PART ONE

Literacy and Development
Tanzania: Preparing to open a bank account for a cattle-dip project, a woman from Naisinyai village practises signing her name, watched by a worker from the Maasai Health Services Project.

Photo: Geoff Sayer
CHAPTER 1

The case for literacy

People often assume that there are absolute states of being literate or illiterate. This idea leads to the belief that a person who is illiterate can be led through a series of simple steps (with a few tests along the way), leading from one absolute state to another. After that, the previous lack of knowledge and skills which prevented him or her from being productively involved in development will have disappeared, and as a newly literate person he or she will become a fully functioning and knowledgeable member of the community.

This notion was always a myth, but it persists, and can be seen in statements or slogans which talk about the ‘eradication’ of illiteracy, as though it were a disease like smallpox. The myth is promoted by those who have been formally educated (like all the readers and writers of this book), who tend to deny the wisdom and competence of the unschooled. Many people assume that, once the skills of reading and writing are acquired, lives will be transformed.

We probably all know cases of successful non-literate people. For example, Paul Fordham’s paternal great-grandmother was a competent dressmaker, raised four children, all of whom went to school, and died in 1917 at the age of 89. She was certainly illiterate at the time of her marriage in 1856, and it seems likely that she remained so. She grew up just before the start of mass literacy in Britain.

In the modern world, there seems little doubt that it is always better to be able to read and to write than not to have these skills. Acquiring them can and should transform people’s lives; but the timing has to be right, and the process must take account of the learners’ social context. These issues are examined in later parts of this chapter and in Part Two.

One of the advantages of learning to be literate is the increase in confidence which it brings, both to individuals and to their communities. In the aftermath of the Tanzanian literacy campaign of the 1970s, Yusuf Kassam analysed eight conversations with newly literate people.1 They all emphasised the sense of self-confidence which they had gained. One person recorded: ‘Now that I have become literate, I feel that before I was carrying a small lantern, but now a pressure lamp has been brought to me ... I don’t feel inferior.’

In the same analysis, one learner recorded how, as a non-literate person, he had been ‘made to work like a plough’. He described the sense of personal liberation brought by literacy: it was as though ‘the rope that had..."
been twisted around me was untied, and so naturally I felt happy’. He went on to say: ‘We can defend our rights; we can’t be forced to do anything against our own wishes; we can’t be cheated.’ Increased confidence often has social and political significance, besides the personal benefits which it brings.

Testimonies collected more recently in Bolivia echo those from Tanzania. Women learners in a shanty town outside La Paz explained that they went to classes ‘So we won’t be cheated’... ‘So that we won’t have to say that we don’t know how to sign our names’... ‘So we can help our children with their homework’... ‘So we’ll know who to vote for’.2

Motivation for literacy

Evaluations of literacy programmes often report that learners lack motivation or that the number of drop-outs is large. A reporter from the current Indian national programme (National Literacy Mission) recorded in one of the ‘low-performing districts’ (Himachal Pradesh) that, while about 26 per cent of the community had enrolled, more than one third had dropped out before the end of the course. Official attitudes were supportive; slogans on bus windscreens declared: Now there will be no more illiterates. But the intended learners did not read the slogans, and, in spite of the high degree of motivation among the professional staff, ‘There is a general dearth of volunteer teachers at the grassroots level, and village-level committees are practically defunct.’ The writer calls for ‘re-planning, based on thorough soul-searching’.3

Such disappointment is common, and not just in India. The history of many of the world’s large-scale literacy schemes has been one of failure. The 1967-72 Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), sponsored by UNESCO, is just one example.4 Only in Tanzania, with strong and persistent political leadership, was the EWLP a success. A dynamic movement for political change lies behind other large-scale success stories, in most cases after revolutionary change (as in the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua).

The preface to this book stated that the planning and implementation of literacy projects requires firm decisions on four key questions:

- Who needs literacy?
- What do they need it for?
- What kind of literacy do they need?
- How will the programme be planned and implemented?

