



United Nations  
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Cultural Organization

# Sustaining Literacy in Africa

## Developing a Literate Environment

Peter Easton

EMERGING TRENDS IN YOUTH AND ADULT LITERACY



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# Foreword

Literacy has never been more necessary for development. It is key to communication and learning, and fundamental for active participation in today's knowledge-based societies. Without literacy, people are excluded from access to, and the use of, knowledge, and even from the most basic information they may need for daily life.

We live in a world challenged by increasing socio-economic inequality and global crises over food, water, energy and man-made disasters. In this era of stark disparities, literacy brings opportunities to those who have been disenfranchised, marginalized and neglected; neo-literates acquire greater capacity and skills to raise their income levels, build sustainable livelihoods, benefit from health and educational services, engage more broadly in the public arena and transform their lives. Indeed, literacy is vital for securing meaningful access to political, economic and cultural opportunities. This is particularly the case for women, for whom lack of literacy skills multiplies the effects of discrimination.

However, despite the global recognition of the importance of literacy, there are still 774 million youth and adults who lack basic literacy skills, of which two-thirds are women. Despite some gains made globally, literacy progress has been uneven across countries and within a country or a population. With the overall population growth, the number of non-literates is even increasing in several countries. It is therefore urgent to ensure that countries increase their commitment to youth and adult literacy through sound policies, supported by feasible plans and strategies, carried out and monitored by efficient institutions and backed by adequate funding.

This publication, entitled *Sustaining Literacy in Africa: Developing a Literate Environment*, is the first of a series of publications on youth and adult literacy that brings together commissioned studies and research as well as papers from

the six UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy held in 2007 and 2008 in the context of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). The aim of this series is to distil information on trends in youth and adult literacy for decision-makers and other key stakeholders. Our hope is that it will prompt further reflection, stimulate change and inspire action in this key area.

I would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our gratitude to the governments that hosted the Global and Regional Conferences – the United States of America for hosting the two Global events and its financial support for the production of this volume, Qatar for hosting the Arab States regional conference, China for the conference in East Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific, Mali for Africa, India for South, South West and Central Asia, Azerbaijan for Europe and Mexico for Latin America and the Caribbean. For making this piece of work available, I am also grateful to Peter B. Easton, a renowned scholar who has provided rich insights based on his vast experience in the field of literacy.

This specific publication contributes, in the critical context of Africa, to the conceptual development of the notion of the literate environment, which has been increasingly used but has been explained far less. It brings rich knowledge and insights about literate environments, highlighting inter-related issues such as its definitions, previous undertakings, methods of assessment as well as interactions between the supply and demand sides of environments.

I hope that it will be of great interest to policy- and decision-makers, planners and programme managers, practitioners and researchers as well as to those working in government departments, international organizations, civil society and community associations worldwide. It will also be a contribution to strengthening our collective efforts towards the attainment of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals, to which literacy is central, by 2015. It is only with rich literate environments that truly literate societies can be developed.



Qian Tang  
Assistant Director-General for Education

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I would also like to extend my gratitude to UNESCO staff, in particular to the Section for Literacy and Non-formal Education and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Mark Richmond, Margarete Sachs-Israel, Clinton Robinson and Sabine Kube generated and developed this publication, in collaboration with Ashley Stepanek. Mmantsetsa Marope, Venkata SubbaRao Ilapavuluri, Mari Yasunaga, and Antoine Cardey gave final shape to the volume. Sayeeda Rahman and Theophania Chavatzia reviewed the draft through the gender lens.

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I owe great gratitude to my wife and family whose support was essential for carrying out the considerable circumnavigation that this and related work has required over the years.

# List of Acronyms

ACALAN	African Academy of Language
AFP	Agence France Presse
ANCEFA	African National Conference on Education for All
ANFE	Adult and Non-Formal Education
ARED	Associates in Research on Education and Development
AU	African Union
BBC	British Broadcasting Service
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
BREDA	Regional Bureau of UNESCO for Education in Dakar
CBBM	Community-Based Budget Monitoring
CHELLO	Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation
CILSS	Comité Inter-Etat de Lutte Contre la Sécheresse au Sahel
CLUSA	Cooperative League of the United States
CONFINTEA VI	The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education
DFID	Department for International Development
EFA	Education for All
ELLCO	Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation
ESA	Education Sector Assessment
EWLP	Experimental World Literacy Programme
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GMR	(EFA) Global Monitoring Report

GRALE	Global Report on Adult Learning and Education
HRD	Human Resource Development
ICT	Information and communication technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IRE	International Review of Education
IWAP	Integrated Women's Empowerment Programme
LAMP	Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme
LCB	Local Capacity Building
LIFE	Literacy Initiative for Empowerment
LLL	Lifelong Learning
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MENAFN	Middle East North Africa Financial Network
MSD	Manpower Supply and Demand
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NLS	New Literacy Studies
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
OHCHR	
PBET	Post-Basic Education and Training
PRAESA	Project for Alternative Education in South Africa
REFLECT	Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UIE	UNESCO Institute for Education (former UIL)
UIL	UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNLD

United Nations Literacy Decade

USAID

United States Agency for International Development

WEF

World Education Forum

WHO

World Health Organization

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# Introduction

This book is devoted to examining a critical but largely hidden dimension of Education For All: the social circumstances under which people are both motivated to acquire literacy of different kinds and are actually able to put these skills to use and to retain them. Such circumstances are often discussed under the heading of a “literate environment” and the concern in the text to follow is not only to analyze the practical meaning of that term but equally to explore how such environments may be created and sustained in regions still struggling with some of the basic necessities of life.

The different chapters of the text examine successively previous literature and experience regarding literate environments, methods for assessing them, their current status on the African continent, potentials on the “supply side” of the issue (i.e. provision of reading materials and post-literacy resources), those on the “demand side” (i.e. development of real opportunities for remunerative or empowering uses of literate competence) and strategies for building literate environments at the intersection of these two forces.

Like any similar effort, the development of this book has involved the contributions of many people besides the author and it represents the culmination of a series of life experiences in which others played critical and often leading roles. Its gestation began in the 1960s with the years I spent in Niger (West Africa) on the design and administration of adult literacy programmes and then in efforts to couple them with arenas for application of newly literate skills in agricultural marketing, health and continuing education. I owe an untold debt to my many colleagues and friends from Niger who provided the inspiration for this work, and no less a one to co-workers in the Ministries of Education and Agriculture of the neighbouring

Republic of Mali where I sojourned in the mid-1970s to help coordinate an evaluation of the functional literacy programme there.

A first opportunity to reflect on the fruit of this experience was provided by the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (now Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie) and the UNESCO Institute of Education (now the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning), which offered me several occasions in the 1980s to help train African educational personnel in evaluation of literacy and post-literacy endeavours. Over the following decade, an extended research project with the Club du Sahel affiliated to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Comité Inter-Etat de Lutte Contre la Sécheresse au Sahel (CILSS) on local capacity building in five West African countries, carried out with excellent researchers from each and the support of staff in the Paris-based Club du Sahel and the CILSS in Ouagadougou, enriched the store of data and experience on the possible applications of literacy in local African environments and their linkages with other sectors of development. This episode was followed in turn by a tour of duty as a consultant at the World Bank in the early years of the last decade to propose policy for better articulation of literacy and other development sectors and then by research commissioned for UIL and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) to address directly the challenge of developing literate environments in preparation for the fourth biennial of the ADEA held in Libreville, Gabon in 2006 (ADEA, 2009). The material produced for that meeting prompted the offices of UNESCO Paris to ask that I draw up related advice for the mid-term report of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD), which – thanks both to the patience and to the wise counsel of staff there – finally matured into the present book.

One oddity of the following text merits mention here in the introduction. I confess to being addicted to African proverbs, having lived for many years in areas of West Africa where they were not only prevalent and highly poetic, but also very helpful in conveying ideas about evaluation, planning and community development that might have otherwise seemed quite alien to listeners. Such expressions consequently appear frequently

in the pages to follow, generally in the original with an English translation. The only problem this really poses is a potential one of equity: I am by far most familiar with proverbs in the Hausa language, the primary mode of communication and something of a lingua franca in the regions where I lived longest, and secondarily with those in Bambara, the most widespread language in neighbouring Mali. There are, however, equally rich traditions in other languages throughout the rest of the continent. I have picked up a number of them from sojourns in those latitudes or from reading, and I include several particularly expressive ones. Overall, though, the selection is unavoidably biased by my own experience in Africa. I welcome readers' suggestions of better samples from other traditions, hoping that this might inspire the way we perceive and deal with circumstances in other parts of the world.

In an area as recently and scantily researched as this one, we are obliged, to a considerable extent, to build the road as we travel. The reader's indulgence is humbly requested for any oversights and for occasional inconsistencies in statistical data – always a moving target; they should in any case have little effect on the strength of the underlying argument.

# Chapter 1

## Defining Literate Environments

**T**he terms 'literacy environment' and 'literate environment' are not new, but they have acquired increasing currency in adult and non-formal education circles over the last decade as a means of designating the contextual conditions and support required – both locally and externally – to make literacy fully sustainable. The increase in usage seems to spring from a pair of circumstances prevalent both in Africa and in other areas of the world where levels of human development remain well below people's hopes and needs:

- Persistent problems of low attainment in literacy programmes and frequent relapse into illiteracy among beneficiaries due in good part to lack of usage of their new skills.
- Increasing recognition across sectors that development itself is a learning process and that literacy is a critical tool for more effective local assumption of responsibility.

International agencies regularly maintain that acquisition and progressive refinement of literate skills by broadening strata of the population are an essential means for promoting local development, as well as a fundamental human right (e.g. Richmond et al., 2008). If so, it is critically important that we understand *why* more progress has not so far been made on this front and *what related responsibilities* must be assumed by the varied actors involved in development work – educators and non-educators alike – for that to happen. And if developing literate environments is an important piece of the puzzle, then it is high time to take the measure of that task. This book is devoted to considering just such issues and to examining the role that better development of literate environments in Africa may play in making Education For All (EFA) more of a reality.

To begin with, however, the term 'literate environment' itself needs some explanation, because it is something of a neologism as well as a notion patently constructed to throw new light on the dynamics of Education For All, rather than a condition visible to the naked eye. Since increasing amounts are now written about literacy and literate environments, my approach in the pages to follow will be to start with what is already being said and then to examine what more we may need to understand.

## Official perspectives

The most relevant official documentation on literacy-related matters consists of the texts, studies and declarations of the Education For All movement itself. They begin with the original Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO, 1990) but have multiplied over the last two decades to include the varied documents listed in Table 1 below. Laid end to end, these texts in fact tell a story of evolving emphasis and increasing recognition of literate environment issues, if not entire clarity concerning them.

**Table 1: List of official EFA and MDG documents consulted**

Author	Document	Date	Internet availability
UNESCO	<i>World Declaration on Education For All</i>	1990	<a href="http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/en-conf/Jomtien%20Declaration%20eng.shtm">http://www.unesco.org/education/wef/en-conf/Jomtien%20Declaration%20eng.shtm</a>
UN General Assembly	<i>United Nations Millennium Declaration</i>	2000a	<a href="http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm">http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm</a>
UNESCO	<i>Final Report of the Dakar World Education Forum (WEF)</i>	2000b	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121117e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/121117e.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>Education For All: Meeting our collective commitments. The Dakar Framework for Action.</i>	2000c	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/1211147e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001211/1211147e.pdf</a>
UN General Assembly	<i>Declaration of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD)</i>	2002a	<a href="http://www.un-documents.net/a56r116.htm">http://www.un-documents.net/a56r116.htm</a>
UN General Assembly	<i>UNLD International Plan of Action</i>	2002b	<a href="http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/f0b0f2edfeb55b03ec965501810c9b6cacion+plan+English.pdf">http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/f0b0f2edfeb55b03ec965501810c9b6cacion+plan+English.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002: Is the world on track?</i>	2002c	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001290/129053e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001290/129053e.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>Aspects of literacy assessment: Topics and issues from the UNESCO Expert Meeting</i>	2004a	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001401/140125eo.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001401/140125eo.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>The plurality of literacy and its implications for policies and programmes</i>	2004b	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf</a>

Author	Document	Date	Internet availability
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006: Literacy for life</i>	2005	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001416/141639e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001416/141639e.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong foundations: Early childhood care and education</i>	2006	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001477/147794e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001477/147794e.pdf</a>
UIL	<i>Literacy Initiative For Empowerment (LIFE). 3<sup>rd</sup> edition</i>	2007a	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001411/141177e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001411/141177e.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008: Education For All by 2015: Will we make it?</i>	2007b	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001547/154743e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001547/154743e.pdf</a>
Richmond et al./ UNESCO	<i>The global literacy challenge: A profile of youth and adult literacy at the mid-point of the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003 – 2012</i>	2008a	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001631/163170e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001631/163170e.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009: Overcoming inequality: Why governance matters</i>	2008b	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001776/177683e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001776/177683e.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2010: Reaching the marginalized</i>	2009a	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606E.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001866/186606E.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)</i>	2009b	<a href="http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIL/confintea/pdf/GRALE/grale_en.pdf">http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIL/confintea/pdf/GRALE/grale_en.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>United Nations Literacy Decade: International strategic framework for action</i>	2009c	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001840/184023e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001840/184023e.pdf</a>
UIL	<i>Advancing literacy: Literacy Initiative for Empowerment. A review of LIFE 2006-2009</i>	2009e	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001850/185054e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001850/185054e.pdf</a>
UIS	<i>The next generation of literacy statistics: Implementing the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP)</i>	2009f	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001850/185054e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001850/185054e.pdf</a>

Author	Document	Date	Internet availability
World Bank	<i>Global Monitoring Report 2010: The MDGs after the crisis</i>	2010	<a href="http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGLOMONREP2010/Resources/6911301-1271698910928/GMR2010WEB.pdf">http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGLOMONREP2010/Resources/6911301-1271698910928/GMR2010WEB.pdf</a>
UNESCO	<i>EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011: The hidden crisis: Armed conflict and education</i>	2011a	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001907/190743e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001907/190743e.pdf</a>
Wagner/IIEP	<i>Smaller, quicker, cheaper: Improving learning assessments for developing countries</i>	2011b	<a href="http://www.iiep.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Info_Services_Publications/pdf/2011/Wagner_secured.pdf">http://www.iiep.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Info_Services_Publications/pdf/2011/Wagner_secured.pdf</a>
UNESCO/Bangkok	<i>Creating and sustaining literate environments</i>	2011c	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002146/214653e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002146/214653e.pdf</a>
World Bank	<i>Global Monitoring Report 2011: Improving the odds of achieving the MDGs</i>	2011d	<a href="http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821387009">http://issuu.com/world.bank.publications/docs/9780821387009</a>
UIS	<i>A place to learn: Lessons from research on learning environments</i>	2012a	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002154/215468e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002154/215468e.pdf</a>
UIL	<i>Global LIFE Mid-term Evaluation Report 2006-2011: Looking Forward with LIFE</i>	2012b	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002151/215158e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002151/215158e.pdf</a>
World Bank	<i>Global Monitoring Report 2012: Food prices, nutrition, and the Millennium Development Goals</i>	2012c	<a href="http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1327948020811/8401693-1327957211156/8402494-1334239337250/Full_Report.pdf">http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1327948020811/8401693-1327957211156/8402494-1334239337250/Full_Report.pdf</a>
UIL	<i>2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Rethinking Literacy</i>	2013	<a href="http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002224/222407e.pdf">http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002224/222407e.pdf</a>
UN General Assembly	<i>Implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade (A/68/201)</i>	2013	<a href="http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/408/99/PDF/N1340899.pdf?OpenElement">http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/408/99/PDF/N1340899.pdf?OpenElement</a>

## Sketching in the background

As has often been noted (e.g. Oxenham, 2006; Torres, 1994, 2008), the original Jomtien Declaration on Education For All issued in 1990 and the strategy adopted for implementing it over the last decade of the century

focused predominantly on primary education and paid relatively little attention to adult literacy or out-of-school learning. Low levels of literacy among young people and adults were in fact one of the main concerns cited in the Declaration itself and 'reducing adult illiteracy' figured among the six principal goals adopted; but while the Jomtien conference set attaining universal primary education coverage by 2000 as a central goal and benchmark of the movement, the specification of levels of adult literacy and the precise means for achieving those levels were left to individual countries.

However, the 1990s were a period of very mixed progress on the EFA front and of growing awareness that its goals could not be addressed solely through formal schooling. Both fulfillment of financial commitments to the campaign and coverage of the school-age population across developing countries fell well short of the pace needed to achieve the targets set in Jomtien (UNESCO, 2002: 96–97). As a consequence, the Dakar World Education Forum, held to mark the end of the campaign's first decade and the beginning of a new millennium, reset the target date for universal primary education coverage to 2015, added a 50% reduction in illiteracy rates as one of the explicit objectives of the international movement, and broadened the focus of EFA to include other modes of educational delivery. It also re-centered the theme of EFA on the spread of sustainable literacy, however that competence might be acquired. Reports on the Dakar forum credit it with having thus defined a 'renewed vision of literacy'. Yet there remained relatively little clarity about just how the new tactics were to work (Torres, 2001).

With the approach of the new millennium, the United Nations General Assembly took action to refine targets, revise timelines and update tactics in two areas of major concern to the international community: first, overall objectives for human development, articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (or 'MDGs'); and, second, plans for achieving the broadened literacy aspirations enunciated in Dakar. Eight Millennium Development Goals were adopted by the summit of world leaders held at UN headquarters in New York in September 2000, including, as one of this core set, the revised Jomtien target: 'Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.' Shortly thereafter

the United Nations General Assembly (2002a) proclaimed a 'Literacy Decade' (2003–2012) that would be devoted to spurring progress toward the newly broadened goals; and the organization issued an International Plan of Action (2002b) designed to chart the way forward. At the same time, UNESCO began to publish yearly Global Monitoring Reports (GMR) on the progress of EFA, the first (UNESCO, 2002) tellingly sub-titled, 'Is the World on Track?' Meanwhile, the World Bank launched – on the heels of the Monterrey Conference – a Fast Track Initiative dedicated to expediting access of developing countries to the funding and support that accelerated accomplishment of EFA and MDG objectives would require (World Bank, 2004).

By the middle of that decade, though, and thanks in part to the monitoring stimulated by the GMRs, it became evident that the pace of progress toward the goal of a 50% reduction in illiteracy was still insufficient to ensure its achievement by the extended deadline of 2015, let alone before the end of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) in 2012, and that accomplishment of universal primary education within the same timeframe was equally problematic. Strategies, procedures and funding all remained less than adequate to the task. To sharpen the focus on the proclaimed common denominator of EFA, the 2006 GMR (UNESCO, 2005) was devoted to the theme 'Literacy for Life' and UNESCO adopted a strategy – the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) – meant to frame the decade remaining before 2015 as a period of major commitment to realizing that goal, spearheaded by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL, 2007a). Not long thereafter UNESCO issued a revised 'International Strategic Framework for Action' for the UNLD (2009e), by now two-thirds transpired; and UIL published a Mid-Term Review of the LIFE initiative and a new prescription for the way forward (2009). In the meantime, hopes for achievement on the primary education front were likewise moderated: the 2008 GMR was titled *Education For All by 2015: Will we make it?* (UNESCO, 2007).

In short, the last decade has seen at one and the same time a modification of the timeline for EFA goals, a broadening of their interpretation, a revision of strategies to accomplish them, and an intensification of efforts to improve

literacy rates – all factors that have influenced changing perceptions of literate environments. Faced with results that remain well below expectations, the international community has had to regroup.

## **Focusing on literate environments**

The first mention of literate environments in official international documents – or at least the first discussion of ideas underlying that notion – stems from the proceedings of CONFITEA V, the Fifth International Conference on the Education of Adults. The Conference was held in Hamburg in 1997, three years prior to the Dakar World Education Forum, but at a time when the problems with achievement of EFA goals were already quite evident. One of the follow-up documents to the Conference, if not the main reports themselves, includes a section on 'Literacy, education and social development' that stresses the importance of embedding literacy understandings and policies in a good grasp of the development dynamics of the environment (UIE, 1997). The authors notably maintain that 'reading and writing become meaningful social practices [only] when they are backed by social institutions that give legitimacy to written documents' (1997: 5), but they do not much elaborate the point.

This perspective begins to bear a little more fruit in the report of the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in April 2000, entitled *The Dakar Framework for Action – Education For All: Meeting our collective commitments* (UNESCO, 2000b). There are numerous references to 'learning environments' sown throughout the Dakar Framework document, although they generally refer to the improvement of conditions for children and (less often) adult students within schools and formal training centres. A reference is made to 'social learning environments' in a passage on improving teaching and learning within the sub-Saharan Africa section of the report (2000b: 30), but the only (and single) notation concerning the 'employment environment' is in the section on Europe and North America (2000b: 66). Nonetheless, the *relationship* between literacy interventions and other efforts to achieve social development goals is at least better highlighted. As part of a section on EFA policy promotion, the authors point out that 'a multi-

sectoral approach to poverty elimination requires that education strategies complement those of the productive sectors as well as of health, population, social welfare, labour, the environment and finance, and be closely linked with civil society' (2000b: 18). They moreover recommend 'integrating basic education strategies into broader national and international poverty alleviation measures', but without saying much about how this is to be done.

On a broader front, Resolution 56/116 – the declaration of the UNLD adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations early in 2002 – reaffirmed 'that literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all and that *creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty*, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy' [emphasis added] (United Nations, 2002a: 3). In addition, two UNESCO reports produced in 2004 elaborate on this as-yet rather vague agenda and serve as a transition to the first Global Monitoring Report devoted explicitly to literacy, which would be issued in late 2005. The more technical of the two (UNESCO 2004a), produced by an Experts Meeting on *Aspects of literacy assessment*, attempted both to give additional substance to the 'renewed vision of literacy' formulated in Dakar and to lay groundwork for innovative assessment practice. Of particular interest for present purposes is the fact that the meeting put a major emphasis on defining and assessing 'literacy in use', rather than simply its acquisition, and took pains to dispel what the authors felt were some persisting myths about it:

*Literacy is not itself liberating – that depends on the way [in which] it is acquired and used, aspects that are socially determined. ... While the theory of literacy has moved to a social view of [the phenomenon], policies of literacy promotion have lagged behind.*

*In the Experts Meeting ... [i]mproving the quality of literacy learning opportunities figured significantly in the suggestions for action ... through enhancing delivery ..., through building stronger connections with fields of literacy use (health, justice,*

*urban and rural development) and through better feedback, monitoring and evaluation systems (2004a: 15)*

The document then gives as much attention to assessing the actual use of literacy as to problems in calibrating its acquisition; and it devotes a few concluding pages to an 'alternate concept' of the literate environment, defined fairly generically as 'a context (or set of contexts) within which written communication is used' (2004a: 36). The proposals made thereafter for development of new evaluation methodologies accord prime weight to supply-side issues in the literate environment – particularly who provides reading materials of what kind – but do probe a little behind them to ask why such provision does or does not materialize.

The second document, on *The plurality of literacy and its implications for policies and programmes* (UNESCO, 2004b), repeats a number of the literate environment themes lightly sketched out in both the *Dakar Framework* and the Experts Meeting report, and adds a few more tentative details. For one, the theme of 'literacy and governance' is introduced here, but is largely restricted to remarks about decentralizing the provision of literacy delivery services through association with NGOs, without directly addressing the realms of social and political governance as fields for post-literacy initiative. A section in Part III on 'creating literate environments' sounds promising, but does not move beyond some generalities about supply factors. A tantalizing remark in the concluding part of the document invites the reader to reflect on literacy 'not from the perspective of supply only but from that of demand [as well]' (2004b: 29). With scarcely a page left for further exploration, however, this turns out to be essentially a restatement of the point about decentralized provision.

This same timidity and tendency to hew close to generalities and supply-side considerations without giving much substance to the construction of literate environments seems to have afflicted the most recent international forum on adult education as well: CONFINTEA VI and its preparatory phases. The GRALE monograph or 'Global Report on Adult Learning and Education' (UNESCO, 2009a), a study document for CONFINTEA VI, makes minimal mention of the issue of literate environments: once (2009a: 51–52) to

characterize the effect of good Community Learning Centres and a second time (2009a: 86) as one contextual determinant of educational quality listed in a larger table. It is perhaps not surprising then that the Conference itself, at least as far as one can tell from its first product – The Belém Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2009c) – adds little of note on the topic. The related *Civil Society Report* of the African Platform for Adult Education (2008) takes a strong stand on literacy advocacy and stresses the importance of a national 'policy environment' that favours its development; but, while devoting an entire section to the 'Absence of Adult Education in Development Frameworks', it does not offer much in the way of specifics on the demand side of the coin.

In general, therefore, the problem of literate environments in Africa (and elsewhere) – or those posed by lack of them – has been increasingly invoked in the literature of Education For All over the last decade, while increased attention has been given to the common theme of literacy. However, there has been little investigation of their dynamics and scant prescription for their reinforcement beyond exhortations to multiply the supply of written materials and continuing education opportunities.

## Broader references

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Concern with the quality of literate environments and with creating opportunities for the productive application of new literate skills considerably predates the turn of the millennium, of course. Prior to the 1990s, however, the key term in such discussions was generally 'post-literacy' (e.g. Dave, Ouane and Sutton, 1989; Dumont, 1990; Mpogolo, 1984), a code word for the problem of what newly literate adults might do with their new knowledge, further discussed in Chapter 2. Although the literature accumulated on that topic – with the exception of articles in the landmark issue of the *International Review of Education* (Dave, Ouane and Sutton, 1989) – was not particularly plentiful, discussion centered on many of the same topics now debated under the banner of literate environments. We probably owe the increasing

popularity of the more recent term to the New Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton, 1994; Street, 1984, 1995) and their emphasis on the ecology of literacy, further discussed in Chapter 2.

In 1996, the ActionAid Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) project devoted a whole section of its Mother Manual to the topic 'Strengthening the literate environment', pointing out quite succinctly and forcefully that it would be entirely artificial to change people's environment or lives in respect of literacy if nothing else changed in that environment. Though some measures can be taken specifically to introduce literacy 'events' within the existing environment, these might have a limited effect because people have survived as non-literates in the environment and could continue to do so. A more effective approach is surely to ensure that there is a wider process of positive social change ... so that ... genuine new demands for literacy are made of people (Archer and Cottingham, 1996: 143).

Reflecting on experience in Pakistan, Farah of the Aga Khan University notes simply, 'While links between literacy and socio-economic development are asserted, plans for increasing literacy remain quite separate from plans for improvement in other social sectors' (2005: 1). The Governance Link project of ActionAid (e.g. 2007), which was carried out in six African countries, made greater inroads into the terrain of giving local (and often newly literate) stakeholders a voice in matters of governance and an occasion to use new skills in project management. But the collaborative study of the African National Conference on Education For All, ActionAid, Oxfam, Pamoja West Africa and the African Platform on Adult Education (ANCEFA et al, 2009), entitled *From closed books to open doors: West Africa's literacy challenge*, while presenting with admirable urgency and clarity the continuing lamentable levels of achievement and gender equity across the region, does little to analyse causes and remedies for poor retention of literacy beyond the uncontested need for greater resource commitment.

In fact, the most lucid analysis of the problem arguably comes from part of an article written in 1994 by Rosa-Maria Torres on 'Literacy for all: twelve paths to move ahead', a title evidently chosen to echo the twelve points of the

Jomtien Declaration. She devotes one brief but incisive section to the issue of literate environments (1994: 64-65):

*Literacy has been handled as an intra-educational issue, as a problem to be solved internally by the formal school system or the non-formal adult education programme. While there is a tremendous need and significant room for improving the supply side (curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training and development, management and organization, teaching and learning conditions in the classroom), a number of studies have revealed extra-educational and demand factors as crucial to the acquisition, maintenance and effective use of literacy.*

*The existence or creation of a 'literate environment' is key to any effective literacy strategy. Contrary to the popular claim, [its] creation... goes beyond distributing books or newspapers, equipping schools with textbooks and classroom libraries or preparing special post-literacy materials for neo-literate youth and adults. [It] means creating the necessary conditions to learn... and to use that knowledge appropriately... [and] meaningfully in everyday life.*

*The economic, social and political conditions that sustain literacy and its continuous reproduction have not changed ... over the past few decades. Dealing effectively with illiteracy means dealing effectively with poverty, because poverty continues to be the main obstacle to literacy and to the building of the literate environment.*

The challenge posed by this reading of the situation, however, was little addressed over the balance of the decade.

## Minding the definitions

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If agencies and civil society partners have at least been talking more about literate environments in recent years, what have they meant by the term?<sup>1</sup>

The most widely publicized definitions may be found in the various editions of the *Global Monitoring Report* on EFA, particularly those of 2006, 2008 and 2009. The first was specifically devoted to 'Literacy for Life' and the latter two constitute mid-term reviews of progress toward EFA that give variable play to the issue of literate environments (UNESCO, 2005, 2007, 2008).<sup>2</sup> To these foundational texts should be added the other GMRs issued over the same period (2006b, 2009b), plus the various policy and programming papers published in connection with the decade-long (2006–2015) 'Literacy Initiative for Empowerment' (LIFE) (e.g. UIL, 2007a, 2007b).

The term 'literacy environment' appears seven times in the 2006 EFA Global Monitoring Report *Literacy for Life*, but the related notion of a *literate* environment is used no less than ninety-two times and discussion of a 'literate society' crops up on seven occasions as well. (It also makes three appearances in the LIFE planning document for the literacy decade, 2006–2015). Definitions vary a bit among these references and, where relevant, more than one is noted.

**Literacy.** The 2008 GMR Glossary offers the most recent broad-ranging discussion of the foundational term, *literacy*: 'According to UNESCO's 1958 definition, ['literacy'] refers to the ability of an individual to read and write with understanding a simple short statement related to his/her everyday life.' The concept has since evolved to embrace multiple skill domains, each conceived on a scale of mastery levels and serving different purposes. Many today view literacy as the ability to identify, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials in various contexts. Literacy is a process of learning that enables individuals to achieve personal goals, develop

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1 Note that the etymology and history of fundamental notions like 'literacy' are more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.

2 The term does not appear in the 2009 GMR.

their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in the community and wider society' (2008: 392).<sup>3</sup> In addition, a 2004 Experts' Meeting convened by UNESCO to consider literacy assessment and related definitions of the underlying concept (UNESCO, 2004a) notes that no search for a single definition of literacy is likely to be successful, in part because the word has both an individually determined and a socially conditioned meaning. Any close examination of it reveals multiple facets. The report of the Experts' Meeting distinguishes prose, document and quantitative applications of the concept (2004a: 20) and enumerates both 'interior' dimensions of its application (e.g. cultural literacy and construction of individual or social identity) and 'external' ones (e.g. objective knowledge, instrumental learning and 'know-how') (2004a: 18).

**Literacy environment.** The term is used occasionally in the 2006 GMR and once in the 2010 GMR, either to designate the degree to which children's home settings are supportive of their school learning or to refer to the larger context in which literacy programmes are set; but it is not defined in the Glossary and does not appear again thereafter. However, the expression crops up frequently in current literature on childhood education, as will be evident below; and it is sometimes used by the authors of the New Literacy Studies<sup>4</sup> to refer to the setting in which literacy practices are deployed.

**Literate environment.** The 2006 GMR defines a 'rich literate environment' as 'a public or private milieu with abundant written documents (e.g. books, magazines, newspapers), visual materials (e.g. signs, posters, handbills), or communication and electronic media (e.g. radios, televisions, computers, mobile phones). Whether in households, neighbourhoods, schools or workplaces, the quality of literate environments affects how literacy skills are acquired and

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3 Further on in the same Glossary, however it is acknowledged that '[a]s used in the statistical tables, the term refers to a person who can... read and write with understanding a simple statement related to his or her everyday life.' And this bare bones definition is the one to which the Glossary of the 2009 GMR reverts.

4 Likewise to be discussed in Chapter 2.

practiced' (2005: 392). The same definition is repeated in the 2007 GMR. Both the 2008 and the 2009 GMRs make, however, a further distinction: 'The term can have at least two meanings: (a) the availability of written, printed and visual materials in learners' surroundings, enabling them to make use of their basic reading and writing skills; (b) the prevalence of literacy in households and communities, enhancing the prospects of successful literacy acquisition by learners' (UNESCO, 2007: 393; 2008: 411). The term is used twelve times in the 2008 GMR, which includes an instructive section entitled 'Literacy and literacy environments: essential but elusive' and several paragraphs on 'understanding and monitoring literacy environments' that detail four realms of special interest: school-based, workplace, household and community settings (2008: 66). It appears twice more in the 2011 GMR..

**Literate society.** Although this term does not appear in either the text or the glossary of the 2008, 2009 and 2010 EFA Global Monitoring Reports, both the 2006 and 2007 editions define it as 'a society within which (a) the vast majority of the population acquires and uses basic literacy skills; (b) major social, political and economic institutions (e.g. offices, courts, libraries, banks) contain an abundance of printed matter, written records and visual materials, and emphasize the reading and writing of texts; and (c) the exchange of text-based information is facilitated and lifelong learning opportunities are provided' (e.g. 2006b: 393).

## Increased attention, insufficient clarity

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The increased attention to the idea of literate environments in official publications has, of course, both triggered and reflected parallel discussion in other fora and associated institutes. Agneta Lind (2008), for example, writing a monograph for UNESCO's International Institute for Educational

Planning on *Literacy For All: Making a Difference*, devotes an entire section to 'enabling contexts and learning environments.' For Lind (2008: 82–83)

*The literate environment refers to the extent to which there is something interesting and/or necessary to read, or situations that required reading and writing in any form, as well as material and infrastructure available, such as books, newspapers, paper ... What kind of information is sought and how it is used in a community, and what documents are available in a certain language determine the use and need for literacy ...*

*The concept of literate environments is a useful way of bringing together all aspects of literacy [from] acquisition [to] use and development ... A lack of concern for the whole environment in which literacy is acquired and used can undermine literacy efforts and offer the learner little chance of using literacy for any desired purpose.*

The issue has thus been addressed much more often in recent years than was the case in the initial phases of Education For All. In addition, recent GMR documents give encouraging evidence of greater attention to the context in which education or literacy acquisition take place. The 2010 edition gives extended consideration to the nature of learning environments, whereas the 2011 GMR, perhaps as one natural consequence of its theme (armed conflict and education), places particular emphasis on how political and physical environment and emotional environments affect learning. A review of the commentary excerpted above brings up three issues that need some clarification, however, and suggests some directions for critical analysis.

### **A fine distinction**

The first concerns the grammatically slight but substantively important distinction between 'literacy environments' and 'literate' ones. As the authors of EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008 (UNESCO, 2007: 62) point out, '*literacy environment*' is the more neutral and generic expression. It

is widely used, for example, in material on childhood classroom and home environments, a topic further examined in Chapter 2 below. The expression '*literate* environment', on the other hand, emphasizes the condition that we are trying to achieve. A 'literacy environment' may be of excellent or poor quality, of strong or weak intensity: it may, in short, be highly literate or nearly totally illiterate. However, when we say '*literate* environment', we are intentionally highlighting one end of that spectrum: namely, contexts that are particularly supportive of the acquisition and use of literate skills. We are also describing the end state that we hope to create. In this document, I will principally use the latter term, despite its slight bias, because that is the form now most often encountered in adult education-related discussions.

## Literacy and literacies

A second issue is posed by the plural of the term 'literacy', which does not appear in either the 2006 or the 2008 GMR Glossary, but is implicit in the latter's mention of 'multiple skill domains' and has been highlighted by UNESCO (2004b), as well as by a variety of research and policy literature (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Masny and Cole, 2009). As the GMR usage suggests, the word 'literacy' is increasingly employed as a metaphor for basic and measurable knowledge in a series of other domains (scientific literacy, civic literacy, computer literacy) that are deemed critical for everyday life in a given society – skills that in fact and for the most part build on basic textual or 'alphabetic' competence, but may occasionally be acquired separately from it. Because those further abilities are generally an extension of basic textual literacy and since needs or requirements concerning them vary a great deal by social context, discussion in this study will be restricted for the most part to the more limited meaning of the term, with three important provisos:

- First, I take *numeracy* – that is, the ability to read numbers and manipulate them in progressively more complex applications (addition, subtraction, multiplication, algebra) – to be part and parcel of the set of primary

written competencies designated by the term 'literacy'. This is, in fact, a standard usage (Gal, Gal and Gal, 2000; Hamilton and Hillier, 2006).<sup>5</sup>

- Second, I acknowledge that the rapid spread of forms of electronic communication (computers, internet, cell phones, etc.) is in the process of fundamentally modifying the meaning and even acquisition of basic literacy – a phenomenon highlighted nearly twenty years ago (e.g. Tuman, 1992), although the exact nature of those growing changes is still not yet clear and their impact in Africa has to date been somewhat different and more limited than in more industrialized areas of the world. The topic is further discussed in Chapter 5, which deals with the supply side of literate environments.
- Third, I recognize that literacy may have radically different meanings in different contexts and that, in addition, the processes involved in its *acquisition* can be helpfully distinguished from those involved in its *use* and from the daily *literacy practices* in which people engage. This said, I personally prefer to use the term as a rough common denominator label for the competence involved in creating, deciphering and deriving meaning from written codes and to leave to derivative discussions the separate yet highly related issues of *how* that competence is acquired and *through what daily practices* it is (or isn't) deployed.

## Varying codes

A final issue requiring clarification has to do with another dimension of literacy's plurality: namely, the various languages and codes in which it may be mastered, many of which co-exist in the same environment. For example, Qu'ranic literacy, African language literacy and international language literacy (using Arabic, English, French or Portuguese, for example) interact in many African countries and occupy different functional and status positions

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5 Happily, there has been increasing recognition in recent literature of the independent value and dynamics of numeracy itself (e.g. Tett, Hamilton and Hillier, 2006) – a topic that is very germane to understanding literate environments and will resurface both in the review of conceptual resources offered by Chapter 2 and in the discussion of field level experience thereafter.

(Tamari, 2009). Which of these codes is involved in any effort to improve the supply of literacy services or increase demand for it must be kept in mind and clearly specified.

## Critiquing the definitions

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Definitions in a glossary like the one at the end of the various GMR Reports or the abbreviated listing above are necessarily quite schematic and it is not fair to hold them up to rigorous standards of completeness and nuance – but at the same time they may be used widely enough to merit careful attention. A few reactions to the set just presented will allow me to sketch right away the main thesis to be developed in the pages to follow and to indicate the added value that such a focus may have for the debate about the role of literacy in Education For All.

There is much strength in the 2006 GMR set of definitions (and its subsequent refinements), just as there is in the overall perspective on Education For All that the 'Literacy for Life' document suggests, despite the fact that more recent editions of the GMR seem once again to have relegated adult and lifelong learning to the back burner. First and foremost, the approach signals the fact that adult literacy is beginning to receive more careful attention than had previously been the case within the movement. EFA is now more clearly acknowledged to include adult literacy and the sort of non-formal education initiatives through which literacy is frequently achieved, as well as primary education. Such heightened attention is all the more welcome as the topic was largely ignored in the early planning literature on EFA (Hildebrand and Hinzen, 2005; Robinson, 2005). In addition, the emphasis given to literate environments, which appears both to grow out of practical field experience and the recent efflorescence of the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (e.g. Street, 2003), adds valuable dimensions to our understanding of the topic and its relevance to EFA – and so to our ability to give support where it is most needed. For all that, we should be very thankful. But it is the *weaknesses* of these perspectives on literate environments and of the related discussion

in the LIFE document underlying them that are of particular interest here, because these shortcomings suggest areas where it may be most important to deepen and broaden our understanding.

## **Acquisition vs. usage**

A first minor problem with the 2008 GMR approach to literacy itself merits mention at the outset. Although the definition quoted above places the same emphasis that I myself propose adopting on the *common denominator competence* in question (even while acknowledging that this can change both qualitatively and quantitatively from one setting to another), it then goes on to identify literacy with a 'learning process'. In fact, as likewise noted above, the competence notion can cover at least two kinds of activities: those involved in its acquisition and those involved in its daily exercise or regular use. Moreover, insofar as the two can be distinguished, it is evidently the latter activities that have the greatest significance for the issue of literate environments.

Perhaps this slight myopia explains at the same time why the notion of a literate environment remains extremely vague in the official documents cited. The word 'environment' is something of a residual category invoked to stand for all that we do not know about the factors supporting durable acquisition, use and retention of literate skills – those very factors whose lack is most telling in regions afflicted by low societal literacy and other forms of disadvantage, inequity and oppression. Explicating that expression and beginning to lay out what it means and involves are among my principal concerns in this book.

Another key issue is that any realistic understanding of a society's literate environment applies to much more than adult literacy programmes. The influence of this kind of supportive context is at least as important to recent primary or secondary school graduates as it is to adult literacy students. Maintenance and improvement of literate skills, along with other competencies, beyond the completion of any given level of basic education, and – *a fortiori* – after the highly variable exposure to formal education that

the mass of school drop-outs receive, is a major social problem throughout much of the African continent (Chimombo, 2005).

It is no accident that a good proportion of adult literacy students are school drop-outs seeking to resume their educational itineraries by other means. All these considerations are, of course, valid reasons why it is so useful to consider the nature of literate environments and the measures that might enhance them in the context of *Education For All*. In any case, we need to keep in mind that, as the World Bank insists in its 2005 *Education Sector Strategy Update*, 'Rather than concentrate on a particular level of education, [one should] emphasize a holistic approach that... recognizes the challenges... [as] intra-sectoral issues that can never be adequately addressed and understood if they are considered from the perspective of [discrete] educational levels' (2005: 20).

## Restoring a balanced perspective

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The principal problem, though, with the GMR perspective on literate environments, and the predominant approach to them in other professional references, lies in a major omission, or at least a continuing case of distinct under-emphasis. Much like the general programmatic literature about EFA, the LIFE Strategy and the GMR Reports place preponderant emphasis on what might be called the 'supply side' of the literacy coin: provision (whether central, regional or local) of books, instructional sequences, lifelong learning opportunities, textual news media and so forth. The mid-term review of the United Nations Literacy Decade itself (Richmond et al, 2008: 62–62) leans much the same way. Those considerations are clearly of great importance, but do not work in isolation. Little attention is given to the *demand* side of literacy: factors governing, and policies likely to promote, the practical *uses* to which such skills can be put and the employments and functions that require them, as well as influences that keep the environment poor in communication resources and technologies. These considerations are critical, because they help us identify reasons for the relative absence in many places

of what economists would call *effective demand* for literate skills – the very conditions that explain the demise of so many literacy programmes after promising, or at least much-publicized, beginnings.

In the economic lexicon, the term 'effective demand' is used to denote a desire for material or services that is backed by the resources (monetary, moral and/or political) necessary to acquire those goods – the only kind of demand that registers directly in social transactions (Sardoni, 1987). You may want something, but until you have the resources necessary to procure it, that desire remains a theoretical or 'non-effective' demand in the communal balance sheet. 'Resources' must of course be understood here to refer to more than just money and to include, for example, social networks, community infrastructure and spiritual supports. The difference nonetheless remains profound. People may wish for schooling or abstractly desire more knowledge somewhere in their own preference order, and the notion of a universal longing for literacy is generally understood in these terms. But, as the Bambara farmers in the *Boucle du Niger* region of Mali were wont to reply to extension agents who proposed new agricultural equipment to them in the days when I worked in that region, 'The tortoise loves to dance – he just doesn't have the legs!' (*Korokara be d'lon fè, sen t'a la!*) Individual and collective resource endowment can be a very real constraint, and until (or unless) sufficient concentrations of spare energy and resources 'bring requital to desire', the widespread interest in literacy often has too little consistency – however virtuous, consonant with human rights or welcome to educators – to fuel sustainable solutions to educational inequity. *Effective demand* among poor populations is, thus, highly selective, unevenly and often quite sparsely distributed, although it may sometimes be collectively mobilized. Further nurturing this energy constitutes one of the major challenges of the drive for universal literacy.

## Recognizing the reasons for imbalance

Why does this omission or considerable disequilibrium exist? The topic is discussed in more detail in the chapters to follow, but brief mention of three possible contributing factors will provide a useful segue into the rest of the topic.

- **The professional habitus of educators.** For one thing, literacy planners and administrators (if not local adult trainers themselves, who may come from more varied backgrounds) are generally members in good standing of the education profession whose habitus grows out of related work and study experience. Education is quite naturally what they know best. They are on average much less familiar, especially in professional terms, with domains – such as agriculture, public health, microfinance, local governance and so forth – where the majority of practical applications of literacy actually occur (or where they unfortunately fail to materialize), and even with the considerable and longstanding training dimensions of these fields. Such potential arenas for literacy application may therefore constitute something of a blind spot for them, and neither the dynamics of promotion within their own profession nor the relative fragmentation of development agencies and ministries into different sectoral specialties – with education largely removed from other fields of social change – creates much incentive to pay greater heed.

