

Community Empowerment and Adult Literacy through REFLECT Methodology: Lessons from Mumias, Kenya

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Abstract: *Community empowerment generally and the empowerment of women particularly, is recognized as an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and respect of human rights, while literacy is regarded as a foundation for reducing poverty. Moreover, it is widely accepted that literacy is not only a fundamental human right but also a basic tool for making informed decisions and participating meaningfully in the development of society. But poverty reduction through promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women is an international target to which the Kenya Government is committed, as reflected in diverse policy documents and a number of development and poverty reduction projects in the Country that have been initiated by Non Governmental Organizations and funded by Kenya's development partners. The Mumias Education for Empowerment (MEFE) project, implemented in the western region of Kenya by the Anglican Church with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID), is one such project that sought to contribute to the achievement of international targets of poverty reduction, through community empowerment, using an adult literacy programme that applied the REFLECT approach. This paper reports on findings based on a study that examined the project purpose, objectives, approach and outputs. It highlights project impact, including a qualitative assessment of the pedagogical impact and "conscientisational" impact, and draws lessons for future similar projects.*

Keywords: empowerment, literacy, REFLECT methodology, project, Kenya

1. Context and Background to the MEFE Project

International, national and local efforts toward the elimination of poverty have existed and persisted over a long time. However, at global level these efforts intensified from 1990 through the adoption of the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), which was re-affirmed in 2000 at the World Forum in Dakar where a Framework for Action to deliver on the commitments was adopted, and further cemented by the approval of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by world leaders at the United Nations Millennium Summit held in 2000. This has further been affirmed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which calls for elimination of poverty in all its manifestations, as goal number one of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Report, 2016). Accordingly, poverty eradication is a collective commitment by governments and other players. At National Level in Kenya, the efforts for poverty elimination found expression in diverse government policy documents, including: Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation, 2003 – 2007; Kenya Vision 2030; First Medium Term Plan, 2008 – 2012; Second Medium Term Plan, 2013 – 2017; and the Concept Note on Medium Term Plan, 2018 – 2022. In Mumias, these efforts manifested through the initiation of the Mumias Education for Empowerment (MEFE) project by the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK), Mumias Diocese. This project, based in one of Kenya's rural areas predominantly inhabited by sugarcane farmers, was initiated, designed and implemented following a needs assessment which had been carried out in 1994 by the ACK.

The needs assessment established that poverty was the major problem confronting the majority of people living within the sugar belt region. The poverty was manifested in high levels

of malnutrition among children, high infant and child mortality, food insecurity, and high adult illiteracy rate especially among women. A significant observation of the assessment was that while women were responsible for their families' food, health and schooling, they had neither power nor control over resources (ACK Mumias Diocese, 1998a). In view of this, it was felt that there was an urgent need for an empowerment programme that would not only assist vulnerable members of the community (especially women and youth) by raising their awareness on better utilisation of available resources, but also creating new opportunities to gain access to increased resources. Accordingly, it was recommended and resolved that in order to realize the desired empowerment of the community, an appropriate literacy programme with the potential for utilising the local resources, promoting a meaningful involvement of communities, enhancing the capacity to generate pre-literacy and post-literacy materials in local languages and promoting the utilisation of literacy activities as a vehicle for development, be adopted as the vehicle for intervention. Subsequently, the REFLECT methodology, rather than the conventional model of adult literacy which was thought to lack functionality, was adopted.

