

EDUCATION FOR ALL: REFLECTING ON ADULT LITERACY LEARNING FOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

When the 1990 World Conference in Education held in Jomtien (Thailand) revealed that illiteracy was on the increase especially in developing countries, UNESCO stepped up the campaign to reduce or end illiteracy. What followed was a series of interventions notable among which was the Education For All (EFA) campaign. The aim of this paper is to discuss Uganda's efforts at fighting illiteracy especially adult illiteracy. The Government of Uganda in joint collaboration with civil society organizations, non-governmental, community based organizations as well as the international community underscored the need to promote adult literacy programmes in local communities as a way of knowledge sharing and imparting of skills intended for development. The objective of the paper is to ascertain the extent to which the adult literacy programmes are viewed as socio-economic tools for development in the country. Indeed, illiteracy poses a heavy challenge to development and hence the provision of literate skills to adults is vital to in order to contribute to communal and national development. Evidence suggests that even though adult literacy learning in Uganda is being promoted, there is little regard of this effort as an avenue for reducing illiteracy and promoting socio-economic development, which forms the research problem of this discussion. Qualitative research data from 2006 and 2011 on Uganda Government's Functional adult literacy programme will inform the discussion. Furthermore, findings from the data indicate a gap between knowledge and skills offered and actual socio-economic development in the rural communities where the literacy programmes are promoted. A number of factors are mentioned as hindering programme effectiveness hence suggesting a lot that needs to be done in order to make adult literacy learning a vital tool in achieving socio-economic development in Uganda.

Keywords: adult literacy, literacy programme, socio-economic, development

INTRODUCTION

There are good reasons why literacy is at the core of Education for All (EFA) – a good quality basic education equips pupils with literacy skills for life and further learning; literate parents are more likely to send their children to school; literate people are better able to access continuing education opportunities; and literate societies are better geared to meet pressing development challenges. (Koïchiro Matsuura, UNESCO, 2006).

The Government of Uganda has taken measures to fight and reduce illiteracy in the country. There are both formal and informal literacy and educational opportunities to address the issue of illiteracy. These efforts by the Government of Uganda resonate with UNESCO's campaign of Education For All (EFA). Furthermore, Uganda has acknowledged the United Nations Millennium Development Goal 2 on promoting universal primary education, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable

Development (2005-2014) as well the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) all of which reflect continued global efforts urging Governments all over the world to stamp out illiteracy.

Background

Uganda is a landlocked and developing African country with a population figure standing at 32.9 million people (Population Secretariat, 2011). The UNDP Human Development Index reports for 2010 and 2011, ranked Uganda as being at 143/169 and 161/187 respectively in the world in terms of socio-economic factors. Obviously the drop in ranking in 2011 indicates the socio-economic challenges facing the country. However, the country remains keen on formulating socio-economic programmes and policies aimed at addressing such issues as illiteracy or lack of adequate educational skills, poverty, environmental degradation as well as corruption. Uganda is also making attempts at meeting some of the benchmarks as set out in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015.

Majority of Uganda's population lives in rural areas and that is about 85.2 percent in 2010 and projected to reach 85.3 percent by 2015 (UBOS, 2006). Agriculture is the main source of income and poverty levels stand at 25 percent of the population (Population Secretariat, 2011). In terms of illiteracy for persons aged 15 and above, 20.5 percent of men and 41.3 percent of women are illiterate (Population Secretariat, 2010) however adult literacy levels for persons aged 10 and above stands at 73 percent of the population (Population Secretariat, 2011).

On a global scale, UNESCO reveals that,

adult literacy rate stands at 83.7 percent where adult literacy rate for males is 88.3 percent and that for females is 79.2 percent. The total number of illiterate adults stands at 793.1 million individuals and female illiteracy rate is 64.1 percent. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 21.4 percent of adults are illiterate (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011).