UNESCO staff, for example, may work only infrequently on such practical matters with colleagues from WHO, FAO or UNDP, who have allied concerns and more of a socio-economic development perspective, let alone those outside the United Nations system. Similar phenomena prevail even in more compact development institutions and at more local levels (Riddell, 1999).<sup>6</sup> The one area of application that educators may know well is continuing education, an important domain but essentially an extension of their own sector. Hence a good part of post-literacy

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6 As is related in more detail below, I myself spent one very frustrating year (2002–03) within the World Bank trying to facilitate contact and collaboration between the EFA/literacy personnel of the agency and staff of local development sectors around a common interest in local capacity building and its literacy requirements.

programming, for example, has traditionally focused on additional courses or learning sequences in which new literates might engage. It has less effectively focused on follow-on employments, varieties of self-employment and enhanced socio-economic roles or political functions that they might perform (e.g. Mushi, 1994; Ouane, 1989).<sup>7</sup>

- **The autonomous model of literacy.** A second possible and related reason for the omission may lie in the persistence of what has been called the 'autonomous model of literacy' (Barton, 2000), that is, the assumption, traditionally dear to educators but in fact much more widely spread, that literacy is quite simply a good in itself, independent of circumstances – a gift that everyone needs and can naturally or automatically use (Goody, 2000). It is thus often assumed to be a skill that triggers its own applications and will inevitably have major effects on both psychic and social development, a faith reminiscent of what economists call Say's Law: the assertion that supply creates its own demand (Kates, 2003).<sup>8</sup> From such a viewpoint, the uses of literacy pose little or no problem. They should automatically appear for anyone with the will to acquire literate competence and they are sure to confer great benefits – material and immaterial – on the learner. Absent the demand-side factors, however, Caliban's response to his mentors in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* rings all too true: 'You taught me language and my profit on't is that I know how to curse!'

In fact, the autonomous model has been widely critiqued in both the theoretical and empirical literature on literacy during the last quarter century for its fundamental deficiencies (e.g. Maddox, 2007b). Recent research carried out under the banner of the New Literacy Studies has sought to better embed understandings of literacy activities in their actual environment and to develop an 'ecology of literacy', while

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7 A relative exception to this rule is nonetheless constituted by the literature on 'post-basic education and training' (e.g. King, 2006), technical-vocational education and training (TVET) (e.g. Johanson and Adams, 2004) and their frustrations, examined more fully hereafter.

8 That theory was hotly contested by nineteenth-century economists and then, though retaining validity under certain circumstances, was largely debunked as a sovereign solution to economic problems during the Great Depression (Sowell, 1972).

documenting and analysing how and under what circumstances different related skills are actually acquired and used (Barton, 2007; Hornsberger, 2003; Kainz and Vernon-Feagens, 2007; Waters, 1998). This is all to the good. However, NLS advocates have mostly focused at the micro and ethnographic level and – with the exception of some scarcely developed excursions into the topic of ‘societal literacy’ (Chhetri and Baker, 2005; Olson and Torrance, 2001; UIE, 1997) – have not done much to examine the ‘meso’ and macro dimensions of the literate environment.<sup>9</sup> Yet these are precisely the ones that, if informed by sensitivity to literacy’s contextual embedding, are most important for policy.

- **Obstacles to inter-sectoral rapprochement.** A third contributing factor may lie in both the political costs and the practical difficulties associated with rapprochement among the sectors that jointly determine the nature and intensity of literate environments. As failed attempts at ‘integrated action’ in previous decades of development have amply demonstrated (Mueller, 2006; Zoomers, 2005), it is no mean task to engineer coordination of activities and interventions from a span of development agencies, even if those sectors are necessarily and automatically ‘integrated’ in the daily lives and major preoccupations of local people.

Sometimes-successful efforts are still made to square this particular circle (e.g. Nunan, 2006), but it is an uphill climb. Institutions have their own agendas and prize their professional independence and status. Dovetailing such varied organizational cultures can be a nightmare. In addition, if the successful coordination of different sectors is in fact a process likely to put into question existing current norms and policies, then those who benefit by these arrangements or are simply used to them may be quite unlikely to support the endeavor.

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9 Earlier proponents of the notion include Naz Rassool (1999).

## A varied and changing tapestry

The task of analysing, mapping and describing literate environments in Africa is made both more complex and much more enriching by the fact that this is a domain where one size most definitely does *not* fit all. Not only is there great variability in the nature and composition of literate environments, but they may change substantially over time. They are continually evolving, and they affect differently and have different meanings for important subgroups within the population – groups defined by gender, age, ethnicity, language use, rural or urban residence, social class, religion and political circumstances, to name just a few. In an introductory work like this, there is scarcely space (and probably not sufficient insight as well) to do much justice to the issue of internal variability, beyond drawing attention to it. The more is the pity, since the diversity and mutability of literate environments constitute much of their richness. In the pages to follow, an attempt is nonetheless made to highlight some of the important differences created by *gender*, particularly with respect to the demand for literacy and the nature of literacy practices, due both to the critical importance of gender perspectives for socio-economic development and in hopes that these efforts to acknowledge and portray one key source of variability will suggest how important it will be, going forward, to take account of others as well.

## Organization of the text

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The ambition of this book, therefore, lies in exploring and beginning to flesh out the missing demand dimensions in our understanding of the literate environment, relating them to the supply perspectives that are relatively well developed in the field, and drawing from the effort some initial conclusions for policy and practice, as well as a few suggestions for further research. In doing so, we will of course want to review and take account of the important work done on the supply side – it should never be left out – but the most creative effort will be required on the other end of the picture and in effecting

a synthesis between the two. The balance of the study is therefore organized as follows:

**Chapter 2** presents a *selective review of literature and experience* with respect to a series of domains that underlie the notion of a literate environment – topics like the history of literacy itself, language issues and strategies for the reinforcement of literate environments in K-12 education, as well as related concerns in other development sectors.

In **Chapter 3**, the options for *the methodology of this inquiry* itself are laid out and a strategy is proposed.

**Chapter 4** is devoted to reviewing the current status of literacy in sub-Saharan Africa – that is, what we presently know about the evolving composition of its literate, illiterate or semi-literate populations and how the proportions of these groups are changing.

**Chapter 5** addresses both *the current status of literate environments* and the most promising innovations in support of them *on the supply side* of the phenomenon: provision – both central and local – of the resources for reading, writing and continued education that enrich the enabling environment for sustainable literacy.

**Chapter 6** deals with *the demand side of the same issues*: generation of multiple uses for literacy in other spheres of local development and creation of a policy environment that promotes productive application of new skills to improved livelihoods and increased human welfare.

**Chapter 7** is then devoted to examining strategies for effecting the *junction between supply and demand*, approaches that arguably offer some of the best hope for rapidly enhancing literate environments and hastening Education For All.

Finally, **Chapter 8** presents *conclusions and recommendations* for practice, policy and ongoing research.

# Chapter 2

## A Foundation for Understanding: Previous Work on Literate Environments

This chapter is devoted to a brief and critical review of the literature on the nature of literate environments and the dynamics of their development. Though a few recent publications from international agencies (e.g., UNESCO Bangkok, 2011; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012) hopefully indicate increased attention to these themes, inspiration must be drawn for the most part from neighboring domains of research and professional work. I will review hereafter work on the following closely-related topics:

- the historical origins and spread of literacy within and across different areas of the world
- the development of our theoretical understandings of literacy
- experience with the enhancement of literacy environments in childhood education
- related lessons learned in several varieties of adult education: technical-vocational education and training (TVET), post-basic education and training (PBET), workplace learning and adult non-formal education and literacy (ANFE) and
- variations introduced by the language of literacy itself.

A short summary at the end of the chapter encapsulates the main ideas brought to light by this capsule literature review.

## Metaphors and images

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I begin by a moment of reflection on metaphors that underlie the entire discussion. It is important to be quite conscious of them. Reification, or the vice of unconsciously turning ideas into real things, is always a danger in such matters. The title of the book itself contains an initial and foundational metaphor – the notion of a *literate environment*. As was remarked in Chapter 1, this is not something that can be readily observed or that exists

independent of our perceptions. A literate environment is instead an image that is helpful in evoking influences in the context of literacy programmes that may significantly affect the success and durability of those efforts and that therefore deserve to be better analysed and more carefully taken into account – nothing more.

A second major metaphor in this book lies in the distinction between, and the complementarity of, the *supply and demand* forces that impinge on literacy behaviours, practices and programmes – two terms drawn from the lexicon of economics that have, in fact, much broader meanings. Here they refer to:

- whatever develops regular uses for enhanced literate skills in the relevant environment and thus accentuates the objective need and/or the subjective desire for them (the demand side), and
- whatever provides resources and services for acquiring and developing those competencies (the supply side).

Such notions and ideas about how the two forces get coupled refer still further back to a pervasive systems model of social life, which offers a framework for examining how human societies and their members produce or muster the resources – moral as much as physical – that serve to meet their growth and survival needs.

Systems models (Midgely, 2003) generally distinguish several closely related and overlapping realms of activity in the preservation and extension of human life:

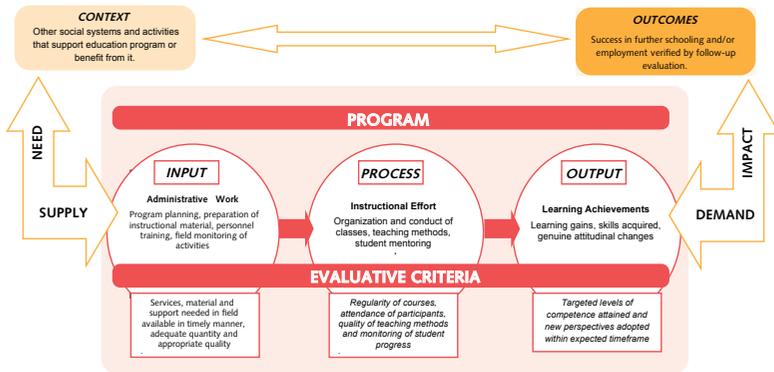
- the social and physical *context* within which this activity takes place
- the resources – human as much as material or financial – that are drawn from the environment to serve as *inputs* to the activity in question
- the *processes* through which those energies and materials are progressively transformed into something that is at once different from its constituent elements, useful in the perpetuation of human society and meaningful to those involved

- the actual *output* or proximate result of the effort, whether physical product, human service or a blend of the two, and
- the impact that its creation and use have on the surrounding social context, the difference they make in its resource endowment, or the effect they exercise on human thought and valuation – in short, the net *outcome* of the effort.

The sequence is typically treated as *recursive*: that is, the outcome of the activity is understood to feed back into the surrounding environment and so to affect subsequent input to or support of it, making both upward and downward spirals distinct possibilities over time.

An example of such a scheme – one that is often used for the evaluation of educational activities – is presented here in Figure 1. In this framework, demand is generated back-to-front (or rightward in this case) by widespread need for the products, personal attributes or services generated, whereas supply is created front-to-back (leftward) by the availability of appropriate resources and inputs. Both are evidently necessary for the process to move forward. Moreover, systems are typically pictured as stacked within each other or grouped in successive clusters or tiers from individual and local levels up through a variety of strata and sectors to whole communities, regions and nations.

Figure 1: Systems model of educational activity



Critics of systems models often decry, with some real justification, the factory likeness of this framework and its apparently productivist tenor. The scheme might seem to have sprung fully clothed from the mind of a functional structural sociologist or a business administration consultant, if not the ancestor of time-motion studies in manufacturing, Frederick Taylor himself (1911). In point of fact, however, much of its charm or ticker-tape banality lies in the eye of the beholder: the categories themselves can be used as handily for discussing art or prophecy (where the 'inputs' include a large measure of inspiration) as they can for portraying industrial operations; and the emphasis may be placed as much on process as on product.

Perhaps the prime virtue of a scheme like this is that it provides a template for:

- highlighting (and mapping) the many different actors and activities that contribute to any social enterprise;
- examining how they jointly create the conditions under which it flourishes – or flounders; and
- better understanding their interrelationships.

As this issue of system interrelationships makes evident, the best metaphor or conceptual framework for investigating literate environments is perhaps *ecology*, which the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines as 'the science of the relationships between organisms and their environments'. Barton (1994) first brought major attention to the idea of establishing an ecology of literacy, or seeking to understand the dynamics of literacy acquisition and loss by careful ethnographic study of how different languages and written codes are actually *used* in the varied transactions, activities and functions of daily living and in a range of local settings. He thus put a very salutary emphasis on investigating the social practices surrounding literacy and the patterns of behaviour that they create.<sup>10</sup>

If this ecological focus has an understandable weakness, since one can't do everything at once but must start somewhere, it lies in relative neglect of equally disciplined and ethnographic study of social practices at the other supra-local levels that impinge on the practice of literacy, and of the uses to which related skills get – or do not get – put. Happily in the last few years, increased attention has been given to this corresponding side of the coin. As Pahl (2008: 305) puts it,

*One of the challenges for researchers who draw on the ecology metaphor is that this approach [requires attention] both ... to identity and learning [and] to the relationship between language, literacy and social environments ... [R]esearchers of literacy and language have to account for institutional policy thinking on language and literacy, while at the same time studying face-to-face interaction in sites as diverse as homes, classrooms, community centres and neighbourhoods.*

Building an ecological understanding of literacy is thus a long-term task that melds research and practice at multiple levels. Any portrait of literacy and its uses that does not attempt to relate the different and often quite disparate strata of the environment shaping social practice cannot really be ecological.

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<sup>10</sup> More relatively recent work on adolescent learning outside of school has likewise made ample use of the ecology metaphor (e.g. Barron, 2006).

That is the task set in this study and the reason why the ecology of literacy is the third of its fundamental metaphors.

## Historical origins and spread of literacy

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I begin with an examination of what is known, and of what may be most relevant, about the historical origins and spread of literacy in different societies. Although it is certainly debatable in this domain – as in the realm of biology or linguistics – to what extent ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’ (i.e. to what degree the development of current forms of activity reprises the path of their historical genesis, an old debate in biological science), it is at least likely that an improved understanding of the conditions under which literacy emerged and thrived in human societies will throw some useful light on the research ambitions of the study and help flesh out the demand side of literate environments.

‘From what we now know’, Michalowski (1994: 53) maintains, ‘writing was invented *ab ovo* only four times in human history: in Sumer, in Egypt, in China, and in Mesopotamia’. Exactly why and how literacy emerged is a subject of some debate, however. Most scholars (e.g. Graff, 1987; Schmandt-Besserat, 1999, 2006; Tuman, 1987) concur that it was a largely functional matter, propelled by the need to manage the new quantities of information and the new type of governance created by trade and large-scale production. The ‘triumvirate’ of uses that kept literacy alive and helped it spread, they suggest, was composed of commerce, statecraft and religion. Sumer in the Fertile Crescent provides arguably the first and prototypical example (Glassner et al, 2003). There it appears that the organizational demands, created in good part by the need to manage water use on the large-scale irrigation schemes of the Fertile Crescent, put a premium on perfecting systems for recording transactions and billing. Significantly, therefore, *numeracy* seems to have largely preceded literacy in the limited and verbal communication sense of that term. And, as Claude Lévi-Strauss reminds us, the roots of

literacy and numeracy in management imperatives indicate as well its close association with power.

*[W]hen we consider the first uses to which writing was put, it would seem quite clear that it was connected first and foremost with power: it was used for inventories, catalogues, censuses, laws and instructions; in all instances, whether the aim was to keep a check on material possessions or on human beings, it is evidence of the power exercised by some men over other men and over worldly possessions (quoted in Graff, 1979: 132).*

Michalowski (1999: 55–56), however, challenges this majority view.

*It is often asserted that writing is part and parcel of the origins of 'civilization', that is, of agriculture, complex society, and the state. According to such a point of view, social complexity and state bureaucracy gave rise to the need for a mechanism for recording accounts and preserving memory and that need was fulfilled by the evolution of simple accounting systems ... into full-fledged writing.*

*The traditional views of the development of the world's first script [i.e. Sumerian] can no longer be maintained ... The first writing systems appear out of nowhere in early state formations ... The rise of complex states ... seems to be linked with the use of writing, although one could point to successful states that did not have writing. A variety of African and South American states can be cited as examples ... The complex relationships involved in the process still elude us, however. It is one thing to argue that effective administration of a large bureaucracy is facilitated by writing and quite another to ascribe a cause-and-effect relationship between the two.*

But the evolutionary argument is based not so much on the needs of statecraft as it is on more fundamental considerations – and observations – concerning the way in which human transactions came to be recorded. Schmandt-Besserat (1999) examines meticulously a variety of impressed tablets and writing artifacts from several thousand years of Mid-Eastern history – most grouped around the Fertile Crescent – and manages to reconstitute an itinerary of early writing, from use of tokens through marks on clay tablets and other impressible media to early numeracy and on to writing. She points out that early numeracy itself involved a particular and innovative form of abstraction that then became essential to literacy and proved highly supportive of the equally abstract patterns and norms of government and religion. But its original impetus seems to have come from increasingly complex trade and agricultural production.

As for the spread of literacy, it remained for centuries a very restricted technology, closely associated, as Lévi-Strauss points out in the quote above, with the exercise of power – or, as Michalowski validly adds, with efforts to contest or replace that authority. Graff (1979: 103) notes that '[w]riting dates from approximately 3000 BC, [and] so is about 5000 years old; ... printing [dates] from the 1450s [and is] now aged a mere 430 years.' He therefore stresses 'the restricted nature of literacy historically considered. In much of the Western world, only in the 19th and 20th centuries have rates of literacy approached universality.' As Calvet (2001) reminds us, in medieval France, to be literate meant to read and write in Latin, a skill restricted to noble and clerical fragments of the population; reading and writing in French had little status or meaning.

The ambition of realizing universal literacy in Europe was, Vincent (2000) points out, one of the principal reforms born of the Enlightenment; yet it took centuries for it to happen. McKetterick (1990) and Toth (2000) document the very limited demographic extent of literacy in medieval Western and Central Europe respectively. Moreover, after the promulgation of universal compulsory elementary education in the more developed nations at the beginning of the nineteenth century, another hundred years were required for those countries to even approach achievement of it. Along the way, the

state accepted the assistance of the church as a partner in a joint enterprise to modernize society, but also to maintain the social order. In fact, Graff and others argue that the common school in England and the equivalent elsewhere on the continent were instituted as much to *control* the spread of literacy as to promote it. The idea of masses of people becoming literate in unsupervised fashion was disquieting, even if – as Hoggart's (1957) classic work on the uses of literacy in English mass culture suggests – those new skills were not necessarily employed in any contestatory fashion. And Limage (2007) pertinently questions the extent to which formal schooling has ever had as its purpose the general dissemination of literacy.

At what point and to what degree then did the environment itself begin becoming 'literate?' It evidently happened in a very selective manner, concentrated among those professions and social strata that exercised managerial powers in societies not yet democratic, or that constituted the guardians of sacred writ and the historical record. If we now speak of literate environments being 'print rich' (e.g. Debruin-Parecki, 2008), it was for a long time only the rich that had print or were the exclusive depositaries of its manuscript predecessors.

## Theoretical and political understandings of literacy

However what we now call 'literacy' may in fact have evolved, the growth of our *understanding* of it has not necessarily paralleled its spread; and it is therefore worth our considering, at least briefly, how existing notions of what the term means and of standards for assessing this phenomenon have themselves developed. Unfortunately, though a socially situated treatment of the subject would call for consideration of the perception of literacy-related concepts in many different cultural contexts, available historical information largely concerns the emergence of such awareness in Western countries.

In English and French, terms for literacy descend from the Latin word *litteratura*, meaning alphabet, writing system or use of letters, since Latin was both the parent – to differing degrees – of the two languages and the

*lingua franca* in much of Europe well into the fifteenth century, preserving a predominant role thereafter in Roman Catholic practice.<sup>11</sup> The word *littérature* appears in 1120 in French, whereas 'literature' shows up in English by 1375. Both terms initially signified either the overall body of written knowledge or the personal quality of being versed in books and letters, well before they started being used to refer to particular books and literary products. Initially, therefore, *lettré* in French (first appearance in 1190) and 'literate' in English (first appearance in 1432) denoted real acquaintance with the existing canon of literature rather than the simple capacity to decipher letters and their meaning; and the French word has kept this exclusive association. The word 'literacy', which in our days denotes basic familiarity with reading and/or writing – and its approximate equivalent in French, *alphabétisme* – did not appear for several more centuries.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, these terms were initially created simply as opposites to the existing terms for 'illiterate' and 'illiteracy' (coined in 1556 and 1660 respectively) and the French *illettré* (1560) or *analphabète* (1580) – adjectives used to describe someone who could not read and write and was therefore considered ignorant of high culture. The first English language use of the term 'literacy' *per se* dates from the *New England Journal of Education* in 1876, whereas *alphabétisme* (with the sense noted) makes its appearance two years later; *alphabétisation* (for the activity of becoming literate) first appears in 1913 and the alternate *léttrisme* much later still: 1983.<sup>13</sup> Even the earliest such uses consequently date from little more than a century ago (Graff, 1979).

As this history of vocabulary suggests, whether or not adults could read or write, let alone how well they could do so, were not matters of widespread

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11 Historical data on etymology and word use are taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Le Petit Robert*.

12 The case in French vocabulary is somewhat more complex. The most frequently used term – *alphabétisation* – in fact means 'to make literate'. The logical equivalent for 'literacy' itself would therefore seem to be *alphabétisme*, and the word is in fact sometimes used this way, recently and notably by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2009). But the dictionary definition of *alphabétisme* in *Le Petit Robert* remains 'un système d'écritures reposant sur un alphabet' (a writing system based on an alphabet – as opposed, for example, to an ideographic one). The term *littéracie* or *littératie* likewise appears on occasion, particularly in Canadian publications, an evident lexical borrowing from English.

13 In fact, the French verbal form *alphabétiser* shows up a bit earlier, in 1853, but with the meaning of 'organize in alphabetical order'.

concern in Western countries until well into the nineteenth century, although particular kinds of literacy were valued in specific contexts like religious vocations and – obviously – schooling.

Heightened social concern with popular literacy and the increasing attention paid to it in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries by political regimes in search of public validation – or at least the appearance of it – meant that understandings of literacy began during this period to evolve much more rapidly along two dialectically related tracks: theoretical reflection on its nature, conditions and consequences on the one hand; and development, both nationally and internationally, of policies and projects to stimulate it on the other. Although it is customary to treat policy as a derivative of theoretical insight, in fact an equally good case can be made for the reverse axis of determination; and, in the paragraphs immediately following, I opt for the latter course, presenting the development of literacy policies and programmes as the first term in the equation and as a critical determinant of the evolution of theoretical reflection on the topic.

## **Evolution of literacy policies**

As Arnove and Graaf's collection of case studies (2008) amply illustrates, mass literacy campaigns in fact substantially predated the post-Second World War period of concern with international economic development in former colonial or 'Third World' countries, and were generally fueled by religious or political energies. In a sense, in fact, the spread of both Christianity and Islam could be considered as earlier, slower and more epochal forms of literacy campaigning, since 'the book' (whether the Bible or the Qu'ran) followed closely on the missionary and the sword, and prompted training of whole new cohorts and generations of literates. To a good extent, moreover, the roots of literacy campaigning in more recent Western history lie in the Protestant reformation and Martin Luther's 'grand design of a spiritual renewal of state, society and the individual', an effort 'to fashion dispositions in which Christian ideas of right thought and action could take root' and to create 'the human elements of a Christian society that would live by evangelical principles' (Strauss 1978, quoted in Arnove and Graff, 2008: 95).

Luther in fact became discouraged with the revolutionary impulses that this campaign unleashed among the lower classes in Germany and soon reverted to a more school-controlled model of literacy propagation, but the religiously fueled movement to spread literacy within the population was reborn over succeeding centuries in a series of other settings – Sweden, Scotland and then the United States – and took on a strong new secular momentum in the Soviet Union after the 1917 revolution. The new Soviet government judged literacy essential for ensuring political education and securing the allegiance of the population. ‘The illiterate person stands outside politics’, Lenin famously said. ‘First it is necessary to teach the alphabet. Without it, there are only rumors, fairy tales [and] prejudice, but not politics.’ (Kenez, 1982: 178)

The formation on the heels of the Second World War of International Institutions devoted to social welfare – like the UN agencies – changed the nature of the situation appreciably, although their immediate agenda was reconstruction of war-torn countries. UNESCO was established with a core mandated commitment to equitable provision of “fundamental education” throughout the world (Jones with Coleman, 2005, pp.57-58). At the same time, the concerns of Bretton Woods signatory countries placed an increasing emphasis on “popular education”, if only to forestall the appeal of the Soviet model, and also resulted in the diversion into bilateral channels of most of the funding for such work (Jones, 1990)’. In any case, the theme for emerging UNESCO involvements in support of widespread literacy over the next decade or more was ‘fundamental education’ – an attempt to improve the living conditions of the economically deprived through community-focused training and self-help. In 1960, however, as the bulk of former colonial countries acceded to independence, the Soviet Union proposed an international campaign for ‘universal literacy’, which UNESCO would pilot. In the tug and pull over related policies, the Western countries succeeded in modifying the theme to an emphasis on widespread ‘functional’ or ‘work-oriented’ literacy, consecrated at the international Tehran Conference in 1965 and given concrete form in the Experimental World Literacy Programme, itself directed jointly by UNESCO and UNDP (Gillette, 1987; Rassool, 1999). That undertaking had at best moderate success, but was extended to eleven

countries over the eight-year period and influenced a variety of other literacy promotion efforts worldwide.

By the time of its expiration in the early 1970s, UNESCO was concerned to return from the functional or work-related theme to a broader definition and operationalization of literacy – one that explicitly included the cultural and human values with which it felt charged. The revised perspective was also designed to establish parallels with empowerment models of development and the ‘conscientizing’ approaches to education promoted by Paulo Freire in Latin America (Freire, 2000; Kirkendall et al., 2004), without necessarily embracing their political implications. At the same time, the experience of purportedly work-oriented literacy programmes that in fact provided little connection with the sort of viable employment or self-employment likely to fuel maintenance of the new skills prompted attention to issues of ‘post-literacy’, or the follow-up needed to consolidate lessons learned (e.g. Akinpelu, 1984; Srivastava, 1984). The post-literacy theme gained some currency over the following two decades before largely merging into the concern with literate environments addressed in this study (Cusic et al, 2004; Xie and Zhang, 2003).<sup>14</sup>

In general, however, the 1980s *zeitgeist* of structural adjustment in developing countries and rates of return to education, spurred in good part by the ascendance of conservative governments in Western nations, put something of a damper on international mobilization for adult literacy, judged a less productive instrument in the ethos promoted by the World Bank and major donors than universal primary education (Hoppers, 2000; Tanvir, 2007); and the initiative passed largely into the non-profit sector. The international flame was rekindled to a certain extent by the Education For All movement and the Jomtien conference in 1990, even though, as pointed out in Chapter 1, adult education initially seemed to have little place or priority in this renewed concern for widespread literacy (Lind, 1997). But increasing awareness of the aging demographics of developed countries and concern

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14 In fact, in recent years ‘post-literacy’ has come to stand for ‘the possibility of rich human communication that exceeds (and hence replaces) visible language (writing and reading) as the dominant means of the understanding and exchange of ideas’ (Ridley, 2009).

with 'Workforce 2000' (Johnstone and Packer, 1987; Judy and D'Amico, 1997) – that is, the capacity of their older and more diverse labour force to meet the challenges of technologized jobs in the twenty-first century – at least brought new attention to Lifelong Learning and to 'multiple literacies' or the varied kinds of basic competence that might increasingly be required of citizens and workers in the near future, both themes that UNESCO adopted and adapted to its advantage (e.g. Fien, Maclean and Park, 2009).

With the new millennium, the worm seems to have turned to some extent. The notion of lifelong learning is now entrenched in the title of UNESCO's Hamburg institute, and policy studies such as the Global EFA Monitoring Report for 2006 signal some renewed recognition of the role of adult literacy and non-formal education in the effort to ensure Education for All – a change prompted in part by the increased and increasingly effective advocacy of non-governmental organizations, which have become a major player in the setting of global educational priorities (Archer, 2004). At the same time, as noted in Chapter 1 above, the idea of literate environments has at least gained a foothold in the *Education For All* annual reports, which have in general begun giving increased attention to contextual factors that impact learning.

But it is certainly too soon to declare victory. Half the news, as the American poet Robert Frost once said, is made by truth going in and out of fashion.

## **Evolution of theoretical debates**

The sequence of policy understandings and fashions just recounted – from fundamental education through work-oriented literacy to new cultural and political sensitivity, and thence through the relative neglect of the 1980s to Education For All, the renewed recognition of lifelong learning imperatives, the increased role of NGOs and the tentative admission of adult literacy advocates to international policy discussions – frames in significant ways both the theoretical debate about the meaning of literacy and the empirical research on its nature and dynamics. Both have served to focus, refract, critique and deepen policy directions. Academic commentators make a

frequent distinction between the 'autonomous model of literacy' – or the belief in its universal and automatic effects that they consider to have underlain much of related policy discussion through the 1970s and to remain an active force – and the more 'ecological' or situated understanding of practice that was introduced by the New Literacy Studies (NLS) of recent decades and has suggested policy directions of its own (e.g. Kell, 2008).

The major contribution of the NLS – as discussed and exemplified in, for example, Barton (2007), Baynham (1995), Brandt and Clinton (2002) and Street (2003) – lies in having focused attention on actual literacy practices in different contexts, on exactly *how, by whom and to what ends* literacy is in fact used in particular social settings and by specific social groups. NLS proponents critique what they consider the long-dominant approaches in the field for considering literacy a prerequisite of rational thought and a totally discrete competence that by itself both changes how people think and creates the essential pre-conditions for economic and social development. Barton and Hamilton (1998: 1–15) compare this doctrine of autonomous literacy to the principal characteristics of an NLS perspective, which they define as follows:

- Literacy is best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life. Literacy is therefore multiple and not a single uniform phenomenon.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relations. As a consequence, some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural patterns.
- Literacy is historically situated. Literacy practices therefore change over time and new ones are frequently acquired, as much through processes of informal learning and sensemaking as via formal education and training.

Though the New Literacy Studies have gained a strong foothold in academic research on literacy and put a needed accent on literate environments, they are still contested in the field of practice by older notions of literacy's efficacy. Moreover, there are calls to go beyond the micro and ethnographic focus of NLS to a better balance of perspectives (Stephens, 2000). We will look further at such possible amendments in Chapter 3 on 'Methods of Assessing the Status of Literate Environments' and give particular attention to the ways in which NLS approaches might be expanded and adapted for that purpose.

## **Literacy environments in childhood education**

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Connections are infrequently made between the issue of literate environments in international adult education and concern with parallel phenomena in *children's* schooling, as well as in their home life. The linkage is nonetheless quite pertinent, both because the two touch on many common themes and due to the flood of research, technical innovation and policy inquiry conducted on the latter topic over the last twenty-five or thirty years (e.g. Barody & Diamond, 2012; Hart et al, 2009; Mayo & Elbers, 2012; Sylva et al, 2008). Moreover, primary school educators in industrialized countries were the first to bring the issue of the environment of learning into greater focus.

In fact, both 'classroom literacy environments' and 'home literacy environments' represent something of a growth industry in the world of pre-primary and primary schooling in Western countries. A search into the OmniFile computerized literature database indicates that the number of refereed research articles on these and related topics has rapidly increased since their first appearance in the late 1980s. There were just under five a year on average in the 1990s, eleven a year in the first decade of the current century and fully twenty on average in 2010 and 2011. The main lesson of the research is that if children are surrounded by an environment rich in print and by role models and family members who read to them and structure interactions to favour the development of reading habits, both their pre-

school and primary-level success in acquiring literate skills and habits are much enhanced. For Wolfersberger et al (2004: 216)

*the four dimensions of print-rich classroom environments include (a) provisioning the classroom with literacy tools or props; (b) positioning or arranging literacy tools within the classroom; (c) participating in literacy events using literacy tools or props; (d) promoting literate interactions in the classroom using literacy tools and props.*

The notion of environments for childhood literacy has in fact been expanded to include the structure of the physical environment, the overall programme of activities in schools, and the style of interactions both in the classroom and at home.

- Kasten (2005), for instance, focuses on how teachers can model 'literature circles' with English language learners in middle school settings.
- Hawken, Johnston and McDonnell (2005) turn their attention to strategies of Head Start<sup>15</sup> teachers that give preschool children 'opportunities ... to engage in emerging literacy activities' and that succeed in 'arranging the environment to improve' these skills. In the next section, we consider some of the tools elaborated to assess these contexts. In addition, attention to home environments has brought into clearer focus the problem of differential endowments and varying family cultures among different strata of the population – poor, middle class and well-to-do; native and immigrant; single and dual-parent, etc. – and the impact of these variations on the quality of the literacy milieu.
- The literature also includes an occasional 'ecological' dimension that expands inquiry into the effect of school physical structure and community setting on literacy learning. Neuman and Celano (2001), for example, examine access to print in urban communities and note

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<sup>15</sup> Head Start is a programme of the United States Department of Health and Human Services that provides comprehensive education, health, nutrition and parent involvement services to low-income children and their families. See: <http://www.nhsa.org/>.

striking differences between neighbourhoods of differing income in their exposure to signage, print, labels and texts, as well as their access to spaces conducive to reading.

- Sylva et al (2008) find that persistence of parents in reading to children at home reliably increased reading fluency and understanding of low-achieving first year primary school students.
- Mayo and Elbers (2012) examine the relation of a strong home literacy environment (HLE) to Dutch preschoolers' acquisition of the academic form of language predominant in the country's schools and confirm it to be widespread.

In short, research on literacy environments in childhood education has offered a variety of perspectives on the characteristics of learning settings that prompt uses of written material and active engagement with writing.

## **Learning environments in organizational and workforce settings**

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We move now more directly into the realm of adult education, focusing initially on the particular sphere of vocational and workplace training, and what – in anglophone circles at least – is often called 'human resource development' (HRD): organizationally administered training for employees, whether in the public, private or nonprofit sector. HRD became a recognized sub-field of adult education only in the 1970s; and though the numbers of people involved in industrialized countries soon exceeded all other branches of the field (Swanson and Holton, 2001), it suffered for years from neglect by K-12 and adult educators alike and scant respect in academia.

HRD practitioners, like vocational educators, however, recognized very clearly that training in organizational and workplace settings made little sense and was very unlikely to have lasting effects if it was not closely tied to applications and if the culture and environment of the company, agency or worksite did not directly support such uses. In addition, experience in

these settings gave birth to the notion of 'organizational learning' (Argyris and Schon, 1978, 1996), a term highlighting the improved competence and increased knowledge durably incorporated into an organization when those trained apply their new skills and modify organizational procedures and resources in ways that leave the unit better able to perform critical functions, even if and when the particular personnel concerned move on to other employments. In short, to some important extent the new knowledge and skills are no longer simply the attributes of an individual or a group of people who have been trained, but are 'built into' the structure and operational routines of the organization. They become part and parcel of the organizational environment and the entity's collective capacity. The idea is quite worth retaining for its relevance to the constitution of literate environments (Gherardi, 2006).

Through gradual refinement and modification, the notion of organizational learning transformed itself into that of a 'learning organization' (e.g. Pettinger, 2002; Senge, 1990) – a code word for an entity structured by the repeated work of training its staff and then transforming its own structure through applications of their new knowledge, to the extent that opportunities for learning and challenges to acquire relevant competencies permeate the organization and promote a continual state of self-renewal. In such an environment, proponents claim, HRD personnel and adult educators are no longer simply dispensable trainers, but become 'strategic business partners' of top management of the organization, because the enterprise of learning is so critical to its future and viability (Robinson and Robinson, 2004).

This perspective has of course its dosage of 'hype' and describes a realm where – when all is said and done – quite typically a good deal more is said than done. In point of fact, as Széll et al (1989) clearly pointed out some years ago, making the necessary changes for rank and file organizational members to apply all they learn and assume new responsibilities has its costs, political as well as financial, and so related recommendations may be more often honoured in the breach than in the observance.

But there are at the same time real examples of success (e.g. Carmeli et al, 2009; Cseh & Manikoth, 2011; Honold, 1991; Sackman et al., 2009;

Weisbord, 2004) that, by analogy, suggest some interesting new substance for the concept of a literate environment. If in workplace settings it is the application of learning, and the assumption of new responsibilities on that basis, that have the potential for transforming the context into a 'learning organization', so might it not also be the practical application of literacy that makes the environment literate? The next section of this literature review provides some additional reflections on just that point.

## **Enabling environments for technical and vocational education and training**

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Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) – both the formal and the non-formal varieties – have gone through several swings of fashion in African development circles and donor organization interest since well before the days of national independence (King, 2003). More important for our present purposes, the experience has generated an understanding of the context and applications of such training – often termed their 'enabling environment' in the related literature (e.g. King and Palmer, 2006a) – that is highly pertinent to better specification of what we mean by a literate environment.

Vocational-technical training was one of the first kinds of education actively promoted by colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often on the 'Tuskegee model' (West, 2007), the style of trade schooling developed after the end of the Civil War in the Southern United States to offer freed blacks new and generally manual vocations to earn their livelihood. That approach appealed to the colonial powers in Africa – just as it had to the ruling class in segregated America – because it seemed peculiarly adapted to enhancing productivity in agriculture and related professions among their subjects, without stoking the dissatisfaction, job demands and political contestation that, it was feared, a more academic type of education might awaken. As one consequence, whatever its virtues, TVET was increasingly labeled as a reactionary and dead-end variety of education. By the end of the

1960s – partly on the strength of Philip Foster's argument (1966) that formal primary and secondary education were in fact the truly 'vocational' variety in new African countries where the civil service exercised power – governments and donors turned resolutely toward universalizing primary education. The disenchantment with TVET was magnified by the meager results of existing programmes, whose leavers seldom found durable employment or self-employment in the trades for which they had been prepared, and often did their best to switch over to academic tracks (Kempner, Castro and Bas, 1993; King, 2003).

King and Palmer (2006b) – and the whole series of studies on Post-Basic Education and Training (PBET) of the University of Edinburgh Centre of African Studies concluded in 2006 – articulate clearly the lessons that technical and vocational educators drew from this experience. They essentially argue that in the kind of impoverished environments that TVET programmes are designed to benefit – typically rural and depressed urban areas of developing countries – there are simply too few jobs to absorb the trainees and too little available capital and consumer demand to underwrite productive self-employment, *unless, that is, the TVET or PBET strategy itself is better coordinated with policies designed to transform these extra-educational conditions.* Failure to address this problem of an 'enabling environment' explains a good part, at least, of previous disappointment with vocational training in Africa. King and Palmer (2006b: 5-6) sum up lessons of experience in the following unambiguous terms:

*States [in poor developing countries] ...will find it difficult to identify a demand for training coming from the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society ... Left to themselves [therefore], skills systems favour the non-poor*

*There are certainly a number of projects which appear to have managed successfully to reach the poor and increase their incomes and productivity. The experience, which is sparse, is that these initiatives are hugely demanding in terms of time, commitment, methodology, curriculum and support structures. Also the numbers actually reached are*

*extremely small ... The latest comprehensive thinking on the development mandate ... take[s] the view that single sector interventions – whether in education, health or enterprise – will have limited impact. Substantial change will only come when governments, with donor support, invest across the board to produce an enabling environment for both public and private sectors [emphasis added]*

*Part of the comprehensive vision must be that employability and productive capacity need to be linked to the provision of training; otherwise training will be perceived as another aspect of service delivery [i.e. as purely a supply-side factor].*

In fact, under current conditions in Africa, the informal economy and self-employment provide the bulk of such opportunities, but these are heavily conditioned by the macro-economic and policy environments, a lesson that Pieck (2005) confirms in large part for Latin America as well. The tendency in recent years among labour economists and their applied counterparts, who are concerned with this critical dimension of African development – as among their applied counterparts, manpower supply-and-demand technicians who work on human resource planning in ministries and corporations – has therefore been to speak of 'livelihoods' rather than 'jobs' (e.g. Deere and Royce, 2009; Kempe, 2008; Oxenham et al, 2002). The British Department for International Development (DFID) is among the international donor organizations that have made a major thematic thrust out of training for and promotion of livelihoods among the African poor. They now propose a toolkit for designing and implementing livelihood strategies in a whole range of productive sectors (Clark and Carney, 2008; DfID, 2002). However, after an initial effort to blend such strategies with literacy programming, best exemplified in the work of John Oxenham and colleagues (Oxenham, 2005; Oxenham et al, 2002), the two emphases seem largely to have split asunder. The situation is symptomatic of the difficulties that appear to afflict any attempt to bridge gaps between literacy and other development sectors – a topic to which we shall return.

King and Palmer's (2006a) brief for an enabling environment in TVET – and for all forms of the still broader phenomenon they call 'post-basic education and training' – offers a good deal of guidance for ensuring increased emphasis on and better specification of what we mean by a literate environment. They are resolute in drawing attention to the inter-sectoral linkages and non-educational factors that condition success in the field and that determine to a large extent its contribution to development. As King and Palmer note (2006a: 43), the UN *Millennium Project Report* (Sachs, 2005) itself recognizes quite explicitly that 'the impact of schooling [and education] is inseparable from other MDG-related initiatives in health, gender equity, water, environment and [employment]'. The *Task Force Report for the MDGs* (Birdsall and Vaishnav, 2005: 27) states the matter succinctly: 'The benefits of education are conditioned by the context.' And the authors of the LIFE Report (UIL, 2007a: 137–38), a key text for this study, seem to recognize the same theme when they affirm that

*the benefits of literacy ensue only when broader rights and development frameworks are in place and operating effectively. Individual benefits, for example, accrue only when written material is available to the newly literate person, and overall economic benefits only when there is also sound macroeconomic management, investment in infrastructure and other appropriate development measures. Similarly, certain benefits, such as women's empowerment, will result only if the socio-cultural environment is accommodating of them.*

'Available written material' in this quote from the LIFE Report is obviously part and parcel of what we have called the supply side of the literacy equation, whereas 'sound macroeconomic management, investment in infrastructure and other appropriate development measures' bring to mind the origin and setting for demand factors.

King and Palmer (2006a) thus conclude that 'there are clearly a whole series of conditions that may well ... determine whether schools and skills are ... used productively' (2006a: 51); and that 'for education and skills to

translate into poverty reduction – and growth – ...other factors, external to the education and training system' must be forcefully addressed (2006a: 55). They also offer a sketch of the composition of the 'enabling environment' that is needed to support productive application of new skills and knowledge. Like the remarks in the policy documents they cite from various international sources, however, it does not take us very far beyond a highly general framework, and so leaves the reader with inspiration, but few specific prescriptions for the tasks ahead.

## **Concern with post-literacy and literate environments in adult and non-formal education**

Similar concerns for linkage to applications and so for the supportive quality of the environment have likewise recurrently appeared in non-formal adult education and adult literacy programmes, although they are clouded somewhat in the latter case by the enduring legacy of the autonomous model of literacy. A certain portion of adult non-formal education has, of course, always been vocationally or practically oriented, as exemplified by the long history of agricultural and health extension services, and thus has generally been associated with immediate and concrete applications.<sup>16</sup>

Faith in literacy's universal value and applicability seems to have delayed reflection on – and policy recognition of – similar lessons in the realm of adult literacy promotion, however. Ironically, though the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), initiated in the late 1960s, paired UNESCO with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), an entity with an explicit vocation for economic and social development, and though the EWLP targeted design and refinement of truly functional and 'work-oriented' literacy programmes, the resulting efforts were mostly functional in curriculum

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<sup>16</sup> My own original field of adult education in the United States traces many of its historical origins to agricultural extension, but traversed an entire period – coinciding with the rise of graduate studies in the field and the general attempt to professionalize it – when adult education leadership grew a little ashamed of these forbears with muddy boots and tended to shun them.

only and were seldom integrated in a meaningful sense with potential lasting applications in the environment (UNDP/UNESCO, 1976). This was, in part, because that would have required restructuring existing patterns of local development and investing in parallel employment creation, initiatives that were not envisaged in EWLP planning and were scarcely feasible without fuller intersectoral coordination and stronger political support.

More genuinely 'functional' forms of adult literacy and integrated programming were attempted here and there outside the purview of EWLP. In Niger, for example, from 1968 through 1973 a joint initiative of the National Literacy Service and the Nigerian Union of Agricultural Cooperatives led to a scheme where rural communities with a sufficient quota of literates could take over marketing of their own commercial crops and use a portion of the proceeds for paying local staff salaries, running their cooperative and making other community investments (Belloncle et al, 1982; Easton, 1972). The literacy programme therefore doubled as a cooperative and marketing training programme. Implementing this initiative, however, required a fundamental reorganization of local agricultural marketing procedures to effect and monitor the resulting decentralization of responsibility and resources.<sup>17</sup> More recently, the Cooperative League of the United States (CLUSA) and the Mozambican Department of Agriculture have been jointly responsible for blending literacy with progressive empowerment of marketing and production cooperatives in that country, with similar encouraging results (Bingen, 1998, Bingen et al, 2000).

