

# Making Large-Scale Literacy Campaigns and Programmes Work



The past decade has seen a resurgence in the popularity of literacy campaigns as a means of mobilizing political will, resources and people. However, a recent analysis of adult literacy campaigns and programmes around the world from 2000 to 2014 found that most large-scale campaigns failed to achieve their overly ambitious targets (Hanemann, 2015a). The recommendations for policymakers outlined in this policy brief draw important lessons from this analysis and take into account the complexity of the literacy task ahead. Addressing the literacy challenge from a lifelong learning perspective will help policymakers to achieve the literacy target of the new global education agenda, Education 2030. This entails linking literacy campaigns to social change and mobilization; ensuring adequate investment; integrating literacy into holistic learning systems; making systematic use of technology; and improving the quality of literacy data.

### **Background: The renewed interest in the campaign model and its viability for the future**

Campaigns have long been used to mobilize people and resources on a large scale as a means of achieving ambitious literacy objectives within a limited amount of time. Mass adult literacy campaigns were particularly popular in the 1970s and 1980s, when they often followed liberation wars with a revolutionary or decolonizing agenda, but they became less common during the 1990s (Bhola, 1999). However, the Education for All movement (2000–2015) gave mass adult literacy campaigns fresh impetus and popularity. Thus over the past decade, major literacy campaigns and programmes have been launched in all world regions with the aim of improving the literacy levels of the young and adult population. Usually, an intense campaign running for a short period is followed by programmes which are more selective with regard to target groups and which tend to develop institutional and organizational structures. The recommendations resulting from Hanemann's analysis of these campaigns and programmes can inform further discussion of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular Target 4.6 of the Education Goal (SDG 4): 'By 2030, ensure that all

youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy' (UNESCO, 2015).

### **An analysis of the strengths and challenges of the campaign approach to literacy**

Hanemann's study examines major adult literacy campaigns and programmes that ran between 2000 and 2014 in thirty-two countries and provides four in-depth case studies from Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa. The analysis focuses on ten main aspects: (1) duration and number of adults targeted; (2) funding; (3) policies and legislative measures; (4) social mobilization; (5) partnerships and management structures; (6) inclusiveness; (7) recruitment, payment and training of educators; (8) pedagogical aspects; (9) monitoring and evaluation; and (10) the continuity of learning opportunities.

Based on the case studies it examines, the study identifies the following strengths and challenges of the campaign approach to literacy:

## Strengths

- Literacy campaigns have helped to create and harness momentum for general mobilization in the countries where they have been launched.
- Campaigns have placed literacy high on national agendas and helped to create a social environment that encourages motivation, participation and retention among learners.
- They have demonstrated strong potential for mobilizing different stakeholders for partnerships and strengthening commitment to contribute to national literacy efforts.
- Increased public and media interest in governmental literacy efforts has created pressure to make the results accountable.
- In some countries, literacy campaigns have been linked to or led to the creation of an institutionalized adult education system.
- If teachers and students from the formal education sector are mobilized as volunteers, the benefit and impact can be mutual, not only helping the non-formal but also energizing the formal education system.

## Challenges

- Major campaigns entail the risk of raising overly high expectations due to very ambitious and often unrealistic targets. This is then potentially linked with manipulation of data and loss of credibility.
- Centrally designed 'one-size-fits-all' approaches with a prescribed curriculum, objectives and materials are not always able to cater to a diversity of learner profiles involving different abilities, ages, prior experiences, geographical locations, genders, life circumstances, interests and expectations.
- The promotional language of campaigns often portrays illiteracy as a 'social illness' that can be permanently 'eradicated' with the right intervention. This stigmatizes and potentially demotivates people with low literacy skills. It may even induce people to hide their problems, particularly after a city, region or country is declared 'illiteracy-free'. It may also be harmful to long-term learning efforts, because some people need longer than the duration of a campaign to develop sustainable levels of proficiency in literacy and numeracy.
- Instead of developing human resource capacity with a longer-term perspective, campaigns rely greatly on voluntary work. This usually involves high staff turnover and lower investment in training, resulting in poorer teaching quality and instability.
- The magnitude of the campaign or programme poses challenges with regard to monitoring and evaluation. This often affects the reliability and credibility of internal assessments and reported data.
- There is often a lack of two-way flow of monitoring and feedback. In order to achieve quantitative results, functionality becomes a priority, resulting in inadequate reporting and less attention to qualitative outcomes.

It should be noted that most of these strengths and weaknesses also apply to smaller-scale programmes or non-campaigning approaches to literacy. The guiding question for future strategy should be: What are the enabling processes, structures and environments that need to be in place to allow the largest possible number of non-literate young people and adults to develop, improve and retain their literacy, numeracy and basic skills levels? The findings outlined below suggest a framework that addresses this question.