The goal of the project was community empowerment and its purpose was to increase functional literacy in the project area, especially among women and youth, and this was to be achieved through three interrelated outputs, namely: the establishment and adaptation of the NFE/REFLECT programme in the project area; an increase in post-literacy activities for women and youth; and increased collaboration with the Government of Kenya, the Mumias Sugar Company, the Mumias Out growers Company and other institutions in the project area (DFID, 1998). Specifically, the MEFE project, whose implementation begun in 1998, aimed to influence poverty indicators positively by improving overall levels of literacy and developing the

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ability of poor people, especially women and youth, to identify and mobilize in areas where they would be able to contribute more effectively to the development of their communities. In this respect, the project focused on empowering poor and vulnerable members of the community through the use of the REFLECT programme methodology to enable them to create new opportunities for themselves. But what is poverty, what is empowerment (especially women's empowerment) and what is adult literacy? According to the *Human Development Report of 1995* (UNDP, 1995), poverty has a women's face as 70% of the world's poor were female. This was corroborated by the *EFA Global Monitoring Report of 2008* which showed that 64% of the 774 million adults in the world who lack basic literacy skills were women ((UNESCO, 2008); and in Sub-Saharan Africa the situation has not changed significantly a decade later. Extreme poverty has been defined as "people living on less than US Dollar 1.90 a day" (United Nations, 2016:). In this paper, however, we share DFID's broad perspective and definition of poverty as not only being a measure of lack of income but also consisting of "lack of access to services and opportunities for human development, lack of a voice in political life and decision making, and social subordination and exclusion" (DFID, 2000: 13). Accordingly, empowerment in this context is then conceptualized as a process by which individuals acquire the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and fulfil their potential as full and equal members of society. More specifically, women's empowerment, as has been rightly defined by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), should then include the following dimensions: acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed; developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life; gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power; and developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (UNIFEM, 2000).

Literacy is generally considered not only as a fundamental human right and a basic tool for making informed decisions and participating fully in the development of society, but also as a foundation for reducing poverty. The basic traditional definition of literacy is "the ability to read and write, with understanding, a simple statement related to one's life. It involves a certain continuum of reading and writing skills, and often includes basic arithmetic skills" (UNESCO, 2009: 251). However, this concept has evolved over time. Conventional definitions now project literacy in a broader dimension to include the ability to identify, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials in various contexts. Literacy is therefore "a process of learning that enables individuals to achieve personal goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in the community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2008:392). Adult literacy then refers to the above definition, but as applied to persons aged 15 years and above. The operational definition of adult literacy as embedded in the REFLECT methodology, as well as a brief description and analysis of REFLECT methodology which provides the conceptual framework that informed this study

and analysis of the Mumias project, are now explored below.

2. The Reflect Methodology

REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) was developed as a radical new approach to adult literacy and empowerment between 1993 and 1995 in three pilot projects in El Salvador, Uganda and Bangladesh (Archer, 2000). The approach was first developed by ActionAid, but has since spread to many other countries.

REFLECT, as an approach to adult literacy, is a fusion of Paulo Freire's theoretical framework and the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques. Freire posits that education (including adult literacy education) is and should essentially be conceived as a process of *conscientisation*, defined as "the development in the learners of a critical understanding of society and an awareness of their capacity to change society" (Youngman, 1986: 155). The development of such consciousness, it is argued, opens up the possibility of people liberating themselves by changing the social structures which de-humanise them and by building a new society. Freire distinguishes three levels of consciousness (naive, magical and critical) and argues that an empowering education is that which enables individuals to operate at the critical consciousness level. At this level of consciousness, individuals see society and the structures/policies thereto as "something unfinished not as something inexorably given, as a challenge rather than a hopeless limitation" (Freire, 1974:13). A pillar of the REFLECT methodology is the provision that participants will dictate the learning process in terms of both content and pace. This implies that, in applying the methodology, continuous adaptation to suit varying local conditions rather than mechanistic compliance to underlying principles, is key to its successful implementation.

