

Literacy and Education for Sustainable Development and Women's Empowerment



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1. Introduction

The fact that women constitute two-thirds of the world's non-literate population has been a cause for concern for several decades now. Despite a number of high-profile literacy interventions specifically targeting women – including UNESCO's LIFE initiative – the disparity between male and female literacy rates persists in many countries of the world (UIL, 2013). This starting point for thinking about women's literacy has however often led to a narrow focus on literacy access and outcomes. Whilst educational policy makers and planners have attempted to identify and overcome barriers to women's participation, researchers have directed their attention to measuring the social and economic benefits of women's literacy (see Robinson-Pant, 2004). Statistical correlations have been presented as evidence of the impact of women's literacy: for instance, in Pakistan, women with a high level of literacy earned 95% more than women with no literacy skills yet there was only a 33% differential amongst men (UNESCO 2012: 196). Barriers to participation have been analysed in terms of structural (timing, location, women-only versus mixed gender) and social (marriage, poverty, language hierarchies) factors (see Ballara 1991). Within such analysis however, little attention has been given to the social processes associated with literacy learning and development.

By contrast, this paper sets out to take a wider lens on literacy in order to explore not only 'what

works' in practical terms of encouraging women to participate programmes, but also to look at how and why literacy programmes can contribute to sustainable development and processes of empowerment. Taking this perspective on women's literacy involves asking alternative questions from the more usual 'how can we make more women literate?' Approaching literacy through the lens of sustainable development and women's empowerment means that we develop a more nuanced understanding of how different kinds of literacy emerge from or support different development approaches and how women engage with such processes of change. How is literacy related to sustainable development programmes? What does empowerment mean to different women in different situations? What kind of research evidence and knowledge are literacy programmes and policy building on? How can adult learning facilitate economic, social and environmental change? These larger questions will guide the conceptual exploration of sustainable development, women's empowerment and literacy, as well as the review of literacy programmes presented in this paper. The starting assumption is that only by looking in depth at the processes of literacy learning and development practice can we begin to address the challenge of narrowing the gender gap in literacy attainment.

2. Sustainable development: mapping the conceptual field

2.1. A short history of the concept

Introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in its 1987 report *Our Common Future* (also known as the Brundtland Report), the concept of sustainable development can be viewed as a response to increasing awareness of

the potential impact of economic and social inequalities, environmental degradation, population growth and climate change. The United Nations Secretary-General's Panel on Global Sustainability launched by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in August 2010 noted that while this new paradigm for economic growth, social equality and environ-



Women participating in the Senegalese *Tostan Community Empowerment Programme*

mental sustainability remained largely undisputed, 25 years on, sustainable development policies had still not been put into practice due to a lack of political will (UN 2012a, p. 4). Their report (*Resilient People Resilient Planet: A future worth choosing*) also pointed to the need to develop a 'common language for sustainable development' so that social activists, economists and environmental scientists could begin to work with each other to bring these ideas into mainstream economics (ibid, p. 5). The panel emphasised economic growth as the main imperative for sustainable development and women's empowerment - above the other two 'pillars' (social equality and environmental sustainability) - noting the costs of excluding women from the economy and the need for training to prioritise women so that skill shortages could be met. They suggested that 'the next increment of global growth could well come from the economic empowerment of women' (ibid, p. 6). The report argued that gender equality was an essential dimension of sustainable development, requiring support for women as leaders in the public and private sectors. The panel discussed the role of formal educational and training institutions in capacity building, and noted the potential of 'non-conventional networks and youth communities' (ibid, p. 16), such as inter-

net forums and blogs, in facilitating young people's participation and influence on decision making.

Ideas on participation and gender equality were further developed at the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in June 2012. The conference report, *The Future We Want* (UN, 2012b, p. 44) recognised that 'the potential of women to engage in, contribute to and benefit from sustainable development as leaders, participants and agents of change has not been fully realised, owing to, inter alia, persistent social, economic and political inequalities' and resolved to 'unlock the potential of women as drivers of sustainable development' (ibid, p. 45). Noting especially rural women's role in developing sustainable agriculture, the report identified a pressing need to address the specific challenges they face, including sexual violence and inequitable working conditions within the informal sector. The environmental dimension of sustainable development was discussed in terms not only of the hard skills and technology needed for a 'green economy' but also of the soft skills required to develop cooperatives, promote indigenous knowledge and ensure sustained, inclusive and equitable growth. The concept of sustainable development used in the report conveyed a strong sense of the interconnectedness of the three pillars, and placed a particular emphasis on rights,

women's voices and social justice. Sustainable development, it suggested, must be inclusive and people-centred.

The recent *Outcome Document from the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals* (UN 2014) placed renewed emphasis on social justice and gender equality, and sought to mainstream gender issues in relation to many of the goals (for example, in recognising women's major role as small-scale food producers under Goal 2 ('End hunger')). Of particular relevance to this report is Goal 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all'. Within the proposed targets, there is a focus on formal education, with reference to eliminating gender disparities. Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) by contrast does not mention formal education but emphasises the 'use of enabling technologies, in particular ICT, to promote women's empowerment'. The targets indicate a strong rights perspective on women's empowerment, expanding previous debates on gender inequality (UN 2012a) to address issues around gender violence, economic exploitation and political representation.

2.2. Education and sustainable development

Education has long been identified as key to translating the ideals of sustainable development into practice through enhancing people's skills and capacities to respond to change and supporting the transition to a green economy. UNESCO's International Research and Training Centre for Rural Education (UNESCO-INRULED, 2012, p. 23) noted the importance of an integrated approach to education, training and support shaped around the three central elements of sustainable development: i) claiming a stake for the marginalized in development; ii) responding to the feminisation of poverty; and iii) ensuring that sustainable production and consumption involves everyone, not just the poor. The Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005 - 2014) focused attention on the importance of education in supporting and facilitating the new values and practices required for a sustainable future: 'Sustainable development requires changes in the way we think and act. Education plays a crucial role in bringing about this change' (UNESCO, 2013, p. 1). The proposal for a global action programme to follow the decade emphasises the need to strengthen ESD in formal,

non-formal and informal settings, including the private sector, and to enhance e-learning and mobile learning opportunities for young people (ibid, p. 4). The seven ESD principles outlined in the proposal recognise the transformative potential of participatory education, emphasising: 'innovative, participatory teaching and learning methods that empower and motivate learners to take action for sustainable development' (UNESCO, 2013, p. 2). However, the proposal makes no reference to gender equality or women's rights, in contrast to the strong concerns around the feminisation of poverty raised in other policy documents on sustainable development (see previous section). During the decade, a discussion paper, *The Forgotten Priority* (UNESCO, 2009) had proposed developing a gendered approach to ESD strategic planning as a key step towards promoting gender equality.

So far, this paper has looked at education for sustainable development, reflecting the stance taken by the UN panel and conference discussions mentioned above (see UN, 2012a, 2012b). An alternative approach is to compare the principles, practices and values of sustainable development with those underpinning adult education and lifelong learning. Mauch (2014) points out that sustainable development was already recognised as a core objective for adult learning before DESD: the decade 'reinforced an existing consciousness that ALE (adult learning and education) could provide a core contribution to achieving sustainable development' (ibid, p.1). Both sustainable development and adult learning and education are informed by the concept of lifelong learning. However, the dominant focus on schooling and formal education within the Education for All (EFA) policy agenda has meant that this vision has rarely been realised in practice. The *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (UIL 2009) noted that adult education was still not a priority in many countries. In research with partners in India, the Philippines, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, the Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE, 2012, p. 18) found that less than 1% of national education budgets was spent on adult education and literacy (see also UIL, 2009). Aside from the resource implications for adult education, incorporating ESD could help the EFA agenda to take a wider and more critical perspective on formal schooling too. Parker and Wade (2012, p. 7) warn: 'Without more synergy with ESD, the danger for EFA in focusing so strongly on universal primary education (UPE) is that this is likely to uncritically reproduce the fragmented subject-led

and curriculum-dominant model of current school systems'.

