

**Sixth meeting**  
**Working Group on Education for All (EFA)**  
**UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**  
**19-21 July 2005**

**Session on Literacy and Empowerment**  
**Background and issues paper\***

**Purpose of the session:**

- **Critical review of the state of literacy: disparities, quality, sustainability**
- **Potential of literacy learning opportunities to contribute to poverty reduction and reaching the EFA/MDG goals**
- **Make recommendations for coordinated partnerships that include integrated literacy programmes which enhance individual and social well-being**

**Geography of literacy, poverty and exclusion**

In general, maps of poverty and exclusion in rural areas as well as the periphery of large urban centres mirror disparities in educational provision, as well as youth and adult literacy needs worldwide. Analysis of the most recent available data (UIS, May 2005) shows that while the absolute number of youth and adults with basic literacy needs is stabilizing or even declining, this is not the case in all regions, or uniformly within individual countries. Disparities are greatest for women and girls. Three regions, Sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and the Arab States, have the greatest challenges to meet the EFA and MDG goals with respect to primary education and adult literacy. They are further challenged by demographic considerations. The school-age population is growing at a greater pace than the capacity of education systems to respond either in quantitative or qualitative terms. Young people readily leave school, without acquiring sustainable reading and writing skills and other competencies, either because of the poor quality of the teaching/learning environment, poverty, conflict or crisis conditions not to mention violence within or surrounding schools (which are no longer 'safe havens' for children.) HIV/AIDs have taken a toll as well, in these same contexts. Forced migration or economic migration from rural to urban areas or internationally makes life more precarious for the disadvantaged as well as challenging efforts to provide effective schooling or adult literacy programmes. Also, maps of poverty in regions and countries which are not necessarily at the extremes of low literacy levels still show disadvantage. In Latin America, maps of poverty often correspond to maps of indigenous peoples. The deteriorating economic climate in countries in transition in Central and Eastern Europe has already taken a toll on previously high quality educational provision and adult literacy levels, Minorities in these countries, especially in rural areas, are also disproportionately affected.

**Why literacy and literacy for what? Critical review of the role of literacy in development, individual and social well-being**

Historically, formal education and access to literacy have only become internationally-

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recognized human rights in fairly recent times, since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Article 26 in 1948. Also, the growth and spread of literacy prior to the 1950s in the world was not necessarily causally linked to economic development. Sometimes literacy levels and levels of education preceded economic growth. In other instances, they followed industrialization but with a significant time lag. Often migration and the nature of labour markets in newly industrializing areas had a negative impact on the availability of schooling and adult literacy, which could not keep pace with demand. Development theories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century based on necessary stages of economic growth have proven inadequate to explain and understand the full dynamics of poverty and growth in the developing world. Indeed, the very fact that there are nearly 800 million youth and adults (15 and above) who lack basic literacy at the beginning of the new millennium raises serious questions about both our theories and political commitment. Yet, basic literacy and numeracy for children and adults alike is now recognized as critical to equitable and sustainable development. Adult literacy is a key component to individual self-confidence and participation in society. EFA Goal 4, *'achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults'* needs the focused and sustained commitment that has been neglected in recent years.

There is no longer a need to demonstrate that literate women are better able to care for themselves, their families and participate in economic and social change in their societies. Educated young people and adults are better able to identify their rights and responsibilities as well as options for change that affect them and their communities. It is also clear that the expansion of primary schooling is not enough to ensure universal literacy in the youth and adult population. Existing school systems in all regions, to a greater or lesser degree, are plagued by wastage (drop-out, underachievement, absenteeism, grade repetition), which, in fact, contributes to fragile or non-sustainable literacy skills. Existing non formal adult literacy programmes or second-chance adult learning opportunities are rarely on a large enough scale or planned and financed in an integrated sustainable manner to respond effectively to diverse need and context.

Perhaps the two of the most basic considerations for the effectiveness of all learning are the language (s) of instruction and the availability of books and other print material (literate environment). Children and adults alike learn most effectively in their first languages or mother tongues. But the choice of mother tongue, bilingual transition education or school /adult literacy programmes in languages of wider communication all depend on context (See Annex I). And some communities may decide that scarce resources would be better spent on radio or press in national languages and choose to address languages of instruction in schools differently. Or adults who seek literacy skills in income generating programmes may see a language of wider communication as more useful to their immediate needs. Also, national language policies are essentially about political choice. Some countries have selected a single or dominant language as an official one to promote national unity, social cohesion or to ensure equality of opportunity. Others, especially federal states, consider that their national unity is best guaranteed by respect for their linguistic diversity. Language in education policies at both school and adult non formal levels are also a product of these larger political considerations. The availability of books, print materials and increasingly, electronic media is critical to sustainable literacy. The international dimension of book publishing, as well as the presence (or lack) of an effective book sector policy that includes a local publishing component, especially in developing countries, have a critical impact on schools' and adult education programmes' ability to transmit reading and writing skills.

