

# Living Literacy



# Introduction

**T**en years after the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand, nations are just coming to terms with the need to create a literate society. Too much is at stake for them not to. At the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, countries finally realized that, at the heart of Education for All, inevitably lies Literacy for All. Creating a literate and learning society must be seen as an inevitable prerequisite to Education for All. The United Nations General Assembly will consider later this year a proposal to proclaim a United Nations literacy decade.

Yet, illiteracy is hardly felt outside the illiterate population. How many of us know what it is like to be an adult and illiterate in one's own language? How many of us know an adult illiterate, for that matter? It is hard for most of us to imagine the humiliation, the frustration and the rage that illiterate people have to live with day after day.

To rally public support for literacy is to make the plight of the illiterate and their children known – to unveil the mystery surrounding it, to share the experience, raise the issues, discuss the trends and face the challenges.

In this document, we learn how UNESCO's latest efforts at promoting post-literacy help alert the most vulnerable group – women and girls – to the danger of HIV/AIDS in the southern African region where the infection rate is the highest in the world. We will also catch a glimpse of how the small kingdom of Bhutan struggles to educate its people between the thin line of national integrity and modernity. The story from Brazil tells of a young father who took it upon himself to start teaching his children to read and write in their own language, Terena, and how that has enhanced their schooling in the second language. The experience of a Salvadorean non-governmental organization worker shows how vision and commitment to literacy could make a world of improvement in people's self-reliance and self-respect. Modern

*information technology in promoting awareness of literacy in Germany is demonstrated. The Haitian programme shows how a literacy programme which combines civics, health, environment and livelihood could benefit learners on the margin of society. From Tamil Nadu in India, innovative use of bicycles in literacy programmes triggered a whole gamut of positive changes empowering women and their communities. The Israeli example shows how a specially designed literacy programme integrates Ethiopian immigrants into the mainstream society. By catering to the unique needs of the Maori people by involving them at all levels, New Zealand has boosted the number of learners. We will also read about how the sleepy island of Rodrigues (Mauritius) mobilized young people to teach others who could not attend school.*

*Pertinent issues in literacy emerge: mother tongue and second language literacy and its intertwining with people's cultural identity, literacy as a guiding ideology for people's empowerment, reaching well beyond the 3R's , volunteerism and professionalism in literacy. These are only some of the facets of literacy work. They are living proof that literacy today is as complex and complicated as the world it must serve. Creating a literate and learning world is an ambitious but necessary task if Education for All is to become a reality.*

*The world needs, more than ever before, to understand literacy and its implications, to take action and to help people face the various new challenges – their own and their nations'.*



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# Literacy and Tackling the

**T**hese days, Saturdays are devoted to funerals, says Dorothy Littler of the Swaziland National Commission for UNESCO. The HIV infection rate in southern Africa is the highest in the world. And despite the increasing availability of information on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, there is little sign that people are changing their behaviour.

February 2001, and UNESCO organized a workshop on HIV/AIDS in Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland. The workshop was attended by around 30 education, health care and communication professionals from Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Each participant chose a topic based on research conducted with target groups in their home country and prepared educational materials for direct distribution to that group.

The subjects of HIV/AIDS and sex are still taboo in many parts of Africa. In Mbabane, the approach was informal and open, and challenged participants to overcome their own misgivings and misconceptions, and to learn from the experiences of their neighbours.

Two of the booklets produced during the workshop deal with the issue of 'wife inheritance' – a custom which exacerbates the spread of HIV/AIDS. In several African countries, including Kenya, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, when a man dies his wife automatically becomes the property of his brothers, along with his cattle, house and land. Perhaps the woman's husband died of AIDS and she is HIV positive, or perhaps her brother-in-law is already infected. Her husband's brother may already have a wife or wives. Each time a wife inheritance occurs, the number of people at risk of infection multiplies.

Two other booklets discuss so-called "sugar daddies", a term used to describe those men who buy sexual favours from young girls with tempting material goods such as make-up, mobile phones and clothes. This predatory behaviour, while not unique to Africa, means naïve and neglected teenagers are even more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

The workshop also discussed the impact of the 'Hyena' practice, a custom which symbolizes society's view of women as nothing more than sex objects. According to this tradition, a family pays a man to have sex with the virgin daughter. She is given a piece of white cloth to be shown to the women of the family as 'proof' that sexual intercourse took place. In a story related by Grace Kulupando-Seka from Malawi, the mothers of girls who contracted sexually transmitted diseases after this 'initiation' were forced to re-examine their age-old beliefs.

# HI V/AI DS: Taboo in Africa

The most uplifting session of the workshop was testimony from a number of people with HIV. Gcebile Ndlovu, for example, who was diagnosed 14 years ago and is a picture of health today, doing all she can to “live and think positively”. Other HIV positive people interviewed at the workshop told of how they now live fuller lives, with greater appreciation and awareness than before.

Workshop organizers also devoted a session to debunking common myths surrounding HIV/AIDS. One of these is that having sex with a virgin offers a guaranteed cure. “The worst nightmare for any parent is to imagine that your daughter could be the target of an HIV positive man on the hunt for a cure,” says Matron Elizabeth Mndzebele, a UNFPA-trained health professional who has participated in numerous sessions on HIV/AIDS awareness. Another is that clean and well-dressed people do not have HIV/AIDS and cannot be infected.