Adult learning and education aims to promote competencies which are associated with sustainable development, including critical thinking, imagining future scenarios, and participatory teaching and learning (Mauch 2014, p. 9). Designing effective adult learning opportunities requires greater recognition of how non-formal, formal and informal learning interact. There is a need to provide 'learning contexts and processes that are attractive and responsive to the needs of adults as active citizens' (ibid, p. 14). As Parker and Wade (2012, p. 23) note, this interaction between different modes of learning is a key element of ESD: 'ESD not only stretches from formal education, to training, to raising public awareness, but also considers how entrenched learning through socialisation may need to be challenged and/or preserved'. The rights-based approach to literacy and the prioritisation of marginalised groups advocated in UIL (2009) clearly fits with the focus on addressing social inequalities in discussions on sustainable development. However within lifelong learning policy discourses, there has been a notable lack of reference to gender equality (Rogers, 2006). This was reflected in a workshop on ESD and Lifelong Learning (Ouane and Singh, 2009), which discussed issues around social justice and redistribution but not in relation to gender.

The other two pillars of sustainable development - economic growth and environmental sustainability - have influenced particularly the content of adult learning programmes and tended to promote a more 'instrumental' approach to women's empowerment through functional literacy. Considering the economic pillar, adult learning projects which focus on income generation and combine vocational skill training with numeracy and literacy for record keeping, have continued to

be popular with programme planners (ASPBAE, 2012). Discussing the earlier literacy and livelihoods approach, Hanemann (2005, p. 102) suggested that most programmes adopted a 'restricted economic view of livelihoods' by prioritising income-generating activities, which prevented them from taking into account people's own views of 'livelihood' as also encompassing social and cultural resources. By linking adult education and literacy with the 'hard' literacy and vocational skills required for economic activities, both sustainable development and the earlier livelihoods approach have tended to take a more narrow approach to women's empowerment - prioritising functional skills over gender awareness and political mobilisation.

In relation to the environmental pillar, functional literacy programmes have also proved a popular approach to introducing environmental issues, such as the protection of community forest resources. However, such programmes have often adopted a didactic approach to conveying messages about sustainable development through stories or articles addressing environmental topics such as soil degradation and climate change. Although the intention may have been to encourage the individual learner to relate the issues to their own situation, in practice, literacy facilitators have frequently focused only on conveying environmental messages and asking learners to memorise and repeat them. By contrast, ESD envisages promotion of a more participatory pedagogy in order to facilitate critical thinking and takes a more holistic approach to development. With limited resources available for training and employing facilitators, a major challenge remains how to ensure that literacy programmes do not end up simply reproducing the 'chalk and talk' or rote-learning approach that many facilitators and participants have experienced in school.

3. Women's empowerment: moving beyond the slogan

For many decades, women's empowerment has been a stated objective of educational policies and programmes, particularly those focused on adult literacy. Growing recognition that women's expe-

riences and needs differ according to age, culture, ethnicity and education has challenged conventional development practices, which have tended to target women as a homogeneous group. There



Women learning about preserving marine environments in Kenya using XO computers

is now widespread recognition that ‘empowerment means different things for women in different situations’ (UIL 2014, p. 3) and that education alone is rarely sufficient to generate such social and political change. However, the tendency to think of ‘women’s empowerment’ as an output rather than a process still persists and this is reflected in the kind of research evidence used to analyse women’s empowerment. Statistical measures of women’s literacy, decision-making and economic participation have a greater influence on policy than ethnographic insights into how women’s lives and identities are changing. As Sholkamy (in DFID 2012, p. 9) has suggested, we need to move beyond a mechanistic notion of women’s empowerment to a deeper understanding of both policy and practice: ‘Women’s empowerment is often treated by international agencies as something that can be designed as a policy blueprint, rolled out and scaled up. What actually happens when policy is conceived, negotiated and shaped may be altogether different’. This relates also to our earlier discussion on the practical difficulties of implementing critical literacy pedagogies on a large scale and the unanticipated ways in which participants and staff may shape a programme at local level.

Through participatory and ethnographic research, the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Programme (DFID, 2012) set out to listen to and learn about women’s lived experiences. Aiming to move away from stereotypes, this approach to empowerment aimed to ‘countenance contradictions and celebrate plural visions and versions of empowerment that fit with the contexts in which they are voiced’ and framed empowerment as ‘a journey not a destination’ (Cornwall in DFID, 2012, p. 3). Research evidence demonstrates that ‘what works in one context to transform women’s lives will not necessarily produce the same effects in another’ (ibid, p. 9). This broader transformative model of women’s empowerment has implications for how we view education for sustainable development, and, in particular, the significance of women organising for change.

Rather than taking formal education as the main vehicle for developing new capacities, skills and aspirations (as within ESD), the DFID report prioritises informal learning. It draws on insights into how women are learning about new possibilities and gaining different experiences through, for example, watching TV, and the importance of women’s organisations in developing relationships among women which support processes of em-

powerment. The notion of working 'with women's imaginations as well as with material aspects of their lives and for changing the way women see themselves and are seen by others' (ibid: 10) stands in sharp contrast to policy approaches which promote women's empowerment for more instrumental economic purposes. A broader perspective is also taken on economic empowerment, emphasising women's control over resources and the importance of 'decent' work. By taking a gendered perspective on social, economic and political structures, the report looks at how education can be transformed and owned by participants. An example is given of how women in a taleem class (discussion group on religious texts) in Bangladesh wanted to gain a textual understanding of Islam in order to develop, question and critique traditional practices (ibid, p. 12). Longwe (2008: 31) describes how Lububa women in Zambia spontaneously took collective action through forming women's committees, because their 'traditional sphere of gender influence' and control over equitable distribution of food had worsened within the refugee camp context.

This broader lens on education and women's empowerment raises questions about how we

define sustainable development and about the limitations of planned development interventions. The bottom-up and process-orientated model of women's empowerment described here, like the sustainable development approaches discussed earlier, has a focus on equity. There is a similar emphasis on the 'soft skills' required for women to organise and move into new areas of economic and social action. However, in contrast to education for sustainable development, this approach to women's empowerment is informed by a notion of development and learning as spontaneous, unbounded processes and by recognition of the limitations of planned interventions with predicted outcomes. Although participatory teaching and learning approaches are promoted within ESD in order to develop skills of critical analysis and build confidence, participation is rarely considered in relation to larger questions concerning who decides what development means and whose values are promoted. These are particularly significant issues to consider in relation to gender equality and women's empowerment.

4. Towards a framework for analysing adult literacy programmes for sustainable development and women's empowerment

Through this discussion of sustainable development and women's empowerment, several key aspects have emerged with regard to the kind of education that could support these two different but interconnected processes of change. The three dimensions of sustainable development – economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability – are situated within a framework of lifelong learning and discussed in terms of the new knowledge, skills, technologies and values required by people. While recognising the need for gender parity in schooling, transformative approaches to women's empowerment move beyond formal educational institutions and programmes to consider how women engage in different kinds of learning through the media, social organisation,

migration and work. This section focuses on the implications of taking a sustainable development and women's empowerment perspective on adult literacy and learning, with the aim of reviewing trends in policy and programming.

4.1. Soft skills, hard skills and/or green skills?

There is growing recognition of the importance of developing soft skills within both ESD and women's empowerment initiatives. Skill development should be broader than 'technical competencies' (UNESCO-INRULED, 2012, p. 13), and should encompass capacities such as communication,



Participant of the Moroccan *Functional Literacy Programme of Women of the Argan Cooperative*

teamwork, creative skills and interpersonal behaviour. The concept of 'green skills' has also been discussed in relation to soft skills. These can include leadership skills, adaptability to apply new technologies, environmental awareness (ibid, p. 30) and attitude change around the three Rs (reduce, reuse and recycle) (UN, 2012b, p. 26). Young people in particular require such capacities to respond to the rapidly changing and increasingly risky rural agricultural environment, with ever shrinking access to land and resources (IFAD-UNESCO, 2014). However, soft skills alone are not sufficient. UNESCO-INRULED (2012, p. 22) calls for a 'multi-pronged approach' linking literacy skills, production skills (including some specialised green skills for new occupational categories), quality of life components and other support (such as access to credit or legal reforms around land ownership). This more holistic approach to skill development proposes the concept of a learning community, recognising that skill training occurs in 'formal, non-formal and on-the-job settings' (ibid, p. 10).