Literacy learning can and should be nurtured in a wide range of contexts and at all ages.

**Table 1** indicates contexts in which literacy skills and competencies can be encouraged by a variety of actors and partners, ranging from family or public authorities to international organizations, including learners' own aspirations and motivation.

### **Multilateral, bilateral, national and community-based approaches to literacy provision**

The international community is fortunate to have nearly a century of experience in mass literacy promotion on which to base the choices it needs to make to meet the Millennium Development Goals as well as EFA targets. The countries which underwent major political and economic transformations in the first half of the twentieth century recognized the critical importance of literacy. Those countries undertook integrated mass literacy campaigns along with rapid expansion of formal education to ensure the widest social participation. They also recognized the importance of the promotion of national and minority languages in education. International organizations, such as UNESCO, in a spirit of optimism, also initially promoted large-scale adult literacy programmes and campaigns alongside the rapid expansion of formal schooling. However, by the mid-1960s, it was clear that neither the political will nor the financial resources were available for such approaches. More targeted and limited adult literacy programmes were supported based on an economic growth theory that later proved inadequate. The UNESCO/UNDP Experimental World Literacy Programme demonstrated that limited success could be expected from an exclusively work-oriented 'functional' literacy effort especially when poorly designed. But for the first time, the international programme also included an in-built evaluation tool and hence was able to recognize its own limited effectiveness. These programmes were 'functional' in name only and never dealt with the critical issues of 'functions' that new literates could in fact assume. Since the late 1970s a number of countries have engaged in a combination of strategies to promote children's and adult literacy. However, few have been supported by multilateral or bilateral assistance in ensuring that their non formal adult learning opportunities are; (a) guaranteed adequate, sustained resources; (b) equivalent to formal school certificates or alternative recognizable quality assurance in terms of design, implementation and relevance and (c) an integral part of multi-sector or even education sector wide planning.

There is considerable experience in associating literacy skill acquisition with income-generation projects and larger poverty-reduction strategies. Yet, the plethora of experience has not been systematically evaluated to take the initiative to a larger scale or abandon an unsuccessful approach. The multitude of donor-driven approaches also works against long-term planning and learning from experience. Community-based approaches also have their strengths and weaknesses. (See Annex II) Response to local needs and aspirations is at the heart of relevant formal education and adult literacy programming, and critical to greater empowerment. Yet, communities are not necessarily democratic or egalitarian. They may be the source of discrimination and other inequalities. Just as 'civil society' reflects all trends, so too non-governmental bodies, private or religious-oriented education/literacy providers at local, national or even international levels, may reinforce very conservative forces that contribute to poverty and disadvantage, especially for women and girls. They may equally be an expression of emancipatory voices when chosen with care. This is not to exclude decentralization of programmes to an appropriate degree and to promote conditions for local renewal. The challenge is to ensure that the international community learns from its considerable experience in ensuring that the acquisition of basic literacy skills and competencies in both formal and non formal learning opportunities actually lead to autonomous literate youth and adults, who are better equipped to ensure their own empowerment.

The graphic display in **Table 2** helps us to conceptualize the issues relating to literacy and empowerment in the practical context of programmes and lessons learned from them. **Graph 1** provides the latest UNESCO Institute for Statistics analysis of data on the state of literacy by region (May 2005).

### **Towards coordinated partnerships: the way forwards**

In the year 2005, the international community has the accumulated experience to recognize the necessary conditions for effective literacy acquisition and the factors that are essential in schools as well as formal and non formal adult learning opportunities. There is also no doubt that basic reading, writing and numeracy skills and other competencies are both a human right for all and a necessity for further learning in the information societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thirdly, priority must be given to the most disadvantaged populations within the poorest countries who have remained largely unreached by fragmented and time bound international interventions. Priority must also shift from unfocused advocacy and awareness-raising regarding isolated ‘success stories’ which may or may not be replicable in other contexts or which have gone largely unevaluated to a much more *complex* response. Literacy learning can start and grow at any age and in many contexts for multiple purposes and practices. The context and the most appropriate source of support for effectiveness and sustainability (public, private, donor or a coordinated combination) need to be carefully identified (See again **Table 1**). This response needs to come from the experience of teachers and learners, administrators and planners, the research community that grounds theory in practice and multilateral, bilateral and other partners in development.