The PRA tools, from which REFLECT as an approach to adult literacy and community empowerment draws, are designed to: enable communities to identify and define their own way to sustainable development; ensure that communities are able to articulate and rank their own development priorities; ensure empowerment of intended beneficiaries in exerting greater control over their resources and their lives; and ensure that local leadership, local knowledge, and local institutions are identified and mobilised for community development. Moreover, a PRA exercise comprises two critical components. First, is attracting outside assistance. This implies a realization that external assistance is available but needs to be identified and defined in the context of community priorities and, that while community institutions can take initial steps to solve their own problems, they may not necessarily have the capacity to solve them entirely on their own. Second, is the translation of all PRA exercises into a Community Action Plan (CAP) which represents a record of all the community's development priorities and potential, and which is subsequently used as a basis for sustainable development planning. Accordingly, "under the PRA framework, communities become directly involved in and responsible for assessing their own problems and arriving at a consensus on actions that need to be taken. This ensures

community commitment to their project” (Lelo, *et al*, 2001: 9).

The REFLECT methodology fuses and adapts Freire’s concepts of adult pedagogy and PRA techniques to arrive at a practical and contextualized approach to adult literacy and community empowerment. In this respect, REFLECT may be viewed from two dimensions: as an approach, and as a programme. As an approach, it seeks to develop participants’ (learners’) ability to operate at a critical consciousness level: to make a critical assessment of their lives, take control of their futures, enhance their literacy skills, generate a written vocabulary which is relevant to their own community situation, recognize and built upon their knowledge, and mobilize for individual and collective action (Ward, *et al*, 1999). As a programme, REFLECT requires that: there be no textbook or literacy “primer”; participants at every circle develop and produce their own learning materials employing participatory tools (graphics) which represent their local reality; the graphics so developed be used to stimulate meaningful dialogue (discussion), participant-generated literacy and numeracy work, and action to address local problems; rather than be left with an exercise book full of copied scribbles by the end of the literacy course, each circle participant will have a copy of the graphics produced as well as the literacy and numeracy work undertaken, as a real document. Indeed, throughout our interaction with primary stakeholders of the MEFÉ project, it was evident that REFLECT was embraced both as an approach to and programme for community empowerment.

It was against the foregoing understanding of REFLECT as an approach to adult literacy and community empowerment, that a study on the Mumias Education for Empowerment (MEFE) project was undertaken.

3. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of the study, sponsored and supported by the UK’s DFID as an output-to-purpose review, was to determine the extent to which the expected project outputs had been achieved, whether the process set for achieving the outputs had progressed as planned, and the extent to which the outputs had individually or collectively contributed to/or were likely to contribute to the attainment of the project purpose. It was further expected that the study would help identify key issues and lessons learnt, that would then help inform any subsequent phases of project implementation/expansion as well as potential areas for policy influence among project partners and the wider public. Among the specific objectives of the study, as defined by the project sponsor, were to assess the extent to which the project had: been able to target the identified vulnerable groups, and the impact of this on their representation on various decision-making structures, particularly at the higher levels of decision-making; and contributed to evidence to the debate on the link between literacy and economic empowerment. The secondary purpose and objective that I as a researcher had were two-fold: *pedagogical* impact and “*conscientisational*” impact. First was to assess impact of REFLECT methodology on adult pedagogy in the project area, particularly REFLECT circle facilitation, the learning process and perceptions of

adult education teachers in the project area. Second was to assess impact of REFLECT methodology on community empowerment generally and women empowerment specifically in the project area, and in particular the extent to which the REFLECT methodology had developed or was developing in adult learners a critical understanding of society and an awareness of their capacity to change and build a new society. This secondary purpose and objective of the study constitutes the main focus of findings reported in this paper.

4. Study Methodology

The study basically entailed an output-to-purpose review of the Mumias Education for Empowerment Project (MEFE), which was carried out by the author of this paper as a lead researcher, assisted by other team members acknowledged elsewhere in this paper. The data collection method involved project document analysis, interviews, focus group discussions, and observation of circle processes as well as income generating activities while on field visits. Among the documents reviewed and analysed were reports of the baseline survey, snapshot reviews, output-to-purpose review, as well as scrutiny of other primary sources of data including record books, registers, accounts, facilitator’s notebooks, project memorandum and minutes of various meeting held. In addition, a project video documentary depicting the impact of HIV/AIDS in the community within which the project was being implemented was reviewed.

The research team randomly sampled and visited 7 REFLECT circles (where circle facilitation processes and activities were observed and participants interviewed), and 3 Non Formal Education (NFE) centers. The focus was not on statistical quantification of project progress but on in-depth qualitative case analysis of pedagogical impact (impact of REFLECT methodology on adult pedagogy in the project area, particularly REFLECT circle facilitation) and “*conscientisational*” impact (impact of REFLECT methodology on community empowerment generally and women empowerment particularly). In addition, the team conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the project management, project staff, Community Development Facilitators (CDFs), NFE committees, and representatives from a number of Government of Kenya (GoK) collaborating Ministries. This was then followed by a feedback workshop for stakeholders where preliminary findings on issues, lessons learned and proposed recommendations for mitigation were presented and interrogated. In order to have a better understanding of the contexts, a visit was made to some areas within the region but which had not been exposed to or benefited from the REFLECT activities or other aspects of the project.

5. Study Findings

How the MEFÉ project was implemented

In order to address project purpose and achieve project outputs, implementation of the Mumias Education for Empowerment project comprised seven key dimensions, namely: establishment of REFLECT circles; recruitment and training of Community Development Facilitators and

Community Resource Facilitators; establishment of relevant project management structures; establishment of the endowment fund; capacity building of various committees in leadership and management skills; establishment and enhancement of public and private sector linkages and collaboration; and establishment of a system of monitoring, evaluation and dissemination of lesson learning. For purposes of this paper, only three dimensions of project implementations are briefly described below, namely: formation of REFLECT circles, recruitment and training of facilitators, and establishment of relevant project management structures.

Establishment of REFLECT circles

A REFLECT circle was the basic unit or cell that comprised 25-30 members (adult literacy learners), which acted as the focal point for functional literacy and post-literacy activities. The circles were established after a series of community sensitization and mobilization campaigns by project staff. At the time of this study, the project had established 236 REFLECT circles spread across 200 villages in the project area.

Recruitment and training of Community Development Facilitators (CDFs) and Community Resource Facilitators (CRFs)

The Community Resource Facilitators were selected by the community, given a two-week training in REFLECT methodology and deployed as facilitators for the REFLECT circles, where they worked as volunteers. The CDFs on the other hand, were competitively recruited as MEFEE project staff. Among their prescribed roles were: community mobilization; training of CRFs; preparation of project reports; monitoring and evaluation; and establishing as well as strengthening project management committees through relevant training and exposure visits. Accordingly, the CDFs were the officers on the ground that were in direct touch with both the CRFs and community members in the project area, and therefore constituted the vital bridge between the project management team and the primary stakeholders.

Establishment of relevant project management structures

The MEFEE project had a well established, functional and devolved management structure that comprised four levels, namely: circle committee, Non Formal Education (NFE) committee, endowment fund committee and project management committee. Each of these management structures had well defined roles and responsibilities not only of committees but also individuals within those committees. Membership to the committees was by election, except for representatives of collaborating partner organizations who joined the committee through nomination by the respective organization. The committee members volunteered their time and skills in the service to the community.

Establishment and Adaptation of the REFLECT Programme

The project management team had maintained a focussed and consistent drive with respect to the establishment of NFE/REFLECT programme related activities in the project

area. At the time of this study, the project was covering 200 villages, had established 19 NFE committees and 236 REFLECT circles covering 5,328 REFLECT learners. Table 1 shows a statistical summary of progress made towards establishment of the NFE/REFLECT programme in the project area, as measured against prescribed targets at commencement of the project.

Table 1

Indicator	Target	Actual	Achievement (%)
NFE committees established	20	19	95
REFLECT circles established	300	236	79
NFE Resource Centres established	20	15	75
CRFs trained	400	380	95

From the table, it is evident that overall at least three quarters of project activities geared towards establishment of the NFE/REFLECT programme had been successfully accomplished. This showed a significantly high success rate against projected targets.