Turning to women's empowerment, there have been proposals to explore 'new learning spaces for women' (DFID, 2012), in recognition that certain skill areas are strongly gendered or that women need to 'catch up' on soft skills in a safe environment. The question of 'which skills and whose knowledge?' are conveyed through a curriculum has been explored through research with women and points to the importance of participatory planning. Women in Palestine who had attended training on democracy complained in interviews with researchers: 'really we are bored from always hearing the same subject, communications workshop, democracy. Learning about our bodies would be better' (DFID, 2012, p. 18). A more participatory approach to developing skill development initiatives has also allowed providers to adapt to local market needs, thereby ensuring greater chance of employability.

A number of issues are emerging here, chiefly: the value of adopting a broad perspective on adult learning and skill development, and the need to consider hard and soft skills as interdependent,

and to explore a range of soft skills through facilitating participatory planning approaches. Many programmes work from assumptions about women's roles and interests (illustrated by the provision of training on democracy for young women in Palestine) rather than by investigating their lived realities and visions for the future. It is also important to recognise that skill development alone is not enough: poor rural women may also require access to credit, land and supportive legislation.

4.2. Moving from women's literacy to gender empowerment

Adult literacy policy has often adopted what has been termed an 'efficiency' approach (see Moser 1993), aiming to make women more efficient in their roles as wives and mothers through focusing on their reproductive role and informed by an economic rationale. Rather than challenging gender inequalities directly, such programmes frequently promote a functional literacy approach, linking basic literacy learning with knowledge about sanitation, maternal/child health, nutrition and family planning. By contrast, the more politicised 'rights' approach to adult literacy builds on Freirean critical literacy pedagogy to encourage women to reflect on traditional gendered roles as a starting point for collective action. Reflect circles, learning groups based on Freire's dialogic approach, have involved men as well as women in this process of discussing and challenging gender relations and roles.

Recent discussion of women's literacy has stressed the difficulties of translating policy into action – noting that even participatory approaches to women's literacy may be implemented through a one-size-fits-all programme that disregards women's diverse interests and identities (Eldred et al, 2014). Ghose and Joshi (2012, p. 117) note that 'gender continues to be largely understood as being a biological category, with girls and women being identified as "target groups"'. They argue that 'gender goes well beyond access issues and needs to be understood in terms of power relations ... interrogating issues of power within education content, classroom practices and structures and ideologies that determine women's lives'. Beyond the classroom, the resourcing of literacy programmes and the career progression of practitioners can also be investigated from a gendered perspective. Women's literacy programmes are often seen as a second-class education, because

of their reliance on female volunteer teachers. These teachers often lack opportunities for career progression as programmes are inevitably run on a short-term basis. The potential of such women facilitators to act as role models for those whom they teach is undermined by their low status within many development programmes. This relates to the earlier discussion of women's empowerment as a process rather than an output. Within both critical and functional approaches to literacy, empowerment may be considered only in terms of the literacy class participants, rather than looking more holistically at gender equality within the programme as a whole.

Taking a transformative approach to women's empowerment requires an understanding where women are now – rather than accepting stereotypes of women's roles in the family, types of work or relationships. Exploring women's lived realities has implications for literacy planning and programming. This might involve working out language policy from an understanding of how women and men use and have access to various languages within their everyday lives; building on informal and intergenerational learning practices and responding to women's multiple and changing identities (such as the often conflicting identities of farmer and student, see Anyidoho et al, 2012). A life-course approach needs to be adopted – recognising that while young men may gain greater autonomy over their lifetime (inheriting land and resources, gaining mobility), for women, the opposite may be true (Bennell, 2011). Recognising the influence of education and the media on values, practices and aspirations – working with 'women's imaginations' as well as their material conditions (DFID, 2012) – means that literacy programmes need flexibility and participatory planning to respond to this dynamic situation.

This analysis points to the importance of identifying the aims and rationale for promoting women's literacy – whether these are around empowerment, better integration of women into the formal economy or improving their roles as mothers. Although many programmes use the term 'women's empowerment', it is most often associated with acquiring functional skills ('what women can do for development rather than what it can do for them', Heward and Bunwaree, 1999) rather than challenging gender inequalities and gender-based violence. Focusing on women's empowerment as a process rather than a product implies taking a broader perspective on literacy programmes, rather than simply analysing the

curriculum and approaches to learning and teaching in isolation. This might involve investigating informal learning – such as learning through role models or exploring the status of women staff within the programme. It could mean looking at how women engage with new ideas and values outside the programme – for example, through the media – or asking how language affects access to informal learning in a community. As well as recognising that women's empowerment means different things to different women, literacy policy also needs to reflect that the meaning of empowerment will change for each individual over the course of her lifetime.

4.3. What kind of literacy and when?

Research on 'situated literacies' (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic, 2000) has emphasised the limitations of an approach that focuses only on the one dominant literacy (reading and writing 'standard' texts) associated with school (Street, 1995). A 'situated' approach, by contrast, recognises and values the multiple languages, modes (visual, oral, written or digital) and scripts that people encounter in everyday life, such as religious books, agricultural extension leaflets, application forms for a job or a loan, mobile phone texts and radio or TV programmes. This conceptual framework can help us to analyse what kind of literacy practice is being introduced or supported through adult learning and sustainable development programmes. In multilingual situations, conflict may be involved in the choice of language for literacy training and it is important to recognise 'the implications of complex linguistic ecologies for learning' (Hannemann, 2005, p. 104). With regard to women's empowerment, an understanding of the hierarchical relationships between languages, and how these play out through gender relations within a specific community is essential.

Education for sustainable development policy emphasises the growing importance of digital literacy (see UN 2014, Goal 5.b, in relation to gender equality). Launching UNESCO's LIFE programme, Tang (2005, p. 28) explained that the programme's core literacy work would be linked to life skills, income generation and sustainable development through the innovative use of ICTs, including distance education and an online platform for teacher training. As well as supporting distance-learning opportunities, mobile phones are increasingly being used to support rural

livelihood strategies (for example, in finding out market prices for goods). Research shows that young people in particular have learned to use mobile phones, even if they are unable to read and write, through developing visual symbols and learning with their peers (IFAD-UNESCO 2014). As with other literacy practices, access to mobile phones and their use may be gendered. For instance, young women in a rural community in Egypt explained that they were not allowed to own a mobile phone until they were married because their families were concerned that they would use them to start illicit relationships (*ibid.*). Similarly, a case study from Pakistan (UIL, 2013) revealed that men were reluctant to let their wives use mobile phones for learning, as they associated this with a lack of control.

The question of when and how people should learn literacy forms another essential part of the proposed framework for analysing literacy programmes. Taking a 'social practice' (Street, 1995) approach to literacy involves recognising that 'literacy is not practised in a vacuum: it is embedded within some socio-cultural set of activities' (Rogers and Street, 2012, p. 17). Rather than assuming that only literate people can participate in literacy activities, researchers have explored how non-literate people also learn to negotiate written texts – for instance, how a vegetable seller in Pakistan could 'read' the names of vegetables and fruits (what Nabi et al (2009) term 'hidden literacies'). This model of literacy proposes that literacy is collaborative – rather than individual as in traditional perspectives on 'schooled' literacy- and that people develop networks of support for literacy activities. Within the context of ESD policy and programming, there are specific implications for the organisation and structuring of literacy teaching. Rather than assume that learners should attend a literacy class, then later apply reading and writing skills to development activities, programmes can start from livelihood activities with the aim of identifying and supporting embedded literacy in either formal or informal ways. This contrasts with the 'literacy first' approach (critiqued by Rogers, 2000) shaping many functional literacy programmes which set out to link initial literacy learning to sustainable development. Rather than setting up separate programmes for non-literate people, the 'literacy second' or 'embedded literacy' approach also recognises informal learning and networks of support. For instance, in Sri Lanka, non-literate farmers learned literacy skills alongside literate farmers while engaged in

a training programme about pests and pesticides (Daluwatte and Wijetilleke, 2000).