In all the successful large-scale cases there was clear agreement:

- Literacy was for everybody.
- The purposes were both political (consolidating revolutionary gains) and economic (providing an educated work-force for the new command economies).
- All was to be done via the national language and a clearly structured, hierarchical organisation.
In the later 1990s, development workers are more likely to be concerned with local initiatives and less with the transformation of whole societies than they were twenty or thirty years ago. Literacy can be a transforming experience, both for individuals and for societies. But the timing of its introduction has to be carefully considered, and any programme has to be firmly embedded in its time and place. In the words of Om Shrivastava, working in adult education in India, when is the 'magic moment' for literacy? When and how can good motivation be assumed or generated?5

**When to introduce literacy**

To understand the right timing for a literacy programme, we need to understand how and where literacy will support other aspects of development. This is the most important question for field workers when deciding on timing. Whether or not the 'magic moment' has arrived may well depend on how literacy skills are likely to affect other aspects of development.

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In Bangladesh, with the help of Oxfam, villagers set up a Community Development Association in order to implement a loan scheme. Villagers all paid into the loan scheme on a regular basis and then were able to borrow larger amounts from it, to pay for the inputs they needed to grow sugar and wheat. The profit they made from selling their harvest enabled them to repay loans into the revolving fund; but in order to manage the credit facilities, all members had to understand basic book-keeping. The need for credit led to the need for villagers to attend a literacy programme.

There are few societies where literacy does not bring more power (both personal and social), more ability to take part fully in society, and more opportunities for personal and social growth and development of all kinds. Nevertheless, the failures of many attempts to introduce literacy underline the need to ensure that the timing is right, and the importance of answering our four key questions.

Development can and does sometimes happen without literacy. For example, radio broadcasts, or group discussions, or demonstrations by an extension agent may be enough for some kinds of agricultural extension. But experience shows that, sooner or later, as the economy becomes more complex and basic services improve, development agencies and potential learners will see a need for literacy skills. And this argument — a strictly economic one — is quite separate from the more idealistic arguments in support of promoting literacy, like enabling people to read the Koran or the Bible, or believing that literacy is a basic human right. But the idealistic arguments sometimes have to be supported by economic ones, especially when trying to persuade funding agencies that a literacy programme is worthwhile or good value for money.

Why is literacy important? Would it not be better to concentrate on increasing employment and production? The answer to this question is that, while it is useless to offer literacy instead of food, housing, clean water, electricity, or jobs, it may become uneconomic to offer them without it. Literacy may be only a part, but it is still an essential part, of the range of basic services which bring direct economic returns as well as direct social benefits.

A VSO volunteer in Nigeria found that the community in which she worked as a nurse began to organise its own literacy programme, after she had formed a village health committee. The committee members took their tasks seriously, and decided that they needed literacy to carry out their role properly. A primary school, recently constructed for the children, provided the venue, and the learners paid for a teacher between themselves.
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Lack of pure water and/or miles of walking to fetch it leaves less time for production and increases the likelihood of illness. Lack of vaccination, health education and basic curative services leaves workers too weak to be fully productive ... Illiteracy reduces workers' flexibility and productivity even in 'simple' occupations such as peasant farming, construction or handicrafts.6

It is pointless to offer literacy courses instead of the more expensive roads, water, and other basic services, because 'without the motivation of the learner, nothing is going to happen. The effects of the campaign will disappear as rapidly as the posters announcing its launching will fade.'7 But deciding when to introduce literacy classes is the essential first step in helping to ensure that learners are motivated to learn.

Participation

The fact that people can and do plan and instigate their own development programmes is often overlooked by professional agencies. Recently the idea of 'participation', or the planned involvement of community members in decision-making, has been presented as a new approach. But the idea is not new in the field of adult education. In early twentieth-century England, students in classes promoted by the Workers' Educational Association successfully demanded a voice in the design of curricula and the appointment of teaching staff. In many universities in the Western world in the 1960s, student movements promoted 'participation' as one of the key ideas behind their demands for change in the way universities were administered.

