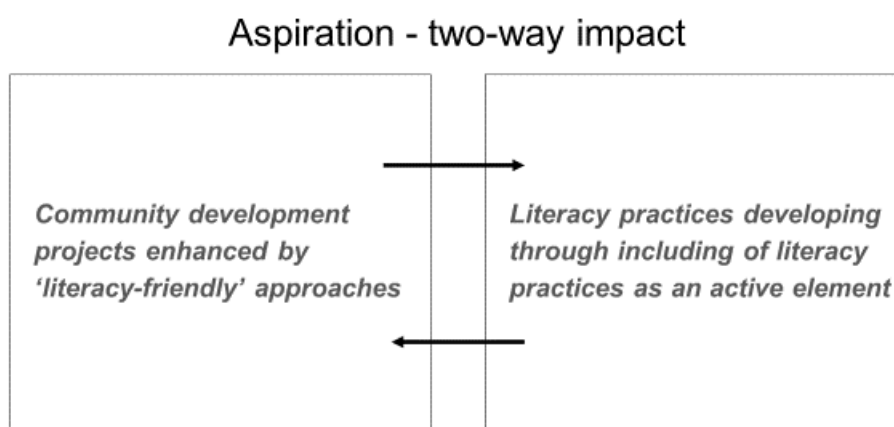
These two elements are briefly explained followed by some suggested solutions from a range of contexts.

Educational attainment is often highly valued in the **recruitment of project implementation teams** in community development projects. This is especially the case where field staff are expected and encouraged to understand and contribute to the development of complex programme management tools, including

logframes. On the one hand, it is good practice to involve community members in every aspect of the programme development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. On the other hand, increasing the range of complex literacy and numeracy practices required by field staff, prior to appointment, increases the expectation that they will need to have considerable educational experience. Project management teams often describe the challenge as a dilemma: whether to select those who have had the greatest access to education to play the key roles in development projects, or to provide adult literacy programmes to develop the skills required to engage in the project. Those with the highest level of education are often less connected with the most marginalised and possibly less able to empathise with the most vulnerable in their community. Equally challenging is the reality that literacy programmes that are run in parallel with community development projects are notoriously difficult to recruit into or maintain. The result is often that community members who are in touch with their peers and could mobilise the most vulnerable and collaborate with them to bring about meaningful change are not appointed, since they lack the educational attainment which the programme management teams consider are essential for the role.

Secondly, programme teams sometimes label community members who do not read and write as illiterate and confuse the lack of use of text with ignorance or the lack of ability to learn, acquire new skills, take responsibility or make decisions. This can contribute to a top-down model of community development.

This paper proposes an alternative way of looking at the role of literacy in community development projects, where, as in the diagram below, there is a two-way interaction and relationship between the programme or project and the development of literacy practices.



In the ILD a range of programmes was discussed where this two-way interaction has been developed with the result that the impact of the programme was enhanced **and** some community members developed their literacy practices in ways which they valued as a result. Key points from two examples are summarised below.

### Incorporating Literacy into Land Rights in Rwanda (2012-2015)

At the beginning of the three-year project on land rights, Human Rights First Rwanda (HRFRA) was not aware of the significance of literacy in their work. The team were highly qualified, legally trained young people, many with more than one higher education degree. They assumed a large proportion of their beneficiaries were non-literate and had no plans to adapt their approach to take this into account. When talking about community members who had not completed primary school, they used words such as ignorant, stupid, not able to understand legal terms, not able to manage their lives, not able to make decisions, or to understand concepts like land ownership, even when described verbally.

The project set-up included two weeks of literacy workshops with the project team, which included assessing the literacy practices of the various stakeholders, the languages they used and the challenges these posed to meeting the project outcomes. The project relied on community-based paralegals to work with vulnerable women to help them gain their land rights. The paralegals tended to have only completed primary school and lacked confidence in their literacy skills, especially in workshops led by lawyers. The HRFRA team quickly realised that there was a gap between their own literacy practices and those of the paralegals. However, the important insight came when they recognised that the responsibility of bridging this gap could be shared and that their complex 'high level' use of language was as much a challenge as the lack of literacy experience of the newly appointed paralegals. The team developed the skills to simplify 'legalese' into straightforward sentences (see table) and considered the literacy levels of the paralegals when designing the record book for their cases.

