

Short Communication

Literacy Practices within Self-help Groups: A Case Study of Jeldu Functional Adult Literacy Groups

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Abstract

Meserete Kristos Church-Rehabilitation and Development Association (MKC-RDA) is a non-governmental organization working to enhance the livelihood of adults via forming Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) groups since 2008. This study was conducted in 2011 to assess the extent of the effectiveness of MKC-RDA's intervention. The study was purely qualitative in nature and purposive sampling was employed to generate wider information for better understanding of the intervention. The findings of the study showed that beneficiaries were intrinsically motivated because they are the one who stated the objectives and take the action. The target group was also appropriate since they were perceived as capable and resourceful whose knowledge and experience counts most. The intervention has helped beneficiaries to build high self-esteem and develop extrovert personality which help them contribute to the betterment of their community by sharing knowledge and experience that has been acquired. Acquiring reading, writing and basic arithmetic skill is considered as the means to an end rather than an end by itself. Indeed, the intervention contributed a lot for it enabled the beneficiaries to develop positive self-concept about themselves and had helped to enhance their livelihood.

Key Words: Functional Adult Literacy, Livelihood, FAL groups

Introduction

Although the country is living with huge amount of illiterate adults, much attention was not paid by the current government on the issue of literacy until the launch of the third Education Sector Development Programs(ESDP III) in 2008. Since then the issue of adult and non-formal education has gathered momentum. The second and third Education Sector Development Programs that were launched as ESDP III and IV considered the issue of

illiteracy as one of the main agendas (MoE, 2010). These programs had the objective of providing functional adult literacy and livelihood skills training to adults and/or adult education in various forms. MKC-RDA decided target groups as adults who need basic education and training and the content ranges from poverty alleviation to literacy and numeracy, citizenship and environment education. The functional adult literacy program aims to empower adult members of the society so as to enable them actively participate in the

national development and poverty reduction strategies.

Though in 2008-9 the government has planned to reach 5.2 million adults, it has not been achieved. Some of the major constraints were lack of financing, lack of structure to run and execute the program at all levels, poor coordination, absence of guidelines and training manuals, and lack of human resources (MoE, 2010).

Building capability of the local community can and should not be left to government alone. Non-Governmental organizations, Community Based Organizations, Private Institutes, Religious Institutes and individuals can play great roles. According to the information from coordinator of the program, MKC-RDA as religious based non-governmental organization, is working to enhance development of the country at large and Jeldu District (which is found in the West Shoa Zone of Oromia at the distance of about 129 km from Addis) community in particular since 2008. The organization has intervention in five Kebeles of the District. The intervention has benefited 2,434 adults where 1,497 of them were male and 937 of them were female. The beneficiaries of the project organized themselves under 131 FAL groups. The name FAL group was derived after the name functional adult literacy though; the groups' nature is more of self-help groups. The

intervention of the project is facilitated by 11 individuals and all of them male.

About 93% of the people in Jeldu District are rural community whose livelihoods are by and large dependent on subsistence farming (WSZSA, 2010). More than 77% of the total population in Oroima Regional State are illiterates (OEB, 2010). The case of Jeldu District was not different if not worse.

This study was therefore conducted to assess MKC-RDA intervention program and how it has contributed to improving the livelihood of the target groups, in addition to identifying the strategy employed to initiate literacy practices among beneficiaries. It is also meant to examine if the intervention has positively affected the literacy skill of the beneficiaries.

Materials and Methods

Description of the study area

The study was conducted in 2011 at Jeldu District. Jeldu is one of the districts in West Shoa Zone of Oromia located at 129kms from Addis Ababa and 74 km from Ambo. The total population of the district is approximately 282,409 (49% males & 51% females) currently. Out of the total population, 95.5% are rural community and agriculture is the main source of their livelihood. The

altitude ranges from 500m to 2900m above sea level. In line with this the altitude can be described as high land to the low land (WSZSA, 2010).

Research design, Sample population and sampling technique

The study was qualitative in nature. The sample population consists of beneficiaries and officials who in one way or the other are involved in adult literacy programs. Different data collection instruments such as questionnaire, interview, focus group discussion and observation were used for the study. Open ended questionnaire was used to collect data from 10 facilitators. While, semi-structured interview was used to collect data from 1 education officer, 1 program coordinator using availability sampling, 1 facilitator using simple random sampling from the employees of MKC-RDA and five beneficiaries for focus group discussion were used to assess beneficiaries views about the success of the intervention.

