

# **The Functional Literacy Programme in Malawi: Educating Adults for Improved Standards of Living**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The functional literacy programme was initiated in 1986 to provide adults who were not able to acquire literacy and numeracy skills in the formal school system the opportunity to do so in a system of non-formal education. As they acquire reading, writing and numerical skills, learners also acquire information that is usable in their efforts to improve their standard of living. However the evidence indicates that the coverage of the programme is below projections. This paper identifies the problems and suggests strategies that government might adopt to improve the effectiveness of the programme.

## **Introduction**

The first formal school in Malawi was established by Presbyterian missionaries from Scotland in 1875. This small beginning was seen by the missionaries as the first step towards the establishment of: "*an institution at once industrial and educational, to teach the truth of the Gospel and the arts of civilised life to the natives of the country*" (Pretorius, 1971:69). The school was seen as a vehicle not just for teaching reading, writing and arithmetic, but for evangelism as well. Every missionary group that came into the country, for example, the Catholics, Anglicans and Seventh Day Adventists, followed the example of the Presbyterians and set up their own schools. Only pupils who were prepared to convert to the particular brand of Christianity preached by the missionary group which owned the school could be admitted.

In spite of the proliferation of primary schools since independence, the growth of literacy in the country has not been very impressive. At the time of independence in 1964 only 10% of the population were literate (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:185). The 1977 census indicated that the literacy rate for those aged five years and over was 23%; this had risen to about 45% at the time of the 1987 census (Malawi Government, 1987:xiv). The low literacy rates are caused by children of

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school-going age not enrolling in school, or leaving school before they have acquired the ability to read and write. Failure to enrol in school, or dropping out after less than five years of schooling when a Malawian child is believed to have attained basic literacy and numeracy, may themselves be attributed to a number of factors, singly or in combination with others:

- (a) the long distance to and from school that a child has to walk when there is no school within easy walking distance
- (b) parents/guardians' failure to pay the prescribed school fees
- (c) preference for Koranic education in the predominantly Muslim areas, and
- (d) in the agriculturally rich areas of the country, children constitute a significant addition to farm labour which cannot easily be forgone.

This paper describes the Malawi Functional Literacy Programme and discusses how its coverage might be improved to effectively contribute to the acquisition of information for socio-economic development.

## Adult Literacy

A high level of illiteracy hinders information exchange and the transfer of skills. Illiterate farmers, for example, have limited access to information that could help them to increase their agricultural output through the adoption of modern agricultural techniques, since the dissemination of these techniques is mostly through the print media. For the majority of rural households who depend on agriculture for their subsistence and cash incomes, the inability to read, in a situation where extension services are either inadequate or non-existent, means continued use of unproductive production methods; and the resulting poor yields easily translate into poverty and undernourishment.

Adult literacy in Malawi began as a component of mass education pilot projects which Britain launched in its colonial territories in the late 1940s and 1950s. These projects, however, were not successful due to technical and political reasons. A National Literacy Committee, set up in 1962 by the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) government which came to power in the August 1961 general elections, decided to make adult literacy a component of development efforts, with an emphasis on self-help. Basically the programme called for the literate members of the community to volunteer to teach illiterate members to read and write and do simple arithmetical calculations. Communities themselves were to provide teaching aids such as chalk, chalk board, readers, exercise books and pencils. Usually, however, the learners had to buy their own exercise books and pencils. By 1970 adult literacy activities

had spread to all districts in the country. According to a 1979 UNESCO survey, the number of graduates from adult literacy classes between 1970 and 1978 was 11,400 (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:186). The curriculum, however, emphasised the attainment of basic literacy and numeracy *per se*: there was no attempt to link such skills with what may be termed development education.

## **The Functional Literacy Programme**

It is estimated that an average of 95,000 illiterates have been added to the population every year since 1966 (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:186). In view of this the government decided in 1986 to intensify the adult literacy programme. Discussions also began about phasing out primary school fees to enable as many school-going age children as possible to enrol in school and obtain at least eight years of primary school education. In 1991 a decision was taken to phase out school fees in Standards One and Two, with that for the higher classes to come later.

The new approach to adult education adopted by government is that literacy and numeracy should be linked with development education. It was reasoned that an adult education curriculum which demonstrated the relevance of what was learned to peoples' struggle to improve their own standards of living would be more attractive than one that failed to do so.

Responsibility for the programme rests with the Ministry of Community Services. The National Centre for Literacy and Adult Education located in the Ministry of Community Services develops the curriculum, produces teaching and learning materials, trains personnel, carries out research and evaluation activities and provides documentation and information services. It receives input from government ministries involved in socioeconomic development such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Education.