#### ***Key questions for discussion in this session for recommendations at: (a) international (b) national and (c) local levels:***

- *Achieving universal quality primary education and universal literacy for youth and adults alike will require shifts in the approach to education at international and country levels. What are the major systemic changes required in national educational planning, and what combination of measures can effectively ensure that the disadvantaged in rural and urban peripheries are actually provided basic literacy learning opportunities and that they are part of sector wide approaches?*
- *Neither centralized nor decentralized education systems guarantee greater equality of opportunity and reduction of disparities in resources or services. What are the necessary conditions in planning educational services to ensure literacy learning for all? How can priority be given to both elimination of wastage and improved quality in schools and diversified, yet quality-controlled, adult literacy programming?*
- *How can gender equality and women’s empowerment be concretely advanced through education and basic literacy and numeracy? What actions can be taken to improve their equitable access to quality literacy programmes that meet their immediate needs and longer-term aspirations? What lessons have been learned, for example, from the association of literacy with micro credit or other income-generation initiatives?*
- *Choices of language of instruction for children and adults are embedded in larger national language policies and community aspirations. In some instances, a language of wider communication is a community priority, in a women’s income generation*

*project for example, where literacy is needed to enhance their managerial and negotiation skills. In other cases, the first language or a multilingual approach may be preferred. How can language in education policies be designed that reduce marginalization but also respect diversity?*

- *What are the key ingredients of reform and accountability at international organization, funding, community and national (public and private sector) levels to ensure that effective literacy learning is available to the most disadvantaged populations?*

**Table 1: Literacy learning opportunities for all: Contexts**

<p><b>Early childhood:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home learning: family reading</li> <li>• Library corners for young children</li> <li>• Family literacy programmes</li> <li>• Pre-school, nursery school, <i>maternelles</i></li> <li>• Community centres and associations</li> <li>• Television/radio/street: print sensitivity</li> </ul> <p><b>Primary school-age children</b></p> <p><i>School:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language education</li> <li>• Textbooks</li> <li>• School library</li> <li>• Remedial and support classes</li> <li>• Private tuition</li> </ul> <p><i>Out-of-school:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home learning</li> <li>• Targeted literacy programmes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Street children</li> <li>○ Refugee children</li> <li>○ Working children</li> <li>○ Girls</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Secondary school-age youth</b></p> <p><i>School:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language education</li> <li>• Reading and writing across the curriculum (History, literature, maths, etc.)</li> <li>• Remedial and support classes</li> <li>• Private tutoring</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Out of school</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home learning</li> <li>• Targeted literacy programmes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Street youth</li> <li>○ Refugee youth</li> <li>○ Working youth</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Institutional: prisons, work place, etc.</li> <li>• Community/Religion-based</li> </ul> <p><b>Adult (24 and over)</b></p> <p><b><i>Equivalency opportunities:</i></b></p> <p>(In adult education institutions, community centres, colleges)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary equivalency</li> <li>• Secondary equivalency</li> <li>• Adult basic education for citizenship</li> <li>• Adult basic education as second language learning</li> <li>• Other certified courses and programmes</li> </ul> <p><b><i>Adult literacy programmes (open enrolment)</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult education institutes</li> <li>• Distance learning</li> <li>• Family literacy programmes</li> <li>• NGO/voluntary body programmes</li> <li>• Skills development with income generation programmes</li> <li>• Targeted voluntary or public programmes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Work-oriented programmes</li> <li>○ Volunteer tutoring: university students, senior citizens, etc.</li> <li>○ Campaigns for initial literacy learning (mass or selective)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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**Table 2: Literacy and Empowerment: Raising Key Issues**