This book takes the view that learners themselves, as well as agencies and field workers, will and should have their own view of what should be done: they should be full participants at all levels of decision making. Their views may be different from the view of an outsider, however well informed he or she may be. If the views of insiders are not taken into account, it is unlikely that the outsider will design a programme that can achieve lasting results.

Programmes that involve users in their design, conception, and organisation are intended to encourage people to reflect more deeply on their own lives, and to take more control over them. However, some words of caution are necessary. Participation has become a widely popular concept, but we have to ask what it means. A recent study commissioned by UNCHS points out that community participation can mean at least three different things.8 It can mean:

- contributing (where money, labour, or materials are provided);
- consulting (where views are sought in order to elicit contributions, but the decisions may be made elsewhere);
- or controlling (where community members are really performing community-management functions).
Development agencies often claim to practise the third kind of participation, when in reality they concede only the first or the second. Field workers should consider very carefully the sense in which they actually use this concept.

The kind of participation which we advocate in this book is intended to promote changes in people’s lives in ways they can believe in. Many programmes have similar aims, but in fact it may be the underlying goals and assumptions of the planners (the outsiders), rather than those of the users (the insiders), that determine the direction of those changes.

In this book, we envisage a certain kind of participatory programme:

- one which recognises, values, and uses the contribution of everyone in the community;
- which recognises people's individual differences, rather than assuming that they are all the same;
- which offers information, rather than seeking to persuade people to make certain choices;
- which accepts that the knowledge of insiders is worth as much as that of outsiders;
- which seeks to exchange that information on an equal basis, where learners will also be teachers and teachers will also be learners;
- which takes a holistic approach, keeping in mind the physical, emotional, and learning needs of a community;
- which does not start from the belief that a literate society is in any way ‘superior’ to an oral society;
- and, finally, one which does not seek to work towards goals imported from outside by the planners, but is free to follow the learning needs of the community which it intends to serve.

What kind of literacy?

Up to this point, we have avoided any attempt to define what we mean by literacy. The reason is that there is no one literacy acceptable for all time, for all people, and for all places. Most writers on the subject now tend to talk of literacies, rather than one state of being literate. Consider two examples, from very different societies.

In St Vincent in 1975, it was decided to prepare a plan for ‘adult education’. The initial brief, although wide, had no particular emphasis on literacy, because schooling was thought to be widely available. An international consultant was hired to write the first proposals and began to look at the issue of unemployment. He called a meeting of the Bel Air Small Farmers’ Union to discuss marketing problems. After some time, he noticed that there were more people outside the room listening in than there were inside and participating. He was told that these were the illiterate members who were ‘too ashamed’ to come in. They had been to school in the past, but had either never learned to be literate or had forgotten what they had learned. The result was a proposal for functional
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In a recent evaluation of literacy classes in Uganda, it was discovered that the range of needs expressed might lead to the provision of different kinds of literacy. Immigrants into Buganda might want to improve their spoken and written competence in the local lingua franca (Luganda), in which the classes were conducted. Native Luganda speakers might need a different approach to a language they could already speak, but in which they could neither read nor write. Others aspired to speak and be literate in the language of commerce and government (in this case mostly English). The government itself considered that a first priority should be to encourage use of the language used by the security forces (Swahili).

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In 1986 in the UK, the same consultant thought it was time to learn how to use a word processor and decided that the first step should be to buy one and practise a little self-instruction. He sought advice from the computer supplier, and began to explore a range of hardware and software options. After a mutually frustrating dialogue, the assistant exclaimed, 'We do expect our customers to be computer-literate — Sir.' The development consultant began to understand a little better the humiliation felt by people who are labelled as 'illiterate'; he knew a lot about books, but nothing about computers, and the scornful shop assistant was a deterrent to further self-instruction. In most societies, standards of what is meant by literacy are in rapid change. It has become easy for anyone to experience at first hand that there is no one literacy.

The question 'What kind of literacy?' cannot be answered until the context is thoroughly understood and there is an answer to the first two of the four key questions for planners: Who needs it? and What do they need it for?

