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UIL Policy Brief 1

Quality matters: Improving the Status of Literacy Teaching Personnel

The global literacy challenge

Literacy and basic education are recognized as fundamental human rights. With increasing use of the written word all over the world, the abilities to read, write and use numbers have become essential requirements for active participation in society, and form a basis for further learning opportunities. Although the adult literacy rate worldwide increased by 8.6 per cent over the last two decades, there are still 774 million illiterate adults (those over the age of 15), 64 per cent of them women (UIS, 2013). If governments are serious about empowering their citizens to become agents of positive social and economic change, they need to make the quality provision of basic literacy skills a priority.

International commitment

At the Sixth International Conference of Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in Belém, Brazil, in 2009, delegates from 144 UNESCO Member States agreed to increase their efforts to raise literacy rates. As teaching personnel are vital to ensuring quality in any kind of educational activity, the *Belém Framework for Action* clearly spells out the need for “improving training, capacity-building, employment conditions and the professionalization of adult educators” (UIL, 2010, p. 9). But parts of the workforce of adult education, namely literacy facilitators, have been given the least attention. To address this situation, this brief presents the main issues related to the status and working conditions of literacy teaching personnel.



It is inspired by the discussions of experts and practitioners from more than ten countries during the “International Workshop on Strategies for the Improvement of the Status of Literacy Teaching Personnel” (held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in March 2013) and contains key points for reflection and action.



Conditions of literacy facilitators

Although adult literacy teaching personnel (in some contexts referred to as facilitators) play a significant role in providing quality literacy programmes, they remain among the lowest-paid teachers and receive the least training. Many do not receive any payment for their services. Because literacy is not a policy priority in most countries, there is a lack of sustained investment and action to improve the status and working conditions of literacy facilitators. This contributes to a vicious cycle of low-quality literacy programmes, which provide little encouragement to governments to increase their investment in literacy and basic skills education.

Data from national progress reports¹ and information collected from countries participating² in the international workshop indicate the diverse situation of literacy teachers/facilitators in terms of entry-level requirements, pre- and in-service training courses, accreditation and working conditions (working hours, remuneration and teaching environments). For example, in Burkina Faso and China any person with primary education can become a literacy teacher, whereas in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nepal and South Sudan secondary education is mandatory. In Nigeria, literacy teachers must possess a National Certificate of Education (NCE). In Europe, many countries report that their literacy teachers must hold a university degree.

1 140 countries submitted their national progress report on the implementation of the *Belém Framework for Action* to the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) in 2012. These reports contributed to the second *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE), which will be published in mid-2013. All national progress reports can be accessed through the UIL homepage at <http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/adult-learning-and-education/confintea-portal/news-target/national-progress-reports-for-grale-2012/af44e96bc9ca05553529f73098b1348b/>.

2 Participants came from Afghanistan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Nepal, Nigeria and South Sudan.

In many countries with high illiteracy rates, it is not unusual for community members with low educational levels to take over the task of teaching their peers.

Some governments only provide a few days of pre-service training (e.g., Sri Lanka and Yemen), some provide two to three weeks of training (e.g., Afghanistan and Malawi) while others provide several months of pre-service training (in Egypt six months, in Mozambique, 12 and in Austria, 18 months). In many countries in Africa and Asia, pre- and in-service training of literacy teaching personnel are offered both by governments and non-governmental organisations.



The skills, knowledge and competences required by literacy teachers include an understanding of pedagogical issues, an appreciation of the nature of literacy and its relationship to vocational education and training, and gender sensitivity. To assure the quality of literacy teacher programmes, some countries (e.g., Indonesia and Nepal) have developed a standard curriculum that can be adapted to local needs. In other countries, universities and other educational research institutions may be given the task of creating space for encouraging innovations related to the professionalisation of literacy teaching personnel.

Another key issue influencing literacy facilitators' status is remuneration, which varies enormously throughout the world. National progress reports reveal a wide range of average monthly pay (e.g., 30 USD in Sierra Leone, 65 USD in Guatemala, 145 USD in the Philippines, 190 USD in Palestine and 3,000 USD in France). In general, more people are interested in practicing a profession if the remuneration is high, reflecting a higher social value.