Delegates also addressed the question of denial, exacerbated by euphemisms for AIDS and the reluctance of people to admit that they have been infected. In Kenya, the disease is called “slim”, to reflect the severe weight loss suffered by those who have it. If someone dies of AIDS, it is common to hear relatives blaming the death on witchcraft or poison. Even the official cause of death is recorded as “a long illness”, perhaps pneumonia or meningitis. Although a young mother may know she is HIV positive, she continues to breast feed her baby. The fear of being “found out” far outweighs the risk of exposing the infant to HIV/AIDS.

The fruits of this workshop, booklets and radio programmes, will be added to those produced at similar UNESCO workshops in other parts of the world. Some of the material is specifically aimed at those people most at risk from HIV/AIDS – the rural poor, in particular women and girls. It also addresses the problems faced by those already infected and reaches out to them with compassion and understanding. By encouraging both men and women to practice safe sex in a sensitive but direct way, the literature produced at workshops like this one will ultimately save lives. But it will take much more to wipe out AIDS; without the consolidated action of citizens, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies, the disease will continue its onslaught on countries and cultures.

*Based on Gender, Culture and Aids – A Non-formal Approach to HIV/AIDS Prevention: a paper presented by Namtip Aksornkool at the UNESCO Workshop on the Production of Radio Programmes and Post-literacy Booklets on HIV/AIDS (6-16 August 2001, Oshakati, Namibia).*







# A Deceptive Idyll Challenge

To the casual observer or tourist passing through, Bhutan is close to paradise. Set like a sparkling jewel in the Himalayan mountain chain, the isolated kingdom is deceptively dazzling. The general perception of life in Bhutan is one of harmony, relative prosperity and gender equality.

Start probing however, and the idyllic sheen is quickly scratched away. When UNESCO's literacy specialist visited the villages of Rukubji and Phubjika in the Himalayan foothills, she heard disturbing reports about how for the people of Bhutan, life is a constant struggle for survival. "It is even harder for the women," she says. "Hundreds of miles from a doctor, a large percentage of women die in childbirth." As for their working lives, she discovered that for Bhutan's rural poor, the daily physical grind takes a heavy toll on health and happiness. "We weave for the whole family," said one of the women, Amma Karma Dorji. "We don't like any job we do. It's all painful." Amma Choden joined in, saying the most hated job was refining the wool before making it into thread – an activity which resulted in lifelong shoulder pains.

The weavers work at traditional looms which require them to sit with their legs straight out for hours on end. This type of loom, also widely used in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and southern China, is blamed for increasing the risk of a difficult and perhaps fatal childbirth. The literacy specialist's young companion Tenzin was particularly interested in the loom issue, and quizzed the women at length. The results of this encounter emerged three months later in the form of a learning programme for women introducing a new type of weaving loom.

Another local practice that inspired an educational booklet is based on the belief that if men carry manure to fertilize their fields, it will bring them great misfortune. Consequently, women are required to carry all the manure, bent double under huge baskets strapped to their backs. This traditional division of labour led Suman Pradhan of the Bhutanese Women's Association to write *The Enlightened Man* – the story of a crop that failed because the women could not cope with fetching all the necessary manure. Sheer frustration forced her husband to defy tradition and carry manure to the fields. The crops flourished, and inspired many other men to help their wives with this strenuous task.

Many people have now read the booklet, which is available in literacy centres in Phubjika and Rukubji. Men and women have been inspired to discuss the issue for the first time. "The burden is not too much on me," says Rinzin, a young teacher and farmer who now helps his wife to carry manure, "and the work's easier for my wife."



# Preserving Tradition in Bhutan

In Bhutan, twice as many boys as girls attend school. The official enrolment rate is just 20 per cent of boys of primary school age, meaning that just 10 per cent of girls receive an education. The situation has come to the attention of the country's royal family. While King Jigme Wangchuk has laid down a policy to promote Education for All, Princess Ashi Sonam has called for programmes for women aimed at increasing their self-reliance, self-respect and ultimately, their status in society.

Bhutan is wary of indiscriminate modernization, which might pose a threat to national integrity. Its development policy is cautious. The question is whether it can be progressive enough to improve its people's lives and to achieve equality between the sexes, yet cautious enough to preserve their paradise.

Based on *Preserving Paradise*, an article prepared by Namtip Aksornkool, UNESCO, for UNESCO's Website.





# Schooling in the Mo

**T**he seeds for this story were planted in the mid 1970s, when two linguists working for the Sociedade Internacional de Linguística (SIL) initiated a pilot project in the Brazilian village of Cachoeirinha. There are 195 living languages listed for Brazil – 155,000 people speak an American Indian language. One of those is Terena. Nancy Butler and Muriel Ekdahl began to train a group of Terena adults who were willing to work as part-time teachers in the community. For one year, the volunteer teachers spent two hours a day with both adult and children learners. Lessons focused on reading and writing in Terena, mathematics and oral Portuguese. Despite the obvious success of the programme and the significant progress made by all those involved, the government opted not to renew SIL's contract, thereby bringing the project to an end.