The programme remains community-based. Communities themselves must take the initiative to ask the Ministry of Community Services to establish an adult literacy centre in their area. They must also select someone from the community to be trained as an instructor. The criteria for selection are that the individual must have completed at least eight years of primary school and willing to work without pay. After the instructor has been identified he or she receives two weeks training in adult teaching conducted by officials of the Ministry of Community Services. A small honorarium of K15 per month (currently US\$1=MK2,80) is paid to instructors by the Ministry of Community Services.

Classes take place in the afternoon when presumably learners have completed the day's work. They are held in primary school or church buildings. In many cases

communities have built shelters specifically for literacy classes. Instruction is in the vernacular, depending on the language predominantly spoken in the area. Primers are however in *Chichewa*, which, along with English, is the national language. Learners are therefore taught to read and write *Chichewa* so they can gain access to printed information in the country.

Learners are taught to read vowels and syllables and to join these into complete words and ultimately sentences. The emphasis is on the construction of sentences which also carry important messages. Thus, for example, when a learner has accomplished joining the syllables FE-TE-LE-ZA to form FETELEZA (fertilizer), the next stage is to join this noun with other words, to form a sentence which might be: FETELEZA AMACHULUKITSA ZOKOLOLA (FERTILIZER INCREASES YIELDS). The instructor might then use this sentence as a basis for a discussion on soil fertility improvement, or on the different types of chemical fertilizers, their appropriate uses and levels of application.

In arithmetic, simple calculations are done with emphasis on practical application. An example might be: if one adult consumes three 90kg bags of maize in one year; how many 90 kg bags of maize does a family of five adults need in a year? Simple calculations such as these make it possible for families to estimate their annual maize requirements properly and thus avoid overselling to commercial buyers, which is a major contributor to food insecurity in rural areas.

Although the programme initially had an agricultural bias in recognition of the fact that more than 80% of the country's population are directly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood, it is now being used to disseminate information on nutrition, health and family planning. As the learner learns to read and write, he or she acquires information that is usable in efforts to improve individual and family standards of living. Where literature is available, functional literacy can effectively supplement the efforts of grassroots extension workers who are often overstretched and unable to effect personal contacts with their clientele.

## Coverage of the Programme

In 1990 there were 2,185 literacy centres catering for an estimated 44,150 learners. This was far below the projected target of 7,000 centres for 175,000 learners (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:187). There are regional as well as district disparities in coverage. One of the main reasons for the disparity is demand for the service. It might be expected that there would be greater demand for literacy centres in those areas with high illiteracy levels than those with lower. But since the establishment of literacy centres depends upon the initiative of local leaders as well as the availability of individuals qualified and willing to serve as instructors, and

upon the interest and motivation of learners, the number of adult learners in an area is not always proportionate to the rate of illiteracy. Thus, for example, although the illiteracy rate in Ntchisi district is much higher than that of Nkhata Bay, the number of centres and learner enrolment in the latter is much higher than that in the former (National Adult Literacy Programme Report, 1990). In other words, in spite of a literacy rate which puts Nkhata Bay among the five districts with the highest literacy levels in the country, enthusiasm for adult literacy is greater than in some of the districts with lower levels of literacy and which normally would be expected to demand literacy centres. It may be argued, perhaps, that the presence of so many people in a community who are able to read and write provides the motivation for those who did not acquire those abilities in their younger days to do so through literacy centres. It is also easier to find academically qualified individuals to teach literacy classes in communities with higher literacy levels than in those with lower.

Enrolment exhibits a sex imbalance; more women than men enrol (see for example 'Daily Times' (1991a:3); 'Daily Times' (1991b:4). Men constitute only 11% of the enrolment (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:189). The typical learner is a single woman (unmarried, divorced/separated or widowed) in her mid – or late – 30s (Kishindo, 1991:20). This would suggest that single women have greater freedom to attend classes than married women with resident husbands who may have to contend with their husband's opposition. There is fear among some men that their wives would use visits to the literacy centre to meet with lovers. Other men, especially those who themselves have no, or little education, believe that their wives would become arrogant if they acquired the ability to read and write. It would appear that female education challenges male superiority. Married women who attend adult literacy centres therefore generally do so with the permission of their husbands.

Although the programme is open to people of both sexes of the age 15 years and above, the evidence indicates that those in the age group 15-20 years are grossly under-represented (Personal Communication, 1991a).

A study conducted in three communities in Nkhata Bay, Mangochi and Ntchisi districts where UNICEF is involved in Child Survival and Development Projects revealed that out of a sample of 1,000 male and female youths aged 15-20 years who were interviewed, only 1.2% attended functional literacy classes. (Kishindo, 1991:21). Clearly the programme has failed to attract younger persons. The major reason given for this lack of interest was that it did not provide skills that would enable them to be gainfully employed (Kishindo, 1991:22).

