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**REFLECT on a large scale: challenges and prospects****Salifu Mogre and Julie Adu Gyamfi****• Introduction**

There appear to have been many successful examples of literacy programmes on a large scale so why make the change to REFLECT? There are a number of issues involved in this change which go to the heart of adult literacy debates over the past thirty years. The success of many programmes has centred on the acquisition of reading and writing skills on an individual basis; the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) are not related to real life use - either for the individual or to the society in which they live. Furthermore development objectives are often not met satisfactorily, particularly in the area of community development.

**Adult literacy strategies in Ghana**

In Ghana in the 1960s, we had a Mass Literacy Campaign which attempted to impart literacy in English. This was difficult because neither the methodology used, nor the language of instruction, were relevant to every day life. This caused practitioners to switch from promoting English to promoting Ghanaian languages, of which there are fifty four, not including dialects. But this had its own problems. It was technically challenging to transcribe such a diverse range of languages and very costly for the government to sponsor. Ultimately, only a few of the main languages were developed for the literacy programme, and thus the attempt to provide literacy in the mother tongue on a nationwide basis was short-lived. Even today, when the national literacy programme in Ghana has made a major commitment to working in different languages, primers and other materials can only be produced in a limited number of them.

Another factor which has undermined large scale attempts at literacy programming is the top-down nature of national systems. On a large scale, it has seemed necessary to standardise everything; from teaching-learning materials to the training of facilitators, in order to offer a programme on an efficient and equitable basis. The effect of this standardisation is that there is little room for cultural diversity or local people's participation in, or ownership of, the process.

**• Literacy from a development perspective**

Continuous efforts have been made to find new methods of providing cost effective, empowering and relevant literacy programmes that will be accessible to every citizen of a country. These have been mainly rooted in community development agendas or Freirean theory (e.g. many primer-based approaches with civic awareness or, even political, messages). How does REFLECT fit into this picture, and , what does it have to offer?

The REFLECT approach has dimensions which attempt to overcome some of the basic obstacles to a standardised, nationwide literacy campaign. REFLECT offers a localised, rather than standardised, literacy process. The prioritisation of themes is developed according to locally-felt needs by the learners (or rather participants) themselves. This gives the community members a controlling role in the design of their own literacy programme, and literacy is thus more attractive to large numbers of people: no-one is excluded. Also important is the wider impact of the literacy programme on other community members. This often happens within the REFLECT circle, particularly when it is using PRA for discussion and other community members (not

enrolled in the literacy class) come and contribute, sharing their skills and experience, and making the conclusions reached more practicable. The locally-generated themes are relevant to the whole community and therefore, a community dynamic for change is initiated. Changes of attitude and behaviour in areas such as agriculture, health and hygiene, and children's education can take place.

On a more interesting note is the awareness of an imbalance in gender workload, leading to an awareness on the part of males to lighten the burdens of their female counterparts by giving them a helping hand. This kind of community development may resemble the developmental activities associated with the approaches to Functional Adult Literacy but are more sustainable because the actions are those suggested, prioritised and carried out at their own pace by the people themselves. They are not imposed by outsiders, however well-meaning or well-informed they may be.

### **Decentralisation**

The management of the REFLECT literacy programme can be shifted from a centralised to a decentralised system which is driven by local initiative and interest. For example, the community can select people to be responsible for various roles within the programme, such as managing the class book box (which is a form of mini-library), construction of silk screen printers, monitoring and reinforcing the attendance of participants and the facilitator. The decentralisation of management to the level of the learner can reduce costs both of supervision (monitoring the attendance of the facilitators can be done by participants and community) and of teaching-learning inputs, such as exercise books, pencils, kerosene for lighting etc., which can be paid for by the participants themselves.

### **Localisation**

The same principle of local control applies to the production of materials. Instead of being reliant on printed materials which are expensive and can take an unnecessarily long time to produce (sometimes a whole year, resulting in late delivery of class inputs); the REFLECT process enables people to write on their own topics, and in their own languages.

