

Literacy Practices within Self-help Groups: A Case Study of Jeldu Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) Groups, Oromia: Ethiopia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to assess the effectiveness of literacy practices of self-help groups in Jeldu District. The self-help groups were formed by Meserete Kristos Church Rehabilitation and Development Association in the district. The study employed a mixed research method. Questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and observation were used as instruments of data collection. Questionnaires were used to collect information from ten facilitators, whereas interviews were used to get insider information from the program coordinator, a facilitator. The district ANFE coordinator and five beneficiaries were considered for focus group discussion. The findings revealed that the intervention helped beneficiaries to build high self-esteem and develop an extrovert personality. Acquiring reading, writing, and doing basic arithmetic skills were considered the means to an end. Indeed, the intervention contributed to reducing the withdrawal of adult learners from the literacy program, developing the positive self-concept of beneficiaries, and motivating them to work hard to enhance their livelihood.

Keywords: Literacy, self-help groups, practices, effectiveness

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in the process of nation-building, for it enhances the physical, mental, and emotional development and productivity of individuals. In Ethiopia, access to basic education has been very limited until recently. To curb the situation and ensure access to basic education, the country has implemented a series of education sector development programs (ESDP) known as ESDP I, II, III, and IV. Because of the relentless efforts made, the enrollment ratio in elementary education has improved significantly. The net enrolment ratio in primary education has increased from 29% to 86% from 1991 to 2014 (WENR, 2018). Although impressive achievement has been registered in primary education, a lot has not been done in the area of adult and non-formal education in ESDP I, II, and III (ESDP VI, 2010).

The country is living with a huge number of illiterate adults whose level of productivity is very low, whose resource management is poor, and whose role differentiation is in line with gender stereotypes. The people observe different days as 'holy' which contributes to weakening their work culture and are deprived of the opportunity to get information (Admasse and Abebaw, 2013). Functional adult literacy has been identified as one of the main agendas in ESDP III and reinforced in ESDP IV (ESDP VI, 2010). The objective of the program was to mitigate the problem of illiteracy, reduce gender stereotyping, and improve the livelihood of adults. A functional adult literacy program aims to empower adult members of society so that they actively participate in national development and play their part in national poverty reduction strategies. The government planned to reach 5.2 million adults in 2008–2009 but has not succeeded, mainly because of a lack of financing, poor coordination, the absence of guidelines and

training, and a shortage of human resources in the area.

A functional adult literacy program is a form of education for young adults whose ages are 15 or older (MoE, 2008). Functional adult literacy deals with the provision of the 3Rs (reading, writing, and numeracy), practical knowledge and skills useful for other aspects of life such as agriculture, health, civic and cultural education, primary health care, prevention of diseases, family planning, environmental protection, marketing, and gender equity (Sonja, 2011). The integrated functional adult literacy program is provided for adult learners so that they make use of their ability to read and write to access information (MoE, 2010). On top of that, the program is intended to improve the living standards of the adult population by providing need-based education and training for adult learners (Tamirat, 2015).

Building the capability of a community cannot be left to the government. NGOs, community-based organizations, private institutes, religious institutes, and individuals would have to play roles. Meserete Kristos Church-Rehabilitation and Development Association (MKC-RDA) has been one of the religious-based non-governmental organizations working to enhance the development of the country at large and the Jeldu District community in particular since 2008. Jeldu is one of the districts in the West Showa Zone of Oromia, located 129 km from the capital city of Addis Ababa to the west and 74 km to the north-east of Ambo. The total population of the district is approximately 282,409 (49% males and 51% females) currently. The altitude ranges from 2900 to 500 meters above sea level. In line with this, the climatic condition of the area ranges from cold to hot. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for the community (West Shoa Zone Statistical Agency, 2010).

About 93% of the people in Jeldu were from rural communities, whose livelihood by and large depends on subsistence farming. According to the Oromia Education Bureau, more than 77% of the total population in Oroima Regional State was illiterate. The case

of Jeldu District was not different, if not worse. MKC-RDA intervened in five Kebeles of the district, which benefited 2,434 adults, of whom 1,497 were male and 937 were female. The beneficiaries of the project were organized into 131 FAL groups, whose name was derived from the functional adult literacy group. The intervention of the project was managed by 11 facilitators. These facilitators were expected to run literacy classes, identify the training needs of FAL groups, and induce and encourage a culture of saving among FAL groups.