In addition to qualifications and remuneration, the question of political representation is also important. In many countries, the low status of literacy teachers is due to their weak

representation in policy-making. In Indonesia and most European countries, the active involvement of literacy teachers' organisations in policy processes has helped, not only to improve the status of literacy facilitators, but also to raise the quality of literacy programmes. Overall, linking the non-formal and the formal systems through equivalency frameworks could also enhance the status of literacy and non-formal education facilitators.

What countries could do

During the "International Workshop on Strategies for the Improvement of the Status of Literacy Teaching Personnel", participants suggested that the policy environment should 1) address the training of facilitators; 2) develop a needs-based curriculum; 3) review remuneration; and 4) ensure the political representation of literacy facilitators. Bearing in mind their specific contexts, the country representatives developed national plans focusing on different elements.

In **Nigeria**, a roadmap for literacy development has been developed. Its main objective is to strengthen institutional and individual capacities for planning, developing, delivering and monitoring quality programmes to enable people to acquire basic and functional literacy skills. It includes the establishment of a professional association to promote networking among literacy facilitators.

Given the situation of **South Sudan** – where most people lacked access to education during the recent decades of conflict – the government identified the creation of a national literacy policy as a crucial first step in improving the situation of literacy personnel. It is expected that with the development of a facilitators' certification and accreditation framework, the working conditions, motivation and remuneration of literacy facilitators can be improved.





To reach those most in need in **Indonesia**, the competencies of existing facilitators in three selected provinces with the lowest literacy rates are to be improved. The overall aim is to involve Community Learning Centres, associations and other networks in the development of learning and training models for facilitators. These training models shall respond to the learners' contexts and refer to indigenous knowledge, culture, local languages and gender issues.

Understanding gender issues and their implications for improving the status of literacy facilitators is important in any country. The social construction of gender leads to the establishment of stereotypes and norms regarding women's and men's roles in society that are difficult to alter. Literacy policies and practices should not reinforce these stereotypes. **Nepal** is a country with great disparities in literacy rates between women and men, urban and rural populations, and rich and poor citizens. The pilot project "Literacy for All: Empowerment and Poverty Reduction in Post-Conflict Nepal" was designed to provide innovative, mother-tongue-based literacy programmes for women in rural communities. Female facilitators were recruited locally, trained, supervised and supported. The participants' feedback on the training experience was highly positive. Nepal's country team also suggested a revision of the national literacy curriculum, ensuring that all learning materials become gender-sensitive and link life and livelihood skills with literacy learning. As the acquisition of core skills (including literacy, numeracy, communication, teamwork, problem-solving and learning abilities) and the development of professional and technical skills are mutually reinforcing, their attainment should be integrated whenever suitable.

Since facilitators need to be equipped with the necessary competencies to help learners acquire different skills, in **Afghanistan** the government

is committed to introducing new teaching approaches in the facilitators' pre- and in-service training. This means the quality of literacy training itself shall be improved, and a needs assessment will be conducted. This will cover specific issues concerning social cohesion that could be incorporated as a topic in facilitators' training. This will entail the revision of the related curriculum and training manuals.

In **Ethiopia**, there are no standard methods and approaches for training non-formal teaching personnel. Therefore, an institute dedicated to the training of non-formal education personnel is to be established by 2015. A strategy for the professional development of facilitators will be drafted with the aim of enhancing their capacities in the areas of research and assessment. This strategy will elaborate on a system of remuneration.

In **Egypt**, the issue of facilitators' remuneration will be addressed. As the salary levels of literacy facilitators are extremely low, the government plans to raise their wages by ministerial decree and to extend contractual appointments to three years. This is expected to increase the number of committed facilitators.

The above examples illustrate the challenges involved in improving the status of literacy teaching personnel. The measures taken differ according to each context and provide valuable lessons on what countries consider to be the key priorities in literacy education. To harness the potential of the world's illiterate people, policy-makers and practitioners need to focus their attention on improving the status of literacy facilitators. If this is done in a comprehensive and systematic way, these efforts will produce a corps of skilled and motivated literacy teachers who can deliver high-quality literacy programmes.

List of references

UIL (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning) (2010), *Belém Framework for Action*. Hamburg: UIL. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001877/187789m.pdf>.

UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics) (2013), *UIS Data Centre*. Montreal: UIS. <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx>