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Innovative leadership in Gambian adult literacy/numeracy: Mid-1970s to early 1980s

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Abstract This article is written for educators and others interested in creating high-quality adult basic skills development systems in both developing countries and other nations. It presents case studies of two Indigenous-language adult literacy/numeracy projects in rural villages in The Gambia between 1976 and 1983. The first project was based at the Gambia Cultural Archives and used written versions of traditional stories as reading materials; the second project was run by the Gambian Department of Co-operation (Co-operatives) and focused on basic numeracy and literacy skills villagers needed for crop sales and other farming functions. The studies draw from a review of reports, curricula, and staff member notes from the two projects, stored in the Peace Corps Community Archive at American University in Washington, D.C. The strengths and limitations of the two projects are then analyzed with reference to recent international adult literacy guidelines.

Keywords Adult literacy · Numeracy · Nonformal education · Basic · Co-operatives · Participatory · Learner-centered · Mandinka · Gambia · Africa

This article is written for educators and others interested in creating high-quality adult basic skills development systems in both developing countries and other nations. It presents case studies of two Indigenous-language adult literacy/numeracy projects in rural villages in The Gambia between 1976 and 1983. The first project was based at the Gambia Cultural Archives and used written versions of traditional stories as reading materials; the second project was run by the Gambian Department of Co-operation (Co-operatives) and focused on basic numeracy and literacy skills villagers needed for crop sales and other farming functions. The studies draw from a review of reports, curricula, and staff member notes from the two projects, stored in the Peace Corps Community Archive at American

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Case studies of two related programs

In the mid-1970s, The Gambia, a small country on West Africa's Atlantic coast, had about 600,000 people, most living in villages and towns in the interior and relying on farming, trading, and fishing, and on remittances sent by family members working abroad. Western countries, especially the United States and England, were major sources of both economic support and cultural influences (Nyang, 1981). Tourism from northern Europe was just getting started as a major economic and social factor.

The nation became independent from England in 1970 through a nonviolent process and had been ruled by the same (elected) president and political party since then. The national government identified *Tesito* (literally, "cinch your belt", and figuratively, "be self-reliant and work to develop your community") as a guiding principle for communities and the agencies that served them.

Most Gambians were considered illiterate in the national language (English), though many adults had developed some level of literacy in their African language for religious purposes using the Arabic script. Islam was—and remains—The Gambia's primary religion. Girls, especially those in rural villages, had significantly lower enrollment in and completion of formal schooling. There had been attempts to start adult literacy projects, including small-scale, nonformal vocational education in Mandinka led by English colonial officers in the 1940s; a Mandinka-language, multipurpose (e.g., health, agriculture) project in Genieri village in the 1950s; and—in the 1970s—a program by Christian missionaries focusing on reading the Bible in Mandinka as well as English-language classes run by the German *Weltfriedendienst* (World Peace Service). Though promising, these literacy efforts and their effects were typically not documented or sustained. Prior to the mid-1970s, there had thus been no concerted, national effort—by education officials or others—to develop and document basic education alternatives for the many men and women who had either never attended formal schools or had left school before reaching the secondary level (National Literacy Advisory Committee [NLAC], October, 1977; O'Halloran, 1979).

Case study #1: National Literacy Advisory Committee (NLAC): 1976–1980

In 1975, the nation's Department of Community Development (DCD) assigned a Gambian staff person to serve as its adult literacy specialist and investigate options for a new adult literacy initiative. DCD also asked the U.S. Peace Corps to recruit a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) to serve as "functional literacy advisor" to DCD. Peace Corps recruited me for this role, and soon after I arrived in September 1976, the DCD's adult literacy specialist was sent to an English university for two years to develop expertise in adult education.

After two months of Peace Corps training in Gambian culture and the Mandinka language, I began my new job as PCV. I conducted an informal survey of adult literacy needs and resources through interviews with representatives of Gambian agencies and foreign aid organizations with an interest in adult literacy. I reviewed literacy reports from UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Program (1976) and from other international development

agencies, such as the U.S.-based nongovernmental organization World Education. In early 1977, I field-tested a "*Tesito* (Self-Help) School" in the rural village where I was posted, using rudimentary Mandinka-language literacy and numeracy assessments and curricula implemented in 28 sessions by volunteer teachers from the local primary school. These interviews, document reviews, and pilot classes gave me a deeper understanding of the realities of establishing adult literacy programs in rural villages.