Obviously, even with global efforts to support education and literacy opportunities since the EFA campaign, the figures as indicated above by UNESCO paint a picture of millions of individuals worldwide who are still without the fundamental right to literacy and education opportunities. Illiteracy is a huge hindrance to personal and communal growth and development. Reflecting on adult literacy provision in Uganda as an EFA effort in the wake of Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015); UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) as well as the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012) is a chance to measure Uganda's efforts and suggest ways for future improvement in terms of aiming at overall individual and country development.

The discussion in this paper will centre on education and literacy services in Uganda; the relationship between adult literacy and development, the REFLECT and FAL programme approaches. Qualitative data collected from adult learners participating in the FAL programme in 2006 and post-literacy adult learners in 2011 will inform the discussion.

Education And Literacy Promotion In Uganda

In Uganda, literacy education is promoted in two main ways: through formal and non-formal education. The formal school system is managed by the Government's Ministry of Education and Sports and has three levels distinguished by national examinations. Primary schooling is for seven years, at the end of which students sit for the national primary leaving examinations (PLE). Lower secondary education comprises of four years, is completed by students sitting for the Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE). At the end of two years of higher secondary education (HSE), students sit for the Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) examinations which determine entry to tertiary education. Vocational and technical institutes offer alternative career paths for individuals who do not make it to university.

In formal education, the Government's support for universal primary education from 1997 and secondary education from 2007 has improved the chances of more children gaining access to formal education opportunities. On the other hand, non-formal programmes such as the Functional Adult Literacy programme is managed by the Government's Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) and Non-governmental Organisations. The programme follows the UNESCO model of adult literacy and has been in existence since 1992. According to MGLSD, the FAL programme is a participatory approach that would motivate learners to seek knowledge and skills to better their lives and their communities (MGLSD 2001: 1-2). Women than men comprise the majority of learners in this adult literacy programme.

Of (Adult) Literacy Programmes and Development

Development can be embedded within the socio-cultural, political, religious and economic aspects of the society. Development can be human development, economic development, and social development especially in a world divided into developed and developing countries. It has frequently been argued that improvement in literacy levels is a positive indicator of development. For example, 'literacy is an important development tool and everything depends upon how it is used' (Phillips 1970: 49). Socio-culturally, Nyerere (1974: 26) writing in the context of Tanzania, and Africa in general, states that 'development means the development of *people*. Roads, buildings, the increases in crop output, and other things of this nature are not development; they are only tools of development'.

According to Esteva (1992: 13) development 'can be social, cultural or economic' (cited in Reid 1995:44). In writing about economic development, growth and welfare, Smith (1994: 14-15) indicates that development can be 'linked to improvements in the quality of life. Such improvements can be better living conditions, health care, improved diets, increased literacy and lower infant mortality rates'. Social theorists like Openjuru (2004a: 11) state that development is about

the general improvement in economic, social and political conditions of the whole society in terms of reduction or elimination of poverty, inequality, injustice, insecurity, ecological imbalance, and unemployment within the context of a growing economy.

This socio-cultural view to development takes into account the individuals, their social practices and how they are able to use these practices to impact on their circumstances.

REFLECT Vs Functional Literacy Approaches

The promotion of adult literacy learning in Uganda has been of interest to both the Government and non-governmental organisations. In this section, I will explore two adult literacy learning approaches namely REFLECT by Action Aid International and the Uganda Government's Functional Adult Literacy programme.

REFLECT by Action Aid International

REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) is a socio-cultural approach that relies heavily on community initiative. REFLECT is a brainchild of Action Aid International, a British development agency operating in developing countries like Uganda, espousing the forms of literacy that lead to '... the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality' and that 'the goals of literacy programmes should reflect this understanding' (Action Aid International 2005: 15).