One consequence of this growing awareness of the problem of knowledge application – and of chronically spotty provision for it – was increasing discussion of the topic of 'post-literacy' programming in the 1970s and 1980s, with related modifications made to a certain number of externally funded literacy programmes. This generally entailed creating a second phase of activities labeled 'post-literacy' during which beneficiaries were to undertake, still with the support or under the supervision of educational programmers, initiatives to which their new literate skills could be applied

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<sup>17</sup> Methods for nurturing literate environments born of this experience are examined in greater detail in Chapter 7.

(McCaffery et al, 2007: 63–64). These efforts were not notably successful and the debate culminated to a certain extent in the professional media with an entire issue of the *International Review of Education (IRE)* devoted to the post-literacy theme in 1989. Because points made in that forum represent a critical juncture in the development of ideas about the literate environment, and can be very helpful in building the argument of this chapter, I reprise here an extended excerpt of my own contribution to the *IRE* issue (Easton, 1989: 428–37):

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### POST-LITERACY IS MORE THAN READING MATERIALS AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

Follow-up to literacy training has traditionally been seen almost exclusively as a problem of providing adequate reading material to new literates. Rural newspapers, libraries and subsidized publishing ventures are among the activities most often suggested and pursued (e.g. Malya, 1977). More recently, the prescription has been extended to include a variety of further training options ... Important as these activities are, the image they present of post-literacy programming is fundamentally deficient. The whole side of that strategy concerning practical applications and uses of literacy is missing – or is dealt with in a phrase or two – though it poses much the larger problem.

If new literates are to improve their skills and put them to practical use, they need *both* structured occasions to apply their learning in tasks relevant to greater mastery of their environment and opportunities for further training. Some of these activities need to be organized with outside assistance; some new literates can thereafter provide for themselves. In an evaluation of functional literacy in western Mali in [the late 1970s], this tightly knit and interdependent matrix of post-literacy programming was presented in the form of the 2 x 2 scheme pictured in Table 2. The key to building up post-literacy, from both a pedagogical and a strategic point of view, is to alternate back and forth among the cells of the matrix – from structured opportunities to local initiatives and back, and from applications to new training and onward to further applications. Learning, applying and then learning more is arguably the best instructional approach. It is often the best strategic choice as well, because each demonstration of the practical uses of knowledge acquired allows one to build motivation and support for the next move up the ladder.

Identifying and structuring genuine (i.e. socially and economically remunerative) applications in a resource-poor environment requires, however, every bit as much care and skill as does the design of curriculum for continuing education.

**Table 2: Matrix of post-literacy activities**

		TYPE OF ACTIVITY	
		Applications	Continuing education
LEVEL OF ACTIVITY	Collective	Chartering and empowerment of local enterprises and cooperatives Decentralization of government functions	General education courses. Technical training sessions Resumption of formal schooling
	Individual	Community and individual self-help projects	Study circles Selfdirected learning and individual reading

### **SPECIFYING THE MEANING OF A 'LITERATE ENVIRONMENT'**

The importance of a 'literate environment' ... to retention and application of reading, writing and numeracy skills is now regularly mentioned in discussions of post-literacy ... Little is said, however, about the exact meaning and implication of these terms and even less about how to achieve such a goal. The root question ... concerns the uses to which literacy can be profitably put in any given socio-economic context, and the degree to which that framework requires and rewards this new technology of communication. The historical record ... suggests that the uses and utility of literacy are closely related to the volume, nature and complexity of transactions created by economic activity and to the social division of labour adopted for conducting these affairs. Literate competencies tend to become essential at the point where the number and complexity of everyday transactions begin to outstrip the tallying and memory capacities of individuals and where the social division of labour (or the forces of political or religious change) require accountability beyond the bounds of family or immediate geographic locale.

The very weak results recorded in most rural literacy campaigns, whether traditional or 'functional', [thus tend to] reflect an accurate assessment by the target population of the limited utility of literacy in such resource-poor (and hence 'low-transaction') environments more than they do any generic incapacity on their part to master the new skills (Easton, 1983). Strategies for better local accumulation and reinvestment of economic surplus – such as the institution of locally and democratically managed marketing and credit structures – can, however, create radically new conditions for the acquisition and uses of literacy [precisely] because they multiply the number and importance of transactions to be managed and create new structures of accountability. ...The same strategies tend to spawn additional types of post-literacy training as a necessary complement to the new investments: training in public health for paramedical personnel to staff village pharmacies, training in agricultural science for local extension agents, and so forth... They also create much more receptive conditions for the use of diverse reading materials, and particularly multiply the occasions for neo-literates to

exercise their skills by virtue of the greatly increased level of written communications among local socio-economic units and between them and central sources of financing and regulation [that they generate].

What is the nature of the reinvestment strategies that can provoke such effects? Two key characteristics stand out. First, the activities must be economically viable. Given the state of resource depletion that characterizes many of the developing country environments where literacy programmes are launched, this entails identifying measures that will create space for economic enterprise and allow greater local accumulation of surpluses. In farm cooperative movements, for example, ensuring economic viability is typically a question of adjusting pricing policies for farm inputs and outputs in such a manner as to enable the cooperative to realize a substantial profit margin by judicious management. The second requirement is that the new activities be in some sense democratically structured – that is, organized in a manner that encourages substantive participation by members, gives them progressively more responsibility for policy decisions and budgetary review, and makes staff accountable. In short, the 'literacy-inducing potential' of an activity is a function not just of the volume of transactions entailed, but also of the way in which these transactions are organized. The same volume of farm produce marketing, for example, may do little for increasing literacy and upgrading human resources in a region if it is monopolized by a few middlemen, considerably more if it is channeled through well-structured village organizations.

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For a while, post-literacy was nonetheless conceived and implemented as a separate and second phase in projects funded by external donors. One of the conclusions of this strand of thought, well expressed in a 1990 article by Bernard Dumont, former chief technical advisor of the Mali EWLP endeavour, was that henceforth 'post-literacy should be implemented *before* literacy' itself! Though this notion gained little widespread acceptance, due perhaps to its political costs, the advent of the New Literacy Studies at least put an increased focus on the concrete uses to which literacy could and was already being put in the environments where those acquiring this knowledge live and work. And scattered continuing evidence of post-literacy efforts and programmes (e.g. Niwaz et al., 2010; TZSS, 2003; Van Der Veen and Preece, 2005) testify to the pertinence of the issue.

Happily, treatment of post-literacy and literacy environment concerns in a few of the recent *Global Monitoring Reports* and publications from the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and the UNESCO Institute for

Statistics indicate that the concern is by no means dead, though – as we will have occasion to discuss presently in greater detail – attention remains focused primarily on the supply side of the problem.

## Issues of language

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The notion of a literate environment, like the conception and execution of literacy programmes themselves, is fraught with questions of language choice and the relative status or accessibility of different modes of communication – international, national and local languages; higher and lower status forms of discourse; and languages that are better or less well endowed with literature resources and media of communication (Robinson, 1990, 2007; Mazrui, 1996; Roy-Campbell, 2001; UNESCO Bangkok, 2008). In addition, the palette of linguistic situations varies radically between countries with a single (or one clearly dominant) language of communication, those with several alternate ones, and those where hundreds of different languages are spoken – often a product of the vagaries of history and even physical terrain.

Some of the interior nations of the African continent have a relatively limited number of indigenous languages. For example, there are three in Rwanda and Burundi, four in Swaziland, thirteen in Somalia, and nineteen in Zimbabwe. Those of the Sahel and the East African coast share a small number of *lingua franca* tongues (e.g. Wolof, Moré, Bambara, Hausa, Swahili), thanks to the unifying effects of very traversable terrain and the long-range trade it allowed. However, countries along much of the rest of the coast or in highly tropical regions, where the land is broken up by rivers and rainforest, may count well more than a hundred (UNESCO, 2009d: 304-305). Nigeria holds the apparent African record with 510, followed by Cameroon with 279 and the Democratic Republic of Congo with 214. For the thirty-seven nations of continental Africa, the median value is forty-one (Zambia) and the average is sixty-five. An extreme example from Southeast Asia – Papua New Guinea, with only a fraction of Nigeria's size and population – counts over 800 (Mühlhäuser, 2006).

Under such circumstances, which are rendered still more perplexing by severe resource limitations, it is clear that difficult choices must be made, at least in the mid-term. The playing field, moreover, is far from level. Paraphrasing George Orwell, one might say that, if all languages are created equal from a linguistic standpoint, in fact some are definitely more equal than others in political terms. Decisions about and uses of language are heavily influenced by the power and resource bases of the communities speaking each of them, as well as by their demography. Louis-Jean Calvet, the French linguist, has suggested that the best technical definition of the term 'dialect', much used in planning discourse during the last century both in Europe and the developing world, is simply 'a language without political power' (Calvet, 2001).

Several language-related factors highlighted in the literature are worth recalling here before considering their implications for the issue of literate environments:

- First, as noted, multilingual situations are the norm for the majority of the world's populations and, in fact, are becoming more so through the effects of immigration, which has transformed countries previously considered monolingual into environments where multiple languages meet (Burck, 2005).
- Linguists refer to any given population group's primary language or mother tongue as 'L1' and the others with which it must deal as 'L2, L3' etc., up to the limit of those practically relevant in its environment. Much of the world's population, therefore, and particularly those not native speakers of a major international language, are either presently or prospectively in at least a *trilingual situation*, needing competency in L1, or the group's own 'native' tongue; L2, or the most relevant language of regional and/or national communication; and L3, or the most relevant medium of international communication.<sup>18</sup>

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18 Robinson (1996) suggests a similar trilingual solution. It is also worth noting that multilingual competence is much wider spread among resident African populations than it is, say, in North America. In the years I spent in Mali, it was not unusual to encounter children in the *Boucle du Niger* region who could speak five languages before going to school – or without ever having attended it. Few young people in the region of the United States where I grew up – excepting recent immigrants – could handle more than one.

- Policy concerning language promotion and use likewise comes in several variants. One version may apply to political discourse, another to the market place, a third to religious institutions and yet another – or several others – in schools of different types or across different sorts of communication media. It is particularly notable that official national language policy on the one hand and policies concerning *language use in education* on the other frequently diverge (Spolsky, 2004).
- There is increasingly solid evidence that respect and use of L1 for education – or at least for early education – is pedagogically advisable as well as linguistically preferable from the perspective of language and culture preservation, since children tend to learn best in their mother tongue and in that way most easily constitute a basis for then mastering other ‘codes’ (Benson, 2005; Dubceck et al., 2012; Trudell, 2012; Webley, 2006).
- Sociologically and economically, however, the case is somewhat less clear and there may be reasons for different educational practice. Parents often prefer that their children receive schooling in the language that they feel is most likely to guarantee their future success in the world of work or social exchange and, where national or international means of communication have the most status or power, the high-success medium is typically not L1. That, of course, does not mean either that the parents in question have a monopoly of truth in this realm, or that the best way for a minority language speaker to acquire L2 or L3 is necessarily to experience it as the language of instruction in the early grades of school. A good argument can be made from experience that in fact those who begin instruction in their own language have an equal or better chance of mastering others. (Webley, 2006) But respecting and confirming that reasoning has its costs. The development and staffing of viable early childhood education programmes in many, let alone all, local languages in any given country, and then the provision of means to transit smoothly into another medium of learning, can be a very taxing and expensive proposition (Spolsky, 2004): so many different manuals to create, so many different kinds of teachers to train.

- There are arguments for and against respect of L1 on the political front as well, and the balance among them tends to depend on the particular complexion of governments in power. To over-generalize, those to the left of the policy spectrum often favour respect and empowerment of existing popular cultures, whereas those to the right are more likely to emphasize the imperatives of the (increasingly global) marketplace and so the importance of acquiring national and/or international languages from the outset. In addition, 'national unity' has long been evoked as a major reason for making sure that the future citizens, and particularly the future power brokers, of a country speak the same language, however many different tongues may be 'native' to it. As Kwame Nkrumah, hero of Ghanaian independence and first President, famously said, in a country where ethnographers catalogue seventy-nine different indigenous languages, 'Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto you.' (Today, nearly fifty years later, Ghana recognizes nine official languages, including English.)
- Finally, ample evidence (e.g. Robinson, 1990; Tiemtoré, 2005) demonstrates that both the creation and the mastery of written transcriptions for the languages of minority groups in Africa can have a powerful motivational impact on their learning and a preservative one on their cultural heritage; although others, like Van Dyken (1990), question whether this alone will justify the eventual use of multiple languages in African countries.

While most of these crisscrossing arguments relate principally to childhood education, they have their relevance and have often been debated in adult education as well. I myself first arrived in Niger in the mid-1960s to lend a hand with an adult literacy programme in the Hausa language that had been created through government fiat and UNESCO support. I remember being addressed reproachfully by some of the potential beneficiaries in the following terms: *Mushe, koya mamu abin da muka sani!* – 'Government clerk, teach us what we already know!' In short, Hausa was perceived as something they already possessed quite well enough, whether or not they

were able to write it – or write it in Latin characters<sup>19</sup> – and the only interest of adult education lay in learning something new and more marketable. Literacy and NFE programmes have typically had greater latitude with respect to language use than formal education, in part due to their lesser perceived strategic importance; but the issues are by no means absent.

What relevance do these issues have, however, for the constitution of a literate environment? Certainly, the availability of written material in a given language exercises a major influence on any effort to constitute a 'print rich' environment or to offer multiple occasions for new learners to exercise their developing skills in reading and writing; and this factor, at least, tips the balance slightly in favour of languages with an existing literature and written tradition. But, in fact, a number of other factors must be taken into consideration, and they may be handily divided into supply and demand categories.

- On the supply side lie issues of local availability, accessibility and usability of written material in different languages and their pertinence to the needs of the population group in question. The words 'local' and 'pertinence' in the preceding sentence are significant: materials available only from specialized outlets or in highly urbanized settings do little for the actual density of reading opportunities outside those particular environs – and publications or media that do not intersect with or make a live difference to the preoccupations of the social group in question likewise may have minimal effect. One can almost phrase the issue as a question of the quantity of relevant written material in the appropriate language or language(s) that 'passes under the nose' of a new literate – to use the typical French expression (*passer sous le nez de l'intéressé*) – in the course of a given period of time, although in fact the true measure lies not just in this issue of very local provision and flow, but equally in that of personally relevant demands and uses for the information that the written medium most conveniently conveys. At the same time,

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<sup>19</sup> In fact, a certain proportion of adults in the country – and a larger one of those in urban areas or involved in market occupations – did know how to write Hausa in Arabic characters: what is known as the *ajami* system.

languages that are regularly used for informal written communication, even if they are represented by few officially published books or formal media outlets, may constitute some elements of a literate environment, as the examples of the N'ko and Tifinagh (Tamasheq) scripts suggest (Oyler, 2002; Savage, 2008).

- Considerations on the demand side include the degree to which institutions and organizational activities in the environment require or motivate members of the group in question to communicate in writing and to use written resources in the conduct of their affairs – as well, of course, as the extent to which writing in the language in question is recognized by them. All kinds of literate resources may be *supplied*, but if the tools of reading and writing in the particular language are not to some degree in-built necessities and ingrained habits of the institutional structures in which people participate, then the intensity of their use will inevitably be lower.

## Lessons from the literature

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The material reviewed above should make at least two things clear:

- There is no existing canon of methodology for the assessment of literate environments that is directly applicable to the situation in Africa, though a few efforts reviewed in the next chapter have been devoted to examining the topic.
- There is nonetheless a good deal of disparate insight across fields of research and neighbouring domains of professional endeavour that can be drawn upon both substantively and methodologically to help overcome the deficit.

From a substantive point of view, the literature review reaffirms in varied ways the idea that literacy acquisition and use compose *a system that is firmly anchored in and dependent on a surrounding environment*. Current literacy researchers have tried to capture this notion with the metaphor of

an 'ecology', which the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines in part as 'the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment'.<sup>20</sup> The related concept of 'human ecology' is further specified as a field of knowledge 'dealing especially with the spatial and temporal interrelationships between humans and their economic, social, and political organization'.<sup>21</sup>

In particular, the literature review suggests that – historically speaking – literacy acquisition has been closely tied to the spread of managerial responsibility and statecraft at all levels (and so to the production and control of surplus value that requires management or governance), but has proved at the same time an important instrument in cultural, religious and political domains. Given those paired and sometimes contrasting uses, efforts to propagate literacy and to achieve 'education for all' have not infrequently been countered by less avowed efforts to limit and regulate it. Organized campaigns for its generalization are perhaps, as a natural consequence, a relatively recent historical phenomenon and one subject to hidden as well as more evident obstacles.

Methodologically speaking, the greatest challenge lies in dealing with an environment that, by definition, stretches well beyond literacy, while conditioning its acquisition and use, and that therefore cannot be apprehended or assessed solely with the tools of educational evaluation. Thanks, however, to adoption of the environmental metaphor in a number of allied fields, there are increasingly plentiful examples of ways to undertake the necessary assessment; reflection on the topic within the realm of adult literacy itself has at least progressed from a concern with literacy's 'functions' or workplace connections to a focus on the whole 'post-literacy' realm and onward to the richer appreciation of the varied linguistic and social 'ecologies' of literacy studied by New Literacy Studies (NLS) researchers, though mostly at individual and local levels as opposed to the more aggregate kind of relevance to policy.

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20 <http://mw1.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/ecology>. (Accessed: 21 September, 2010).

21 <http://mw1.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/human+ecology> (Idem).

# Chapter 3

## Methods for Assessing the Status of Literate Environments

**G**iven the varied perspectives on literate environments reviewed in Chapter 2, how do we realistically assess their current state in sub-Saharan Africa? How do we identify the obstacles impeding their development and the factors most likely to favour it? Answering those questions is almost as important as performing the assessment itself, since the development of appropriate procedures will surely outlast the relevance of any particular time-bound effort to investigate current conditions.

Unfortunately one finds few studies devoted to that effort, although there are examples of methodologies for assessing related dimensions of literate practice or educational programming that can provide some guidance, and initial attempts at deriving procedure for literate environment assessment have begun to appear. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a UNESCO report of the Experts' Meeting on *Aspects of Literacy Assessment* (UNESCO, 2004a) gives some space to 'assessing literacy use' and notes that 'new measures need to be found which focus on use' (2004a: 25). The subsequent pages of the same document at least review a series of considerations preliminary to developing such a methodology. The 2008 *Global Monitoring Report* goes a bit further, outlining four domains in which it will be important to monitor literate environments: schools, workplaces, households and community spaces (UNESCO, 2007). But neither text gives anything like full treatment to the issue. As the 2008 GMR (*idem*) explains:

*Measuring and monitoring literate environments is a challenge; in the absence of any systematic data, this section can only underline their importance and discuss briefly how they might be monitored (2007: 65).*

More recently, a publication from UNESCO Bangkok (2011) on *Creating and Sustaining Literate Environments* offers a helpful inventory of different dimensions of the social environments that support literacy retention and use, while a Technical Paper from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012) includes a chapter on "Methods and Tools" for assessing the quality of school learning environments.

Below I briefly review a series of other potential sources for appropriate methodology and then draw a few additional lessons about the nature of the task, before outlining the particular approach used in this book. The principal lesson and best counsel, however, is probably just to keep it simple. Given the rudimentary state of current reflection on literate environments, let alone appropriate procedures for assessing them – as well as the intrinsic importance of the topic – we are at a stage where it is critical not to miss the forest for the trees. That means, among other things, not focusing prematurely on one partial aspect of the issue while neglecting others that equally and jointly determine outcomes. The danger of doing so is the more acute as educators – like most professionals for that matter – tend to be afflicted with uni-sectoral blinders. Education and instruction are what we know. The factors circumscribing or amplifying their effects are more likely to escape our sight.

We will thus best be served by a broad angle of vision, even if it necessarily misses some of the detail – one that enables us to distinguish the interrelationship of neighbouring fields of practice and thought that are relevant to diagnosis of the situation, while taking into consideration both supply and demand factors.

## **Potential sources for a methodology of literate environment assessment**

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There are numerous examples of related approaches in neighbouring fields, some more directly relevant to the assessment of learning environments than others, and the latter – alas – better elaborated than the former. I will consider briefly and in an order that proceeds roughly from the micro to the macro level: (a) classroom and home literacy environment assessments in early childhood education; (b) ethnographic studies of literacy practices; (c) organizational learning and learning organization inquiries in business and government settings; (d) post-literacy evaluation and tracer studies in adult, vocational and non-formal education; (e) the techniques of education

sector assessment and manpower supply and demand studies in educational planning; and (f) the tradition of participatory and action research.

## **Classroom and home literacy environment assessments**

Methodologies in this first domain are exemplified by the Wolfersberger Classroom Literacy Environment Profile (Hoffman et al, 2004), the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Toolkit of the Educational Development Center (Smith and Dickenson, 2002), the Creating a Classroom Literacy Environment procedure of the Children's Literacy Initiative, and the Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation (CHELLO) (Neuman, Koh and Dwyer, 2008). They are all based on first-hand observation of the setting in which literacy skills are acquired.

As Neuman, Koh and Dwyer (idem) note, most such instruments – like CHELLO – are built on the premises and methods of ecological psychology (or its variant, 'environmental psychology'), which, broadly speaking, investigates the reciprocal relationship between human behaviour and its environment. CHELLO is emblematic of most related approaches in specifying observation of the following dimensions of the environment:

### **Physical design features that are supportive of literacy**

- Use of space (e.g. availability of small well-defined 'niches' and 'nooks' in which children may read)
- Use of materials that involve children in constructive 'language-generating' activities – e.g. block building that requires cooperative work, as opposed to pull-toys
- Placement and grouping of objects (e.g. clustering related literacy-relevant objects like those relating to composing and mailing letters in a carefully associated manner)
- Proximity of quality reading materials at children's eye level.

## **Social and interactive supports for literacy learning**

- Engaging children in 'rich dialogues'
- Creating secure settings where children feel the emotional freedom to engage in innovative activity
- Sponsoring activities that require joint reasoning and collaboration.

Assessment therefore essentially involves: (a) verifying to what degree given micro-environments are in fact characterized by features like these; and then (b) carefully observing the nature of student interaction with and within them, as well as the apparent literacy-related effects.

## **Ethnographic studies of literacy practices**

Originating in the early 1980s (e.g. Scribner and Cole, 1981; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984), a school of research subsequently labelled the 'New Literacy Studies' began focusing on what could be learned from careful ethnographic study of actual literacy practices: how people used such skills, what codes and languages they employed in different settings, what meanings were associated with the activity, and how socio-political context influenced or constrained its performance. Seminal work in the following decade (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Waters, 1998) and the more recent one (e.g. Blommaert, 2008; Prinsloo and Baynham, 2008) further advanced the effort to 'understand local literacies' and probe 'grassroots practice'.

Some of the fruit to date of the New Literacy Studies was summarized above in Chapter 2. What concerns us here is the approach typically used in carrying out such research. The methodology is broadly qualitative and ethnographic, involving interviews, case studies, occasional surveys and examination of artifacts like diaries and letters, or inventory and study of other forms of written communication like account ledgers, religious devotionals or poetry. It is generally undertaken to throw light on *how literacy is actually used*, the contexts where it is deployed, and the meaning it has for those involved. Case studies include, insofar as possible, histories or observation of literate

activity in the particular local settings concerned. Like most qualitative research, such investigations aspire to 'thick' description of actual events or meaning attributions: that is, detailed recording of what happened or was said, the settings within which it was done, and the enviroing circumstances or influences that impinge upon it.

When problems arise with the methodology, it is because actual events are the intersection of multiple frames of reference – the varying cultures of participants, the exigencies of different life moments, the parameters set down by environmental circumstances, and a variety of super-ordinate social systems – to such a degree that they can be exceedingly difficult to identify and portray fully, let alone integrate into a coherent picture. Things inevitably get left out, to be discovered later. In the last decade or more, there has thus been an effort to better situate such ethnographies by taking more fully into account those other levels of the overall ecological system in which they are embedded – institutional policies, nodes of socio-economic power and political influences. These inevitably impinge on their use, but got scant play in early ground-level research (Maddox, 2007b). Recent studies are serving to flesh out this enlarged methodology by focusing, for example, on the ways in which organizational policies and norms condition workplace literacy practices (Karlsson, 2009), the interrelations between literacy behaviours and housing struggles in South Africa (Kell, 2008), and the joint effect of 'micro- and macro-level variables' on literacy outcomes in the endangered language communities of indigenous Mexican groups (Paciotto, 2010).

## **Organizational learning inquiries**

This particular strain of literature originated with Argyris and Schon's (1978) classic reflections on the importance of organizational learning in business and administrative settings, mentioned above. It was considerably extended by the writings of Peter Senge (e.g. 1990; Senge et al, 1999) and others (Abu Khadra and Rawabdeh, 2006; Bowen et al, 2007) on what they term the 'learning organization': industries, public agencies and nonprofit institutions structured and managed in ways that promote continual on-the-job learning by employees and direct application of the new skills or knowledge

acquired for improvement of organizational performance and enhancement of personal fulfillment at work. Less has been written about just *how* to gauge the amount of organizational learning transpiring or (most relevant to our current purposes) the degree to which institutions have in fact become 'learning organizations'. Nevertheless, both the general tendencies of this field and some of the more recent attempts at such assessment are at least informative to our ends.

To begin with, it is clear that in organizational settings such methods entail looking at *events that transpire in the environment outside of training per se*, and yet are highly complementary to and supportive of it. A clear conclusion throughout the theoretical and experience-based literature is that, absent a supportive environment and immediately or rapidly materializing opportunities for beneficial application of new learning, training is largely a waste of time if not a detriment to organizational health and productivity (Short and Opengart, 2000).

Secondly, this literature illustrates a critical condition of the constitution of literate environments: how well learning habits and incentives are built into the structures and procedures of the institutional environment. Thought has been given to related issues in business, government agency and school settings. Most of it originated in the business environment, where prime emphasis has frequently been put on organizational culture, attitudes and values.<sup>22</sup> Prescriptions in this realm can at times seem rather vague and impalpable, if certainly important; but other and more 'empirical' directions have been taken by related business research. Dealtry (2005: 470–85), for example, distills from organizational literature and experience *nine key factors* that should be assessed in determining to what extent organizations have developed a substantial learning environment.<sup>23</sup> It is particularly interesting to note that this configuration seems most analogous and applicable not to literacy programmes *per se*, but rather to the larger social agency structure

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22 See, for example, the interview with Peter Senge at [http://www.solonline.org/organizational\\_overview/](http://www.solonline.org/organizational_overview/)

23 Some of the factors in this model are slightly rephrased to make more evident parallels with the situation of adult literacy.

or development strategy of which they are part – a point to which we shall return.

1. **Designation of an 'intervention platform'.** That is, an agency or set of actors that can 'strategically manage the persistent organic changes that are generated by a [learning] environment'.
2. **Funding.** The activity must be identified and treated as 'a major strand of investment at the heart of business development'.
3. **Strategy.** 'The formulation of business [or organizational] strategy must now involve [related stakeholder] education as a major developmental strand in the analysis of strengths and weaknesses.'
4. **Policy and operations management.** 'Identification of learning needs from current [organizational operations] and participat[ion] in learning policy development relating to every aspect of operations' must be an integral part of the responsibilities of line management.
5. **Flexibility in learning service delivery.** The entity must be capable of delivering varied types of formal and informal training to personnel and situations most requiring it in a highly flexible and effective manner.
6. **Talent development.** Learning-supported career paths for employees must be made 'much more visible'.
7. **Performance management.** Greater 'decisional power' or discretion must be granted to line personnel as a result of training and learning in order to achieve – and reliably monitor achievement of – organizational goals.
8. **Employees.** The reorientations evoked above require at the same time *psychological changes* on the part of employees and stakeholders, and therefore a parallel effort to monitor and optimize the feasibility and quality of the experience for them.
9. **Skills and competencies.** Although there are specificities in the needs of each organization, the common denominator of the skills that must be

learned, and arguably the most important among them, is learning-to-learn itself.

## Tracer studies

Tracer studies involve just what the term implies: a systematic effort to follow and then analyse the subsequent itineraries, employments and literacy-related activities of learners, and to verify what those who complete some given cycle of education or training actually do with the skills, knowledge and certification they have acquired, and how they go about applying or upgrading these attributes. Such inquiries stem from an old tradition in manpower supply and demand analysis, further discussed below, that entails closely examining employment trajectories and might be thought of as a precursor of the New Literacy Studies emphasis on the *process* of knowledge acquisition and the *usage* of the abilities acquired. This sort of research is particularly well developed in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), although some of the organizational learning literature (e.g. Lantz and Friedrich, 2003) takes a similar approach.

The methodology is relatively straightforward (except for daunting sampling and survey administration considerations), though the existing literature on the subject is not extensive (Chau and Witcher, 2005). Studies entail checking back on graduates or trainees on a number of occasions following their completion of study in order to see what they have become, what they are doing and how they now view the utility of their training – and then analysing these data both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Reverse tracer studies turn this procedure around (see e.g. Easton et al, 1998 for a literacy-related example). They start with people occupied in different segments of the labour market and social system and then seek to establish, through interview and/or survey, what training, education and experience itineraries they followed to arrive at that point.

## Post-literacy inquiries

Post-literacy studies – discussed at some length in Chapter 2 – constitute one example of tracer methodology adapted to adult and non-formal education, though one more often recommended than actually carried out. They are most helpful when they span *both* (a) varieties of continuing education or learning in which new literates are able to engage, *and* (b) instances of socio-economic application of skills learned – and when they include activities initiated by the neo-literates themselves on the basis of locally available resources, as well as those sponsored or ‘enabled’ by other actors and organizations (Easton, 1989).<sup>24</sup> Typically, the few studies of this type actually conducted have not taken as broad a perspective (e.g. Dave, Ouane and Sutton, 1989; Xie Guodong and Zhang Zhupeng, 2003).

A series of studies on literate environments in Senegal (Shiohata, 2005, 2009, 2010; Shiohata and Pryor, 2008) provides one good and instructive example. Shiohata (2005) develops a ‘matrix of the learning environment’ for use in investigating two urban settings in Senegal. The matrix cross-hatches three ‘locations’ – public spaces, household spaces and private spaces – with the following types of publications or uses of writing: political and administrative materials and activities, economic and commercial ones, livelihood-related uses and supports, educational uses and items, religious and cultural activities and resources, and personal uses and artifacts like graffiti, letters and diaries. The methodology itself then involves both inventorying the nature and frequency of different instances of these resources or events in the two communities investigated, and interviewing a sample of stakeholders concerning the meanings that they attach to these activities.

The procedure and the perspective are both useful, but at the same time largely omit the demand-side issues to which this study has alluded and that arguably constitute the biggest gap in our understanding of literate environments. These begin to surface more palpably in the most recent of the articles cited, at least insofar as the environmental reading materials

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24 In essence, these indications for sampling domains of inquiry reproduce the ‘matrix of post-literacy activities’ portrayed in Table 2 above and extend the one presented in Shiohata (2010).

and prompts reviewed in fact offer an initial picture of different realms of functional demand for literate skills in an African urban milieu. The authors note (Shiohata et al, 2010: 266) that '[s]eparation of the literate environment from the broader socio-economic environment may hide key problems: poverty and deprivation of basic social services', but does not explore further how such factors affect the intensity of contextual support for literacy use or can be effectively addressed.

This whole arena, in any case, offers intriguing possibilities for 'operationalizing' the main thrusts of the New Literate Studies and making them more applicable to 'meso' and 'macro' environments as well as micro ones, while prompting investigation of the socio-political and economic dimensions of literate environments, as well as linguistic and ethnographic factors. Further remarks were made on that topic above in the section on ethnographic studies of literacy practices, and a few recommendations about directions to take in extending the NLS agenda in this direction are offered in the concluding chapter.

## **Education sector assessment and manpower supply and demand studies**

The progression in scope of analysis, followed above, roughly built into the sequence of domains and types of methodology for literate environment assessment, now brings us to the most large-scale or macro variety of such efforts.

Spalletti (2008) recounts how manpower supply and demand (MSD) methods grew out of the early post-revolutionary social planning efforts in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, and were then adopted and adapted by institutional economists in the Western world. These approaches essentially involved using the results of surveys and interviewing to forecast the likely output of current educational programmes and institutions (i.e. a 'matrix' of types of graduates by levels of competence) in a given country or region. Their qualifications and anticipated labour market destinations were then compared with projections of the likely nature and volume of need for different kinds of skills

and occupations in the workforce, based on forecasting quantitative and qualitative changes in production in different sectors of the economy from trend lines and alternate high-probability scenarios (Kaufman and Brown, 1968). The most explicit purpose was to foresee and diagnose mismatches or bottlenecks – in other words, discrepancies between anticipated need and forecast supply – that might slow economic growth or imperil welfare, and so make it possible to use educational planning as a means of adjusting supply to demand (or social and economic planning as a means of doing the reverse).

The technique, which experienced a heyday in the 1950s and 1960s as a support for planning in new developing nations, was in fact rather wooden and subject to major errors due to imperfections and gaps in available data as well as indeterminate results from calculation. But it was not without its virtues as well. As educational planners tended to quip in the years following the relative demise of formal MSD approaches, the methodology of manpower supply and demand analysis had many problems, but manpower supply and demand *analysts* themselves turned out in fact to be highly useful, for it was a real benefit to have people around who tracked and studied changes in labour market behaviour and the employment of graduates of different types of education in the way they did.

Education sector assessment (ESA) – a methodology widely used by international donors to education starting in the 1970s and then adapted to other sectors – is both a lineal descendent of MSD and an amplification of it (Windham and Chapman, 1986). ESA essentially involves gathering data and opinions to establish a portrait of student flows, administrative operations, and costs and outcomes in the different parts of a national education system – primary education, secondary education, higher education, vocational-technical training, non-formal education and so forth – and then using them to assess the internal and external efficiency of different cycles, as well as key investments worth making in each. It is thus very much a *macro* approach to educational assessment tailored to the needs of planning. It also typically includes in some sequence or form a type of MSD analysis, a cost-benefit assessment of different cycles and subsectors of education (often with rate

of return calculations), identification of relative unit costs, plus a good deal of common sense collation and analysis of other indicators of subsectoral operations. It was for some time billed as a fully empirical approach to educational planning in developing countries ('data-driven decision making') and in fact served to justify a number of major policy and financial choices in foreign aid to education throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>25</sup> But it was always plagued by problems with the accuracy, validity and completeness (or representativeness) of the data used (Easton, 1988); and in the last fifteen years has been increasingly abandoned or fundamentally modified by the inclusion of more qualitative data, stakeholder input and participatory analysis (e.g. Adams, Kee and Lin, 2001).

Perhaps the leading characteristic of both related methodologies lies in their 'systemic' approach – that is, their attempt to carry out observation at a macro level and to fit the resulting information into an organized framework that would yield an overall picture, not just of the state of education in a given country or region, but of its evolution or dynamics and its relation to the larger socio-economic environment. Insofar as concern with 'literate environments' represents a roughly similar effort to link literacy to its context, lessons and methods from ESA have at least some pertinence to the topic, however different the inspiration and actual uses.

## **Participatory and action research**

The last source of inspiration for assessment of literate environments considered here is less a variety of focus that fits neatly into the progression from micro to macro sketched above, than a question of validity and procedure that cuts across all of them. The set of design and methodological considerations most often grouped under the heading 'participatory and action research' refers to a long-standing tradition of stakeholder involvement and direct field engagement in social science inquiry, going back to Kurt Lewin (1951), Budd Hall (1975, 2005) and Orlando Fals-Borda

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25 Given its sometime tendentious uses, critics enjoyed dubbing ESA methodology 'decision-driven data analysis' (Easton, 1988).

(Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991) – and inspired in good part by the thought of Antonio Gramsci (e.g. Kiros, 1985) and Paolo Freire (1973).

In very few words, participatory research, action research and their hybrid, participatory action research (PAR), can be characterized as efforts to enhance both the validity of research studies and the relevance of their results to the lives of intended beneficiaries by finding systematic ways of involving the latter group – or some representatives from it – in the design, execution, analysis and interpretation of the research itself, as well as in its subsequent application to practice. Without going further into the particularities of these methods, well presented in works such as Atweh et al (1998) and Bradbury and Reason (2001), it should be evident that inquiries focusing on how people *use* literacy may benefit immensely from their active involvement – and that outside researchers probing such lived experience bear an ethical responsibility for making their procedures as transparent and accessible as is feasible. In fact, concern for appropriate inclusion must extend in varied and carefully nurtured ways to the entire network of stakeholders involved, and prompt strong alliance with interested researchers and institutions within the countries in question, a principle admirably reflected in the presentation of the study on *Languages and education in Africa*, edited by Brock-Utne and Skattum (2009).

## Synthesis

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What then do we learn from this capsule review of methodologies relevant to the assessment of literate environments? Several common denominator issues and approaches stand out:

- Two shared concerns across methodologies seems to be: (a) a ‘systemic’ view of the environment within which educational programmes operate (and in which their graduates must find new roles), and (b) a relational perspective that places a strong emphasis on *linkages* between education and other sectors of the society and economy. The systemic ambition typically entails ‘mapping out’ interacting domains in social life in one

fashion or another in order better to visualize and influence their joint results.

- Although data shortcomings pose major problems in almost all of these types of assessment – particularly in circumstances of widespread poverty or oppression where the reliability and availability of valid information, not to say its political acceptability, can be very difficult to ensure – analysts manage to compensate by attaching greater importance to *orders of magnitude* and to determination of trends, directions and constraints than they do to exact numbers.
- The background analytical framework employed in most cases highlights supply, demand and their interaction. Both quantitative and qualitative data and analysis are used in reaching conclusions about these factors. Micro and macro-level analysis is, however, rarely well dovetailed in these assessment procedures, though they offer many opportunities for refining the synthetic approach.
- The baseline purpose of assessment is generally to illuminate the way forward, but the degree to which causal questions, as opposed to largely descriptive ones, can be addressed and answered is seldom clarified.
- The entire exercise is designed to be directly useful to policy-makers, a domain in which half a loaf is distinctly preferable to none, where the best may (as the French say) be a sworn enemy of the good<sup>26</sup> and where ‘satisficing’ – as opposed to ‘optimizing’ – is, as Herbert Simon (1947) first noted, the decision-making rule.
- Wherever possible, participatory and action-oriented studies provide the strongest guarantees of valid and useful results.
- Finally, heightened attention to environments – both pedagogical and political – that condition learning in recent international reports on education and at least incrementally increasing mention of literate or

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26 *Le mieux est l'ennemi du bien.*

literacy environments in these documents suggest that the time is ripe for a methodological leap forward.

The New Literacy Studies have thankfully provided a good template for ground-level research into how literacy is in fact *used* in particular local settings where literate environments take lived shape. To date, they have much less often provided a sense of how these individual experiences fit together and what it would take to derive a representative picture of the distribution of use across communities and countries. They have also tended not to account systematically for the institutional, cultural and contextual forces that shape the use of literacy and for the processes by which those factors themselves change. At the macro level, on the other hand, it remains far from clear how to develop what the 2008 GMR calls 'national measures of the literate environment' with much validity, given the spotty and unreliable nature of data of that magnitude.<sup>27</sup>

In general terms, therefore, the task seems to involve building research up from the local setting (with the collaboration of supportive central agencies), deriving hypotheses and insights from ethnographic and case studies in particular contexts where representativity is inevitably unclear, and then using them to inform assessments at progressively higher levels where both the variability of conditions across social units and the factors that help explain that variability can be grasped. The next challenge would then be to move from the local to the 'meso' level – the supra-local situations where individual practices more clearly encounter institutional norms and external forces, and where their interplay, as well as the intersection of supply and demand, is more evident. Such larger-gauge studies will inevitably be plagued by problems of restricted sampling and limited generalizability, which typically restrict results to order-of-magnitude conclusions. But in a domain as critical and poorly understood as the evolving nature of literate environments,

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27 The UNESCO Institution for Lifelong Learning and the regional bureau of UNESCO in Dakar, Africa (BREDA) have in fact undertaken this very task for the francophone countries of West Africa. See <http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/literacy-and-basic-skills/news-target/international-capacity-building-seminar-on-the-measurement-of-literacy-acquisition/21cfff9900073330634d313f3f95a/>

order-of-magnitude resolution already constitutes a real achievement and a genuine step forward.

## Approaches for the present study

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To what degree can we assess in this book the current state of the literate environment in sub-Saharan Africa? How should we go about it? What methods can be borrowed from the varied strategies portrayed above?

Those questions raise in turn another important one: To what extent does this assessment require that we attempt to grasp not just *what* is presently transpiring or has so far been achieved in the various realms of the literate environment, but also *why* these results (good and/or bad) and not others have been obtained – in other words, the causal and diagnostic issue? Are we simply looking at manifestations or also trying to uncover their roots? The former subject has its own difficulties, given the relative lack of easily accessible current information on different dimensions of the literate environment in Africa. The latter purpose is even more ambitious, since causal connections are not easy to pinpoint among the welter of contributing or simply co-existing conditions. Nonetheless, it is the purpose of greatest importance to future planning and policy, and one that cannot easily be dodged in a book devoted not just to documenting, but to *developing*, literate environments in Africa.

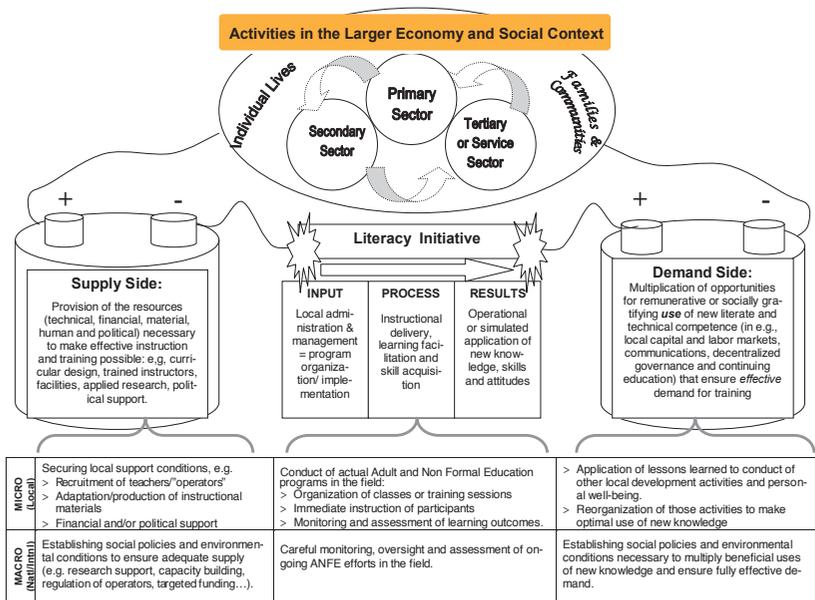
As mentioned, the ambitions of this study are primarily exploratory: to get at least an approximate sense of the overall situation and to begin suggesting the principal problems that it poses, what their causes may be, and which remedies seem most promising – all this in the interests of helping to map out an agenda for future research and action that will enable us to better address such challenges. The sequence to be proposed in the remainder of this chapter and then followed in the balance of the study will therefore involve three steps:

1. First, *mapping the field* – that is, distinguishing the different domains in which current conditions and possible underlying factors need to be examined.
2. Next, *reviewing* successively what we know of the *status* in each as well as *lessons learned from leading initiatives* in the field.
3. Finally, using the latter (lessons learned) along with the testimony of the literature considered in Chapter 2 to *formulate at least a series of good guesses* or first hypotheses *about the causal factors at play*, in the hope of managing in this manner to trace out a possible agenda of study and action for discussion.

## Mapping the field

The initial step in mapping is to separate the field into the two related domains of 'supply' and 'demand' that are the source of much of its dynamics: on the one hand, the availability and nature of people with literate skills plus the provision of materials and resources for their acquisition and exercise (the supply factors); and, on the other, the density of functions and locally beneficial activities requiring that sort of competence (the demand forces). As has already been noted, the two domains overlap in many ways, a phenomenon that is addressed in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5. Illustrative detail is sketched below and represented graphically in Figure 2, a scheme designed at the same time to suggest the 'electric potential' that solid connections between supply and demand can create.

