

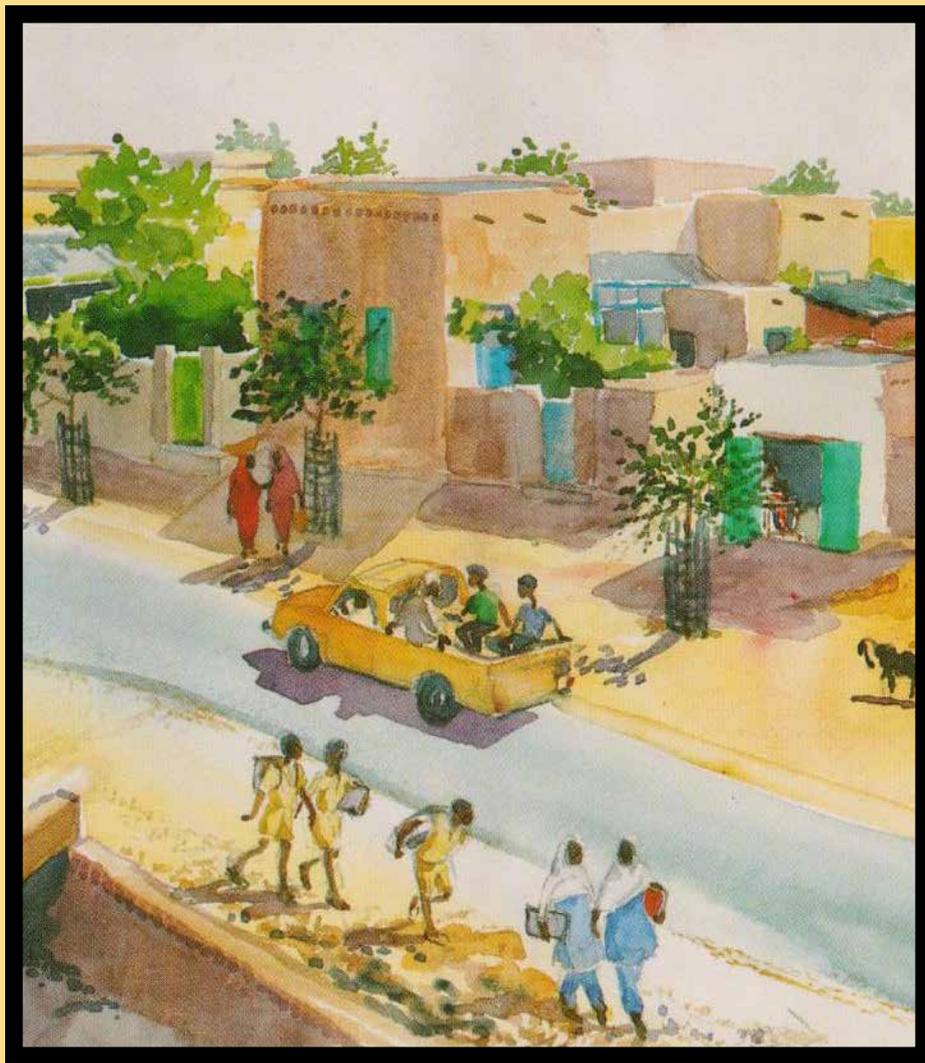


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Challenges to Literacy and The Role of Women's Community Literacy Networks in Sudan

Imogen Thurbon*

Introduction

Over the past five years, I have been lucky enough to see firsthand the work of the Women's Education Partnership (WEP) in bringing Arabic community literacy opportunities to the communities of internally displaced and disadvantaged people who live in Khartoum's sprawling hinterlands.

The stories of the remarkable women I met while attending the literacy circles are inspiring and in this article I attempt both to do justice to their stories and to give a sense of the transformative power of community literacy.

WEP's literacy projects operate under the direction of two remarkable women: Dr Leila Bashir, lead expert in community literacy and WEP patron, whose work I touch on in this article, and Mrs Adila Abdel Rahman, our project coordinator. As with all educational and development work, approaches to achieving goals evolve and change over time and one of the many motivations for my visits was to see whether community literacy and specifically REFLECT methodology really works.

