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# **The Literacy Campaign in Zimbabwe**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper first presents a general background and global perspective on literacy. It mentions the various approaches that can be adopted towards the eradication of illiteracy, the purpose of literacy and its relation to economic, social and political goals. The need for a literacy campaign in Zimbabwe is analysed and the development of the National Literacy Campaign in that country, and the responsibilities for it assigned to the Ministries of Education and of Community Development and Women's Affairs, are discussed. The main emphasis of the paper is on the poor participation in and relatively high drop-out from literacy classes, presaging the failure to achieve the commendable objectives of the campaign within the target period.

Some recent statistics are presented, which indicate the trend of the campaign over the last three years. A study of participation in literacy classes is then presented, together with an analysis of the reasons for low participation. The conclusions drawn indicate that there is a need for national commitment, revitalisation of the campaign and new motivation at all levels if it is to succeed and so achieve its original objectives.

## **Introduction**

Illiteracy is a major obstacle to world development, equality and peace. In 1980, UNESCO estimated that there were some 814 million illiterates in the world; despite an overall reduction in the global illiteracy rate, the absolute number of illiterates is increasing, due to the population explosion.

The problem of illiteracy is not confined to the Third World. There is no country in which it does not exist to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the proportion of illiterate people in the United States of America exceeds that of some African countries, while in the United Kingdom a recent study showed that some seven million Britons cannot read or write. The huge number of illiterates attracts worldwide interest and

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concern and, over the past ten years, governments, international organisations and aid agencies associated with work in the field of literacy and numeracy have addressed themselves to the eradication of illiteracy

Literacy is both country and time specific. Therefore, campaigns cannot be successfully imitated or transferred. Thus countries have adopted various approaches to the problem, choosing between campaigns, programmes or projects in accordance with their perceived needs. Those countries which have successfully waged campaigns have conducted them under particular conditions and during particular phases of their socio-political development, but certain general characteristics can be identified from the trend of the various campaigns.

Historically, literacy has developed out of complex cultures which needed writing in order to achieve economic and political goals. In today's world, too, developing countries see literacy as an essential vehicle for the economic, social and political development of the country. This view is shared by the educators, who believe that literacy is not only a basic human right, but that it also supports and stimulates development. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that literacy will serve only political ends. A better perspective on literacy would be one which acknowledges the whole person, with needs and interests beyond vocational skills. Also, as Oxenham (1980) says, "literacy does not necessarily bring about startling changes in the organisation of capital and labour, in the volume of goods, or in the distribution of income and consumption. Nor does it, by itself, provoke questions and challenges to the established order".

It is also important to bear in mind that while governments and educators may regard illiterates as incomplete people, deprived of basic rights and knowledge, illiterate adults see themselves as full, complete and dignified persons and do not usually view illiteracy as an obstacle to being a responsible citizen, worker or parent. In the rural communities, they live and participate in strong networks where, through exchange of services and assistance between family and friends, they lose little by their illiteracy. To them, oral communication, moral values and common sense are more important than book learning. Indeed, they may see an inverse relation between educational level and common sense (Fingeret, 1982).

Care must be exercised to ensure that, in the urgent acquisition of literacy, traditional knowledge is not devalued. There is a danger that, in their eagerness to acquire new knowledge, young people will lose interest in books from the wider literature. There would therefore seem to be value in including instruction in social and cultural factors in the literacy syllabus.

Many literacy programmes are intended to produce technological competence but campaigns will fail unless they impart meaning, along with

the technical skills, to literacy learners. The renowned literacy campaigns of Tanzania are said, in a recent article (Tanzanian Daily News, 1985), to be failures; although they learned to read, Tanzanian peasants still had an intolerable level of communicable diseases, and this despite the fact that lessons on public health improvements were written into the literacy readers. The campaigns failed because they failed to impart meaning, as well as technical skills, to the literacy students. Programmes should not have a solely economic perspective on literacy but one which acknowledges the whole student - with interests and needs beyond the mere acquisition of vocational skills. If the interest of the illiterate students is to be retained, they need, as Street (1984) says, to be given explicit examples of the uses of literacy and what skills they can expect to have when they have completed their courses.

The various views of the purpose of literacy - the development of the individual and society, 'conscientisation', the transfer of information and the needs of the whole learner - will be met if those designing programmes and syllabi keep in mind the UNESCO definition of literacy, evolved from the distillation of thought and debate among educators from all over the world:

A person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community, and those attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic make it possible for him to continue to use these skills towards his own and the community's development.

