Livelihood skills and functional literacy via ICT in Sierra Leone: Issues, actions, problems and prospects

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Abstract
The current practice of literacy is being strengthened by the linkage between literacy and livelihood. Literacy is both a basic need and right. The rights-based approach emphasizes the right of learners to access learning opportunities and the obligations of duty bearers to fulfill their obligations to enable learners exercise their right to learn.

The objectives of functional literacy are in consonance with the overall national development objectives with poverty reduction as a key focus. Literacy for livelihood is an effective methodological approach which ensures improvement of learners' quality of life. A number of functional literacy initiatives in the country reveal that people enroll in literacy programmes because they wish to ''learn for livelihood''.

There is little evidence on the use of ICTs for literacy although, tremendous opportunities exist for the use of radio. A survey revealed that there are 21 FM radios targeting large, albeit, illiterate audiences in the densely populated areas of Freetown, Bo, Kenema and Makeni.

To maximize the use of radio for literacy, learners should be mobilized; organized into learning groups and providers sensitized to the potential benefits which can accrue from the use of radio for literacy.

1.0. Introduction

This paper discusses the key issues, actions, problems and prospects of literacy initiatives via ICTs in Sierra Leone. Where necessary, examples are used to illustrate the discussion.

1.1. Linking Literacy, Livelihood and ICT

The linkage between literacy and livelihood represents a shift from the perception of literacy as an end in itself to the view of literacy as a means to development. The concept of learning and livelihood can be operationalised through an integrated approach to meeting the basic needs of learners. In the context of the rights-based approach to development, literacy is a basic right and at the same time a means of fulfilling a basic need. The right to literacy implies exercise of duties and obligations not only by those who hold the right but also those whose duties it is to create opportunities to facilitate exercise of the right as well (Thompson, 1996, p.3).

The objectives of functional literacy generally coincide with the overall development objectives of the country which address such issues as Poverty Reduction, Education For All; Health for All; Food Security etc. Thus, skills, knowledge and values derived from literacy programmes should address the needs of the population in those areas. Literacy programmes whose objectives are not linked to basic needs and rights of the learners are likely to fail (Thompson 2002, p.18). Other related factors are the contents, methods and materials. The content of a functional literacy programme is central to the curriculum which spells out in detail the topics to be covered, their scope and sequence, teaching and learning methodology, materials and evaluation procedures to be used in the delivery process. Of particular relevance to this paper is the teaching and learning methodology. At present, the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for literacy education is in its infancy in Sierra Leone. According to Chowdry (cited in Adeya, 2002 p.4) ICTs are potentially useful in helping the poor to acquire literacy, and marketable skills. "Information Poverty" i.e. lack of access to accurate information, is defined as a new type of poverty in developing countries (d' Orville, 2000). The traditional definition of literacy (ability to read, write and count) is inadequate in the context of technological development. Functional literacy now includes the capacity to identify sources of information and utilize relevant information for the development of the individual and his/her community.

A number of functional literacy initiatives in the country reveal that people enroll because they wish to "learn for livelihood". Thus, skills in such vocation as hairdressing, laundry soap production, clothing and textiles production (batik, gara tie and dyeing); sewing and dressmaking; vegetable gardening; food processing and preservation combined with literacy and numeracy skills would be acquired within three to nine months. The learners would then either enter the job market or set up their own businesses. In the process of skills acquisition learners can be organized into listening and learning groups. The curriculum might include not only literacy, numeracy and vocational skills training but also group formation, management of groups, business management and other life skills topics.

Economic empowerment of the participants in adult literacy and education programmes in general is an effective strategy for poverty reduction. Poverty, which has been defined as the inability to provide basic material goods and infrastructure, adequate medical services and educational facilities, is multidimensional. It is manifested in such phenomena as social exclusion, shortage of income, deprivation in knowledge (e.g. illiteracy), low life expectancy, poor quality of life and lack of material means (Thompson,2002 p.9)

According to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, (PRSP) (GOSL, 2005, p.21) promoting human development is the third pillar of Sierra Leone's Poverty Reduction Strategy. After food security, access to basic education, health, water and sanitation is the second national development priority. Literacy, livelihood and ICT should therefore be discussed in the context of poverty reduction

The PRSP recognizes that human resources development is the bedrock of poverty reduction and sustainable development. It asserts that the overall objectives of the education sector are to provide basic education for all Sierra Leoneans and to support manpower development in key sectors. The Government is committed to the global initiatives of Education for All and the universal completion of primary education. According to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) there are about 26% (1.5 million) of Sierra Leoneans who are `food poor'. This number is comprised almost entirely of illiterates. Over 70% of male and female headed households are poor and are living below the poverty line. Heads of households are in general illiterates. There is therefore a co-relation between illiteracy and poverty.

Poverty is concentrated in rural areas where 80% of the people are poor compared to 54% in urban areas. The highest incidence of poverty is to be found in the districts of Kenema, Kailahun, Bombali, Port Loko and Tonkolili (GOSL 2005, p.24-27). The consumption expenditures of the rural poor are 37% less than the amount required to meet their basic needs (GOSL 2005, p.24-27). It is imperative therefore, that functional literacy programmes should address issues of poverty. It is on this basis that Government of Sierra Leone embarked on the promotion of literacy through livelihood skills. Poverty reduction is the first step towards attainment of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015

The learning needs of newly literate persons (adults) include knowledge and skills acquisition, attitude formation, and internalization of living values. The operational contexts and circumstances of the learners determine to a large extent how these needs might be met. In designing and implementing adult education programmes therefore, factors such as social, economic and cultural contexts have to be taken in to account (Thompson, 1996, p.12).