Figure 2: Creating the “Electric Potential” of literacy programming



On the supply side we then have domains and considerations like the following:

- The magnitude and composition of both the ‘stock’ and the ‘flow’ of literate people within the region in question – i.e. the size and nature of the existing group having such skills, and the quantity and quality of additions to (and subtractions from) that population in any given time period.
- The availability of opportunities for continuing education and self-directed learning beyond the level already attained by the people in question.
- The accessibility, origins, density and quality (relevance to readers’ interests and needs, legibility, etc.) of written publications in the language(s) in question, including notably:
  - Books
  - Newspapers and other print media

- The density and nature of signage and institutional documents, forms and instructions in the language
- The accessibility, origins, density and quality (relevance to readers' interests and needs, legibility, etc.) of electronic media in the language(s) in question
- The density, nature, accessibility and resources of local libraries and other outlets for written material in the language(s) in question.

On the demand side, however, domains like the following must be taken into careful consideration in mapping out the density of conditions that *require* and support the exercise of different kinds of literacy and numeracy within the relevant environment, as well as the possibility of creating such circumstances:

- Labour market and employment conditions
- Opportunities for self-employment and local capitalization
- Levels of decentralization and local capacity development or use in political governance and public administrative functions
- Patterns of democratization, leadership accountability and citizen control in organizational and institutional life
- Uses and status of literacy among laity in local religious practices, and
- The popularity of local cultural composition and expression using the written form of the language.

## **Status review**

As we shall see, information on these various factors will have to be pieced together and is seldom found in a single source or reported with much completeness and reliability. Available data inevitably constitute a non-random and fairly reduced sample of what might potentially be collected. Nonetheless, the attempt to review this information should both yield a valuable first sense of the dimensions of the situation and the relative weight

of its different components, and prompt us to clearer thought about the configuration of literate environments in Africa.

## Probing the 'why'

To draw policy guidance from an assessment, one must go beyond documentation of the current situation to analyse the factors that underlie it and that would have to be addressed by any effort to change or improve it. There is little hope of doing so on a purely quantitative basis, as the numerical data are too scant and the available models insufficiently applicable for that kind of analysis. But models for quantitative demonstration start with qualitative, but nonetheless empirical reflection, and we will have in this study enough of those elements to ensure some forward progress in understanding the situation, highlighting its important elements, and identifying questions and hypotheses for additional research.

I seek to accomplish this double agenda in stepwise fashion: Chapter 4 immediately hereafter is devoted to reviewing the current status of literacy acquisition and retention in Africa. Chapter 5 then highlights factors on the supply side of the literate environment in Africa and some of the most hopeful innovations in that realm. Chapter 6 undertakes the same task for the demand side of the issue – emerging needs for literacy on the continent and factors that multiply its potential usages. Then, in Chapter 7, I attempt to examine the *intersection* of supply and demand factors, the dynamics of this confluence and measures that have or could be taken to intensify it. Chapter 8, at the end of the study, is devoted to related recommendations for policy and further research.

The one orientation for research on literate environments counseled above that can, alas, only be respected to a limited extent in these pages is the participatory one. Although advice and reflections on key themes in the book were sought from a variety of those working in the field and – as indicated in the Preface – those themes themselves emerge from a substantial amount of shared practice, the topic does cry out for more of a collective and cross-national approach. This will hopefully characterize reaction to the theses developed in the pages to follow and, especially, follow-on research.

# Chapter 4

## Baseline Situation: The Current Status of Literacy in Africa

**A** literate environment has no meaning apart from the people who inhabit it and bring it into being, including:

- the durably literate who make regular use of such skills
- those with beginning and fragile levels of competence who may have few opportunities to apply, consolidate and so retain them or little confidence in their ability to do so
- people largely lacking in literate skills who may yet need and seek means to acquire them, and
- many variations between and among these categories.

It therefore makes sense to begin our inquiry into the nature and operation of literate environments by examining the current baseline situation of literacy itself: its distribution and progression, its acquisition and retention, and its outlook in sub-Saharan Africa.

Words like status, situation and even statistics all derive, in European languages at least, from Greek and Latin roots having to do with *where things stand or sit*, or where they have been placed – for example, the Latin *stare* for 'to stand'. These terms and the portraits they produce may consequently have a slight 'static' bias – asserting that this is the way things are – and may convey less attention to the way in which conditions are *changing* or on factors that may *explain* both their present state and this movement.

In an attempt to remedy that potential shortcoming and after a brief reminder of the relevant Millennium Development Goals and Education For All targets, this chapter begins with the static side of the picture – a snapshot of the current situation of literacy in sub-Saharan Africa – and then considers its evolution in recent years and the factors fueling those changes. The last section of the chapter is devoted to the implications of these observations for literate environments on the continent and for the strategy of the whole EFA effort.

## Where we are hopefully going: the MDGs and Education For All

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According to an old American witticism, when you are up to your neck in alligators, it can be quite hard to remember that the original plan was to drain the swamp. The real challenges in advancing on the EFA front may divert attention from the underlying issue. Yet it is doubly hard to plot a way forward through such difficulties without a fresh sense of why that effort is important and how it became so. Reminders of goals and of the history of their establishment, postponement and partial fulfillment are therefore a good starting place for any consideration of the way forward.

### Millennium aspirations

The Millennium Development Goals – which Hulme (2009) has characterized as ‘the world’s biggest promise’ and Saith (2006: 1167) as ‘a cloud of soft words ... good intentions and moral comfort’ – are the broader of the two sets of aspirations and, formally speaking, the more recent. They were officially adopted in 2001 by 189 signatories, both Members States of the United Nations and international organisations, on the basis of a set of international development targets, themselves spelled out in the Millennium Declaration voted into effect the preceding September at the Millennium Summit in New York City’. They have, though, a longer history of their own, which Hulme (2009: 7-12) traces to the ‘Four Freedoms’ declared by American President Franklin D. Roosevelt in early 1941, and thence through the UN Declaration on Human Rights in 1948, the proclamation of the UN Development Decade in the 1960s and – after the ‘lost decade’ of structural adjustment in the 1980s – a host of world conferences leading up to the year 2000: Education For All, the World Summit for Children and the Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), among others.

Only one of the eight goals, of course – the second, which sets the target of ‘universal primary education’ – bears directly on education, and it is cast in terms of formal schooling, although increasing literacy rates in the 15–24 year age-group are sometimes cited as a sub-goal. The UNDP document

on prospects for achieving Goal 2 (Birdsall et al, 2005) admits as much and points out (2005: 31) that the EFA Goals are significantly broader in this regard than the Millennium Development set:<sup>28</sup>

*Unlike the [MDGs], Education for All covers much more than formal primary education. It includes expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children; ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes; achieving a 50 percent improvement in adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for adults; and improving all aspects of the quality of education so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes, especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills, are achieved by all.*

This said, Birdsall et al, who place a very salutary emphasis on the important gender-equity dimensions and implications of the MDGs, confirm in numerous passages throughout the rest of the document that non-formal education and adult literacy programmes have often proved peculiarly effective at raising women's literacy rates and that, barring this sort of reinforcement, the lasting effect of literacy gained by women, who get no more than primary education and may not complete that, is subject to much doubt (e.g. 2005: 5, 61–63).

At the same time, one can note that the first of the Millennium Development Goals – 'eradicate extreme poverty and hunger' – is a domain of cross-sectoral endeavour in which literacy and non-formal education programmes have often played a critical role, and to which they generally bear a closer or at least more immediate relationship than does primary education. In fact,

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28 The still more recent broader-scoped UNDP document on all the MDGs (2009: 16) notes that '[h]ope dims for universal education by 2015, even as many poor countries make tremendous strides' and cites 2007–2008 data reporting the net primary enrollment rate in sub-Saharan Africa as 76.4% and the proportion of children starting first grade who complete the last grade of primary education as 63.8%.

virtually all of the MDGs strongly if indirectly imply that *training of youth and adults for new roles and in new skills* will be a necessary accompanying condition for achieving the proposed targets. Literacy is thus arguably a premise, if not a focus, of the MDGs.

## Education For All

The EFA Goals in fact antedate the MDGs, as they were formulated at Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. But they likewise grow out of a history of target-setting, international planning and generous rhetoric devoted to improving the human condition universally, including precedents like the 1965 First World Congress on the Eradication of Illiteracy held in Tehran (UNESCO, 2006a), and the United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UNHCR, 1966) adopted the following year.

The goals actually set at the initial World Conference on Education For All in Jomtien were a mix of targets defined explicitly during that encounter – like achieving universal coverage of primary education by the year 2000 – and others left to the discretion of member countries, like the rate of overall literacy to attain. Increased donor funding and support were also promised.

Progress made during the ensuing decade fell far short of goals and expectations, however, and the gaps were evident in the round of assessments prepared in the run-up to the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in September 2000. Some goals were whittled down, others were better specified, and the climate was rather downbeat in comparison with the euphoria of Jomtien (Torres, 2001). A comparison of the two sets of ambitions is presented in Table 3. Attainment of universal primary education was postponed to 2015 and a single but more modest goal was set for literacy, which had received little attention over the elapsed decade: achieving a 50% *improvement* in levels of adult literacy by 2015. Other more specific ambitions and themes are evident in Table 1 and include eliminating gender inequities in primary and secondary education and expanding early childhood care and education. Despite these problems, the EFA goals and frameworks for action do offer a useful elaboration and specification of

the second Millennium Development Goal, though little elucidation of the linkage between the two sets of ambitions.

**Table 3: A comparison of Jomtien and Dakar goals for EFA**

1990–2000: Jomtien	2000–2015: Dakar
1. Expansion of early childhood care and development activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children.	1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.
2. Universal access to, and completion of, primary education (or whatever higher level of education is considered "basic") by the year 2000.	2. Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
3. Improvement in learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort (e.g. 80% of 14 year-olds) attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement.	3. Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes.
4. Reduction in the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age cohort to be determined in each country) to, say, one-half its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to significantly reduce the current disparity between the male and female illiteracy rates.	4. Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults.
5. Expansion of provision of basic education and training in other essential skills required by youth and adults, with programme effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural changes and impacts on health, employment and productivity.	5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.
6. Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development, made available through all educational channels including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change.	6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence for all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

## A statistical snapshot: hard to focus

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The next task in establishing a baseline situation for consideration of the literate environment in Africa is to draw a portrait of current literacy conditions. That is not very easy to do for several reasons.

To begin with, available data tend to be somewhat partial, approximate and lacking in detail. The 2012 GMR (UNESCO, 2012), for example, has recent estimates for male, female and total adult literacy rates in forty-three of the forty-six sub-Saharan African countries listed, with these data actually coming from different years between 2005 and 2010. Historical adult literacy rates (which may refer to any year between 1985 and 1994) presented by the Report are available for only twenty-four of the forty-six countries. Recent estimates of the youth literacy rates for the 15–24 year-old age group are made for forty-four (2005-2010) and twenty-four (1985-1994) countries in the two categories respectively. The reliability of the data poses some evident problems, however. In one-third of cases with 'historical data', when figures are compared to the similar ones in the 2006 GMR, discrepancies appear, plus cases where earlier estimates disappear. The authors of the 2008 GMR are quite lucid about these problems. Such estimates, they remind the reader (UNESCO, 2007: 62), are

based on conventional cross-country data drawn from censuses or household surveys that rely on self-assessments, third-party reporting or educational attainment proxies. Usually in censuses, respondents are asked if they can 'read and write, with understanding, a simple statement of their everyday life', in the words of UNESCO's traditional definition of literacy. The growing availability of data that rely on direct assessments of literacy skills, such as those from a recent survey in Kenya..., suggests that the scale of the literacy challenge may be even greater. *Conventional literacy data tend in fact to overestimate literacy levels and should be interpreted with caution* [emphasis added].

Obviously, moreover, the definitions of literacy applied in such surveys may be a far cry from those suggested by international agencies and excerpted in Chapter 1. In fact, many of the same problems plague data on primary education as well, which the authors of the 2010 GMR are not hesitant to point out in a section (2009b: 58) entitled 'Children count – but counting children is difficult'. They note, for example, that 'household surveys for a number of countries indicate overestimates of 10% or more in school attendance rates'. (2009b: 54)

Data on a sample of twenty sub-Saharan African countries of different sizes and cultural traditions are presented hereafter in Table 4. The information is the most recent presently available. The columns on the left contain some summary demographic and economic growth data, drawn in January 2014 from three principal sources: (i) *World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision* published by United Nations Population Division; (ii) the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI); and (iii) the PovcalNet website of the World Bank Group, which is devoted to questions of poverty and income inequality in developing countries. These socio-economic data are used to place the education-related statistics in context. Next to the right then are data covering primary education and, further to the right, those on literacy rates, both drawn from the 2012 *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2012). Though these data are at least more recent than the examples given above, they are likely to be afflicted with similar problems.

**Table 4: Economic, demographic and educational data on twenty African countries**

Data Categories	Demography							Primary Schooling Indicators									Youth and Adult Literacy Rates													
								Net Enrollment Ratio						Survival Rate to Grade 5			Adult (Total Population over 15 yrs)						Youth only (15-24 yrs)							
								1999			2010			2009			1985-1994			2005-2010			1985-1994		2005-2010					
Parameters	Projectd Population in 2013 (thousands)	Population Growth Rate (2005-2010)	Life expectancy at birth (Projectd, 2010-2015)	GDP 2012 in billions of current US \$	GDP Growth Rate 2012	GDP per capita 2012 in current US \$	Population below income \$2 a day (2005-2011)	Total NER	Male NER	Female NER	Total NER	Male NER	Female NER	Total Rate	Male Rate	Female Rate	Tot Adult Lit Rate	Male Adult Lit Rate	Fem Adult Lit Rate	Tot Adult Lit Rate	Male Adult Lit Rate	Fem Adult Lit Rate	Projectd Total Rate 2015	Tot Youth Lit Rate	Male Youth Lit Rate	Fem Youth Lit Rate	Tot Youth Lit Rate	Male Youth Lit Rate	Fem Youth Lit Rate	Projectd Total Rate 2015
Burkina Faso	16 935	2,9%	56,1	\$10,4	10,0%	\$643	72,6%	33%	39%	27%	63%	65%	61%	75%	73%	78%	14%	20%	8%	29%	37%	22%	36%	20%	27%	14%	39%	47%	33%	45%
Cameroon	22 254	2,6%	54,9	\$25,3	4,6%	\$1 167	30,4%	33%	NA	NA	32%	99%	86%	76%	76%	77%	NA	NA	NA	71%	79%	63%	77%	NA	NA	NA	83%	89%	77%	87%
DR Congo	67 514	2,8%	49,8	\$17,2	7,2%	\$262	95,2%	33%	34%	32%	NA	NA	NA	60%	62%	58%	NA	NA	NA	67%	77%	57%	66%	NA	NA	NA	65%	68%	62%	62%
Ethiopia	94 101	2,7%	63,3	\$41,6	8,5%	\$454	66,0%	36%	43%	30%	81%	84%	79%	51%	50%	51%	27%	36%	19%	39%	49%	29%	49%	34%	39%	28%	55%	63%	47%	69%
Ghana	25 905	2,5%	61,0	\$40,7	7,9%	\$1 605	51,8%	61%	62%	60%	84%	84%	84%	78%	80%	77%	NA	NA	NA	67%	73%	61%	71%	NA	NA	NA	81%	82%	80%	85%
Guinea	11 745	2,5%	55,9	\$5,6	3,9%	\$492	69,6%	43%	51%	35%	77%	83%	70%	69%	74%	62%	NA	NA	NA	41%	52%	30%	49%	NA	NA	NA	63%	70%	57%	74%
Kenya	44 354	2,7%	61,6	\$40,7	4,6%	\$943	67,2%	62%	62%	62%	83%	82%	83%	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	87%	91%	84%	89%	NA	NA	NA	93%	92%	94%	93%
Liberia	4 294	3,8%	60,3	\$1,7	10,2%	\$414	94,9%	46%	52%	40%	NA	NA	NA	60%	64%	56%	43%	55%	32%	61%	65%	57%	65%	60%	66%	54%	77%	71%	82%	80%
Madagascar	22 925	2,8%	64,5	\$9,9	3,1%	\$447	92,6%	65%	65%	66%	NA	NA	NA	35%	34%	35%	NA	NA	NA	64%	67%	62%	65%	NA	NA	NA	65%	66%	64%	65%
Malawi	16 363	3,0%	55,1	\$4,3	1,9%	\$268	82,3%	99%	99%	98%	97%	94%	99%	61%	60%	62%	49%	65%	34%	75%	81%	68%	79%	59%	70%	49%	87%	87%	87%	90%
Mali	15 302	3,2%	54,8	\$10,3	-1,2%	\$694	78,7%	42%	48%	35%	63%	67%	59%	88%	89%	87%	NA	NA	NA	31%	43%	20%	38%	NA	NA	NA	44%	56%	34%	53%
Mozambique	25 834	2,6%	50,2	\$14,2	7,4%	\$565	81,8%	52%	58%	46%	90%	92%	87%	44%	45%	43%	NA	NA	NA	56%	71%	43%	62%	NA	NA	NA	72%	79%	65%	78%
Niger	17 831	3,7%	58,1	\$6,8	10,8%	\$395	75,2%	26%	31%	21%	62%	68%	57%	71%	74%	69%	NA	NA	NA	29%	43%	15%	36%	NA	NA	NA	37%	52%	23%	46%
Nigeria	173 615	2,7%	52,3	\$262,6	6,5%	\$1 555	84,5%	61%	67%	56%	58%	60%	55%	86%	84%	90%	55%	68%	44%	61%	72%	50%	65%	71%	81%	62%	72%	78%	66%	75%
Senegal	14 133	2,8%	63,3	\$14,0	3,5%	\$1 023	55,2%	57%	62%	52%	75%	73%	78%	74%	73%	75%	27%	37%	18%	50%	62%	39%	56%	38%	49%	28%	65%	74%	56%	73%
Sierra Leone	6 092	2,3%	45,3	\$3,8	15,2%	\$645	79,6%	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	42%	54%	31%	48%	NA	NA	NA	59%	69%	50%	67%
South Africa	52 776	1,3%	57,1	\$384,3	2,5%	\$7 508	31,3%	92%	91%	92%	85%	85%	85%	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	89%	91%	87%	93%	NA	NA	NA	98%	97%	98%	98%
Tanzania	49 253	2,9%	59,0	\$28,2	6,9%	\$609	87,9%	49%	48%	50%	98%	98%	98%	90%	87%	93%	59%	71%	48%	73%	79%	67%	74%	82%	86%	78%	77%	78%	77%	
Uganda	37 579	3,4%	61,4	\$19,9	3,4%	\$547	64,7%	NA	NA	NA	91%	90%	92%	57%	56%	58%	56%	68%	45%	73%	83%	65%	78%	70%	77%	63%	87%	90%	85%	91%
Zambia	14 539	2,8%	57,7	\$20,7	7,3%	\$1 469	86,6%	71%	72%	69%	91%	90%	92%	71%	71%	70%	65%	73%	57%	71%	81%	62%	72%	66%	67%	66%	74%	82%	67%	74%
<b>MEDIAN</b>	<b>22 590</b>	<b>2,8%</b>	<b>57,4</b>	<b>\$15,7</b>	<b>6,7%</b>	<b>\$626</b>	<b>77,0%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>84%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>75%</b>
SSA Average	900 633	2,7%	NA	\$1289,8	4,3%	\$1 417	69,9%	58%	62%	54%	76%	78%	74%	71%	71%	70%	53%	64%	43%	63%	71%	54%	66%	66%	73%	59%	72%	76%	67%	75%
S/W Asia Aver.	1 753 029	1,4%	66	NA	3,5%	NA	NA	74%	80%	67%	88%	89%	87%	66%	62%	71%	47%	59%	34%	63%	74%	52%	70%	60%	70%	49%	81%	87%	75%	88%
LA/Carib Aver.	616 645	1,2%	75	NA	3,9%	NA	NA	92%	93%	91%	94%	94%	94%	92%	90%	93%	86%	87%	84%	91%	92%	91%	93%	93%	93%	93%	97%	97%	97%	98%

Source: United Nations (2012), World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI) and PovalNet (2013), and UNESCO (2012)

The data in Table 4 prompt the following observations about the baseline situation for literate environments in Africa:

- In macroeconomic terms, growth is palpable despite the effects of the global economic turndown that began in 2007. The 2012 median GDP growth rate for the 20 sub-Saharan countries of our sample was 6.7% per annum, up from negative rates in many of the same countries during the decade from 1985 to 1995. This growth has, however, been insufficient to pull many of the countries out of severe poverty.<sup>29</sup> The median percentage of the population subsisting on or below the equivalent of US\$2 a day for the twenty countries in question is over 77%. Moreover, measures of within-country income equality or “Gini coefficients” (not presented in the table but available on the PovcalNet website referenced above) for countries in our sample correlate substantially with GDP figures for the same nations ( $r = .64$ ), signifying that the better off an economy in the aggregate, the less equitable its income distribution tends to be.
- Population growth rates are in nearly all cases between 2.0% and 3.8% per annum, with a median value in this sample of 2.8% and an average value for sub-Saharan Africa of 2.7%. That demographic growth rate for the entire region, if maintained, would lead to a further doubling of its population in less than thirty years, in less than twenty-five for countries that equal or exceed a 3% rate on a continuing basis and in less than twenty for the most rapidly growing of the set: Liberia (3.8%), followed closely by the Republic of Niger (3.7%).
- In fact, current literacy levels are obviously the lowest on average among the least-favoured strata of the African population within each country, even though that important facet of the situation is not much evident in Table 4. Those concerned typically face economic, social and political obstacles to improving their standard of living just as much as they face technical or educational ones. To reprise the title of a book (Collier, 2007), development economists are speaking increasingly of ‘the bottom billion’

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29 For the major depressive effects of the global economic crisis on Africa, see International Monetary Fund (2009).

in the worldwide distribution of income – those who have not seen their lot improve while strata above them are reaching new levels of security. Collier frames the point in terms of countries, but it is at least equally valid with respect to population groups. A large portion of the illiterate unfortunately inhabits those stagnated zones.

- Progress toward achieving the goals set in the Dakar Framework of Action for 2015, although evident, is generally insufficient to ensure their accomplishment. There was a relative surge in primary enrollments between 2000 and 2005, but progress seems to have slowed since that time and the overall Net Enrollment Rate (NER) for the sub-Saharan region – probably an overestimate for the reasons already mentioned – stood in 2010 at about 84%, while varying between 58% and 98% in the countries of our sample for which data are available. Moreover, among the same countries, the median rate of primary school survival to the fifth grade – the point at which durable literacy could potentially have been acquired – was 71%. In other words, in nations within the mid-range of this distribution well over a quarter of children entering first grade drop out of school by, if not before the fourth grade level, likely failing to acquire durable literacy, as well as targeted basic knowledge and skills. That rate in fact approaches or exceeds 40% the most severe cases, including six of the seventeen countries of our sample for which we have related data.
- Happily, gender equity seems to have improved, the 8% gap between the Net Enrollment Rates for boys and girls in the 1999 region-wide data having shrunk to 4% in 2010, thanks in good part to several countries where girls now outnumber boys in primary schooling. But overall, the 2010 GMR concludes, ‘The international community has a long way to go if it is to deliver on the promises made in Dakar and in the Millennium Development Goals’. Moreover, the last 20% or 25% of non-enrolled children are generally the most difficult to reach and retain, as they come from the least-favoured or furthest removed strata of the population. That is certainly one reason why the 2010 GMR is entitled *Reaching the Marginalized*.

- The situation with respect to adult literacy levels is rather less encouraging. Primary schooling constitutes one of the principal sources of rising literacy, but with median survival rates to the fifth grade of primary school reaching a median value of only 71% in the countries of our table, literacy levels among school leavers and dropouts are likely to lag noticeably behind the NER figures. In the decade or more that elapsed between the midpoints of the two timeframes for which estimates of adult literacy rates are available (roughly from 1985–94 to 2005–2010), these median values moved up region-wide from 53% to 63%, for an average increase of about 0.5% a year, whereas the rates for youth 15–24 years of age moved in similar fashion from 66% to 72% of that cohort. Projections to 2015 put the former, the adult literacy rates, at 66% and the latter, the youth (or adolescent/young adult) literacy rates, at 75% for the entire region and – presuming constant rates of increase – suggest that it would take at least twenty more years to reach target levels. Current country-specific adult literacy rate estimates in the nations of our sample, based on the most recent available data between 2005 and 2010, vary widely from 29% to 89% with a median value of 63%, whereas they vary from 37% to 98% for the 15–24 year old group with a median value of 72%. The gap between male and female adult literacy rates is 15%, only about half the gender difference in the earlier data, a definite accomplishment; the gender gap in youth literacy has decreased from 13% to 10% over the same period.<sup>30</sup>
- Rates, it must be remembered, are not absolute figures but are strictly relative to population in any given year or period. The data on population growth and economic welfare suggest that, for many of the twenty countries in the sample, progress on both educational fronts (primary school completion and literacy acquisition) is being appreciably slowed if not largely swamped by the continuing demographic explosion, as well as by economic hardship. The average population growth rate for the

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30 Of course the problem is not limited to developing countries, as Richmond et al (2008: 24) point out in their mid-term review of the United Nations Literacy Decade, 'A survey undertaken in France in 2004–5 showed that around 9 per cent of the adult population did not have functional literacy skills, even though many of them were in work.'

subcontinent over the most recent decade was 2.4%, restraining the annual increase in literacy rates just noted and foreshadowing a further 20% increase in population by 2015. At that speed, achieving a 10% net increase in the enrollment ratio would require a 30% increase in provision and enrollment. Moreover, as mentioned, the NER is only a measure of input – i.e. of the proportion of appropriately-aged children entering primary schooling. It is an important indicator for calculations of infrastructural capacity, but says less about the volume, let along the quality, of ‘output’: that is, of people who have acquired durable literate skills. The data on in-school ‘survival’ rates to fifth grade cited above suggest that the number of durably literate (or at least those made so by initial schooling) may be only half as large.

- The data do not reveal what the actual sources of rising literacy rates are – that is, to what degree they are fed or maintained by schooling and to what degree by other types of literacy programming or self-directed learning. Tuman (1987), for example, has suggested that increasing literacy rates in England during past centuries were pushed to a much greater extent by informally acquired competence than by schooling, and even makes a historical argument that formal schools in that country were put in place as much to control the spread of literary, seen as too rapid and anarchic, as they were to promote it.<sup>31</sup> Given, however, the numbers of African children added to the student population each year and the number completing primary education – and despite the uneven record of effectiveness in primary education (generally paralleled by the variable productivity of adult literacy programmes) – it seems evident that the bulk of change in numbers and proportions of newly literate citizens over 15 years of age stems from the effects of formal basic education, a

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31 It is at the same time worth noting that the English economy during that period of history, like the economics of several other Western European nations, was booming with the effects of the “triangular trade” – that is, the inflow of resources and produce from African and Caribbean colonies and the transformation of that wealth into products once again exportable to Africa, like textiles and manufactured goods (Ogborn, Miles. 2008. *Global lives: Britain and the world, 1550-1800*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press). The historical example further indicates the close connection between economic dynamism and the spread of literacy.

conclusion supported by comparisons with the incrementally higher rates among the 15–24 year old group.

- Moreover, a number of other important qualitative dimensions of the situation are likewise not shown by the data. For one thing, school dropouts constitute a significant proportion of participants in adult literacy programmes, where they typically enroll in order to consolidate the literacy skills never reliably acquired during their interrupted schooling, and/or in hope of finding an avenue for continuing their formal education (Hoppers, 2000). In a broader sense, moreover, adult and non-formal education (including the technical-vocational programmes in that sector) have for a long time offered venues in which school dropouts and even primary school completers acquire livelihood-related skills not conveyed by formal schooling, and so have also served to create a kind of critical interface between the basic education sector and the economic and technical ones that is not much available elsewhere (Atchoarena and Gasperini, 2003). This situation is likely to continue. As Richmond et al note (2008: 26) with respect to EFA throughout developing nations,

*School systems cannot absorb the increased population or cannot deliver education of sufficient quality to guarantee usable literacy skills to the large numbers who pass through them. Similarly, adult learning opportunities are not available to increased numbers of unschooled, underschooled or dropout youth.*

By the same token, these non-formal activities have played an important role in fleshing out the literate environment for all students of basic education, both on the supply side (opportunities for continuing education and training, plus creation of literature in African languages or accessible versions of other lingua franca) and on the demand side (improved linkages with neighbouring sectors of rural development and generation of employments). As has been noted, the historical record suggests that much of literacy acquisition – and particularly much of the work necessary for its consolidation – occurs *sub rosa* in non-formal and informal settings, rather than in formal schooling (Graff, 1979; Limage, 2005; Tuman, 1987). Such activities constitute therefore a

partly hidden domain that does not always register in official statistics; and it may belie the apparently dominant role of formal education that seems evident in them.

Insights like these should help to better situate adult and non-formal education offerings within the full network of basic education efforts that contribute to increasing literacy rates and to procuring related benefits to the population of each country. The example of large and occasionally successful (although less often durably successful) adult literacy campaigns notwithstanding, adult and non-formal education (ANFE) seems to play for the most part a critical backstopping and support role in the drive to Education For All, the weight of demographic numbers lying rather with formal primary education, even if, as Limage (2005) argues, the spread of literacy – and particularly critical literacy – has never been its principal function in historical terms. But ANFE seems at the same time to represent a key instrumentality for developing literate environments, thanks to its closer ties both to local culture and to development efforts in other economic and social sectors of local society. Its impact in these realms can render the achievements of primary education (plus its own) significantly more durable, while spurring the spread and reinforcement of literacy along informal channels.

## **The environment for EFA**

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It has already been pointed out that literate environments are theoretically of as much concern to primary and secondary school personnel as they are to literacy teachers and adult educators, although the latter have typically paid more attention to the quality of such contexts in the external world outside of schools. In fact, by the simple criterion of *volume*, the number of primary school dropouts and leavers who are at risk of returning to illiteracy likely exceeds by a substantial margin the number of adult education students who risk the same fate. The summary data on the evolution of net enrollment ratios in primary schooling across African countries presented in Table 4 above make it evident that, on average, between 20% and 30% of each age cohort never enters primary school, and a good number of those who enroll do not complete a full cycle of basic education.

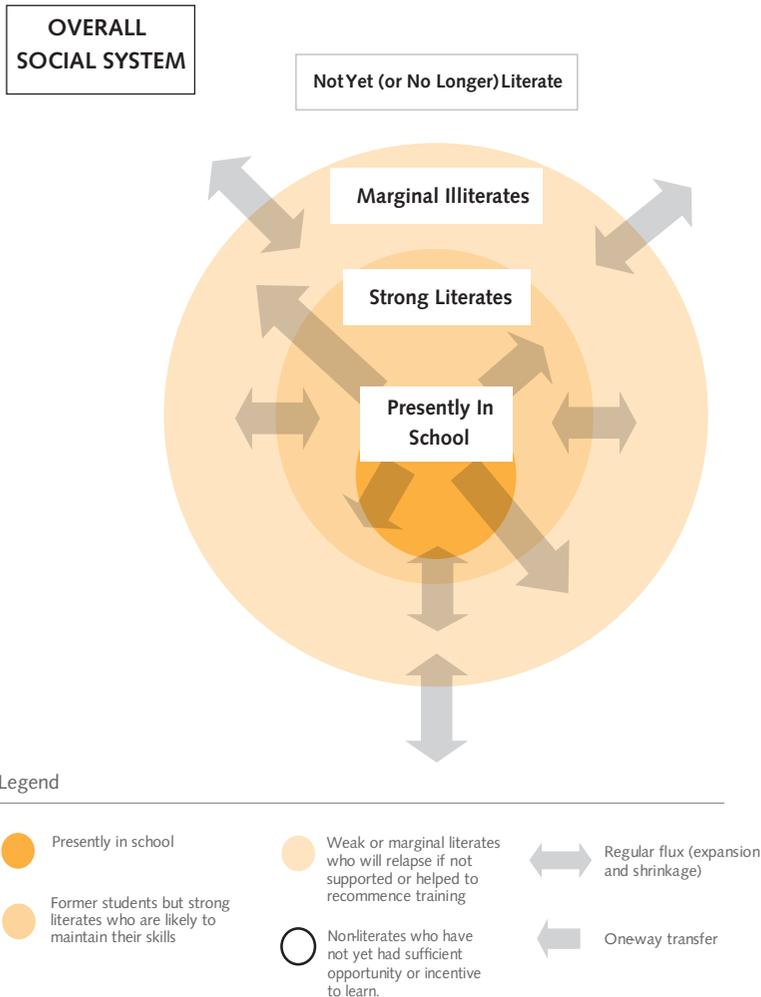
When these data are combined with supplemental information available through the UNESCO Institute for Statistics website (<http://www.uis.unesco.org/>), the quantitative dimensions of the 'semi-schooled' problem in Africa begin to come clear (UIS, 2007). The median Gross Primary Education Completion Rate across countries for which relatively recent data are available is around 40%, with girls falling measurably below and boys above that central tendency. In short, about 60% of children who enter school at present do not get a full primary education and, as was evident in Table 4, about one third of the enrolled cohort do not even make it to the sixth year. Putting the pieces together, we can say that between 20% and 25% of African children at present never set foot in formal school, while a significant proportion of those entering school do not survive to the last grade, let alone graduate. Conservatively, therefore, around half of today's growing population of African young people do not attain an easily sustainable level of literacy through formal education, or at least would require strong follow-up support to remain in the ranks of the literate, even though such central tendencies of course conceal large inter-country (and intra-country) variations.

The promotion of literate environments is thus a very live issue for primary school staff and the whole EFA assembly as well. Practically speaking, of course, with the limited resources at their disposal, elementary education personnel in African countries are more than adequately employed just trying to keep the *internal* environment of the system reasonably 'literate' and to shepherd as many of each cohort as possible on toward higher levels of education. *Mkulima hula kima* a Swahili saying reminds us: 'The farmer eats standing up', he has so many things to do at once. But one should nonetheless keep in mind throughout the chapters to follow that the larger human nexus of literacy and the issue of supportive contexts for it are a live concern for people at all levels of the educational system, and that all can therefore collaborate on finding ways to make the environment more durably literate.

Overall, the available data suggest a pattern where, even with continued growth in gross and net enrollment ratios, many more children enter school than attain sustainable literate skills in that manner, and where deterioration of learning acquired and relapse into illiteracy are quite frequent phenomena, countered to

an unknown extent by people who gravitate into literacy programmes to refresh their skills or who find ways to do so on their own. The situation might be (somewhat simplistically) portrayed in the manner illustrated in Figure 3 below.

**Figure 3: Situation of marginal literates**



The wide grey area between those who have attained a sustainable level of literacy skill (generally by acceding to situations that will allow them to maintain or improve it) and those who have as yet no access to such learning is occupied by people – and young school dropouts in particular – whose grasp on literacy is weak. If that competence is not supported and exercised by the environment or opportunities for structured extension of learning are not available, they very much risk returning to the outer ring. And the dimensions of the entire circle continue to expand with population growth.

This brief section on the baseline situation of literacy in Africa has thus allowed us to review its main characteristics as well as likely scenarios for its evolution under the impact of foreseeable changes in schooling and demography. On the face of things, rates of progress are defensible by historical standards, yet far from the goals that have been set in international conferences and the Education For All movement. *Doki daya a fage, gudu gare*, the Hausa people say: A single horse on the village square is always a fast runner ... because there is nothing to compare it to. The situation of literacy in Africa is quite the reverse: there is much to compare it to. Criteria are continually defined and often interpreted as thresholds below which the concerned countries will not get their economies afloat, and perhaps do not even merit doing so. These assumptions may bear re-examination in the light of succeeding chapters.

# Chapter 5

## The Supply Side: Status and Potentials

**W**e turn now to the first step in assessment of the literate environment itself – an attempt to portray both the current supply-side status of such contexts and the most hopeful potentials in that domain against the backdrop of the human situation just reviewed. This chapter therefore examines the availability of continuing education opportunities, the provision and accessibility of reading materials and related media, and the use of information communication technologies across the subcontinent – all components of the supply side of a literate environment.

Given the largely untried nature of this assessment undertaking and the lack – or at least great dispersion – of relevant and reliable information, the present effort is designed as much to suggest and begin portraying the dimensions that must be taken into account in such a review of current status and future potential and to fuel reflection on factors that explain the situation, as it is to offer a fully detailed and accurate picture. In fact, as noted in Chapter 1, the situation could be better described and assessed by stratifying it in quite a number of other highly relevant ways, if not ones easy to discriminate in available data, for example, by language use, relative socio-economic well-being, geographic locale, age group, gender or political environment. Instead, I will simply attempt at this point to note the impact that those differences may have on patterns of supply and on the emergence of innovation, with an emphasis on the gender dimension.

## **Framing the questions**

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Before beginning the examination of supply and demand factors impinging on the literate environment that occupies this and the following two chapters, it is important to frame things with a few remarks about issues of relativity, definition and agency – by recalling the *overlap* between supply and demand considerations, by specifying *what* is being supplied or demanded, and by considering *who* is supplying and demanding the goods and services in question.

## Recognizing the overlap

We should regularly remind ourselves that the distinction between supply and demand domains is inevitably a bit artificial, since the two overlap to a considerable degree. Supply factors like quality continuing education opportunities or ample and relevant post-literacy reading materials can contribute to increasing the demand for the skills and knowledge they help reinforce, whereas strong demand forces like the need for local management competence or decentralized governance can elicit added resources for learning.

In fact, it is that sort of complementarity and overlap between the two sides that makes it possible to enhance their intersection. Supply continually proffered without corresponding demand, or the reverse (effective demand with no consequent offer of learning or competence), is an anomaly that should lead one to ask what in the world may be impeding their junction. *Ba banza ba an iske dan jariri cikin kufai*, they say in northern Nigeria: 'It's no accident if one finds a baby in an abandoned hut.' Something is seriously off kilter.

## Specifying the stock in trade

It is also helpful to keep in focus *what* is being supplied or demanded. Perhaps the simplest shorthand is 'one species of *human capital*' or one variety of human resources. The notion of human capital, of course, is a much-invoked and much-disputed one, born out of the economics of education a half-century ago (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1958). We can skirt the considerable debate about its validity, however, (e.g. Baptiste, 2001; Bowles and Gintis, 1975) by sticking with a broader and more generic version, which might be quite simply defined as:

*the set of skills, attributes and resources acquired through education, training or experience that increases a person's productivity and value in other activities of importance to*

*themselves, their employers and their social group (cf. Becker, 2005).*

These attributes definitely include what is often called 'social' or 'cultural' capital – that is, the networks of relationship and the familiarity with codes and canons of meaning that facilitate new activity and enhance its value for those involved (e.g. Coleman, 1998; Dumais, 2002) – every bit as much as they do technical competencies. The concept therefore offers a useful umbrella term for bracketing together the outcomes of literacy acquisition and other personal characteristics or resources that may facilitate their use, and for outlining the terrain where the supply of such factors encounters the demand created by need for their potential uses.

That terrain is, of course, the literate environment, whatever its intensity and quality may be. If the stock-in-trade here is a particular kind of human capital (literacy and numeracy competence of some level, coupled with other personal attributes and resources that enhance its potential uses), the supply of that commodity is constituted by the set of such resources provided by previous experience and training, whereas the demand is represented by opportunities and needs for its productive application to other realms of personal and social life, via assumption and exercise of viable new economic, political, socio-cultural and technical functions and activities. The word 'viable' in the preceding phrase of course indicates in turn that the activities in question must be effectively solvent – that is, they must yield a balance of human benefits over human costs that is both perceived by key participants and stakeholders as positive enough to merit continued effort, and that attracts or provides whatever financial and political backing is required.

This whole realm lies 'downstream' from the operations of literacy programmes themselves, on the far right-hand side of the systems model portrayed in Figure 1. Literacy outcomes figure there as intermediate results in a longer chain of human development and social welfare activities. One consequence of this focus on literacy outcomes is that we will not be taking into direct consideration the relatively rich and varied supply of literacy programming itself, much of it provided in recent decades by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Archer, 2004; Bromley, 2010). That

background reality is assumed, even though it very much merits closer examination, and prime attention in the pages to follow is given instead to the programmatic initiatives and social conditions that offer ways to continue learning beyond the literacy and basic education level, or that create pressing and practical needs for literate skills throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

## Identifying the responsible parties

The third introductory consideration for this chapter and the one to follow concerns the sources of relevant supply and demand: *who* is (or should be) making available the supply of literacy skills and continuing education opportunities, and *who* is (or should be) stoking the demand for literate competence – factors that can jointly serve to refashion the environment? Multiple actors of course intervene in this arena and do so cooperatively or competitively at a variety of levels. The roster of them can be divided most handily, if rather simplistically, into public and private or ‘civic’ spheres and among international, national, regional (i.e. sub-national), community and individual-family levels of activity. In addition, concerned parties in both public and private domains come from a number of different sectors (agriculture, health, public administration, etc.) over and beyond education *per se*; and private intervention may be further parcelled out between for-profit and non-profit entities and, in the latter regard, between lay and religious sources.

It is worth noting that, as one moves from supply issues to demand considerations, the role of actors and agencies external to education – or at least of *multi-sectoral* ones – becomes increasingly important. This is because so much of the need for application of literate competence is created by (and so much of the related initiative underwritten by) activities in other social and economic sectors. Public agencies cover by definition most or all of the sectors in question, which is why the patterns of policy and practice that they establish can have such a major influence on the development of literate environments. But the persistent and prototypical obstacles in the public realm include lack of resources within African governments, as well as lack of coordination and even outright policy contradictions among the different

sectoral agencies. Though these problems are theoretically remediable, it is often difficult to resolve them in practice, and even less-than-desirable for those who fear a 'totalizing' government or external donor presence.

On the non-governmental side of the coin, many NGOs and civic organizations have learned that they must span different sectors of endeavour if they are to have durable effects on local development, and so they habitually engage in multi-dimensional initiatives (Brown et al, 1996). Yet all that glitters is not gold in their camp either, as problems typically arise from the gap between intentions and implementation, from instances of corruption or failures in accountability and from the ephemeral nature of some interventions (Gibbs et al, 1999; Harvey et al, 2001; Thompson, 2000). *Baƙo raba ne, ɗan gari kaba*, they say in Hausa – 'The guest is like the dew, the native son like the date palm.' One disappears when the sun rises, the other continues to grow.

## **The supply of further learning opportunities**

The supply of literate competence in sub-Saharan Africa was reviewed in Chapter 4. Here we turn therefore to its complement or extension: resources available for continued learning. What is the current status of post-literacy learning opportunities, and what are the best chances for further developing them? Six types of opportunities are considered in the balance of this chapter: those for (i) engaging in further education and training, (ii) reading books and related publications, (iii) consulting newspapers and other print media, (iv) employing electronic media, (v) benefiting from library resources, and (vi) using signage and other environmental prompts. A final section is devoted to drawing a composite picture from this preliminary data.

### **Availability of continuing education and training**

Perhaps the first element to identify on the supply side of the literate environment – because it represents an extension of the organized learning process itself – is the availability of different forms of continuing education in

which new literates and school dropouts might engage in order to maintain and increase their competence. There is quite a tradition of continuing education in Africa, if not yet a demographically dense one outside of South Africa. Most of it, however, is university-based and only accessible to those who already have at least the equivalent of a primary school certificate.

For related social and economic reasons, the prime continuing education desideratum among new literates and school leavers, particularly the younger ones, is to continue their education, preferably in formal schooling or, if not, in some type of vocational education reliably linked to employment (Lemba, 2002; Mukweso and Easton, 1997). Programmes and policies that actually enable 'graduates' of youth and adult literacy programmes to sit for examinations granting access to formal schooling at an appropriate level – often called mechanisms for equivalence in English and *passerelles* in French – have been slow to develop in Africa, and are still thin on the ground as well as difficult to inventory directly (Farrell and Hartwell, 2004; Hoppers, 2007), though they are much more evident in Southeast Asia (UNESCO-Bangkok, 2008; Rahman et al., 2010). The way is beginning to open, however, as the adoption of African languages in formal basic education, and thus the better elaboration of methods for transiting from African language literacy to international language instruction, starts to remove one of the existing obstacles (Fiorente, 2007).

There are many other impediments to facilitating transfer of new literates to formal education, however, including lack of space in primary and secondary schools, age discrepancies between traditional students and the graduates of non-formal programmes who would like to undertake formal schooling, and the difficulty that existing primary and secondary school teachers (and administrators) experience in dealing with this diverse population of new students. As a consequence, places in existing schools naturally get rationed to younger children and – on the whole – somewhat disproportionately

to boys.<sup>32</sup> Here and there one finds private primary schools or NGO programmes that cater principally to over-age students, returning dropouts, new literates or street and working children. They are gradually engineering channels by which this alternate constituency can continue its formal education (e.g. Redvers, 2009), but such arrangements remain very much the exception, rather than the rule.<sup>33</sup>

What Kenneth King and colleagues (e.g. King, 2007; King and Palmer, 2006a, 2006b; Palmer, 2007; Petersen, 2007; see also Johanson and Adams, 2004) have called 'Post-Basic Education and Training' (PBET) constitutes an important hybrid case and a variant outlet. PBET is discussed above in Chapter 2. Such programmes, designed to create a bridge between graduates of basic education and the job market, represent a long-standing if underfunded area of linkage between basic education and development outcomes, and one that has been largely ignored in current literature on Education For All or on strategies for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. PBET is designedly a somewhat broader concept than Technical-Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Palmer, 2005), which generally concerns vocational education in the formal system, whereas PBET covers the full variety of formal and informal mechanisms available for ensuring that those completing – or leaving – their initial experience with the educational system

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32 According to the latest *Education For All Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO, 2011), gender parity in Gross Enrollment Ratios at the primary level (girls GER over boys) stands at 0.91 for the whole of sub-Saharan Africa in 2008. Seven of the twenty-seven countries for which data are available (generally among the smaller ones) reach or exceed a parity index of 1.00.