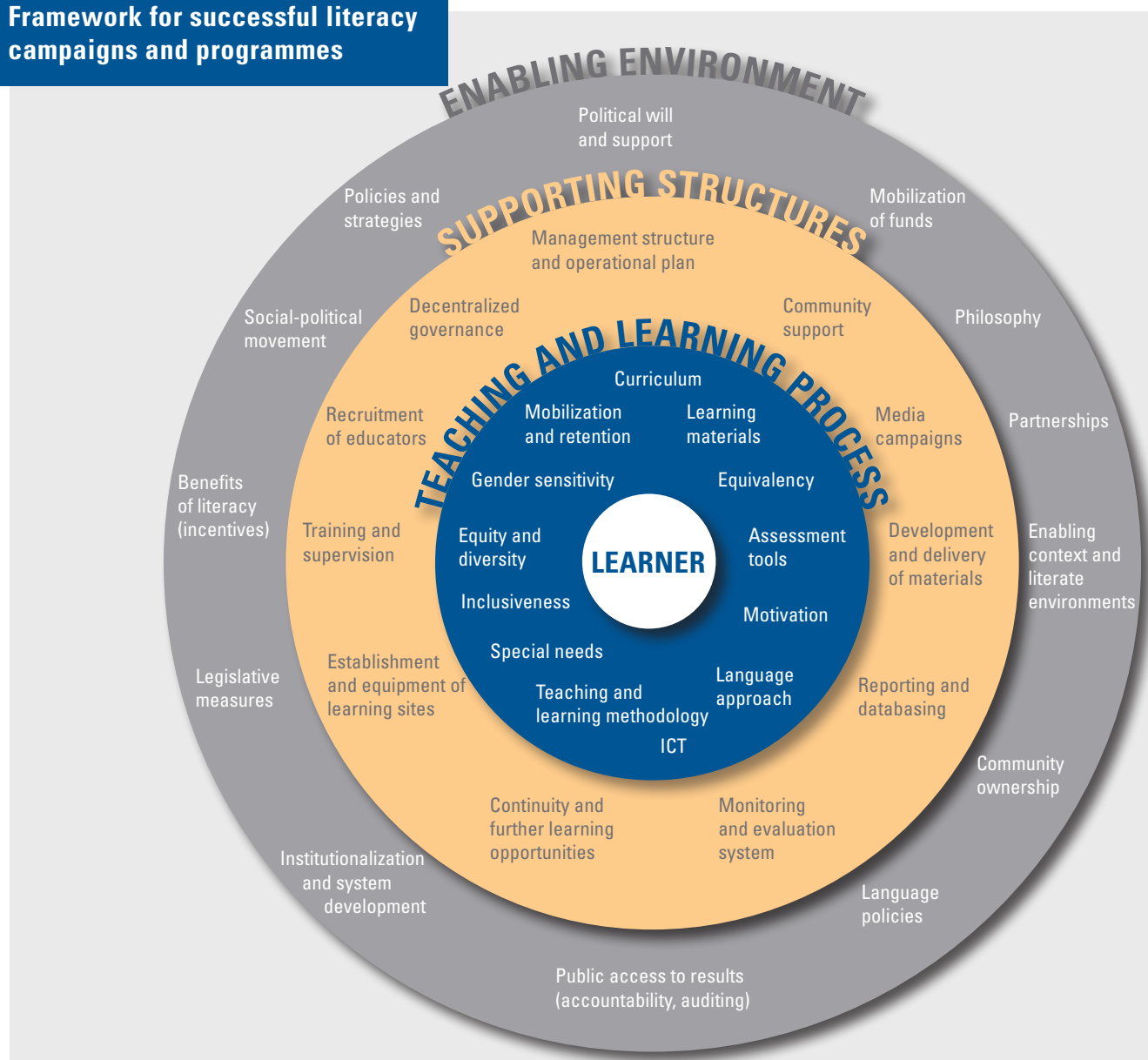
### **Main finding: The complexity of the task is often underestimated**

While campaigns and large-scale programmes help to generate momentum for literacy, they tend to set overly ambitious targets and underestimate the complexity of the task. The continuity of learning processes beyond

elementary literacy and the integration of short-duration campaigns into national (adult) learning systems are major challenges.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action reflects a contemporary understanding of literacy as a learning continuum of different proficiency levels. There is a growing recognition that enabling individuals to move beyond elementary literacy and master higher-order literacy skills is essential for the creation of knowledge societies. The Education 2030 Framework for Action states that 'by 2030, all young people and adults across the world should have achieved relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education' (UNESCO, 2015: 20). While each country will have to set its own targets according to its specific context, the setting of a minimum literacy threshold increases the ambition and complexity of the literacy task.

Figure 1:  
**Framework for successful literacy campaigns and programmes**



In Figure 1 above (Hanemann, 2015a), the complexity of successful large-scale literacy campaigns and programmes is captured in an analytical framework. The various elements, contexts, circumstances, systems, measures and resources are grouped around the **learner** in three domains representing the **teaching and learning process**, the **supporting structures** and the contextual dimension which shapes the **broader enabling environment**. The figure – which in no way exhaustively represents important success factors – shows that the initiation of a large-scale literacy campaign or programme is a highly complex endeavour that needs to be undertaken with a longer-term perspective.