Functional adult literacy is an approach used to help adults acquire reading, writing, and basic arithmetic skills and enhance their livelihoods in their locality, which in turn could contribute to the development of the country. A functional adult literacy program is developed through a bottom-up strategy based on the following principles (McCaffery *et al.*, 2007):

- *Local context:* the definition of functionality depends on what kind of reading and writing skills are commonly needed in the learners' community. Therefore, each community needs its own definition of functional literacy.
- *Local design:* the tutors receive training on how to design their learning activities and curriculum, how to make their learning materials, and how to network with local organizations to produce learning materials and resources that meet the needs and interests of target groups.
- *Participatory process:* the learners are involved in all aspects of learning activities. They develop their functional capabilities by making decisions and planning their own learning.

This study was conducted to look at how intervention through MKC-RDA has contributed to improving the quality of life of the target groups and to identify the strategy employed to initiate literacy practices among beneficiaries. It was also meant to examine if

the intervention has positively affected the literacy skills of the beneficiaries.

Research design and methodology

The study employed qualitative and quantitative methods. The sample population consisted of beneficiaries, facilitators, and officials who were in some way involved in adult literacy programs. Instruments of data collection were semi-interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and observation. A questionnaire was used to collect data from 10 facilitators. One facilitator, one education officer, and MKC-RDA program coordinator took part in semi-structured interviews. Five beneficiaries were approached for the success of the intervention. The observation was carried

out while the teaching-learning process took place to verify the replies of different stakeholders (Brown, 2006).

Methods of data analysis

The data collected were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively using percentages to triangulate the findings to reach a valid conclusion..

Results and discussions

Criteria for membership of the FAL groups were one of the issues that needed due consideration. In this regard, facilitators were asked to share their views on issues like being a member of the community, literacy skills, interest, poverty, sex, and sources of livelihood were portrayed in the following table.

Table 1. Criteria to be members of the FAL groups

	Target groups are selected based on	Yes		No	
		No.	%	No.	%
1	Being member of the community	10	100	0	0
2	Literacy skill	4	40	6	60
3	Interest	10	100	0	0
4	Being poor	3	30	7	70
5	Sex	0	0	10	100
6	Sources of livelihood	10	100	0	0

In Table 1, being a member of the community was one of the criteria taken into consideration to be a member of a FAL group, as all facilitators (100%) responded to the question positively (see item 1). Item 2 was meant to find out if literacy was taken as the criterion for the selection of the target group; only four (40%) facilitators said yes, while six (60%) of them replied negatively. Item 3 was forwarded to find out if interest was considered as the criterion for selection. All of them have responded positively, which implies that interest was one of the major criteria for selection. Item 4 was meant to find out if economic status was taken as the criterion. Only 30% of the respondents reported that

being poor was one of the requirements, although one of the main purposes of the intervention was to enhance the livelihood of the beneficiaries. Item 5 was asked if sex has been taken as the requirement for selection. All respondents anonymously said that sex was not the criterion. Item 6 was meant to find out if the source of livelihood of the target groups has been viewed as the criterion for selection. All facilitator respondents replied yes to the question. Thus, the data showed that to be a member of the FAL group, being a member of the community, interest, and sources of livelihood were considered outstanding criteria. Being illiterate and poor might encourage a

person to join the group, although it is not mandatory.

Two of the interviewees (the program coordinator and the facilitator) have also agreed with the reply given by the respondents who have taken part in filling out the questionnaire. They said that economic background, age, interest in being a member of the community, and livelihood were the most important factors considered in order for the target groups to be taken as beneficiaries. Literate individuals were

also accepted to be members of FAL groups, mainly because the focus of the program was not limited to the provision of literacy skills but also economic empowerment. FGD participants also revealed that the intervention was designed to enhance their livelihood in that some of the beneficiaries of the programs were literate. Thus, members of the community who were members of the FAL groups were empowered because of their participation in the program because the intervention dealt with the holistic development of individuals.