#### Organic Law determining the use and management of land in Rwanda. (14.07/2007 Law no. 08/2005)

##### Article 3:

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.

Land is for the benefit of all Rwandans: past, present and future.

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***.

This approach, of taking literacy into account during the initial stages of the project, has had a profound effect at organisational and implementation levels.

At the organisational level HRFRA has

- understood the role of literacy awareness-raising and registration of land-ownership rights
- recognised their own complex literacy practices and the different literacy practices of different stakeholders
- gained skills in a range of literacy-enhancing techniques
- recognised the role of language, Kinyarwanda, French and English in formal and community communications
- identified the literacy skills and abilities which are required in potential paralegals and those which can be developed
- gained skills in text simplification and incorporated these into legal rights documentation
- incorporated awareness of literacy into the production of community resources.

At the implementation/impact level

- HFRA has produced 'simple' land rights handbooks 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, including supporting their children at school, managing their income generation activities more effectively and being able to access local services including health more effectively.

### **Female genital cutting (FGC) in Sierra Leone – (2018)**

In Knowledge Sharing Workshops with civil society organisations working to end FGC in Sierra Leone and Liberia, the organisations were introduced to participatory approaches to Stakeholder Analysis. Their initial reaction was that the communities with which they worked are not sufficiently literate for these approaches to be useful. This escalated into an explanation of how because few people in the target communities had completed primary school that all workshops or community sessions must consist only of telling them information and teaching them songs about the harmful effects of cutting. It was assumed that the women would not know about any of the health consequences of cutting as they could not read the highly complex leaflets which had been produced.

Simple visual tools were introduced, which initially used no words, only pictures, but did require detailed discussions about the practice of cutting and the wide range of stakeholders involved in the practice.

When these tools were taken out to the community, the civil society organisation quickly realised that the level of understanding of the issues relating to FGC among community members was considerable. Both male and female groups wanted to actively engage in the baseline analysis and began supporting each other in the use of the diagrams and charts. They produced key word lists of the different stakeholders, using a combination of words and simple line drawings; for example the traditional cutters were portrayed as a pair of scissors, health practitioners by a red cross etc. These codes were owned by all in the group, irrespective of their ability to 'write' in any traditional sense.

As we watched the groups, it was clear that the women were supporting each other and working creatively to produce charts which visually displayed their insights into their own community. The level of engagement was heightened by the collaborative activity and their strong desire for their voices to be heard.

By overcoming the civil society organisation's perception of community members as 'illiterate and therefore unable to input into the stakeholder analysis', the process became a more collaborative one which revealed greater insight into the factors contributing to the continuation of cutting in these communities. By using collectively owned charts the data was recorded in a format which everyone owned and could readily refer back to as the discussion progressed. Noticeably, community members who had previously not engaged in the discussion contributed and others who had not previously written anything, reached across for marker pens to commit their thoughts to paper.

The examples described also included community peacebuilding, agricultural extension, vocational training, maternal and child health projects. In each example, by focussing on the literacy-linked activities which were either required by or beneficial to the development or implementation of the project, community members became more engaged and participated more fully than previously. Moreover, there was increased achievement of the project's stated outcomes.

As a result of these programmes I have developed and refined a Six Point Literacy Plan (below) which has been used to promote the embedding of literacy into community development projects.

### Six Point Literacy Plan

1. Know the **language patterns, uses and preferences**
2. Know the **education levels and literacy practices**
3. Know the **literacy dimension to the project**
4. **Avoid discrimination** against those with limited literacy / numeracy practices
5. **Adapt materials** to suit the literacy / numeracy practices
6. Use '**literacy-friendly**' **approaches** which support the development of literacy and numeracy practices



Points 1 and 2 are concerned with understanding the literacy and numeracy context within which any community development project is taking place, including the languages being used and the different literacy practices of different stakeholders. Once these are known then appropriate decisions can be made for example, about the language used for notices about community meetings, or the complexity of the reporting forms for field workers.