This article begins by considering the connection between folktales and oral traditions of literacy, and conventional understandings of what it means to be literate. I then look at changes in approaches to literacy work in developing countries and briefly describe the background and life circumstances of our participants and their experiences of attending literacy circles. Finally, I discuss the nature and application of the REFLECT literacy approach in Sudan and its challenges, concluding by considering the many challenges that still face WEP in its work.

Sudanese Folktales and our understanding of literacy

The women of Darfur have a folktale to account for the age-old mystery of why it is women and not men who give birth. In the telling of this tale, they also elegantly explain how the stunning but uncompromising topography of their homeland came into being. As with all the best folktales, it is both lyrical and subversive.

At the beginning of the world, so one version goes, God created Darfur as a lush, verdant plain, blessed with gently rolling fields and fertile farmland (Nagy 2014, p. 438). It is a satisfyingly tidy Eden, our Darfuri narrator tells us, with what I like to imagine is just a hint of a wry smile. In this very Sudanese

Eden it is men and not women whom God has entrusted with giving birth. However, when the Almighty is done with creating other worlds, he returns to inspect his creations in Darfur, only to find his handiwork utterly altered; the once fertile lands are now riven with deep gullies and valleys; the rolling plains scarred with ridges, hills and high sand dunes. A terrified silence meets God's demands for an explanation. In the end it is an elderly woman who summons up the courage to explain that such was the wild kicking and flailing about of the men during childbirth, that they had torn apart the very earth and ruined the land. From then on, God decrees, it will be women who give birth for men "are chickens and not fit for such heavy responsibility" (ibid).

There are, of course, many readings of this tale and it is clearly both a reminder of the quiet powers of resilience of Sudanese women and a gentle poke at male pride. Such folktales, and the oral histories they spring from, belong to a rich tradition of cultural and critical rural literacy in Sudan and as with this tale, they often wittily challenge the *status quo*.

I saw many more folktales, proverbs and songs on the walls of the literacy circles I visited in Khartoum two years ago and all of them were thought-provoking.

Folktales and proverbs can both challenge people's understandings of their cultural and ethnic worlds and re-affirm them. In a literacy facilitators' training session which I attended during the same visit, the women were discussing the validity of the Sudanese proverb, "*afjakh al basalah gubaal tabga asalab*" ("crush the onion before it becomes a python") which is generally understood to advocate the need to discipline a woman physically while she is still young and docile enough to be malleable. Needless to say, the ensuing discussion was lively and the proverb was held up as one that should be debated in the literacy circles.

Folktales and oral traditions such as these also challenge traditional understandings of what it means to be literate. They call into question the traditional view of the inherent separateness between the oral and the literate and explore how societies express and value orally transmitted knowledge, as well as how structures work within societies and how their members interact and negotiate their roles.

Defining what it means to be literate is far from straightforward. The Melanesian Critical Literacies Project defines literacy as "the capacity to read nature as a living text and understand the reason for events and problems," (Action Aid, p.17). This definition reframes our understanding of the knowledge, intelligence and cognitive processes of rural peoples in negotiating their environment.

Approaches to literacy

Our understanding of literacy and its acquisition has been subject to the ideological orthodoxies of the day. The ‘banking of knowledge’ approach to education, famously identified by Paulo Freire, suggests that knowledge is, “a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing” (Freire 1993, p.21). This approach has broadly given way to more participative approaches based on learners’ life experiences (often called ‘New Literacy Studies’), in which knowledge is set firmly in local contexts.

Traditional technical definitions of literacy are underpinned by the idea that just teaching people to read and write will almost of its own accord bring social and developmental benefits to societies. New Literacy approaches challenge this assumption, warning that if the root social and structural causes of illiteracy are not acknowledged or addressed, then it is questionable how transformative literacy input really is (see Street 2003, p.77). Those working in the field of New Literacy Studies have developed a ‘literacy as social practice’ model, where “conceptions of knowledge, identity and being” are “embedded in social practices” (ibid, p.78).

In essence, the model described above implies that we should approach literacy acquisition always asking ourselves ‘Whose literacy prevails?’ ‘In which chosen language?’ and ‘In which context and to whose benefit?’ while remaining mindful of the underlying power conflicts at play.