Adaptation of the Programme

The key purpose of the project was to increase functional literacy in the project area, especially in women and youth, through the *establishment* and *adaptation* of the REFLECT programme. As already pointed out, in applying the REFLECT methodology, continuous adaptation to suit varying local conditions rather than mechanistic compliance to its underlying principles is key to its successful implementation. Moreover, it has been established that one of the keys to the success of REFLECT is the way in which it fuses a literacy learning process with an empowerment process based on people doing their own detailed and systematic local analysis. But what is empowerment? I share the assertion of Godfrey (1999) that empowerment, especially economic empowerment is achieved when a woman (or youth) feels fully able to employ her or his literacy in her or his own interest and for the good of her/his family and community. In this respect, empowerment is seen as a function of practice and experience, and is premised to occur when an individual has ample opportunity to try out ideas, use his or her own voice, and experience both success and failure from which she or he is able to deepen his or her personal awareness of his or her socio-economic potential.

With respect to the MEFEE project, a key question of the study was not only to what extent the REFLECT programme had been established but also to what extent it had been or was being contextualised or adapted to local conditions. From the field visits and observation of circle processes, this study established that learner attendance and participation in REFLECT circle processes and activities was high, the content of topics covered (such as HIV/AIDS, agriculture, income/expenditure distributions and cultural impediments to development), and the basic principles underpinning REFLECT approach to adult literacy were well understood but rigidly followed by circle facilitators.

In one of the previous project review reports, it had been noted that most CRFs observed and interviewed by the review team followed a rigid format during circle processes and that as a result, unique opportunities for meaningful

dialogue, which would translate into action plans, that arose during group discussions/debates were lost. Further, it had been noted that in many instances, the facilitation process was not discursive but narrative, participation was free flowing but not critical, and that as a result the impact of the project on liberation became minimal. However, the current study established that major improvements and gains over the shortcomings noted by the previous review had been realized. The topics discussed during circle processes were highly relevant and adapted to local needs, the facilitation process was both narrative and discursive although not critical in many instances, all the discussions were followed by clear action plans, and innovative attempts to apply multi-grade teaching/facilitation were being made. In one of the circle processes visited, the facilitator had grouped learners into three: non-literates; literates; and senior literates.

It was evident that REFLECT circle processes and activities had played an instrumental role in: challenging and shifting power relations at household level; gradually shifting cultural values and practices that had previously been discriminatory to women; and cultivating a slow but noticeable gender sensitivity and equality in sugar cane contracting.

However, in all cases of circle facilitation observed during this study, it was noted that while sufficient time was given to discussions, relatively less time was spent on actual literacy and numeracy development. Predictably, learners found discussion of practical issues more appealing than the literacy component, but this raised serious challenges on facilitators in terms of striking a balance between engagement in discussions of ideas and development of literacy as a core goal of the MEFÉ project.

6. Project Impact

Impact on Women Representation

The project has continued recording positive impact on promoting women representation on decision making bodies within the community. The composition of the MEFÉ staff itself has been a role model as not only is the project headed by a woman but also women constitute at least 40% of the project staff. This has acted as a motivation by other women in REFLECT circles to aspire for leadership positions.

The previous review noted that there was evidence of women representation on decision making structures, especially within REFLECT related structures. Specifically, it was reported that on average, women constituted 40% of leaders of various REFLECT circle committees. At NFE Committee level, analysis of the top three positions (chairperson, secretary and treasurer) revealed the following: chairperson- 100% male; secretary- 56% male, 44% female; treasurer- 11% male, 89% female. However, the current review revealed a significant leap in women representation in leadership positions within MEFÉ structures. At circle level, women now constitute 65% of the total number of officials while at the NFE committee level they constitute 52% of the officials. The table below gives comparative figures (by category) for the two reviews.