### **Recommended action to make large-scale literacy provision work**

The following **key policy recommendations** are based on the analysis of the success factors of some major literacy campaigns and programmes from around the world.

#### **1) Link literacy campaigns to social change and mobilization processes**

Successful large-scale literacy campaigns and programmes are linked to processes of social change and development. Literacy should be integrated into national development strategies and provided in different settings to enable everyone to acquire basic skills and qualifications. A multi-pronged strategy works best to address the literacy challenge from different angles simultaneously and across the life span. It is necessary to work with a vision to develop the literacy skills not only of individuals but of whole families and communities. The ultimate goal is to build literate societies. Therefore, literacy has to be made more visible in society. The rights of many people still need to be fulfilled by providing them with the skills to participate in text-based activities. Good communication, social mobilization and advocacy work are required to raise the profile of literacy and strengthen commitment at all levels.

## 2) Ensure adequate investment in quality teaching and learning

Sustainable and sufficient funding is crucial for large-scale literacy interventions. Without substantial increases in funding for literacy programmes and sustained investment in human resources to build professional capacity in adult literacy and education, it will not be possible to seriously address the literacy challenge and achieve progress at the necessary pace. The backbone of an effective campaign structure is a pool of professional managers, trainers, monitors, coordinators, educators and facilitators who are available country-wide. This also requires partnership with universities and training centres, the development of quality criteria and quality assurance strategies, as well as the strengthening of research into and use of good practice and innovation.

## 3) Integrate literacy into holistic learning systems

Participation in adult literacy programmes is increasingly perceived as one step on a longer road to developing sustainable proficiency levels in reading and writing. This needs to be supported by literate environments and opportunities for further learning to obtain recognized qualifications. More must be done to establish systems of counselling and coaching to assist learners throughout their learning careers. Providing literacy programmes that are structured into levels of graded progression and creating different pathways that meet a diversity of (evolving) learning needs remain major challenges for most of the large-scale literacy campaigns and programmes currently running. This is why short-duration campaign approaches need to be firmly embedded into national (adult) learning systems while dealing with literacy as a continuum and as part of lifelong learning.

## 4) Make more systematic use of information and communications technology (ICT)

In the context of accelerated technological developments, the concept of literacy skills must be broadened to include the basic problem-solving skills required in technology-rich environments. A more systematic use of ICT is also important to expand the coverage of literacy programmes by reaching both learners and teachers with relevant training opportunities.

## 5) Improve the availability, reliability and comparability of literacy data for better planning, monitoring and evaluation

Although most countries have records of the number of learners enrolled in literacy campaigns and programmes, they do not have accurate information on successful completion rates. The databasing of campaign participants with unique identity numbers should become the rule, as this is the only reliable way to track individual learning careers. Such databases must be integrated into broader education management information systems (EMIS). Special efforts are necessary to improve the availability, reliability and comparability of literacy data for better planning and targeting. This includes using standard-based tests to generate comparable statistics on learning achievement and conducting more complex studies to assess proficiency levels of literacy and numeracy skills.

## Main recommendation: Promote literacy as part of lifelong learning with a long-term perspective

Future strategy should promote literacy as part of lifelong learning within the framework of the Education 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. Literacy can only unfold its full transformative potential if it is conceptualized and operationalized from a lifelong learning perspective. This involves: a) understanding literacy as a continuous learning process which takes place across all ages and generations; b) embedding literacy in or combining it with the development of other skills and integrating it into other development activities; and c) ensuring that literacy is part of national or sub-national learning systems and development strategies (Hanemann, 2015b). Integrated approaches such as family literacy bring literacy closer to people's lives and the different purposes for which they need or want to read, write, calculate and communicate. Making the achievement of literacy and numeracy part of lifelong learning attitudes, habits and systems should be an essential aim of campaigns and large-scale programmes. Rather than one-shot interventions and quick-fix solutions, this requires taking a long-term view when working towards literate societies.

### References

- Bhola, H. S. 1999. Literacy campaigns: a policy perspective. D. A. Wagner, R. L. Venezky and B. V. Street (eds.), *Literacy: An International Handbook*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press, pp. 288–293.
- Hanemann, U. 2015a. *The Evolution and Impact of Literacy Campaigns and Programmes, 2000–2014*. UIL Research Series No. 1. Hamburg, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002341/234154e.pdf> [accessed 3 January 2016]
- Hanemann, U. 2015b. Lifelong literacy: some trends and issues in conceptualizing and operationalizing literacy from a lifelong learning perspective. *International Review of Education – Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 61(3), pp. 295–326
- UNESCO. 2015. *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action. Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All*. Available at: <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/incheon-framework-for-action-en.pdf> [accessed 2 June 2016]
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). 2013. *2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Rethinking Literacy*. Hamburg, UIL. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002224/222407E.pdf> [accessed 3 January 2016]

Published in 2016 by  
UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning  
Feldbrunnenstrasse 58, 20148 Hamburg, Germany

© UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

