

# A Reflection on the Past Trends in the Delivery of Literacy Education in Zambia: Challenges and Prospects

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## Abstract

This paper examines the different views about the definition of 'literacy' and how it is applied in the Zambian context. It argues that the absence of a contextual definition of literacy or illiteracy has raised some doubt on the magnitude of the problem and the extent to which success has been achieved through various literacy programmes. It highlights the growth of literacy education in Zambia, achievements and problems.

The paper observes that whereas many efforts have been made to improve the country's literacy rates, the government has not been able to achieve significant results compared to neighbouring countries such as Botswana and Tanzania. It attributes the dismal performance of literacy educational programmes to factors such as inadequate resources, absence of a well-laid down programme and follow-ups. Finally, it outlines some options which may not only improve the literacy rate in the country but may sustain it also.

**Keywords:** *literacy; functional literacy; literacy campaigns; prospects; challenges*

## 1. Introduction

This paper seeks to describe delivery of literacy education in Zambia. It begins by examining the concept 'literacy' and how it applies to Zambia and then discusses the development and growth of literacy education in the country. Later, the paper examines the problems that have hindered the eradication of illiteracy given the high number of literacy programmes that have been introduced from time to time in the country. It ends with a discussion on the prospects of delivering a more effective literacy education programme.

### 1.1 Background

Literacy has continued to occupy a central place in adult education and work thereon has been intensified both in terms of its quantitative growth and new alternative approaches. Since its foundation in 1946, UNESCO has been at the forefront of global literacy efforts aimed at keeping literacy high on national, regional and international agendas. However, with many million adults lacking minimum literacy skills, literacy for all remains an elusive target. Literacy rates can vary widely from country to country or region to region. Often, this coincides with the region's wealth or urbanization, though many factors play a role, such as social customs which limit the education of females in some countries. Illiteracy is seen as a social problem. Most of the developed world has managed to overcome illiteracy while Africa continues to grapple with this problem.

The Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report for 2006 shows that literacy is still 'a right denied to nearly a fifth of the world's adult population' (UNESCO, 2006a). The report reveals that currently, 40 out of every 100 Africans are still unable to read and write, against 25 of every 100 in developing countries. It further reveals that the problem of illiteracy is more pronounced in West Africa than in Eastern and Southern Africa. In spite of all its resources, Nigeria merely manages a 66.8% literacy rate, trailing behind Tanzania (69.4%), Lesotho (81.4%), Zambia (67.9%), Botswana (78.9%) and Swaziland (79.2%).

Population experts have said that the increase in illiteracy is a function of rapid population increases, lack of universal primary education, inadequate literacy follow-up and relapses into illiteracy (Kassam & Healey, 1984). The magnitude of this problem has become so big that a number of countries in Africa such as Botswana, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Somalia as well as India and Vietnam in Asia have in recent years launched mass

literacy campaigns. Kassam and Healey (1984) contend that these campaigns attempt to match the magnitude of the problem of illiteracy with corresponding massive literacy efforts. Experience has demonstrated that only campaigns with clearly defined goals can create a sense of urgency, mobilize popular support and participation, and harness all possible resources to sustain mass action, continuity and follow-up.

In Zambia, the government ran a Basic Literacy Programme from 1966 to 1970 for adult learners. A second intervention, the Functional Literacy Programme with emphasis on agricultural production was initiated in 1970. It spanned two years with theoretical and practical components included. The focus was on growing maize - the staple crop of the country. A third programme, the Functional Literacy, Health and Nutrition Programme started in 1978 and introduced topics on health and nutrition into the state-run functional literacy programme. The most recent programme was the 1990 National Literacy Campaign. But statistics indicate that the interventions have not had much impact.

It has been reported in Zambia that while the illiteracy rate dropped from 67 per cent in 1964 to about 41 per cent in 1980, the actual number of illiterates grew from 1.2 million to three million (Mutava, 1988). Among the countries in Africa that have been known to have succeeded in reducing illiteracy on a large scale are Tanzania and Ethiopia. Tanzania's illiteracy rate dropped from 67% in 1970 to 10% in 1986 (Lasway, 1989) while in Ethiopia, the literacy rate in five languages grew from 7% to 44.8% in 1987, following a national campaign that was started in 1979 (Cairns, 1989). Partly to blame for the unsatisfactory literacy situation in Africa is the fact that the concept of literacy itself is often too restricted and many adults fail to perceive the relevance of literacy in their everyday lives. This is mainly because in sub-Saharan Africa, literacy education has often focused on providing reading, writing, basic numeracy and occasionally functional skills (Maruatona, 2008). There are, however, a number of models of good practice proving that literacy programmes are much more successful when they relate literacy skills to the practical needs and concerns of people (Omolewa, 2008).