33 The motivational potency of equivalence schemes should also be taken seriously as an indicator of one other condition that bears on the understanding and constitution of literate environments. In fact, what many of those who populate literacy programmes or seek to gain basic education want at the same time, if not exclusively, is *certification* of a new social status and the local respect and perquisites that may go with it. In what might be thought of as a formal schooling version of the critique of the autonomous model of literacy discussed above, proponents of alternate economic viewpoints on education like 'screening' and 'signaling' have long pointed out that schools serve at least as much to *label* people and sort them into socially meaningful categories on the basis of pre-existing traits, as they do to instill in them productive skills that are later valued by the market (Groot and Hartog, 1995; Yamauchi, 2005). On this scale, literacy training remains in most contexts about the lowest status form of educational credentialing, and what its beneficiaries may want in a 'literate environment' is as much a context that gives more dignity to the training they have, as one where there are more accessible applications for it.

in fact gain the additional technical and vocational knowledge needed to apply learning in the labour market and to find or create useful employments.

Both the prevalence of PBET in its multiple forms and the subsequent employment itineraries of its graduates are hard to verify at present. In the conclusion to their six-country study of such efforts, Palmer et al (2007) avow as much, pointing out that even formal technical-vocational education only accounted for a median value of 4% or 5% of secondary enrollments in the countries studied in 2002–2003, the most recent data available to them; and they point out that the problem lies more in policies favouring the demand for such skills than in the supply of training opportunities. In fact, the 2010 Global Monitoring Report avows that TVET as a whole has been seriously neglected, with the result that Goal 3 in the Dakar Framework for Action – enhancing youth and adult technical skills and expanding related opportunities in the twenty-first century economy – is one of those least likely to be achieved (UNESCO, 2009a: 76–93). The Report paints a bleak and urgent picture in this regard:

*The Dakar Framework for Action does not provide targets for youth and adult skills ... [but simply] a vague aspiration ... [Yet] the economic downturn has left its deepest imprint on vulnerable, unskilled workers, especially the young ... In many countries ... technical and vocational education is in such bad shape that it merits its reputation as a form of second-class schooling. (Ibid: 76.)*

Throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa, girls have least access to what viable continuing education and training options there may be. In 2007, they constituted 44% of enrollments at the primary level, but only 35% in lower secondary school and 39% in the thin ranks of TVET (ibid: 397).<sup>34</sup> That same year, 'school life expectancy' for girls – that is, the number of years of schooling that a female entrant to first grade could hope on average to achieve, based on present rates of completion – was 7.9 years compared

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34 Data on gender is not included in the principal policy overview on PBET (Thin, 2006), which makes in fact no mention of gender issues.

to 9.3 for boys. As the 2010 GMR notes (ibid: 75), 'Girls face a distinctive set of barriers: longer distances [from home to school] may reinforce security concerns and, in some contexts, early marriage prevents them from progressing beyond primary school' ... even when they can complete it.

## **Reading material: books and publications**

The trends in continuing education reviewed immediately above are an important factor in developing opportunities for new literates but generally presume an available supply of relevant texts and learning materials in accessible languages. Furthermore, the sustainability of the learning that such continuing education confers poses again the question of the literate quality of the rest of the environment. Books and publications constitute a major portion of this important backdrop.

It is important to remember that the circulation of books and manuscripts in sub-Saharan Africa is scarcely a new phenomenon and in many ways pre-dates the publication history of Western Europe and North America, notably in Islamic areas of the sub-continent (Hall and Stewart, 2009). During the millennium of intense trans-Saharan trade, there was a lively exchange of written material – of which traces still exist – along trade routes and through religious networks (e.g. Hunwick et al, 2003). Although not demographically widespread in its coverage, it was geographically and culturally significant. However, this was considerably curtailed when relations with colonial powers superseded the trans-Saharan ones.

'Why are most African books published outside Africa?' Solani Ngobeni (2006), executive director of S&S Publishing in Cape Town, pertinently asks. In fact, with about 12% of the world's population, sub-Saharan Africa represented in 2002 only 1.6% of the world potential for book marketing, and 46% of that came from South Africa and Nigeria (OECD Development Centre, 2003). Wafawarowa (2007) enumerates some of the obstacles facing publishers on the continent:

- Limited economies of scale, themselves a result of –

- Linguistic diversity at national and continental levels
- A paucity of disposable income
- Low literacy levels, and
- The fact that African authors prefer to have their work published outside the continent.

In addition to those factors, the vast majority of materials printed in Africa itself (95% in 2000) are textbooks ordered by government education ministries (The Research Group, 2000), which do not give much play or generate much demand for other types of creativity. Even in that realm, moreover, school textbooks remain very thin on the ground, particularly in rural and depressed urban areas. The Publishers Association of Tanzania found in 2004 that the ratio of students to textbooks in local schools was as high as 14:1 (MENAFN, 2008).

The problem is in fact even more pronounced in African languages and at the level of adult literacy, the domains having perhaps the greatest impact on constituting a literate environment for the majority of the population, since the bulk of existing material – both that published on the continent and that coming from abroad – is aimed at a different audience. I am reminded of an experience some thirty years ago evaluating a functional literacy programme in the Republic of Mali (cf. Easton, 1983). It was a participatory evaluation and to those purposes we prepared a manual and self-testing form in Bambara, the *lingua franca* (with its Mande, Malinke and Jula variants) in the central portions of the West African Sahel. The following year when we returned for the second stage of the evaluation we found that an appreciable number of centres were studying the evaluation manual itself as their textbook – because it was the only reading material they had! Such situations unfortunately remain all too frequent.

There are nonetheless a number of encouraging experiences, like the recent initiative of the South African government to join with Cape Town's Blac Publishing House in printing and publishing a new series of novels in Xhosa (Memela, 2006), or the popular – and some would say 'pulp fiction' –

fashion of locally produced Hausa romance novels increasingly widespread in Nigeria (Whitsitt, 2002; Harris, 2008). Some of these promising experiments are noted below in the sections devoted to library work and newspaper publishing. New Africa Books of Cape Town, for example, has teamed up with the French publisher Edicef and African Christian Press to translate Edicef's exemplary 'Cameroun Vert' series for children into Akan (a major language of Ghana and Ivory Coast), English and all eleven South African languages for wider distribution (Wafawarowa, 2007). At the same time, the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), a subsidiary unit of the African Union (AU), has affiliated with the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) to prepare the publication of sixteen booklets for preschool African children in all the languages of the AU (idem).

Though no less welcome, some of these efforts – like the one in favour of Xhosa literature – are beset with historical ironies. The first Xhosa-language novel, *USamson*, was in fact written by S.E.K Mqhayi in 1907, but roundly criticized by prominent South Africans for offering a variant on the biblical narrative about Samson (Opland, 2007); and there have been repeated efforts to break through barriers to publication in indigenous South African languages since that time. One of the works now issued in Xhosa by Blac Publishing House under the joint initiative with the Ministry, Sindiwe Magona's *Abantwana Baba Ntwana Bam*, was written a number of years ago but only gained recognition when published in English as *My Children's Children* (Memela, 2006).

In short, the realm of book publication in Africa, while both critical and hopeful, so far remains one where, when all is said and done, a good deal more once again appears to have been said than done. At present, the contribution that this domain makes to literate environments in Africa remains very modest, although the efforts noted hopefully are a bellwether of things to come.

At the same time, the strong focus that gravitates almost automatically to publications and printed media in any assessment of the supply side of the literate environment – in sections to follow as much as in this particular one – also biases the portrayal in some significant ways. We owe to the

New Literacy Studies an expanded attention to ‘communicative practices’, a term that, as Betts (2004) points out, better captures the varied systems of information exchange and relationship in which the local uses of literacy, particularly among women, are embedded and sometimes hidden. Where the fixation on print is too strong, we may pass over the full tapestry of written communication, record-keeping and correspondence that has always been among the first manifestations of literacy, and that case studies – like those in Robinson-Pant (2004) and Barber (2006) – bring back to light.

### **Supply, nature and density of newspapers and other standard written media**

Worldwide, newspaper sales increased by about 2.5% in 2007, *World Press Trends* reports, but fell by about 0.5% in Africa (Kilman, 2008), although reliable information in this regard is very hard to come by. The greatest increase on the continent, reported by the same sources as 45%, occurred in Kenya. The largest readership is clearly South African, and it predominantly attends to English and Afrikaans-language newspapers (idem). The number of newspaper titles published in sub-Saharan Africa increased over the year by nearly 4%. Circulation trends among large dailies over recent years appear, however, to be down, particularly in francophone Africa: the readership of *Fraternité Matin* in the Ivory Coast dropped from 70,000 to 20,000 and that of *Le Messager* of Cameroon from 120,000 to 10,000 over the 1998–2005 period (RAP21, 2006). Similar patterns of new newspaper appearance and decline in the circulation of large dailies appear across the continent, though with greater amplitude in anglophone than in francophone and lusophone countries, where the tradition of restrictions on the press has been heavier and the birth rate of new media is more restricted. A large proportion of the new ventures are, however, ephemeral (Esipisu and Kariithi, 2005).

In fact, newspaper publishing in Africa faces many of the same obstacles and handicaps evoked above for books. Given their inevitably topical and political content, their visibility and – at least until recently – their frequent dependence on state subsidy, print news media are in addition more exposed to the threat and reality of censorship, if not outright suppression (Kilman,

2007). Numerous cases of suppression or severe restriction are still reported around the continent. 'In too many African countries', Kwame Karikari (2007) comments, 'independent media outlets and journalists continue to face harassment and violence.' The wave of democratization or at least partial liberalization of regimes in Africa over the last twenty or thirty years has nonetheless resulted in a relative proliferation of private and non-governmental media. Between 1966 and 2000 in Madagascar, for example, the number of newspapers grew nearly fourfold (from 67 to 252), whereas radio stations multiplied from a single governmental source to fully 100 different options (Andriantsoa et al, 2005).

Diffusion of print media must also deal with other issues, prime among them, once again, those of language. RAP21 (2003a, 2003b, 2004) – the bulletin of the African Press Network for the 21st Century – summarizes the problem well in an article entitled 'The Challenge of Local Languages' (2003b: 2):

*The dominant commerce and administrative languages in Africa are English, French and Portuguese. This is also reflected in the African newspaper landscape, where the majority of newspapers are published in one of the languages inherited from the colonial powers....*

*One exception to this rule is Tanzania, where a large number of titles in Kiswahili are published. Both Kiswahili and English are official languages of the country, but English is the primary language for business and administration.*

One finds a handful of newspapers that publish in two European languages (French and English in Mauritius, for example), but there are almost no recorded instances of bilingual journalism blending African and international tongues (RAP21, 2003b).

The number of African language newspapers, which may fluctuate considerably from year to year, given the small size and limited resources of most, seems nonetheless to be on the rise. An Amharic language offspring of Ethiopia's English language *The Daily Monitor* – itself entitled *The Monitor*

– began publishing in 2003 (RAP21, 2003a). A new national Setswana language newspaper in Botswana, *Mokgosi*, was launched in 2004 (RAP21, 2004). The following year the Zulu-language medium *Isolezwe* saw the light of day. Local newspapers in African languages, sometimes spinoffs of adult literacy programmes or NGO activities, seem to come and go, generally not benefitting from any stable financial base or advertising market once outside funding has dried up. But the *impulse* to publish in African languages persists and appears to grow (Hughes, 2005).

South Africa, the one industrialized nation of sub-Saharan Africa, is a case of its own, though perhaps something of a bellwether for the continent as well. The International Marketing Council of South Africa counted, in March 2007, 20 daily newspapers, 28 major weeklies, 670 consumer magazines, 765 business-to-business publications and 425 consumer newspapers and magazines (Alexander, 2008). It notes in current data that over 44% of the adult population currently read newspapers and 8.3 million of them are regular clients of daily papers. Moreover, 'newspapers with a largely black working-class readership are booming', particularly the new tabloids. In fact, the Council sees local newspapers and tabloids as the growth sector and concludes, 'Content is changing, too. It is human interest, focused on the local community and often uses local languages. *Son*, for example, is written in rough street Afrikaans' (ibid).

From the perspective of a literate environment, though, the net effect remains once again promising for the future, but distinctly limited in the present. Until the density and distribution of print media reach a scale that alters their availability at the local level and to African language literates, their affect on the literate environment continent-wide will remain circumscribed.

## **Supply, coverage and nature of electronic media**

If Internet and electronic media are the wave of the future, as headlines in the industrialized countries continually remind us, then that wave has so far only washed up to a limited extent on African shores. With 15% of the world's population in 2011, the continent, inclusive this time of both sub-

Saharan and South Africa, accounted for only 6.2% of worldwide Internet users and the degree of Internet penetration (those online as a proportion of overall population) was calibrated at 13.5%, compared to nearly 36% for the rest of the globe and 78.6% in all of North America (Internet World Stats, n.d.),<sup>35</sup> figures that would be distinctly lower if South Africa and the states bordering the Mediterranean were excluded. In the World Bank *Sourcebook for Poverty Reduction Strategies*, Kenny et al (2002: 1) give a pessimistic picture of the impact of electronic technology on poverty in the short run:

*Despite the potential links between ICTs and poverty reduction, direct access by the poor to more advanced ICTs in particular is extremely limited ... The availability of local content on the Internet is [an indicator of] the dominance of industrial countries: a recent host survey shows that Africa generates only 0.4 percent of global content. Excluding South Africa, the rest of the continent generates a mere 0.02 percent.*

*Usage of the Internet in particular is dominated by a tiny educational elite. Ninety-eight percent of Ethiopian Internet users had a university degree – in a country where 65 percent of the adult population is illiterate. Finally, women have less access to ICTs than men ... [A] survey of African users found that 86, 83, and 64 percent of Internet users in Ethiopia, Senegal, and Zambia, respectively, were male.*

Numbers of Internet users on the African continent did grow rapidly between 2000 and 2011, ballooning by nearly 3000%. (Internet World Stats, n.d.). Of course, even where it is more dense, coverage tends to be biased away from the clients of basic education with whom we are mostly concerned in this discussion; and, as Enguehard and Kane (2004) point out, it rarely includes

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35 Interestingly, the highest coefficient of penetration for major countries on sub-Saharan Africa – 29% – is found in Nigeria, which handily outstrips South Africa in this realm.

material in African languages, despite the relative ease of adjusting in this medium for the special characters they may require.<sup>36</sup>

All this does not mean that the 'electronic revolution' has no impact on Africa or scant significance for its learners, nor that it should be in the least ignored. Tuman (1992), an old scholar of literacy, has argued that certain of the characteristics of online literacy, like hypertexting, provide for a level of involvement in reading that has even greater potential for new learners than traditional media. The New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) launched several years ago an initiative for 'Bringing the Benefits of ICT to Africa', reasoning not just that more and more inter and intra-continental communication and trade would be handled in that fashion, but also that African school children would need that exposure to be prepared for the labour market of the twenty-first century (Solomons, 2003). Watts and Ibegbulam (2006) report on an initiative using the Internet to make medical information from the University of Nigeria more widely available to communities. And in Senegal, efforts began as early as 2001 to introduce computer technology into community-sponsored primary schools, which serve the poorer strata of the population (Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 2007). All such initiatives indicate potential. Scale may be another issue.

How smoothly and soon computer technology will penetrate the bulk of African primary schools is, however, an open question. Ferreiro (2005: 40-41) expresses some skepticism from the point of view of students and teachers:

*Poor countries ... tied to the reproduction mechanisms of foreign debt, go on indebting themselves to 'give a computer to every school', without the least proper educational debate about what that implies. It is not the same [thing as giving] desks and toilet bowls to every school. Computers*

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36 Most African languages transcribed in Roman script include special characters – hooked b's and d's for the 'implosive' versions of those consonants, for example – to represent sounds that do not exist in European languages. These were difficult to render on typewriters without special modifications. Modifying word processing software to these ends, however, is a relatively easy matter.

*need permanent technical support; they require permanent software updating, they require a telephone wire or line that will guarantee the internet connection. To give a computer to every school without thinking of the essential infrastructure is to put in something useless which will become obsolete a few months after being installed.*

*It is already a cliché ... to say that the teacher feels left aside by the attractive technology that generates ... playful attitudes and not necessarily learning attitudes.*

And more recently Williams (2010) finds that the continent's backbone electronic communication network remains very rudimentary indeed.

The element of electronic technology for which scale represents no issue, of course, is cell phones: they are so widely disseminated on the continent as to appear at times omnipresent, at least in urban areas, although calling is much more frequently practised than 'texting'. In 2001, Africa became the first area of the globe where the number of cell phone subscriptions actually exceeded the number of land lines (Butler, 2005). Numbers of subscribers on the continent grew between 2000 and 2004 from 2 million to 82 million, according to the International Telecommunication Union. In addition, in 2007, AFP reports, 'The South African newspaper *Sunday* became the first on the continent to offer readers [the opportunity to get] information via cell phone and internet connectivity' (AFP, 2007). Yet through 2005 only about 50% of the territory on the continent was covered by cell phone networks and ownership stood at around 10% of the population.

Cellphones nonetheless constitute an important and encouraging new factor with implications for the usage of literate skills as well as for the supply of reading resources. They are given further consideration in Chapter 6 on the demand side of the question.

## Libraries

The connection between libraries and a literate environment, particularly in regions where individual subscription to print or electronic media and individual ownership of books or journals are both difficult and rare, appears quite evident. That linkage is in fact the subject of a valuable monograph by Krolak (2005), who maintains that 'library and information services [whether] in public [or] school [locations], in community learning centers or NGO resource centers are dedicated to creating literate environments that support basic education for all.' (2005: 2)

Unfortunately, such libraries have not been very densely distributed in sub-Saharan Africa, although adequate census information about them is lacking. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics has at most very scant data on public libraries in Africa from 1995 through 2007, a few points in 1995 and 1999 involving a handful of countries, and nothing since (UIS, 2007). These few indications suggest that in countries like Benin, Kenya, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda, such resource locations seldom exceeded twenty or thirty for the whole country and sometimes numbered less than ten, averaging out to one public library for about 500,000 inhabitants, typically in urban locations and minimally accessible to the bulk of the population. These figures certainly understate overall availability of such resources, when one takes into account school libraries and those sponsored by various private organizations not reliably included in the census. But the latter are hard to track, quite variable in their level of endowment and even longevity, and usually well out of reach of the neo-literate population. Montagnes (quoted in Krolak, 2005: 5) notes in his review of *Textbooks and learning materials, 1990-1999* at the World Education Forum in Dakar that:

*[S]chool libraries were said to have the lowest of priorities in educational spending. The majority of schools possessed no library. Where some semblance of a school library did exist, it was often no more than a few shelves of outdated and worn-out material, inadequately staffed.*

Rosenberg (likewise quoted by Krolak, 2005: 9) describes the typical life cycle of a community or school library effort:

*Originating from the initiative of a group from the community or an aid agency, their birth is followed by a year or two of rapid growth and a good deal of local publicity and attention. This is [succeeded] by a period of slow decline, accompanied by theft, the departure of the initiators [and] loss of interest among staff and users. [T]he library still exists but signs of life are barely discernible. Sometimes this period continues indefinitely, but often a final stage is reached when all remaining books are removed, stolen or damaged beyond repair and the premises and staff are allocated to another activity.*

In short, the activity does not appear highly sustainable under present circumstances. Even in the best endowed of the sub-Saharan countries, South Africa, only 34% of schools had functioning libraries in 2006, a figure that descended to as low as 2% in some rural provinces (Wessels, 2010: 29). A World Bank study (2008) indicates that stocks are threadbare in secondary school libraries as well. And, as Richardson (2004: 235) remarks for the case of Eritrea, 'Most of the school libraries are really [only] reading rooms, which still serve an important purpose, of course.'

Such data could be put in a bit of salutary perspective by recalling, de Chantal (2000) reminds us, that as recently as 1960 France itself was characterized by meager availability and use of library facilities: less than 5% of citizens were members of a local library, books lent per year amounted to 0.75 per adult citizen on the average, and fully 58% of the adult population had never read a book. Africa could thus be seen as negotiating the lower end of an ascending curve in this regard, positioned – in historical terms – not so far behind a tardy worldwide trend. But if it will take another forty or fifty years for most African countries to reach the intensity of library resources now enjoyed in France, this factor will obviously not itself be a determining influence on creating literate environments on any scale compatible with EFA goals.

There is no lack of reasons why a library could contribute in important ways to community welfare and post-literacy (well summarized in publications like Mchombu and Cadbury, 2008, from Book Aid International and the Commonwealth Foundation), as well as no lack of interesting models and technical advice from the brotherhood (and sisterhood) of trained librarians and their associations, a valuable resource that is beginning to be better represented on the African continent (Cuban and Cuban, 2007). Sithole (2007) sees them as a locus for collecting indigenous knowledge. DeJager and Nassebeni (2007) report on apparently successful attempts to train librarians in a rural province of South Africa to access information on health and HIV-AIDS via computers and share what they learn with local community members. Olatokun (2007) expands on the role that libraries could play in initiating women to greater political participation in Nigeria. Passchier (2002) describes experiments with 'camel libraries' in Kenya and WordPress (2008) features the 'donkey cart' libraries of Ethiopia as efforts designed to bring the reading material closer to the user.

Encouraging initiatives and worthwhile ideas are thus once again to be found, but the density of implementation – and the resources for it – remain quite sparse.

## **Signage and environmental prompts**

A last supply dimension of the literate environment in Africa to consider is perhaps the simplest one and at the same time the variety most closely related to the ecological concept of literacy that underlies this discussion: the display of written communication in the signs, documents and markers that populate the immediate environs of urban and rural citizens. Usage of literacy finally comes down in some part to the simple quantity or density of functional print that confronts the citizen in his or her daily rounds and that regulates or facilitates access to needed information or resources. An important element of that, as well as an indicator of the operational use of written communication in the environment, lies in the prevalence of signs, bulletin boards, billboards and other forms of visible public or commercial messaging in a language

comprehensible to those in question. The association of public signage and literacy is, moreover, an ancient one (Schwartzman, 1999).

There are few studies or assessments of this situation to base remarks upon. Shiohata's (2005, 2010) papers on available supports for literacy in two Wolof-speaking Senegalese communities are a welcome exception. He documents a number of forms of written posters and signs in public spaces – commercial, organizational and governmental in nature. The latter are almost exclusively in the official French language as are the major commercial billboards. In local shops and stores, however, a significant minority of inscriptions in Wolof had begun appearing and the language was likewise used in occasional public education posters of NGOs. Changing official signage would evidently require a political decision and entail some careful preparation, perhaps easier – as Warsame's (2001) study suggests – in countries with more authoritarian regimes.

## Composite picture of supply: status, initiatives, outlook

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What can we say to summarize the supply side of the literate environment? To start with the flow of literate people themselves highlighted in the previous chapter, there is no circumventing the persistent illiteracy problem that afflicts the continent, although it is more pronounced in some areas than others and still more severe among women than men, despite higher net enrollment ratios for girls in selected countries. While the percentage of illiterates in the African population over 15 years of age has indeed fallen considerably in the last half century, it still surpasses 30% as we approach the next deadline for EFA: 2015. At the same time, the resources devoted to providing education remain weak as do, to an even greater degree, those devoted to addressing *adult* illiteracy. Does one factor explain the other? Not necessarily, stress those most concerned with creating a literate environment (Bhola, 1989; Chhetri and Baker, 2005; Rogers et al, 1999). It is rather, they suggest, the undersupply of opportunities to read (books, libraries, media)

and to continue education beyond the level of basic literacy (equivalence and linkage with formal education or accessible lifelong learning activities) that are most responsible for the weak results of literacy programmes, and the high proportion of their graduates who relapse into illiteracy a few years after completion. In this chapter, we have tried to go beyond statistics on literacy acquisition and instructional programme availability to examine the quality and density of these other dimensions of the literate environment.

Unfortunately and perhaps not surprisingly, they also are in short supply: availability of books is limited, especially in the African languages that are the most frequent medium and object of adult literacy – and the same can be said of other written media: newspapers, magazines and even environmental signage. Electronic communication is beginning to make inroads on the continent, most notably in the form of cell phones. Computer technology and the Internet are spreading rapidly from an extremely narrow base and will certainly continue to change the nature of education in Africa as they are doing throughout most of the rest of the world. However, their penetration is still too limited – and too restricted to already literate and urban sectors of the population as well as to international languages – and the limits to their dissemination too dependent on scarce resources to portend much immediate impact on upgrading literate environments in a demographically significant manner, let alone an equitable one. Cellphone usage constitutes one possible exception to that rule, given its rapid spread and texting features, and will therefore be further considered in Chapter 6. Libraries are critically important facilities that can give access to books, journalistic resources and electronic media to whole sectors of the population who cannot purchase them on an individual or household basis; but they too remain few and far between in most African countries, excepting a few privileged urban neighbourhoods. As suggested above, literacy acquisition is finally determined in part by the simple quantity and relevance of written material or media that circulates in the vicinity or appears in the physical surroundings of those ready to begin using it on a regular basis – and, despite encouraging pilot efforts, the resources to gear up to that scale are simply not available.

Of course, the quality of literate environments does not depend solely on outside provision of reading material or even – perhaps more to the point – on local generation of official written communications. ‘Communication practices’, the New Literacy Studies advocates remind us, are a good deal broader than this and are also nourished in *sub rosa* fashion but highly meaningful ways by the personal uses people find for modified patterns of sharing and recording thoughts, information and feelings.

Moreover, one must ask whether it would be sufficient simply to intensify and upgrade provision of these different literacy resources on a massive scale throughout the concerned countries, even were one able to do so and responsible authorities were to spearhead the initiative. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was wont to say (1996), there is nothing as pointless as the answer to an unasked question. If the environment does not require this tool, then how effective would simple multiplication of it prove? At the least, one must ask *why* the provision both of new literates and of the opportunities for reading remains so restricted. Paucity of resources offers one response, but one that only pushes the question back a notch further. Perhaps there can be no answer without looking at the flip side of the issue – that is, the state of factors conditioning the *demand* for literate competence and determining the ecology of literacy in Africa today; and to that I turn in the next chapter.

# Chapter 6

## The Demand Side: Status and Potentials

**T**he demand side of a literate environment denotes the forces that create an objective *need* for literacy – that is, all those activities within society that impel different population groups to acquire and maintain given levels of competence in reading, writing and numeracy or that afford them opportunities for using those skills to their benefit and the benefit of their families and communities. Most (but by no means all) of these forces reside in realms of society that lie *outside of the educational system itself*, and all are dependent on resources largely generated elsewhere. Such stimuli for literacy compose a complex and highly varied tapestry, best – if still partially – portrayed in recent years by the research on literacy practices (e.g. Barton, 2007; Baynham, 1995; Street, 2003). In this chapter, I deal with six principal types of demand, briefly considering in each case the current status of the realm in question in sub-Saharan Africa, then some examples of successful efforts to elicit or intensify demand, and finally a glimpse of future potentials. The domains to be considered are the following:

1. Formal employment
2. Informal and self-employment, plus related types of local entrepreneurship
3. Administrative decentralization
4. Political mobilization and democratization
5. Information and communications
6. Religious practice, conversion and diffusion
7. Cultural enrichment, lifelong learning (LLL) and varieties of further education.

The common denominator among these overlapping realms is of course that they not only afford opportunities to exercise new literate skills, but that they provide those involved with critical means for survival, human development and personal fulfillment. Yet as has already been noted, their incidence and effects vary significantly among subgroups of the population, even those with little schooling or literacy training. A last section prior to the

chapter summary is therefore devoted to such fluctuations and to the specific case of gender.

In a sense, of course, media and written communications in relevant languages could also be listed on the demand side of the ledger, insofar as their multiplication in any social environment causes critical information to pass increasingly by written channels, and so creates intensified needs for literate competence. (In fact, most if not all arenas of social life reviewed in the preceding section on supply factors also have a demand facet, and the reverse is true – *mutatis mutandis* – for the forces requiring literacy considered here. That is part of their essential linkage.) However, the multiplication of written media is itself largely dependent both on the number of potential readers and on the other demand forces enumerated above, and so – though it is evoked at different junctures in the following pages – the principal portrait of the domain of written communication is left on the supply side of the equation.

As argued above, the demand side of literacy is critical to the creation of a literate environment and has received less attention in educational circles than the supply side. This chapter is consequently the most detailed of the book, and it constitutes the heart of my argument.

## **Employment in the formal labour market**

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Any of the six domains of demand for literacy evoked above could be placed first on the list. The ordering is not meant to suggest priority. I shall in fact try to portray them as acting together and reinforcing each other in important ways. Employment is put first and cultural enrichment last only because, on the supply side of the question, issues of literature availability, print and culture have already been explored – and, as a consequence, I use this ordering as a way of striking the balance proposed in Chapter 1, before returning in Chapter 7 to the equally important topics that lie closer to that intersection.

The first realm considered is one traditionally uppermost in portrayals of economic welfare and human resource development in Africa, if perhaps least accessible to newly literate adolescents and adults: employment in the formal labour market.

## Status

Official employment, that is, participation in the formal labour market, has been endemically weak in sub-Saharan Africa, due to the undeveloped nature of the industrial sector – the historical ‘engine’ of job creation world-round. Moreover, it is worsening in most areas of sub-Saharan Africa. The contribution of industry to GNP throughout the region in fact declined from 35% to 30% between 1989 and 2006, by World Bank figures (World Bank, 2006, 2010). Johanson and Adams (2004) characterize the employment situation:

*The formal economy has been stagnating in most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Zimbabwe had a net addition of about 100,000 wage-employed workers during the entire decade of the 1990s, less than the number of annual new entrants to the labour force. Zambia took 20 years to generate 100,000 formal sector jobs. Wage employment levels in Ghana in the 1990s fell well below those achieved a decade earlier. Similar contractions occurred in Côte d'Ivoire and Tanzania ...*

*Private sector growth has been modest. Employment creation in the private sector was either minuscule ... or negative in the 1990s. The growth of the public sector, which expanded rapidly in many countries in the 1980s, slowed or contracted with economic reforms in the 1990s ... In short, overall formal sector growth, from either private or public sources, has been minimal.*

*The formal sector currently does not generate enough jobs to absorb all labour market entrants. If the formal sector of a given country employed 20 percent of the labour force, then*

*wage employment would have to grow at 12.5 per cent per year to absorb the 2.5 percent annual increase in the labour force ... Allowing for growth in productivity, formal sector wage employment would need to grow even faster. This exceeds the realm of feasibility.*

In fact, in the wake of the global economic downturn starting in 2007, which reduced GDP growth rates for the subcontinent as a whole to less than 2%, youth employment for the 15–24 year-old-group has become particularly problematic and was the theme of the following year's *Africa Development Indicators* report from the World Bank (2009). The authors note that in 2005 '62% of Africa's overall population fell below the age of 25', while over 70% of the group lived on less than US\$2 a day. 'The still very high fertility rate', they add, 'along with a demographic transition that is slowly taking place in the region are likely to increase the pressure African countries face for job creation over the coming decades' (2009: 1). The authors of the 2010 Global Monitoring Report make this grim prospect even more graphic (UNESCO, 2009b: 82–83):

*Demography and poverty combine to leave sub-Saharan Africa facing particularly stark challenges in youth employment. The region's share of the world's youth population, currently about 17%, will be some 25% by 2025. Almost two-thirds of the population is under 25. The transition from school to work is enormously difficult for this growing population. Every year between 7 million and 10 million young Africans enter labour markets characterized by high unemployment, low productivity, chronic insecurity and poverty-level incomes.*

South Africa and Botswana constitute a partial exception, due to the industrial and extractive infrastructure developed there over the last century: wage-earning employment covers 82% of the South African workforce, for example. However, the share of *informal* employment in non-agricultural work in sub-Saharan Africa was estimated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) at 72% in 2002, a figure which rose to 77% when South Africa was excluded, and that Palmer (2009) has estimated at 90% in Ghana.

The nature of informal employment and of the informal labour market is thus crucial to any assessment of the demand side of literate environments and is examined in the paragraphs below.

Newly literate adults and young people are in any case seldom candidates for salaried or wage-paying formal employment, barring extremely rare national or regional policies to the contrary, and with the exception of idiosyncratic individual cases. But at the least the state of this labour market is an indicator of livelihood opportunities and has an important indirect effect on those more accessible to the undereducated, since primary and secondary school leavers unable to find formal sector employment are thus more likely to flood the informal labour market and displace those with even less training.

## Initiatives and outlook

Industrial development, unionization and the employment they generate are all critical to Africa's future. However, the direct impact of these forces on increased demand for literate competence on the continent, while real and potentially major in the longer term as well as currently significant in particular areas like South Africa, is largely restricted at present by Africa's limited industrial base and the further constriction that continuing budgetary austerity in the public sector is likely to create. Factors like these in fact led to a whole debate about Africa's 'labour aristocracy' between the 1960s and the 1980s (e.g. Arrighi and Saul, 1973; Seidman, 1994), based on the notion that secure employment in industry at even modest wages was both so rare and such a windfall, when measured against prevailing threadbare livelihoods on the continent, that those who acceded to such positions constituted in fact a labour force 'elite' more than a militant working class – and one that was inevitably more interested in defending its privileges than in contesting economic conditions or manifesting solidarity with the less fortunate.<sup>37</sup>

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37 The notion of a labour aristocracy was, of course, first developed by the Communist movement (and Karl Kautsky in particular) to analyse difficulties encountered in organizing the working class, then given its best known expression in Lenin's *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism* (1939).

In addition, as noted above, the reduction in public sector employment throughout much of Sahelian Africa in the last two decades seems to have provoked some segments of the population to abandon schooling and the hope of formal wage employment for their children, and to resort to Islamic education as an avenue to livelihoods in the employ of traditional merchants (Devèze, 1996). Although the labour aristocracy thesis has been widely contested (e.g. Post, 2006) and the substitution of Islamic for formal schooling in Sahelian Africa modified by the growth of joint schooling in *medersa* (Brenner, 2007), the weak outlook for increased formal employment on much of the continent, and the general lack of access for neo-literates to related opportunities, relegate this sector to secondary status in any realistic diagnosis of opportunities for intensifying literate environments for the bulk of the population, and particularly the clients of adult literacy programmes.

In fact, the prime possibilities and initiatives for augmenting the impact of formal employment on demand for beginning literate competence probably lie in the progressive formalization and better organization of the informal economy (Xaba, Horn and Motala, 2002), and the upgrading of those unofficial employments that spring up in the wake of different forms of economic and political decentralization around new local entrepreneurial ventures, or on the margins of existing firms.

## **Opportunities for informal employment and small business creation**

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The dearth of formal employment opportunities for school leavers and newly literate adults alike throughout sub-Saharan Africa means that the large majority of these people must find their livelihood in what is loosely termed the informal economy – that is, through self-employment in urban and rural areas, by affiliation with unregistered small businesses, or via temporary and undocumented work with major employers (Al-Samarrai and Bennell,

2007).<sup>38</sup> This phenomenon has, among other things, spawned a massive literature from academics and development organizations alike on informal sector development and strategies with respect to it (e.g. Chen, 2007; Lyons and Snoxell, 2005; Palmer, 2005).<sup>39</sup>

## Status

The notion of an 'informal sector' in economic and development activity first gained wide currency in studies of Kenya in the early 1970s (King, 1977), and was initially conceptualized as something of a 'wildcat' realm in which people emerging from agricultural and rural occupations, who could not find formal employment, managed nonetheless to generate their own livelihoods.<sup>40</sup> Over the years the understanding of this domain has changed and matured. The more recent adoption of the term 'informal economy' indicates fuller understanding that such activities do not simply represent some sort of minor adjunct to the important sectors of developing (and, in fact, developed) nations, a domain characterized by poor working conditions and low job security, but rather constitute an integral part of the national economy that may be linked in diverse ways to formal enterprise, and make significant contributions to overall GDP (Fernández-Kelly and Shefner, 2006; Portes et al, 1989). In fact, in contrast to the rather weak contribution of formal sector employment to reinforcing demand for the skills of newly literate adults, varied sources of evidence suggest that the informal economy absorbs a much greater proportion of this potential and so merits close examination, although the dynamics are as complex as they are fascinating (Ellis and Freeman, 2004; Guha-Kasnobis et al, 2006).

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38 It should not be forgotten that education may itself form part of the informal sector, including in that case quite a number of community and private schools or training schemes created quite outside of any framework of government supervision or quality control. We consider the specific case of community schools in Chapter 7.

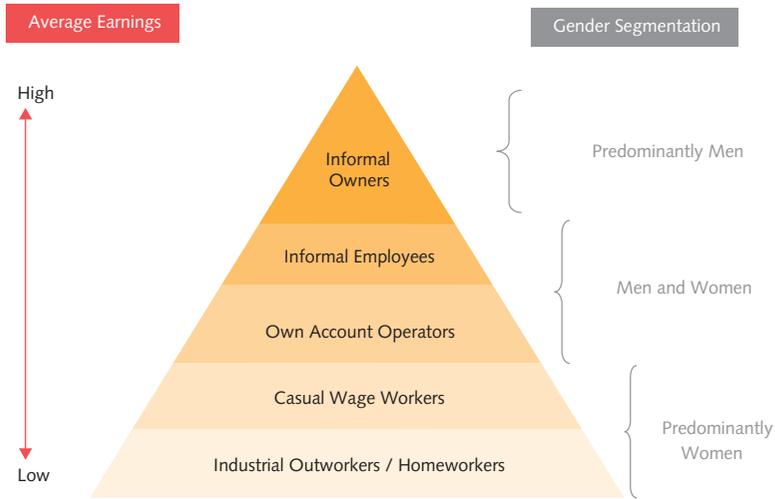
39 My own university library, scarcely the best endowed when it comes to literature on development and publications from national and international agencies operating in the field, nonetheless numbers over 275 titles dealing with one aspect or another of the topic, published from 1966 through 2010.

40 The Kiswahili term for the sector is *jua kali* – literally 'hot sun', and a reference to the hard and predominantly outdoor work required of those who do not have official jobs or businesses.

The informal economy is defined by the ILO as 'all economic activities that are, in law or practice, not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements' (ILO, 2002: 53). That definition is rather sparse and generic. In elaboration, Chen (2007) points out that researchers and practitioners have been obliged over the last two decades to refine and differentiate their descriptions as they became increasingly aware of a number of facts:

- that economic activities in any country spread themselves out along a continuum from decidedly informal to highly formal with no clear demarcation between them (beyond variable distinctions codified in legislation)
- that the concept should cover unregulated and instable work, sometimes for formal businesses, as much as it does small unregulated enterprise
- that far from disappearing with historical evolution and development, the informal economy seems to be here to stay
- that there are a number of axes of stratification within the general residual category of informal economic activity, including average wages, gender composition of labour force and relative longevity as well as sector of operation
- that the underlying objective of intervention in this realm should be less to 'formalize' informal economic activities than to improve the quality of work performed in them, increase the benefits derived from them, and moderate the disadvantages incurred by those who staff them.

Figure 4: Internal stratification of the informal economy (from Chen, 2007, p. 15)



Chen summarizes (Table 5) the difference between old and new perspectives on the informal economy, and pictures one version of its internal stratification in the manner portrayed in Figure 4 above, while noting that further distinctions of this sort could be made using religion, ethnicity, race, gender or caste as stratifying factors.

**Table 5: Old and new descriptions of the informal economy (from Chen, 2007, p. 12)**

The old view	The new view
The informal sector is the traditional economy that will wither away and die with modern, industrial growth.	The informal economy is 'here to stay' and expanding with modern, industrial growth.
It is only marginally productive.	It is a major provider of employment, goods and services for lower-income groups. It contributes a significant share of GDP.
It exists separately from the formal economy.	It is linked to the formal economy - it produces for, trades with, distributes for and provides services to the formal economy.
It represents a reserve pool of surplus labor.	Much of the recent rise in informal employment is due to the decline in formal employment or to the informalisation of previously formal employment relationships.
It is comprised mostly of street traders and very small-scale producers.	It is made up of a wide range of informal occupations—both 'resilient old forms' such as casual day labour in construction and agriculture as well as 'emerging new ones' such as temporary and part-time jobs plus homework for high tech industries.
Most of those in the sector are entrepreneurs who run illegal and unregistered enterprises in order to avoid regulation and taxation.	It is made up of non-standard wage workers as well as entrepreneurs and self-employed persons producing legal goods and services, albeit through irregular or unregulated means. Most entrepreneurs and the self-employed are amenable to, and would welcome, efforts to reduce barriers to registration and related transaction costs and to increase benefits from regulation; and most informal wage workers would welcome more stable jobs and workers' rights.
Work in the informal economy is comprised mostly of survival activities and thus is not a subject for economic policy.	Informal enterprises include not only survival activities but also stable enterprises and dynamic growing businesses, and informal employment includes not only self-employment but also wage employment. All forms of informal employment are affected by most (if not all) economic policies.

Information collected by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2011) and presented in Table 6 hereafter gives a rough sense both of the size and of the proportional variability of informal economy employment in Africa. Though that approximate portrait is a very useful one, three things should nonetheless be noted about the data in question: First, much like information on adult literacy rates, calibrations of informal sector employment are notoriously thin, unreliable and underestimated, given the difficulties attending data collection and the political sensitivities they may awaken. As is evident in Table 6, moreover, the estimates are seldom made

annually and stem from different years between 2004 and 2010, depending on survey practices. Second, the information is only available on the 11 African countries listed. Third, the ILO makes a laudable effort to refine the focus by distinguishing “informal employment” (which includes people working without contract or official wages in formal sector enterprises) from “informal sector” workers, meaning those employed in unregistered (and generally small) firms. The former category is larger than the latter. Moreover, “informal sector” workers include at the same time a small number of cases of formal registered employment within the informal sector.

**Table 6: Available data on rates of informal sector employment in selected African countries (2004-2010), drawn from International Labour Organization (ILO) World of Work Report 2011: Making markets work for jobs. Geneva. ILO**

Country	Year	Informal Employment (000's and percentage)						Informal Sector (000's and percentage)					
		Total		Male		Female		Total		Male		Female	
		Nb.	Pct.	Nb.	Pct.	Nb.	Pct.	Nb.	Pct.	Nb.	Pct.	Nb.	Pct.
Côte d'Ivoire	2008	na	na	na	na	na	na	5 138	69,7%	1 240	60,5%	1 194	82,8%
Ethiopia	2004	na	na	na	na	na	na	1 089	41,4%	528	36,3%	561	47,9%
Lesotho	2008	160	34,9%	90	34,1%	70	36,1%	225	49,1%	131	49,9%	94	48,1%
Liberia	2010	343	60,0%	136	47,4%	206	72,0%	284	49,5%	96	33,4%	188	65,4%
Madagascar	2005	1 271	73,6%	600	66,8%	671	81,0%	893	51,8%	365	40,7%	528	63,8%
Mali	2004	1 180	81,8%	528	74,2%	652	89,2%	1 029	71,4%	447	62,9%	582	79,6%
Namibia	2008	121	43,9%	59	41,1%	62	47,0%	121	43,9%	na	na	na	na
South Africa	2010	4 089	32,7%	2 071	29,5%	2 018	36,8%	4 089	32,7%	1 303	18,6%	922	16,8%
Uganda	2010	2 597	68,5%	1 419	66,5%	1 178	71,2%	2 597	68,5%	1 216	57,0%	1 027	62,1%
Zambia	2008	920	69,5%	513	62,9%	407	80,1%	854	64,6%	497	60,9%	357	70,3%
Zimbabwe	2004	909	51,6%	462	42,7%	447	65,9%	698	39,6%	338	31,2%	360	53,1%
Median African Sample			60,6%		47,4%		71,2%		49,5%		45,3%		63,0%

To judge by these rather spotty data, rates of informal employment during the first decade of the century varied among the eleven countries in question from a low of 32.7% in South Africa to a high of 81.8% in Mali, with a median value of 60%, whereas employment in the informal sector itself likewise varied among those two country cases from a low of 17.8% to a high of 71.4%, with a median value of 49.5%. While the span is great, it nonetheless makes the relative importance of the informal economy abundantly clear. Moreover, the median rates of informal employment and

informal sector work for women are almost half again as large as those for men, a fact to which we shall return. The scale and nature of informal sector opportunities, whether in rural or urban areas, themselves depend in turn on the availability of seed capital in the environment. A West African proverb expresses it well: 'It takes water in the belly to draw more from the well.'<sup>41</sup> Although the informal market and self-employment are sometimes described as the best available remedy for a chronic scarcity of jobs and the attendant dangers of unrest in developing countries (e.g. De Soto, 1998), in fact success in that realm typically requires three complementary kinds of resources to at least some initial degree: start-up funds; opportunities to access viable markets on reasonable terms and with some level of equity and security; and the requisite skills, experience and/or and knowledge. The first two types of resources are typically quite hard to come by in rural and depressed urban environments, although threadbare micro-enterprises often proliferate in the latter, as programmes like the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Grameen Bank have clearly demonstrated (Cerven, 1999; Islam, 2005; Khandker, 1998).