This process starts in participants' exercise books at the basic literacy stage, and progresses to the use of low-cost, low-tech community-based printing (e.g. silk screen printers) as an appropriate and integral part of the literacy programme. On a large scale this contributes to greater cost effectiveness, and could be factored into the budgeting for a national literacy programme. It also provides greater continuity in planning for basic and post literacy because the emphasis on local writing and materials production is repeated in both stages.

In REFLECT, the training and follow-up support for the literacy facilitators is shifted from the dissemination of a standardised body of knowledge imparted in a 'cascade', to a mixture of well-focused training, integrating central staff and local experience. This is the initial activity in the recreation of REFLECT necessary for every new programme. In addition, this kind of mixture leads to regular meetings of facilitators to share experience and plan their work together. These meetings promote a self-critical culture of analysis and action amongst facilitators, which they can share with the participants in their circle; for example, facilitators plan together on Action Points which affect their own families. This process of developing facilitators needs highly skilled support staff, and is thus one of the key roles of central staff in a large programme. In the long term the costs of such support can be offset by the use of experienced facilitators to train facilitators new to the programme.

Lastly, the 'local language' obstacle can be transformed into a strength, a way of drawing on the riches of local culture which can teach outsiders as well as insiders. This is particularly important in Africa, where the diversity of language development can be overwhelming for planners. The emphasis on writing based on analytical discussion and action means that the language of the specific learning group can be written down and developed almost simultaneously with the literacy programme. Some initial groundwork must be done (e.g. through a local writers' committee of people literate in another language with a transferable phonetic system e.g. English, a neighbouring language, Arabic) but once the process is started, the facilitators and participants can reach agreement about the

most logical way to write down sounds so that everyone can understand what is meant. This principle of communication is the only important test.

### • Remaining challenges

In general, there seem to be encouraging prospects for REFLECT on a large scale as far as cost effectiveness, meeting development objectives, language diversity, decentralised training, management and materials production are concerned. The next question must be about the challenges which lie ahead.

One of the key challenges must be finding a way to plan and budget for a large programme at the same time as moving at the pace of local communities. An example may be when to deliver book boxes to literacy circles, considering that different circles may be ready at different times. But many similar questions may arise. Workable solutions can perhaps only be found if the staff responsible for implementing a large-scale programme are encouraged to move from a top-down to a bottom-up view of the world, and feel confident in taking their own decisions at their own level. In general, many staff working for national governments have not had the opportunity to develop practical skills in more bottom-up approaches to literacy and development.

Another challenge is how to utilise the existing capacity and prior investment in other approaches to literacy. When resources are scarce, it would be wrong not to consider this as an important question. There would be different solutions for different countries but one way of using the printed primers would be as supplementary reading materials in the later stages of the cycle or in 'post literacy'. Another strong point of having facilitators trained in teaching traditional approaches to literacy and numeracy is that they can adapt the same techniques, such as gap filling in sentences written on the chalkboard; dictation etc., for their new roles as REFLECT facilitators. The main difference is that they have to link the 3Rs to the collective analysis of their participants. Again the main challenge in this area has proved to be the change of attitude necessary for facilitators, who have to be prepared to accept a new and apparently

more 'humble' role where they learn as well as teach.

In a national programme, equitable coverage is a vital objective, and there may be potential literacy participants who are not so interested in the REFLECT approach. For example, participants in urban areas who come together only as a literacy circle but do not live in the same area, and do not have the same aspirations and needs, may not be motivated to discuss and plan issues collectively as a group. If this is the case, then literacy should be provided using another approach which meets their felt needs.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the prospects, and the challenges, for REFLECT on a large scale are exciting. There are no large scale programmes at the moment, but the government literacy programmes in India, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Uganda and Ghana have started pilots to see how the new approach can fit into their existing system<sup>1</sup>. Since one of the key criteria for using REFLECT is to work at community level, it is an appropriate tool for both governmental and non governmental organisations. Therefore we expect that on an international level, there will be sharing of experiences, and a new improved version of the approach that is appropriate for mass coverage will be developed.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of going to press, the government of Ghana is organising a workshop of 'Scale Up REFLECT: Challenges and Prospects' - to which thirty national literacy programmes across Africa have been invited. This should be an excellent opportunity to explore issues that arise when taking up a participatory approach on a large scale.