The term 'literacy' often takes on a wider meaning in the context of women's literacy policy and programmes, encompassing other kinds of learning, particularly the soft skill development that women engage in through literacy interventions. Like the varied meanings of 'women's empowerment', we cannot take 'literacy' in such discussions as necessarily meaning simply reading and writing or even the 'broader conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural context' signalled by the term 'literacy practices' (Rogers and Street 2012, p.16). Similarly, Hanemann (2005, p. 102) pointed to the contested meaning of 'life skills', suggesting that the term was used for 'other dimensions of literacy than reading, writing and numeracy, such as problem-solving skills, working in teams, networking, communicating, negotiating and critical thinking'. A recent seminar held by the International Council of Adult Education and UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning in Hamburg (June 2014) arrived at the conclusion that life skills were best defined by Delors' four pillars of learning to be, to know, to do and to live together (UNESCO 1996). Given the centrality of the terms 'literacy' and 'life skills' within ESD policy discourse, these varying definitions need to be taken into account when considering how women's literacy can facilitate processes of empowerment.

Ethnographic research into the diversity of women's roles, identities and everyday literacy practices highlight the value of adopting a social practice approach to educational and development

planning. However, there are many difficulties in implementing this approach within programmes, particularly on a large scale. As Bown (2004, p. 249) warned: 'Our main predicament is that we are concerned about diversity in literacies, in women's interests in locales and methods of literacy learning, while policy makers, with costs in mind, are concerned about uniformity. Is there any hope of convergence?' The predominance of one-size-fits-all women's literacy programmes today suggests that this tension will continue as long as formal educational interventions are seen as the main route to girls' and women's empowerment. Seeing women's empowerment as a journey not a destination, with greater attention given to informal learning within development contexts and outside formal programmes, is a first step towards implementing a social practice approach to women's literacy.

This paper has gone some way to answering the initial questions posed in the introduction about how literacy is related to sustainable development and what empowerment means to different women in different situations. By drawing on ethnographic and participatory research into how women engage with development and literacy practices, a framework has been developed which does not rely on stereotypes of women's roles, assumptions about what skills they need or why. The importance of informal learning has emerged in relation to all three pillars of sustainable development. Given the focus on attitudinal and behavioural change within discussion on sustainable development and women's empowerment, it is critically important that we ask how formal and non-formal programmes can facilitate and build on such informal learning.

5. Investigating adult literacy programmes through a gendered Education for Sustainable Development lens

This section will review a wide range of adult literacy programmes¹ in relation to the ideas about education for sustainable development and

women's empowerment introduced above. The focus will first be on each of the three pillars of ESD (economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability) in order to analyse how various programmes have addressed these dimensions in relation to women's literacy. It is worth emphasising here that the majority of literacy pro-

1 The source for these case studies is UIL (2013) and the UNESCO Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices database (LitBase, <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/>) unless otherwise indicated



Women of the Argan Cooperative learning about current threats of economic exploitation to the environment

grammes set out to combine at least two of these dimensions - an important part of this analysis is to identify how programmes have developed the synergy between the three dimensions. However, in order to look in more depth at the relationship between literacy and each pillar, programmes have been categorised initially according to which sustainable development dimension is their main focus or entry point.

5.1. Literacy and Environmental Sustainability

Whilst many literacy programmes have incorporated environmental issues into their curriculum (protecting the forest or reducing pollution of water sources, for example), there are few that have made environmental sustainability their core concern. An exception is the *Mayog Family Literacy Programme* in Sabah, Malaysia (Gunigundo,

2012). This programme worked with women from the largest indigenous group, the Kadazandusun, whose land and livelihoods were being immediately threatened by logging and other kinds of exploitation. The project began by exploring indigenous beliefs about the environment – which included the belief that nature has its own spirit – and the need to pass these ideas on to the next generation. What was unusual was that the project not only targeted non-literate women, but also encouraged peer learning, through literate and non-literate women writing together in groups about their experiences in their own language. Eleven themed stories about environmental issues – including landslides, bio-piracy and deforestation – were published. The books were read by women to their children, and later introduced into teacher training colleges with the aim of incorporating indigenous knowledge about forest conservation into the formal curriculum. By building on indigenous and informal learning, the project recognised women's



Functional Literacy Programme of Women of the Argan Cooperativ, Morocco

existing knowledge and helped develop their roles and capacities through writing, editing and publishing books for the children in their community.

The *Functional Literacy Programme of Women of the Argan Cooperative*, run by the national NGO Association Ibn Albaytar in Morocco, had similar origins. The programme aims to respond to current threats of economic exploitation to the environment and to 'promote and demonstrate a balanced relationship between people and nature'. The Argan tree, from the programme takes its name, serves as a buffer against desertification from the Sahara desert. It is also a source of oil used in cooking, the cosmetics industry and for traditional medicine. Women have traditionally worked in the Argan oil trade. Through this programme, divorced or widowed women were supported to set up their own cooperatives. A new literacy programme was designed in Amazigh, a Berber language spoken by the women, and combined practical skills around running the

cooperatives (including knowledge of legislation) with awareness-raising about the importance of preserving the Argan forest. The project also introduced knowledge about new family laws, especially those concerning the status of divorced women. All three dimensions of sustainable development were combined in this project – and by targeting a specific group of women (divorced, Berber speaking and all in the Argan oil trade), it was possible to address both their practical and strategic (longer term) gender needs (Moser, 1993). The programme links closely with the government's *Projet Vert* (Green Plan), which suggests that it may be possible to sustain and integrate their experience and expertise in the Argan sector.

These two programmes show how women's traditional roles and their knowledge of the environment can be enhanced and disseminated through literacy activities. New literacy practices and knowledge can also become an entry point for environmental and literacy programmes.

Empowering Self-Help Groups in Kenya through ICT for Better Education and Alternative Livelihood Activities, a programme run by the NGO Coastal Ocean Research and Development in the Indian Ocean (CORDIO East Africa) and Avallain Ltd Kenya, teaches coastal communities how to preserve marine environments through 'interactive community training units with literacy and environmental content'. Working with Avallain, a social enterprise based in Switzerland which offers expertise in e-learning and e-publishing, the programme combined environmental issues with basic skills and ICT skills to foster employability. 'Avallain Author' software was used to develop simulated case studies focused on fishery, tourism and the environment. The programme was based on the Swedish model of participatory learning in study circles known as folkbildning. Women were provided with laptops, which proved popular as they could use them while sitting together on the ground rather than in a more formal classroom environment. Participants learned to use computers to access the internet, record their sales and meetings, and make calculations – though some women struggled due to age and failing eyesight. There were also issues concerning the inadequate infrastructure and high costs of implementing this programme in such poor rural areas. However, the project shows the potential for non-literate women to engage with new digital literacy, as a way of gaining knowledge about marine conservation and enhancing their livelihoods.

In contrast to projects such as these, which were all implemented within local communities, the *NaDEET (Namib Desert Environmental Education Trust) Environmental Literacy Project* set up an environmental education centre on the NamibRand Nature Reserve in Namibia's southern Hardap Region. Run by a group of environmental activists, the centre works with both children and adults to provide hands-on experiential learning and the opportunity to reflect on their real-life experiences in relation to sustainable living and climate change. The centre also produces publications, including the *Bush Telegraph*, a youth magazine covering environmental topics with a distribution of more than 18,000 (over half of the readership of the Namibian national newspaper). Their sustainability booklet series is also available to download in PDF versions. Like the Mayog programme in Malaysia, this project aims to engage a broad range of people – not only non-literate women. Through the booklets, participants can share what they have



XO computers used in Kenya to empower self-help groups through ICT for alternative livelihood activities

learned about ways of reducing pollution and living sustainably (for example, by making fuel bricks out of paper litter) with their family and community members when they return home. This approach has been constrained by a lack of resources to develop materials in indigenous languages.

