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Overcoming Destitution through Literacy: A Case of the Disabled Persons' Literacy Programme in Kano State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experimental literacy programme for the disabled, set up in Kano (1), Nigeria between 1989 and 1990. The programme's objective was to help the destitutes to overcome some of their socio-economic drawbacks. The programme took off with the enrolment of 450 people. At the end of the programme, 380 participants or 84.4% sat for and passed the qualifying examination. As expected, 70 people from among the neoliterates found jobs in the Civil Service bureaucracy, while 250 or 55.5% were able to continue their education in the post-literacy programmes organised by the State Agency for Mass Education. However, the lack of funds, inadequate professional preparation of the instructors, and discontinuity of the programme limited its potentially wider impact. It is therefore advocated that multi-lateral and international donor bodies such as the British Council, UNICEF and UNDP should provide fiscal assistance to such programmes, in order to create a basis for promoting greater global equity.

Introduction

Literacy helps development in a variety of ways. It provides opportunities for the optimum acquisition of basic skills which are useful for everyday life. It is a tool to enable the conscientisation and emancipation of people from class oppression, enabling them to become more completely human (Freire 1974). It also helps to promote peace and human survival (Bhola 1990). Similarly, literacy can serve as an instrument for coping strategies of women and children involved in war and

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(1) Kano is one of the 30 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. According to a census conducted in 1991, it had a population of 5,632,040 people, making it the second largest state in the country. Its main economic activities are farming and commerce. The people speak Hausa and are for the most part Muslim.

conflict situations (Indabawa 1995a). Above all, literacy is vital as a means of empowering people to overcome poverty, disease, social immobility, helplessness, malnutrition, the prevalence of preventable diseases, and lack of productivity (Ampene 1980); thereby ameliorating severe destitution (Indabawa 1991).

Yet in Nigeria, as in most developing countries, illiteracy is high among adults, particularly disadvantaged groups (Akinpelu 1994). Those most affected include women in the rural areas and urban slums, as well as the poor and the disabled. In fact, Nigeria's adult illiteracy rate stood at 46% in 1992 (CBN 1992). Since this situation has not favoured the possibility for rapid social, economic and political development; Nigeria has taken steps to educate its adult population, since the first mass literacy programme of June 1946. These efforts, however, have been sporadic, so it comes as no surprise that the complete eradication of adult illiteracy nationwide has by no means been effected. In 1994, a total of 43.6 million Nigerians were still illiterate, indicating that Nigeria ranks fifth out of the nine major countries in the world, constituting 705 million adult illiterates. Increased attempts have been made to drastically reduce adult illiteracy, with Nigeria's active participation in the Jomtien Declaration of 1991. This aimed to provide Education For All (EFA) by the year 2000, through the intensification of adult and nonformal education activities among signatory nations.

The initiative to promote literacy among disabled people in Kano State, is one such programme, designed to enable equal access to basic education, as enshrined in the National Policy on Education (NPE 1981). In Kano State in particular, the programme had the additional objective of overcoming destitution (Indabawa 1991); as the rising number of "destitutes", which is a generic term including all people affected by a variety of disabilities, has become a source of concern.

This paper examines the basic literacy programme for the disabled, which the Kano State government ran from 1989 to 1990. Given the positive results of this experiment, it is one to be commended for situations, in which existing injustices and disadvantages negate the effective involvement of disabled people in the life of the wider community.

The Level of Destitution in Kano State

Since 1987, Kano State government has been concerned with the high numbers of destitutes among the population. In fact, a survey indicated that in 1987, there were 1.5 million destitutes in Kano (Indabawa 1991). One of the most immediate social problems posed by widespread destitution, is the common practice of begging in the streets of urban centres. There have been other problems as well. A state survey of 85,112 street beggars showed the nature and distribution of

disabilities as follows:

Table 1: Disabilities among Beggars in Kano State, 1992

<i>Disability</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Blind	9,834	11.7
Cripple	7,734	9.2
Leper	7,366	8.8
Deaf/dumb	3,817	4.5
Juveniles	37,817	44.8
Mentally disabled	4,007	4.8
Able bodied (lazy)	10,118	4.2
Others	3,494	12
TOTAL	85,112	100

Source: This is a modified version of Table 1 in Auwal, M.N. (1992) "Almajirci: A Degenerated Social Institution" in *Education Today*, Vol. 5, No. 3, p.26.