In other words, REFLECT aims 'to integrate literacy and numeracy teaching with broader efforts to stimulate development locally and to address communities' social and political concerns' (Barton 2007: 192). REFLECT is a contextualized way of drawing together literacy uses in people's lives aimed at socio-economic transformation. To emphasize the differences and similarities, Openjuru's (2004b) comparison of the FAL and REFLECT approaches are set out in table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the ideological foundations of the FAL and REFLECT approaches (following Openjuru 2004b: 421-422)

FAL	REFLECT
Differences	
1. ... a primer is the basis of teaching literacy... Lessons in the primer usually cover topics on agriculture, health, sanitation, gender relations, income-generating activities, civic life of the community ...	2. ... learners in the REFLECT literacy circles are expected to develop their own literacy materials by constructing maps, matrices, calendars and diagrams on the ground, using materials that are locally available in the literacy circles ...
3. ... emphasis is more on reading than writing (Archer & Cottingham 1996a).	4. ... emphasis is more on writing than reading ...
5. ... generally emphasizes economic development fitting more with the autonomous model of literacy.	6. ... emphasizes community empowerment and identifies with the ideological model of literacy ...
Similarities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ... theoretically, they both draw inspiration from the work of Freire (1974). • ... still drawing on Freire, both approaches agree on the importance of learner's knowledge as the starting point for teaching new concepts. • Both approaches use literacy as one way of improving community welfare, socially, economically and politically. • Both use adult literacy facilitators trained under the programme or project to teach literacy. The facilitators use some kind of guide book. • Both approaches are aimed at attaining rural community development. 	

The REFLECT approach prioritizes individuals and their transformations within their local communities. Literacy should be beneficial and a tool that learners use to improve their everyday life in meaningful ways. In the next section is the discussion on the FAL programme.

The Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) Programme

The Government's FAL programme has its roots in the functional version of literacy introduced and promoted by UNESCO. UNESCO played a big role in the re-introduction of Uganda's Functional Adult Literacy programme, including through a 'number of planning workshops held in 1983, 1987 and 1989, co-financed by the Government of Uganda and UNESCO' (Okech et al 1999: 12).

This literacy discourse places emphasis on individuals obtaining skills that would enable them to actively improve their lives. Greater emphasis is placed on the programme following the World Conference on Education held in Jomtien Thailand in 1990 that revealed that the number of illiterate individuals in especially developing countries was on the increase. This is Uganda's longest running adult literacy programme after three failed attempts in 1960s and 1970s.

It is also worth mentioning that the implementation of the FAL programme in Uganda had the Government attaching the literacy initiative to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) poverty reduction strategy. The World Bank's '1995 paper on strategies for education, acknowledged the problem of illiteracy among the poorest people of the poorest countries and the need to provide the kinds of education that would work to reduce their poverty' (Carr-Hill et al 2001: xi).

Although the World Bank analysis does not specifically mention literacy learning, I think that some of the underlying challenges to socio-economic development involve lack of education and literacy skills. So the FAL programme, linked to economic skills and poverty reduction efforts, ensured that Uganda would continue implementing the UNESCO version of literacy; a version central to understanding and implementing the IMF/World Bank's structural adjustment policies (SAPs) that promised the improvement of people's socio-economic situations in developing countries.

The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development affirms that 'literacy is a key in helping the poor extract themselves from the conditions causing poverty particularly through access to information' (MGLSD 2002: v), and that is why the Functional Adult Literacy programme is promoted across the Districts in Uganda.

FAL Programme Levels

Ministry Roles

The roles of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD) include:

- Policy formulation and development;
- Programme design, development and implementation;
- Networking with other actors in the area of adult literacy;
- Supervision and monitoring of activities; provision of technical support in the areas of training literacy supervisors and instructors;
- Coordination of material development and production; publicity and advocacy for functional adult literacy;
- Research and documentation on adult literacy; assessment of learners' achievements (MGLSD 2001: 4-5).

Adult literacy falls under the Department of Elderly and Disability within the Ministry and Commissioners are appointed to manage the various Departments.

The Ministry introduced the National Adult Literacy Strategic Investment Plan 2002/3 to 2006/7 (NALSIP) in which it advocates a number of reasons for supporting the FAL programme.