The observation method was carried out while the teaching learning process was taking place to check against the reply of different stakeholders, based on the inferential observation as described by Brown (2006).

Method of data analysis

All data collected were subjected to qualitative analysis procedure, and

where necessary simple descriptive statistic was employed with results shown in percentages and presented in tabular form. Moreover, the different categories from all the data sources in the study were triangulated to generate a general picture on each aspect of the training to reach a conclusion.

Results and Discussion

Comparison of literacy practice by government and MKC-RDA

One of the problem observed with FAL program administered by government was the high withdrawal and less motivation of participants. This had earlier been reported by Kebede and Solomon (2010). But regarding the program that is administered by MKC-RDA, withdrawal is not a problem and participants are highly motivated. This is because of the fact that membership of FAL group is purely voluntary and it is the participants who decide almost everything as the team. As far as motivation of facilitators is concerned, facilitators of MKC-RDA are highly motivated because they are employed primarily to serve the purpose of the program. But, FAL program being administered by government is purely dependent of the volunteers: they are mainly from primary school teachers and are not rewarded in anyway. Because of lack of rewards and the workload as they are primary school teachers, they lack

commitment to serve the purpose (Kebede and Solomon, 2010).

Another area of difference in FAL program being run by the two parties was relevance of the curriculum. As has been witnessed by Woreda Adult Education expert, the curriculum of FAL used by Woreda Education Bureau was prepared at regional level. The learning materials utilized for the intervention, on the other hand was, prepared by MKC-RDA considering unique features of the Woreda. On top of this, as the researcher observed while different types of demand driven trainings were organized to satisfy the beneficiaries training need. That of course contributed in increasing the relevance of intervention.

Criteria for selection of members of the FAL groups

On the criteria to become a FAL member, 40% of the respondents reported literacy skill, even though it was not strictly enforced, while interest is one of the most determining criteria in order to participate in the FAL group as has been rated by 100% of the respondents. Being poor was

not a criterion as responded to by only 30% of the participants. Sex was not found to be considered as the criterion because whoever interested and have the willing to be beneficiaries in the project whether male or female can join the FAL group.

Information obtained from the interviewees also was in agreement with the reply given by the respondents who have taken part in filling the questionnaire. They said that economic background, age, interest and geographic proximity were the most important factors that were considered before being taken as a beneficiary. Literate individuals were also accepted to be members of FAL groups mainly because the focus of the program was not limited with enabling the beneficiaries to acquire the literacy skill. The program was designed to enhance the livelihood of the rural community in the intervention area. Therefore, those who have the literacy skill might get empowered because of their participation in the program.

Table 3. Participation of Learners in Learning Tasks as replied by the facilitators

Learning tasks	Participation			
	Yes		No	
	No.	%	No.	%
A In the preparation of the objectives	7	70	3	30
B In the preparation of the contents	7	70	3	30
C In selection of the methods of learning	10	100	-	-

Table 3 above showed that 70% of the facilitators believed that learners

participate in the preparation of the objectives and contents while 30% of

facilitators believed that learners do not take parts in the preparation of the objectives and contents of the learning tasks.

The selection of method of facilitation, facilitators confirmed the involvement of learners' participation in the selection of methodology. Selection of method of facilitation was one tasks that would hardly been done by participation of trainees. This was an indication of facilitators' very limited understanding. The approach to teaching was totally teacher centered during the class observation, even as the subject matter was not understood by the target group.

The same questions put forward to the coordinator reported that FAL groups are engaged in setting the learning objectives fully because it is believed that learning activities would have to be related to their livelihood. Accordingly, objectives are identified and prioritized by the beneficiaries themselves and treated accordingly. To meet the desired objectives the contents of the learning tasks are identified by facilitators in collaboration with the FAL groups (Table 3).

Relevance of learning tasks

Based on the response of the beneficiaries who have taken part in interview and focus group discussion, the intervention encouraged them to reflect on their own practices. Participants of the FAL groups were given the opportunity to look at why,

when and how they spend money in kind and cash. Most of the FAL groups came to realize that they over utilize meager resources whenever holidays are celebrated, in the preparation of marriage feasts, to solicit support from neighbors and friends to plough farm land and harvest crops usually known as 'dabo'. In all these and related circumstances, they were required to prepare food and drink.