The above table gives an idea of the kind of destitution, which tends to lead to street begging. Sadly, the majority of destitutes are juveniles with hardly any visible physical disability. Perhaps the prevailing high levels of poverty are a vital factor in this case. More so, the largest proportion of juveniles come from the rural areas to the cities in search of a more modern life. Due to this phenomenon, as well as other consequences of destitution, Kano State government decided to evolve a new social policy, which would re-awaken the social consciousness of these people.

The initiative took off with the inauguration of four committees of experts on:

- (i) the destitutes
- (ii) the Almajirai (child beggars)
- (iii) women, and
- (iv) social mobilisation.

Once these committees were formed with academics from the Federal University located in the city (the Bayero University, Kano), and notable retired and serving bureaucrats; terms of reference were defined for their operation. After a six-month period of deliberation, the committee submitted reports to the government with far-reaching recommendations, deemed necessary for improving the situation.

For the destitutes, a major recommendation was for the provision of opportunities for basic education, with an emphasis on vocational competence. Disabled people have the same right to basic education which:

connotes fundamentals, which in turn reflect those aspects of behaviour modification required by the individual within an environment, without which s/he would be so handicapped that s/he would be living at the periphery of the society, not benefitting from it and not contributing to its welfare and improvement. (Fafunwa 1990)

The questions asked, therefore, were: how the destitutes could be provided with this kind of education, which agency would be responsible, what would be taught, and what would follow once this form of education had been acquired.

Basic Literacy Education for the Destitute

The operational definition of basic literacy in the context of the Kano programme has been to consider it as:

Denoting the ability to acquire and optimally utilise the enabling skills of reading, writing and numeration, in a given language (local or foreign) for the effective and efficient pursuit of everyday activities involving the individual in society. (Indabawa 1995a)

The question of language is vital, as according to the National Policy on Education, instruction in the first three years of basic education, whether formal or nonformal, should be in the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. In fact, this has been found to be a means for facilitating faster and more effective learning. For adult literacy, the process is much easier given that the adult (a person of 15 years and over), has already acquired the necessary linguistic competence. It is also true that the transition to a second language then becomes easier.

Generally, basic literacy education is divided into two major phases. The first is the *Basic level* and the second is the *Post-literacy level*. The Basic level usually lasts for a period of six to nine months. The Post-literacy level, on the other hand, runs for up to two years. At the completion of these two phases, a participant would have acquired the knowledge, skills, attitudes and aptitudes equivalent to that of a primary school leaver, whose education, however, usually lasts for six years, with an obvious higher cost in terms of time and human, as well as material

resources.

The running of the basic literacy programme usually takes place in the months of January to July or September, on the basis of one and a half to three hours per day, for two to three days per week, and undertaken at evening periods beginning from 4.00 p.m.

Basic literacy for the destitutes in Kano was jointly organised by the Kano State Rehabilitation Board for the Disabled, established in the early 1980s, in order to:

...promote the welfare of the disabled and provide vocational training (programmes) for the rehabilitees. It was also charged with the responsibility of finding employment for the disabled and for caring for the elderly and other handicapped. (Bello 1976: 3)

and the Kano State Agency for Mass Education (AME), that came into being on the 1st of April 1980, with the following objectives:

- (i) to serve as an instrument for the eradication of illiteracy among adults, drop-out youths, and as a source of enlightenment among people in the state and for the provision of facilities for continuing education;
- (ii) to develop in adults and youths the ability to use the skills acquired to enhance their knowledge and understanding of their social and physical environment, in order to improve their standard of living and their state of well-being;
- (iii) to develop in adults and youths alike, attitudes and commitments towards active participation in the transformation of their immediate locality and the nation at large;
- (iv) to prepare the adults and youths in the promotion of such activities, which the Agency may deem purposeful and constructive in terms of the overall development of the state and the nation; and
- (v) to serve as a localised resource centre with training facilities in artisan crafts (AME 1980-1989: 1).