Literacy serves as a strong foundation for removing gender inequalities, increasing ordinary people's entrepreneurship, enabling poor communities to act more effectively in pursuit of their development goals, improving agricultural practices, reinforcing quality and access to primary education, enhancing family health and hygiene, increasing civic participation and overall raising of living standards. (MGLSD 2002: vii)

This portrays a comprehensive package in promoting national literacy in Uganda and one of the targets of NALSIP is 'to attain an equitable access to basic and continuing education for women and out of school girl youth' (MGLSD 2008a: 18). NALSIP offers the Government's explanation for promoting functional literacy countrywide.

District Roles

At the District level, the responsibility for implementing FAL activities falls under the Department of Community Based Services. A District Community Development Officer (DCDO) is appointed to oversee activities within the District. There are six sectors which are (a) Child Care, (b) Youth (c) Culture, (d) Gender and Women in development, (e) The Disabled and Elderly, and (f) Labour. There is no separate mention of the adult literacy programme as it is presumed to be incorporated in each of the sectors listed above.

Sub-county roles

At the Sub-county level, the FAL programme carries the same name of Community-based service and functions as at the District level. Also at the Sub-county level, the Community Development Officer is in charge of the programme implementation.

FAL Programme Curriculum

The FAL programme curriculum focuses on such areas as “health, legal issues, agriculture, cooperative and marketing, animal husbandry, gender issues, culture and civic consciousness as well as language” (MGLSD 2003: 3). These areas of programme study resonant somewhat with the above mentioned pillars of education for international understanding. But is the adult literacy programme taken seriously as one that would enable adult learners participate creatively in overall community and national development in Uganda. Discussing the challenges in the next section should assist in answering this question.

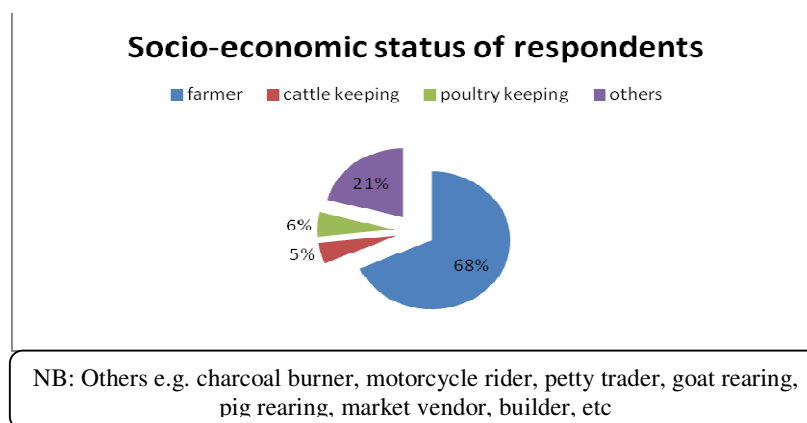
FAL programme stages

The programme has three stages where Stage one is the beginners’ stage with 180-226 contact hours equivalent to nine months of study. Stage two is also for another nine months with the same contact hours as Stage one. Stage three, introduced in 2006, has 150-180 contact hours between adult learners and their literacy instructor. Literacy instruction in the first two Stages is in the local language of the learners and only in Stage three is basic English language introduced.