In the years that followed, there was no change in an education system in favour of Brazil's 15,000-strong Terena community of Mato Grosso do Sul. Tuition in state schools was exclusively in the dominant national language, Portuguese, meaning that children from homes where only Terena is spoken were at a disadvantage from the outset. Many were never able to achieve a complete command of Portuguese, and consequently spent many years languishing in first grade. In November 1998, a senior education official visited local schools in the area. He was shocked to discover that of the Terena children in first grade, 74 per cent could not read or write in Portuguese. Over the past six years, some 55 per cent of Terena students in eight Terena village schools were unable to reach the linguistic level necessary for them to pass from first to second grade. Many Terena students have overwhelmingly negative recollections of their school years – a time marked by struggle, frustration and feelings of failure. Drop-out rates were also startlingly high in Terena areas.

The situation was of great concern to many local people, especially those with children about to embark on their school career or already in the system. A young Terena couple, Laucidio Sebastiao and his wife Lindomar, decided to take matters into their own hands. Their own son was nearly 5 years old – the boy had just started at the local primary school and was attending classes solely in Portuguese. Laucidio was determined that his education should not suffer, and began to teach a small group of Terena children – among them his son – from his own village, Igua Branca. The children would learn to read and write in Terena, and classes would be held in parallel to normal schooling. Initial response to his project was sceptical and dismissive, and the young father received little encouragement from his community.

Nancy Butler was living in the area at the time, and Laucidio approached her for help and advice. Together, they developed ideas, materials and games to suit the ability, age and interests of this small group of children.



# ther Tongue, Brazil

The community reacted with astonishment to the results of this experience – the bilingual system was working wonders, with children quickly learning to read and write in Terena. Far from hampering their progress in Portuguese, the confidence gained from tuition in the mother tongue facilitated learning a second language. Suddenly, parents began to sit up and take notice of Laudicio's success. Naturally, they were keen that their own offspring should benefit from the "experiment".

February 1999, and news of the venture reached the Education Secretary responsible for schools in the Terena area of Taunay. He approached Nancy Butler and asked her if she would head up a bilingual education project there. Would she be willing to give a four-day intensive course to a group of Terena teachers on contract with the local government? There was little time to spare. Once Nancy had put the teachers through their paces, there were just two days to cram some didactic material specifically geared towards teaching in Terena. Classes began on 22 February 1999, in schools in three village locations in Mato Grosso do Sul.

When the Education Secretary for Taunay revisited the schools in June 1999, his evaluation showed that 71 per cent of those children with previous learning difficulties were reading with ease and starting to write in Terena. The project has already yielded some fruit, but the way ahead is still dotted with obstacles. Its long-term aim is to equip Terena teachers with the necessary tools for eventual self-sufficiency, by giving them eight extra hours per week for planning and inter-group discussion, and enabling pairs of tutors to gradually take over the training of new recruits.

Two years on, and the Terena community of Brazil has grown in confidence and stature, as its members see others devoting time and effort to preservation and sustenance of the Terena language and culture. This is arguably the greatest achievement of the project – quite apart from the benefits gleaned on a personal level by all those involved. Teachers report that children are often arriving one and half hours early for class, and even skipping their lunch breaks in their eagerness to learn in their mother tongue. This unbridled enthusiasm has rubbed off on the older members of the community – a group of young Terena men in Igua Branca asked Laudicio if he would run a night school especially for them.

On 19 April 1999, the local government passed a law stipulating that bilingual intercultural education is now obligatory in all municipal schools in the Terena region. With their work, Laudicio, Lindomar and Nancy have succeeded in convincing the authorities that learning in the mother tongue is essential for the indigenous Terena community. In opening the minds of the doubters on all sides, they have improved the prospects for Terena youth in Brazil, and equipped them for a better future.

Based on a contribution by Laudicio Sebastiao for *Unsung Heroes – Tales of Literacy Workers* (UNESCO, forthcoming).





# The Meaning of Lite

**E**rik –most people knew him by that name– died in a car crash in October 1999. News of his death sent ripples across the Usulután region of El Salvador, where Erik had been working as director of COMUS, or the United Communities of Usulután.

For David Archer, in the region as Action Aid's head of international education, Erik was the personification of Central America. A guerrilla commander with the FMLN during the civil war in El Salvador, he took up non-violent combat following the peace accords as director of the grassroots organization COMUS. Turning military hierarchical structures on their head, Erik worked to build the organization from the base upwards. Driven by his vision of justice and equality, the process Erik initiated was, in the most fundamental sense, a literacy process.

When Erik and David met, both men were disillusioned by their past experience of adult literacy work. Archer had developed an idea for a new approach to adult literacy. "Within a few minutes," says Archer, "Erik understood my proposal better than I did myself."

In Archer's view, although traditional literacy programmes usually espoused radical ideas, they mostly failed in practice. For the past 30 years, most such programmes have been based on textbooks or "primers", devised by experts in the capital city and sent out to rural areas. He proposed an alternative approach, which was at the time being piloted in Uganda and Bangladesh. Erik agreed to set up a third pilot project of Archer's scheme in El Salvador. Now known as REFLECT, the approach is used in various forms by over 250 organizations in 40 countries.