The definition of literacy of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation is concerned with the acquisition and use of reading, writing and numeracy skills such that this leads to the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods and gender equality (UNESCO, p.12). This definition raises many questions: ‘How and when does acquisition of reading and writing skills translate into development goals?’ ‘Can we reliably demonstrate a correlation between the two?’ ‘Does literacy work really work?’ My visits to the Khartoum literacy circles set up and run by WEP were in part a search for answers to these questions.

Literacy circles in Jebel Aulia, Khartoum

In the autumn of 2016, I visited a women’s literacy circle lying on the very edges of Khartoum’s sprawling metropolis. If the landscape of Darfur can be cruel, so can the searing heat and parched earth of this small settlement of low mud brick homes lying on the edge of Jebel Aulia. Under a sky blanched white by the heat we made our way to the small outhouse attached to the communal mosque. Despite the suffocating heat of midday and the pressing demands on their time, energies and meagre resources, the room was full of women ready to give up

their time for literacy. Eager to acquire the urban literacies that would enable them and their families to flourish in the city, they brought to the circle the rural literacies and skills of their homelands in the Nuba Mountains and Darfur. These women clearly believed or at least wanted to believe that literacy worked.



*Jebel Aulia Literacy Circle
(Credit, Imogen Thurbon).*

Most had suffered the impact on their lives of poverty, family tragedy, regional upheaval, and in some cases ethnic and economic conflict. As a result they had missed out on conventional literacy opportunities. One participant told me she had never gone to school because her parents had only had enough money to educate one child and so her elder brother was chosen for schooling. Another had been orphaned as a young girl and had taken on the responsibility of caring for her family alone.

Many came from regions increasingly affected by climate change with the loss of productive agricultural land, diminishing water supplies and forced migration to urban areas that that brings. Others

had never had to chance to go to school because their home villages were geographically isolated and had been overlooked by central government when it came to investment in educational resources. Others still had been forced to marry early or were simply of an age that meant they had never had the opportunity to study when they were young. It is interesting to note that Sudanese women over the age of 65 appear to be by far the most vulnerable to a lack of educational opportunities, with some estimates putting the rate of illiteracy among this group as high as 90%.

That these women felt it was worth attending literacy circles is remarkable given the life challenges they have faced; but it is also remarkable for another reason. Literacy work may have become more participative and moved away from the 1960s' primers whose mummified remains can still be bought on the pavement book stalls of Qasr Street in Khartoum but it is still widely suspected of being deadly dull. Yet what I saw during the circles I attended was anything but pedestrian and the circles were never dull.

Literacy circles in action

In one circle, a participant explained what had motivated her to attend her local literacy group and the sense of empowerment and confidence it had given her:

“I had to go to the health clinic but because I couldn’t read the signs, I had to keep asking people for help in finding it. At last I reached what I thought was the clinic and asked the man standing nearby if I was right. He turned to me and said, ‘What’s the point of you looking for a clinic when you can’t even read? You should stay at home!’ At first I felt terrible but then I got angry – angry that he thought he could insult me in that way. So I joined our literacy circle. Now I feel proud that I can read. No one will insult me again,” (Thurbon 2016, p. 19).

Another participant’s testimony echoes the gently subversive tone of our Darfuri folktale, with its hints of challenging the *status quo*:

We women were all sitting inside the lorry while the men, as is our custom, sat on the roof. Night was falling and we were anxious to arrive so we called up to our brothers and husbands asking where we were. They kept saying, ‘Not yet, not yet. There’s still a long way to go.’ I knew that we had to be getting close by now, so I stood up and looked out. Pointing to the road sign that I



I could read perfectly, I shouted up to them: ‘You need to turn left here, look at the sign! We’re almost there.’ They were astonished and asked me how I knew, so I told them about our literacy circle. From then on, they encouraged their wives to go too (ibid, p 14).

Another circle I attended were discussing the community action that they could take to prevent malaria and bilharzia outbreaks by clearing stagnant water ditches and visiting neighbours to explain simple prevention strategies. In another circle, I was told the women had requested a visiting public health official to talk about the prevention of watery diarrhoea and he did so using drama and role play.

Jebel Aulia participants discussing local health issues (Credit, Imogen Thurbon).