	2001		2002	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Representation at circle level	60	40	35	65
Representation at NFE committee level by type				
Chairperson	100	0	67	33
Secretary	56	44	55	45
Treasurer	11	89	17	83

Apart from representation within MEFÉ structures, women representation on community decision making structures has improved. A number of women now serve on local health management boards, school management committees and related structures. Leadership opportunities created for them at circle level have served as springboards to more involving leadership levels at community level. It was noted for instance that there was a woman candidate for the office of the Bishop of Mumias ACK Diocese when elections were called, although she withdrew from the race before the actual elections were held. For the first time in history, a woman from the project area has now been elected as one of the Directors on the Kenya Sugar Board. The project has been instrumental in encouraging women to contest in elective positions and the literacy project has given them the needed confidence that they can ably participate in such organs.

Savings and Credit Scheme as a tool of liberation from exploitation

The savings and credit scheme has slowly but steadily challenged and eroded the exploitative lending mode that had thrived in the project area before MEFÉ was introduced. Previously, poor members of the community would borrow money from rich businessmen offering either their unharvested sugarcane or some other valuables as security. The money borrowed was repayable within one to three months' period at 100 percent interest rate. In case of default, the borrower forfeited the sugarcane to the businessman or whatever security had been offered. The security demanded was often disproportionately higher in value than the money borrowed. In some instances, the defaulting family would offer themselves and/or children to provide free labour to the lender over a long period of time.

However, through MEFÉ vulnerable members of the community have been able to unite, mobilise their resources, and establish the savings and credit scheme where they can borrow and repay on more favourable terms – 10 percent interest rate. Besides, the project has educated them on how to invest money borrowed in income generating activities. As one member remarked:

I used to borrow money on a shilling for a shilling basis and I would risk prosecution, lose of my property or enslavement if I defaulted. But now I am able to borrow money with low repayment profit and with no strings attached.

In the above context, the savings and credit scheme is playing a transformational role not only by helping the poor to mobilise savings but also realize their potential for self emancipation against exploitation.

Stimulation and development of entrepreneurial spirit

One of the most significant contributions of the MEFE project has been a demonstration that in Kenya, poverty is as much a condition of the mind as it is a consequence of natural predisposing factors. This is because until MEFE was launched, most people (particularly women) in the project area seemed to have been successfully labelled as poor. They saw themselves as subservient to men and/or the privileged rich few. They believed and unquestionably conformed to the prescribed beggar status. But with the advent of MEFE and in particular their participation in REFLECT circle activities, they slowly started rediscovering their potential. Through discussion groups and organized exposure visits to other areas outside the project area, they came to learn that others elsewhere had made it despite operating in similar or worse environments. Through training in entrepreneurship they realised that investment and profit is not about volume of initial capital and ones social status but initiative, commitment and strategy. More importantly, they gradually appreciated that they too could be entrepreneurs, whatever the initial capital. As one member confessed:

I used to think that only rich people could start a business. But now I came to learn that you do not have to wait for 1000/= (one thousand Shillings) to start an income generating project. MEFE taught me that I can start a project with even 200/=. So I decided to start. I had 200/= which I used to buy a small tin of paraffin. After selling the paraffin and making profit I again bought a bigger tin of paraffin. Then I used the money raised to buy two bags of maize. I then made a bigger profit and was able to hire a shamba (farm) where I planted maize and harvested 8 bags. Now my business is still growing bigger and I am able to feed my family too.

From the above observations, one may see poverty as a state of the mind, and therefore equate the poor to a dormant but not extinct volcano. The REFLECT programme is then seen as an effective tool for liberating a conditioned mindset and a catalyst for transforming the volcano from a dormant to an active state.

