

Writing the Wrongs: Invest in Adult Literacy now!

The Global Campaign for Education and ActionAid have recently published *Writing the Wrongs: International Benchmarks on Adult Literacy*. This work, undertaken by David Archer and Yaikah Jeng, argues that present under-investment in adult literacy is a global scandal. This publication, based on detailed consultation with programmes in 35 countries and advice from people in over 50 countries shows that there is a strong consensus about what policy makers and practitioners should do. Insights from this work have been compiled into twelve simple benchmarks to guide future work and catalyse new investment in adult literacy.

There are nearly one billion adults who cannot read and write, according to UNESCO statistics. The real figure is probably nearer to two billion and still more if numeracy and the actual use of these skills are taken into account. Most of these are people living in extreme poverty. Almost two-thirds are women, and nearly 1 in 5 is a young person between 15 and 24. Yet these people have been abandoned in recent decades. Although governments worldwide have signed up to a UN goal that promises a 50% reduction in illiteracy by 2015, they are investing scandalously little in programmes to deliver that goal.

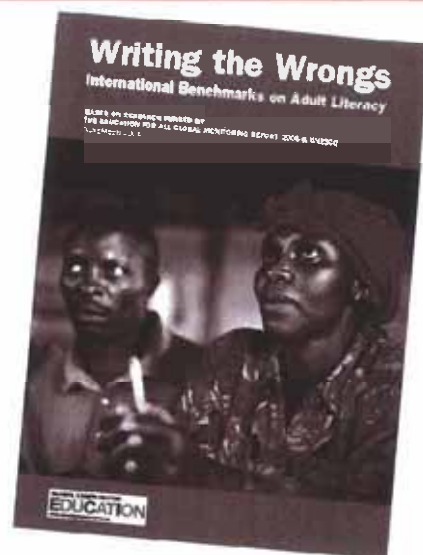
Illiteracy is a violation of the fundamental human right to education. But if that is not argument enough, the Global Campaign for Education believes that there are five compelling practical reasons for governments and donors to invest now in adult literacy:

- *Literacy is vital to reducing gender inequality.* Literacy increases women's participation in both private and public spheres, in household decision-making, community affairs and as active citizens in national life. Adult literacy programmes have a dramatic impact on women's self-esteem, empowering them to unlock economic, social, cultural and political resources.
- *Adult literacy is critical for the healthy development and education of children, especially girls.* Each extra year of education for mothers is associated with a significant

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decline in infant mortality and improved child-health. More literate parents raise more literate children. Children with parents (especially mothers) who can read and write stay in school longer and achieve more.

- *Literacy is vital to human and economic development.* Improving literacy levels would deliver significant economic benefits both for individuals and for countries. Multi-country studies show clear connections between literacy levels in a country and both economic output and GDP per capita growth. By the same token, current high rates of illiteracy among women and the poor are limiting the impact of programmes designed to boost livelihoods, improve incomes, protect the environment, deliver clean water, promote civic participation and democracy, and fight killer diseases. Unless the intended target group possesses basic literacy and numeracy skills, many of these programmes will not work properly, and there is even a risk



that those who already have power and resources (who tend to be more literate and male) will capture the benefits.

- *Literacy is vital for fighting AIDS.* The AIDS pandemic is creating a lost generation of orphans and vulnerable children who are growing up without an education. As the World Bank has warned, if left unchecked this trend could cripple African economies for decades to come. Adult literacy programmes can play a crucial role in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS and enabling communities to respond to a world in which HIV/AIDS affects every dimension of their lives. Large-scale provision of adult literacy programmes is also essential to provide a safety net of second chance education for AIDS orphans (as well as for the many other young people who are affected every year by war or natural disasters that force them out of school and into harmful forms of child labour).
- *Adult literacy programmes work.* Finally, the research contained in this report shows that, contrary to conventional wisdom in the donor community, adult literacy programmes can be both affordable and effective. This is reinforced by recent research, not least the studies commissioned by the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006. This demolishes any remaining excuse for governments and donors to avoid their responsibilities to the world's illiterate youth and adults.

Literacy, in short, is the fertilizer needed for development and democracy to take root and grow. It is the invisible ingredient in any successful strategy for eradicating poverty. Unfortunately, in recent years it has become all too invisible.

The UN Education for All (EFA) goals, as agreed in Jomtien in 1990 and re-affirmed at Dakar in 2000 include a strong commitment to lifelong learning and a promise to reduce illiteracy by 50% by the year 2015. Many practitioners believe, however, that the EFA movement post-Dakar has focused funds and political will almost exclusively on the expansion of formal primary schooling, to the detriment of non-traditional sectors such as adult and early childhood education.

This is not only unacceptable but extremely short-sighted. Education for All will make the greatest contribution to development and poverty reduction if it is genuinely “for all” – targeting all social groups in need of basic skills and knowledge, not just those under the age of 12. Although the task of getting every child into school is both urgent and demanding, the intense effort that is needed to achieve universal primary education need not and should not come at the expense of the other dimensions of EFA. Moreover, as discussed below, adult literacy is intrinsically linked to the success of the other EFA goals. Our research suggests that the EFA literacy goal could be attained with as little as 3% of the Ministry

of Education’s annual budget.

For some time, governments and donors have taken refuge in the widespread notion that literacy programmes don’t work or that you simply cannot teach adults, at least not in large-scale programmes. This is nonsense. It is contradicted by the successes of many past adult literacy programmes, particularly in post-revolutionary contexts where there was real political will and sustained momentum. But precisely because so few programmes are now ongoing, it has been difficult to find more recent evidence of success, particularly in a simple and practical

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form that planners and policy-makers can use.