It is the third type of resource mentioned, however – skills, experience and knowledge – that creates or enhances the demand for training, although its magnitude obviously depends in good part on the availability of the other two. Moreover, the new skills may be obtained in a variety of ways. This 'human resource' component has long been provided to some extent by traditional apprenticeships and existing strategies of experiential learning, including knowledge acquired and lessons learned through out-migration. However, formal Technical-Vocational Education and Training programmes (TVET) (Atchoarena and Delluc, 2001) and non-formal Post-Basic Education and Training programmes (PBET) (King, 2006), for the most part anchored respectively in the educational system and in the extension services of technical development agencies, have also been offered for years by external sources at generally low levels of intensity and support as a means of addressing the need.

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41 Hausa: *Sai da ruwan ciki a ke ja na rijiyu*

Asset accumulation is obviously a key ingredient in the mix, as a World Bank publication explicitly recognizes (Moser and Dani, 2008). One tactic for assembling the financial resources necessary to such start-ups is by collectivizing assets, whether via cooperative management, micro-credit facilities or traditional Rotating Investment and Savings Schemes (RISS, also called 'tontines'). In the latter ventures, group members pool financial contributions and take turns drawing on them while furnishing guarantees of reimbursement, thus ensuring group-enforced savings and investment (Sika and Strasser, 2001). As recent literature both on micro-credit and on PBET programming emphasizes, however, *absent explicit policies to invest in these areas and to create what the economic development people call an 'enabling environment' for such initiative*, the scale of related undertakings remains quite small and adds little to the overall set of opportunities for new literates and school leavers (King and Palmer, 2006a). Where the environment is favourable in these regards, however, micro-enterprise strategies have demonstrated a capacity not only to supplement the incomes of the poor in significant manner, but to contribute to building the literate environment.

### **Initiatives and outlook: livelihoods strategies**

There has been over the years a host of outside efforts – some of them enjoying success, at least in the short to medium-term – to create self-employment, business start-up, or savings and investment opportunities in rural and depressed urban areas for newly literate adults, or to link them to such outlets (e.g. Berhanu et al, 2007; Chuks, 2004; Lauglo, 2001). As Oxenham et al (2002) note, such initiatives have typically been more fruitful when they have involved the introduction of literacy or basic education training into existing economic ventures, than when they have entailed establishment of income-generating activities within existing literacy or training programmes. This is, in part, because the sponsors and staff of the latter generally have less knowledge of how to constitute viable businesses, and less access to seed capital than those involved in the former.

Perhaps the most sustained external attempt to support and develop employments in the African informal economy over recent years is

represented by the DFID Livelihoods programme (DFID, 2002), although in fact 'livelihoods' initiatives from many other sources (e.g. Ellis and Freeman, 2004) have similar characteristics. Such approaches are built on recognition of the rather grim picture for formal sector employment in Africa summarized above, and of the necessity of finding ways to create socially sustainable means for earning a living and improving conditions in such an environment. They tend to focus resolutely on *both* the macro and micro dimensions of the issue, but constitute more a framework for addressing these problems in and across concerned sectors, than a specific strategy for engagement on any particular front.

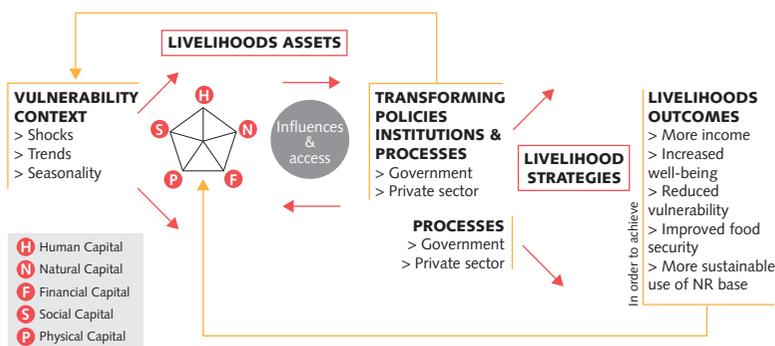
The DFID Livelihoods Approach (Clark and Carney, 2008; Scoones, 1998) proposes five key steps in addressing poverty:

1. take account of the most important 'vulnerabilities' of the concerned population groups
2. inventory their existing assets
3. assess policies, institutions and processes that may need to be modified in order to ensure an enabling environment for remedial initiative
4. devise strategies for addressing key blockages and opportunities, in order to
5. produce recognizable and sustainable livelihood outcomes for stakeholders.

Those steps and some of the recursivity and environmental interactions involved are summarized graphically in Figure 5. The concept of assets in the DFID scheme, however, goes considerably beyond financial resources to include, as indicated by initials in the diagram, Financial, Physical, Human, Social and Natural Capital, all of which need to be integrated to some

degree in devising durable solutions to poverty.<sup>42</sup> Numerous instances of its application are documented in resource documents available online (National Strategies for Sustainable Development, 2003). The strategy has been applied across sectors as various as water management, livestock, health, fisheries, microfinance, land titling and microenterprise development.

**Figure 5: Graphic portrayal of the Department for International Development (DFID) livelihoods strategy (adapted from DFID, 1998)**



The very explicit inclusion of human resources in the asset pentagon in Figure 5 implies that important factors like seed capital and a supportive social framework are not enough to ignite the cycle of capitalization – some sort of education and training is likewise an essential element of the livelihoods approach. The late 1990s and the turn of the millennium witnessed a good deal of writing and conferencing about ‘the role of literacy in livelihood strategies’ (e.g. Chuks, 2004; DFID, 2002; Oxenham et al, 2002), but the topic seems to have fallen out of favour and little has been heard of

42 This is largely similar to the ‘fivefold capitalization’ scheme advocated in the PADLOS-Education Report (Easton et al, 1998), where the identified components were physical, financial, institutional, intellectual and cultural capital. In this publication, we largely adopt the DFID scheme (though the PADLOS-Education version is pictured in Figure 11 further on), but interpret human assets as including both health and the results of education and training (knowledge, skills and attitudes), and will consider social assets as covering both what is often called ‘social capital’ and cultural resources. These distinctions are obviously as arbitrary and approximate as they are useful.

it in recent years.<sup>43</sup> DFID Livelihood Guidelines still include major sections on 'Human Capital' that emphasize *inter alia* the importance of training local actors in impoverished regions and making optimum use of existing indigenous knowledge, but little is said about organized learning strategies or linkage with educational activities and institutions.

Nunan (2006) describes and analyses one particular example of a DFID activity: locally directed lake management in Uganda. In that undertaking, gender equity, natural resource management, fisheries development, poverty reduction and community-based planning are all integrated in a scheme where stakeholder groups form and govern 'Beach Management Units' charged with improving fisheries yield and better protecting the environment, as well as with participatory monitoring, control and surveillance of all activities. In addition, those local fishery units play a role in both participatory research on lake preservation and assessing supportive legislation. Although great importance is given to local capacity building among stakeholders, and particularly women, the document – like most of those in the DFID Livelihoods corpus – does not offer much detail on *how* this training dimension is carried out. It is another example of circumstances where needs for training and literacy appear to emerge *sub rosa* from challenges of management and inter-sectoral development.

Despite the ups and downs of international agency attention to informal sector employment and the importance of efforts to 'formalize' it, the phenomenon is not likely to disappear in the foreseeable future. It is in fact a staple of transitional and developed economies as well, though sometimes labeled 'underground economy' in those cases (Schneider and Enste, 2002; Wallace et al, 2006). Its relevance for the nature of literate environments can therefore not be ignored.

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43 These insights were not new at the turn of the century: works like Oxenham (1980) and Belloncle et al (1982a) are in this regard prescient reads. But the livelihood theme surfaced more evidently, if somewhat ephemerally, in development agency circles a decade ago.

## Dealing with the 'Great Divorce'

This relative disconnect seems symptomatic of a general phenomenon that might be called 'the Great Divorce': namely, the lack of connection and even the strongly ingrained *mistrust* that tends to prevail between educators and their institutions on the one hand, and the agencies and personnel most concerned with economic development and employment on the other, a situation ironically endemic in developing countries themselves, as well as among the organizations that work on their behalf. What could explain this prejudicial standoff?

- Some of the missed opportunities are a natural (if no less regrettable) consequence of the different training, experience and preoccupations of the two groups – differences that may be more acute the higher one goes in institutions, the more removed personnel are from field experience where common denominators emerge, and the more advanced and specialized the training of those in positions of responsibility.
- Part of the problem may be laid at the feet of educators themselves: if adherence to the 'autonomous model of literacy' – discussed in Chapter 2 – has had the ill effects portrayed above on a rounded understanding of the issue and on a balanced engagement in research and policy concerns, it is no less true that widespread belief in education as a panacea and a silver bullet with the power to unilaterally overcome the problems of poverty and underdevelopment has produced its own distortions in strategy and practice.
- Finally, part of the disconnect may be due to an instinctive sense among those who benefit from the status quo that connections of this type risk producing sparks that could increase pressures to modify the present distribution of wealth and power every bit as much as they might produce real educational and development benefits.

It should be noted that a significant attempt has been made over the last two decades, at least in industrialized countries and in the realm of workforce training, to bridge the education-economy gap. Studies and advocacy pieces

under the general rubric of 'Workforce 2000' or, more recently, 'Workforce 2020' have appeared with great regularity, particularly in the United States throughout this period (Johnstone and Packer, 1987; Judy and D'Amico, 1997; Rojewski, 2004). The theme, amply reflected in governmental hearings and the popular press, has been largely spearheaded by enterprise institutes and motivated by the concern that the national economy will lose its competitive edge in world markets if the educational system does not turn out people with the requisite technical skills, or turn the increasingly diverse school population of Western countries into a productive and cooperative workforce.

Little of the same has been evident in developing countries, however, and the gulf between advocates of literacy and sectors knowledgeable about employment seems to be a fact – one that I experienced again during a year (2002–2003) spent working at the World Bank on rapprochement between adult literacy programmes and other African development initiatives and sectors. Although strategies adopted or envisaged in those other realms created clear imperatives for local capacity building, when push came to shove the responsible offices were extremely hesitant to involve literacy personnel – or for that matter educators of any stripe – in planning for joint support of the fivefold strategies implied by the asset pentagon, and this despite some real examples of success. The reason seemed to have two facets: on the one hand, a certain degree of turf jealousy, insularity and ignorance of what other sectors were up to (shared, for that matter, by most educators and scarcely unusual in large organizational settings); and, on the other, economic and social practitioners' deep-seated mistrust of staff in education programmes, judged generally clueless about the practical concerns of development, and likely to muck things up if they started getting involved.

## Political and administrative organization

As important as the domains of economic employment and personal or collective livelihoods are to the demand for literacy, they scarcely operate in isolation and are certainly affected – and sometimes trumped – by other factors. As sociologists and political economists (e.g. Deere and Doss, 2007) regularly remind us, the key question in dealing with economic development is often not so much *how* production is increased as *cui bono?* – *who* does it, who reaps the benefits and how the enterprise is organized. In fact, matters of social and political organization are generally the medium term by which economic movements yield educational consequences and educational innovations are translated into improvements in material welfare.

Varying strategies of political and administrative organization can thus themselves have a significant impact on the demand for literate skills, and so on the nature of the literate environment as well. The trend towards increasing decentralization of activities and authorities both in government and in broader realms of societal *governance* – that is, management of a variety of institutions and organizations across sectors – creates opportunities for the assumption of new functions at the local level, and so can be an important factor in intensifying the need for literate competence and the density of its uses (Ndulo, 2006). This trend is at times abetted by movements for greater democratization in society and by increasing budgetary restrictions on government activity, which may incline those in charge to devolve functions on others (Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007). Political and administrative decentralization thus can be at one and the same time:

- a means of granting increased authority to subaltern and local units in government, development agencies and community-level businesses
- a method for realizing cost savings, and/or
- a strategy to enhance the effectiveness of service delivery and production (ibid).

What is most important from the perspective of literate environments is the fact that such strategies – whether in public administration and governance, in agriculture and livestock, in health service delivery or education and across a variety of other sectors – can end up creating not just *uses for*, but in fact *imperatives of* more widespread literacy or more widespread mobilization of existing literate competence. When people must take responsibility for management and decision-making in an existing and viable framework of production or social service delivery, as the historical analysis of literacy's origins offered in Chapter 2 clearly suggests, major learning needs and opportunities are quickly born.

## Status

The efficacy of decentralization initiatives in this regard, as in others, has proven to be highly dependent on the way in which they are conceived and carried out, the resources devoted to them, and the political climate in which they take place. Moreover, that impact depends on a number of tactical factors. To begin with, the term 'decentralization' covers many different strategies, and the differences generally have to do with the level of authority and self-determination that is effectively generated, shared or transferred. Students of the topic (e.g. Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007; Uphoff, 1986) often distinguish the following variants, each of which may have differing consequences for literacy needs:

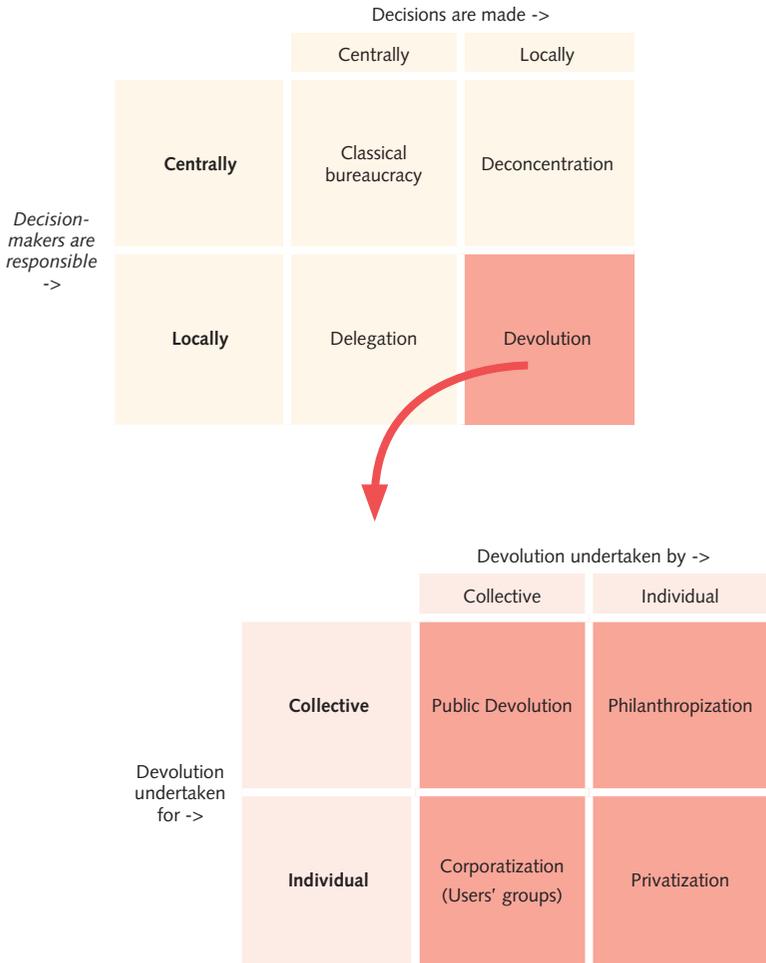
- *Deconcentration*. Under this strategy, central agencies create field offices to better implement their programmes at that level, but the parent institution continues to call the shots.
- *Delegation*. This term describes a situation in which decision-making responsibility is effectively transferred to another institution, but the activity is not necessarily localized to any increased extent: the second institution may itself be a 'central' one, as when given ministerial functions are shifted to a parapublic entity.
- *Devolution* is the most ambitious form of decentralization and usually involves statutory transfer of authority for specific sectors of activity to

local authorities or institutions. Here both decision-making powers and implementation responsibility are given to an institution closer to or more effectively controlled by ground-level beneficiaries. Four subtypes of this species of decentralization are sometimes distinguished:

- *Public devolution*, where authority is transferred to a collectivity that exercises the new functions on behalf of its own citizenry
- *Corporatization* (the ‘users’ group’ strategy), where a private organization like a farmers’ cooperative exercises the functions on behalf of – and generally at the behest of – its individual members
- *Philanthropization*, which involves transfer to a private foundation (or individual) that exercises the functions in a non-profit manner to the benefit of some larger public, and
- *Marketization*, which entails transfer of authority to private individuals, who exercise these rights for their own benefit (though, under fully competitive market conditions, potentially to broader public benefit as well), as in a free market or ‘public choice’ strategy.

Each of these variants, it should be evident, entails different degrees of new initiative at the local level, and so creates different intensities of demand for new learning. The overall scheme is portrayed graphically in Figure 6. It is interesting to note that, when it comes down to actual devolution, the essential axes of differentiation lie in specification of the parties *by whom* the function is assumed and those *on behalf of whom* it is exercised.

Figure 6: Uphoff diagram of varieties of decentralization (Uphoff, 1986)



A second important factor determining the 'stimulative' potential of decentralization strategies has to do with the quantity of resources that the parent institution actually has at its disposal, as well as the proportion of those that it is politically willing (or in fact able) to share. Decentralization is thus an area where there may be quite a gulf between declared intention and actual performance, in part – as Weiler (1983) once astutely remarked – because in this domain there is a definite political benefit to publicly endorsing the principle ... and a real political cost to putting such matters into practice. When I was working on related policies with Malian colleagues in the 1970s, a distinction was rapidly made between what they themselves called 'empowering' and 'servitude' versions of authority transfer, the latter involving formal endowment with new functions but no actual resources or authorities to carry them out, what legislators nowadays call an 'unfunded mandate'. The subaltern entity is left to underwrite and 'muscle up' the activity itself, whereas the parent institution may realize some appreciable savings in its own operating budget: not a bad day at the office. Or, as a Burkinabè official exclaimed in frustration during a session on the transfer of management powers to rural collectivities in the 1990s, *Mais on gère pas le néant !* – 'But you can't manage nothing!'

At least three relevant conclusions may be drawn from the ample literature on the experience (so far) of decentralization in developing countries (Barkan, 1998; Cheema and Rondinelli, 2007; Olowu and Wunsch, 2004):

1. One must be quite skeptical about the results of broadly publicized initiatives (Bardhan and Mookerjee, 2006). There is much fool's gold in the treasure chest – or, as they say in Swahili, *Ana fimbo lakini siye Musa*: 'The one who has a stick is not necessarily Moses.' Moreover, even when decentralization strategies are faithfully implemented, there is a distinct danger of what political scientists call 'elite capture' – that is, of local dignitaries and privileged groups monopolizing the reins of control and largely nullifying the initiative's larger participatory and welfare ambitions (Platteau and Gaspart, 2003). The major antidote seems to be that some measure of *democratization* (discussed below) go hand-in-hand with the decentralization effort, or follow it stepwise thereafter.

2. Despite this sobering reality, popular pressures for greater levels of decentralization, democratization and accountability are not likely to let up any time soon, so it is worthwhile persevering, staying on the lookout for emerging opportunities, and learning to make the most of them when they arise.
3. Decentralization is in fact a live issue in a variety of civil society institutions beyond government itself, and its democratizing and capacity-building effects may be as important in that realm as they are in the public sector.

## **Initiatives and outlook**

As a consequence, the field of decentralization is by nature a highly contested one, characterized by continual tug and pull. But by the same token it is also one where initiatives may increase the quality, situational relevance and cost-effectiveness of services, while simultaneously creating broader requirements – and thus greater ‘effective demand’ – for new skills and knowledge on the part of those now charged with enlarged responsibilities. It is therefore worth fighting for, or at least worth constantly monitoring and investing with effort whenever conditions lend themselves to diminishing the gap between declared intentions and actual practice, and so adding another brick to the construction of a literate environment.

The payoff side of this increased demand, where and when it becomes real, is the necessity for developing new skills and competencies on the ground. *Local capacity building* (LCB) – a prominent theme in recent literature on socio-economic development (Elong-Mbassie, 1994; Narayan-Parker, 2002; Waisbord, 2006; Crawford and Hartmann, 2008) – may of course take many forms other than traditional or organized literacy programmes. In fact, the required training initiatives generally operate under the aegis of the political authority or technical agency being decentralized, rather than official educational agencies, if not quite simply within the local association that has assumed or created such new powers. Rogers (2002) has tellingly remarked that the learning required by such activities may be gotten in highly varied ways, including remembered elements of interrupted schooling, self-directed

learning, lessons of out-migration, experience with formal employment, and even practical application of religious instruction; and it may therefore not necessarily fuel growth of official literacy programmes in direct proportion. The PADLOS-Education study (Easton et al, 1998) of the learning itineraries of those who staff local development initiatives in West Africa substantiates that viewpoint by demonstrating that genuine experiences of decentralization and local empowerment tend to attract people with different sets of experience and knowledge, who use the opportunity to apply and increase the skills they have acquired in a whole gamut of previous experiences.<sup>44</sup> But the increased demand for local competence inevitably entails new learning of some type, and the development activities in question frequently include or are rendered more effective by a *literacy or numeracy component*, blended with the relevant elements of technical skill, situational knowledge and enhanced understanding of the political and social environment. The *dynamics* of local capacity-building are further examined in Chapter 7 below, which is devoted to intersections between supply and demand in the field of literacy and adult learning.

Experience with local capacity building in Africa (see e.g. Bingen, Robinson and Staatz, 2000; Easton et al, 1998; Ubel, 2008) reveals it to be a phenomenon with potential spread effects that, when coupled with some measure of *democratization*, creates additional demands for new competence as it takes hold. Typically in self-governing local institutions, three levels of competence are required, though they may be replicated at a series of levels in larger organizations:

- increasingly advanced managerial and technical capacities among those in positions of responsibility
- sufficient analogous competence among a second and slightly wider set of people so that they can monitor the performance of those in positions of responsibility and replace them in case of malfeasance, and

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44 Figure 7 at the end of this chapter graphically portrays the heterogeneity of learning itineraries that formally illiterate people may follow in acquiring the competence to play enhanced roles in local development.

- enough awareness of issues and stakes among a significant proportion of the broader membership to ensure both buy-in and accountability.

The Hausa language has a pithy and historically loaded expression for the lowest and broadest tier in that pyramid of learning, that is, for the minimum level of competence required to protect one's interests in a social situation, most frequently used to say that one speaks a little of some other language: *Ba su iya saida ni, ban sani ba* – 'At least they can't sell me without my knowing about it!' In short, I have enough information and knowledge about the area in question to protect my own vital interests as a citizen or stakeholder ... in fact, to overhear evidence that they are about to be violated and take precautionary measures. In any case, as an organization grows and as its scope of operations increases and/or it generates and hives off new activities, the scale of these requirements likewise intensifies and broadens.<sup>45</sup>

Table 7 hereafter offers a glimpse – supported by selected references – of local capacity-building strategies used in a variety of sectors of African development, and their effects on the demand for literate competence. Two cross-cutting factors of importance should be noted:

1. First, the common denominator across fields and the function that is often most important in increasing literacy and numeracy demands (and therefore the first to emerge) is resource management. There is an obvious connection here with the observations made above about the historical nexus in which literacy was in fact 'invented': management of water distribution on the increasingly large irrigation schemes of the Fertile Crescent (Graff, 1987; Schmandt-Besserat, 1999; Tuman, 1987).<sup>46</sup>

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45 There is also an intriguing parallel here to the traditional age distribution of responsibility in West African societies described by Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1972), the renowned Malian ethnographer and author, and these layers of responsibility and knowledge required for accountability. Bâ distinguishes three layers of social responsibility defined by age and stage of life: technical functions, exercised (under supervision) by young adults; managerial and directorial ones, exercised by mature or middle-aged adults; and advisory ones exercised by elders.

46 Yet the lapidary caution of the Burkinabè colleague cited above bears remembering: 'You can't manage nothing'.

2. The depth and breadth that these various demands for competence attain, however, have very much to do with the level of organizational democracy that characterizes the initiative – in short, the degree to which responsibility is progressively shared with, delegated to or devolved upon wider segments of the membership and stakeholder population. Initiatives bearing the label ‘decentralization’ may, therefore, result in distinctly limited new demands of this type if the delegation or devolution of powers, or the resources available to pursue them, is highly circumscribed.

**Table 7: Example of local capacity building strategies in different sectors of development**

Sector	Typical Decentralization Activities	Training and Literacy Requirements	Sample References
Health	Establishment of local health clinics staffed in good part by paramedical personnel trained from among local literate adolescents and adults or those able to acquire the requisite competence. Creation or reinforcement of local pharmacies.	First, paramedical training, numeracy training, management skills work and recognition of key labels and terms. Next, fuller literacy, more advanced medical/ pharmaceutical learning and practical accounting.	Lewin et al., 2006; Rasmussen (2000)
Agriculture	Creation of self-governing agricultural marketing cooperatives that begin to reinvest funds in other dimensions of local development.	See sequences portrayed in Figure 7 P. 192.	Bellonde (1985); Nwonwu (2008)
Natural Resource Management	Community-based natural resource management schemes: association of local users in sustainable resource uses, local management of vertically interested resource industries.	First, relevant natural resource knowledge (e.g. water, forests...) and numeracy/bookkeeping for management, then fuller literacy, more advanced management and accounting competence.	Brown (2003); Kaschula, Twine & Scholes (2005)

Sector	Typical Decentralization Activities	Training and Literacy Requirements	Sample References
Education and Culture	Multiplication of literacy and training centers, local management of community schools, recording and transcription of local history and cultural lore.	Sufficient mastery of literacy and numeracy to offer instruction, basic teacher training for instructors and management and accounting training for Boards.	Fagerberg-Diallo (2001); Mukweso & Easton (1997)
Finance	Expansion of locally-administered micro-credit schemes to fund new entrepreneurial activity.	Though training may start with basic numeracy, management and bookkeeping procedures, greater competence in mathematics and accounting are soon required along with fuller literacy.	Bingen, Serrano & Howard (2003); Buckley (1997)
Government	Creation of village development councils to supervise new local investments and training, development of fiscal and conflict resolution capacities relevant to local government	Basic public administration, management, numeracy and bookkeeping training followed in a subsequent stages by fuller literacy instruction and development of facilitative, training and conflict management skills.	Olowu & Wunsch (2004); Zoomers (2005)

## **Political mobilization and democratization**

Strong political movements, democratization initiatives, mobilization campaigns and advocacy processes may also create motivation for enhancing literate skills, as well as new uses for them. Such efforts might take place within particular organizations and institutions or in larger realms of society. They might be devoted to promoting the rights of particular groups or to furthering the perceived interests of an entire region or country within the community of nations. In fact, democracy is arguably the leavening element that transforms the various types of technical and political decentralization reviewed above into true engines for local capacity development, and that most strengthens their potential for augmenting demands for literacy and contributing to the creation of literate environments.

## Initiatives and outlook

As political voice and decision-making powers continue to penetrate their way to the local level in Africa, if quite spasmodically, democratic processes of some variety become an option in municipal and sub-regional governments, as well as in the governance of other local institutions, creating in turn a demand for accountability and so a need for the means to exercise it (e.g. Buur and Kyed, 2007; Gellar, 2005). In fact, NGO programmes like Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques (REFLECT) and Tostan have made democratic process a *leitmotif* of all their programmes (ActionAid, 2007; Tostan, 2005). Examples of the effect of this realm on the demand for literacy and its uses can be taken from three distinct arenas: the experience of political mobilization and liberation movements; official initiatives in existing countries designed to enhance democratization of government and administration; and strategies developed and implemented *within* the institutions and organizations of civil society – including of course the family itself – that promote democratization of governance and train citizens in civic skills.

**Political mobilization and liberation movements.** There is a long history of association between liberation and political mobilization movements on the one hand, and literacy campaigns on the other. In the 1920s, the new Soviet government in the former USSR was one of the first to launch a widespread literacy campaign (Clark, 1995, 2000; Lovell, 2000), and the story of similar initiatives in Cuba, Nicaragua and Viet Nam (Arnové and Graff, 2008) is well known. Such efforts have often been devoted to socializing and developing the new citizen as much as to inculcating literacy, but the two goals have served to reinforce each other. Political revolutions are accompanied by changes in social organization and hierarchies that may invest new groups of people with decision-making and management responsibility, and so create motivation for learning. Generally the strongest political literacy movements take place *after* the rise to power of their parent movements and are carried out partly in the interests of consolidating legitimacy. Although the efforts are not always long-lived and remain subject to the fortunes of the new regime, such initiatives certainly reinforced the cause of 'Education For All'

long before the slogan was born. The tactics that gave birth to them are generally not ones that outside parties should or could advocate, but their dynamics illustrate means for enhancing literate environments.

**Democratization of official political life.** Although the word ‘democracy’ is on most tongues at present, it is another realm characterized by great gaps between rhetoric and practice. This gulf is widened by a significant contradiction in the dynamics of this sector itself, well described by the comparison from Weiler previously cited: whereas there is, at least at present, a considerable political payoff to *talking up* democracy, there are major political costs to actually *implementing* related measures. As a consequence, most academic assessments of, or research on, official democratization initiatives in Africa come to the conclusion that the emperor has relatively few clothes (Bratton and Chang, 2006; Goldsmith, 2001), and that democracy has not been particularly favourable to economic growth (Collier, 2007).

At the same time, surveys of different slices of the African population reveal that democracy and associated issues like accountability, valid representation and human rights, are becoming increasingly live concerns of the population at large (Bratton and Chang op cit). Pressure to conform more faithfully to such norms or future African adaptations of them is not likely to lessen. In addition, some observations of local government processes in Africa – like Lehman’s (2007) study of municipalities in South Africa – are now concluding that, despite the manifest shortfalls in implementation of democratic intentions, habits of citizen participation and democratic behaviours are spreading. It is also worth noting that most official advocacy of localization and democratic government in Africa – like Kiyaga-Nsubuga’s (2007) keynote paper on ‘Local Democracy, Good Governance and the Delivery of the MDGs in Africa’ at the fourth New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) Workshop on Making Local Governance Work – stresses the importance of local capacity building in carrying out democratic intentions, so adding to the potential demand factors for broader literacy.

**Democratization of civil society ‘governance’.** Democracy promotion is even more evident within a variety of NGOs that make the theme part and parcel of their development strategy – although harmony between means

and ends may always pose a question and constitute an indicator of sincerity. The cases of REFLECT<sup>47</sup> and Tostan (2005) are of particular interest, because they are among the relatively few such programmes that have for some time attempted, in one way or another, to intervene at both micro and macro levels in this regard.

The REFLECT methodology of ActionAid, a large multinational development advocacy and support organization with major fund-raising capacities, was developed in Latin America as an application and adaptation of Paolo Freire's principles. It involves facilitating bottom-up efforts to diagnose and address social problems and to organize for their resolution, both through local activity and broader political advocacy. The process is definitely, at the same time, a learning endeavour, though typically training and literacy efforts follow on and are dictated by the activist agenda established by local participants, rather than preceding or even paralleling them. In Uganda, for example, the interest of slum dwellers in advocating for improved urban service delivery in government circles led to their training in budget analysis (Gariyo, 2002), whereas in Zimbabwe HIV/AIDS groups ended up training facilitators in their midst to gain voice in national level debates about the importation of anti-retroviral drugs (Gomo, 2007). In each country where the REFLECT/ActionAid currently operates, a national office – like the one in Kampala, Uganda – assists with tracking policy issues in government that affect the rights of local participants and assisting them with intervention at this level (ActionAid, 2008).

Tostan, on the other hand, is a Senegal-based NGO that began work in the 1980s (and was incorporated in 1991) as an educational programme for rural women. It was loosely based on the principles of *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al, 1986) adapted to a West African cultural context and has since become more gender-inclusive and developed a broadening agenda (Gillespie and Melching, 2010; Monkman et al, 2007). One of Tostan's more widely known and successful activities has been a locally driven campaign for the abandonment of female genital mutilation (FGM), which was initiated in

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47 REFLECT is an acronym for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques. More information may be found at: <http://www.reflect-action.org/>.

fact not by the programme itself but by women participants who decided, during the problem analysis sessions that typically conclude each training session, that the local social welfare goal they wished to set was to eliminate FGM henceforth and for evermore. The story of the growth of this movement is a saga in itself (see for example Easton and Monkman, 2009; Easton et al, 2003) and amply illustrates the tightly interwoven character of learning and action, as well as the close relationship of the personal and political dimensions of social change. In part as a result, Tostan has had considerable success in developing local applications and localized adaptations of the notion of 'democracy' as another of its main themes, extending even to the family level (Easton, 2000).

## **Information and communications**

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Opportunities for improved communications and increased information constitute a dynamic but somewhat slippery dimension of the literate environment because they register on both the supply and demand sides of the picture, a phenomenon that is particularly telling with respect to information and communication technology (ICT). We reviewed in Chapter 4 the availability of various sources of communication and information in sub-Saharan Africa and the 'supply, coverage and nature of electronic media.' Desires and needs to make greater use of these resources, however, may themselves be a powerful dimension of demand, and so a major component of that side of the literate environment. As noted in Chapter 4, cell phones are becoming an increasingly widespread technology of information and communication throughout the subcontinent, and their 'texting' function both requires literate skills and has already served as a basis for some innovative training efforts.

Let's begin, though, with a reminder of what is and isn't known about the givens of the situation. There is quasi-universal agreement both from casual observers and from available surveys that the use of ICT and cell phone technology in particular is rapidly increasing, but, as James and Versteeg

(2007) point out, proclamations of the mobile phone 'revolution' in Africa are subject to a good deal of rhetoric and exaggeration. Hard data are largely lacking, particularly on the category of greatest interest – not owners or the population with theoretical access (by virtue of residing within the mobile network 'footprint') but rather effective *users*. They are more numerous than cellphone owners, since the cost of the technology is still a limiting factor in ownership, but fall far short of the population with theoretical access. Etzo and Collender (2010) document significant differences in penetration rates among areas of the continent (nearly 100% in urban Gabon, for example, but about 10% in rural Ethiopia); and Kwapong (2008) concludes from her surveys in Ghana that use of all types of ICT varies considerably among regions of the country, across occupations, along gender lines, between richer and poorer populations and from urban to rural areas. The most recent data (Johnson, 2012) put the penetration rate of cellphones continent-wide at around 60%, with Nigeria (87 million subscribers) well in the lead over the second-place contender – Egypt. Although women in general have less access than men, specific categories of them – like the South African hawkers and vendors studied by Jiyane and Mostert (2010) – are highly aware of this resource. Moreover, some aspects of demand cut across rural and urban distinctions, since patterns of out-migration in Africa mean that those working in urban areas or abroad have a pressing need to keep in touch with kin back home.

This said, use of the texting feature of cell phones is, by all indications, still much more restricted than cell phones themselves, in part due to limited ability to handle this literate feature of the technology on both ends of the communication. A study by Beltramo and Levine (2010) in rural Senegal reveals that, while 58% of respondents used cell phones, only 8% (or about 14% of the users) actually employed the text messaging feature, though more would like to – in part because, to judge by the same study, fully 76% of respondents had close friends and/or relatives living outside of Senegal itself. A recent initiative in Niger (Aker et al, 2010) – *Projet Alphabétisation de Base par Cellulaire* or 'Project ABC' – has benefitted from similar patterns in that country to experiment with literacy programming based on cell phone usage in villages of the Dosso and Zinder regions. The evaluation indicates

good results in the literacy programme itself, though variable by region and more pronounced in more densely populated areas. The authors cannot affirm to what extent such outcomes are due to the use of cell phones as a teaching and learning support – in other words, as pedagogical exercises to reinforce teaching or means of continuing application and acquisition of new information to strengthen learning – or are due instead to other dimensions of the programme. But they do conclude (idem: 1) that 'simple and relatively cheap information and communication technology can serve as an effective and sustainable learning tool for rural populations'.

In short, it is clear that ICT and especially cell phone usage are becoming significant factors on the demand as well as the supply side of the literate environment in sub-Saharan Africa, and that these effects are rapidly increasing, if not quite as rapidly as claimed by the heralds of the next electronic revolution on the continent. At the same time, this dimension of demand remains interlocked with others considered above, insofar as cell phone and texting usage turn out to be highest among those who have financial means and matters of socio-economic importance to communicate: small business entrepreneurs and families with members working gainfully in urban and overseas environments.

## **'Religions of the Book': religious practice with respect to literacy**

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### **Status**

Africa is currently the area of the world where *both* Christianity and Islam – among the principal 'Religions of the Book', as they are called – are growing most rapidly, although the demographic balance between them is widely disputed (McLaughlin, 2006). Conversion to and regular practice of these faiths create a climate for literacy in and of their own, whether their scripture is recorded in Arabic, European languages or African languages transcribed in Latin or Arabic letters. In fact, in the case of Christianity, the Bible was

among the first types of literature translated into the African vernacular and made widely available in that form. Christian missions were also among the first institutions to undertake literacy in African languages, develop Western alphabet transcriptions for them, and use them systematically (Manarin, 2008).

Jenkins (2006) comments on the role of literacy in Christian churches of the global South:

*Reading as such also carries great weight. In a neo-literate community, access to the Bible betokens power and status, and there is no reason why this gift should be confined to traditional elites. Women – and young people of both sexes – have most to gain by achieving literacy. The more conspicuous one's knowledge of the scriptures, the greater one's claim to spiritual status.*

*But beyond any single text, the Bible as a whole offers ample ammunition for the cause of outsiders, to the dismay of the established and comfortable. People read of the excluded who become central to the story, of the trampled and oppressed who become divine vehicles – and of how God spurns traditional societies, hierarchies and ritual rules. As David Martin famously wrote in his account of global South churches, Pentecostalism gives the right and duty to speak to those always previously deemed unworthy on grounds of class, race and gender. In the new dispensation, outsiders receive tongues of fire. The same observation can be applied across denominational frontiers. (Jenkins 2006: 23–24)*

Mustafa (2010), like a number of other recent commentators, estimates that by the year 2000 the Bible had been translated into well over 100 African languages, and Wycliffe Bible Translators say they are targeting 250 more over the upcoming decade (Vu, 2008).

The literate tradition in Islam is similarly strong and long-standing, though of a somewhat different type. It was introduced into Africa as early as the ninth century and centres of learning and instruction were established in different cities of the Sahel and the East Coast over the following 400 years (Leviton and Pouwels, 2000). A distinction is generally made between 'Koranic schools' and 'madrassas', the former referring to non-formal institutions for instruction of children in recitation of the Koran, from which the most disciplined may pass on to actual understanding and reproduction of the text, whereas the latter designate more particularly the 'reformed' schools combining Islamic/Arabic and Western instruction that sprang up across East and West Africa after the Second World War.

Though the practice is *haram* or forbidden to Islamic fundamentalists (Khan, 1987), the Holy Qu'ran was translated into a few African languages starting early in the twentieth century – Swahili, Yoruba and Hausa being among the first – and the movement has accelerated over recent years: current inventories put the number of languages used for translation of the Koran at over twenty and growing (Loimeier, 2005). For years, in fact, African languages have been transcribed in Arabic script, a system generally known as *ajami* (related to the word for 'foreign' or 'hybrid' in Arabic) that is used for many purposes (Brigaglia, 2005). However, the system is not well standardized and most recent translations of the Qu'ran are therefore recorded in Latin transcriptions of African languages, thus creating a further incentive to acquire or improve mastery of that script.<sup>48</sup>

For several hundred years now, widespread instruction in informal Koranic schools and their extensions has provided a literate clerical class for the management of business and administrative affairs in predominantly Muslim countries, as well as a much larger group of young people at least familiar with the mechanics of reading and writing, many of whom then populate adult and non-formal education programmes (Baxter, 2003; BBC, 2008; Easton and Peach, 1997). In fact, the historical association between long-distance – and originally trans-Saharan – networks of trade and the dissemination of Islam has built close ties between traditional commercial infrastructure

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48 Transcription of the Wolof language of Senegal in Arabic characters is known as *wolofaw*.

and Arabic-based literacy that confer additional numerate and managerial competence on those proficient in it.<sup>49</sup>

## Outlook

In any case the rapid spread of both Christianity and Islam, plus the increased availability of their holy scriptures in African translation as well as in Western languages, must be counted as an important influence on the demand side of the literate environment.

These religions create in addition local organizations whose leadership must be literate, as must all those who aspire to or feel called for such functions. They motivate and support a great deal of continuing education, while constituting large-scale social organizations and dense networks of interaction that are an integral part of civil society and must be continually governed and managed. They may therefore constitute by their growth and operations a major element of the literate environment.

## Cultural enrichment, continuing education and lifelong learning (LLL)

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### Status

Are cultural enrichment and lifelong learning the last of the demand impulses that promote acquisition and utilization of literate skills – the weakest of the forces in play? Hardly, one could as readily say that they constitute the bottom line or the fundamental factor. Most of the literacy that we are talking about, and a large proportion of the literate environments we are considering, are denominated in African languages, which are both prime vehicles and genuine

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<sup>49</sup> Part of the relationship between Islamic literacy and numerate competence is apparently circumstantial and a product of practical needs, since study of numbers and mathematics is frowned upon in official West African Islam as a temptation to geomancy and divination (Al-Munajjid, 2010).

products of African cultural inspiration. Cultural elements penetrate and animate, moreover, the other types of literacy applications already reviewed and constitute one criterion of their viability and sustainability. Robinson's work on literacy with speakers of minority languages in Cameroon was cited earlier as a witness to the strong motivation that mastery of writing in one's own language can create, and the work of Tin Tua (Tiemtoré, 2005) and Associates in Research on Education and Development (ARED) – to be discussed below – offer further confirmation of this catharsis.

Those motivations are never absent and may be quite strong indeed. Making such demand fully 'effective', however, requires that the community locate or mobilize at the same time the means to sustain a literate environment in their cultural idiom, which links the issue back once again in good part to livelihoods and the communication functions they engender. As media in the language gain more consistency from their social and economic functions, as the 'readership' and population of new literates grows and finds the resources and political confidence to amplify its own voice, cultural enrichment moves from a communal desideratum to an executable programme. A UNESCO publication thus emphasizes the critical importance of policies that foster diversity of cultural expression and thereby enhance motivation and demand for literate competence (2009d, 144): '[M]edia and information literacy ... must not only be made an integral part of non-formal education but also be recognized as a tool for empowerment and capacity-building in the production of local content.' Understandably, though, this is most feasible, if not exclusively so, in the hybrid cultural communities covered by African *lingua francas* or regional languages like Swahili, Hausa, Lingala or Zulu.

Similarly, lifelong learning is in one sense the ambition of every student of literacy – particularly the adult variety, who know what value the lessons of experience can have. Avoseh et al (2001) remind us that there is in fact a well-rooted tradition of lifelong learning in African society.<sup>50</sup> But for very real economic and political reasons, access to organized forms of lifelong learning

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50 Along with a healthy respect for the knowledge and skill inherent in every type of work. *Í táxa oxo lá hèelu–o sùu aa mán kòle kà à hée dii?* they ask rhetorically in Malinké: 'It isn't difficult to steal your friend's flute, but how are you going to play it?'

remains to date largely limited to graduates of and students in the higher education institutions of the continent (Plumb, Leverman and McGray, 2007), and to the realms of continuing professional education (Walters and Funeka, 2000). The exceptions largely lie in fields like public health and agricultural extension, where opportunities may be offered for newly literate people, particularly those serving in government localization efforts, to further their technical knowledge of particular domains through agency-sponsored training (e.g. Johanson and Adams, 2004; SNV, 2005). The effort to further propagate such activities is certainly worth pursuing, though without illusions about its present breadth and depth (Aitchison, 2003).

In short, it doesn't take that much to release the latent demand for cultural enrichment and continuing learning. In the wake of the Nigerien literacy and cooperative management experience, more thoroughly described in Chapter 7, I distinctly remember the Hausa staff of the local cooperative launching out on a series of joint efforts to read and learn new things unrelated to the mechanics of market administration – and even camping out on the national highway, then being upgraded by Zarma-speaking road crews from the western part of the country, in order to question them about vocabulary and to start composing a Hausa-Zarma dictionary. Given what was still then the severe lack of continuing education materials in African languages, this amounted to a strong demonstration of the interest in further self-directed learning – and the manifest capacity for it – characteristic of newly literate adults.