According to the 2000 Census of Population and Housing, Zambia's literacy level was estimated at 55 per cent. The results further indicated that the problem of illiteracy continued to be more prevalent among females than males. In addition, the problem of illiteracy is more pervasive among the rural than urban population. Furthermore, in terms of regional segregation, Copperbelt and Lusaka Provinces had the highest rate of adult literacy (80%) while Eastern followed by North-Western Province recorded the lowest literacy rates of 47.6% and 53.4%, respectively (MOE, 2008). In light of the foregoing, this paper examines the problems that have contributed to Zambia's failure to achieve higher literacy rates. In addition, it examines the prospects of better literacy delivery in the country. But first, we examine the meaning of literacy both in and outside the context of this paper.

### *1.2 Definition of Literacy*

What is most critical about literacy is its definition. Literacy has traditionally been defined as the process of writing and reading (i.e. making sense of written texts), and of writing and interpreting written numerals and their relationships. But recently, this definition has been challenged.

First, literacy is often confused with both language and mathematical calculations of various forms. Statements are sometimes made which seem to imply that adults cannot learn a language or how to do a calculation without literacy. But adults universally learn to speak a language without any form of assistance. In this regard, many adults who come to literacy learning programmes have already acquired their language and their calculation processes. Many adult literacy learners in Africa and Asia confuse literacy with language, frequently making statements such as, "It would be good if we could learn English," (Farrell, 2004). In fact, many people learn to speak English without acquiring the skills of literacy.

The second challenge comes from the increasingly common use of the term 'literacy' in widely diverse fields. For example, it is used in phrases like 'computer literacy' which means having computer skills while 'legal literacy' means having knowledge of the law. The intention behind these terms is very different from the meaning of literacy as the process of writing and reading texts. The different uses of the term 'literacy' highlight the fact that some people see literacy as leading to other outcomes, such as cognitive development, skills enhancement and changes in personality (Farrell, 2004). According to Farrell, this view is, however, being challenged. Some argue that literacy is not the same as awareness, skills, knowledge and confidence. They point out that it is possible to develop skills, self-confidence and awareness without literacy.

Measurement of literacy is yet another dimension that can be considered. Wagner (2000) states that persons deemed literate in one culture or setting would not necessarily be considered literate elsewhere. Changes in religion, government, technology and the labour market have resulted in changing definitions of literacy. Furthermore, literacy as an individual characteristic is not a unitary phenomenon but is more accurately conceptualized in terms of literacy

practices (i.e. reading newspapers, writing letters, etc) in which individuals in a population can acquire proficiency. Accordingly, Wagner (2000) argues that the calculation of literacy rates that bifurcates each population into literates and illiterates is neither valid nor informative. It tells us little about the distribution of competence or proficiency in the socially valued literacy practices of a community.

UNESCO's definition of literacy and who a literate person is have been adopted in total in Zambia and so far not much discussion on who an illiterate person is has taken place. Implementers of literacy programmes have at times arbitrarily decided on school grade equivalent. In 1969 when basic literacy was evaluated, a person was considered to be literate if he or she had attained the equivalent of grade 3. This grade has been criticized in some circles because it is lower than grade 5 which is a standard measure for the developing countries. The Central Statistics Office which is responsible for vital statistics in Zambia does not also accept the grade equivalent; neither does it consider any lack of schooling a form of illiteracy (Central Statistical Office, 1990). This makes it even more difficult to come up with a definition of illiteracy.

Though the paper mainly addresses the adult, the example of a child in relation to the concept 'literate' is used to demonstrate that those who leave school early with a weak foundation in literacy are obviously the future illiterates.

The measurement of who is literate in Zambia is still problematic. Is the use of school grade sufficient and appropriate? If at the level of grade 5, all pupils are regarded literate, is there no chance that some pupils can spend 5 years without acquiring any ability to write, read and do some simple calculations? Probably literacy among children can easily be determined since they are catered for by the formal education system. But what about the literacy education given to adults who may not join the formal education system, how should we evaluate the extent to which one has become literate?

In 1998, a national workshop of experts and government officials in Zambia defined a literate person as one:

“ ..... with the ability to read, write, calculate and interpret symbols for use and application for effective functioning of self, family, community and environment in which one is found”(Chali,1998:10).

This definition is similar to UNESCO's definition, which treats a person as literate when one has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable such a person to engage in those activities in which literacy is assumed. In other words, literacy may be applicable in a number of situations. This avoids the notion that one can only be considered literate when one has the mastery of a particular language such as English. However, it emphasizes the view that literacy is simply the mastery of the ability to read, write and do basic calculations relevant to the tasks at hand.

This way of looking at literacy to a greater extent approves of Wagner's (2000) reasoning that a person deemed literate in one culture or setting would not necessarily be considered literate elsewhere. Chali's definition implies that a literate person should have the ability to read and write in one's mother language in order to fulfill the demands of one's life such as reading and writing letters; and the ability to make simple calculations in dealing with everyday demands, for example, basic budgeting, estimating quantities and telling time.