METHODOLOGY

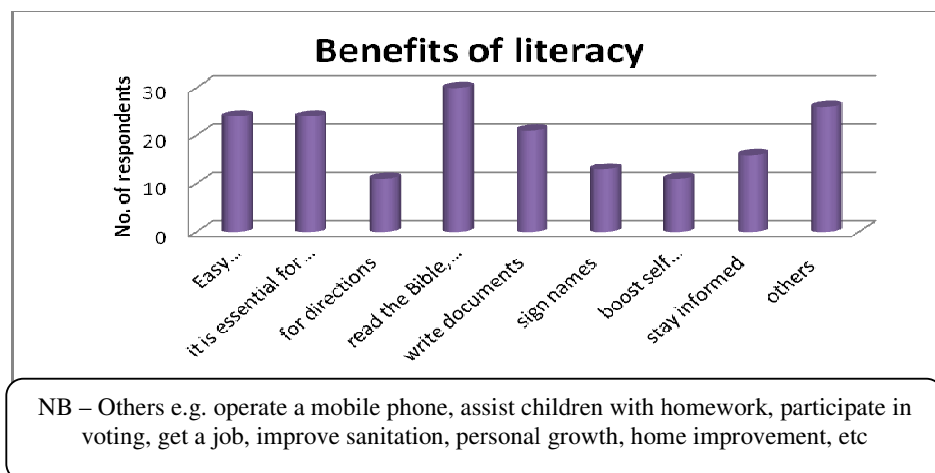
The findings discussed in this paper are based on qualitative research data of 2006 and 2011 on the Uganda Government’s Functional Adult Literacy programme. In 2006, six adult learners, two literacy instructors from two and three literacy programme implementers at each of the three levels of the programme implementation were selected and interviewed as part of a doctoral thesis entitled “Ugandan women in two village literacy classes: literacy learning, poverty reduction and empowerment”. The respondents were drawn from the District of Mpigi in the Central region of Uganda. In 2011, 113 post-literacy adult learners selected from three districts of Jinja, Iganga and Kamuli in the Eastern region of Uganda were each requested to fill out a questionnaire as part of a comparative study on “suggesting alternative approaches to making adult literacy learning opportunities sustainable for learners in their local communities in three countries of Uganda, Kenya and Vietnam”. Their responses are presented below as a way of ascertaining the extent to which the knowledge and skills acquired through the programme is sustaining the learners socio-economically. Results in Chart 1 below show the nature of socio-economic involvement of the learners interviewed in 2011. Majority of the learners are farmers which affirms the fact that Uganda depends on agriculture for her livelihood. Also other learners are involved in other economic activities as outlined in the ‘others’ section of the chart. Even though this socio-economic status demonstrated in Chart 1 refers to respondents drawn from Eastern Uganda, overall, there is no difference in socio-economic activities from the respondents drawn from the Central region of Uganda in 2006. The adult learners in the 2006 study were all farmers. The FAL programme targets individuals in rural communities of Uganda and their socio-economic activities correspond with chart 1 below.

Chart 1



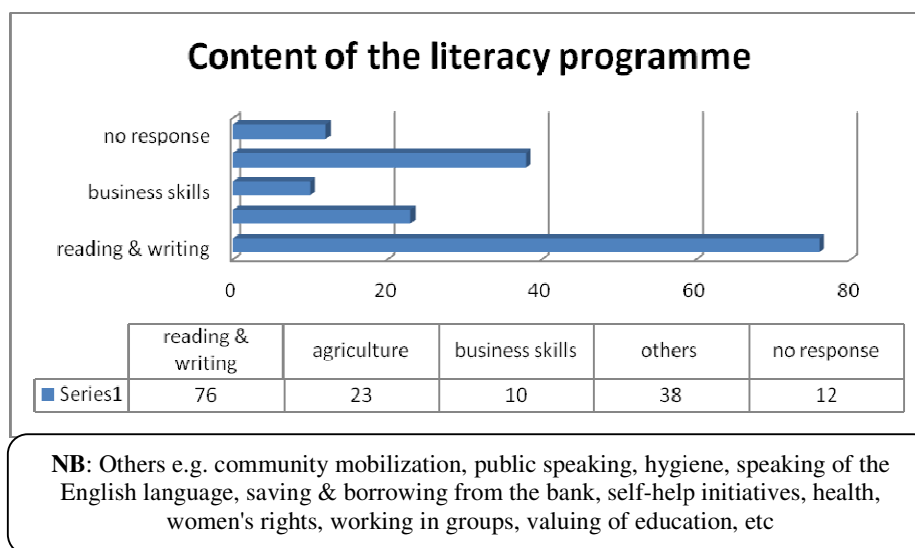
The respondents were then requested to share their views on the benefits of literacy as received from the FAL programme. The responses are represented in chart 2.

Chart 2



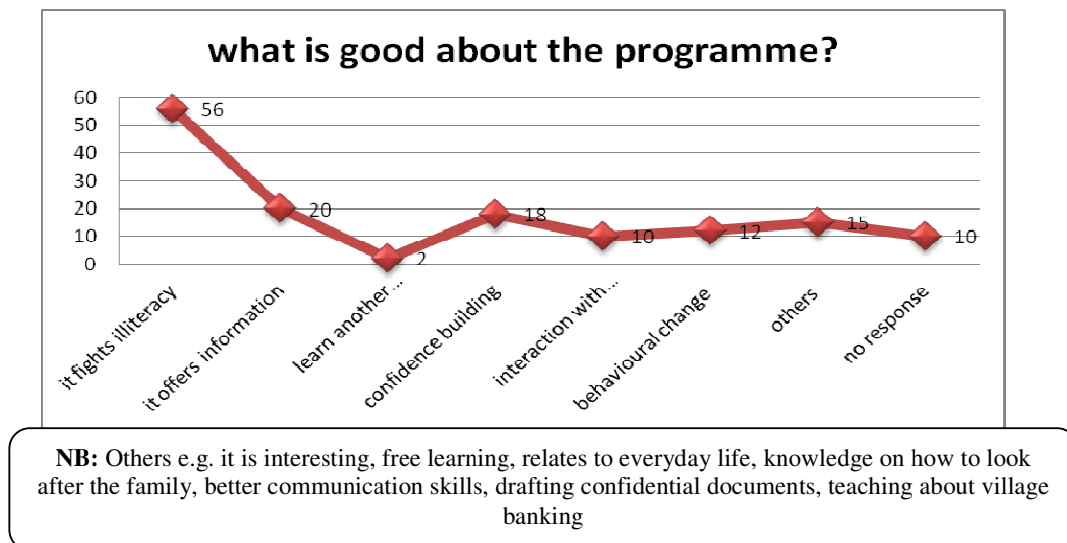
The results show that a lot of meaning was attached to being able to read for example the Bible or signposts. This was followed by literacy being essential for business as well as for easy communication. There is a range of meaning attached to being literate by the respondents. Their responses also indicate that it is difficult to function well if one is illiterate in the community.

Chart 3



In chart 3, the question was intended to discover if there have been any changes to the content of the literacy programme from what was earlier discussed in the FAL programme curriculum nearly 20 years of programme implementation in the rural communities of Uganda. Results indicate that majority of the respondents still thought that the programme concentrated more on teaching them to read and to write. This is followed by the 'others' section where respondents mention a range of other activities that are taught to them. The content is obviously targeting both individual and communal growth and development. Also, the content in the 'others' section can also be justified by the fact that in Eastern Uganda, non-governmental and community-based organisations have incorporated their own agenda within the FAL programme. This is the only part of the country where this arrangement is being operated.

Chart 4



Having to ask respondents ‘what was good about the programme?’ was mentioned to solicit their views of what has made the programme remain operational? In 2011, 56 respondents were of the strong view that the programme fought illiteracy while 20 respondents believed that the programme was a useful source of information.

In 2006, the adult literacy learners, literacy instructors as well as programme implementers at the Sub-county and District levels were able to share their views of what was hindering the programme from being effective as demonstrated in table 2 below.