Moreover, cultural enrichment and self-directed learning are scarcely limited by the availability of translations of textbooks or works authored in international languages, as useful as these can be. The movement to recognize and better record 'indigenous knowledge' that has taken on increasing momentum over the last twenty years provides the beginnings, at least, of one critical medium for local enrichment and exchange (Woytek, Shroff-Mehta and Mohan, 2004).

## Initiatives and outlook

Growing interest in written African languages and cultural enrichment through literacy is not something easy to tabulate or track statistically, but a number of straws in the wind suggest real progress in this realm. Three examples are singled out in the following paragraphs.

**ARED: Literature in Pulaar.** Associates in Research on Education and Development (ARED), an NGO jointly domiciled in the United States and in Saint-Louis, Senegal, has for years been a leader in the creation of African-language literature (e.g. Guissé, 1994). Since 1995, it has been producing books designed to multiply both the quantity and interest of written material available to new literates in Senegal and adherents among the Pulaar diaspora (Fagerberg-Diallo, 2001).<sup>51</sup> Although the organization has lent support to literacy work and publication in a number of African languages, its speciality has always been Pulaar, one of the largely inter-comprehensible variants of Fulani (or Peulh), the language of the widespread ethnic group of that name. These traditionally nomadic people have spread across the interior of West Africa from Senegal to the northern Cameroon, but are sedentarized and strongly organized in several key regions where they were dominant at earlier points in history. The ARED experience has a number of remarkable dimensions. Those most instructive for our purposes are perhaps its convincing demonstration of two aspects:

- *The importance and deep appeal of cultural materials in African languages.* ARED produces literacy manuals and technical extension materials. Its particular emphasis, though, has been on the development and publication of novels, poetry and historical material expressive of the Pulaar culture and the experience of Fulani peoples. These have struck a deep chord not only with new literates, but with members of that group across West Africa, and in the many nations to which they have emigrated. The functional, ARED maintains, is not enough; and when

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51 An initiative that will hopefully continue with renewed strength after the recent passing of the organization's much regretted founder, Dr. Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo. For further recent information on ARED, consult <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=6>.

one taps into the cultural values and memories of a people, there is a well-spring of self-directed learning and group communication available.

- *The potential viability of publication in these media.* ARED has, in addition, managed to run its publication activity on a business and near break-even basis, recouping more than 75% of the cost of its work through sales of its publications, 90% within Africa itself. The organization has been selling in the neighbourhood of 500,000 publications a year, representing over 200 titles.

In some ways, of course, the ARED case is a special one (as are all, for that matter), since it drew quite serendipitously on a widely dispersed people, who are very proud of their cultural heritage and well enough placed in their diaspora settings to support this remarkable publication venture both morally and financially. But their example only proves that ways can often be found to circumvent the obstacles to publishing in African languages.

**Hausa-language romantic novels.** Over the last several decades, and under the radar of official literacy agencies, there has sprung up an increasing widespread fashion of 'pulp fiction' or popular romance novels written and published in the Hausa language of northern Nigeria and neighbouring areas. Whitsitt (2002: 119) reports:

*In the urban areas of northern Nigeria, a burgeoning corpus of contemporary Hausa popular literature has captured the attention and concern of the entire Hausa community .... Avid readers have little difficulty in locating booksellers who have strategically positioned themselves in the midst of every potential direction of foot-traffic. Sidewalk displays, market stalls, and independent book kiosks dizzy onlookers with hundreds of appealing book covers of youthful couples acting out different love interest scenes. Currently, this genre of popular romance fiction, known to Hausa speakers as Littattafan Soyayya (books of love), enjoys huge popularity as interested parties voraciously devour books and await the soon-to-be-published works of their favourite writers.*

Sullivan (2009) complements this picture by describing the origins of Hausa novels in the written poetry and transcribed folklore that emerged in Nigeria in the 1930s. She highlights the didactic character of much of this work, with its exhortations against immodesty, greed and drug use, and support of national independence. By all reports (e.g. Isa, 2007), the didactic brand of Hausa literature continues to develop in a parallel vein, and debates about the relative merits of the two have made frequent appearances in the Nigerian press over the last decade or more.

**ACALAN: Going continent-wide.** The African Academy of Languages, located in Bamako, Mali started work in 2000 as a Mission created by the Presidency of Mali and, by progressive steps, acceded in 2006 to its present status as a specialized unit of the African Union, conducting research, publication, training and consultation in support of the development of the continent's linguistic heritage. Its current activities focus in particular on consolidating the background capacity to effectively support wider adoption of African languages in schooling and non-formal education venues, train teachers and researchers able to intervene to those ends, and create a certain number of essential tools like a linguistic atlas of the continent. The example of ACALAN's collaboration with the Project for Alternative Education in South Africa in the publication of African language booklets for pre-school children has already been cited in the section on supply factors; and additional initiatives of this sort are in the offering. The very chartering of ACALAN is an indicator of the increased interest in defense, development and utilization of these elements of African heritage (UNESCO, 2006a).<sup>52</sup>

## **Internal variations and the signal case of gender**

The intensity of effective demand for literacy that is nurtured by factors like those just reviewed is, however, scarcely uniform across the landscape, and in fact varies by location and among population groups just as much as the

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52 The bilingual (English-French) ACALAN website at <http://www.acalan.org/> provides considerable further detail.

supply of literacy materials. Differences between rural and urban areas in the availability of both formal and informal sector employment, for example, have always been one of the major factors driving rural-urban migration. Religious literacy demands obviously vary by affiliation and culture in any given region, and opportunities for political participation may depend on social class as well as on the ideological coloration of government regimes or local authorities. Perhaps the most fundamental variable intersecting with all three factors is *gender*.

There has happily been a relative efflorescence of work on women and literacy in developing countries over recent years (e.g. Aganou, 2004; Daniell and Mortensen, 2007; Egbo, 2000; McTavish et al., 2010; Purcell-Gates and Waterman, 2000; Robinson-Pant, 2004). One characteristic of demand for literacy on the distaff side that periodically emerges from those accounts, and matches some of my own experience in evaluating such programmes, is that it tends to be less dependent on the promise of outside and remunerated employments or on applications that are patently profitable in material terms than is generally the case among men, although this particularity of women's literacy, as further noted below, is definitely a two-edged sword. In a number of social contexts, the opportunity for women to assemble, to address common concerns, to acquire new knowledge, and to form local alliances and projects beyond the household is itself deeply appreciated. This experience can by itself make such strong contributions to new identity formation and enhanced self-confidence that Say's Law (the thesis that supply creates its own demand), decried above and in most recent economic literature, comes much closer to proving true. In short, the simple fact of making available such opportunities can work wonders of transformative learning. There is no lack of heart-warming stories about changed lives and invigorated communities (e.g. Mezirow and Taylor, 2009).

This theme is prominent, for example, in reports from the Tostan project in Senegal and other sub-Saharan countries (e.g. Easton and Monkman, 2009; Monkman, Miles and Easton, 2007). There, the sometimes remarkable success of the grassroots and culturally sensitive campaign against female genital mutilation can be attributed, at least in part, to the empowerment that

participating women experienced in gathering to educate themselves on the topic, acquiring tools of literacy, and organizing village-by-village meetings where others could tell their own stories of heartbreak from daughters lost to the practice. If nothing else, the imperatives of male out-migration that have afflicted rural societies of the subcontinent, from Botswana to Mauritania, create imperatives of association and alliance among women that give added weight to any such opportunities (Meillassoux, 1975).

For similar reasons, microfinance and *tontine* activities among women have had frequent success when organized in tandem with literacy reinforcement and training (Daley-Harris, 2007; Islam, 2005), even barring major outside support: the experience of securing increased economic independence through one's own effort and by cooperation among peers is simply a strong motivator of its own. And a number of the female exemplars of 'tin-trunk' literacy documented by Barber (2006) – that is, African women of the last century with little more than a primary school education, if that, who wrote reams of unpublished journals and letters later consigned to family storage – were motivated by experiencing, as Barber (2006: 7) puts it, 'the way in which personal writing [could be] involved in the constitution of new kinds of self-representation and personhood.' Such stories serve in addition as a salutary corrective, reminding us how important the acquisition of literacy skills may be to the formation and reinforcement of a sense of personal identity (Kendrick and Hissani, 2007; Puchner, 2003).

Whatever validity such observations have, they should obviously not be taken as a reason to conclude that external sources of demand for literacy or of environmental support for it are unimportant to women, a point of view that risks rapidly degenerating into old debates about focusing provision solely on 'domestic needs', public health matters and women's roles as mothers and homemakers. As the women strikers from the textile mills of Lawrence, MA (USA) are reputed to have chanted during those demonstrations in 1912, 'We want bread and we want roses, too.' (Watson, 2005) The enhanced aptitude for self-fulfillment in literacy, and the occasions for association and self-discovery that it creates, do not diminish the importance of balancing supply and demand-side considerations in devising support strategies.

As many of the women could tell us, they may in fact increase it while making clearer precisely to whom policy-makers must answer if the present imbalance continues unabated. Women who have succeeded in promoting their own literacy and creating its applications are typically, as the Tostan example illustrates, quite capable of promoting their interests and claiming their due in other realms. But these stories do both introduce a valuable and important set of nuances into arguments about the demand side of literacy, and suggest some of the variations in its complexion that occur across and within different strata of a highly diverse population.

## Demand-side summary

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There are thus a number of *potentially* strong sources of effective demand for literacy throughout sub-Saharan Africa. However, a particular emphasis must be given to the italicized word in the last sentence, since they have generally not much materialized at the local level or attained great demographic impact, particularly in impoverished areas of the sub-continent. Most of them, moreover, *lie outside of the realm of education itself* in other sectors of development, and few are fully coupled with the channels of supply of literacy resources. Perhaps for this reason, they remain somewhat somnolent and underdeveloped, and one must ask why the coupling with supply is so spotty. In any case, the engine for powering literate environments largely resides elsewhere. And starting it up depends to a good extent on policy.

At the same time, this review of sources of demand for literate competence on the continent brings out three other issues that have been latent in the discussion to this point, but merit articulating more clearly.

## Collectivizing the requirements

The first issue concerns the financial requirements for generating literate environments. The reasoning in this book has so far linked such potential underwriting, to a considerable extent, with resource management

responsibilities and viable social service or production activities in other sectors of the local economy. It has been remarked that 'one can't manage nothing' and the term 'capitalization' has been used, albeit with a multi-dimensional meaning that goes well beyond financial backing. But how much is required in the way of resources and how are they generated?

Answering those questions goes well beyond the topic of this book and into the realms of socio-economic development and political economy, but it is at least important to note one often overlooked dimension of the situation. Although much of the literature about literacy acquisition is quite individually oriented, going back to 'each one teach one' (Laubach and Laubach, 1960) and continuing through (useful) studies of the learning capacities of adults (e.g. Abadzi, 2003), in fact individuals in impoverished environments seldom have the wherewithal to launch single-handedly those types of infrastructure-creating initiatives. Where such things happen, they are more often the result of some kind of pooling or collectivization of resources, some sort of cooperative endeavour. Another African proverb expresses the idea well: *Shawara dāukar dāki*.<sup>53</sup> 'Reaching a decision [with resource implications] is like roofing a hut.' Everyone must position themselves around the conical thatched structure and lift together if one hopes to get it placed straight on the adobe walls. The roof is simply too heavy for a single person.

The relevance of this subject for literacy – and literate environments – was borne home to me while I was working on programme evaluation in the neighbouring country of Mali with a team of national researchers. In tabulating the number of programme participants who had become literate over the preceding years of the campaign, we were struck by an anomalous fact: nearly nowhere were there as many per community as the programme was designed to produce in its first cycle: 20–25 newly literate people. Yet at the same time, there were rarely none at all. Over and over again, one found between three and six or seven people who could qualify as literate. 'Why?' we wondered. Closer investigation made it evident that there were precious few uses for literacy in that environment except for monitoring transactions on the commercial farm produce markets, which most farmers

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53 Likewise in the Hausa language and from the Republic of Niger.

visited with their crop once or twice a year, and where they not infrequently got fleeced (Easton, 1983). That was not a sufficient density of uses to justify their expending the effort to become literate, but it was nonetheless very important that someone oversee the weighers and merchants who bought the crops, because they were well known for cheating whenever the occasion offered itself.

The solution that had been found was to collectivize these functions – that is, to name a team of three or more villagers, generally young people, to become literate and accompany all local produce to market as a hedge against fraud. Whereas the work was not frequent enough at the level of individual farmers to serve as a stimulus for much literacy acquisition, when reorganized in this fashion it made a very critical and respected occupation for the young people involved. And so the dimensions of literacy results from community to community across wide expanses of that country could be traced in large part to this stratagem.

In similar fashion, to the degree that ways can be found to collectivize the effort required to nurture the infrastructure of a literate environment, or maintain the kind of socio-economic activities that require and generate it – whether through cooperative, associative, local governance or private enterprise means – what seems scarcely possible at the individual level then does start to seem feasible. Such cooperative tactics have the additional virtue of creating some of the other resources needed for success: social capital, an impulse for cultural adaptation of strategies, and increased motivation for individual learning. In any case, the centrality of modes of cooperation and social organization to literate environments bears remembering.<sup>54</sup>

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54 It should be noted that positions of technical responsibility in local level development efforts, like cooperative agricultural marketing, are increasingly occupied these days by school dropouts or leavers – some of whom refresh their skills by participation in ANFE programmes. That is scarcely a surprising turn of events, given the increasing output (and wastage) of primary schooling and the lack of other avenues of employment. It is also one that does not fundamentally change the dynamics of the literate environment, which by definition embraces the work and activities of former primary or secondary students as much as it does those trained in literacy programmes.

Of course, 'collectivization' is used here in its generic sense, having to do with means for enabling groups of people with similar interests and needs to share the work and expenses necessary to meet them in ways that they might not be able to do as individuals, rather than in the historical sense of the forced social reorganization measures of early communist regimes. It has, nonetheless, obvious political requirements (that term also being used with a small 'p'), meaning in particular the necessity of working out means and strategies of at least limited agreement that will allow people to work together to common ends.

### **Satisfying the demand**

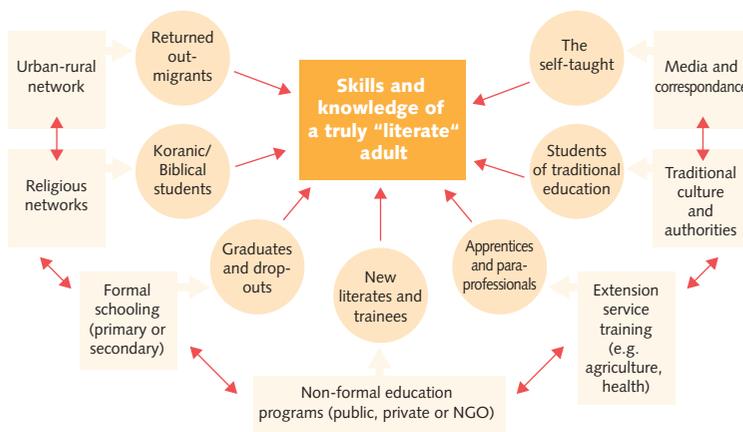
If effective demand for literacy skills is such a key factor in creating the literate environment, by whom or by what is it satisfied? Demand that is met by no supply generally does not persist for long – or is translated into other forms of grievance.

In a sense, the answer to this question is quite evident, even tautological. The demand is of course satisfied by people with literate competence, a truism that appears to take us back to the supply of new literates from schools and training programmes. But there is an important point to stress here. 'Literate' is a descriptor for a broad range of competencies in reading, writing and/or numeracy, plus at times some other related skills, the mix and 'calibration' of the set depending on the nature of the demand and the activity from which it derives. The term generally does not automatically or exclusively refer to people trained in formal schooling institutions and official literacy programmes or even having certifiably passed through their doors, though such candidates may certainly satisfy the demand. So may, however, people who have acquired the requisite skills in quite a variety of other ways.

One of the first things that becomes evident about income generating activities or new social organization initiatives in regions of relatively low literacy and economic development is that the work needs they create often get filled by people with quite a spread of backgrounds, who have taken

many different training itineraries in order to arrive at that point.<sup>55</sup> New literates from non-formal education programmes generally rub elbows with primary school graduates – or dropouts – and not infrequently with products of religious training centres and vocational or extension programmes, not to speak of those who acquired their skills from out-migration or simply from self-instruction, plus many hybrid forms of all the foregoing. The point is that the supply of literate skills is rooted in a sort of implicit human resource development system – somewhat notionally represented in Figure 7 – that is, in fact, present even in areas of low literacy and development, if in a largely uncoordinated and disarticulated form. Much like the informal economy itself, however, the system is typically better articulated and linked together *de facto* than at first appears, at least to outside observers. And those who navigate through it or manage portions of it are – individually and collectively – the people most sensitive to the nature of effective demand for skills in that milieu and so to a central component of the literate environment.

**Figure 7: Sources of local literate competence**



55 Sometimes, of course, they are filled by people who have followed a strictly 'political' itinerary and have few of the technical skills required.

## Minding the variability

The situation of literate environments can vary markedly among groups and locations across the African continent. I have tried to illustrate some of the difference that one stratum of differentiation, gender, can make. If the success of literacy and of efforts to build a literate environment depends, as many of the arguments heretofore imply, on the cultural and economic 'ecology' of the groups and communities involved – that is, on the particular conditions they face and the ways in which they deal with them – then it will be no surprise to learn that those differences turn out to be as pronounced along linguistic, geographical and religious lines as they are between gender groups – and that they are therefore worth taking into careful account.

The larger lesson to be derived from full acknowledgement of this variability, however, is that there are few iron-clad generalizations or scientific verities in the field of adult literacy promotion and consolidation. There is one imperative, however, and that is to involve all concerned in a continual process of inquiry and analysis, and a continual effort to identify and remove the blinders that so often impede it. Speaking of current needs for youth and adult skills, the 2010 Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2009b: 92) notes that "there is a growing sense in which "what you know" is less important than "what you are able to learn", – or perhaps what you are *ready* to learn. Applying this truism to the nascent effort at understanding literate environments pushes further inquiry far up the priority list.

Policies that favour development of demand for literate skills at the local level, and its articulation on existing programmes and opportunities to acquire that competence, are relatively rare and so constitute one of the key missing elements in remediation of the situation. For it is arguably the *intersection* of measures for accentuating this demand with those devoted to providing educational opportunity that is most effective in creating a literate environment. And it is therefore to the topic of their intersection that I turn in the next chapter of this study.



# Chapter 7

## Intersections: Status and Potential

Examples cited in the preceding two chapters indicate some of the valuable work that has been accomplished in testing and elaborating different components of a literate environment in Africa, and in strengthening supply and demand forces – as well as the major challenges that must still be met to carry this work to fruition. However, it should be quite evident that the greatest potential not only for endowing such environments, but, more important still, for unleashing the dynamics that ensure their self-generation across the continent, lies in strategies that *couple the supply and demand sides of the equation*, or that link resources for learning to real uses of new skills. It would be no exaggeration to say that it is this junction that most reliably *creates* literate environments.

In Chapter 7, therefore, we consider insights into *how* the intersection has been effected and examples of leading experiences of this type in order to begin drawing lessons for policy.

## The challenge of coupling supply and demand

By what methods and approaches are the supply of literacy resources and the demand for literate competencies most effectively mobilized and coupled? Of course, in an ideal and well-supplied free market economy – of the sort that never exists but that at least throws some light on necessary preconditions – this would happen automatically: the opportunity to increase production, to ensure new efficiencies in service delivery, or to create new meaning and motivation for existing activities by progressively intensifying the acquisition and use of literate skills would be enough both to call forth resources for instilling this competence and to link them to outlets for its productive application. This might happen as well in the command economy of a benevolent dictatorship, though 'moral hazard', as the political economists like to call it – the likelihood that government without corrective accountability mechanisms will behave in inappropriate and oppressive ways – makes this avenue equally problematic (Miller et al, 2007).

In fact, such an ideal outcome is more or less what the autonomous model of literacy assumes. And it certainly does happen to a degree, as will be evident in some of the examples cited later in this chapter: under the right circumstances, the spark jumps the synapse pictured in Figure 2 (in Chapter 3 on assessment methodology) and this apparently spontaneous combustion takes place. The likeliest point of junction, our review of demand for literacy in the last section suggests, lies in those fields where new literate and numerate skills are successfully applied to developing viable livelihoods, governing social activities, capitalizing resources and enriching culture. But how can such fields be more widely identified and cultivated? What are the prerequisites? And what factors impede better junction of supply and demand at present?

To help answer that latter question about obstacles, we could try putting the shoe on the other foot for a moment. Such connections are natural, the economic model assures us. Under normal (or at least highly rational) circumstances, knowledge seeks out applications, while social institutions and activities solicit the input of new competencies in order to enhance their effectiveness and protect their interests. In fact, the goal of policy with respect to literate environments, one could reasonably argue, is to help nurture those conditions that enable and incline people to create their own, or that remove existing impediments to that activity. The question that may rather need asking is therefore: *'why is the intersection then so rare among minimally literate population groups in sub-Saharan Africa?'*

One response may be that the 'free market' metaphor and the autonomous model, while expressing some important dynamics of the situation, leave much out and are simply inadequate to portray the true situation of supply-demand intersection in literacy, particularly in highly burdened developing economies, where its weaknesses are further magnified by the obstacles to widespread asset accumulation that geography, history and current power relations have created. Another response may not be so hard to find if we start with the domains of high potential demand illustrated in the previous chapter, and ask a further question. What consequences might ensue if

they were in fact effectively coupled with the supply of new literate skills? Consider possible outcomes in the areas highlighted:

- growing local businesses, credit schemes and member-managed cooperatives that take over an increasing slice of production and consumption among the poor majority
- effectively decentralized public services and government administrations in which local staff exercise increased control
- more pronounced democratization of social and political institutions, where greater accountability is instilled and the voice of minority and female constituents is more effectively expressed
- an enhanced 'priesthood of all believers' in religious communities, where congregants acquire the familiarity with the roots and traditions of their faith to bring its ethical precepts more fully to bear on social life, if not to challenge the pre-eminence of a clerical elite
- fuller articulation of the wisdom, languages and histories of local culture – along with greater access to information about others

Clearly, even partial and hesitant realization of such outcomes would produce some re-scrambling of existing social hierarchies, along with modifications in patterns of resource control within the countries or regions concerned, and they would very likely elicit some strong resistance as well. Without invoking any conspiracy theories or *dei ex machina* – scarcely needed in this case – that fact itself could go some ways toward explaining the rarity of effective supply-demand intersections. No diabolical conspiracy is required to produce such an outcome. All that is needed and is readily available are natural forces of social inertia reinforced by poverty, collective self-interest and sticky policy.

The issue in this culminating realm of 'intersections', and in the conclusions and policy recommendations to follow, is therefore how to help those with the greatest stake in the issue – particularly the minimally literate population groups and their allies in-country – to forge such new linkages in the teeth of considerable inertia if not opposition; and which approaches promise most

success in the venture. In brief, it seems less a question of massively or directly intervening, an unlikely turn of events in any case, than of a more Vygotskian strategy (Glassman, 2001): helping *scaffold* the approaches on which different local and national partners can learn – and modify – new tactics for joining supply to demand; identifying and working to remove constraining conditions or policy impediments; providing the cover and protection under which innovative and cross-sectoral research and development (R&D) can go ahead; and maintaining commitment through the sequential process of ratcheting-up initiatives by which promising new intersections are capitalized into sustainable social endeavours (Osei-Hwedie, 2003).

The most innovative and difficult step may lie in developing precisely such inter-sectoral alliances and strategies with domains that typically lie outside the comfort zone of educators, and where their capacities and ministrations have not always been highly esteemed or their occasional cross-border ventures much appreciated – a theme to which I return in the conclusion. Such initiatives pose a further tactical problem that will also bear further examination: the challenge of convincing advocates to think of 'literacy *second*', as Rogers (2000) has suggested, or of tending to 'post-literacy before literacy', as Dumont (1990) advised.

First, though, it is important to examine in some detail strategies by which the supply of new literate skills and the demand for them (effective demand, of course, in the sense defined above) have been successfully coupled, concentrating on resource-poor African environments like those where the problems of persisting illiteracy are the most severe. I begin with the example of agricultural markets and cooperatives, as they are the domain in which I have the greatest personal and professional experience. But thereafter we look as well at the application or modification of some of the same principles in the domains of health, microfinance, community development, educational provision and cultural development. Conclusions are left to Chapter 8 hereafter.

A brief note first, however, for any who may feel in the pages to follow that we have somehow wandered from the central topic of developing literate environments in Africa. Where are the books, where are the newspapers and

further educational opportunities? In fact, those supply factors are there, as should soon be evident, but they are blended in often seamless ways with demand forces, which is arguably the ideal arrangement. To perceive them and discern the meaning of the mix, we need briefly to recall the definition developed above for a literate environment. It is one that sustainably supports the increasingly frequent *use* of literacy and the regular *application* of literate and numerate skills; and it supports them not just by providing resources, but by fueling demand for these skills and nurturing terrains on which they may be profitably applied. To get beyond that first level of insight, however, we must have a better understanding of just how the engine of demand works, and how the supply of opportunities primes and feeds it. Developing such increased clarity requires in turn that we descend a bit into the boiler room of the activities in question in order to examine some of the nuts and bolts of the interaction and get a first-hand feel for it. I attempt to outline that journey in the pages to follow.

## **The example of agricultural marketing development**

Multi-dimensional post-literacy efforts – that is, those covering both demand and supply dimensions of the literate environment – have generally had the most success, literature and experience suggest, in realms where other development sectors and agencies recognize an acute need to decentralize their own operations, and/or to transfer new economic and political responsibilities to local actors and institutions (Belloncle et al, 1982b; Bingen, Serrano and Howard, 2003; Nunan and Scullion, 2004; Schwettmann, 2011), or where those actors succeed in generating them by main force. Since examples of this sort highlight important dynamics of the constitution of literate environments, somewhat extended consideration of lessons learned is appropriate.

I use as an example the domain of agricultural marketing. It has the additional virtue of highlighting what the historical record suggests to be one of the key initial and common denominator functions of literacy: making possible

effective management of increased resource flows; and it sets the stage for discussing the conditions, means and consequences of better articulating literacy supply with the demand for those competencies. The lessons learned derive from a compound of experience over the last forty years reported in a variety of sources (e.g. Belloncle, 1979, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1985; Belloncle et al, 1982; Bingen, 1994, 1998; CLUSA, 2008; Easton, 1983, 1989). For the sake of illustration, however, I use the particulars of my own first and longest experience in the Republic of Niger (1964–71).

The situation described began in the late 1960s on agricultural cooperative markets organized by the Union Nigérienne de Crédit et de Coopération. However, roughly similar dynamics, with instructive new twists and turns, have been evident in many other settings. In the Niger case, thanks to a favourable political juncture, the national agricultural cooperative union had decided to experiment with the transfer of management authority – plus a related proportion of the proceeds of local export crop marketing – from existing middlemen to any village groups that could demonstrate the necessary organizational capacity and technical competence to assume these functions. I was asked to participate in the process as a representative of the national literacy agency (in which I had then been working for three years) and as technical assistant on training matters.

The detail of the experience is interesting in and of itself, but will be skipped here in order to save space<sup>56</sup> – with the exception of one bellwether dimension that became evident soon after the transfer of functions and resource entitlements got underway. The site of the first self-managed cooperatives was in a rural region of central Niger, where there had been for several years a Hausa-language literacy programme that was making minimal headway. Once this 'new system' of cooperative management – *sabon tsari* in Hausa – had been put in place, I saw people who had been attending literacy classes on and off for years without learning much of anything sit down on a bag of peanuts and acquire basic literacy in the space of a couple of months. The obstacle appeared not to have been either the pedagogy, as deficient as it was, or any lack of inherent capacity on their part, but rather the absence

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56 For further detail in this regard, see Belloncle et al (1982) and Easton (1972).

therefore of any clear application for the new knowledge. Once that obstacle was circumvented, things turned around rapidly.

Here, though, I wish to concentrate on a few critical and synoptic lessons learned from this experience with the uses of literacy in situations of rural poverty, and from similar cases in other settings. They can be summarized in the form of four ideas – or, more accurately, a first (and familiar) external principle, one observation about internal dynamics, and two further ones concerning conditions of maximum impact and sustainability.

### **External principle: literacy second**

The evocative phrase 'literacy second' was suggested by Rogers (2000), but in effect reasserts and further elaborates a principle recognized when Dumont (1990) advised planning and providing for post-literacy *before* literacy, as well as a dynamic implicit in most experiences of the type reviewed here stretching back over previous decades. It is further echoed in the contrast that Oxenham et al (2002) have made between the limited success of livelihood strategies developed by literacy programmes, and the generally more positive outcomes of those initiated in other sectors with which literacy programming is then associated and to which it is adapted.

The lesson is that, in most under-stocked and disempowered environments, literacy must be a tool for improving one's material and social circumstances concurrently with it becoming a resource for cultural expression and enrichment. In such settings, it does not work in a sustainable manner and on any scale solely as a means of cultural enrichment or – *pace* human capital proponents – as a prelude to or precondition for local development, especially when such benefits seldom materialize. Its initial functional uses, like its historical origins, tend to lie in management of resources and in improved social organization. But such uses only become evident when the *scale* of those resources, the degree of authority for them, and/or the intensity of organizational needs reach a level – seldom achieved by *individuals* within the poor majority – that cannot be effectively handled by purely oral means and through memory recall. Short of that rather imprecise but important threshold

(or, better yet, without attaining a series of thresholds corresponding, as we shall see, to successive steps in knowledge acquisition and application), spark and tinder don't come together for three important reasons:

- there is insufficient literacy application to ensure retention
- there is insufficient benefit from it to sustain motivation
- there is quite simply insufficient related activity to give birth to a literate environment

As our Burkinabè colleague cited above pungently put it, 'One can't manage nothing!' Moreover, educators rarely have the tools, the knowledge or the authorizations to create such circumstances, and so need to seek out and support partners who do, and who generally either work in the productive sectors of the economy, are involved in political mobilization efforts, or hold responsibility for viable existing social and economic functions that need to be better supported or more broadly disseminated. As the Oxenham et al (2002) World Bank publication on literacy and livelihoods notes, experience to date demonstrates that such integration is more easily accomplished when literacy and adult education programming is fitted into the development activity in question, than when the reverse is attempted. It is in effect a joint strategy mapping out the interventions and commitments of both – or all – partners in sponsorship, and tracing out a traversable path of learning and assumption of new functions for local participants. Establishing those partnerships requires a degree of combined technical, social and political artistry to which we will return in the conclusion to this study.

### **Internal dynamic: experiential learning, alternating pedagogy and political ratcheting**

The first internal principle to respect is a pedagogical one that has major tactical implications, and it concerns the optimal alternation between learning and application. The principle is in fact little more than common sense or an application of Kolb's theories of experiential learning (1984), and yet it is both critically important and insufficiently applied to literacy

programming. I am speaking of the imperative – from both instructional and strategic perspectives – of *building a healthy alternation between learning and real application into a programme*. 'Real application' refers not just to the practice sessions that allow students to exercise the skills or knowledge they are acquiring, and enable them to make connections between the lessons studied and things they already know, important as such activities are. Development of the practical dimensions of curricula is certainly a critical aptitude and related methods should be an automatic part of the toolkit of any adult educator or instructional designer. But in the context of local capacity building for real development responsibilities the principle must be carried further and embodied in a lesson plan that *architecturally relates each level of learning to the assumption of a new level of responsibility* in some solvent and sustainable enterprise or function. And this is why such joint strategies typically work better when literacy and training are fitted into development strategies in other sectors and allowed to transform them than when the reverse approach is attempted.

This principle puts a premium on the staff of the relevant partner sectors or agencies practising and perfecting together a new competence: the ability to analyse any development activity or function in joint pedagogical and political terms, to prioritize or rearrange in a sequence or hierarchy the component tasks and skills involved, and to express them as a lesson plan. First people learn this and are able to do that; then they acquire this additional understanding or skill and are able to assume such and such expanded responsibilities or more technical functions. And so forth. The example is radically oversimplified but the principle remains valid. The alternation between learning and actual assumption of new responsibilities is premised on the notion that, as mysterious or difficult as the competencies required to exercise particular development functions may appear – especially when seen from afar – they are in fact composed of an interrelated set of tasks and understandings. And if one breaks these down and rearranges them in the right sequence, it is entirely possible to come up with a strategy and lesson plan that will enable a group of individuals or a community to master the

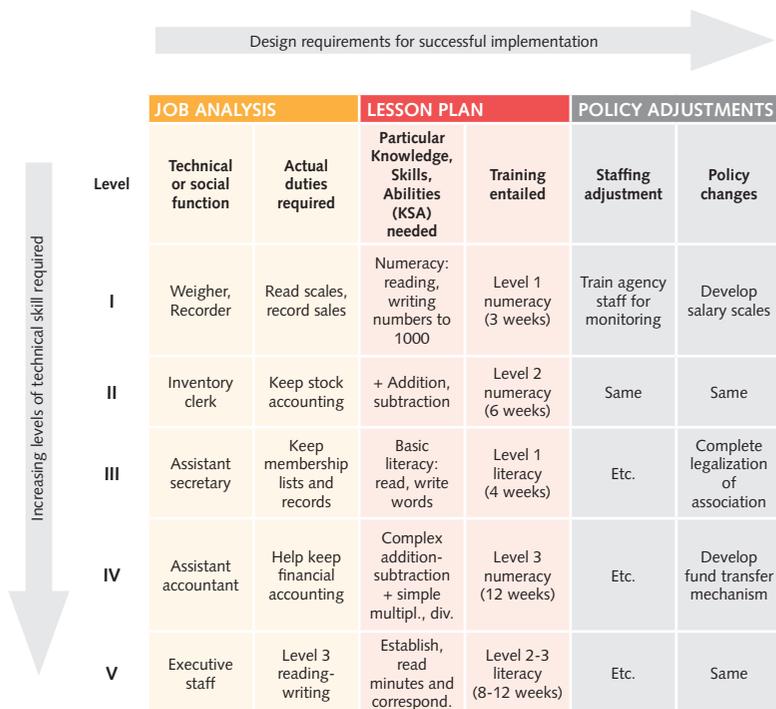
various levels of proficiency required.<sup>57</sup> That same principle is integral to the discipline of Instructional Design (e.g. Mager and Pipe, 1970).

Administration and management of local agricultural markets in Africa in fact provides an excellent example. Figure 8 hereafter illustrates – in highly simplified form – the sort of analysis and lesson plan required in the Niger case some forty years ago. After careful consideration of the various steps and tasks involved in crop market administration, it became evident that a number of the related duties (just like the challenges that seem first to have motivated invention and use of written script in the ancient Near East) required no more than the ability to read and write numbers and so to record transactions.

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57 In fact, the competencies required may appear difficult or indissociably complex in part because those who currently exercise them have an interest in presenting them that way, and in maintaining the privileges associated with their own exercise of them. To expose this pretention, adult educators in North America often quote, tongue only partly in cheek, the apocryphal remark of a farmer turned agricultural extension agent: 'Last year I couldn't spell 'agronomist' and now I are one!'

**Figure 8: Schematic presentation of alternation between learning and application**



People who acquired this skill could therefore already serve as recorders of market transactions, weighers of the product, payers of remittances and/or supervisors of these operations. Right away, the assumption of these functions gave them a real sense of accomplishment, and at the same time helped resolve one of the enduring problems of local crop markets – corruption by weighers and scribes who had no link to the local community and couldn't be controlled by them.

The next level up (next in this scheme, which was by no means the only conceivable one) entailed people learning to handle addition and subtraction with remainder or carryover of results. Equipped with this skill, learners could begin to understand and then master simple materials accounting (formatted for easy accountability), like the sort of forms that must be kept on intake and disbursement of products from a storeroom or warehouse. Those who

went beyond to learn the manipulation of larger numbers, the meaning of decimals, the execution of operations in series and the basics, at least, of multiplication and division could begin handling cash accounting as well as materials inventory.

There was a similar hierarchy in the mastery of reading and writing, though it entered into play a bit further down the sequence of steps in assumption of market management responsibilities. It stretched then from the ability to draw up and decipher lists of co-op members or material goods onward to the capacity to prepare and receive simple written communications, and further forward to preparation and analysis of reports and complex correspondence.

Overall, these steps constitute an example of the simple alternation between learning and application that can be built into local assumption of development responsibility in a particular sector of development. People learned this and then they did that, and they reflected on lessons learned before going further. The sequence simultaneously dovetails with the realization of increasing degrees of local autonomy – or, more accurately, higher degrees of *complementarity* between what local actors can do and the support required from outside institutions. This potentially fuels improved performance all around, particularly when ‘performance’ is defined to include client satisfaction with the process and sense of investment in it or ownership of it. It also tends to produce spillover learning effects, like those described above by the two village accountants who set out to devise a Hausa-Zarma dictionary.

This same basic procedure is applicable and has been applied *mutatis mutandis* – that is, with appropriate modifications for each domain and context – to local assumption of responsibility in a whole range of development sectors, from natural resource management to public health administration, and from agricultural extension to local governance and the extension of primary schooling itself. A few relevant examples are presented shortly. In each case, those responsible have had to start by analysing the different component tasks involved in execution of the functions in question, and then organize them into some sort of hierarchy of difficulty, reformulate them as a lesson plan, add the required instructional support methodology and personnel,

implement the strategy and simultaneously ensure the parallel changes in policy required to make actual assumption and exercise of the new functions possible.

Figure 8 above recapitulates this process and its various components in simplified graphic form. The vertical dimension represents the progressive level of difficulty of the technical functions to be assumed, whereas the horizontal dimension represents the steps in strategy design required: analysis of the functions in question, preparation of the lesson plan, and provision for any parallel policy adjustments needed. The content of the cells is a bit fanciful and meant purely as an illustration, but it should clarify the above assertion that a similar strategy could be applied to many different kinds of development functions.

### **First condition for optimizing impact: broader accountability**

The next observation concerns, in effect, organizational democracy – always a relative term – and has to do with the role of broader literacy in stakeholder control and corporate accountability. The scenario just presented contains at least one potential danger frequently experienced in the field: it can become too exclusively ‘technicist’, and thereby lend itself to takeover by elites or minorities who restrict access to the requisite competence, and use the nascent enterprise to their own exclusive or preponderant benefit (what political scientists call ‘elite capture’). To a considerable degree, democratic procedures – many of them already inherent in African cultures (Owusu, 1997; Wiredu, 1997) – provide the antidote, but an antidote that only begins to work as broader numbers of people gain the basic literate skills required to defend their interests more effectively. Recall the Hausa expression for minimal second language competence cited above: ‘At least they can’t sell me without my knowing it.’

For a local enterprise or community venture to be democratically governed, it is not enough that the requisite number of local people gain the competence necessary to assume its various functions. If they are the only ones to possess such competence, a situation of moral hazard has been created – one that

that lends itself to abuse of power, malpractice and the risk of embezzlement. At least three other elements are necessary to circumvent the obstacle:

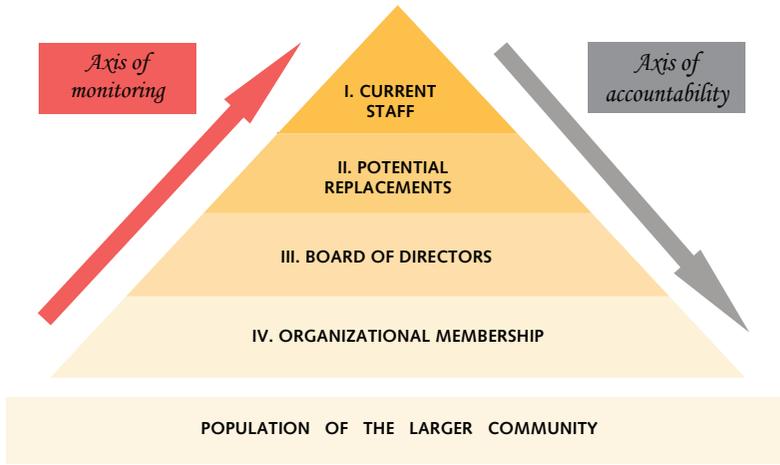
1. a set of people – rather like ‘understudies’ in the theatre or critical bench players in a sport – who have nearly the same levels of competence, and who are able to take over functions in case of incapacitation of the existing staff, or problems of conduct that might lead to their removal
2. a board of directors or governing council of the organization, whose members must arguably be at a roughly similar level in order to exercise effective oversight
3. a body of stakeholders or members who (or a representative sample of whom) are sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to audit the work of staff and verify that it is on the up-and-up

These four tiers – the frontline staff of the organization and the three other layers of stakeholders detailed above – are schematically portrayed in Figure 9. Note that the strata are organized by type of technical skill entailed to carry out the different functions, not by their relative power in the organization, from which point of view the governing board would presumably be on top. The level needed to exercise this ‘stakeholder’ control is not the same as that needed to exercise the function on a daily basis. This basic ‘civic’ level of competence in nascent local enterprises and services is nonetheless an essential ingredient in the mix – and a motivation for broader acquisition and diffusion of literate skills within the community. Moreover, the permeability of partitions *between* strata is arguably key both to the viability of the scheme and to its impact on learning. That ‘porosity’ is measured by the ability of general stakeholders to gain the additional training they may need in order to move up into technical or leadership positions, then perhaps revert to standard membership status à la Cincinnatus.<sup>58</sup>

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58 Lucius Quinctius *Cincinnatus* (519 BC – 438 BC) was a Roman farmer who, legend has it, left his fields to take charge of the Roman army and save the Republic in a time of crisis, then returned to civilian life once the crisis was resolved (Malamud, 2009).

Figure 9: Axes of monitoring and accountability among strata of a community organization



In Figure 10, this dynamic of progressively broadening both participation and the knowledge required to make it effective is added to the scheme already presented in Figure 8, which pictured the pedagogical and organizational consequences of the assumption of new functions at the local level. Onto the grid of learning and application is grafted a horizontal dimension that specifies the different groups of organizational or community members, who might attain levels of competence allowing them either to replace given local staff in their functions or, more generally, to assume monitoring and accountability verification responsibilities. The detail is obviously sketchy and the utility of the scheme lies rather in the general strategy depicted: a progressive broadening of the base of competence in the community or organization in order to ensure its democratic operation. But the scheme also graphically represents how the narrow technical mastery challenges of local assumption of responsibility can – and must – be translated into broader democratic ones that provide an impetus for increasingly widespread literacy and technical training. Add to this the possibility of multiple such organizations taking form in any geographic area and the possibilities for widespread learning become even more evident.

Figure 10: Double axis of associational development

	Level of responsibility assumed	Actual technical functions	Requisite knowledge and skill	Training needed	Social groups or categories of persons involved			
					A	B	C	D
I								
II								
III								
IV								
V								

**Second external condition: asset accumulation and ‘multiple capitalization’**

The second condition for optimizing impact, and the final lesson learned from the agricultural marketing experience, is at least partly a financial one: it concerns the importance of different kinds of resource accumulation to the success of local capacity building and empowerment strategies. The strategy sketched above for agricultural markets obviously combines several interwoven types of investment or capitalization – financial, social, infrastructural and intellectual – which recall the DFID asset pentagon portrayed in Figure 5. It is in fact the rising level (and increasing spread) of new knowledge and skill in the community or organization that makes it possible for the group to assume new functions. That expansion of local control can

in turn ensure important returns to the investment of effort in learning. A portion of the financial returns will serve to maintain the personnel that have exercised the functions and cover the operating expenses of the undertaking, but part should also be invested in increasing the underlying capital of which the community or organization disposes. In this manner, accumulation of the various complementary assets or forms of capital progresses in rough tandem.

The different kinds of assets involved and their interdependence might be notionally defined as follows:

1. *Physical capitalization* or the development and conservation of both the built and natural environment: buildings and facilities, of course, but also the quality of the natural environment and the related natural resource base.
2. *Financial capitalization* – quite evidently the accumulation of funds and monetizable assets that allow the group to meet its operating expenses, invest in its own physical and social development, and insure itself against loss and mishap.
3. *Social and institutional capitalization*, or the formation of networks of affiliation, reciprocal obligations and communication – and the institutionalization of certain among these into legally guaranteed form. For years now, both academics and development practitioners have put increasing emphasis on the importance of 'social capital' in the development process (e.g. Ostrom and Ahn, 2003). These networks and relationships make it possible both to: (a) mobilize energy and support when those are needed to develop new functions or to strengthen an organization's financial and political position, and (b) insure the group against various kinds of mishaps or catastrophes by holding in reserve a set of allegiances that can serve to bail it out when necessary, or restore its operations when those are compromised.