The first step involved tearing up the old primers, not just in Usulután but across the country. The aim was to move the power base for literacy programmes from the "experts" in the capital to the real "experts" in the communities where the projects would take place. Instead of treating the *campesinos* as passive beneficiaries, they were to be active protagonists. Rather than begin from the patronizing standpoint of teaching people what they do not know, the project aimed to cultivate the complex knowledge base of the poor.

The seeds of the idea took root. Erik mobilized COMUS education promoters in Usulután, and secured support from another national non-governmental organizations (NGOs). He appointed Abdon as one of the project's key coordinators, a local *campesino* who had never been to school himself and only learned to read at the age of 23.



# Literacy in El Salvador

In accordance with a programme developed between 1993 and 1995, each community developed its own learning materials. Known as literacy “circles”, a group served as a democratic forum where people could join forces to compile a detailed survey of their local environment. For example, participants created a map of their village using sticks, stones, seeds and beans to illustrate different features –this idea was then expanded to produce maps detailing local history, the changing natural environment, land use and land tenancy. People were encouraged to draw up calendars recording seasonal workloads, income and expenditure, and the occurrence of various illnesses; diagrams explored power relationships locally and nationally. Having begun life as three dimensional models on the ground, these images were eventually transferred to paper for permanent, official records. In the end, each community had produced a comprehensive archive of the locality – in many cases the first of its kind.

The last time David visited Erik at COMUS in July 1999, he had developed an even deeper sense of the relationship between literacy, power and organization.

Recent years have seen a proliferation of NGOs in El Salvador, just as in many other parts of the world. Erik saw this as the effective privatization of poverty. While it is relatively easy to set up an NGO, often there is no direct accountability to the communities it aims to serve. Potentially, these organizations can raise substantial funds, but more often than not, the poor are excluded from the decision-making process which eventually allocates those funds.

He wanted to give people the means to seize the power of literacy, so that they can critically review all the plans and budgets that are drafted in their name by external NGOs and government agencies. So that they can write their own plans and budgets, and put forward their own studies and proposals. This is what Erik envisaged as the next step for REFLECT in Usulután. For him, literacy was about placing people firmly in the centre rather than on the margins of society.

Based on a contribution by David Archer for *Unsung Heroes – Tales of Literacy Workers* (UNESCO, forthcoming).



# Preventing Illiteracy and Pro

**S**tamping out illiteracy is not a challenge faced by developing countries only. In Germany, the social problem of functional illiteracy has been acknowledged since the end of the 1970s, when the country's first literacy courses were set up. The movement has been through lean times: resources for the promotion of literacy and basic skills education were cut in the 1990s due to an economic downturn. After a period of evolution and development, the Bundesverband Alphabetisierung (Federal Literacy Association) finally came into being in 1997.

The Association is a nationwide, non-governmental and non-profit organization bringing together adult literacy teachers, literacy institutions and other interested parties. In March 2001, the Association had 211 individual members and 54 institutional members.

The main aims of the organization are to promote reading and writing in adult education programmes; to offer support to the people and institutions involved in or interested in getting involved in this work; to lobby on behalf of Germany's illiterate minority; to conduct a public awareness campaign; and to develop new teaching materials and publish specialist literature on the subject of literacy.

The Association has its own advice centre and hotline, known as the ALFA-TELEFON (or ALPHA-Hotline). This service offers free, nationwide help to people with literacy problems. The advice is given anonymously and provides callers with information on learning opportunities in their area. More than 1,000 people dialled the ALPHA-Hotline number in the first three months of 2001.

As well as running training courses for literacy teachers, the Association also publishes reading and writing materials for young people and adult beginners. Much of the literature is written and created by people who are themselves overcoming learning difficulties. The organization also publishes Germany's only specialist magazine on the subject of literacy and basic skills education. The ALFA-FORUM magazine is published three times annually – each copy had a print run of 750 in the year 2000.

Many people find their way to the Association via the Internet. The Bundesverband has had its own homepage since 1999, and the platform provides an easy way to communicate developments and information to all interested parties.

# Promoting Literacy in Germany

Lobbying for public recognition of the plight of Germany's illiterate minority and for funds to finance the necessary projects is a full-time concern of the Association. In March 2001, the Association received confirmation of conditional financial support from the Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research. The project is scheduled to begin this year, and is expected to run for between two and three years.

The Association has been working hard to enhance its public profile and few people in Germany can have failed to notice its latest awareness campaign, headed up with the slogan: "*Schreib dich nicht ab. Lern Lesen und Schreiben.*" (Don't write yourself off. Learn to read and write). The message has been spread by way of postcards, billboards, newspaper advertisements and commercials aimed at television and cinema audiences. Designed to encourage participation in a literacy course, the commercials also aim to challenge the prejudices affecting those with learning difficulties. The billboard posters, which also flag up the hotline number, are now visible in employment offices across the country.