This study is the largest-ever attempt to systematise experience of what works in adult literacy. We analyzed 67 *successful literacy programmes in 35 countries* in order to see whether they shared any common features that could be simplified into concrete, hands-on benchmarks or guidelines for policy-makers. Although no one, least of all the GCE, would advocate a ‘blueprint’ approach to literacy, there was remarkable consensus among the practitioners we surveyed as to the basic ingredients for success. This was reinforced by the positive feedback we received to early drafts of these benchmarks from 142 *respondents in 47 countries* (including policy makers and practitioners from governments, NGOs and universities). It turns out that we do know what works in adult literacy programmes and there is no great mystery to it. There are clear steps that can be taken to design and manage good quality, cost-effective programmes – and where this is done they can yield exceptional results.

The Benchmarks

The benchmarks that are set out on the next page are designed to facilitate serious planning to achieve the Dakar ‘Education for All’ goal of a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy by 2015, which has been endorsed by 185 governments around the world. They have been developed by experts in adult literacy from around the world and are based on responses to a global survey of effective adult literacy programmes.

We hope these benchmarks will provide a starting point for policy dialogue between governments, funding agencies, NGOs, and those adults who have been deprived of their right to education. They might also be used as a checklist against which a government or donor might ask questions about an existing or proposed programme. However, they are not intended as a blueprint or a set of conditions. Our research affirms the widely shared insight of experienced practitioners that the success of any literacy programme depends on flexibility to respond to unique local needs and circumstances.



Kate Holt/Evening Action

The Benchmarks

1. Literacy is about the acquisition and use of reading, writing and numeracy skills, and thereby the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality. The goals of literacy programmes should reflect this understanding.
2. Literacy should be seen as a continuous process that requires sustained learning and application. There are no magic lines to cross from illiteracy into literacy. All policies and programmes should be defined to encourage sustained participation and celebrate progressive achievement rather than focusing on one-off provision with a single end point.
3. Governments have the lead responsibility in meeting the right to adult literacy and in providing leadership, policy frameworks, an enabling environment and resources. They should:
 - ensure cooperation across all relevant ministries and links to all relevant development programmes;
 - work in systematic collaboration with experienced civil society organisations;
 - ensure links between all these agencies, especially at the local level; and
 - ensure relevance to the issues in learners' lives by promoting the decentralisation of budgets and of decision-making over curriculum, methods and materials.
4. It is important to invest in ongoing feedback and evaluation mechanisms, data systematization and strategic research. The focus of evaluations should be on the practical application of what has been learnt and the impact on active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality.
5. To retain facilitators it is important that they should be paid at least the equivalent of the minimum wage of a primary school teacher for all hours worked (including time for training, preparation and follow-up).
6. Facilitators should be local people who receive substantial initial training and regular refresher training, as well as having ongoing opportunities for exchanges with other facilitators. Governments should put in place a framework for the professional development of the adult literacy sector, including for trainers/ supervisors – with full opportunities for facilitators across the country to access this (e.g. through distance education).
7. There should be a ratio of at least one facilitator to 30 learners and at least one trainer/supervisor to 15 learner groups (1 to 10 in remote areas), ensuring a minimum of one support visit per month. Programmes should have timetables that flexibly respond to the daily lives of learners but which provide for regular and sustained contact (e.g. twice a week for at least two years).
8. In multi-lingual contexts it is important at all stages that learners should be given an active choice about the language in which they learn. Active efforts should be made to encourage and sustain bilingual learning.
9. A wide range of participatory methods should be used in the learning process to ensure active engagement of learners and relevance to their lives. These same participatory methods and processes should be used at all levels of training of trainers and facilitators.
10. Governments should take responsibility for stimulating the market for production and distribution of a wide variety of materials suitable for new readers, for example by working with publishers/newspaper producers. They should balance this with funding for the local production of materials, especially by learners, facilitators and trainers.
11. A good quality literacy programme that respects all these benchmarks is likely to cost between US\$50 and US\$100 per learner per year for at least three years (two years initial learning plus ensuring further learning opportunities are available for all).
12. Governments should dedicate at least 3% of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programmes as conceived in these benchmarks. Where governments deliver on this international donors should fill any remaining resource gaps (e.g. through including adult literacy in the Fast Track Initiative).

Time for Action

In the past two decades, as governments have withdrawn from meaningful investment in adult literacy, NGOs – including many of the member organizations of the Global Campaign for Education – have stepped into the gap. NGOs have played an important role and should continue to do so, but only governments can ensure that all citizens, including adults, have access to the quality basic education that is their right. Moreover, improved

literacy rates will help governments to achieve their own goals for economic growth, gender equality, and poverty reduction. Governments must therefore re-engage in literacy, with full support from the donor community; and this study shows that for those who are willing, the way forward is clear.

Indeed, these benchmarks have backing from key experts in governments who are still engaged in adult literacy work – from countries as diverse as China, Brazil, Peru, Guatemala, Nigeria, Ghana,

Namibia and Ireland. They also have support from a wide range of key people in multilateral and bilateral agencies and from international NGOs, national NGOs, social movements and academics. It has long been known that investing in the education of adults has dramatic economic, social, cultural and political returns for a country. Now that adult literacy programmes have also been shown to be practical, affordable and effective, there is no further excuse to deny adults their chance to learn.