The first mass literacy campaign was conducted in the USSR after the 1917 Revolution but it took twenty years to complete the campaign and illiteracy in that country was finally eradicated only in the late 1950s. Of some fifty literacy campaigns which followed only a few are noteworthy, their success due to the eagerness and enthusiasm with which they were waged. The most spectacular success is to be seen in the Cuban campaign where, with the advantages of a commencing rate of illiteracy of 23 per cent and a single, phonetic language, illiteracy was reduced to 3,9 per cent of the total population within nine months.

The characteristics of the successful campaign are that it is ideological, all-embracing and vigorous; it has clear-cut intentions and it revolutionises the national culture; often it requires charismatic initiation and it should be based more on commitment than on resources and regulations.

### **The need for a literacy campaign in Zimbabwe**

Following 90 years of colonial rule and 14 years of war, Zimbabweans were so displaced and the national infrastructure so disrupted that a comprehensive

programme of national rehabilitation and resettlement was necessary. This called for the participation of many people in planning, construction, farming projects and several kinds of formal and informal employment, including co-operatives. These, in turn, required literacy skills for efficient and effective management; the resettlement programme, in particular, needed the involvement of literate peasants who would farm properly without destroying resources.

So it was urgently necessary for all illiterate adults to attain literacy skills which would facilitate mass participation in government's development plans and so make possible the fulfilment of the expectations of the people for better wages, better housing, better education and health services, and better working conditions. Nothing was more immediate than a literacy campaign in a country where development was to be conceived, planned, implemented and exercised fully by the people. It was therefore important to meet the need for literacy by a comprehensive campaign, rather than by a programme or projects.

At this time, functional illiteracy prevailed to a great extent among workers and both urban and rural dwellers, the majority of whom had not participated directly in the liberation struggle. This functional illiteracy extended to such areas as labour rights, political ideology, legal matters and many other aspects, which could be corrected only through education. Early in 1982, the then Ministry of Education and Culture established a full Non-Formal Education Section comprising, in addition to head office staff, an Education Officer in each region and two District Literacy Co-ordinators (DLCs) in each of the 55 districts of the country, responsible for recruiting volunteer literacy tutors (VLTs), for training them and for establishing and monitoring adult literacy classes. The Ministry conducted a four-week orientation course for the DLCs then deployed them in their respective districts. At the same time, the Ministry designed trial literacy and numeracy primers for use by the literacy learners.

It was intended that the Campaign would depend on voluntary work by VLTs and on moral, material, political and financial support from individuals, organisations, institutions and Government Ministries. There was heavy mass mobilisation of human and other resources to alert the nation to this new enterprise, the Literacy Campaign. Soon after deployment of the DLCs into the districts, work commenced in the field. At that time, the political zeal derived from the liberation struggle was very much alive.

In August, 1982 some of the campaign responsibilities were transferred to the Training Section of the Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs. The DLCs were also transferred from the Ministry of Education to this Ministry. Responsibilities assumed by the Ministry of

**Community Development and Women's Affairs included:**

- a. the mobilisation and organisation of the population for a literacy campaign;
- b. the facilitation of a direct link between literacy programmes and self-help projects;
- c. the setting up of a National Literacy Co-ordinating Council, the responsibility of which would be to mobilise the nation for a war against illiteracy;
- d. the provision of the basic data and information relevant to the development and production of learning materials.

The Ministry of Education retained responsibility for the conduct of training of the cadres of literacy teachers, the production of material for the campaign and evaluation.

The Prime Minister, the Hon R G Mugabe, officially launched the Adult Literacy Campaign on 16th July, 1983. At the same time, the structure of the campaign was announced - a National Literacy Council, with Provincial Literacy Committees and Literacy Class Co-ordinating Committees. All the ingredients for a successful campaign were now present - charismatic initiation, ideology, it was all-embracing, with clear-cut intentions. The campaign approach is clearly a challenge which most countries cannot accept. It is, however, one which Zimbabwe faced with strong resolution. However, by August, 1984 a year after the official launching of the Literacy Campaign, less than 120 000 of an estimated total of 2,5 million illiterates had enrolled in literacy classes and, although there was an increase to 378 000 by September, 1985, a projection of these growth figures to the end of the five-year campaign shows that less than half of the target figures will have enrolled by then.

The factors influencing participation/rates have been the subject of a study (Grainger, 1986), commencing assumptions for which were that the content of instruction and educational material is not sufficiently relevant to meet the needs, wishes and aspirations of illiterates in their social, environmental and economic milieu.

### **Latest campaign statistics**

The progress of the Adult Literacy Campaign in Zimbabwe is much slower than was envisaged. Recent figures, revealed in a closing address to a Literacy Symposium by Sen J Culverwell, Deputy Minister of Education, in December 1986, show that only 28 520 learners participated in the evaluation exercise.