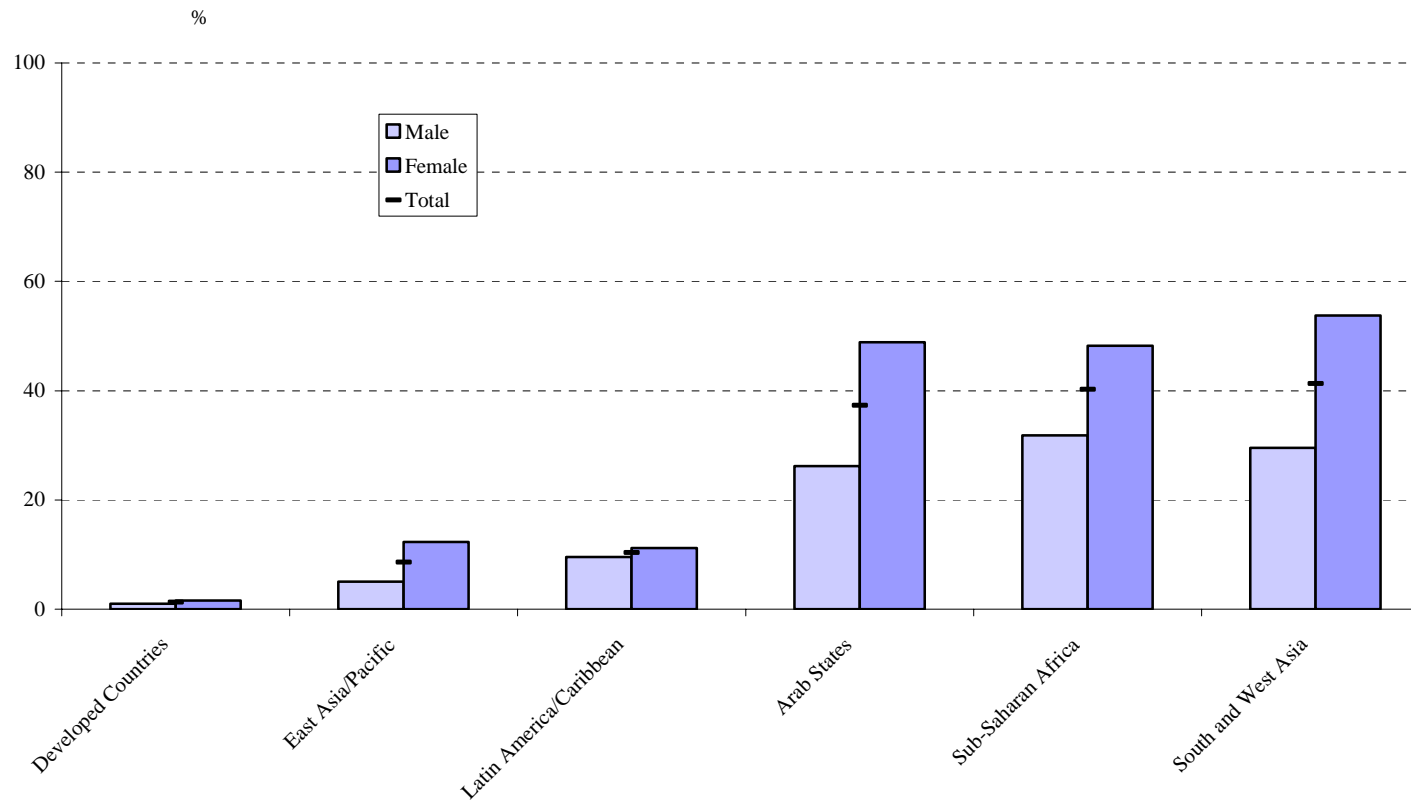
Peter B. Easton, Ph.D., Florida State University