With regard to basic education, Zambia has moved towards provision of basic education to its citizens up to grade 9. According to the new government policy, grade 9 is considered as the minimum level of education that a candidate must attain; a level which is widely used in developing countries when defining literacy. It must be noted that the attrition rate at primary school level is generally high. This could affect the current literacy levels because a good number of pupils stop school before they reach grade 9. But whether government will take this grade as a yardstick to be considered literate has not yet attracted its attention and the general public. Diverse as the definitions of 'literacy' may be, in this paper, the concept will refer to a person's ability to read and understand and write in a given language appropriate to one's needs.

## 2. Growth and Development of Literacy

Literacy instruction was the earliest form of education that Zambia was introduced to by the early missionaries. Its growth and development can be traced to the pre-colonial period, company rule, colonial rule and post-independence periods. The missionaries set up numerous village schools where rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic were taught to children who stayed after religious instructions. Though the provision of some literacy training continued for a long time, village schools were poorly organized and were staffed by untrained teachers (Snelson, 1974).

The Phelps-Stokes Commission visited Northern Rhodesia in June 1924 and made important recommendations to improve literacy work. In 1943, the Colonial government recommended a system of education catering for both children and adults and appointed a Commissioner for Native Development who set up Area Development Centres, one in each province. These centres taught courses such as home craft, brickwork, carpentry, tailoring, leather work, blacksmithing and mass literacy (Mwansa, 2005). Alongside literacy organized by the Commissioner for Native Affairs, the Department of African Education was assigned the responsibility of conducting mass literacy in selected area. Some voluntary organizations and individuals also got interested in mass literacy work. Literacy was, however, overshadowed by skills training activity (Mwansa, 2005).

In 1963, a year before, Zambia's political independence, a UNESCO Mission visited Northern Rhodesia and found that 50% of pupils enrolled at grade 1 (Sub A) did not proceed beyond grade IV. The Mission observed that with the prospect of Northern Rhodesia becoming independent there would be a motivation for starting a literacy campaign to create a literate electorate. Thus the Mission made many recommendations concerning adult literacy. First, it recommended literacy in English. Second, it recommended a six month literacy course for literacy teachers. Third, it recommended that literacy should be implemented by two ministries namely the Ministry responsible for Community Development (literacy related to hygiene, agriculture and community) and the Ministry responsible for Education (literacy in English).

The recommendations of the mission were wide in scope but among government officials literacy was not taken seriously. Though some form of literacy was introduced in community development materials which were used, they were not suitable and those who attended classes soon relapsed into illiteracy (Mwanakatwe, 1968). At the time of political independence, there were over one million adults who were not able to read and write (Mwanakatwe, 1968; Alexander, 1971) and adult illiteracy was estimated at 61%. The government saw the high illiteracy rate as an obstacle to economic development. For this reason, the government immediately thought of programmes aimed at reducing illiteracy among men and women so that they would meaningfully contribute to the development of the country. These are explained below.

i. Basic Literacy Programme

In 1966, the Basic Literacy programme was launched by the Department of Community Development under the Ministry of Rural Development. This programme was earmarked to run from 1966 to 1971 and its main objective was to teach the three Rs i.e. writing, reading and arithmetic. It involved large numbers of participants with over 1,300 local volunteer teachers thereby making literacy a major national concern and not just the responsibility of few full time government officers (Mulenga, 2000; Mwansa, 2005). In addition, 16 literacy supervisors and eight literacy officers were trained to run the programme. Six primers entitled *umwenge* (meaning 'light') were used in the programme.

ii. Functional Literacy (Agriculture)

In 1970, functional literacy was introduced initially in two provinces namely Central and Southern as a pilot project but later was extended to Eastern and Northern provinces in 1974. The following year, the programme was extended to North Western and Western Provinces. Thereafter, the remaining provinces were covered. The programme was linked to the growing of more maize, the staple food of the country. And to supplement the project, a radio programme on literacy was introduced. It broadcast information on self-help programme, mother and child care, self-reliance and how to save money from their produce (Mwansa, 2005). This programme was jointly funded by the government and UNESCO.

iii. Functional Literacy (Health and Nutrition)

The period after 1978 was characterized by a decline in the provision of adult education and literacy mainly due to reductions in budgetary allocations to adult education brought about by severe economic crisis. In 1978, the Ministries of Education and Health in collaboration with FAO and WHO introduced a health and nutrition component into the on-going functional literacy programme. After a pilot study phase from 1978 to 1981 in three provinces namely Central, Lusaka and Southern, it was integrated into the Functional Literacy Programme nationally.

iv. National Literacy Campaign

In 1984, the Zambian government formed a national committee to identify feasible strategies of eradicating illiteracy following the Udaipur Conference organized by the International Council for Adult Education and the Germany Foundation for International Development (Mwansa, 2005). At the same time, the Women's Affairs Committee of United National Independence Party (UNIP), the ruling party then, created an inter-ministerial committee to examine the feasibility of launching a national literacy campaign following a conference to mark the United Nations Decade for Women. This sparked interest among women and in their working document proposed identification of needs, sending

of study parties to Tanzania and Ethiopia to learn how those two countries had reduced illiteracy. Though the project failed to take off due to lack of resources, it contributed to the nurturing of political will among politicians and senior government officials (Mwansa, 2005).