To mark International Literacy Day 2000, the Association published a book titled *The Cross They Sign is the Cross They Bear. Illiteracy and Promotion of Literacy in Germany*. The book made its debut at the First International Learning Fair and Global Dialogue at the EXPO in Hanover, and demand has been growing ever since. Some 5,000 copies have been distributed so far, and target promotions will see the book going to schools and universities, libraries, job centres and other public authorities. The book can be downloaded from the Internet, along with a catalogue of teaching materials and specialist literature currently available on the market, compiled by the Association with the support of the Ministry for Education, Science and Research.

The work of the Association may go unnoticed by many people in Germany, but it is the driving force behind a movement to reach out to social minorities and encourage their full and active participation in everyday life. As a result, its endeavours are a key factor in the realization of national educational goals.

ALFA-TELEFON +49 251 53 33 34

Based on the submission of the Federal Republic of Germany for the International Literacy Prizes 2001.





“If I’m capable at the end of the project of signing my name or understanding what’s happening when they fetch me for the elections, I know I’ll have lived for something,” says an 86-year-old learner in the Alfabonit project. The literacy learners in Haiti’s rural, disadvantaged area of Saint Marc are adults of all ages, mostly women.

The project’s aim is to improve the living conditions of the population through literacy. The task ahead is tremendous. Haiti is one of the world’s poorest countries, roughly half the adult population is illiterate. Two-thirds of the children who start primary school never finish and end up swelling the ranks of the illiterate.

To ensure learners’ full involvement, the Canada-based Paul Gerin-Lajoie Foundation that launched the project with the Haitian government in 1998 has a unique partnership with the communities. The foundation supplies the learning materials and manages the project; the communities provide the buildings and furniture.

Another unique feature is that the learners can chose their educator – a local person who is specially trained to teach them. This ensures the full commitment of both teachers and learners. The literacy centres provide no comfort. Learners sit on benches they make themselves or on a pile of straw on the ground.

This Haitian initiative has just been awarded one of UNESCO’s two annual King Sejong Literacy Prizes. The project combines reading, writing and arithmetic with micro-projects and awareness-raising in environmental issues, civil rights and health.

Environmental degradation has reached a disastrous pace. According to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), more than 98 per cent of Haiti is deforested and each year 15,000 acres of fertile top soil is washed away. The project discourages people from cutting down the remaining trees and participants learn to make what they call “miracle charcoal” – a briquette of sawdust and paper recuperated from banks or other companies and mixed with water. A small-scale tree-planting scheme has also been carried out.

“Awareness of one’s rights and duties as citizens is fundamental,” says Marie-Michelle Fournier of the Paul Gerin-Lajoie Foundation. She explains that, as 85 per cent of Haitians have neither an identity card nor a birth certificate, they cannot participate in democratic life. Thanks to the project, 1,500 have now obtained these documents. In fact, some of them lost no time in exercising their democratic rights: six were elected at the last local elections.



# Commitment in Haiti

Learners are encouraged to set up small shops to sell articles of use to the community such as locally produced oil, rice or briquettes. Each one contributes a small sum (less than a dollar) and the Foundation adds to it to get the concern up and running. Some forty micro projects have received financial assistance in this way. Health is especially oriented around themes such as first-aid, breast-feeding, family planning and sexually transmissible diseases, principally AIDS.

"We must constantly motivate the learners to attend the classes," says Fournier, who sees Women's Day was an opportunity to raise awareness of the importance of educating girls. Under the slogan: "Today's Girls, Tomorrow's Women" 2,000 people participated in the first march organized on Women's Day. The second march drew 15,000 people.

Lack of reading materials for new literates is a problem. "We can't even find a newspaper here in French or Creole", says Fournier. "To keep their new-found skills alive we invite the learners to write about local events. These texts are then distributed in all literacy centres."

Since the project was launched, some 5,000 people have become literate and around 6,000 are currently following classes; 800 educators have been trained and 120 literacy centres and 10 community dispensaries have been opened.

The Paul Gerin-Lajoie Foundation and the Quebec Ministry for International Relations provide Can\$630,000 to finance the project.



Based on the submission of the Government of Haiti for the International Literacy Prizes 2001. From *Countdown*, September-November 2001 issue.

# Illiteracy in India – Target

**P**udukkottai district, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Population 1.32 million, the majority of them women. Most people here rely on the sun-parched land for sustenance – but barren soil and poor irrigation systems means crops are lean, locking families into an interminable cycle of poverty. Back in 1991, the literacy rate for Pudukkottai lay well below the national average, and women lagged far behind their men folk. A door-to-door survey conducted then revealed that of the 290,000 illiterate people aged between 9 and 45 years, more than 75 per cent were women.

It was 1986, and 24-year-old Kannammal was working as an assistant at the Life Insurance Corporation. Through her membership of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum, she became involved in a scheme bringing street theatre, or *kalajathas*, to illiterate communities. Although the cultural programmes were a great success and inspiration to many, Kannammal felt they did not go far enough to address the problem of illiteracy.

By 1989, campaigns to eradicate adult illiteracy and promote basic education were already underway in the Ernakulam district of Kerala and the Union Territory of Pondicherry. Kannammal and her colleagues mobilized public support for a similar project in Pudukkottai, and eventually secured government backing.