Although environmental issues are the entry point of these projects, the first three case studies also show how social equality and economic activities can be incorporated into the programmes as integral to supporting environmental change. With regard to women's empowerment, projects differ in how far they adopt participatory planning approaches and whether they recognise and start from women's existing gendered roles (in the oil trade) or traditional literacy practices (indigenous stories about the environment) or set out to introduce new literacy practices or ways of learning (ICT in Kenya, youth magazine in Namibia). Inter-sectoral collaboration was also key to several of these programmes – to ensure that literacy instruction was supported by the necessary technical expertise and resources (particularly the computer hardware and software in the Kenya project). What was striking in all these programmes was how intercultural learning was integral to facilitating change (through different knowledge, pedagogy, facilitators and technology from outside the region).



Farmers selling goods on a local market

5.2. Literacy and Economic Empowerment

The vast majority of women's literacy programmes take a functional literacy approach in order to link literacy learning with income-generating activities. These programmes vary in how far they aim to challenge women's existing economic roles and in whether they prioritise non-farm or agricultural activities. In terms of learning and teaching approaches, whilst most programmes take a 'literacy first' approach (literacy programmes followed by skills training), some programmes offer support for literacy embedded in income-generating or livelihood activities.

The Kenya Adult Learners' Association's (KALA) *Economic Empowerment and Functional Adult Literacy Programme* focuses on non-farming activities, in recognition of farmers' increasing vulnerability due to climate change and environmental degradation. The programme is based on the Kenyan national adult literacy curriculum integrated with supplementary entrepreneurship and management training, as well as issues affecting women around human rights, economic empowerment and environmental conservation. The programme includes both formal and non-formal adult education courses, and also facilitates informal learning through peer-exchange programmes

to share experiences and develop new business networks. The entrepreneurial training and literacy learning is complemented by the provision of a capital savings grant to enable women to set up new businesses or improve existing enterprises.

By contrast, the *Adult Literacy and Skills Training Programme* in South Africa focuses on agriculture and adopts a 'literacy second' approach. The NGO Operation Upgrade, which primarily targets women aged between 25 and 50 years, provides a vege-

The Operation Upgrade 'Literacy Garden' in South Africa





But four to six days are over. We still haven't got work.

Journalist from the *Khabar Lahariya (News Waves) Programme* in India

table tunnel managed by a group of 20 learners as a cooperative venture. Literacy is taught through the production of a variety of vegetables as the participants learn to manage intra-group dynamics, organise work rosters, keep sales records, deposit money in the bank and market their products. The tunnels have provided families with both nutritious vegetables and an income. One of the groups has been given a contract to supply spinach to a major South African supermarket.

Other examples of literacy being used to support agricultural skills and technology development can be found particularly outside the education sector. For instance, the African Development Bank in Liberia launched the *Agriculture Sector Rehabilitation Project*, which created awareness of new farming technologies among farming communities and introduced functional literacy life skills, numeracy and book keeping to help improve their agribusiness practices (AfDB, 2014). A UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) programme in Western Chad introduced new technologies, such as drip irrigation for vegetable production, and targeted women-headed households. They supported women's groups to negotiate land-loan agreements so that they could use irrigable and fertile ground and farm it in their own names (FAO, 2014). The primary focus of these programmes is to enhance agricultural production and nutrition

by taking a more holistic approach which recognises the importance of developing 'soft skills' such as confidence and networking, and of offering legal and financial support to women's groups. An International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, 2014) evaluation of two projects in Uganda revealed that linking literacy training to credit helped women gain greater control over household income. However, even when women acquired basic numeracy skills, they were reluctant to keep their own accounts as this was seen as the domain of men. Conversely, men saw functional adult literacy classes as women's domain. Some of the women suggested that if the classes were presented as 'business training' then more non-literate men would attend (ibid). Such examples suggest that empowering women depends on more than simply providing functional skills or literacy development alone and it is important to understand how literacy and livelihood practices are gendered.

Challenging gender stereotypes around women's roles and work has proved another route to economic empowerment. In Indonesia, the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) established non-formal educational equivalency programmes, targeted particularly at young women and girls over the age of 13 who had dropped out of formal education. Partnerships were established with community learning centres. A farm centre intro-



BUNYAD's Adult Health Functional Literacy Programme in Pakistan

duced vocational training in organic farming and livestock training for young women, which were traditionally male areas of study (Eldred 2013: 24). Through women gaining qualifications and employment in these new areas of work, there was the potential to change attitudes more widely around gender roles. Other literacy programmes have also recognised the importance of providing women with the opportunity to gain not only basic literacy skills, but also a qualification that can lead to formal employment. The NGO Association Algerienne Alphabetisation's (IQRAA) *Literacy Training and Integration of Women programme* in Algeria supports women to empower themselves through gaining a qualification and has negotiated with the Ministry of Vocational Training for their literacy certificate to be recognised. In Brazil, the Ministry of Education's National Programme of Adult and Youth Education integrated with Vocational and Social Qualification took an alternative approach. It worked within the formal education system to challenge the historical dichotomy between basic education and vocational training and to refocus on family agriculture through using a Freirean approach and the notion of work as social practice.

The NGO Nirantar's '*Khabar Lahariya*' (New Waves) programme in India trained rural women in news gathering and production by setting up a low-cost weekly rural newspaper to report on issues of concern to these communities in their own language. This example of women being enabled to break into male-dominated socio-economic spaces as journalists is unusual in that the programme also had a wider empowering influence through simultaneously providing a way for other women to engage with gender issues (through reading the newspaper). Nirantar provided trainees with

intensive training in basic literacy, ICTs (using the internet and digital cameras), and in the technical aspects of journalism. The course included modules on a variety of subjects, such as health, environmental management and conservation, national and international politics, gender violence, the dynamics of the caste system and livelihood community development. The newspaper is described as 'journalism by the village, of the village, for the village' (UIL, 2013, p. 49), and readers have used some of the articles to demand action from state officials regarding the implementation of development projects, bureaucratic negligence and cases of gender-based violence. Gaining formal employment as journalists has raised the women's status within their families and communities. The newspaper has also helped to enhance the status of local languages. Rather than starting with literacy classes or aiming to support women's traditional roles, Nirantar began this initiative by identifying a male area of work into which women could move through training and that could have a ripple effect into wider society. Other women's organisations are now starting to set up newspapers too.

The wide range of approaches to facilitating economic empowerment through literacy programmes reviewed above indicates that functional literacy can help to support and generate small-scale income-generating projects to enhance women's livelihoods, particularly if focusing on specific groups of women and building on their existing work. There is also potential to challenge the traditional division of labour by gender and to provide different gender role models through taking women's empowerment in a transformative sense as the starting point.



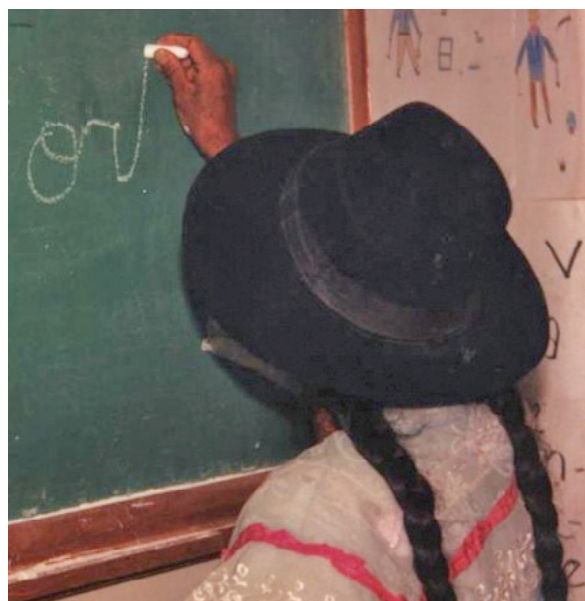
The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport's '*Bilingual literacy project in reproductive health*' in Bolivia