In 1990 when UNESCO proclaimed the year 1990 International Literacy Year, a new committee (i.e. The National Literacy Campaign Committee) comprising non-governmental organizations and ministries was formed. The National Literacy Campaign Committee under the supervision of the Ministry of Community Development undertook three major activities in 1990 as follows:

- i. Under a joint committee of the Ministry of Community Development and Curriculum Centre of the Ministry of Education, literacy materials were reviewed and revised;
- ii. The National Literacy Campaign Committee played an active role in the preparation of the country paper for the International Conference on Education-For-All held at Jomtien, Thailand; and
- iii. Training workshops for literacy instructors were conducted in all provinces in preparation for a national literacy campaign.

The Government of the Republic of Zambia launched the first national literacy campaign on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1990. The goal of the campaign was to reduce illiteracy to 12 per cent by the year 2000. The beneficiaries were identified as 'the underprivileged women and men who had attended school and those who had relapsed into illiteracy' (ZAALIT, 1993). The campaign was designed to be implemented in phases starting with Lusaka, Western and Eastern Provinces. Later, it would be spread to North Western, Central and Southern Provinces. Then, finally the campaign would be spread to Luapula, Northern and Copperbelt Provinces. However, no time frame was fixed for any of these regions.

In 1992, the government established the Zambia National Alliance for the Advancement of Literacy (ZAALIT). The main goal of ZAALIT was to design and implement a campaign to eradicate adult illiteracy. By 1993, ZAALIT had established over 1,000 classes with an enrolment of 25,243 students (ZAALIT, 1993). However, like other previous campaigns ZAALIT was also faced with lack of adequate funds.

The government of the Republic of Zambia released the second policy document on education: Focus on Learning. The main thrust of Focus on Learning was the mobilization of resources for the development of formal education. Then in 1996, the final Draft of the Education Support Implementation Programme (ESIP) document, Investing in our People and the 1996 Educating Our Future were released. Both documents recognised the central importance of adult continuing education and literacy. Furthermore, both documents also acknowledged that adult continuing education faced serious problems of underfunding, lack of skilled personnel and transport, inadequate materials for learning and teaching and poor coordination. It was again noted that although there was potential for enormous growth in the number of students reached by adult continuing programmes, the capacity to sustain immediate and rapid growth did not exist (Ministry of Education, 1996).

### 3. Discussion

It is evident that population growth puts extra burdens on the capacity of African nations to meet the educational needs of people in general. Literacy education can be singled out as one such need that has not been availed to all the people who desperately need it. At independence, in Zambia, there were over 1 million illiterate adults, representing two thirds of the total population. In the year 2000, the Census of Population and Housing statistics did not show any better picture in as far as literacy is concerned.

The question that needs to be asked is: why has Zambia not done as well as Tanzania in eradicating illiteracy? What have been the problems in the fight against illiteracy in Zambia? This section describes the problems which have contributed to Zambia's failure to achieve high literacy rates. It starts by examining the achievements of previous literacy programmes and the problems that were experienced. After that it examines prospects that could help deliver better literacy education.

#### 3.1 Achievements and Problems

- i. First Basic Literacy Programme (1966-1970)

The main achievements of the First Basic Literacy Programme which ran from 1966 to 1970 can be seen in the number of participants that were involved in the programme. For five years the programme was able to sustain a good number of participants and volunteer teachers throughout the country thereby making literacy a major national concern. The other achievement was that the number of female participants was larger than that for male participants. This was a

good effort for a group that is always marginalized as shown in Table 1 below. During the five-year period, out of 65,887 participants in the programme, 90.07% were female while 9.92% were male.

**Table 1.** Enrolment Figures in Basic Literacy (1966-1970)

Year	Male Participants	Female Participants	Total
1966	457	4,107	4,564
1967	1,532	14,326	15,818
1968	1,083	9,742	10,825
1969	1,726	15,530	17,256
1970	1,739	15,645	17,385
Totals	6,537	59,350	65,887

*Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Services, Department for Social Development (1985). Mass Literacy and Welfare Programmes Background.*

It is also worth noting that a big programme like this one requires a lot of money. Fortunately, funding for the project was readily available.