In the exercise of its duties (iv) and (v) above, and based on its known capability to provide vocational education programmes, the AME was probably the most appropriate government agency to partake in this collaborative endeavour.

Implementation of the Programme

Soon after the coming together of the two agencies on the programme, a survey was conducted with a view to opening literacy classes in the targetted destitute areas of the State. Initially, 450 adult learners were enrolled to begin the first phase, with 21 classes in 11 local government areas as indicated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Basic Data on the First Phase of the Literacy for the Disabled Programme, 1989

<i>Local Government</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Enrolment Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
Municipal	70	20	90
Gezawa	22	8	30
Rano	20	10	30
T/Wada/Kiru	25	7	32
Dambatta/Kazaure	20	8	28
Gumel/Ringim	20	20	40
Dutse/Birnin Kudu	25	15	40
Jahun/Kafin Hausa	25	10	35
Hadejia	25	15	40
Wudil/Gaya	27	13	40
Bichi/Dawakin Tofa	20	15	35
TOTAL	299	151	450

Source: AME (1990) Report on the First Phase of the Disabled Basic Literacy Programme.

So, on the 1st of June 1989, the programme took off with a government grant of N850,000 (Eight hundred and fifty thousand Naira only), or the sum of US\$106,250 (at the rate of N8 = \$1 in 1989). In addition, the government provided the instructional materials, paid the monthly honorarium of the Instructors/Facilitators, and provided a monthly stipend of N50.00 (i.e., US\$6.25) for each of the participants. Perhaps the next question to ask is: what was the content of teaching and learning material?

According to the national syllabus, the content is based on the effective teaching of adult learners to read, write and numerate in the Hausa language. In specific terms, the following is a summary of what was taught:

vowels; consonants; formation of words; construction of sentences; use of basic punctuation marks; writing a simple letter; addressing an envelope; posting of letters; simple composition writing; paragraphing; counting 0-9; units and tens (1-99); hundreds and addition; simple subtraction; multiplication; division; exchange of naira and kobo; time; units of length; units of measurement; units of weights. (NCME 1992: 1-11)

In addition to these, the students were encouraged to learn at least one trade from an array of ten vocational activities. This was in order to promote rehabilitation, which in the opinion of Townsend (1966) refers to: "The process of restoration of the handicapped to the fullest physical, mental, social, vocational and economic usefulness of which they are capable". Or according to Bello (1996): "... caring through the provision of basic living facilities, or making one socially functional after disablement, illness or abject poverty".

Results of the Programme

The basic literacy phase was completed in November 1989. No subsequent phase followed the initial one. The adult learners who remained on the programme were 380 or 84.4%, and this proportion of students sat for the certification examination set by the State Agency for Mass Education. It is significant to note that "... begging constitutes the single most disrupting influence on the students" (i.e., adult learners) (Auwal 1992: 27). Yet, of the number that sat for the final examination, 368 or 81.7% managed to pass. They were each given completion certificates and a token gift at a very colourful graduation ceremony. Thus, on the basis of performance per programme (PPP), the pass rate of 81.7% indicates that the first phase was very successful. There remains a pertinent question, however, which is the following: what will happen to the pioneer set after the completion of the programme?