Point 3 suggests that the programme team examines the literacy requirements, both explicit and hidden, in the activities and the reporting requirements. These are usually considerably more than might appear at first sight and could include recording payments, registering a new community-based organisations with the local authorities, writing case studies, keeping a record of participants in workshops, completing voting forms, and writing minutes from a community meeting. Once these have been identified, the information from points 1 and 2 can inform the selection of language, style, complexity, frequency and support for each of these activities.

Point 4 invites the programme team to ask themselves whether there are any occasions where people with less well-developed literacy practices are being unnecessarily excluded from roles, or excluded from participating fully in workshops. One example involved women in an agricultural extension programme who were not considered to be community mobilisers despite being well-respected in their community and successful farmers; this was because they did not have the required literacy skills to read the handouts in the community mobiliser training workshops.

Points 5 and 6 are linked and are based on the principle of **not** avoiding the use of text for fear that some community members might have limited experience of reading and writing, but rather of making the process less stressful and easier for people to draw on those literacy practices they have and to develop them further, if they wish to.

Point 5 suggests that literacy and numeracy materials can be adapted to be more appropriate for the

educational background and literacy practices of those needing to fulfil the tasks. Examples include the use of more pictures with fewer words on FGC information leaflets, the use of pictures and key words in maternal and child health materials, the design of a template for recipes for a vocational training project and the simplified design of the paralegal record books so that all paralegals can successfully record the essential information and those who can write more also have the opportunity to do so.

Point 6, involves using approaches which can support and encourage community members to see text as accessible and consequently gradually develop their confidence. Examples include using only a few words on a blackboard or flipchart, rather than complex lengthy sentences; writing each word and saying it clearly at the time, linking where appropriate with pictures or symbols; providing key word lists for vocational training and identifying where each appears on products; labelling plants in an agricultural extension project with pictures and names of plants; encouraging groups to identify the words and numbers on a fertiliser sack and to support each other in interpreting them.

Some of the reported outcomes from adopting the Five Point Literacy Plan have been:

1. More appropriate selection of project staff able to relate to and represent their communities more effectively
2. Increased participation and engagement by community members, including those who are most marginalised
3. Higher achievement of outcomes
4. Increases in literacy and numeracy practices among stakeholders.

However, this approach does require a shift in thinking about the capacity and capability of those with fewer literacy practices in communities. It also requires the collective responsibility of developing appropriate literacy practices by all involved in community development projects. Finally, it requires capacity building of programme staff and some additional resourcing to carry out the initial literacy and numeracy surveys.

Further more rigorous evaluation would also be beneficial. One of the challenges is that enhancing literacy practices is often not included in the programme's intended outcomes. This is partly because measuring literacy enhancement is immensely challenging and partly due to donors' relative lack of interest in community-based literacy for adults. Consequently, programme evaluation frequently takes only a cursory or anecdotal look at the impact of embedding literacy.

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**Acknowledgement:** The projects which are reported here were part of the portfolios of Feed the Minds, Network for Africa and Orchid Project. Each of these organisations recognises the value of enhancing the literacy dimension in community-based programmes, including instances where enhanced literacy practices are not one of the primary intended outcomes.

**Katy Newell-Jones**, PhD, is chair of BALID and has worked in both the higher education and international development sectors. Katy was previously Programme Director for Feed the Minds, a UK-based NGO with a focus on literacy, and has over 30 years' experience as a literacy facilitator, evaluator and researcher in community development projects primarily in Africa and South East Asia. Increasingly, her focus is on the literacy dimension of community development projects, rather than discrete literacy initiatives. Her publications include *Storytelling: a tool for peacebuilding* (2012), *Education and rights: a toolkit for facilitators* (2013), *Literacy and numeracy for trade* (2014), co-authoring a UNESCO family learning resource pack *Learning together across the generations* (2017) and *Female genital cutting in Somaliland: a baseline assessment* (2018).