Time concept was another area of debate for the FAL groups. As the coordinator reported FAL groups were highly encouraged to reflect on utilization of time and on the number of working days within a month. As the participants of the focus group discussion confirmed, before intervention of MKC-RDA, the community used to look at different days (days like Gabriel, Michael and so forth). After series of discussions and reflections with the help of facilitators were carried out among FAL groups they started to ignore the uniqueness of those days and engaged in their businesses to improve their livelihood.

Another important point of discussion was division of labor. Some of the customs and traditions were in line with gender stereotyping. FGD participants have confirmed that in Jeldu community there were jobs reserved for male and female. The respondents have talked on one of the traditions that were prevailing on the community. It was about collection of crops during the harvest time. As they

said, collection of harvest was the sole responsibility of female. After series of discussions and reflections the FAL groups have realized that such customs and traditions were not helpful to enhance their livelihood. The FAL groups helped the beneficiaries to reduce such kinds of stereotyping and gender biases.

Strategies Employed to Ensure the Relevance of the Intervention

The membership of FAL group was purely voluntary and the participants were solely responsible for organizing and grouping themselves according to their interests, aspiration and capacity. Accordingly, they were required to state the purpose and give a name for the groups. Example: 'Rabbira' which means From God, 'Abdi Guddina' means Hope for Development; 'Abdi-Waq' means Hope in God were some of the names adopted by the FAL groups.

The strategy to acquire reading, writing and basic arithmetic skill was considered as the means to an end rather than an end in itself. The FAL groups were thought the skill if and only if they are convinced that those skills are important and helpful in improving their livelihood. This doesn't however mean that the three skills were treated as secondary in importance but the organization helped the participants to see the importance of the three skills in enhancing their livelihood.

The study observed that unlike most of the development agencies, the intervention initiated by MKC-RDA did not perceives beneficiaries as subordinate, dependents, poor, helpless and needy. Rather, as capable and resourceful whose knowledge and experience counts most. This approach had helped the beneficiaries to build high self-esteem and develop extrovert personality. The knowledge and experience acquired because of the intervention is shared freely and contributes to the betterment of the community.

Moreover, employing this unique approach had helped the intervention to be meaningful and rewarding in many ways. Among other things, it helped to reduce problem of withdrawal significantly. Withdrawal has not been observed as a problem in the project when compared to most adult literacy classes run by government in the West Shoa Zone (Kebede and Solomon, 2010).

In fact, beneficiaries got acceptance and rise in the community as a result of being part of the groups and building a strong household. Those who were not accommodated earlier in the intervention package either because they were not willing when the project was initiated or they were beyond the reach of the project have seen the need to participate in the existing FAL group or be added to a new one.

Major changes due to Intervention

The result of the study indicated that the intervention has brought significant changes to the beneficiaries' livelihood. The intervention actually helped the beneficiaries to become free from exploitation by illegal 'money lenders'. According to the respondents, money lenders are people who lend money to individuals in need and make huge profit out of it and make themselves richer while the rest of the community is getting poorer and poorer. Before MKC-RDA's intervention brought the idea of saving, people borrow money from the money lenders with an interest rate up to 100 %.

The respondents (both interview and focus group discussion) had reported their economy is getting better because of the intervention. It enabled them to save money in their respective FAL groups.

In order this to happen, one of the issues raised among the FAL groups was about saving. Why saving, strategies of saving, administration of the financial matters, and the like were the key points for discussion. As FGD participants reacted, they discussed and decided the amount of money they wanted to deposit per week. All FAL groups were taking part in saving. For the sake of illustration, one FAL group from each Kebele had been taken randomly and shown below in the following table:

Table 3. Money saved by different FAL groups from 2008 to 2011

Name of the FAL group	Total number of members	Year organized	Amount saved (in Ethiopian Birr)
'SenaGuddina (Dano Center: OsoleKebele)'	20	2008	11,240.00
'AbdiWakayyo (sarittiDakuKebele)'	23	2009	25,700.00
'MisomaabdiWakayyo (Kolu Galan Kebele)'	16	2011	3,207.00
'Jalane (BichoKebele)'	15	2011	1,010.00
'AbdiBoru (ChalalakaWarabulch center: BoniJaweKebele)'	21	2011	11,358.00

Source: MKC-RDA internal document, 2011)

By looking at the above table, it is possible to infer that: the amount of saving is not the same, groups have been formed at different time, the numbers of members of participants in FAL groups are not the same, their economy may also is not the same, and their commitment and creativity also is not the same.