5.3. Literacy and social equality

As the case studies above illustrate, literacy programmes which aim to reduce poverty and stimulate economic activity often have a strong social equality dimension. As with the economic dimension, programmes vary greatly in terms of whether they aim to challenge or support women's traditional reproductive and productive roles and gender hierarchies. Social change activity in women's literacy programmes is often focused on health awareness, particularly around reproductive health, or simply on offering an alternative route to education for women. An example is BUNYAD's *Adult Health Functional Literacy Programme (AH-FLP)* in Pakistan which offers literacy, vocational, business and life skills training as well as civic, health and agricultural education. The programme developed a curriculum integrating learning in Arabic and Urdu in order to respond to parents' desires for their daughter to learn to read the Qur'an. Although vocational skill development (such as cutting and sewing skills) has been included, the main aim has been to support young women to lead more independent lives through learning to read and write. In an area where many girls have

restricted mobility and are prevented from going to school, the programme is facilitating social change through literacy, while also responding to traditional views that women should not leave their homes unaccompanied (classes are held close to

Developing bilingual literacy skills in Bolivia



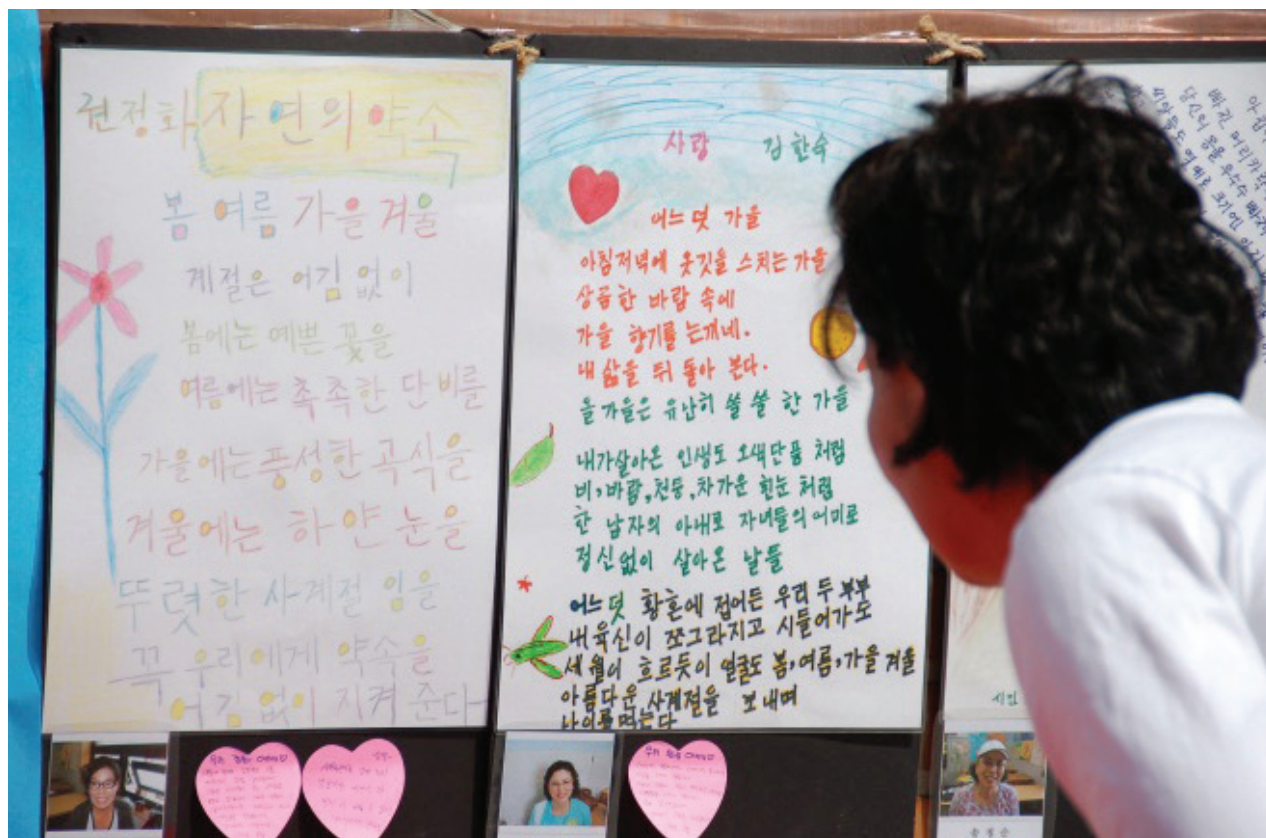
participants' homes) and that the focus should be on religious texts.

The Association for the Promotion of Non-Formal Education's (APENF) *'Empowerment of women living in extreme poverty in Burkina Faso'* project is similar in that it offers literacy, income-generating activities and health education (particularly awareness of HIV/AIDS and malaria). Rather than adopting a functional literacy approach, this programme uses Reflect – a combination of PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) visual methods and Freirean methodology – to facilitate discussion on a wide range of topics, such as protection of the environment, soil fertility, citizenship and gender. The project has led to many more women applying for birth certificates, national identity cards and marriage certificates, signalling their enhanced status and confidence. The Stepping Stones and Reflect (STAR) approach was developed specifically to address issues around sexuality and HIV/AIDS prevention – an example being *Jeunesse and Developpement's Community Development Programme* in Mali. In Bolivia, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport's *'Bilingual literacy*

project in reproductive health' used a similar Freirean approach to encourage women to reflect critically on their experiences in relation to thematic words such as health, pregnancy, children or gender relations. By developing bilingual literacy skills within the indigenous population (in Quechua and Spanish), the project helps to strengthen ethno-cultural identities whilst also facilitating women's access to the language of power.

The Korean Purun Citizen Community's *Mothers' School* targets older women, many of whom missed out on education during the Korean war in the 1950s and the economic crisis in the 1960s and 1970s. Recognising that illiteracy can be a stigma in Korean society, the programme offers three levels of literacy instruction, using textbooks from elementary schools. These are supplemented by autobiography writing classes and learner-led theatre which give women an opportunity to tell their own stories and gain confidence. This programme could be seen to promote 'schooled' literacy through the initial formal academic approach. The participants preferred classroom instruction and academic exercises and initially rejected the

Poetry exhibition in the *Purun Citizen Community's Mothers' School*, Republic of Korea





Tostan's *Community Empowerment Programme* draws on traditional African song and dance

civic education activities outside the classroom, such as theatre groups. This example shows that the women participants and the facilitators had contrasting ideas of what empowering education should consist of.

Social transformation can take place through apparently traditional literacy approaches (as in the Korean example), depending on the overall aims and values promoted by the programme. In Yemen, the *Literacy Through Poetry Project* set out to recognise and reaffirm women's poetry, in order to encourage younger women to revive and continue their mothers' poetic traditions (Adra, 2008, p. 127). Rural Yemenis over the age of 35 traditionally compose short poems of two to four lines, which express their inner feelings as well as addressing international or local issues. However, the tradition was dying out due to the influence of new media such as television and new imported conservative interpretations of Islam denouncing women's oral traditions as 'un-Islamic'. Using participatory approaches, facilitators encouraged women to create their own texts through stories, poems and rhyming proverbs, which were gradually developed and typed up as a collective book for the class. Community members initially resisted the teaching methods, while complaints about the

lack of textbooks led some facilitators to supply written materials such as calendars and newspapers. The project also faced opposition from some young men who raided classrooms and destroyed learning materials. Some younger women in rural settings pretended not to know any poetry, regarding this as an outdated and unsophisticated tradition. However, this project showed eventually that reclaiming women's oral tradition could initiate social change and help address gender inequality, since women learned to read and write, as well as gaining greater voice in their communities.

The NGO Tostan's *Community Empowerment Programme* in Senegal used a similar participatory approach to develop a non-formal education programme for women and girls, drawing on traditional African techniques such as song, dance, theatre, poetry and storytelling. The programme has also been implemented in a number of other West African countries. Based on human rights, the Tostan approach has facilitated social change in five areas: governance, education, health, environment and economic growth. The programme has two phases. The first, called 'Kobi', a Mandinka word meaning 'to prepare the field for planting', involves primarily oral discussions on issues related to the community's wellbeing.