On the other hand, there were a few lapses that were found in the programme. The first was that the contents of the primers had no connection with the social context and lacked an effective delivery system (Mulenga, 1991; Mwansa, 1993). The absence of a social context meant that the reading they learnt could not easily be applied or generalized to their real life situations. Even worse was the fact that the primers were covered so quickly that as soon as learning ended, the participants relapsed into illiteracy. Other problems facing the literacy programme included lack of supervision, problems of remunerating teachers, lack of an effective delivery system, lack of interest among literacy officers and lack of transport (Mulenga, 1991; Mutava, 1988). It was, therefore, recommended that the programme should be replaced with functional literacy. In addition, the programme would be transferred from the Ministry of Community Development to Municipal Councils and Prisons.

The mere recommendation of the phasing of the programme and its subsequent transfer to the Municipal Council and Prisons was not the right decision at all. What was required was for the government to examine the problems that affected the programme and find long lasting solutions. For example, problems of remunerating teachers could best be handled by government itself. Even after the transfer had been effected, the same government would still continue to bear the costs. But what is surprising also is the fact that whereas it was reported that funding for the literacy programme was adequate, there was still a problem of remunerating the Literacy Officers. Probably, this could have been the main reason why officers became disenchanted.

It may have been the right decision to give this programme to Municipal Council if the problem of transport was anything to go by. This is because Municipal Councils are centrally located and would therefore be able to cover shorter distances unlike when the programme was centrally planned and executed at national level. But one thing that was overlooked was that the trained literacy officers who would still be needed to carry out this work had lost interest. Similarly, the Municipal Council and Prisons would not have the capacity to supervise or oversee operations of a campaign for which they lacked qualified staff or were ill qualified themselves. In addition, if the delivery system had also been defective, then without the government taking corrective measures, Municipal Councils and Prisons could have performed poorly.

#### ii. Functional Literacy Programme

The Functional Literacy Programme which ran for two years recorded a few positive results. The programme improved crop yields especially maize and groundnuts and other people benefited from the knowledge they acquired. The second benefit was that functional literacy had been used as an entry point for organizing other related activities such as women's clubs and self-help projects (Mwansa, 2005). This gave rise to the formation of women club's and self-projects especially in the rural areas of the country.

However, this programme also faced many problems (Mulenga, 1991). Although the programme covered a big geographical area, the enrollments were disappointingly low. The number of female participants, just like the Basic Literacy Programme, was still higher than that for male participants. To illustrate the point, here are a few figures given in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Enrolment Figures for Functional Literacy (1971-1972)

Year	Male Participants	Female Participants	Total
1971	570	2,852	2,852
1972	362	1,456	1,818
1973	586	2,342	2,928

*Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Services, Department for Social Development (1985). Mass Literacy and Welfare Programmes Background.*

In addition, the budgetary allocation to the programme was rather low. The reduction in the budgetary allocation adversely affected the availability of inputs and resources such as books. For example, whereas in 1971 the programme was given K250, 000,000, in 1973 only K 100 000 000 was released. Thus, despite the strong verbal support provided by numerous policy statements, the government's financial commitment to the eradication of illiteracy had consistently been small.

Although Zambia has nine provinces where almost each of them has its 'staple' food and varying climatic conditions, the Functional Literacy Programme did not take this into consideration. Instead maize and groundnuts were the only crops introduced for study under the programme. Just to illustrate the point, Northern and Luapula Provinces, and to some extent Western Province, have cassava as their staple food. So for government to have chosen two 'foreign' crops for the programme when people's staple food and climate were at variance was not only a mistake but an imposition also. This was a classical example of predominance of national needs over community and individual needs (Mwansa, 2005). This factor contributed to low attendance.

### iii. Functional Literacy (Health and Nutrition) Programme

The period after 1978 was, however, characterized by a decline in the provision of adult education and literacy mainly due to reductions in budgetary allocations to adult education brought about by a severe economic crisis. The Ministries of Education and Health in collaboration with FAO and WHO introduced a health and nutrition component into the ongoing functional literacy programme in Central, Lusaka and Southern provinces. The project was well funded but when an evaluation was made, it was found that the primers were not relevant to the peculiarities of different regions. Further, in 1989 in a study made by UNESCO (Mwansa, 2005) two major factors were identified as responsible for the relapse into illiteracy. These were lack of continuing education, and lack of relevant instructional materials. In addition, the programme lacked human resources such as teachers (Hassan, 2006).

The problem of funds persisted from year to year and consequently affected the provision of literacy. The erosion of provision of adult literacy meant that field activities had to be reduced and consequently enrolments declined from 17,385 in 1970 to only 4,363 in 1989. This pathetic picture was made worse by the fact that efforts to build a supportive (post-literacy) environment for the newly literate members all but collapsed in the late 1980s (Mulenga, 2000).