Learner drop-out and low participation in literacy classes are the major problems in the Zimbabwe campaign. In Chegutu, for instance, of 114 learners who initially enrolled at the municipal-run adult literacy school in the

town at the beginning of 1986, only 48 managed to complete their year's study. Of these, only 33 actually sat their end-of-year examinations. Figures recently obtained from the Masvingo province indicate that there is a continuing decrease in attendance at adult literacy classes in that province. At the end of 1986, figures showed a decline of about 22 per cent compared to the previous year. It has been observed over the past few years that, of the original number of students enrolling at the beginning of the year, almost half dropped out of classes before the year ended. Preliminary figures obtained from various Provincial Reports in January 1987 reveal that, during the period 1984-86, the total of learners enrolled in literacy classes was constantly decreasing. During 1984, in all eight of the provinces, the total of adult illiterates enrolled in classes was 117 461 while, in 1985, the total fell to 105 203 and, in 1986, further to 82 138. The downward trend observed in learner participation in the campaign was due to various problems, but chiefly to drop-outs and poor mobilisation.

The only province to maintain high figures of literacy learners (according to statistics given in a Provincial Report) was Matabeleland South where, although there was a reduction in the figures of tutors trained and teaching at the end of 1986 as compared with 1985, learner enrolment was not affected. In most provinces it was evident that a large decrease in the number of tutors resulted in a simultaneous drop-out of learners.

These figures fall far short of the expectation of the campaign organisers and indicate that the original aim of eradicating illiteracy in Zimbabwe within the five-year life of the campaign cannot be achieved unless the trend is corrected. This is a matter of grave concern to both relevant ministries, whose efforts have, since the early 1980s, been strongly dedicated to the achievement of this objective.

### **Participation in literacy classes**

Why do so few adults participate in literacy classes? Why is there such a large percentage drop-out from classes after enrolment? Literacy in Zimbabwe is a new enterprise for many adult illiterates and the question of taking part in it or not will depend on such factors as motivation, interest, aspiration, the value and importance given to literacy, attitude, conviction, tradition, culture and many socio-economic factors.

A significant role is, however, played by such determinants as those related to the structure and functioning of the campaign. Such factors as mobilisation, co-ordination, training, opportunities offered, information and facilities available, as well as the pedagogical approach adopted, also influence participation. It is observed that male participation in the Zimbabwean Literacy Campaign is extremely low. From the early stages of the campaign,

most illiterate men have failed to join literacy classes. They had a wait-and-see attitude which was further strengthened when some of the men who had joined classes dropped out. Sometimes illiterate community leaders who mobilise their communities for literacy classes themselves refrained from taking part in these classes.

In our recent research, it was found that the most common reason for men not attending literacy classes related to lack of interest and low motivation, followed by beer drinking, socialising and laziness. A combined total of 75.3 per cent of respondents to a questionnaire indicated clearly that men gave literacy a low place in their priorities.

Socio-cultural prejudices, too, are forces influencing men's participation in literacy classes (a woman being brighter than a man? Or the fact that, today, women want equality with men?). This often contradicts the belief held by most men that women should submit themselves humbly before men. It was found that most men fear losing the respect of their womenfolk if they were to attend classes together. It is also a fact that, because the literacy campaign is a responsibility of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, most men regard literacy as another 'women's activity'.

### *Environment and participation in classes*

The researcher assumed that environmental characteristics would also influence the decision whether to participate or not in literacy classes. It was thought, for example, that those who live in the cities or other major urban centres and who are necessarily in contact with others to whom reading and writing are commonplace, might soon perceive the advantages of being able to read and write. It was also thought that illiterates in such an environment would need hardly any encouragement to attend classes.

The situation of the rural illiterates was somewhat different. These needed to be stimulated because, for them, the relationship between work and the value of knowing how to read and write had not yet been established. It was assumed that, for those who live in areas with limited or no means of communication and where the written word is practically unknown, interest, motivation and stimulus would have to be created. If, in the environment of such a person, there is little or no written material, attempting to work through a literacy programme with him could well be pointless because, even if he did manage to complete the course, he would soon lapse into illiteracy from lack of practice. Clearly, therefore, the rural community must have access to as many books, magazines and newspapers as possible. A rural library, with materials always flowing into it should be a crucial part of the literacy campaign. This is not as necessary in the urban environment, where notices, advertisements, street names and other signs are to be seen by anyone walking down an ordinary street. Here too, newspapers, magazines and periodicals in English, and often at least one vernacular language, are readily



available and there are often library facilities as well.