One way of defining literacy might be to say that for any one person it requires an ability to communicate through reading and writing all that can be understood and communicated through speech. But this leaves too many questions unanswered for it to be universally accepted and would not, for example, cover the person who wants to learn another language at the same time as becoming literate. UNESCO defines a literate person as one who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life.

What is functional?

Literacy specialists often insist that literacy must be 'functional'. What does this mean? It is easy to give examples of what is not functional. For instance, a water-catchment project which used voluntary female labour
plus paid male masons held a literacy class under a tree. The women learned to write a few words related to the project (such as water, well, dam) in their own mother-tongue. But, because the classes were not taken seriously enough to be held regularly, there was no evidence of learning to read sentences, even after a year of classes. And the women were in no better position to contribute to the catchment programme just by learning to read and write a few words. Moreover, their particular mother-tongue is not often seen in written form. The written words they would see in their daily lives, such as advertisements, or government notices, were likely to be in the local lingua franca (in this case Swahili), or in English (the language of the elite, of formal business enterprise, and the major newspapers). So what seemed a clear and simple decision to promote ‘functional’ literacy turned out to have complex implications which had not been considered in advance. The literacy component of this water programme seemed unlikely to be very useful, either in improving the practical project or in advancing the learners’ reading and writing skills; unless, of course, there were fundamental changes in perceptions and organisation. So what steps can be taken, both to make literacy functional and to make some contribution to other aspects of development?

The question of whether or not literacy is functional depends on the context; that is, it has to be re-defined for every time and in every place. In the example given in the previous paragraph, it could be argued that literacy would help development, if the women were learning to be part of project management, as well as providing cheap labour; and if the language used was one in which they could read information useful to the project. (This is the highly political question of language choice.) Sharing the management of the project would have to be built in at the project-planning stage, as part of a policy to increase community self-management capabilities (sometimes called ‘capacity building’). A different choice of language might also increase individual motivation to learn (because it would be more useful) and therefore increase the general level of understanding and willingness to change ways of life. Both would make a significant difference to the lives of the women, and the income they could earn. In any context, there is a complex interaction both between different aspects of development (such as water, health, agricultural development, education) and between development and literacy: the latter is never a simple technology and cannot be planned as if it were.

However, there are some general guidelines — often based on past mistakes — which can help development workers to think about what to do. These general guidelines are considered below. Above all, the starting point has to be asking questions about purposes.

**Changing ideas about what is functional**

In the past, what was thought to be ‘functional’ was seen in a rather simplistic way. In the 1960s, for example, UNESCO promoted the Experimental World Literacy Programme, which tried to add a literacy
certain crucial questions.

- What is the purpose of literacy in this project?
- When should it be introduced?
- How should it be planned and taught?
- What language should be used?

In the 1960s it sometimes seemed enough to say that farmers in an agricultural development project would need to read the instructions on the fertiliser bags; but this ignored what the farmers themselves wanted, and was one of the reasons for widespread failures in the EWLP. Contemporary ideas of development assumed that more and better education (as determined by educational and development planners) would lead directly to economic growth and so, less directly, to increased human welfare. For some lucky individuals, in the right place at the right time, it worked; for the majority, it did not.

In the 1970s, literacy in development sometimes became more overtly political and aimed at the total transformation ('liberation') of whole societies. The writings of the Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire, were used to widen the idea of what was functional, to include political, social, and cultural purposes as well as economic ones. The relative success of mass literacy campaigns in post-revolutionary societies (such as Nicaragua) led some enthusiasts to recommend such campaigns as appropriate for all developing countries. But this enthusiasm tended to obscure the fact that, as we have already noted, the purposes of the successful mass campaigns were, first, to help ensure the rapid growth of new command economies, planned and operated by the new political States; and, second, to ensure a new and centralised political unity after revolutionary change. The purposes of the later 1990s, and therefore our ideas of functionality and appropriate methods, are likely to be different. We are now more concerned with local literacies and languages than with centralised national agendas. And we talk less of 'liberation' in the global sense, although the word is still used in some circumstances, especially where women are concerned.