The sex imbalance in favour of women indicates that the programme has problems attracting and retaining male enrolment. A number of reasons may be advanced to explain the male lack of interest and these would tend to vary from area

to area. However the more common reasons are that men are generally unwilling to attend classes with women for fear of being shown up to be less capable than they; and are also reluctant to be taught by persons who are young enough to be their own children. Men who dropped out of the programme have often remarked that they did not particularly like being made to repeat words aloud after the instructor in the manner of real "school children". It would appear that women are less inhibited by these considerations.

Even if learners were more interested and motivated to enrol in the functional literacy programme than at present, the expansion of the programme would be limited by the shortage of instructors. Since teaching adults is not really a career, very few people offer themselves. The few who do volunteer often leave as soon as the chance for a more permanent job occurs, or in the case of women instructors, when they get married to someone living in town or outside the area. In 1989 alone the programme lost 200 instructors (UNICEF/Malawi Government, 1991:191). The departure of an instructor usually means the death of a literacy centre since a replacement cannot be found easily. It must also be mentioned that because instructors do not regard adult teaching as a career they are not particularly committed to the task and absenteeism is very high. Instructor absenteeism makes it difficult for learners to acquire the required knowledge and it is often a source of frustration to them.

Although efforts are being made to sustain the learners' newly-acquired skills through simple post-literacy literature, the booklets are insufficient and some centres do not have them. Lack of funds is cited as the major reason for the failure of the Ministry of Community Services to produce adequate quantities of post-literacy literature (Personal Communication, 1991b). It is believed among educationists that if reading and writing skills are not constantly practised they can get lost. The current efforts by the National Library Service (NLS) to set up village libraries would help alleviate the problem of lack of reading material for the newly literate.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that the functional literacy programme in Malawi is intended to link the acquisition of literacy and numeracy with development education. In the process of learning to read and write, the learner is enabled to acquire information on such subjects as agriculture, health and family planning which would help families to improve their standards of living. However it also notes that there is a high rate of turnover of instructors, lack of interest by youths, and men. These factors, acting alone or in combination, limit the coverage of the programme among the illiterate population.

If government's desire to see the functional literacy programme contribute to improvements in the standard of living at the grassroots is to be realised, a number of changes need to be effected. The Ministry of Community Services must recruit, train and pay the salaries of functional literacy instructors in the manner that the Ministry of Education operates. It does not seem realistic in a situation of unemployment and poverty as that which exists in rural Malawi to expect people to be committed to a task that does not give them material benefits. Generally poverty militates against volunteerism. It is suggested that the cadre of instructors for the programme could come from the large number of Malawi Young Pioneers who have been trained in agriculture and leadership and sent back to the villages as volunteer leaders in local self-help development projects. Most of these do not stay in the villages but drift to the towns where they hope to get wage employment. Adult teaching could therefore provide a career option for the more academically able of them. Apart from academic qualifications, age would have to be a criterion for recruitment: only the older and more mature men and women would be selected. It is assumed that such men and women would be more acceptable to older learners than younger people. If the instructors are to be effective as adult teachers, not only must the supply of teaching and learning materials be improved, but the period of training needs to be extended beyond the present two weeks. The extended period would enable the trainee instructors to acquire the basic principles of adult teaching. Since civil servants can retire at age 55 years, many of the primary school teachers who have retired at that age are still strong and full of life: the Ministry of Community Services would do well to consider recruiting such persons too for teaching in the functional literacy programme. This might be achieved by transferring funds from less useful existing programmes within the Ministry; or by asking for an increased Ministry budget in annual estimates.

Given the fact that men in Malawi, as in most other African countries, make the major decisions in the family – for example, income expenditure and adoption of family planning practices – it is important that they be exposed to the functional literacy programme, if the information disseminated is to contribute to improvements in the standard of living in rural households. Without the involvement of men, or their appreciation of the functional literacy programme, the knowledge gained by women is not likely to be put to use. A massive, coordinated campaign by political, church and other influential leaders needs to be mounted to interest men in the programme. In those areas where men do not want to be taught with women, arrangements could be made to teach the sexes separately, in shifts, or on different days. The most important thing is that in its implementation, the programme should be flexible enough to accommodate local level conditions.

The idea of village polytechnics, where marketable skills are taught alongside literacy and numeracy, should be considered for the thousands of youth without any education, but who do not see the relevance of functional literacy in their search for a sustainable cash income to meet their needs.

In the final analysis the most effective way to curb illiteracy in Malawi is to create conditions whereby school-going age children enter the school system and stay long enough to acquire literacy and numeracy. The envisaged elimination of primary school fees is a step forward. However, whether the government will be able to sustain free primary education from its budget remains to be seen.

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