SEQUENCE OF KEY ISSUES	CAPSULE ANALYSIS	ILLUSTRATIVE EVIDENCE
<p>1. What is “empowerment” anyway?</p>	<p>An important term, frequently used and just as frequently abused. There are no fewer than 23 distinct definitions currently listed in Google. Here is an instructive one from Canada: “A mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their own affairs.” In empowerment we are not talking – except via political participation – about the power that issues “from the barrel of a gun” but rather about the sort that grows from new responsibility successfully assumed and exercised. What is its <b>connection to literacy</b>?</p>	
<p>2. What is the link between empowerment and literacy?</p>	<p>Literacy – and nonformal or adult education in general -- may be linked to empowerment in at least two related ways: “micro” and “macro”:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) <i>At the micro level</i>, literacy and NFE programs may be designed and conducted in an “empowering” manner: one that makes participants into authors of their own learning, developers of their own knowledge and partners in dialogue about limit situations in their lives. Call this <i>psycho-cultural empowerment</i>.</li> <li>(b) <i>At the macro level</i>, literacy and NFE programs can contribute directly to larger scale processes of <i>socio-economic empowerment</i> – in short, to the mastery that people, organizations and communities acquire over their own affairs and the control that they are able to exercise on their environment.</li> </ul> <p>The two types overlap and intertwine. The micro strategy is well illustrated in procedures like Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed,” the methodology of Action-Reflect and the principles of Global Learning Partners. The macro strategy, on the other hand, requires a “pedagogy of the environment” that is unfortunately less well developed because politically more exacting. It involves participants actually taking control of new functions in their lives. To understand the connection of literacy to empowerment at the socio-economic level, we must first grasp the <b>conditions for assumption of new powers</b>, the exercise of new functions and the accumulation of new resources by those previously under-represented -- and then see what role literacy actually plays in the process.</p>	<p>Freirian literacy: Freire (1967) Action_Reflect results: Global Learning Partners: Vella (1994) Socio-economic empowerment: Belloncle (1993)</p>
<p>3. What are the main conditions required for true socio-economic empowerment?</p>	<p>How do people acquire increased mastery of their environment? Generally two factors are involved:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) The decision of relevant authorities to relinquish and transfer relevant resources and powers, or at least to authorize and tolerate their local accumulation (generally meaning <b>decentralization</b> of some type – delegation, deconcentration, devolution – plus the provisions for increased participation that go with it); and</li> <li>(b) Activities or programs that actually enable local actors to accumulate and manage their own resources, and then to reinvest them in improving their circumstances (generally involving <b>capitalization</b> of some type – collective or individual, private or public).</li> </ul>	<p>Relevant analysis of decentralization: Uphoff (1987) Literacy and capitalization: Easton et al. (1998), Rutherford (2001); Grameen Bank: Krishna, Uphoff &amp; Esman (1997); World Bank (Pitt, 2003)</p>
<p>4. When, how and why are these ever realized?</p>	<p>On the one hand, governments, agencies and ministries that genuinely wish to ensure the <i>sustainability</i> of development initiatives at the local level must also strive to <b>build local capacity</b> for the management and implementation challenges involved. They therefore take decentralization more and more seriously.</p> <p>On the other hand, communities and groups that wish to <b>escape the cycle of poverty</b> must begin accumulating and reinvesting their own resources – whence the imperative of local capitalization. The conditions on both sides are thus potentially widespread and increasingly evident.</p>	
<p>5. How then does literacy factor in?</p>	<p>New literacy initiatives – just like better schooling -- can be one <i>consequence</i> of genuine local empowerment. More importantly, though, adult literacy is in fact a <i>necessary element</i> or <i>concurrent requisite</i> for it: In brief,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) There is no effective empowerment without beneficiary acquisition of management skill, and no acquisition of management competence without literacy and a local system for training;</li> <li>(b) At the same time, there is no sustainable empowerment without accountability, and no accountability without some means for democratizing skills.</li> </ul> <p>For related reasons, experience suggests that the most effective role for literacy is neither before nor (solely) after effective empowerment</p>	<p>management: Belloncle et al. (1983, 1993), Oxenham &amp; Diallo (2002); Local Capacity Building: Easton et al. (1998); Easton</p>