However, the findings of the study indicate that participation differs only slightly according to environment. From a sample believed representative of the total illiterate population, it was found that participation is lowest in semi-urban areas, where only 22,2 per cent of those interviewed were attending classes. For the most part, the semi-urban areas covered in the research are composed of mines and their compounds, commercial farms, urban outskirts and small urban centres. Semi-urban centres have the least recreational facilities, except for beer drinking. Despite the lack of recreational facilities, adults in the semi-urban areas still find no reason for active participation in literacy classes. On the other hand, this could, perhaps, be justified by the fact that the number of literacy classes is lowest in these areas, possibly because of the absence of constant monitoring by DLCs and other officials which is, in turn, due to lack of transport and the isolation of these areas from other concentrated settlement. It does, however, appear that the need for literacy skills in these areas is also low, because the residents are always performing routine duties and do not interact frequently with many outsiders, written information and complicated technology.

The 35,2 per cent participation level in the urban environment is indicative of the composition of illiterates in these areas, which includes manual labourers, manufacturing and industrial workers, as well as domestic workers in the low density areas, most of whom could participate in literacy classes if they wished to do so. Urban illiterates often see the need for literacy skills, as they are exposed to written material that they are unable to read; they also receive letters from relatives and friends. This fact alone increases the demand for literacy. Another reason is that urban dwellers often aspire to a prestigious life and better employment for which they need academic achievement. A flow of information is much easier to obtain in the urban areas and mobilisation is usually easier, as the people live in concentrated settlements. In short, participation is higher in urban than in semi-urban areas, because there is a greater need for literacy and numeracy skills in the urban areas.

The rural areas of Zimbabwe have the highest degree of participation, with 42,4 per cent of sample adults taking part in literacy classes. Perhaps this fact coincides with the fact that illiteracy in those areas is much higher than in towns. Some 75 per cent of all Zimbabweans live in the rural areas, where illiteracy is highest and the relative density of schools lowest. Rural communities have received special emphasis and priority in most government development efforts. The allocation of literacy campaign resources is also biased towards rural areas in an effort to reduce illiteracy as quickly as possible.

The study concluded with the belief that participation in literacy classes varies in the different environments, but that this is not a direct result of environment *per se* but rather of the emphasis given to the areas and to other factors mentioned earlier.

## **Importance given to literacy**

The study revealed that literacy is important to nearly all illiterates. They give it importance, mainly because they see the use of literacy first as academic achievement (reading, writing and calculating), second as communication skills (talking, understanding, writing letters), and third as the acquisition of more knowledge or practical skills for development. This picture of the value of academic and functional literacy was presented by members of both sexes in their interviews. Those interviewed in the survey showed clearly that they associated the campaign with the acquisition of the 3 Rs. Academic achievement is, to them, strongly related to the acquisition of certificates (the Diploma Disease) and prestige. Those who gave priority to the functional aspect of the campaign indicated the need for development of skills such as farming, fishing, home economic and similar activities.

### *Factors demotivating participation in classes*

In the study it was found that both men and women were discouraged and demotivated by the fact that no recognised certificates - which might facilitate further education - were awarded and because neither the primers nor training included instruction in simple practical skills. The study found a lack of motivation in learners; it also found that there were strong factors demotivating the District Literacy Co-ordinators and Voluntary Literacy Tutors. Learners were demotivated because they were not getting what they expected from the campaign. The tutors were demotivated because they received no remuneration, honoraria or other incentives and saw little prospects of employment or opportunities for further education when the campaign is over. The co-ordinators were disenchanted because they lacked transport, equipment and incentives to maintain enthusiasm for their work; they would also welcome assurance of a widening of their careers to include other areas of education at the end of the campaign.

## **Conclusion**

The literacy campaign, as originally conceived, was ideally suited to meet the needs of Zimbabwe. The momentum created by the charismatic initiation of the campaign by the Prime Minister, the efforts made by the Ministries of Education and of Community Development and Women's Affairs, and the general enthusiasm and motivation shown at the beginning have not been maintained. While the resources and regulations are there, commitment is not.

For the campaign to succeed - and succeed it must - a new enthusiasm, a new eagerness and a new national commitment are necessary. A complete revitalisation must be undertaken in terms of motivation and academic approach. Higher priority needs to be given to efficiency and to co-operation between the relevant ministries, the government and non-government organisations involved in the field of literacy; maximum and better use must be made of those qualified and experienced in literacy.

Only with the total commitment of all those involved in the campaign will the commendable target of the National Literacy Campaign of Zimbabwe be achieved.

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