Table 2. The FAL Programme challenges

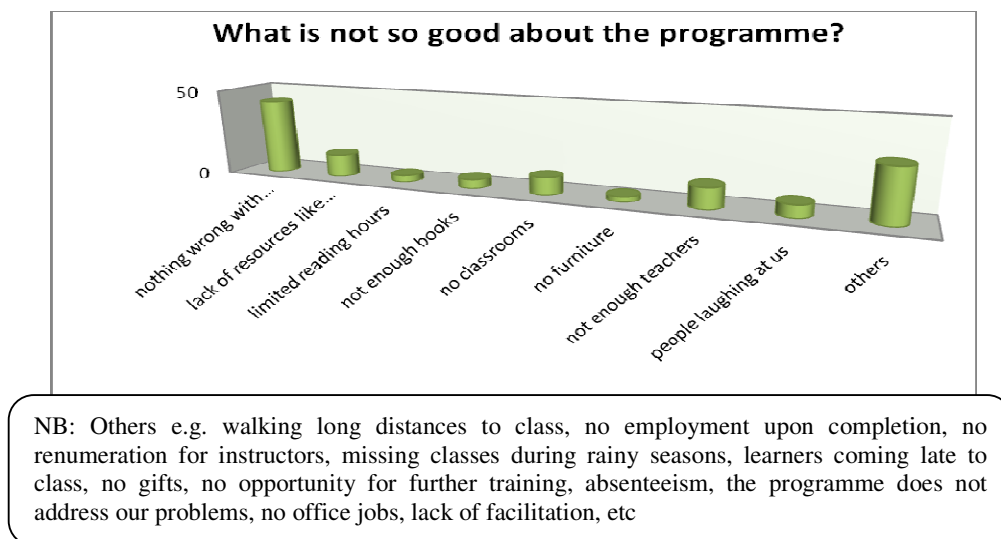
Communication and feedback (delayed/limited): Literacy implementers at the District and Sub-county levels suggest that communication and feedback between the District and the Central Government needs to improve.
Physical infrastructure: The limited choice of venues such as under a tree may not be conducive to learning.
Volunteer literacy instructors (no remuneration): Under the FAL programme, remuneration of literacy instructors is not catered for. Literacy instructors are volunteers from the local community who are trained. It is indeed wishful thinking from the Government that these literacy instructors are expected to offer their services without any financial reward.
FAL within the Department of Community Development: The FAL programme is located within the Department of Community Development and this means a range of responsibilities either at District or Sub-county levels. The Department of Community Development is entrusted with the mandate to manage social issues such as youth programmes, the elderly and disabled, gender and women programmes, children’s issues and adult literacy. Thus there are effective supervision challenges.
Local leadership (weak): Political and community support is integral to the FAL programme’s success. A fundamental weakness is that local leaders within the community and political leaders have not stepped up the campaign to end illiteracy among adults, and in particular, women.
Men shying away from the literacy programme: In the interview, I asked the three women why men were not attending the FAL classes. Each learner explained men’s absence differently; but all their

reasons point to men having an attitude problem: they are embarrassed to be seen entering a literacy class.
Diverse adult learners in one class: Having diverse adult learners in one class is not easy for the literacy instructor as s/he is forced to make time for all the learners who are in different stages within the programme.
Content of the literacy primers: The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development document named National Adult Learners' Strategic Investment Plan (NALSIP) outlined the objective of "increasing people's access to information and participation in self, community and national development through improving the quality of learning in the literacy programme through better delivery systems" (MGLSD 2002: viii). One way of accessing information for the adult learners has been through the FAL primers. However, in some of the literacy classes visited, some learners had literacy primers, while in the other classes only the literacy instructor had a primer.
<i>Class contact hours:</i> The FAL programme policy states that adult learners are entitled to six contact hours per week over nine months, however some literacy instructors do not follow this prerequisite.
<i>Funding and resources (inadequate):</i> The effects of underfunding are felt at all levels of the FAL implementation process, including in the classes.

Source: Sarah Hasaba (2009).