Source: PADLOS - Education Report (Easton et al. 1998)

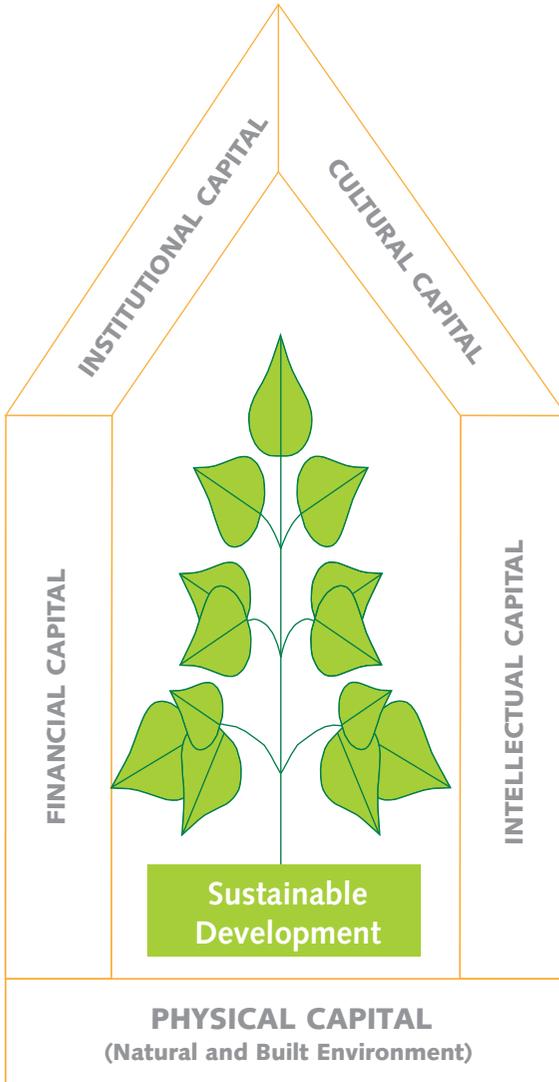
4. *Human and intellectual capitalization*, sometimes called 'human capital', which refers both to the knowledge and skills possessed by members

of the community, and to their individual and collective health or well-being.

5. *Deep cultural capitalization*: less recognized but no less important, this constitutes another type of accumulation – the development of cultural meanings around the new activity, its modification to reflect them, and its appropriation as a part of local culture.

All five of these forms of accumulation can be seen as interdependent aspects of the same reality. In fact, organizational audits might well be carried out on the entire set, because neglect of one or another in the assessment may make it seem to appear that resources have disappeared with no counterbalancing credit or asset appreciation, whereas they may, in fact, have served in important ways to augment the physical, social, intellectual or cultural capital of the organization. The five dimensions are graphically – and rather fancifully – represented in Figure 11 on the next page, drawn from the PADLOS-Education Report (Easton et al, 1998), which bears a significant resemblance to DFID's 'livelihood pentagon'. Whatever its literal value, a scheme (and a reasoning) like this illustrate how closely learning activities must be woven into the developing competence and capital endowment of local organizations.

Figure 11: Graphic representation of “fivefold capitalization”



## Stepping back

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What lessons can we draw from the agricultural marketing example to help answer the questions of how the intersection between supply of literacy resources and demand for literacy skills is best effected, and how sustainably literate environments are most successfully created? Without jumping the gun on a discussion that will be more fruitful once we have examined cases in other sectors, it will be useful to deduce a few principles from the agricultural marketing experience that may provide a template to test against and refine through examination of the material that follows. The principles are:

1. **Derived demand.** The example helps confirm and refine the idea that – once again, in the impoverished circumstances where most African programmes operate – literacy is to a large extent what the economists would call a 'derived demand': that is, the need for it arises, or at least crests above the level required for allocation of consistent personal effort, when it becomes necessary to meet other imperatives, or benefit from other opportunities generated in the various sectors of local production, governance and fundable service delivery.
2. **Social scaffolding.** The activity of building literacy into these other domains of social life, and alternating between the acquisition of new levels of competence and engineering an enabling framework for their application, is what in fact serves to construct a local and sustainable literate environment.
3. **Cultural payoffs.** Cultural motivations and applications are then interwoven throughout and much energized by these fields of application. Examples include multiplied uses for African languages, enhanced readiness for lifelong learning, greater interest in the related experiences of others, and the rewards and tribulations of developing social frameworks for the new activity that blend indigenous knowledge and values with the challenges of democratic development.
4. **Diagnostic infiltration.** The essential related skill for literacy personnel is that of knowing how to infiltrate neighbouring sectors: diagnose (with

them) the training needs that their own operations are stimulating – or could awaken if more progressive orientations were adopted; identify improvements in the efficiency and equity of their operations that restructuring for greater stakeholder involvement might procure; help to develop the careful alternation between learning and application that would make those achievements possible; and make maximum broader learning mileage for all out of the opportunity.

5. **Generating resistance.** Ensuring the success of such strategies also means keeping your powder dry, figuratively speaking. Such movements generally provoke opposition, some of it a justified variety from which one can learn much, some of it from interests that feel threatened. *Sa dōgōlen be dōgō*, the Bamanan say: 'It is the hidden snake that grows long'. Once perceived threats are out in the open, counter-measures are likely to follow. Progress towards a literate environment is therefore always composed of favourable episodes followed by setbacks and new attempts.

I turn now to briefer examples from five other sectors that will serve to triangulate on the first lessons suggested above and refine them a little before the final chapter on conclusions. Those domains include governance, microfinance, education, public health and cultural development. Several words of caution are, however, necessary:

- First, despite eschewing the form, I shall unavoidably succumb in a substantive way to what might be called the 'tyranny of boxes': typographically packaged snippets about case examples that increasingly populate policy reports on education and development topics, but inevitably give too little analysis or information to support the conclusions drawn from them, and often present a rather varnished or surgically enhanced picture of experiences that are in fact fuller mixtures of light and shade. Constraints of space (at least) make that inevitable. It is therefore important to recognize that such illustrations represent a *vehicle for developing an argument* more than they do a conclusive demonstration of its worth, and that judgement on the latter can only be made on the

basis of greater detail, like the kind contained in the references cited with each example.

- Second, none of these experiences is an ideal type, if indeed such a thing exists. All of them can be validly critiqued and should be subjected to that cross-examination. Seeking perfect embodiments of supply-demand intersection in literacy is a little like hoping for what left-leaning political movements once called the unlikely objective of 'socialism in one country'. That is, the development of such initiatives is as dependent on the larger environment as it is on the project's own methodology; and that environment is always characterized both by facilitating and by severely constraining influences. Rather than treat any individual case as a transcendent model, I shall therefore hope simply to draw some lessons about the dynamics of supply-demand intersections from the assembled experience.
- Next, the cases to be briefly considered, though grouped under different sectors of development, are scarcely as distinct as they may appear. Any degree of success in one domain is typically contingent on and tends to lead to progress in another, since the problems of development are, after all, multi-sectoral; and dynamic local governments or associations that find ways to generate or acquire new resources and begin to master the challenges of resource management, stakeholder representation and accountability almost inevitably end up expanding their portfolio across sectors and creating linkages among them.
- Finally, for the same reason, we shall resort in certain instances to citing more than one experience from each subsector (along with relevant references) in order to draw lessons from brief consideration of the whole set.

## Governance: participatory evaluation, planning and budgeting

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Initiatives for more active participation of local citizens in the mechanisms of social governance and in the halls of government itself, which have cropped up across the continent, create new means for applying literate skills to the improvement of social life, and new motivations for acquiring them. Action Aid, which published for several years a biannual bulletin – *The Governance Link* – recounting similar efforts in various of the countries where it works, has helped sponsor Community-Based Budget Monitoring (CBBM) efforts in Ethiopia, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda that initiate local people in the process of public budget establishment, allocation, disbursement and verification, and give them at the same time the enhanced literacy and numeracy skills needed to exercise these functions (ActionAid, 2007). 'People's Report Cards' are an instrument of its closely allied project of 'Economic Literacy and Budget Accountability for Governance' and lead to the establishment of locally completed evaluations of government performance – or organizational governance. The Kabarole Research and Resource Centre in Uganda carries out participatory monitoring and assessment of the local effects of the country's poverty reduction programmes, notably with respect to land planning. Even oil companies have joined the bandwagon (Parker et al, 2008): Ashridge Business School in the United Kingdom, with a group called 'Business Community Synergies,' has recently proposed to the World Bank a scheme for 'Participatory Planning and Monitoring in the Extractive Industries'.

Participatory governance phenomena – a very broad category indeed – cover of course as much dross as gold and every gradation in between (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). But they are potentially an arena in which new literate skills get put to important and practical use, and they are particularly powerful and empowering when participatory assessment leads to participatory planning and budgeting, and thence to monitoring of the implementation of decisions made.

## **Community Development: Nwodua, Ghana and POTAL MEN in Benin**

Upward spirals of local development may in fact grow out of literacy and training programmes themselves, provided other ingredients are present in the environment or are soon assembled. The village of Nwodua in Ghana, for example, is celebrated for its self-improvement efforts (Easton, 1999a; Best, 2006).

In 1979 the residents of Nwodua, a community of 900 people located 20 kilometres from Tamale in northern Ghana but harbouring no school, set up their own adult literacy programme with the assistance of teachers from neighbouring villages. Instructors were paid in kind by manual labour on their farms, and were replaced if they grew dissatisfied with this small salary. The group of newly literate adults then managed to convince the Bishopric of the Catholic church to establish a primary school in Nwodua, and arranged for the village to become the centre of a new functional literacy project in the Dagbani region. As one result of its role in the regional literacy project, the village was also able to establish a permanent Adult Primary School in the community.

Members of the group succeeded next in using these initial accomplishments as selling points to different NGOs and aid agencies, and acquiring from them support for new activities: establishment of a commercial tree nursery and a soap factory, purchase and operation of a grain mill, and construction of a new road linking the village to the main interurban route. But the most remarkable aspect of the experience is undoubtedly the fashion in which the residents of Nwodua remodeled their community government system to support this programme of activities and multiply its diverse effects. A large share of authority seems to have been transferred without a hitch from the traditional chief to a 'General Development Committee' elected from the initiators of the various experiments. The committee has in turn created a series of sub-committees to oversee the different socioeconomic projects currently underway, and its members undergo ongoing training. So the addition of a series of new demand factors in a community initially mobilized

for literacy has in turn created many of the elements of a literate environment needed to sustain that development.

POTAL-MEN, on the other hand, is a local organization established in 1997 by Fulani herding communities in the Atacora Department of northern Benin to take over literacy and human development efforts after an existing foreign aid-supported livestock project drew to a close (UIL, 2008). (Its name means simply 'our union' in the Fulfulde language, one of the designated national languages of the country.) Although illiteracy rates among that agro-pastoralist population were estimated at over 95% in the late 1990s, members of POTAL-MEN were resolved to link instructional programmes in Fulfulde to training in management of income-generating activities and preventative health for young people and women's groups, and to follow up at the post-literacy level with acquisition of basic French. Over the following ten years, a battery of related training efforts targeting Fulfulde literacy, business management skills, STD/AIDs prevention, veterinary science, civic education and French comprehension were designed and launched interactively between POTAL-MEN membership and supportive external parties like the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Health, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and local administrative authorities. By 2008, more than eighty centres were in operation, over 1,500 people were being trained a year, and 70% of those achieved literacy in Fulfulde (SDC, 2010).

### **Microfinance and banking: Fandène in Senegal, Integrated Women's Empowerment Programme (IWEP) in Ethiopia**

The village of Fandène, Senegal, just 6 kilometres outside of Thiès, drew on local literates to create its own credit mutual in 1987, and convinced twenty surrounding communities – both Muslim and Christian – to take part. Its capital soon amounted to over 20 million CFA francs (about US\$80,000 at the time) and its operations were and are entirely managed at the local level. Loans were made at 15% interest principally to community groups involved in development projects. In addition, the Fandène staff used part of the profits from the work to offer consulting services to low-income urban communities

interested in undertaking the same sort of effort. Since the 1990s, the Fandène-initiated village credit and banking function has continued to grow, and was recently further extended by the creation of a mutual health insurance scheme including a similar set of neighbouring communities, once again, managed by its members. Fandène offers a variety of local training to prepare minimally literate village constituents for assumption of these new tasks (Easton, 1999b). It has more recently expanded its services into the field of micro-health insurance with positive effects (Tabor, 2005).

In Ethiopia, micro-finance for small enterprise has grown over the last twenty years into a major activity, and migrated from a poverty-lending approach to more of a financial institution one (Ageba and Amha 2006). By 2002, there were over twenty such formally institutionalized lending facilities reaching 700,000 clients, plus a host of unregistered ones – yet they were still estimated to cover less than 10% of the potential demand. Those in charge of the micro-finance outlets, both formal and informal, must of course be economically literate, and a number of the facilities offer training for clients as well as staff. The Integrated Women's Empowerment Programme (IWEP) in Ethiopia, funded and supported by Dutch and German foreign aid but coordinated under the country's national development plan, recently developed and began implementing a strategy for linking financial and institutional strengthening of local women's groups with literacy education and skills training (Sandhaas, 2008).

### **Education by All: community schools in Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso**

The community schools movement provides in certain places instructive examples of literacy creating its own employments – as do analogous processes in many non-formal education programmes. Of course, absent external support, the communities in question must be able to mobilize resources from internal sources or other locally managed ventures in order to foot the bill (Assié-Lumumba et al, 2005; Marchand, 2000). It might be called a strategy of Education By All to supplement the long-lasting, much-publicized but still incomplete Education For All initiative – 'by' all, insofar as

local beneficiaries (families, community leaders, literate resource people) take important though varying roles in creating schools where there were none before, and in relating them in innovative ways to ambient culture and local needs.

The movement is in fact quite a varied phenomenon, rooted in many communal aspects of African tradition. It stretches back at least to the *harambee* schools of Kenya created by local towns and villages, which date from the late 1950s onward and still constitute 75% of the secondary level institutions in that country (Bradshaw, 1993; Chieni, 2005; Mwiria, 1990).<sup>59</sup> Any such 'wildcat' creation of schools is obviously a result of excess (as well as 'effective') demand – that is, a strong desire for schooling in an environment where an insufficient supply is made available by the public sector, and parents or community authorities are able to invest in local provision. Of recent years, however, community schools – both the outside-supported and the locally initiated types – have probably been more noticeable in francophone Africa, if only because they constitute more of a break with the generally centralized tradition of national education (Marchand, op cit). How much local initiative and management are actually involved varies from one site or system to another, but there are notable examples where parents and community members have taken very active roles in sustaining the venture, where locally hired and trained teachers have rendered stable service, where student performance has at least matched official school norms, and where fallout benefits for non-formal education of adults and associated creation of new local business have been realized (Sall and Michaud, 2002).

Along with concerns for educational quality and the creation of 'infra-schools' (Easton and Fass, 1989; Hoppers, 2005), one key issue with such community ventures is, of course, their sustainability. This is why the association with business generation can be a useful initiative. At one end, moreover, community schools shade off into proprietary schools (and sometimes turn into them once donor support is withdrawn), or local institutions for religious instruction (Bible and Koranic schools) able to generate their own subsistence

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<sup>59</sup> In fact, these experiences are manifestly rooted as well in widespread African patterns of traditional community education (e.g. Adeyemi et al, 2002).

from the fees paid by parents or the contributions made by the faithful. At the other end, they lead to the intensification of experiments in confiding literacy programming in local civil society organizations (e.g. Nordtveit, 2007). Overall, in any case, they represent another arena where assumption of important local responsibility can lead to new functions and new usages of literacy among those who need to exercise those skills, and so can contribute to the constitution of a literate environment – even while simultaneously providing for the instruction of the next generation.

### **Health: Tostan in Senegal, Guinea and the Sudan**

Some years ago, the Senegal-based NGO Tostan (a name derived from the Wolof word for 'breaking out of the egg') developed a women's empowerment version of adult literacy in that country's central peanut-growing region. The programme eventually included men as well and has had some astounding effects in realms as diverse as local democracy, conflict management and health. The best-known effects are probably in the latter field, and were initiated independently by women participants of the region when they decided that the highest priority application for their new knowledge was the elimination of female genital mutilation (FGM) – a customary practice among large segments of the Senegalese population, although not among the Wolof, the country's plurality ethnic group (Monkman, Miles and Easton, 2007). The women organized themselves into delegations that circulated in surrounding villages to tell their stories of girls' suffering, encourage other women to do the same, and enlist the willing in a movement to change the long-standing custom. The impulse was progressively relayed from one group of communities to another around much of the country, and even motivated the national legislature to author a ban of the practice, although the Tostan-affiliated villages lobbied *against* that measure, maintaining that the abandonment had to come from education and conviction, not fiat, or there would be no lasting change in culture and practice. The same approach was subsequently transplanted to Guinea, Mali, the Gambia and the Sudan, with varying but encouraging results. In nearly all instances, it has at the same time provided a means for the local women involved to exercise literacy

skills and develop new ones in political organizing and the management of community affairs.

As another outcome of this programme, a group of women in the village of Saam Njaay of the Thiès region established a programme of baby-weighing and maternal health (Tostan, 2005). Building on the contribution of materials by a philanthropic organization and the support of certain of their husbands, they extended the initiative to more than fifteen villages in the adjacent region. Pregnant women and mothers of young infants from the entire area began visiting the infirmary for consultations and medical visits. The group gradually developed its functions to provide a complete system of preventive medicine, first aid and referral to the regional hospital. Its newly literate personnel maintained such detailed files on consultation and treatment that it was possible, beginning in 1996, for the group to conduct its own statistical analysis retracing the incidence and evolution of infantile disease in the zone. The results demonstrated a net improvement on several important indicators, and drew a visit from the chief public health physician in Thiès, very interested by this instance of local epidemiological studies.

Public health is thus not only a domain of great importance and live concern to African communities; it is also one where local assumption of responsibility and apprenticeship in new functions can both increase the effectiveness of services and create whole new realms for the application and improvement of literate knowledge.

### **Culture: indigenous knowledge and action research**

Myriad forms of cultural change, adaptation and articulation are woven throughout the instances of literacy application mentioned above, since the chance to use new literate skills in the fuller management of one's affairs, as well as in continued education, gives those concerned a means for further developing their own identity and working out a blend of their cultural background with the demands of their environment and their time (Holmes, 2008). The importance of using development opportunities to better articulate local culture and its relationship to change were already well illustrated in the

success of the Associates in Research on Education and Development (ARED) publishing ventures in the Pulaar language, described earlier, and are well developed in the UNESCO publication on cultural diversity (2009d).

As another bellwether effect of such processes, 'indigenous knowledge' has become not only a byword among development agencies seeking better synergy with local culture (or at least the appearance of it), but also a cottage industry in and of itself (Woytek, Shroff-Mehta and Mohan, 2004). Despite excesses, deficits and ample gaps between rhetoric and practice, this enterprise has at least given new dimensions to the idea of 'modernization', and created multiple opportunities for recent (and existing) literates to apply their skills in better articulating how traditional knowledge and culture relate to external varieties, and what each can learn from the other (Jimenez and Smith, 2008; Semali, 1999). One excellent vehicle for the undertaking has proven to be 'participatory research', a version of inquiry where important (if highly variable) roles are given to local people in the conception, design, execution, analysis and/or dissemination of studies. Increasing numbers of examples may be found in fields as diverse as natural resource management, health, agriculture, forestry and urban planning. Africa-relevant examples include participatory research case studies in medicine (Mosavel et al., 2005), agriculture (Degrande et al, 2006; Jonfa and Waters-Bayer, 2005) and natural resource management (Pound et al, 2003).

## Drawing lessons

In what ways do these further brief examples of intersection between the supply of literacy competencies and the demand for them in developing environments confirm, modify or amplify the tentative lessons drawn earlier in this chapter? What additional insights do they provide?

- **Derived demand.** Cases are quite evident where it was the acquisition of literate skills, whether from formal or non-formal education, that served as the stimulus for the launching of other development activities as fields of application for the new competence, and as a guarantee against its loss. At the same time, however, successes of this type generally come

to pass where the environment affords some arenas of application, and individuals or groups with a high level of initiative manage to weave the elements together, effecting by persistent effort the junctions between supply and demand. Their relative scarcity – which is hard to assess from a few case examples, but perhaps evident in the overall slow progress of literacy in regions where such connections remain the exception rather than the rule – nonetheless continues to suggest that intensification of demand is the surest route to increased learning.

- **Social scaffolding.** This principle seems to be largely confirmed. All the cases examined are characterized by progressive elaboration of means for applying new learning to social applications, and a strategy largely defined by alternation between the two. That alternation, which is the heart of a pedagogy or instructional design potent enough to build up the literate environment, itself depends on agreements reached and policies modified in neighbouring sectors of governance and development.
- **Cultural payoffs.** The expansion of our case examples beyond the realm of agricultural marketing makes even clearer the tight interweaving of cultural meanings and expression in the coupling of supply and demand. The payoff, though, exists as much in recreating one's culture as in perpetuating it – and both activities consolidate popular participation in and ownership of activities that offer new applications of literacy.
- **Diagnostic infiltration.** These examples amplify our understanding of the effort necessary to build bridges between sectors and realms of social life, and to involve counterparts from other realms in jointly analyzing the training and literacy needs that arise within their own operations.
- **Generating resistance.** One might almost say that the more significant the linkage developed, the greater its effect on the literate environment; and the larger the responsibility shared with local stakeholders, the more quickly resistance risks being encountered, since fundamental change never comes easily. But initiatives that address the core issues, and demonstrate the effect of coupling literacy with practical empowerment targets in local development, promise durable impact on both the social

and the literate environment, even if they themselves inevitably ebb and flow.

At the same time, the reader should not forget the three supplemental cross-cutting insights derived at the end of the last chapter on demand forces: (i) cultivating demand, scaffolding applications and ensuring cultural payoffs tend to be more feasible and successful when undertaken on some sort of collective basis, rather than on individual terms; (ii) the situation – and so its diagnosis – may vary amply among different subgroups within the population; and (iii) the particular needs and potentials in this respect of women, who constitute in many areas the largest clientele of literacy programmes, bear close examination.

We have now retraced much of the path set out in Chapter 1, from review of relevant empirical and theoretical literature, through examination of the supply and demand dimensions of literate environments in Africa, and on to consideration of possibilities for better linking the two sides of the picture. The last chapter is devoted to a few conclusions and recommendations.



# Chapter 8

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The term 'literate environment' points to a critical relationship between literacy and its environment. It is the composition of that environment and the nature of the relationship that I have tried to elucidate in the preceding chapters. I have tried to do so in ways that apply not just to adult literacy programmes, but to all related strategies for promoting Education For All, including formal basic education and vocational-technical training, even if other terms (enabling environment, learning environment, literacy environment) are often used in these neighbouring realms. Within that network, adult and non-formal education (ANFE) programmes have particular and important roles to play, though they seldom involve enumerable enlistment of massive numbers of new recruits, and so don't show up well in statistical tables.

The final chapter of the book is devoted to drawing together the strands laid out over preceding pages and attempting to answer the questions posed at the outset. What do we really mean by the notion of literate environments? How are they constituted and how do they grow? What is their present status in sub-Saharan Africa? How can such environments be promoted and advanced under the conditions typical of development work on the continent? What recommendations does that analysis imply for future policy, practice and research on the part of the different stakeholders involved and for educational ones in particular?

## Understanding literate environments

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The reasoning and data marshalled in this book indicate that *a literate environment can be best understood as one that both supports and impels the acquisition and use of literate skills*, and that therefore offers ample and beneficial opportunities for applying them.<sup>60</sup> The support criterion speaks most particularly to the supply side of the issue, the impulsion or intrinsic requirement standard more pointedly to the demand side. Analyses

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<sup>60</sup> This conclusion parallels remarkably an old dictum familiar to adult educators: 'Education is the art of putting people into situations from which they cannot escape without learning.'

or conceptual frameworks that underemphasize either dimension or that fail to portray the circumstances of their intersection remain fundamentally deficient.

To portray both sides and their intersection, however, entails going beneath the surface of literacy phenomena and carefully linking them to forces and functions in their surroundings. A literate environment is irrevocably a relationship between learning activities and a network of active institutions and socio-economic functions in their larger context. The relationship cannot be examined without a grasp of the sources of demand for literate skills and of the nature, contingences and effects of their uses, for these constitute the linkages. However, since education is a domain of service supply – and a very worthy one at that – demand-side factors are less immediately evident within its realm; and professional educators are, on the average, less attuned to them.<sup>61</sup> To track these wellsprings of learning one must get down to the roots of literacy behaviour; and, as the American philosopher Henry David Thoreau famously phrased it, 'There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root' (Thoreau, 1854: 62).

Perhaps the first conclusion to be drawn in this regard from the situations and arguments reviewed in the previous chapters is that, since it is principally the intersection of supply and demand that nurtures literate environments, so also efforts to enhance them *must be intersectoral and cooperative in nature*. This principle should come as no surprise since the emphasis on cross-sectoral collaboration has been widespread in recent years. The World Health Organization champions, for example, bridging intersectoral gaps in water sanitation (WHO, 2010); UNDP and the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) advocate similar partnerships as the only effective way of 'localizing' achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (SNV/ UNDP, 2009); and USAID is putting renewed emphasis on what it terms 'cross-cutting programmes', which involve 'working through the Agency's key sectors to implement their goals in a coordinated fashion' (USAID,

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61 An exception should certainly be made here for most vocational-technical educators, as well as for adult educators resident in other sectors of the economy, but they have typically felt themselves on the outside looking into most debates about and initiatives in favour of Education For All over recent years (e.g. Middleton, 1988).

2010a, 2010b). But the emphasis has rarely been as pronounced in, or with respect to, education.

## Exploring the roots

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In this study, we have attempted a survey of the roots of literate environments: the needs they respond to, the resources they require, and the ways in which those two determinants intersect in creating new conditions that are more supportive of the acquisition of literacy. What have we learned?

Borrowing language from economics, the need for literacy has been termed a 'derived demand' – in short, an impulse that draws much of its vital energy and necessary resources from the uses to which literacy can be put in neighbouring sectors of social life: business management, local governance, continuing education, cultural expression and public health *inter alia*. In the final analysis, those uses are what 'bankroll' and impel it. In fact, the issue of creating or enhancing literate *environments* further highlights the problem of sustainable bankrolling and impulsion, for to speak of the environment for social functions is to speak of infrastructure and institutional supports, which can only be built at a financial, political and social cost. And such costs are only durably covered in contexts or as part of activities where the *overall* benefits produced – financial, political, social and cultural – in fact prove to outweigh them.

These observations give additional significance and meaning to the conclusion of the Basic Education and Livelihood Opportunities for Illiterate and Semiliterate Young Adults (BELOYISIA) workshops and the related World Bank publication (Oxenham et al, 2002), that the literacy-development combination works better and much more durably when literacy is integrated in some fashion into the particular development activity or strategy in question, than when one attempts to introduce real socio-economic application activities into literacy programmes *per se*. In any case, as mentioned above, it is apparently the intersection between instructional supply and external demand – and, more particularly, the alternation of

learning and its practical application, and the progressive 'ratcheting up' of scope and social function thereby produced – that actually generates or enhances literate environments and underwrites their extension.

There is a corollary further demonstrated in our case material: namely, that fueling effective demand for literacy essentially entails expanding and better organizing locally controlled productive functions, where the latter are understood to include all those social activities that contribute both to *reproducing* existing community life and to *better adapting* it to changing conditions. Enhancing the effectiveness of such functions and better organizing them sooner or later make broadened literacy imperative, but the importance and feasibility of the latter can best be preached by those who are actively involved in and knowledgeable about the former.

From this point of view, though provision of books and reading materials is always worthwhile, *'building the literate environment'* means *first and foremost engineering the connections between supply and demand and removing the impediments to their development*. With this diagnosis, we are getting ahead of ourselves, however, and need first to turn to a summary of lessons learned from examining the current status of literate environments in Africa.

In any case, the intersection of supply and demand is more instrumental to nurturing a literate environment than simple provision of reading materials ever could be, because it generates social functions and units that can themselves reproduce these conditions on a sustainable basis.

## **Status review**

In the foregoing sections of this study, the current status of literate environments in Africa was reviewed 'on both sides of the coin': with respect to supply and demand, evidence of their intersection, and lessons about how to promote that junction. In both realms, but on the supply side in particular, a distinction needs to be made between a few heartening case examples and the sort of broader demographic results necessary to attain EFA. Whereas the cases may suggest encouraging directions and possibilities, one must always

ask whether they remain isolated instances and, if so, why they aren't already better replicated or disseminated. The fact that one looks repeatedly to a few encouraging instances, or 'jewel box' experiences, as they are sometimes called, may be at the same time an indication of fundamental impediments in the environment or unrecognized favourable conditions in the case sites that render spread effects unlikely. A Hausa proverb with particular poignancy for evaluation sums the case up well: 'When the dog was told there was food for everyone at the wedding feast, he said, "We'll check that out at ground level."'<sup>62</sup> The dog isn't allowed to get up on the table and won't know if there is truly enough for all guests until the provender gets down where the other half lives.

## Supply of literacy resources

'Supply' in our lexicon refers not so much to the provision of resources for running literacy programmes as it does to the availability of the various 'inputs' needed to stock a literate environment: people with the requisite capacities, of course, but also reading material (books, newspapers and other written communications) and opportunities for continuing education and lifelong learning.

On that ledger, we found examples of valuable initiative, but slow overall increases in provision – slower, it would appear, than either demographic growth or the spread of literacy programmes themselves, which have been bolstered by increasing entry of NGOs into the fray. This situation suggests a growing imbalance between need and opportunity, the inverse of the situation one would prefer.

## Demand for literate skills

The picture on the demand side appears, if anything, a bit more acute, although once again with hopeful examples of progress and much evidence of potential.

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62 *Da an ce da kare, 'Tiwo ya yi yawa a gidan biki', ya ce, 'Ma dai gani a kas!'*

There is no lack of aspiration among new literates to continue their education in formal schooling or through varieties of non-formal lifelong learning, but programmes allowing such transfer or offering solid opportunities for renewed instruction are still relatively few and far between. Employment in the formal labour market is not likely to offer much of an avenue for application of skills by the poor majority targeted by African literacy programmes, but phenomena like decentralization, democratization and local capitalization – even in the attenuated forms most often encountered – can create a whole palette of opportunities to involve local citizens in new learning and multiplied usage of literate skills, even while increasing the impact of the activities in question. And, provided credit and seed capital are available, self-employment in the informal market – and gradual ‘formalization’ and upgrading of these enterprises – continues to offer the prime arena for creating applications of literacy where there were few or none before. However, the ‘seed capital’ condition is often a determining one; and making such credit arrangements themselves sustainable means expanding beyond the exemplary work that a limited number of NGOs can promote. It means rebuilding banking and credit structures in deprived areas. As a Moré proverb pertinently recalls, *Sên gâe-a a to pîrê gâee tênga* – in essence, ‘The one who sleeps on a borrowed mat should remember that he is sleeping on the cold hard ground!’

## **Confluence of supply and demand**

Our review of the efforts to couple supply and demand in the post-literacy arena reveals excellent instances of this intersection, some quasi-spontaneous, but scant diffusion of best methods and little evidence that related skills have entered into the repertory of those working in the concerned sectors. That conclusion must of course be tempered by an awareness of how much is deeply embedded in local context and ‘flies beneath the radar’ in a domain like this – in other words, how much escapes all but a very attentive research effort. In any case, efforts to better dovetail the provision of new literates with such opportunities in other sectors of development, and to programmatically adjust those initiatives to their services, remain hampered by continued manifestation of what I have called ‘The Great Divorce’ between principal

actors in the education system and those responsible for management in the realms of socio-economic development. In addition, insofar as dovetailing leads to greater local empowerment and so increased contestation of the factors impeding it, another source of entrenched resistance enters into play, making more evident the importance of political support in any such undertaking.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in literacy programming increasingly integrate it with other development enterprises – a favourable sign – but their impact is limited by dependence on special outside funding, and in most cases an inability to intervene at the national or regional policy level where impeding conditions must be addressed. The lack of greater dissemination of their models speaks to the density of scarcely visible structural impediments in the environment.

### **Resituating these factors in their human and social nexus**

It was emphasized in Chapter 4 that the environment, including its literacy dimensions, belongs to those who inhabit and work with it, to the people at its centre and to those responsible for its stewardship. It is not some independent reality that we can simply debate about in a vacuum or work on in a laboratory. For supply and demand to be effective, they must be apprehended and coupled together by local actors themselves. The issue of their intersection, which – it was claimed above – is the principal force generating literate environments, can best be resolved when those who are most concerned are given opportunities to ‘call the shots’.

But broadening the perspective of adult educators and literacy workers to take fuller account of demand for literate skills (and the reasons for its absence), as well as the supply of learning materials and opportunities, cannot stop there. This impulse to better acknowledge the environment means at the same time being attentive and dry-eyed about still broader realities, like the major political constraints that weigh on development in many of the regions where the literate environment remains largely unbuilt, and the economic crisis recently unleashed in the West that threatens to afflict Africa with

collective infections magnitudes worse than those suffered by the markets of industrialized nations.

## **Recommendations: enhancing literate environments in Africa**

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These, then, are some of the synoptic conclusions that might be drawn from our earlier analysis of the history, status and potentials of literate environments in Africa. What recommendations do they suggest?

Before attempting to move, though, from description and analysis to prescription and hope, one matter merits consideration: *to whom* are recommendations being made? The most evident response is UNESCO, the organization that commissioned this task. At the same time, as just pointed out, there are multiple stakeholders involved in EFA and potentially concerned with the status of literate environments in Africa. They range from international agencies and national governments through local communities to a wide variety of other interest groups. In making recommendations to UNESCO, the respective roles of these other actors must be kept in mind, since the existing division of labour may in fact be part of what needs closer examination and judicious modification. Such issues have not been much broached in this study and we say only enough at this point to register their importance.

### **Assigning responsibilities and roles**

How are stakeholder roles optimally apportioned? Although the analysis of literate environments and of the factors that contribute to enhancing them suggests the increasing importance of cross-sectoral approaches, the international and national institutions officially concerned with the literacy area tend either, like the United Nations agencies, to be unisectoral – each dealing with its own fields of specialization – or, like multilateral and bilateral donors, to embrace a full range of development domains, while reproducing

to a large extent within their structure a similar unisectoralism for lack of practical cross-disciplinary bridging patterns and procedures. This suggests a general need to do two things:

1. rethink the roles and operational procedures of the international and national institutions in question; and – realizing that this first endeavour is at best a very long-term proposition –
2. simultaneously find ways of giving the multisectoral actors who operate closer to the field, and especially those validly representing the interested population groups, greater voice in the determination of related strategy and policy

In fact, as experience with successful administrative decentralization indicates, delegation or devolution of functions generally does not mean superannuation of the role of the central institution, but simply a more effective division of labour among levels of operation, each specializing in realms where it has a distinct 'comparative advantage'. This also can produce greater synergy between them. The comparative advantage of central institutions (or those that operate in a largely unisectoral manner) tends to lie in developing technical resources, diagnosing structural (and often macro-level) impediments to field initiatives, and helping to address these or advocate for their removal. The comparative advantage of more local and multisectoral institutions and those more representative of the target population lies to a greater extent in effecting the cross-sectoral linkages required, coordinating the activity on the ground, and prompting policy reform.

The conclusions of this study are principally addressed to central and international actors. As a consequence, the recommendations focus on changes in large-scale policy and institutional orientations that may be required to create space for fuller development of literate environments in the field. As another Hausa proverb reminds us in quite lapidary fashion, *Uwa na kiwon danta, can ya sha nono*: 'The mother is taking care of her child and he will drink his milk in due time.' In short, do what you can to place her in favourable conditions, for she is likely better placed than you are to tend to her own baby's needs.

## **Paying increased attention to demand factors and post-literacy linkages**

A first important recommendation is simply to pay greater attention to demand-side factors and post-literacy linkages, both in literacy programming and in efforts to enhance literate environments. If the central contention of this study rings true – namely, that what most reliably creates and reinforces such environments is the regular intersection of supply and demand – then the biggest deficit to be addressed in current strategies is not either improved provision of literacy materials, nor better training of instructional personnel, as important as these two factors are. Rather it is *working out better linkages with viable post-literacy usages of new skills*. Or, better yet, establishing genuine alternating pedagogies of learning and application in the neighbouring sectors where the majority of such applications lie, and attending to policy blockages that impede such intersections. As pointed out above, this means building enhanced literacy training into a variety of other development activities, while recasting them in forms that create new responsibilities and investment at the local level, rather than trying to attach income-generating components to existing literacy or adult education programmes.

More of course needs to be said here. There are doubtless a series of implications with respect to reward structures and training requirements *within* the national and international institutions involved and with respect to their internal division of labour. But these must be left to a different kind of assessment to be carried out by or for those institutions themselves, excepting the recommendations about staff recruitment, training and development registered in the last point below.

## **Fuller field experimentation of methodologies for cross-sectoral work**

There are some historical precedents for this sort of cross-sectoral linkage in functional literacy programmes, although not particularly successful. More recent empowerment and local development strategies of NGOs, in

particular, offer valuable new experience (e.g. Longwe, 2000; Natarajan, 2005). Nonetheless, much remains to be done in pioneering local approaches to integration or coordination with other realms of development of the sort likely to lay a better 'demand foundation' for literate environments. Three axes of experimentation are of particular significance:

- *Development in a series of fields of joint curricula that alternate between learning and application*, while conferring on a range of stakeholders the competence – and entitlements – they need to occupy positions of increasing responsibility. The tables presented earlier only hint at some of the technical and political complexity involved, but existing experience in vocational-technical education, and in workforce training and development offers a number of templates and lessons learned.
- *Discovery and testing of forms of administrative collaboration* at different levels to facilitate the joint effort required.
- *Progressive elaboration of a new division of labour* between central, regional and local actors in the execution and evaluation of such strategies.

Moreover, as a number of other commentators have noted (e.g. Mueller, 2006; Zoomers, 2005), it is important to respect in this regard the lessons learned from the relative failure of large-scale 'integrated development' or *action intégrée* projects over the last four decades. Cross-sectoral collaboration does not necessarily mean a tightly coordinated and centrally directed campaign to dovetail, in some seamless manner, the interventions of a series of development agencies, whether national, international or both. It may mean something more like increased communication, nascent partnership and shared brainstorming and assessment, by representatives of a number of different stakeholder groups from various levels in configurations where the local actors play managerial roles and the central ones perform facilitative and support functions.

## Careful identification of existing institutional and environmental impediments

As pointed out above, it is no accident that literacy programming and decentralization, democratization and empowerment strategies, in other sectors of development, have not often been better dovetailed with capacity-building strategies that incorporate literacy (or that those strategies themselves have not been better elaborated). The success of such tandem efforts might well affect existing patterns of decision-making, power and privilege. There is also a good deal of simple institutional inertia involved in the situation.

In both cases, one frequent consequence is that policies and practices at a variety of levels have been built up that consolidate and perpetuate the disconnect. 'Smoking out' these sticking points and campaigning in an appropriate manner for their reform or elimination is an activity with as much potential impact on increased learning and fuller constitution of literate environments as actual teaching or field administration of programmes. It is at the same time an activity for which staff of regional, national and international offices should have a unique talent at their respective levels. But the talent requires careful nurturing.

In short, building literate environments that sustainably connect supply and demand is an arduous and long-winded task. 'Sustainable' necessarily means 'institutionalized', for in human affairs it is our institutions that perpetuate patterns of behaviour. Developing local institutions and anchoring literacy in them is a lifetime vocation. A Bambara proverb says it well: *N'ba wolola, àni n'ba tilara, u tè kelen ye.* "Saying my mother has given birth and saying she has finished her work are *not* the same thing."

## Accompanying staff recruitment, training and development

The new procedures, policies and habits involved in better coupling the supply and demand sides of literate environments require of staff, in all responsible organizations, a new set of skills and knowledge, and a new sense of their own professional roles and identities. These have to be developed through

appropriate personnel training and experience and will, in some cases, require the recruitment of new generations of facilitators with a different and broader skill set.

Most actors will have modified roles and skills to learn in this regard. In particular, central stakeholders (e.g. national and international agencies) will need to become increasingly attentive to the viability of cross-sectoral connections – and increasingly adept at helping to design them. They will also need to be more and more competent at assessing the sustainability of local interventions, and better and better at discerning the particular, and sometimes low-profile, roles that they can play in creating ‘upstream and downstream’ conditions that give local capacity building better chances of success.

In sectoral terms, literacy personnel will have to learn new roles as well. As Rogers (2000) has perceptively pointed out, in workable ‘livelihood’ strategies, local people acquire the sometimes incremental levels of competence needed to assume new functions in a variety of ways, and not necessarily through identifiable literacy classes or programmes. Some – like primary school dropouts, former Koranic students or young people returning from out-migration – manage to adapt or activate latent knowledge that they already had. Others may find ways to learn on the job; and still others may get coached (or even ‘represented’) by family and friends. As a consequence, there may be distinctly less demand for traditional literacy programmes, even though there is distinctly greater demand for literacy and numeracy. This is scarcely a tragedy, however; in fact, it is an opportunity for literacy personnel to learn new roles as more rounded facilitators of the ‘ecology’ of literacy in given locales and as useful partners in a variety of other domains. It is work, as we said in Chapter 5, that requires combined technical, social and political artistry to perform well.

## Research: a few priority themes

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At numerous places in the preceding sections, mention has been made of our relative ignorance of several dimensions of the literate environment issue in Africa that merit closer study:

- the basic givens of these phenomena in Africa and their evolution
- the usage to which newly literate young people and adults put these skills and how that changes over time or by sector of employment and residential location, as well as by key stratifying factors like gender and location
- the types of literate needs that development strategies and realities in different fields are bringing to birth, and
- the political and technical factors that impede better coupling of literacy training with beneficial applications.

These are certainly fields ripe for investigation where participatory action research by and for the affected groups can and should play a prominent role – in tandem with inquiries that may be carried out both by African universities and their allies, and by the government or private organizations most interested in the role of literacy in decentralization and empowerment strategies. Three research foci are particularly worth mentioning:

- **Census and tracking of publications and written media available to new literates** in different areas of Africa: this topic merits an observation station established at several African universities to keep tabs on the supply side of the literate environment in a good sample of locations.
- **Extending the 'New Literacy Studies'**. A page could profitably be taken from the line of New Literacy Studies (NLS), which have typically concentrated on discovering, in much greater local detail, just how literacy functions within particular social and cultural contexts, how individuals acquire and interact with it, and the meaning they give to it. Extending that lens more explicitly to the variability of literacy practices *across* settings and

situations, the influence of policy-malleable factors and environmental characteristics on literacy's uses, and the circumstances under which these abilities get deployed to local development ends might greatly enrich our understanding of this 'dark side' of the moon. Chapter 3 remarked that new varieties of NLS research that include this broadened ecology of practice, and consider the 'macro' as well as the micro variables that determine it, are beginning to appear (e.g. Karlsson, 2009; Kell, 2008; Paciotto, 2010). They could be further developed by ensuring multi-disciplinary participation on related research teams – political scientists and economists as well as educators and anthropologists, for example, or the reverse – and by launching a new generation of tracer studies.

- **Policy research.** The impediments to better articulation between literacy acquisition and use of these skills in other sectors of development, as well as for equivalence in formal schooling, merit close investigation. Policy research could be undertaken dedicated to elucidating where the problems lie and what measures and alliances might resolve them, as well as documenting and assessing any innovative policy initiatives in this vein. As Richmond et al point out in conclusion to their review of the literate environment topic in the mid-term review of UNLD (2008: 62), 'Up to the present, literacy policies generally have not focused on the literate environments, and there is more work to do to understand how policies might take the broader view that would address [it] in an integrated way.'

Finally, research on these topics should be of the sort that marries means and ends, contributing to the development of literate environments at the same time that it investigates them. In short, it should be conducted insofar as possible on a participatory or action research model with direct involvement of stakeholder groups, discussion of results with literacy teachers and students in the field, and restitution to them of principal results in appropriate languages. 'There is no way to peace', A.J. Muste once famously remarked, 'Peace is the way'.<sup>63</sup> As much could be said for the attainment of Education For All, arguably only possible to the extent that it also becomes Education By All – and the creation of truly literate environments on the African continent.

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63 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.\\_J.\\_Muste](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A._J._Muste)

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Literacy has never been more necessary for development. It is key to communication and learning, and fundamental for active participation in today's knowledge-based societies.

This publication entitled *Sustaining Literacy in Africa: Developing a Literate Environment* contributes, in the critical context of Africa, to the conceptual development of the notion of the literate environment – an essential element for the promotion of literacy. It brings knowledge and insights about literate environments, highlighting inter-related issues such as its definitions, previous undertakings, methods of assessment as well as interactions between the supply and demand sides of environments.



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