

Post-literacy for refugees and IDPs in Sudan

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Thousands of Eritreans, many of them second- or third-generation exiles, live in refugee camps in the northeast of Sudan. Millions of southern Sudanese have fled to the north where IDP settlements are scattered around urban outskirts.

Both groups of displaced people lack adequate education provision. Refugees and IDPs alike are excluded from formal education and employment opportunities due to language barriers, gender/ethnic prejudice and lack of basic skills.

In the Arab World illiteracy eradication programmes have traditionally focused on schools. Adults who had missed out on schooling were given a second chance and exposed to classrooms, rows of desks, teachers, text books and teaching methods drawn from the pedagogy of teaching children. Mass mobilisation campaigns – enrolling illiterates in literacy classes for a short period – were characterised by a high rate of relapse back into illiteracy, due to poor post-literacy activities.

More recent programmes have been influenced by ‘andragogy’ – the theory of adult learning that sees adults as self-directed and able to take decisions. Moving away from the classroom and from one-size-fits-all approaches to adult literacy, andragogical approaches focus more on the process and less on the content.¹

As NGOs and the Sudanese government become increasingly aware of the problems confronting literacy programmes and the need to develop appropriate post-literacy strategies, the Sudan Open Learning Organisation (SOLO) is playing a pivotal role. Set up in 1984 by the UK-based International Extension College (IEC), SOLO has been working with NGOs and displaced communities to promote and deliver a range of non-formal and open learning programmes. Through face-to-face adult

literacy classes, SOLO has reached over 6,000 learners.

Despite initial successes, barriers to learning still remained. There was no follow up to the literacy classes, no ‘next step’. Once literacy courses were over, people were considered ‘literate’ and provision ceased. The profound lack of reading and writing materials for the newly ‘literate’ and their social exclusion made it virtually impossible to apply their new skills.

Confidence-building literacy

In response IEC and SOLO have pioneered the ‘Building Literacy in Sudan with SOLO Press’ project (BLSP) project. BLSP is a post-literacy project which enables newly literate refugees and IDPs to write and publish their own stories in the form of books, magazines and newsletters. BLSP seeks to encourage displaced readers to read on a daily basis. From modest beginnings SOLO Press has become a fully-fledged commercial educational publisher generating income to provide SOLO with a more secure base to sustain its education activities.

BLSP has created 28 ‘circles’ among refugees and IDPs with some 1,800

members, the vast majority of whom combine circle membership with additional community activity – building drainage systems, carrying out income-generating activities and awareness raising. On an individual basis, people are now writing letters to family members, reading to their children, reading newspapers and teaching other family members to read and write.

SOLO has recruited Community Liaison Workers (CLWs) from the camps and settlements and trained them in selecting participants, facilitating circle development and encouraging participants to write, read and edit their own stories. CLWs were initially encouraged to gather participants in circles, which were to focus on reading and writing activities at prescribed times and venues. This had a semblance of unintended formality about it which seemed consistent with the early demands from some participants (especially those in urban areas) for a more formal, classroom-type of ‘instructional literacy’ approach with certification of competence upon ‘completion’.

Samira, Karkora refugee camp

The circle has helped her to feel confident while exchanging ideas with friends. She says also that friends show each other how to improve handwriting and other skills. She is showing her neighbours what she has learnt in the circle and helps them to learn.



IEC writing circle

It was a slow process to consolidate circle numbers, expand the types of reading, writing and discussion-based activities undertaken and generate outputs which would promote an intrinsic motivational energy and thus defuse the demands for something more 'formal'. However, once ideas generated by the circles resulted in published stories and community-based sensitisation campaigns, the interest and motivation of participants and potential participants grew dramatically. The desire for formality and certification died a natural death, overtaken by the obvious benefits of activities that led to enhanced individual and community self-esteem.

The volume and range of writing produced in the groups has been impressive, with hundreds of personal stories already written in several languages. A comprehensive commissioning process enables project staff and beneficiaries to choose which stories go through for publication. A new spirit of self-confidence, motivation and coordination can be detected. This form of applied confidence-building literacy is empowerment, rather than simply a process of empowering.

In recent years enthusiastic and visionary first-generation circle participants (known as Group Leaders) have led expansion groups while still retaining membership of their original circles. The range of activities within such groups has grown to include: editing, designing reading materials, participatory rural appraisal, community work, income generating, organising lectures, PRA-related information collection and distribution of literacy publications. The list of activities continues to grow.

Participant groups, while still clearly active in writing and reading, have become much more holistically 'communicative' and 'developmental'. Community leaders and participants themselves talk about the 'dignity' that group activities bring them. Individuals are learning, sometimes for the first time, skills of cooperation and organisation, problem identification and planning.

Challenges and discoveries

A danger for all post-literacy projects is that participant expectations rise

beyond the capacity of the project to cater for them. The challenge is for the participants themselves to creatively meet these expectations. The groups have grown and developed from their own energies, fuelled by their own skill bases and vision. These, in turn, have become an appropriate foundation on which to build other integrated development initiatives, including income-generating projects that are highly likely to succeed. This contrasts with the more common scenario of a development agency 'creating' a development initiative (e.g. an income-generating or nutrition project) and imposing it on a 'group' formed for the purpose. This is highly likely to fail.

Ashirim, Dar El Salam IDP settlement

"SOLO has improved my life and in turn others' lives."

Since becoming a Community Liaison Worker, Ashirim has become confident. He is facilitating circles in post-literacy and also mobilising community change, from water drainage to cleanliness to health and wider educational activities. He is committed to changing people's lives. He explains that his wife was illiterate, but she is now participating in the circle. He has brought experts to talk to the circle about health and educational issues and is making relationships with other organisations

The methodology employed by this project has seen highly organised, focused and competent groups emerge, which have identified their own needs and developed their own management structures to suit their needs. Groups and communities are acquiring social and financial capital. The challenge for the project now is how to work with the potential partners who may provide financial capital.

The project is confronted with a range of dilemmas and questions:

- Will the circles be able to survive in their current form? How will they evolve?

- Should we be worried about seeking stability of participant membership, or accept a much more fluid kind of membership or attachment by the various categories of participants?
- How will the CLWs evolve?
- How can the range of more 'integrated development' activities expand while still allowing a focus on facilitating the depth and frequency of reading and writing experiences for participants?
- Are we achieving applied empowerment - written work with social consciousness and awareness?
- Will different contexts see different groups of participants surviving and developing in their own, unique ways?
- How should we feel if groups move in entirely different directions with the use of their applied literacy?
- Does the aim of the community movement remain the same as the project?
- If we are a project, and if there is a process or system of 'post-literacy', when does 'completion' come?

BLSP is a model with its own momentum, a momentum which is created and owned by the communities themselves. The ownership by participants of the process is due to the fact that their words are transformed into tangible, published and widely distributed texts. Their voices, their words, are 'out there' for people like them who previously lacked access to the world of reading.

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1. For more information on the theory of andragogy, see www.andragogy.net