The second phase is called the 'Aawde', a Fulani word meaning 'to plant the seed', and includes literacy lessons plus project management training to assess the feasibility of income-generation projects. There is a strong emphasis on community mobilisation, with collective action facilitated to address harmful social practices such as female genital cutting, exploitation of young boys in some Islamic schools, and child/forced marriage. The programme has promoted new technologies, sponsoring women to train as solar engineers in India and developing modules on the use of mobile phones for literacy and development. Participants learn how to send and receive text messages in local languages instead of making calls, which are much more expensive. The Tostan approach is unusual in both challenging and working with indigenous cultural practices, as well as actively engaging with and incorporating new literacy practices and knowledge. The programme has a gender focus, which includes men as well as women and promotes human rights for all. Tostan's holistic approach involves developing a more complex understanding of empowerment, recognising that social action is often constrained within broader systems of social power. For instance, in 1997 when 30 women decided to reject female genital cutting, they realised that unless people in neighbouring intra-marrying communities also abandoned the practice, sustainability would not be possible. The ongoing reflection and analysis of changing power

relations evident in the development of the Tostan programme suggests that women's empowerment is viewed very much as a journey rather than as a destination.

There is a strong peace-building and conflict resolution strand within several of the projects described above, reflecting the cross-cutting themes of governance, peace and security within education for sustainable development. The poetry project in Yemen recognised that poetry had been used for conflict mediation in the past. Tostan developed a strategy for engaging powerful community members and institutions, using mobile technologies too as social mobilisation tools to help build consensus and alliances. In areas of conflict, storytelling techniques have been used to enable people who have experienced trauma, discrimination or violence to make their voices heard.) The 'Trauma healing through storytelling, reading and writing' project run by NGO Feed The Minds (Newell-Jones and Crowther, 2014) explored how storytelling could be used for peace-building through the sharing of different perspectives on conflict.

This review of how literacy programmes have begun to facilitate social change indicates the value of adopting a bottom-up approach based on a recognition of women's existing roles, values and practices. Whereas in one cultural context, the key to empowering women may lie in strengthening indigenous practices, languages and knowledge

Community mobilisation to address harmful social practices such as female genital cutting (FGC) by Tostan in Senegal



(as in the Yemen poetry project), elsewhere, new digital literacy practices and technologies (the mobile phones and solar engineering technology used by Tostan) may open up new opportunities for rural women. An important element of many of the projects which aim to enhance social equality is the attention given to intergenerational learning and action. Aubele (2010, p. 46) noted that Western development programmes often sidelined elders. In Senegal, grandmothers participating in a World

Vision programme to address female genital cutting commented: 'we never practised cutting maliciously but rather to educate the girls. Now we understand that as grandmothers we have a responsibility to put an end to this practice' (ibid.). Rather than regarding and targeting women as a homogeneous group, all these programmes show the importance of understanding the specificities of women's identities, situations and dreams in order to support them to gain greater social equality.

6. Outlining principles of good practice and key challenges

This analysis of adult literacy programmes through the lens of sustainable development and women's empowerment has revealed a wide range of differing approaches and practices. Here, we identify principles of good practice that emerge from this review and consider the implications for policy and planning processes. This analysis draws on the framework introduced in Section 4, exploring the following dimensions in relation to literacy for sustainable development and the empowerment of women:

- ☞ The skills supported in relation to women's roles: whether the focus is on new or traditional areas of work, or 'male' or 'female' skill areas; what combination of hard and soft skills is encouraged; and how other support was integrated with skill development.
- ☞ The approach taken to women's empowerment: whether the focus is on functional skills or gender awareness; and how far gender inequalities are addressed within programme implementation as well as within the literacy curriculum.
- ☞ The kind of literacy practices introduced: how far programmes build on familiar or new literacy practices, in local and/or dominant languages, using new or old technologies; whether literacy learning was 'embedded' in other activities or a 'literacy first' approach was promoted; and whether literacy teaching approaches were collaborative, tailor-made

for individuals and/or integrated into lifelong learning programmes.

6.1. Strategies for women's empowerment

Programmes focused on a specific group of women with shared interests related to age, social status, ethnicity or profession (such as the Korean older women or the divorced Argan oil traders), as opposed to targeting poor rural women more generally, were able to respond not only to their practical needs for literacy/training but also to address the social, legal and political factors influencing their status. A similar understanding of gendered relations in specific communities informed the decision about whether and how to involve men as well as women in such programmes (see, for example, Tostan's programme in Senegal). Designing projects around women's traditional roles and identities (see the Yemen Literacy Through Poetry Project) can prove as transformative as those initiatives which set out to challenge traditional gendered roles directly by providing access to 'male' skill areas (see the MoNE programme in Indonesia, for example). Programmes also varied in how far they took account of non-programme processes of change – the visions that women had gained through the media or migration (see Longwe, 2008). Promoting a holistic, gendered, rights perspective from the outset (see Nirantar's journalist training project) seems to be key to

ensuring that women's empowerment remains the central aim of the programme.

6.2. Approaches to literacy and education for sustainable development

The programmes reviewed here varied in the literacy teaching approach and curriculum promoted. The approaches ranged from Freirean (see *Bilingual Literacy and Reproductive Health project* in Bolivia and other Reflect examples) to functional literacy (see AHFLP in Pakistan) and family literacy (the *Mayog Family Literacy Project* in Malaysia) to conventional alphabetic 'schooled' literacy approaches (such as the *Mothers' School* in Korea). Taking a Freirean approach did not necessarily result in greater emphasis on the political dimension of women's empowerment. Several Reflect programmes, like the functional literacy programmes, focused on economic empowerment through income generation. Many programmes engaged in development of soft skills – such as entrepreneurship, confidence-building and negotiation skills – alongside training in specific vocational areas, some of which were non-traditional areas of work for women (solar maintenance – Tostan in Senegal, organic farming – MoNE in Indonesia, journalism – Nirantar in India). An embedded or 'literacy second' approach to literacy development was evident in some of these programmes – with literacy support and training being introduced through vocational or community mobilisation activities. Such approaches offered more individualised and tailor-made literacy support, immediately relevant to the task in hand.

There seemed to be a dominance of classroom-based formal approaches to literacy teaching and learning, even within non-formal programmes. Sometimes this was in response to the symbolic value of schooling and women's desires to catch up with men in terms of a school education (see, for example, the Korean case study). Mobile structures and participatory learning approaches had been developed to help overcome the constraints that women faced in attending regular classes. A few programmes influenced by the concept of lifelong learning (see the *NaDEET Environmental Literacy Projects* in Namibia) succeeded in developing approaches which involved both young and old, literate and non-literate learners, through encouraging peer learning and the sharing of ideas and skills between generations. Programmes working with

women from indigenous groups (see the *Empowering Indigenous Women* project in Malaysia) used their knowledge and skills as a resource for literacy learning and awareness-raising in the wider community. Intercultural learning was a sometimes hidden element of successful programmes. It was notable that several programmes had been set up by an 'outsider' facilitator, whose own learning and alternative perspective on cultural, environmental and social practices had subsequently contributed to critical reflection and dialogue within the target communities (see the *Tostan Community Empowerment Programme*).

Considering the kind of literacy introduced and developed by these programmes, it is evident that both new literacy practices and traditional/indigenous literacy practices can contribute to women's empowerment. While some programmes were concerned to strengthen women's roles through the revival of indigenous literacy practices (the Yemen poetry project, for example), others saw enhancing women's access to new digital literacy skills as key to empowerment (see, for example, the use of ICT in the the Avallain project in Kenya, and digital photography in the Nirantar newspaper project in India). It was also evident that a number of programmes had identified and were building on new literacy practices (such as text messaging in the Tostan programme) with which women were already familiar. As with skill training, literacy practices can also be gendered (see IFAD, 2014, which shows how women in Uganda saw account keeping as a male literacy practice). There was also consideration of language hierarchies in relation to literacy teaching and literacy use. Literacy programmes can address both women's unequal access to languages of power and the need for them to express themselves through writing in their mother tongue – as illustrated by the Bolivian bilingual programme for Quechua-speaking women.