One of the points respondents constantly talking about during interview and focus group discussion held with the beneficiaries was that each FAL groups employs different strategies to increase their savings. Group members were engaged in different kinds of income generating activities that called for entrepreneurship skills. As the FGD

participants said, all FAL groups have agreed not to keep money in cash; rather each group members were encouraged to borrow and invest the money saved with modest interest (on average 6%) either personally or in groups. This had helped the group members to be critical and engaged in different kinds of entrepreneurial activities which helped to increase the income of the respective household and savings of the FAL groups. The process of borrowing and lending money was another episode where active learning and sharing of experience occurred. FAL groups have

got own respective committee in charge of managing the finance; provide advisory service and made follow up activities. In order to borrow money from the association, an individual or group of individuals need to come-up with their business plan. The feasibility of the business plan will be scrutinized by the committee and other relatively experienced members of the FAL groups before the budget are approved and constant follow-up and supervision is conducted to make sure the money borrowed was used for the intended purpose.

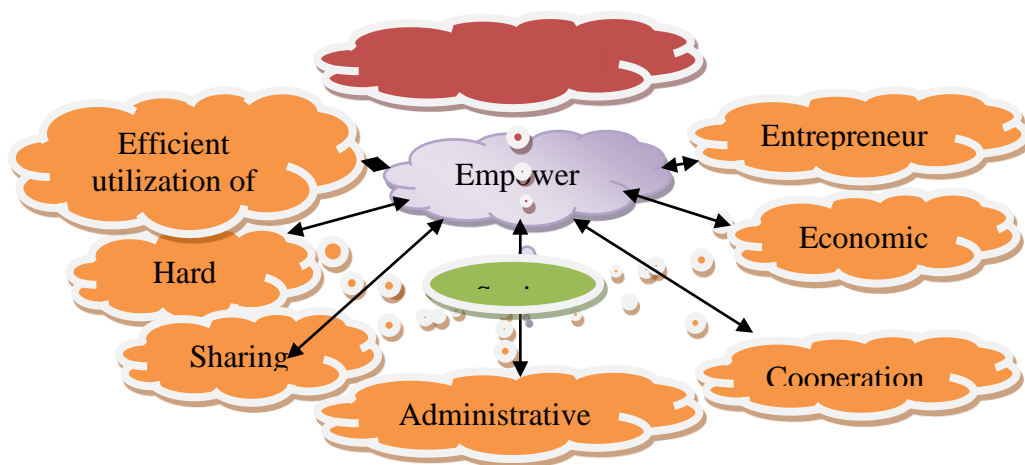


Figure 1: How saving is related with different aspects of livelihood within the FALgroups Source: designed from the study

Attitudinal changes due to the intervention

One of the most notable changes observed in the study during the focus group discussion was the change in attitude of beneficiaries towards their future. The realization of being able to make a difference in their livelihood was demonstrated by clearing up to 6km of road, which had hitherto been

a problem in connecting and transporting their product to the nearby city. The road, as observed can be used by small vehicles with some difficulty during the dry season. This of course, showed that the FAL groups believe in themselves and their capacity to change their circumstances.

Beneficiaries' literacy skill and the extent of utilization of the skill

Table 4: Frequency of meeting to attend literacy class

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

It was revealed that the frequency of their meeting to attend literacy class differs for FAL groups. Of 131, only 23.7 % (31) FAL groups meet five days per week. About 38.2% (50) of the FAL groups met three days per week. 30.5% (40) attended literacy classes twice per week and the rest engaged in literacy activity only once per week. This was because of the fact that

attending literacy class was purely voluntary activity and the decision was made by the beneficiaries.

The ability to read and write varies among members of the FAL groups. Some of the participants do not have the ability to read and write. Others have the ability to some extents, while others have acquired the skills sufficiently and they have started to use the skill in their day to day activity.

To verify the information provided by the respondents, random selection of participants was made to write their names in Afan Oromo (Oromo Language) and put their signature (figure 2).