Table 2. Degree of Participation of Learners in Learning Tasks as replied by the facilitators

Learning tasks	Participation			
	Yes		No	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. Participate in need analysis	10	100	0	0
2. Participate in the formulation of the objectives	7	70	3	30
3. Participate in the preparation of the contents	7	70	3	30
4. Participate in the selection of the methods of learning	10	100	0	0

In Table 2, item 1 was meant to find out if FAL groups were allowed to participate in the identification of needs analysis. 10 (100%) facilitator respondents said that FAL groups took part in the identification of needs analysis. Item 2 focused on the formulation of objectives, and it has been revealed that 70% of the facilitators believed learners participated in the preparation of the objectives even though 30% of facilitators replied that learners did not take part in the preparation of the objectives. Item 3 dealt with the preparation of the contents of learning. 7 (70%) facilitator respondents reported that adult learners took part in the preparation of learning contents, while 3 (30%) of them replied negatively. As has been depicted in item 4 of the same table, all facilitator respondents confirmed learners' participation in the selection of methodology. The selection of the method of facilitation was one of the tasks that would hardly be done with the participation of the trainees. This was an

indication of the facilitators' limited understanding of methodology. This actually was what the researcher saw during observation in the actual teaching-learning process. The facilitator was trying to talk about poultry. The lesson of the day was about the preparation of places for a day-old chicken at the household level. The method of teaching was totally teacher-centered. He was using words like centimeter and meter that could hardly be understood by the target groups, and he made very little effort to involve FAL groups in the process of learning.

The same questions were raised with the program coordinator and the facilitator. According to them, FAL groups were actively involved in the identification, prioritization, and analysis of needs, which in turn contributed to setting the learning objectives. This was because the organization strongly believed that learning activities would have to be related to

the livelihoods of beneficiaries. Accordingly, objectives were identified and prioritized by the beneficiaries themselves and treated. To meet the desired objectives, the contents of the learning tasks were also identified by facilitators in collaboration with the FAL groups.

Relevance of Learning Tasks

Based on the reactions of the beneficiaries who have taken part in the interview and focus group discussions, beneficiaries were encouraged to reflect on their practices. Participants in the FAL groups were allowed to look at why, when, and how they spent money in kind and cash. According to FGD participants, most of the FAL groups came to understand that they over utilized the meager resources they had whenever holidays were celebrated and in the preparation of marriage feasts. They also over utilized the meager resources they had whenever they hosted parties in recognition of the support a household got from neighbors and friends to plow farmland and harvest crops usually known as 'dabo' (Debo is a communal practice exercised to give a hand to one another whenever needed). In all these and related circumstances, the rural community was required to prepare food and drink. Time

Strategies Employed to Ensure Relevance of the Intervention

Membership of the FAL group was purely voluntary and the participants were solely responsible for organizing and grouping themselves according to their interests, aspirations, and capacity. Accordingly, they were required to give themselves a name for their groups. Example: 'Rabbira' which means from God; 'Abdi Guddina' means Hope for Development, and 'Abdi-Waq' means Hope in God. Members of respective groups were encouraged to explicitly state the purpose. Hence, they were allowed to state their objectives and develop strategies to meet the desired results. Such a practice course helped the respective FAL groups to take responsibility for their acts.

concept was another area of debate for the FAL groups. As the coordinator reported, FAL groups reported beneficiaries were highly encouraged to reflect on the utilization of time (being scheduled, and the number of working days within a month). As the participants of the FGD confirmed, "Before the intervention of MKC-RDA, we used to look at different days: days like 'Gebriel', 'Micheal' and so forth." After a series of discussions and reflections were made among FAL groups with the help of facilitators, FAL groups started to ignore the uniqueness of those days and started to engage in their businesses to improve their livelihood. Another important point of discussion was the division of labor. Some of the customs and traditions were in line with gender stereotyping. As FGD participants confirmed, some jobs were reserved for males while others were for females before the intervention. The FAL groups were encouraged to discuss such kinds of issues and began to understand that the stereotyping was only the result of customs and traditions. Having been witnessed by the respondents, one notable example was that the collection of crops from the field during harvest time had been the females' duty. However, after a series of discussions and reflections, both men and women of the FAL groups had begun collecting crops during the harvest season, irrespective of their sex.