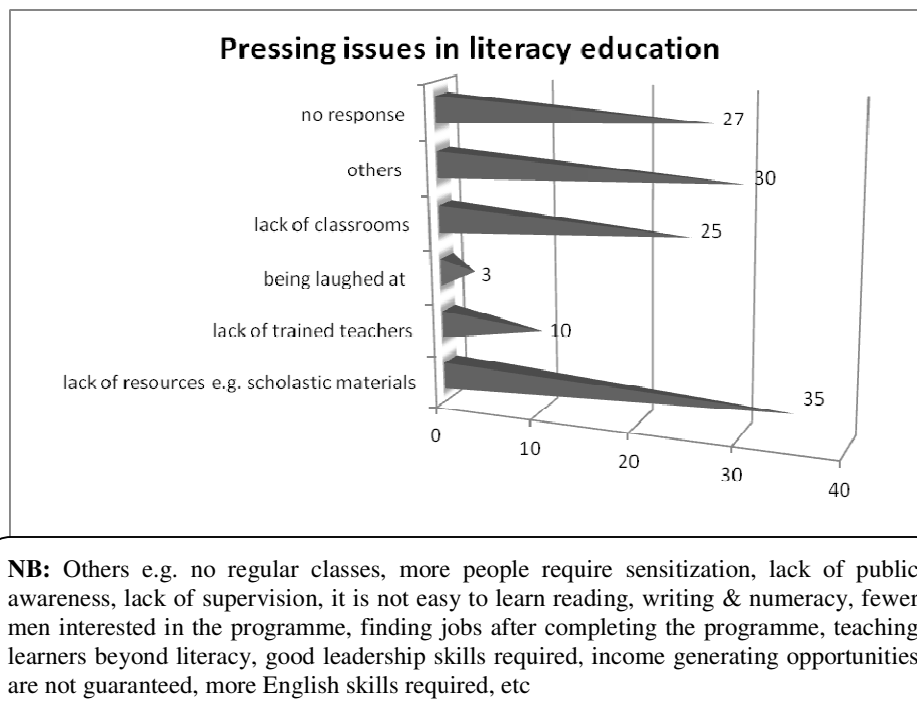
In 2011, the respondents were asked to share their views on 'what is not good about the programme?' as well as the 'pressing issues with regard to provision of literacy education programme'. In charts 5 & 6 below are their responses which were in a way meant to cross check with the issues raised in table 2.

Chart 5



The responses in chart 5 were a way of cross checking the views from adult learners in 2006 with post-literacy adult learners interviewed in 2011. Although 43 respondents in chart 5 were of the view that there was nothing wrong with the literacy programme, the respondents who are categorized in the 'others' section shared their views on what they believed were reasons that made the programme not good.

Chart 6



The respondents were also asked the most pressing issues with regards to provision of the adult literacy programme in their communities. Combining the responses in charts 5 & 6 brings out a lot of challenges to effective literacy programme implementation. It appears as if little has changed in terms of the Government actually improving the programme over the years. It also portrays a lack of strong political will to improve the acquisition of literate skills among adult learners and sustaining these skills.

Overall, such issues such as not finding jobs upon completion in the programme and also no income generating opportunities point to socio-economic challenges to growth and development. This gap is not only experienced by adult learners but also by students who have gone through the country's formal school system. The number of available jobs does not tally with the number of graduates who complete school. Currently, the level of unemployment in Uganda stands at 9.5 percent (Population Secretariat, 2011). The lack of adequate resources for socio-economic development is alarming.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Indeed, the adult literacy programme in Uganda is a wonderful opportunity to fight adult illiteracy and essentially, it should offer a good opportunity to enable adult learners acquire knowledge and skills to contribute to socio-economic improvement of their communities. However, it is clear that the FAL programme faces a lot of challenges to its effectiveness; challenges that can be addressed if the Government committed much more resources to operating the programme in districts and sub-counties in the country. Fighting illiteracy in children and adults remains of fundamental importance to Uganda. Unlike the REFLECT programme, the FAL programme covers the whole country and it is a chance to engage all individuals in the acquisition and use of knowledge and skills for personal and communal development.

This paper therefore calls for more focus on adult literacy programmes in terms of quality not quantity passing through the programmes. With more literate adults in the country, it is easier to shape the next generations of young people by keeping them in school. The role of the Government, non-governmental and community based organisations is central to making this happen. Without national, community and international actors, the true purpose of having adult literacy programmes as tools to improve socio-economic conditions of people will not have great effect beyond just receiving basic

literacy skills. The connection between literacy and socio-economic earning needs to be strengthened. Education For All / Literacy For All campaign remains a right that every individual in society should enjoy.

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