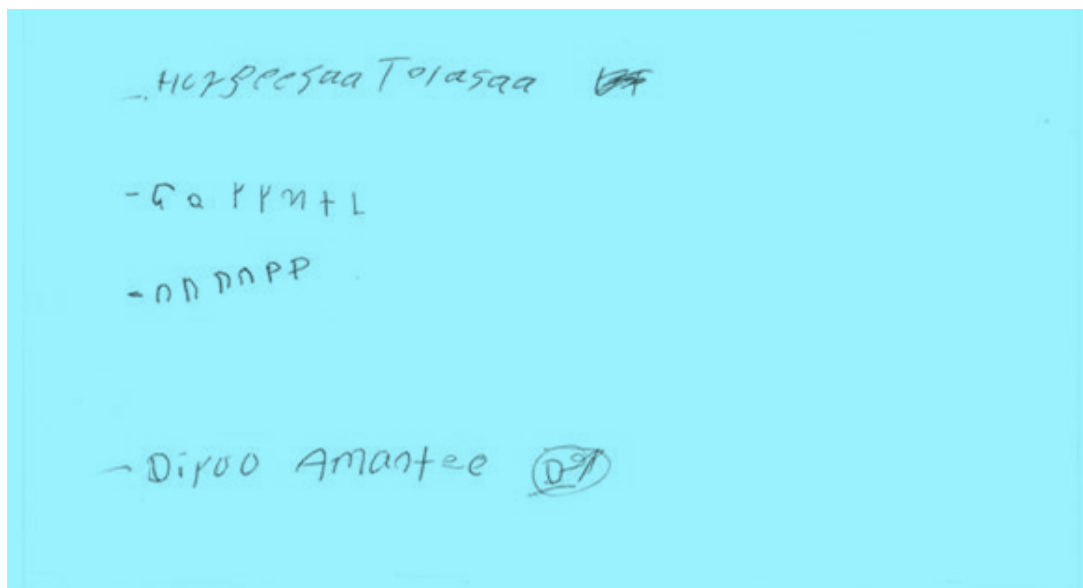


Figure 2: the above picture is designed to check the literacy skill of four of the interviewees: they were invited to write their name and put their signature

The FAL groups' participants were encouraged to take part in literacy class using different strategies. Among other things, "all members are required to hold the leadership position in their respective FAL group one after the other which requires literacy skills" as the program coordinator replied. Thus, members of FAL groups were challenged to take advantage of literacy classes for their own good. Who became literate were keeping the financial records of the FAL groups such as monthly contribution of members, amounts of money lent to members, and other related information. On top of that one of the interviewees has said that 'I have started to assist my children's schooling activity'. Thus, those who have got the ability to read and write with understanding were utilizing their literacy skill in their day to day activity.

Issues of concern

Based on the findings of the study, 11 facilitators are required to serve about 2434 beneficiaries organized in 131 FAL groups. This translates to a facilitator-beneficiary ratio of 1:221 or a facilitator expected to serve about 12 FAL groups, which is quite large and might have adverse impact on the effectiveness of the program.

Firstly, learners would not get enough support from facilitators because they can hardly satisfy the need and interest of different FAL groups. Secondly, facilitators would be overburdened which in turn lead

them to frustration. Thirdly, it would be difficult to execute administrative tasks effectively and provide timely feedback.

The interview response indicate a gap between the MKC-RDA and the Woreda (district) education bureau according to the district officials, this link if it had been created the MKC-RDA would have gotten legal support from the Woreda Education Office. It would have also been possible to share the experience with governmental organizations so that the effectiveness of the approach would have been scrutinized and scaled up.

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 own capital. The FAL group served as credit giving association for members with fair interest rate and members having equal opportunity to borrow money as individuals or group of individuals protecting members from 'money lenders'. The creation of capital also brought about increased aspiration for growth, most of the beneficiaries engaged in different kinds of income generating activities which had helped them to inculcate entrepreneurship skills. Though the intervention was found to be generally successful, participants did

not get enough support because of the fact that the number of facilitators and beneficiaries were not proportional. Facilitators did not provide as much support as expected and significant number of beneficiaries do not have the ability to read and write with understanding.

Recommendation

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations have been made, which could improve the intervention program of MKC-RDA.

1. It is highly recommended that the strategy employed by MKC-RDA be scaled up at national level and the experience shared to different governmental and non-governmental organizations including religious institutions.
2. The organization should create a mechanism on how to tackle the problem of lack of facilitators. It is wise to look at the possibility of making use of beneficiaries to serve as co-facilitators should be considered. Initiating and building up culture of volunteerism could be another strategy towards solving this problem.
3. It was observed that a significant number of participants were still illiterate despite the different strategies in place. Thus, the organization needs to exert extra ordinary effort to create awareness and prove the

advantage of being literate to improved livelihood.

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