In accordance with an existing legislation which came into force in October 1958, government departments and identifiable (i.e. registered) companies and other private concerns are expected to provide employment opportunities for disabled persons, who have undergone formal or informal training with valid certificates as proof of this (Abba 1991). The legislation constituted a part of the ensuing basic literacy programme for the destitutes in Kano. However, after completing the programme, only 70 of these people (15.5%) were absorbed into the civil service bureaucracy. One explanation for this is that there were not enough job openings in the service for the kind of qualification the participants

had acquired. Another explanation is that the wages for these rather lowly posts were unattractive to the neoliterates. Others felt that the neoliterates had better options in terms of employment, especially in terms of self-employment in the various trades they learnt during the programme.

Whatever the reason, many of these people were unable to find jobs after completing the programme. There are other reports which indicate that many of the participants decided to enrol in the next level, that is, the post-literacy programme, which the State Agency for Mass Education operates in many parts of the State. About 225 or 55.5% of the successful graduates took advantage of the post-literacy programme to continue their education. This will probably lead to better jobs, higher income and improved standards of living for these people in the future.

Some Criticisms of the Programme

Several criticisms have been raised and discussed, regarding the programme's laudable efforts. First, many felt that the number in the first phase (i.e. 450 participants) was inadequate, given the existence of 1.5 million people in the category of destitutes. At the rate of 450 per session, it means that a total of 3,333 years will be needed to eradicate illiteracy among the target group. Even this will only be possible if the number of destitutes remains constant. This is improbable, given the increasing pauperisation and the continuous marginalisation of the disabled generally. This is more so in developing countries, where destitution has become an endemic problem. The number of the annual target group is also inadequate to meet the expectation of providing Education For All by the year 2000.

The second criticism relates to the inappropriateness of the content. It is now common knowledge that the content of all informal educational programmes should be determined by the learners themselves. It should not by any means be imposed on them, as was the case in this instance. In fact, many beneficiaries of the programme confirmed that they never knew who decided the content, nor were they ever consulted on the matter (Dahiru and Iliya 1996).

A third criticism was the method used to teach the disabled adult participants. The "banking/dehumanising" concept as outlined by Freire (1972) was the one adopted here. Not much effort was put into orienting the Instructors/Facilitators as to the ways of teaching special adult groups, such as those targetted in this programme. For example, teachers need to know how to teach the blind, the deaf, or the mentally disabled. None of the instructors were sufficiently prepared for the ensuing tasks. No doubt, the banking method is unsuitable for the purpose, for it

is characterised by some degree of "bondage and disempowerment, it neglects the adult learners' personal identity and fosters the spirit of dependence" (Avosch 1995). There was also the issue of lack of credit facilities for the neoliterates, which would have promoted self-employment. Inadequate enforcement of the legislation on the employment of the disabled neoliterate adults was also criticised. This applied particularly to the industrial sector and to private concerns (which are extensive), where no record indicated the absorption of the neoliterates. It is also true that the efforts of non-governmental bodies in this area were not coordinated enough to influence the process. There are certainly many other observations and serious criticisms that can be made of the programme.

Despite these negative factors, it is evident that Kano State has taken a serious step in providing appropriate education for the destitutes. They have been given the opportunity to learn, as well as to overcome their state of helplessness through the utilisation of the knowledge and abilities the programme offers. What is most impressive is the fact that Kano State is the only state in Nigeria to ever take such an open step in reaching out to the destitutes. If this kind of effort were to be sustained, equity would gradually come to fruition, one day making the world a better place for everyone.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the literacy programme for destitutes, that was planned and implemented in Kano, Nigeria, with a view to helping them overcome the problems posed by their objective conditions. This small-scale effort, despite its brief duration, has proved that adult destitutes can learn and that what they learn can generate social and economic returns for self-reliance, in the pursuit of a fulfilling life. Governments should take such initiatives more seriously; while non-governmental organisations, as well as multi-lateral and donor agencies such as the British Council, UNICEF and UNDP should contribute (especially in fiscal terms) to this kind of venture, as the termination of the Kano programme was said to be due to lack of funds.

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