### iv. The National Literacy Campaign (1990 – 2000)

The national literacy campaign in Zambia was initiated at a time when the economy was devastated by a long drawn economic recession compounded by heavy international monetary indebtedness to the International Monetary Fund (Akashambatwa-Lewanika, 1990). Thus even the creation of the National Literacy Unit did not bring increased resource allocation, to the literacy campaign, from the national treasury. In general, the compound of logistical, personnel and financial problems which had affected the basic and functional literacy programmes were inherited by the newly created Unit.

Lack of government financial outlay for the running of the campaign was a manifestation of a campaign created to depend on external resource support (Mwansa, 2005). The campaign was designed to be implemented on instalmentalist basis. Further, the time frame for the implementation was not fixed but would depend on the availability of funds. This approach is characteristic of a programme and not a campaign. A campaign is cautious in its planning but urgent in its execution because a long drawn campaign is likely to 'dissipate the national will' (Bhola as cited in Mwansa, 2005).

Having removed from the campaign the sense of urgency and limited by inadequate resource allocation, the Zambia Literacy Campaign was in November 1991 renamed the Zambia Alliance for Literacy (ZAALIT, 1993). Renaming the campaign this way not only muffled the sense of urgency and visibility of the campaign but sowed seeds for further bureaucratization of operations of literacy by a Unit without resources and under an expanded Committee without any legal powers (Mwansa, 2005). Further, on paper one of the objectives of the campaign was to provide linkage between

literacy, and non-formal and continuing education. This linkage did not have any specifications as to who would offer what type of education and from what level of linkage despite the large number of organizations that had evolved in the country. The Committee did not have any connection with the grassroots organizations.

Following the delinking of the administrative wing of the campaign from the Department for Social Development, the Literacy Unit did not have field staff of its own. Questions thus arose:

- i. Was the campaign's administrative unit going to recruit its own staff?
- ii. If it did, who was going to pay their salaries and where was the money going to come from?
- iii. What link was going to be provided between literacy work and ongoing activities such as home economics clubs which had been part of the Department for Social Development?

Examining what was happening, one is left with one possible explanation that the central problem of the campaign hinged on resource allocation and programme management. With resources, the delinking of literacy from the work of the Department for Social Development would not have arisen.

One other problem in the administration of literacy education to adults in Zambia is that there is a general feeling especially among the youth that adults' time for study is long gone. Their perception is that adults had their time and that the resources are better used on them. In fact, in situations where adults and young children are found learning together, there is ridicule and hostility towards the former. For example, a 50 year old, Clara Moyo of Chipata in Zambia with 11 children shares her experiences when she decided to go to school in her late 40s as follows:

“Because of my education, I am able to understand many things. But it is not easy because some fellow pupils always laugh at me when they see me, an old person, wearing a school uniform for girls.” (IRIN, 2009).

Adults, like Clara Moyo, have been forced to join formal schools because of the absence of appropriate infrastructure and educational materials for adult literacy in the country. No government ministry seems to be fully in charge of adult literacy although the Ministry of Education is supposed to be coordinating all the activities concerned with adult literacy. Sometimes there are mild differences or conflicts over the 'ownership' of adult literacy programmes, with the Ministry of Education assuming what it considers its natural role of providing most forms of education while the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services also feels adult literacy is under its jurisdiction.

Another problem facing literacy education concerns the objectives of the campaign. The goal of the 1990 National Literacy Campaign was to reduce illiteracy to 12% by the year 2000. The objectives of the campaign were to: a. Mobilize resources; b. Stimulate awareness; c. Organise basic (reading and writing) and functional literacy (nutrition, health, child care, home management); d. Provide skills to enable people participate effectively in national development; e. Promote awareness of women's rights, and finally, f. Raise people's standard of living.

In my view all the above-listed objectives apart from objective number 3 were irrelevant to the campaign because none of them addressed the problem of illiteracy. None of the objectives or a combination of them could help in the eradication of illiteracy. A campaign must not have too many objectives but should have few so that they are more focused on issues that will help solve the problem at hand. The goal of the 1990 Campaign probably could not be achieved according to the plan partly because of too many broad and abstract objectives which did not squarely address the problem. If anything, these objectives worked like distracters to the campaign.

While Zambia has made strides in promoting basic education, with an estimated 90 per cent of children said to be enrolled in primary schools at the moment, there seems to be no deliberate policy targeted at improving elderly people's access to education. And this probably explains why the statistics on illiteracy in Zambia have never been impressive by any standard (Mulenga, 2007). The lack of a formal policy framework for literacy education has had an adverse effect on the provision of literacy education in Zambia. The tendency to sideline adult basic education at the government policy level is also seen in a number of other African countries.