So international ideas about what is functional have changed with
what is seen as appropriate for 'development'. As long ago as 1974, the World Bank noted that the 'human capital' approach to development had been changed, and that the term now embraced questions of employment (or lack of it), environment, social equality, and participation. A UNESCO monograph in 1992 goes further and argues that making literacy functional implies placing people at the centre of their environment and giving them the means to take an active part in community life. It is also argued that development must be 'sustainable', which means two things: that local communities must acquire the capacity to carry on and develop themselves when outside agencies have left, and that development should not have a negative impact on local environments. Key words for development workers in the late twentieth century are thus: employment, environment, social equality, and sustainability. These suggest some general guidelines which might help in determining what functions or skills are appropriate objectives for literacy in any particular project.

Some practical examples of functionality

**Literacy and civil rights in Bangladesh**

Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (an Oxfam-funded organisation) provides a good example of literacy promoted for a particular purpose: in this case to enable some of Bangladesh’s poorest communities to fight injustice and to campaign for their rights. For example, it is easy for moneylenders to cheat non-literate peasants and to demand excessive repayments on small loans. One widow’s story is typical: she had been obliged to mortgage her one acre of land for 1,000 taka when the crop failed. But when she came to pay back the money-lender and reclaim the deeds to her land, he had forged the papers, and was demanding 20,000 taka. Her
her land, he had forged the papers, and was demanding 20,000 taka. Her village group took the money-lender to court.

Literacy classes in this area of south-west Bangladesh often lead to the formation of village groups to deal with locally identified problems. An Oxfam report noted:

_In one area a mass protest of 7,000 people, 1,500 of them women, forced local officials to remove a ‘tax’ on fishing in streams and canals which they had illegally imposed. Several other groups exposed local corruption in the government flood-relief programme: ration cards and emergency clothing supplies had gone missing, ‘food-for-work’ wages had not been properly paid in the emergency employment programmes. A number of groups were fighting for possession of khas, or government-owned land, to which they were entitled as landless labourers._

In circumstances like these, the need for literacy may well come after a social movement for change has taken root, leading to a demand for the empowerment of individuals and groups which literacy can bring.

**Numeracy and income generation in Tanzania**

Maasai villagers of Naisinyai in Tanzania set up their own health committee and organised classes at the church. In community discussions, people identified shortage of milk as a major problem: more than half their calves were dying from East Coast Fever. The men wanted to spray the cattle; the women preferred to build a cattle dip, which would use fewer chemicals. The committee held a vote, and the view of the women prevailed. Oxfam provided the building materials, and a loan for the first consignment of chemicals.

The women charge five Tanzanian shillings for each cow that goes through the dip. The village council decreed that all the cattle must be dipped once a week; herdsmen from other villages brought their livestock too, until about 1,000 animals were going through the dip each day. East Coast Fever was virtually eradicated. The scheme started to make a profit. The loan was paid off, and the women began to look for ways of investing the income. They decided that their priority would be a borehole to provide clean drinking water, and pipes to deliver it round the village.

At first the women took turns to take home the day’s takings for safe keeping. But too often the woman who carried the money-bag would come under pressure from her husband to lend him the money. For a time, every woman would carry a bag home every night, so that no one would know who really had the money. Before long, they realised that they needed to open a bank account. This meant organising numeracy classes, learning to sign their names and fill in forms. Eventually they progressed to book-keeping classes, with the help of an Oxfam health worker.

The group’s next priority is to build and equip a village dispensary.
Some general guidelines on making literacy functional

• The purposes, both of the learners and of the promoting agencies, should be made clear to everyone. If they do not coincide, further discussion is essential.

• Learners do not think about their own development in separate ‘sectors’ (such as health, agriculture, or education), so literacy projects should be planned and thought about in an integrated way (‘cross-sectorally’, to use the jargon of development).

• People know why and when they need literacy skills. Programmes should be designed with them — and, where possible, by them.

• Any new developments need to be built on local ideas and local cultural practices, rather than models imported from somewhere else.