The proposal was accepted by the National Literacy Mission later that year, meaning work could begin in earnest. One of the first priorities was to recruit full-time volunteers for outreach work and devise ways to ensure maximum efficiency. It was proposed that in view of the priority target group – the women of Pudukkottai – it would be preferable to have female volunteers. The idea was met with derision by male officials, who scoffed that “if women are appointed they will only visit one village a day, so things won’t move fast enough.” Kannammal and her colleagues suggested that the women could perhaps be taught to ride bicycles. As well as learning to read and write, both the volunteers and their pupils would master the art of two-wheel travel.

As a gentle introduction to the idea and to help women overcome their apprehension, a number of motivating cycle songs were sung in the rural communities. One of them went like this: “Learn to ride the cycle sister, set in motion the wheel of life, sister. Earlier the husband would ride with the wife sitting behind.

This is now an old story, now you ride and let the husband sit behind. Start a new story.” Within one year, 6,000 women had learned to ride a bike.



# ting Women in Tamil Nadu

Today, this healthy, environmentally-friendly mode of transport is a common sight in rural Pudukkottai. Women use their bikes to fetch water, go to work in the fields and to help others in emergency situations.

Although Kannammal was busy with her own four-year-old son, she had no doubts about committing to the project and took a period of leave from her office job. The literacy campaign in Pudukkottai was officially launched in October 1991, and continued until June 1992. Drawing on past experiences, the organizers knew that success would depend on local community involvement on a grand scale. The driving force behind the initiative was the Pudukkottai District Literacy Society, an organization bringing together government officials, non-governmental organizations and members of the public. A total of 30,000 volunteers were trained as tutors. Their brief was to consciously broaden the scope of tuition, to look beyond basic literacy skills and include training in a range of empowering, confidence-building skills. The classes, held out in the open on village streets until 11 p.m. in some cases, were attended by some 240,000 people. By August 1992, the state governor of Tamil Nadu declared Pudukkottai district totally literate.

But it wasn't all plain sailing. The village of Mukanampatti posed volunteers with a particularly sensitive problem. The area has a majority Muslim population, and women were refusing to come out of their houses in the evenings to attend literacy classes. Many husbands were working away from home in the Gulf, but the women were not able to read their letters. Kannammal accompanied the local co-ordinator to a meeting with Muslim leaders, an encounter that called on all their powers of tact and diplomacy. Surely it would be beneficial for Muslim women to be able to read the Koran? Their efforts paid off, and soon all the women were coming to the classes, and bringing their children.

As for Kannammal, she suffered her own highs and lows. It was hard for her being without her son. Whenever she felt demotivated, she looked to fellow volunteers for inspiration. "Shashi Kumar lives in the village of Vavaneri," she says. "He came from a very poor family, but he was a dedicated worker. He ran a class for 10 women in the evenings, and taught them cycling at weekends. He was a real tonic for me."

As well as the literacy campaign, Kannammal was also involved in a parallel workers' movement, known as the Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA). The scheme aimed to free women from the shackles of hard labour by awarding a contract directly to a group of 20 quarry workers.





By cutting out the middle man, in this case the contractor, the project gave women greater influence over their pay and conditions. After a series of protest rallies and appeals, the Government was persuaded to give long-term backing to the scheme.

It was 8 September 1996, and Kannammal attended a book launch to mark International Literacy Day. Titled *Literacy and Empowerment*, the book related the story of the Pudukkottai campaign. Up to this point, Kannammal had been silently working behind the scenes, perhaps not fully aware of the difference she and her colleagues had been making. In the presence of government ministers, television crews and other VIPs, Kannammal was asked to say a few words about her own personal experience. "All eyes turned towards me," she recalls. "I was so scared, memories of visiting each village on hot days and cold nights rushed through my mind. How could I say it all in a minute?" But Kannammal overcame her fear, and her speech was greeted with a standing ovation. "There were tears of joy in my eyes," she says.

The 1991-92 literacy campaign changed Kannammal's life, and that of thousands of other women. "I was living in a small world which consisted of my family, my children and my office," she says. "The campaign took me out of that world, and gave me the chance to expand my sphere of activity. Before 1991, I knew nobody. Today I have many friends, not only here in India but all over the world. Now I have the confidence to achieve anything." These days, Kannammal is State Co-ordinator of Samam – an education campaign promoting equality for women.

Later analysis of the impact of this campaign showed that basic education gave women confidence, independence, higher incomes and a clear improvement in lifestyle. It also led to a significant reduction in cases of domestic violence. Thanks to Kannammal and her fellow volunteers, the women of Pudukkottai have truly been able to "start a new story".

Based on a contribution by N. Kannammal for *Unsung Heroes – Tales of Literacy Workers* (UNESCO, forthcoming).