In the case of Zambia, Mulenga has noted that:

Continuing education is a Cinderella department functioning at the margins of public and ministry concerns, operating with minimal funds, physically carrying out its activities in [a] structure ... a structure just within the perimeter fence of ministry, but almost far out of the marginalization of adult continuing education. Although there have been numerous official statements [on] adult education and literacy by the government, there has been no consistent and coordinated policy on adult education and literacy. This is partly due to the initial colonial



neglect by the government, but also reflects the lack of a coordinated “policy lobby” by those involved in funding and providing adult education (Mulenga, 2000:180-181).

Lack of policy on adult education and literacy has also been acknowledged by the Minister of Education. According to Geoffrey Lungwangwa, ‘the government would have a national adult literacy policy in place soon (IRIN, 2009). In the 2008 national budget, government allocated 15 per cent of the US \$ 3.4 billion budget to the recruitment of more teachers and construction of classrooms for basic and secondary schools, but no funds were allocated to improve adult literacy. According to Jennipher Chiwela, an education specialist, the biggest problem is lack of commitment by the political leadership to effective adult literacy programmes (IRIN, 2009). In the absence of a policy on adult literacy, it is difficult to know who is responsible for what, where learning is supposed to take place and so on. This lack of coordination leads to lack of coordination and funding for materials, tutor training and learner support. But on paper, the Ministry of Education is supposed to coordinate all the literacy educational programmes.

Funding of literacy programmes and campaigns has also been a very big problem in Zambia. Lack of sufficient funding has been cited as one of the problems that contributed to failure in literacy in one way or the other. For example, all the other problems cited in most of the campaigns such as lack of transport, lack of interest among literacy officers and delay in paying them were all linked to funding of the project. Comprehensive planning is needed for such major assignments as campaigns against illiteracy. A piecemeal approach to such important issues not only frustrates the people directly involved (as well as volunteers) but does raise issues of credibility of the results obtained.

It has also been noted that another major problem that has affected effective delivery of literacy education is the relevance of primers that have been used. Most of them have been described as inappropriate and irrelevant. This is a very serious problem to the students because not only do they fail to get the right information but after a while they are forced to relapse into illiteracy too. If the primers are the right ones and students have been guided well and sufficiently, effective use of what has been learnt could help adults avoid relapsing into illiteracy. Similarly, various other groups are also involved in literacy provision including church organizations, International NGOs, and local community-based organizations and NGOs. These initiatives are of uneven value, often limited in scope and not coordinated. Their instructional materials are of questionable relevance (Feldberg & Tenga, 2007).

#### **4. Prospects**

The prospect of improving literacy levels in Zambia is very high. If what the former Minister of Education, Geoffrey Lungwangwa, said is anything to go by, then we would have 100 % literacy rate in the next one year or so in Zambia. The Minister told a visiting Communist Party of Cuba Central Committee Member, Dr. Puente that Zambia intended to eradicate literacy in one year. The Minister’s hope was most probably based on the rapid expansion of the formal school system especially at the lower levels. The expansion of schooling continues to be a powerful determinant of the spread of literacy around the world (Education for All Global Monitoring Report, 2006a). Zambia is witnessing a rapid education expansion especially at basic education level. There are also plans that as from next year, children will not be writing grade 7 qualifying examinations to proceed to grade 8 or junior high school level. This will ensure that every able bodied child has access to at least the first 9 years of schooling.

The formal school system can be used as an effective tool to eradicate illiteracy especially if basic education is made compulsory by law. Nine years of schooling should help curb illiteracy. While access to school is a key determinant for literacy acquisition, equally imperative and important is to provide children with quality education. On the other hand, adult literacy should not be neglected at a time statistics have been improving. The adult rate slightly increased from 66 per cent to 67.2 between 1990 and 2000 (MOE, 2008). This is one group that can easily be left in the cold because it does not have its own infrastructure while staff usually offers literacy lessons on a voluntary basis.

Literacy education could have a very bright future if government and other stakeholders took a number of measures. These measures can range from management of both human and financial resources to mobilization of people. First, as a developing nation we may lack financial resources but human resource is readily available. Most school leavers do not have jobs even long after they have completed college studies. During the campaign against illiteracy, these school leavers can be engaged to teach illiterates. But what is important is for government to ensure that a monthly honorarium is paid to the school leavers. This will avoid a repeat of what was happening in the previous campaigns where even full time literacy staff of the ministry could not be remunerated.

However, some caution must be taken. It is clear from studies of literacy campaigns that both the commitment and skills of literacy promoters are very important. Enthusiasm is not enough. It is not that straight forward to facilitate learner participation in dialogue and discussion. Certain skills are needed to put across ideas and so on. Many of the

literacy workers are young (mostly between 18 and 25 in the successful Botswana campaign). This means that they need not be automatically accepted or appreciated (Graham-Brown, 1991). But what is important is to pay them when they are doing a good job to keep them going.