SEQUENCE OF KEY ISSUES	CAPSULE ANALYSIS	ILLUSTRATIVE EVIDENCE
	<p>activities, but rather right behind the first of them, as an essential supporting condition: call it the principle of “Literacy Second!”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If literacy comes before resource and authority transfer, then there is little field for application of the new knowledge.</li> <li>• If it does not come until after, then there is seldom the local capacity to sustain empowerment or to render the new local authority accountable.</li> </ul> <p>The key linkage between literacy and empowered development thus lies in local <b>management</b> and commerce -- and in appropriate means for progressively <b>democratizing</b> decision-making, knowledge and control.</p> <p>☆ <i>management</i>, because individuals and communities cannot handle and invest increased resources without increased accounting and communication competence (it is no accident that writing was invented in part on the water irrigation schemes of the Fertile Crescent when the needs for resource allocation and record-keeping exceeded what anyone could keep in their head!);</p> <p>☆ <i>democratization</i>, because unless ability to monitor transactions and to participate in technical activities and decision-making extends beyond those initially responsible, there is no guarantee against embezzlement or expropriation and essential <i>social capital</i> is rapidly squandered.</p> <p>Management cannot be locally mastered or democratically controlled on any durable basis without <b>the support of progressively broadened and deepened literacy</b> (i.e. instruction that reaches progressively larger strata of the population and enables each to go further in their acquisition of knowledge); and literacy instruction is seldom retained without remunerative activities – or at least “solvent” and beneficial ones – to which it can be applied</p>	
<p><b>6. What is required to promote literacy’s empowering role?</b></p>	<p>The realms that local actors need increasingly to manage and the political powers and social capital that they want to acquire largely <i>lie in domains other than education</i> (i.e., in sectors like agriculture, health, governance, producer credit and natural resource conservation, plus their various overlaps).</p> <p>It follows that effective literacy programming must be hammered out to a considerable extent in tandem with – and support of – these activities in other sectors; and that <b>intersectoral collaboration</b> is the order of the day.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ In essence, socio-economic empowerment entails reconnecting the supply side of literacy provision with the demand side of literacy application in the other sectors of local development.</li> <li>❖ NGOs tend currently to be better than governments, international organizations and donors at escaping “sectoral silos” and effectively bridging this divide.</li> <li>❖ But the policies required to allow empowering solutions to extend beyond pilot project or jewel box status and “go to scale” depend in the final analysis on authorities and funders.</li> </ul>	<p>Intersectoral collaboration : Easton et al. (1998); and community-driven development: World Bank 2005b) Policy conditions: DassGupta et al (2003) Gillespie (2004)</p>
<p><b>7. What are the consequences of doing so?</b></p>	<p>True empowerment of this kind – psycho-cultural plus socio-economic -- helps to resolve the classic dilemma of “post-literacy” because it puts in place activities that can provide employment for new skills and serve as a basis for increased written communication.</p> <p>It may likewise create a new locally-rooted momentum for EFA. Communities and groups that acquire the means to accumulate, manage and reinvest new resources – and the literate knowledge necessary to sustain that drive – are typically themselves demanders of increased education for their children, willing stakeholders in it and capable monitors of it.</p>	

Graph 1

World Illiteracy Rates by Region  
and Gender 2000-2004



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, May 2005

## **Annex I : Education Policy on Language and Culture: Problems and Constraints Questions for Discussion**

*Prepared by Professor William Francis Mackey, University of Laval*

*Published in Language Policy, Literacy and Culture, (proceedings of UNESCO roundtable during the 43rd Conference of Ministers of Education, UNESCO-IBE, Geneva, 1992)*

Education has now become the focal point of most of our social and political issues. Those affecting language and culture have proven to be the most intractable. This is because each ethnolinguistic context generates its own web of intertwined concerns in each strand of which one can long remain entangled. Here are some of the most evident.

### **Problems affecting Language:**

#### **Identification**

What variety of speech is to be considered as THE language for which a policy is to be designed? What varieties are excluded and according to what criteria? How should conflicts between opposing regiolects or between different sociolects be managed?

#### **Viability**

Should the life expectancy of a language be a factor in language policy? Can one establish a reliable threshold of survival – a point of no return? What level of language viability should justify public support?

#### **Standardization**

To what extent should a language variety be selected and standardized for speech and writing? On what basis: a prestige variety, a common denominator or a linguistic construct? Who chooses between conflicting standards of grammar, spelling and vocabulary? Should the state get involved?

#### **Production of a corpus of materials**

How is the material necessary for reading and/or listening to be produced?

### **Problems affecting People and their Cultures**

#### **Identity**

Who identifies whom in this continuum of parameters with differing degrees of belonging, belief and behaviour? Is self-identity the solution and if so, how will it operate? Does the right to be culturally different from the majority suppose the right to be the same? Does categorization of people by language and culture penalize the bilinguals who belong to two different cultures?

#### **Legitimization**

What counts for the legitimate representation of a language community? Is there division between native speakers and non-speakers, between second-language speakers and would-be speakers? Are the claims of each of these groups legitimate?

#### **Legalization**

Who holds jurisdiction over language policy – the region or the central government? Which language should have its own territory? Should language rights be territorial, individual or collective? Should a language minority have more rights than the majority or should its language rights be subsumed? Should group rights include control of educational institutions? Who settles the conflicts between group rights that are inherent (sex and race) and those that are attributive (language and culture)? Are language rights limited to intra-national minorities or are they extended to extra-national (e.g. immigrants) populations? What duties do minority language rights impose upon members of the majority language group?