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# Integrating Ethiopian

**M**ore than 65,000 Ethiopian Olim live in Israel today. Many of them come from rural areas, and first made their way to refugee camps in Addis Ababa to await their 'aliyah', or 'immigration' to Israel. When they arrive in Israel, most Ethiopian immigrants have no formal education and cannot read or write Amharic. The severity of the culture shock cannot be underestimated. In some cases, immigrants have to bridge a knowledge gap spanning hundreds of years. In addition to adjusting to life in a modern, technologically advanced society, Ethiopian immigrants are faced with a new climate, a new language, unfamiliar religious rituals and a very different status for women. Ninety-two per cent of the men from the villages earned a living as independent farmers, the remainder worked as weavers, carpenters, metal-workers or other commercial activity. Among urban residents, there are people who worked as drivers, teachers and soldiers. Some 10 per cent may have had between five and twelve years of schooling.

Before it closed down in 1999, many Ethiopians participated in Hebrew learning projects at the Hazerot Yassaf centre, which aimed to help ease the transition between the initial arrival and permanent housing elsewhere in the country. They would spend between 12 and 18 months at the centre on average. This was where a new approach to teaching Ethiopians was first implemented.

Past approaches left much to be desired. As in so many other cases, the residents of the host country perceived their role as one of educator and teacher, in an integration process that did not take into account the immigrant's culture, past and existing knowledge base. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that many Ethiopian immigrants were illiterate when they arrived in Israel. How could they be expected to learn Hebrew before wholly mastering all aspects of their native Amharic? Teaching methods applied to western, literate immigrants are based on both a verbal and written culture. These tried and tested strategies are worthless in the face of a society that communicates predominantly by oral means. The Ethiopians are typically listeners rather than talkers; their learning processes revolve around listening, absorbing and passing on stories and proverbs told by their elders.

Whereas an adult student from the West is likely to possess a number of acquired skills such as classification, selection and application, such tools were not part of the Ethiopian student's inventory. This led to confusion and frustration in class, on the part of both teachers and pupils.

# Immigrants in Israel

The framework for the new concept, first employed at Hazerot Yassaf in 1997, was generated by the Head of the Adult Education Division, Dr Meir Peretz. It was decided that those most fitted to teach Ethiopian immigrants were young Ethiopian men and women with an academic background, perhaps an Israeli university qualification. These new recruits possessed the two most important tools for this challenging post – a sound command of Hebrew, and good spoken and written Amharic.

The Israeli Ministry of Education had previously tried to remedy the unfavourable situation by doubling the course length from five to ten months, and reducing the breadth of vocabulary for Ethiopian learners. But the subject matter remained the same, and cosmetic changes did not go far enough to address the problem. The new programme aimed to remove cultural barriers between teachers and pupils; teach the immigrants in their native tongue as a confidence-building measure; to use subjects that are relevant to the students' lives, using their past experience and knowledge as a learning resource; and encourage pupils to play an active role in the design and implementation of the programme, thereby creating a coherent learning community.

The new approach took the Ethiopian oral culture into account, recognizing that the society of the immigrant is one that strives towards developing superior oral skills, and mastering the socio-linguistic rules, such as who one faces when speaking, how and why; when silence is necessary; and who is permitted to present a problem and how.

This programme has now been in use since 1998. The classes are held in special institutions across the country. Teaching is intensive: due to their special needs, Ethiopian immigrants receive around 1,000 hours of tuition over a 10-month period. The first evaluation took place six months after the scheme was introduced, and the results were largely positive. Implementing the new strategy has been a learning process for all concerned. Graduates of the revised curriculum have been finding it easier to integrate without being forced to deny what they are and where they have come from. And this can only be of benefit to the society in which they now live.

Based on the submission of the Government of Israel for the International Literacy Prizes 2001.







# Reaching out Literary Program

**S**ix young girls sit on a single row of stones. A few metres to their right, a black plastic sheet – a makeshift blackboard – hangs from a ramshackle, condemned building. Way down below, the waves of the Indian Ocean crash onto the coral reefs. The lagoon beyond is a flawless, glassy blue. A soft breeze nudges the coconut leaves.

Fifty learning centres like this one have sprung up over the past two years in villages on Rodrigues Island, eight hours by boat from the main island of Mauritius. The facilities are poor by any standards, but the young pupils are making progress. For most, this will likely be the last chance to acquire the basic skills many take for granted – reading and writing.

At 83 per cent, the overall literacy rate for Mauritius is the highest in Africa. Most of the population, 60 per cent of which is of Indian origin, live on the main island. The Rodriguans live almost exclusively off the fruits of the land and sea. They grow yams, potatoes, corn and other produce, and supplement their staple diet with fish. A few of the island's residents work for the Government. Sounds idyllic? From an educational point of view, Rodrigues is in crisis.

Of the children who enrol in primary school on the island, more than 50 per cent drop out before they reach the fourth grade. The reasons are self-evident: economic hardship means girls are needed to work in the market gardens, and the boys are expected to go out to sea and catch fish for their families. For the parents, the most pressing concern is not whether a child can read or write, but where the next meal is coming from.

The children are turning their backs on school, and a glance at some of the textbooks is enough to explain why. Illustrations of girls and boys gathered around a birthday cake covered in candles bear no relation to these pupils' everyday lives. The scenarios, names and customs featured in the books belong to a time and place far removed from the reality of Rodrigues and unable to give these young people any support in their pursuit of knowledge and identity, nor any footholds in their quest to master reading and writing.