*Trainer and participant discussing household income and expenditure
(Credit, Imogen Thurbon).*

A third circle was mapping out on large sheets of card how household income and expenditure varied from month to month and from season to season, and discussing how to supplement household income through the handicraft skills they had brought with them from their rural homelands in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains. Others had requested training in food processing skills and had attended a course offered by a local employer.

Some of the circles I attended were tackling sensitive issues of ethnic, economic and family conflict, as well as exploring attitudes towards and the personal challenges they faced relating to gender-based violence and coercion, polygamy and inheritance disputes. Often these issues were explored through debate, songs and role-play. The role-play I witnessed was about the tensions generated in a family when a husband chooses to take a second wife; heartfelt personal and social dilemmas were explored in both moving and informative ways.

The literacy circles I had the privilege to attend certainly seemed at the very least to give cause for optimism that on both a personal and community level, participative literacy work paid dividends in terms of women's literacy and community engagement.

Approaches to Literacy in Sudan

The need for optimism is great in Sudan, given the grim literacy statistics; these are despite the committed work of the National Council for Literacy and

Education (NCLAE) that aims to eradicate illiteracy.

The NCLAE has launched mass literacy campaigns focusing on the young and there has been a considerable improvement in literacy rates since the 1990's, when it was estimated that fewer than 20% of women in Northern Sudan were literate. As in many developing countries, Sudan has focused on eradicating illiteracy by seeking to improve primary school uptake. World Bank website documents state that primary school enrollment in Sudan is 46% of eligible pupils while secondary school enrollment stands at 21% of those eligible, with substantial variations by province and region.

The problem with this approach is that it fails to acknowledge the role of adult literacy in children's education and adults' own right to literacy. Adult literacy has overwhelmingly been treated as the poor sister in national education development programmes. Sudan is no different in this respect, in that most adult literacy projects are left to small scale Non-Governmental Organisations, often operating under severe financial and regulatory constraints. The NGO literacy providers generally favour participative and community-based approaches to literacy training, rather than the more traditional and often volunteer-based training that characterises state-funded mass literacy campaigns.

Helena Colliander, quoting NCLAE sources, states that illiteracy rates are estimated to be between 60% and 70% (2014, p.7). A personal communication to Colliander from the NCLAE Deputy Secretary General in 2011 says, "the number of illiterates over the age of fifteen is above 7.2 million and about two thirds of these are women."

REFLECT

The literacy circles I attended use a community-based, participative methodology that has evolved out of the Rural Participative Appraisal of Paulo Freire and others; it is known as REFLECT or 'Mirror' in Arabic. It was introduced into Sudan in 1998.

The Pamoja REFLECT Network Sudan brings together Sudanese practitioners and trainers in the REFLECT method; it is dedicated to advancing community development in Sudan. One of its founders, Dr. Leila Bashir, is closely involved in the training of facilitators at WEP and has been directly responsible for the design, content and editing of the training manual we use.

Participants determine the written language they wish to acquire through a negotiated focus on issues of direct relevance to them and their community. Progressing from visual representations in the form of maps, charts, diagrams and drawings of their home, workplace, domestic and work activities and community resources, they move on to express key ideas, schemata and

relationships in a written form. This process acts as a vehicle for personal and community development and change, as issues are continually debated and discussed in an open and respectful group dynamic.

This methodology is claimed to be ideally suited to the adult learner as it draws on adults' deductive skills and their knowledge and experience and is both functional and psychosocial.

There are substantial free online resources offering detailed frameworks and training materials for facilitators. As the participants themselves generate their own learning materials, REFLECT is often mistakenly seen as an attractively low-cost literacy option by those involved in budgeting and funding for literacy programmes. As we shall see later, there are considerable costs if a REFLECT programme is to be fully and professionally implemented because the methodology is highly dependent on the strong skills base of its facilitators.

As with all methodologies, REFLECT has its drawbacks and its implementation and assessment pose particular challenges. Riddell sums up the complexities involved in adopting a methodology which is so much more than just teaching reading and writing:

What distinguishes REFLECT from other adult literacy programmes is the direct connection it has with community development. Community development is not something that is done with literacy after it is acquired, but rather community development permeates through the literacy training. For REFLECT to serve the multiple purposes that are expected of it however, frequent evaluations have to be made; the information they give is used to plan further interventions so as to improve implementation and enhance outcomes (Riddell 2001, p.69).