Acquisition of reading, writing, and basic arithmetic skills was considered as the means to an end rather than an end in itself. The FAL groups were taught these skills if and only if they were convinced that the ability to read and write were important and helpful in improving their livelihood. As the coordinator of the program reported, "The organization helped the participants to realize the importance of the three skills in building their capability." The intervention initiated by MKC-RDA did not perceive beneficiaries as subordinates, dependents, poor, helpless, and needy. Rather, as capable and resourceful, whose knowledge and experience counted most. That helped the beneficiaries to build high self-esteem and develop extroverted personalities who continued to contribute to the betterment of the community by sharing the knowledge and

experience they gained because of the intervention.

Major Changes Observed Because of the Intervention

Literacy activity in West Showa is characterized by learners' withdrawal, a lack of commitment from facilitators, problems related to the motivation of learners, a lack of cooperation among stakeholders, and problems with the relevance of the curriculum (Kebede and Solomon, 2010). The researcher tried to find out the literacy activity observed in the MKC-RDA intervention, taking into consideration the issues of adult learners' withdrawal, relevance of curriculum, cooperation of stakeholders, and facilitators' commitment. Based on the attendance sheet and other supporting documents, it has been learned that withdrawal was not the problem, and the FAL groups attended their literacy class as per the schedule consistently. As the coordinator of MKC-RDA said, FAL groups were highly motivated, mainly because participation in the program was purely voluntary and the learning experiences were need-based. Participants in the focus group discussion (FDG) also asserted that membership of the FAL group was purely voluntary and that it was the participants who decided almost everything as a team. Concerning the curriculum, as the coordinator reported, FAL groups are actively involved in the process of design, implementation, and evaluation of the curriculum.

Another notable change observed in the beneficiaries was their attitude towards their future. They started to realize the possibility of making a difference in their livelihood and began to aspire for improvement. As participants in the FDG have confirmed, "We started to work hard, and our productivity has increased significantly." The FAL groups also cleared up bushes and leveled about six kilometers to make a road. The road, as the researcher observed, could be used by small vehicles with some difficulty during the dry season.

Beneficiaries got acceptance, and they were contributing to raise awareness of the community as a result of being part of the groups and building a strong household. According to the focus group participants, friends and colleagues who were not accommodated in the intervention package because either they were not willing when the project was initiated or they were beyond the reach of the project have started to ask to be accommodated in the program. The coordinator also affirmed that greater demand was coming to the organization from the community to be beneficiaries of the program.

The intervention helped beneficiaries to become free from exploitation by illegal 'money lenders.' According to the respondents, money lenders are people who borrow money with high interest for individuals in need of it. Before MKC-RDA's intervention and brought the idea of saving, people used to borrow money from money lenders with interest rates up to 100%, making themselves richer, while the rest of the community was getting poorer and poorer.

The respondents (both the interviewees and focus group discussion participants) have said that their economy was getting better and better because of the intervention. As the facilitator respondent said, beneficiaries were encouraged to discuss their practices about resource management, focusing on financial issues. For the FAL groups to start saving, they were allowed to reflect on their economic status, existing practices in the community focusing on their money lending or borrowing practices, and how their status would be changed. Why saving, strategies of saving, administration of financial matters, and the like were the key points for discussion. Discussants of the focus group reported that members of FAL groups were adults who would decide on their own; they discussed and decided the amount of money they wanted to deposit per week. Based on the information obtained from the program coordinator, almost all FAL groups were taking part in saving. For the sake of illustration, one FAL group from each Kebele was taken

randomly and shown below in the following table:

Table 3. shows the amount of money saved by randomly selected FAL groups within two years

Name of the FAL group	Total number of members	Amount saved (in Ethiopian Birr)
Sena Guddina (Dano Center: Osole Kebele)	20	11,240.00
Abdi Wakayyo (saritti Daku Kebele)	23	25,700.00
Misoma Abdi Wakayyo (Kolu Galan Kebele)	16	31,207.00
Jalane (Bicho Kebele)	15	11,010.00
Abdi Boru (Chalalaka Warabulch center: Boni Jawe Kebele)	21	11,358.00