Re-conceptualising traditional roles

The project has facilitated significant shifts in the way certain traditional roles are conceptualised and played within the community. A key strength underpinning these shifts is the project's emphasis on encouraging communities to reflect on and re-conceptualise rather than abolish established social role-structures. An illustrative case is the observed shift in the role of traditional midwives. Whereas previously they were only concerned with helping expectant mothers to safely deliver babies, they have now been sensitised and trained to evaluate and advise on other aspects of the family's health such as nutrition, general hygiene and family planning. This is reflected in the following observation that was made by one of the midwives when she was asked to state what benefits she had derived from REFLECT activities:

As a midwife, I am now on call, just like a doctor. Previously, I was not on call and in high demand,

because there was no organized grouping like REFLECT circle where my skills could be recognised, appreciated and sought for. But now, since REFLECT came, I do not just do midwifery, but when I go to a home I find out whether they have a toilet, the health status of the children, the eating habits of the family and the general cleanliness. Before, I could simply help her deliver the baby and go. I did not know that other things are important. But now I know them and practise them.

Literacy as protection against fraud

A critical mass of illiterate sugarcane farmers had for a long time acted as a ready market for enriching fraudsters. For instance it was reported that:

In Mumias, there used to be collaboration between agents and Bank Cashiers to defraud sugarcane farmers of their cash. For example while filling a cash-slip when the farmer asked for 800 shillings, the agents (purported to assist illiterate farmers to transact bank business) filled 8000 shillings instead and the unsuspecting farmer would sign the slip (by thumb print), be given the 800 shillings and the balance of 7200 shillings shared between the agent and the colluding cashier.

However, by producing an enlightened, literate and empowered community, the MEFE project through the REFLECT programme, made a great stride towards eliminating this social vice to which the vulnerable members of the community in the project area had been subjected to for a long period.

Reversal of declining adult participation in literacy activities in the region

A significant contribution of the MEFE project was the revival of literacy programmes in the project area. Adult participation in GoK sponsored literacy programmes had been on the decline. In western province (where the project was located) for instance, there were 49,859 adults enrolled in the programme. The number had dropped to 17,992 by 1990 and to 13,254 by the year 2000. In 2001, there were only 12,900 enrolled adults in the programme [Paper presented to the Review Team by the Provincial Adult Education Officer (Western) entitled: *Brief on status of adult education in western province in August 2002*]. Effectively therefore, adult participation in GoK literacy programmes had dropped by 73% over two decades. Prior to the commencement of the MEFE project, a headcount for illiterates was undertaken and it revealed that 483,907 adults were supposed to be enrolled in GoK literacy programmes in the then Western Province as opposed to only 12,371 (less than 3%) that were actually enrolled. Moreover, at the time of this study it was reported that a number of GoK adult literacy centres were inactive while a few had closed down altogether.

The above trends contrast sharply with the success story of the MEFE project whose REFLECT programme had recorded a total of 5,328 adult literacy learners over a period of three years and within a very small coverage area and population.

Improved access to agricultural services and enhanced food production

The project mobilised GoK agricultural extension officers and on several occasions facilitated their transportation to meet and educate farmers (REFLECT circle members) on modern farming techniques. Farmers' field schools had been particularly instrumental as avenues for disseminating appropriate attitudes and developing modern farming techniques. The establishment of income generating activities that also served as post literacy activities, such as poultry keeping, fish farming, horticulture and vegetable farming and marketing had increased the demand for agricultural extension services. Agricultural officers in the project area found themselves busy, no longer able to sit idle in their offices. When they do not visit farmers, the farmers were now able to demand services from higher offices through the MEFÉ project staff. As a result, the farmers had improved access to agricultural services. This seems to have had a positive impact on food production in the project area. Although there was no quantitative data to demonstrate this impact, there was qualitative evidence that suggested food production was on the rise. This was reflected in confessions by two women circle members who were interviewed. They had this to say:

I used to think that I had to concentrate many maize seeds together in order to harvest more, not knowing that many meant little and more expensive.

When my farm would produce yellow maize leaves (sign of infertility) I used to think someone had bewitched my farm. But now I know it is due to poor preparation of the farm.