She continues by warning that if “practitioners do not want to be judged on their ability to produce literate and numerate participants, then they must be judged on their ability to produce empowered, self-confident communities” (ibid). This raises the really important question of how far facilitators really integrate literacy into broader development aims and how far those aims are sidelined in favour of technical literacy skills.

In many of the monthly reports submitted by Adila Abdel Rahman to WEP, the tensions between what some facilitators see as discrete aims and the more holistic REFLECT methodology are very evident. Some facilitators, though trained extensively in the holistic aspects of REFLECT, are in practice delivering fairly standard traditional literacy classes. We must also consider how the balance between social and technical skills is negotiated within the group, as it is they who should determine the syllabus.

In addition, REFLECT's ideological underpinnings concerning gender equality



Dr Leila Bashir explaining how human rights can be integrated into literacy discussions (Credit, Imogen Thurbon).



Dr Bashir with trainees mapping out health relationships (Credit, Imogen Thurbon).

may need to be carefully contextualised in the interests of cultural sensitivity.

In relation to its effect on gender equality, the use of REFLECT has been found to enhance women's mobility both in terms of traveling within their community and in their ability to move from private to more public arenas within their community as their self-confidence grows. Analysis of male and female workloads can bring about shifts in perceptions of gender roles but "the sustainability of such a change when the fundamental issues of inequality between women and men are not confronted is the crucial question," (Cottingham, Metcalf and Phnuyal 2010, p.30).



*Some of our participants
(Credit, Imogen Thurbon).*



*Some of our participants
(Credit, Imogen Thurbon).*

I certainly felt that the women I spoke to in our literacy circles believed themselves to have been empowered by their experiences in the circles and that this had changed their lives in many ways. Some had gone on to initiate community health projects; others had enrolled on vocational courses or had become more actively involved in the education of their children. All of them expressed their views with clarity, focus and self-confidence. One had found the courage to report the physical abuse of her daughter to the authorities after growing in self-confidence and becoming more aware of the community structures and institutions that allowed her to do so safely.

REFLECT is highly dependent on the dialogue developing skills of its facilitators and their ability to identify and develop community leadership skills among participants. Facilitators need regular high quality training and refresher input, and an infrastructure that allows them to share experiences with other trainers and to maintain their motivation in what can sometimes feel a lonely environment. However, the reality is often that the training of facilitators is limited, piecemeal and poorly resourced, and the only measure of the quality of the sessions is deemed to be attendance. The need for facilitators who come from the same community as their participants, who speak the participants' mother tongue if different from the target literacy language, and who can empathise with the community's stresses and challenges, cannot always be met.

I was struck by the fact that in many of our circles, participants commented that what kept them coming, when work and family pressures were acute, was the personal empathy and concern for their wellbeing expressed by their facilitator, who would call on them to check if they were well if they missed a session. This echoes Colliander's findings on the importance of empathy and caring in assessing literacy-trainer competence.

Conclusion

If the method's radical community development and empowerment aims are to be realised, REFLECT circles and the organisation that provides them need to be strongly embedded within the community they serve, to establish strong networking and corporate ties within that community and the larger society, and have good links to national health, education and welfare bodies. A fair and rigorous appraisal of achievements in literacy acquisition and community empowerment is difficult to establish and organisations often lack the funds and infrastructure to pursue this adequately. In this, WEP is no different from many other NGOs operating in this field for which investing time and resources in the recruitment of skilled facilitators, overcoming bureaucratic complexities, being able physically to visit and monitor their work on a regular enough basis to be meaningful, and provide the opportunities for staff to

meet, share and grow in their REFLECT skills, often have to take precedence over longer-term aims.

The Women's Education Partnership is grappling with many of the challenges outlined above and has a long way to go towards resolving these issues; not least that of evaluating the impact of our literacy work on long-term community empowerment and in providing training support and development networks for our facilitators.

It is easy to become pessimistic in a field where it is often said that 70% of projects fail but while acknowledging that we still have a long road to travel, my own observation of the circles which we run gives me great cause for optimism, as the experiences and testimonies of the participants in our circle bear witness.

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