#### **Institutionalization**

In which institutions of the state is the other language (or languages) to function and to what extent – in education, public administration the legislature, the courts? Is the presence of both languages governed by the principle of parity? Is there a bilingual bureaucratic infrastructure to make this possible?

#### **Politicization**

How does one deal with the pressures coming from different forces within a language group: ideology (for an ethnic state with its own language), activism (mobilization of the population to agitate for language rights cum social reform), elitism (union of language activists with local power brokers) networks (extra-territorial groupings of language minorities). Where does the impulse for change originate – from the centre or the periphery, from theoretical constructs or popular consensus?

#### **Resource allocation**

If a state lacks resources to educate the majority of its citizens should it get involved in minority language education? Or should each minority have its share of the limited resources? To what extent does the state finance a language for its own sake? What are the costs in terms of basic education? Is each family aware of the trade-off? Is their choice made under elite or group pressure?

#### **Media and Technology**

To what extent does technology liberate a language minority from its necessary isolation? Does the availability of mass media lead to its acculturation?

#### **Policy implementation**

Does the implementation of an education policy account for differences in cultural values? Does the culture value identity over education? Is its norm of success different? Is social learning more valued than formal education? Does the language policy implementation account for different degrees of tolerance for deviation from the norm?

## **Annex II: When small is essential: Literacy with micro credit and literacy for out-of-school adolescent girls**

The nearly 1 billion of the world's illiterate population are also those who are amongst the world's 1.3 billion poorest, the majority of whom are women. They suffer from a complex set of factors that include a lack of access to basic services (education, health care, housing and sanitation facilities, safe water, to name a few) as well as a lack of employment opportunities and financial mechanisms to suit their needs. Therefore, effective strategies to respond to their learning needs are analyzing the broader issues related to their livelihoods. Increasingly, information on income generation, on legal rights, on basic health, etc. are being integrated into literacy and vocational skills programmes.

Similarly, since a majority of these same populations have extremely limited wage employment opportunities in the formal sector of the economy, rely on self-employment for their livelihoods, micro financial mechanisms have been developed to respond to their financial needs. Microfinance is particularly relevant in this context because it enhances poor peoples' opportunities for self-employment and income generation. However, given that the complex process of poverty reduction cannot be resolved by successful intervention in any one area, and, that even well-designed microfinance programmes have limited impact on the livelihoods of the poor unless complemented by basic education components, many development initiatives are now integrating microfinance with literacy and non formal education, vocational and marketing skills as well as basic health care and information on legal rights.

### **Targeting out-of-school adolescent girls' education**

Today's out-of-school adolescent girls are tomorrow's women. Gender discrimination still deprives poor women of mainstream development initiatives. Consequently illiteracy and unemployment are very high amongst them, which, on the one hand, limit their options and dependency. Studies show across Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa that women's education and female employment increase women's voice in family decision-making and emerge as the two most significant influences on reducing high fertility rates that lead to over population. Investment in women's income generation possibilities through micro-finance improves household livelihoods. Since the UN conference on women in 1995, there has been a growing awareness that amongst the poorest segment of the population, adolescent girls constitute the most vulnerable group. In most developing countries, the consequences of illiteracy, lack of skills and training as well as employment opportunities and, at the same time the pressure to earn an income, is so harsh that in order to survive, adolescent girls born in poor families are often forced to accept early marriages and pregnancies, badly paid, demoralizing work as well as all kinds of abuse and exploitation. In addition, their situation is aggravated by any crisis in the family or the community. Vulnerable adolescent girls thus become easy prey for traffickers and kidnapers, and fall into the vicious poverty-prostitution cycle. Despite the compelling need, there exists virtually no setting in developing countries, particularly in the LDCs, where a broadly conceived strategy is in place to make investment in adolescent girls. The great untapped potential that adolescent girls represent in terms of human capital as well as economic and social power can be transformed into a productive force, which can contribute greatly in the development efforts of a country. Instead, millions of adolescent girls with little or no education and limited skills face aggression, exploitation, deprivation, and become victims of trafficking and the prostitution-poverty trap. Well-targeted literacy programmes that reach these girls should be part of a larger national poverty reduction strategy supported by the international community.

(from Sayeeda Rahman, Division of Basic Education, UNESCO, 2005)

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