In the case of women who do not have access to literacy educational opportunities, the use of radio and tape recorders can be an effective way of mobilizing them and organizing them for learning. The education of women tends to enhance their self-reliant capacities and enables them to contribute to increasing their productivity, ensures their autonomy and facilitates informed decision making. This, undoubtedly, would result in an increase in the level of their motivation for continuing learning and education.

2.0. Livelihood and Functional Literacy Initiatives in Sierra Leone

Learning for livelihood initiatives in Sierra Leone is, for the time being, promoted by the Non-Formal Education Directorate of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and a number of NGOs and religious organizations. The overall objective of these initiatives is to reduce the high level of illiteracy, especially amongst women, and to support young people to acquire skills for their own livelihood development. One major initiative in this domain is the Illiteracy Eradication Project (IEP) implemented by the Non-Formal Education Directorate of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in six districts in all the provincial regions of the country. This Islamic Development

Bank-funded project has created opportunities for non-literate young women and men to acquire a range of literacy, numeracy and income generating skills which have enabled them to contribute to their own development and that of their communities. This project can be described as a success story; the secret behind the success are: Government commitment, sustained donor support; motivated and committed management and field personnel; effective planning, monitoring and supervision, the full participation of learners and host communities and the functionality of the project. Participants have gained material benefits in addition to the knowledge and skills acquired.

2.1. Implementation Strategy

The IEP is being implemented following well planned logical steps and strategies as follows

Participatory Learning Needs Assessment

Project personnel spent several weeks in the field seeking information from beneficiary groups and their communities. Information in respect of the learners, the type of skills they wish to acquire, resources available to support livelihood functional literacy projects, and a wide range of facts and figures that served as bases for training content and strategy.

Production Of Teaching And Learning Materials

Teaching syllabuses for literacy, numeracy, community studies and income generating activities were developed with the participants and curriculum specialists, literacy coordinators, supervisors, organizers and facilitators. In addition, NGOs involved in literacy provision, training specialists from the university, graphic artists and technical personnel from hair dressing training schools, home economic centres and craft centres were part of the material production process. The contents, methods and materials were derived from data obtained from the participatory learning needs assessment.

Community Sensitization

A series of Sensitization meetings were conducted using radio and television and creating and raising awareness. Television and video were and are still used in disseminating messages on the prevention of STIs and HIV and AIDS, reproductive health and reproductive rights in all the communities were the centres are located.

Training Of Facilitators

A series of training of trainers (TOT) workshops were conducted in respective project communities. Focus of the TOT was on the use of teaching learning materials and the use of participatory methodologies.

Functional Literacy And Livelihood Skills

Literacy centres were set up in selected communities and provided with material support. For the time being, face to face training methods are generally used and are supplemented by video documentary presentations, especially in communicating messages on HIV/AIDS and other STIs supported by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

The gains derived from this project can be shared by many more beneficiary groups if and when there are opportunities for the use of Information, Communication Technology (ICT) strategies. For the time being, radio and television are the only practicable channels through which non-governmental agencies and government line ministries such as Education, Science and Technology, Agriculture, Health, Local Government and Rural Development reach farmers and the rest of the population with development messages and relevant information intended to transfer knowledge and skills to target groups. Though expensive ICTs are cost effective and can play a significant role in reaching out to many more illiterate people who wish to acquire livelihood skills within a short period.

3.0. Use of FM Radio

The widespread use of radio as an important means of information and education has been extensively documented (see for example Buckley 2000 as cited in Adeya). However, the emerging literature on new ICTs appears to be obscuring the radio.

There is a proliferation of FM Radios in several parts of the country both by Government and private organisations. These stations are used for commercial purposes but also serve educational objectives. The following table indicates the FM Radios in operation in Freetown and in other parts of the country.

4.0. PROBLEMS

The provision of basic education and increasing access to educational opportunities especially in the rural areas are still key challenges for Government in most rural communities in Sierra Leone. Poverty assessments reveal the absence of the essentials of life and low income earning opportunities among the rural poor. This has resulted in

Low access and low resource capacity for structured use of radio

Poverty of learners to procure radio sets and batteries

High cost of fuel for generating electricity for the use of television and video

In addition to poverty, other problems and opportunities include

Low awareness of providers about the potential efficacy of radio as a means of providing mass literacy.

Low utilization of ICT for literacy currently

Growing number of FM Radio in various parts of the country.

Focus on awareness raising on the need for literacy and mobilization for participation in literacy programmes by NGOs and CBOs.

5.0 PROSPECTS

The link between literacy and livelihood is justified in terms of the need to integrate education and work, create opportunities to apply the skills acquired in literacy and numeracy and to contribute to the process of poverty alleviation. There exists an enabling environment which is characterized by a favourable policy context. However, there is a need to develop the capacities of literacy providers on the value of ICT especially on the potential benefits of radio. Radio and tape recorders may be preferable because they are relatively low in cost and accessible. To maximize the use of radio learners should be mobilized and organized into learning groups - radio learning and listening groups. The initial cost for the use of television and video might be high but in the long run the usefulness and benefits that would be derived outweigh cost.

6.0. CONCLUSION

Technology mediated distance learning is becoming popular in Africa and Sierra Leone stands to benefit from the application of ICTs to promote education for all. Livelihood skills designed to graduate people out of poverty are destined to be a major contribution to the nation's overall recovery strategy. With a determined political will and availability of financial resources, the country will emerge from its unenviable position of one of the least developed countries in the world (UNDP, 2005) to one in which the citizens will be sufficiently empowered to contribute to their individual and community development in general.

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