Experts say that in addition to poverty and a lack of positive role models, the irrelevance of learning materials is a factor contributing to the high dropout rate. Official statistics indicate that the number of children failing to attend school is set to grow annually. In a few years' time, they in turn will swell the ranks of adult illiterates.

# to Rodrigues mes in Mauritius

A project known as Basic Education for Adolescents (BEFA), run by UNICEF with technical support from UNESCO, is providing a partial solution to the problem. The project encourages children who have stopped attending school to have another go, this time at a special learning centre. The modules contain reading passages and comprehension exercises on subjects useful and relevant to a young Rodriguan's life: agricultural issues, the environment, health and sanitation, accounting and finance. Pupils are expected to attend classes for two hours each day. The programme also relies on the dedication of volunteer teachers, often secondary school students themselves, motivated by a youthful, altruistic desire to help their less fortunate neighbours.

The UNESCO-UNICEF evaluation team was alarmed by the lack of access pupils had to reading materials outside the classroom. They appealed for immediate action to remedy the problem. As a result, a group of Rodriguan representatives met every day for two weeks at the island's main town of Port Mathurin. It was an opportunity to discuss the most pressing concerns and prepare a series of illustrated booklets for the BEFA project.

The booklets produced covered a wide range of topics relevant to the lives of the people of Rodrigues, among them family disputes, drug abuse, sex education and the HIV/AIDS taboo, traditional farming techniques and discrimination against women. They have since been published and used in literacy and other development programmes for young people, and there is already a new range in the planning. Although their authors admit there is much scope for improvement, young Rodriguans have given the new reading material a positive reception.

Based on an article by Namtip Aksornkool, Senior Programme Officer, UNESCO.







# Addressing the Needs

**A**t the beginning of the twentieth century in New Zealand, the indigenous Maori had a higher rate of literacy than their British colonizers. One hundred years later, the Ministry of Education found that “over 1 million adults are below the minimum level of competence required to meet the demands of everyday life.” A closer look at the ethnic analysis reported on showed that 70 per cent of Maori fell into this category. While this survey examined literacy in English, the ministry estimates that just 10 per cent of the adult Maori population are competent in Te Reo Maori (the Maori language).

A landmark report published in 1960 on the standard of Maori health, education, housing and levels of income set down the facts – that indigenous people could expect to fare far worse in life than their white counterparts. Attempts to assimilate the Maori into the western model were stepped up across the country, resulting in cultural dislocation which has adversely affected literacy rates among the indigenous community.

Before the arrival of the British, Maori communication was predominantly and traditionally oral. But the settlers used printed materials as a way of modernizing Maori society. Before long, power rested in the hands of those who could read and write. Literacy became a powerful and divisive tool.

The adult literacy movement in New Zealand began almost 30 years ago. Groups were established and worked separately until 1982 and the establishment of Literacy Aotearoa Inc. (then known as the Adult Reading and Learning Assistance Federation, or ARLA). From 1989 until 1999, in response to a remit passed at its General Conference in 1989, Literacy Aotearoa has worked to change its structure to become a Treaty-based organization.

It now has equal representation of Maori and *Tauīwi* at both management and membership levels, and has committed itself to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi in the Maori language).

Literacy Aotearoa provides community-based adult literacy services delivered by trained tutors throughout the country. Each of the 63 Poupou (member groups) – which must have a minimum of 6 students and 6 tutors – provides either one-to-one or group tuition either in English and/or Te Reo Maori, in sessions tailored to the students’ goals and particular circumstances. The organization works actively to recognize and implement both Maori and *Tauīwi* (non-Maori) practices as legitimate norms within literacy provision. Literacy Aotearoa has seen a significant growth in Maori participation in its programmes from 8 per cent of students in 1992 to 29.5 per cent in 1999.



# of Maori in New Zealand

There has also been a dramatic increase in the numbers of women and younger people attending literacy classes in New Zealand.

One of the most significant achievements of the past decade is that now, literacy provisions for Maori are often administered and delivered by Maori themselves. Internal criticism in the late 1980s prompted ARLA to include Maori representatives on its National Committee and to begin to employ Maori staff for literacy work in the field. Maori participation at all levels of decision-making, policy development and implementation is seen as a critical factor in the structural overhaul and ultimate success of New Zealand's literacy movement.

This success is becoming more and more evident. The message is getting through. Literacy Aotearoa regularly receives enquiries from tribal authorities and local Maori groups who want to join the organization. The many programmes and projects continue to be a learning process for all those involved. Over the past few decades, the descendants of New Zealand's colonizers have been asking themselves not what they can teach the Maori people, but what they can learn from them.

Hutia te rito o te harakeke. Kei hea to komako e ko?  
Whakatae rangitea, rere ki uta, rere ki tae.  
Maau e ki mai e ahau, he aha te mea nui o te ao?  
Maaku e ki atu, he Tangata, he Tangata, he Tangata.

If you tear out the core of the flax bush, where will the bellbird go?  
It will look to the seas and over the land (in search of sustenance) it will find nothing.  
You enquire of me, what is most important in this world?  
My reply will be, it is people, it is people, it is people.

Based on the submission of the Government of New Zealand for the International Literacy Prizes 2000.