As has been depicted in the above table, members of FAL groups and the amount of savings were not the same. The income, commitment, and creativity of households of different FAL groups might not be the same. One of the points respondents predominantly talked about during interviews and focus group discussions held with the beneficiaries was the fact that FAL groups employed different strategies to increase their savings. They were engaged in different kinds of income-generating activities that, of course, called for entrepreneurship skills. According to FGD participants, “FAL groups have agreed not to deposit money rather each group member was encouraged to borrow money and invested it with modest interest (on average 6%), either personally or in groups.” This helped the group members to be critical and engaged in different kinds of entrepreneurial activities that helped

them to increase the income of the respective households and the savings of the FAL groups.

The process of borrowing and lending money was another episode where active learning and sharing of experience occurred. The FAL groups have their respective committees that were in charge of managing the finances. The committee was also responsible for providing advisory services and follow-up activities. As the facilitator reported, “For an individual or group of individuals to borrow money from their association, they were expected to come up with their business plan.” The feasibility of the business plans was scrutinized by the committee and other members of the FAL groups who were relatively experienced. On top of that, constant follow-up and supervision were conducted if the money borrowed was used for the intended purpose.



Picture 1: Indicate how saving is related with different aspects of livelihood

Beneficiaries’ literacy skills and the extent of utilization of the skill

Based on the information obtained from the coordinator, the frequency of the meetings of FAL groups to attend literacy class was not the same as has been discussed in the table below.

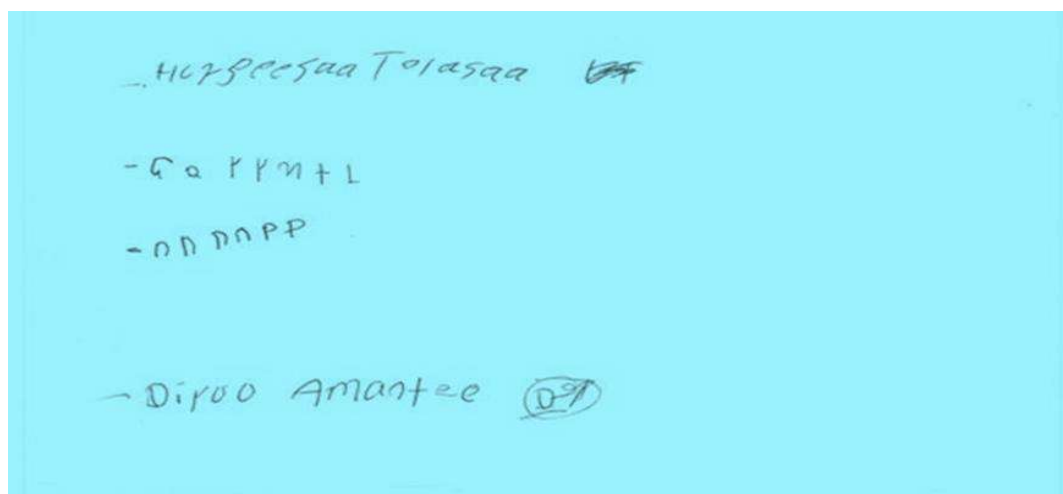
Table 4. Literacy class per week based on the data obtained from the MKC-RDA program coordinator’s office

	Frequency of meeting to attend literacy class per week	No.	%
1	Five days	31	23.7
2	Three days	50	38.5
3	Two days	40	30.5
4	One day	10	7.3

Table 4 depicts that 23.7 % (31) of FAL groups met five days per week, 38.2% (50) of them met three days per week, 30.5% (40) of them attended literacy classes twice per week, while 7.3% (10) of FAL groups were engaged only once per week in literacy activity. This happened to be the case because attending literacy classes was purely a voluntary activity, and the decision was made by the beneficiaries themselves.