6.3. Challenges to successful implementation of programmes

The strongest principle to emerge from the above analysis is around the importance of investigating and building on an in-depth understanding of women's and men's lives and aspirations for change. Whereas the introduction of new skills or literacy practices might lead to women's empowerment in one context, another group of women may prefer to strengthen their traditional roles

and areas of work. Some programmes aimed to challenge gender roles and stereotypes directly by enabling women to enter traditionally 'male' areas of work, engage with new literacy practices, learn languages of power or campaign against forms of gender oppression. Conversely, other interventions were designed to support women's traditional roles, identities and indigenous literacy practices. The case studies demonstrate that both approaches can empower women, if they are informed by a contextualised understanding of gender inequalities and target a specific group of women with shared experiences. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution and the constraints noted in many of the case studies give an insight into the challenges likely to be faced in translating these principles into policy and practice on a wider scale.

Almost all the programmes reviewed in this paper relied on volunteer or very low-paid facilitators to run literacy programmes. The main constraint mentioned in almost all of the case studies was the lack of adequate resources and structures to sustain the initiatives in the long term. An exception was the Tostan programme, which highlighted good remuneration for facilitators as an important factor in developing a strong programme. Reliance on unpaid female facilitators can serve to undermine messages about women's empowerment conveyed within a literacy course primer and contribute to the notion that non-formal literacy programmes are a second-class education suitable only for women, as compared to formal education. Above all, literacy for sustainable development needs to be seen as one element of a coordinated lifelong learning strategy.

The question of how to finance high quality adult literacy programmes remains an issue because it continues to be a low priority within national educational budgets. There are examples

of collaboration with private companies, for example, Avallain funding the development of software and provision of laptops in the Kenya programme. However, the difficulties of maintaining such technology and the challenges posed by a lack of ICT infrastructure in poor rural areas were noted as a major constraint. Cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination with government departments through shared policy dialogue are an important part of any strategy for long-term continuity (see the Argan project and the Moroccan government's *Projet Vert*). Such partnerships can help to ensure the necessary technical expertise is available for 'hard skill' development within functional literacy programmes – for instance, in Egypt, the Integrated Pest Control Project collaborated with different governmental bodies concerned with adult education to integrate literacy with technical inputs (see IFAD-UNESCO 2014).

Participatory planning approaches seem key to ensuring that local women have a say in the kind of educational programmes they want – as well as sharing their grounded understanding of possible constraints in implementation. Several case studies revealed not only men's but also women's resistance to new literacy approaches, suggesting the importance of developing ongoing negotiation with communities (see, for example, AHFLP in Pakistan which focused on religious literacy practices in response to local requests). Many implementing organisations have mobilised women to form committees and become involved in the running of literacy and sustainable development programmes. This not only provides a 'hands-on' opportunity to develop skills such as leadership, literacy (including learning to write feasibility studies in the case of Tostan) and conflict resolution, but can also help to sustain programmes in the long term.

7. Recommendations for future action

This paper set out to review literacy programmes, not only in terms of 'lessons learned' at the micro level, but also to explore the larger questions around the relationship of literacy to sustainable development, what empowerment of women means in different contexts and how adult learning can

facilitate change. This section outlines four areas for future action to help ensure that literacy programmes can respond to sustainable development goals and that education for sustainability takes a transformative approach to women's empowerment:

Literacy policy should build on and seek to strengthen the interconnections between the three pillars of sustainable development thereby developing a more holistic approach, which can facilitate greater cross-sectoral interaction and support women's empowerment.

The review of best practice suggests that literacy interventions can help to strengthen the connections between the three dimensions of sustainable development. Yet, all too often, literacy policy prioritises only one pillar (usually economic or social and, in occasional cases, environmental). Whilst literacy programmes may choose to focus on one pillar as an entry point, that strand needs to be extended through attention to the other interconnected pillars and areas of activity. Most significantly, literacy policy needs to start from a more holistic perspective on development interventions and actors so as to maximise cross-sectoral interaction and support from the outset.

Action points

- ☞ National governments and international development agencies to plan and evaluate adult literacy and skills development programmes through the framework of ESD in order to maximise interaction between the three pillars/dimensions;
- ☞ Staff at programme level to develop curriculum and learning/teaching approaches which recognise and promote collaboration across sectors and create opportunities for addressing gender inequalities; and
- ☞ Education policy makers and planners to work with colleagues in other sectors to develop greater understanding of the role of literacy and soft skills development in sustaining development initiatives and facilitating gender equality.

A wider range of research evidence is required to inform literacy policy and planning.

The terms 'literacy' and 'women's empowerment' have different meanings for different people in different places. The field of women's literacy and development is frequently characterised by a top-down approach to policy and planning based on stereotypes around women's reproductive

role and reliance on quantifiable evidence of impact. This review has illustrated how different kinds of research can help to answer different questions and serve different purposes. In-depth ethnographic research studies of literacy programmes can provide greater insight into women's identities, meanings of literacy and processes of empowerment through sustainable development and educational activities. This contextualised understanding is essential to inform decisions about which literacy teaching approach to adopt; whether to target a specific group of women, or women and men more generally; how to challenge existing forms of gender oppression and what other kind of support (legal, financial, organisational, skills development) may be required.

Action points

- ☞ International development agencies to build research capacity within partner organisations in order to deepen understanding and complement statistical evidence of the links between literacy and development;
- ☞ UNESCO to continue to facilitate sharing of good practice through the dissemination of case studies, as a training resource for literacy planners – including analysis of principles through the lens of education for sustainable development and women's empowerment;
- ☞ Policy makers to promote participatory research approaches at national and district level to ensure that the voices of poor rural women and girls can begin to influence literacy policy debates and programmes: and
- ☞ Literacy teachers and programme staff to be trained and supported to conduct action research, so that they can continuously reflect on and improve the quality and relevance of their work.

There is an urgent need for future policy development on Education for Sustainable Development to incorporate a gender dimension, promoting a transformative and holistic approach to women's empowerment.

Policy documents on Education for Sustainable Development have tended to pay little attention to gender issues. A transformative approach to the empowerment of women needs to be developed particularly in relation to the social equality pillar

of ESD. Given the explicit attention to education and gender in the proposed sustainable development goals (Goals 4 and 5 respectively), there is an opportunity to develop the inclusive and people-centred approach outlined in Sustainable Development policy statements in future policy development on Education for Sustainable Development.

Action points

- ☞ Participants in ESD policy debates - particularly at the final conference on DESD in November 2014 - to ensure that a gendered analysis of literacy and development programmes and a transformative approach to women's empowerment informs future ESD goals and strategies;
- ☞ National and international policy organisations to develop ESD strategy not only in relation to the formal sector, but also to recognise the importance of informal and non-formal learning in facilitating social change; and
- ☞ Capacity building in gender awareness and planning for international and national policy organisations to be supported, with the aim of developing a more holistic and contextualised approach to women's empowerment through literacy.

The importance of literacy to sustainable development and the empowerment of women should be explicitly recognised within the post-2015 Education For All goals, as a first step towards mobilising adequate resources for adult education and lifelong learning.

The resourcing of literacy programmes is the greatest obstacle and needs to be urgently addressed to avoid reinforcing the 'second-class' status of women within sustainable development and education programmes. This review has demonstrated an impressive range of good practice in adult literacy programmes, but most have been constrained in terms of scope and sustainability because of a lack of adequate resources.

Action points

- ☞ All participants at this conference to advocate for a stronger commitment to adult literacy within the post-2015 EFA goals as an essential

step towards sustainable development and women's empowerment;

- ☞ National governments and international donor agencies to prioritise greater budget allocation to adult literacy programmes and the literacy components of sustainable development programmes; and
- ☞ International agencies to mobilise private companies, particularly in the ICT sector, to develop partnerships with national adult literacy programme for improving access to new technology and funding streams.

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