In this period, I also discovered several other individuals and agencies interested in developing adult-literacy-related resources for the nation. The two agencies with the greatest active interest—and relevant expertise and other resources—were the Gambia Cultural Archives and Ministry of Agriculture's Extension Aids Unit (EAU). When it became clear to those agencies that this new PCV—recently graduated with a U.S. master's degree in social education—was now in country and ready and willing to work at improving adult literacy, the Archives' director and the EAU's expatriate Agricultural Education Advisor (Bakary K. Sidibe and Cyril V. Eyre, respectively) assembled a group of Gambian agencies to begin planning a new adult literacy effort.

With seed money from the Rural Development Programme (RDP), a Gambia Ministry of Agriculture initiative funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the National Literacy Advisory Committee was formed in December 1976, composed of representatives from the Gambia Cultural Archives; Departments of Agriculture, Co-operation (Co-operatives), Community Development, and Education; and other agencies. NLAC members met regularly for the next three years, totaling about 58 meetings. Using office space provided by the Cultural Archives, a core Technical Sub-Committee performed much of the day-to-day work, planning and implementing a pilot project with three goals: (1) help rural adults develop useful literacy/numeracy skills; (2) design, field-test, and document a model for future adaptation; and (3) facilitate planning of a more-robust, longer-term, formalized national adult literacy program. The first classes were implemented in five villages in January through May 1978. By April 1979, 15 villages were participating, with a total of 25 teachers and some 800 learners.

Initial and ongoing collaborative needs assessment, planning, and program improvement

NLAC became a forum where representatives of various agencies and ethnic groups could give input into the project's design, based on reports from field sites and on their own understanding of rural communities. To further ensure program relevance and community buy-in, NLAC hired experienced schoolteachers to serve as Field Officers (supervisors) who—to help with initial planning—visited potential sites, met with village leaders, showed a film about Mali's national literacy program, and clarified what the villagers hoped to gain from literacy classes. When classes got underway, the Field Officers made regular visits to participating villages, observing classes in action, monitoring what was happening at field level, and talking with participants, village leaders, and instructors. They reported their findings back to NLAC headquarters to inform program improvements. Information about classes was recorded in NLAC meeting minutes, and it guided instructor and staff training and other support activities.

These ways of making evidence-based decisions and implementing and improving activities were guided by an implicit ethos of collaboration and building on team members' strengths. For example, the Cultural Archives' Director had significant academic and real-world expertise in Gambian linguistics and anthropology and advocated for development

that emphasized respecting and working within existing cultural values and institutions (e.g., traditional *kafo* youth groups) (Sidibe & Galloway, 1976). EAU's expatriate (British) advisor brought deep knowledge of using communications technologies such as mobile film units and radio in extension work. The experienced schoolteachers serving as Field Officers knew Gambian village life, how to communicate with villagers, and how to adapt their knowledge of primary school instruction to adult literacy.

NLAC members representing co-operatives, agriculture, and other agencies likewise contributed their cultural and technical knowledge. As a PCV, though new to The Gambia and adult literacy, I had graduate-level education in integrating education with social issues, strong writing skills, and personal experience as a second-language learner in foreign cultures. I also could devote myself full-time to the project and had a motorcycle that allowed quick movement and communication among project sites and partner agencies, especially important because little telephone service was available outside the capital. Two expatriate (American) artists adapted their skills to prepare curriculum materials with attractive and easy-to-read and -duplicate texts (e.g., familiar village scenes illustrated in simple line drawings) that facilitated learning and instruction. Young Village Facilitators (described below) and Community Development Assistants (CDAs, extension workers of the DCD) contributed their understanding of and respect for village communities. Local leaders who supported the classes, and community members who attended night sessions after working all day, took a risk with no guarantee of benefit and were key to the classes' success. Primary-funder RDP had already developed an integrated rural development strategy that the literacy project fit into smoothly. All of these national- and local-level stakeholders contributed a positive energy, commitment, and willingness to try something new.