FAL groups.” Some of the participants could not read and write. Some others were found to be semi-literate in that they read and write with some degree of difficulty, while others have acquired the skills sufficiently and have started to use them in their day-to-day activities. To verify the information provided by the interviewee, beneficiaries were randomly selected and invited to write their name in Afan Oromo (Oromo Language) and sign. Two of the participants have managed to write their names in a fairly good manner, while the other two have failed to do so as has been displayed here under.

Based on the information obtained from the facilitator respondent, “the ability to read and write varies within individual members of the



FAL groups were encouraged to take part in literacy classes using different strategies. Among other things, “all members are required to hold the leadership position in their respective FAL group turn by turn which

requires literacy skills”, the program coordinator replied. Thus, members of FAL groups were challenged to take advantage of literacy classes for their own good. Those who became literate were keeping the financial

records of the FAL groups, such as monthly members' contributions, money borrowed and collected from members, and other related information. On top of that, one of the FGD members said "I have started to assist my children's schooling activity." In conclusion, those who can read and write with understanding were utilizing their literacy skill in their day-to-day activities.

Issues of concern as discussed by stakeholders

Based on the information obtained from the center office coordinator situated in the study area, it was learned that 11 facilitators were assigned to serve about 2434 beneficiaries who were organized into 131 FAL groups. From the data, it is possible to infer that the facilitators-beneficiary ratio was 1:221. On the other hand, it is also possible to see that 1 facilitator is expected to serve about 12 FAL groups, which

Conclusion

The intervention of MKC-RDA to enhance the livelihood of the community in five Kebeles of Jeldu Woreda using FAL as an approach helped to improve members' saving activity and to create their capital. The FAL group served as a credit-giving association for members with fair interest rates, and members had equal opportunity to borrow money as individuals or groups of individuals, which saved members from 'money lenders.' The creation of capital also brought about increased aspirations for growth. Most of the beneficiaries were engaged in different kinds of income-generating activities which helped them to inculcate entrepreneurship skills. Though the intervention was found to be generally successful, participants did not get enough support because the number of facilitators and beneficiaries was not proportional.

Recommendations

From the findings of the study, the following tentative recommendations have been made, which could improve the intervention of MKC-RDA. Further research is required to test if

were quite large, and that might hurt the effectiveness of the program.

Firstly, learners would not get enough support from facilitators because they can hardly satisfy the needs and interests of different FAL groups. Secondly, facilitators would be overburdened with huge responsibility, which in turn might lead them to frustration. Thirdly, it would be difficult to execute administrative tasks effectively and provide timely feedback.

As the MKC-RDA coordinator reported, the Woreda Education Bureau was not providing supervisory support and failed to arrange a forum to share experiences with similar institutions engaged in similar tasks, even if the bureau had been invited formally. Had organizations working in the area of FAL created strong links, it would have been possible to share the experience, and the effectiveness of the approach would have been scrutinized and scaled up.

these recommendations apply to the wider program.

1. As the study confirmed, the intervention strategy employed by the organization was unique and exemplary. The organization sees the beneficiaries as capable, knowledgeable, and have experience that counts. It is highly recommendable if the strategy is scaled up at the national level and the experience is shared with different governmental and non-governmental organizations, including religious institutions.
2. The findings also revealed that the number of facilitators is not enough as compared to the number of beneficiaries. Indeed, it is wise to create a mechanism for how to tackle the problem. The researcher believes that there is a possibility of making use of beneficiaries so that they can serve as co-facilitators. Initiating and building up the culture of volunteerism could be another strategy that can be used to come up with the solution to the mentioned problem.
3. It has also been seen that the organization was using different strategies to encourage

participants to take advantage of literacy classes. But, as has been observed good numbers of participants were still illiterate. Thus, the organization needs to exert extraordinary effort to create awareness and prove the advantage of being literate to improve one's livelihood.

4. Though the organization has had cooperation and good relationships with governmental organizations, little effort has been made to get supervisory service from the Woreda Education Office. To learn from others and share one's own experience, it is wise to get supervisory service.
5. To make the intervention more meaningful and rewarding, facilitators played a very crucial role. In order to discharge their duties and responsibilities effectively, they need to be acquainted with the subject matter and methodology. Thus, the organization needs to arrange different kinds of tailor-made training to capacitate facilitators so that they can serve the purpose at their level best.

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