Conventional teachers can also be effectively used as 'literacy teachers' and also work hand in hand, if not supervise, the school leavers. The use of teachers is very important because they are already trained professionally to teach. Other than that teachers are distributed all over the country wherever there is a school. This means that the whole country will be covered more effectively. The government stands to gain in that the exercise will cover the whole country at once unlike in the past. Secondly, the government will spend less in terms of transport which previously used to be a problem. Teachers will be able to teach in their communities with a few exceptions, which may also not cost a lot. Because of this added responsibility, teachers will need to be paid. Considering the low salaries that teachers get, their engagement in this national event and subsequent remuneration should be an added incentive.

There has also been an emphasis on developing appropriate materials. In order to ensure that the primers are relevant to the participants, every effort must be made to involve not only the literacy officers under the Ministry of Community Development but the Curriculum Development Centre under the Ministry of Education also. The Curriculum Development Centre is a body that evaluates the curriculum and curriculum materials in Zambia from grade 1 to 12. For this reason, it is a competent body that can be part of the experts to assess the suitability of the primers. As much as possible, let there be a deliberate policy to make functional literacy a reality by taking into account the social context of people where primers will be used. For example, if an area is predominantly a fishing area, primers must include topics on fish farming, effective conservation methods, good fishing methods, etc. Literacy education must have a real meaning in people's lives.

The state can get better results if it ensures that for every literacy programme introduced, there are follow-ups. In the past, following a short spell of learning coupled with irrelevant primers, most participants almost as soon as they had stopped learning relapsed into illiteracy. As Graham-Brown (1991) suggests, once people achieve basic literacy, whatever its precise form, the process creates further demands for post-literacy education, whether to 'catch up' on missed formal education, or to develop organizational or practical skills. This situation can be reversed if once a group has finished learning, there is already a post-literacy programme planned for a specific period. In addition, the post-literacy programmes should not only focus on what was learnt previous but should also introduce new lessons that should not only excite the participants but also enable them to move a step further. This should go a long way in improving retention of participants.

While almost all governments have explicit formal education policies, far fewer have adult education literacy policies and there is often a lack of coordination across different ministries and providers. This is the situation that is obtaining in Zambia. There are two ministries involved in literacy programmes. These are Education and Community Development. However, the Ministry of Education is the one that is mandated to guide education delivery at all levels, and is responsible for Schools for Continuing Education, Educational Broadcasting Services and the Curriculum Development Centre – all important for literacy work. The absence of an adult literacy policy has led to lack of proper direction, even for the few civic organizations and community volunteer organizations that attempt to raise the education levels of the 'little' educated (Mulenga, 2008).

Finally, a research on issues relating to literacy education should be conducted from time to time. Topics that can be researched include: establishing factors that discourage or encourage participation in literacy programmes and remedies to these, factors, other than inactivity of recipients, leading to relapses into illiteracy, what topics are of greater use in people's lives, what attracts people in great numbers (some kind of a needs assessment), etc. Through research, a number of sound decisions can be made and help in improving the delivery of literacy education in Zambia.

## 5. Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this paper to illustrate that the absence of a contextual definition of literacy or illiteracy has raised some doubt on the magnitude of the problem and how much success has been achieved through various literacy programmes and projects. However, the moment a more definite and acceptable definition is found, the problem of illiteracy will be given the attention it deserves. This is the more reason a suggestion has been made that a national examination or exercises can be set for children and adults alike to ascertain their proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy skills. In this way, any country's claims of attaining a given literacy rate would be more standardized, meaningful and appreciated.

The paper has further shown how the diffused nature of the objectives of literacy campaigns, unclear policy on literacy education, government's lack of financial preparedness and political will for the campaigns have all contributed to government's underperformance in its fight against illiteracy. Literacy, it has been noted, demands greater commitment by government in terms of resources and development of institutional structures and mechanisms to facilitate the development of a coordinated and sustainable programme. The history of literacy campaigns in Zambia has revealed that government has been failing to create a sense of urgency in its fight against illiteracy. For example, the planning for the 1990 campaign started 6 years earlier before it could be launched. Was there any sense of urgency? A sense of urgency can certainly generate sympathy from the general populace and culminate into popular support and participation. One major weakness has been inadequate resources which have contributed to government's failure to sustain mass action – and we all know too well that without any follow-ups, the literate ones easily relapse into illiteracy. The persistent trend of people relapsing into illiteracy must also be a source of worry. It begs the question about the quality of literacy education in Zambia.

However, government can eradicate illiteracy in a shorter period if basic education is made compulsory and the quality of education is improved upon. The adults can in a similar way be catered for using other avenues such as non-government organizations, Churches and at Trade Unions at places of work. If adults cannot share school facilities for their learning because of the imminent friction between them and their children, then government must step in and ensure that decent buildings are secured for such noble undertakings.

Finally, it is rather difficult to say that education and mass literacy in Zambia have been fashioned for political ends rather than for political liberation and autonomy of individuals. A more elaborate examination of this assumption could yield sufficient information for a concrete and precise conclusion.

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