Minimal project impact on civic awareness and critical consciousness

The project memorandum rightly asserted that the strength of REFLECT lies in its insistence that the learning process be dictated by its participants, and its recognition that adult literacy education is more effective if used as a means of achieving a defined end (see section 3.4.4.1 pg 16 of project memorandum). However, it defined three core areas towards which literacy activities were to focus or be directed, namely;

- Increased understanding of simple farming techniques;
- Small enterprise activities such as selling farm produce; and
- Community organization.

Along the way, the project has rightly evolved to embrace health, in particular HIV/AIDS, as a way of responding to emerging issues that threaten to reverse the gains already made towards fighting poverty in the project area.

However, evidence of civic awareness and specifically the empowerment of women and youth with respect to awareness of structures and policies, and the ability to analyse and challenge oppressive aspects of the same was very minimal in most cases. Does this call for the fourth dimension in project focus, or a re-examination of the third dimension (community organization) which seems to have

been interpreted as community mobilization? It was noted, for instance, that the project started by challenging the mental models that support the status quo at household and community level, dwelling mostly with the self or "who I am", and that the REFLECT approach has broken many of these mental models, cultural oppressive structures and enhanced awareness of "who I am", existing assets and potentials. Accordingly, the community should therefore strategically consolidate all these information and discoveries to make an informed analysis of the existing oppressive policies and structures. Specifically, since many of the learners have gained the confidence to speak in public and challenge some issues, adding the fourth dimension (civic awareness and critical consciousness) to the project focus is likely to achieve greater results.

Pedagogical and Conscientisational Impact

The quality of circle facilitation requires further scrutiny with a view to achieving higher levels of *conscientisation* among adult learners. This study established that while the Community Development Facilitators (CDFs) and the Community Resource Facilitators (CRFs) excelled in community mobilization and sustaining high levels of participation by learners in circle activities including discussions, the CRFs generally lacked the ability to induce, invoke or otherwise trigger critical thinking and discussion during circle facilitation. This could imply that people would continue operating at naïve levels of *conscientisation* despite their active participation in circle activities. Although the study could not conclusively establish the key contributory factors to the relatively low quality of circle facilitation, anecdotal evidence seemed to point to the need for examining the quality of CRFs, the cascade model of training CRFs and the quality of CDFs with a view to devising suitable intervention measures for future similar projects.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The MEFÉ project had, despite the many challenges and demands, largely kept focus on the purpose for which it was conceptualised. It was evident that the project was likely to largely achieve the three outputs: establishment and adaptation of the REFLECT programme in the project area; increased post-literacy activities for women and youth; and increased collaboration with the Government and other stakeholders. However, while sustainability of post literacy activities such as farming and endowment fund seemed largely assured, the sustainability of REFLECT literacy activities, especially small scale farmers' involvement in the learning circle, would need to be addressed through deliberate and targeted intervention strategies beyond the project life.

In order to enhance civic awareness and specifically the empowerment of women and youth with respect to awareness of structures and policies, and the ability to analyse and challenge oppressive aspects of the same, it is recommended that civic awareness and critical consciousness be explicitly embraced as a distinct dimension in the project focus for future similar projects.

Probably the greatest contribution the community made in the implementation of the MEFÉ project was in the use of the Community Resource Facilitators in adult learning circle processes. However, this study established that this voluntarism, on the part of the Community Resource Facilitators, could not be banked upon forever. Considerable time is required for one to be a good Community Resource Facilitator. To expect people to “donate” their productive time to community development to a level where meeting the needs of their families is jeopardized may, in the long run, undermine an otherwise good programme because this is not sustainable. The lesson is that ways and means should be sought to ensure that if community resource facilitators are deployed on voluntary basis, mechanisms should exist through which the time they spend on circle activities is compensated for. Further, as has been pointed out in the foregoing sections, the quality of circle facilitation requires further scrutiny with a view to achieving higher levels of *conscientisation* among adult learners.

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