Relevant, user-friendly, research-informed curriculum

To develop the curriculum, NLAC's Technical Sub-Committee drew on the Cultural Archives' expertise in preparing Mandinka-language texts (e.g., transcribed versions of villager interviews and traditional stories sung by *griots* [minstrels]) to identify themes of likely interest to a cross-section of Mandinka speakers. Simple illustrated versions of these popular, culturally-relevant materials served as a kind of "functional" (applied) literacy relevant to a wide range of age, gender, and economic groups within Gambian villages.

The initial curriculum materials were written in Mandinka, the most commonly used (especially in rural areas) of The Gambia's half-dozen languages. Archives staff based this use of Mandinka on linguistic research indicating adults more easily develop literacy using a language they are already fluent in. (Use of local languages for literacy instruction was subsequently strongly supported at an international conference in Liberia in 1978 [NLAC, November 3, 1978]). While many villagers expressed an interest in learning English—used in formal schools, higher-paying urban jobs, and other nations that Gambians were migrating to—NLAC argued that first mastering literacy in local languages, using the Roman script, would be an efficient step to learning English if that was learners' longer-term goal (NLAC, February 4, 1978). It helped that the Archives already had a well-organized trove of Mandinka-language written materials to adapt as learning resources. Using Mandinka in the initial phase of classes not only could reach the largest numbers of Gambians but also serve as a proving ground for development of similar curricula for speakers of other Gambian languages (e.g., Wolof, Fula, Jola, and Serahule). In retrospect, it might have been helpful for NLAC to make the reasoning behind use of Mandinka more widely known from the beginning, especially among government officials who might have seen the use of Mandinka as excluding speakers of other languages.

The Archives' easy-to-use, Roman-script orthography avoided using letters and accent marks used by linguists but not normally found in English. This strategy was based on the premise that instructors would already be familiar with English and not have to learn new ways of writing that were not only difficult to master and teach but unnecessary (NLAC, October 21, 1977; NLAC, December 29, 1978; NLAC, January 22, 1979).

Village facilitators

NLAC pioneered using Village Facilitators (VFs) as community literacy organizers and instructors. (In Mandinka, they were referred to as *deemaarilaa* or "guides.") All were young men with at least six years of formal education, nominated by village leaders for their responsibility and other strengths. NLAC trained them in instructional, administrative, and leadership skills and provided supervision through occasional site visits, and material supports such as teaching materials, equipment (kerosene lamps, chalk, chalkboards), and—in some cases—financial or in-kind help to acquire classroom furniture and/or build or refurbish classroom structures. Some VFs also received mentoring and co-teaching assistance from teachers in local government schools. NLAC arranged for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to donate bags of rice as in-kind compensation to VFs. Though from the beginning NLAC had explained that it could not pay salaries to VFs, a number eventually asked for some kind of payment on the grounds of both fairness and the practical need to support themselves and their families (NLAC, May 6, 1978; NLAC, May 20, 1978).

Adapting to learner schedules

Though learners were generally positively motivated, they and the VFs typically had other regular duties. For example, men were generally required to work in the fields from the start of the growing season in May to the harvest and sale of crops in October and November. After that, many traveled to urban areas to earn additional income as laborers during the 5-to-6-month dry season (NLAC, March 17, 1978). NLAC scheduled the pilot classes (60 one-hour literacy and 60 two-hour numeracy classes spread over two years) for January through May. Classes were held in evenings, after participants had completed their daily duties and the air temperature had cooled. But for rural villages, none of which had electricity, night classes posed another challenge: lack of lighting. As a remedy, NLAC purchased bright—though expensive, hot, and difficult to maintain—kerosene-powered hurricane lamps.

Integrating literacy/numeracy with other services

As classes became established, NLAC turned to the question of what other relevant and motivating activities learners might engage in. In some cases such activities could generate income to cover costs of materials, equipment, and VF stipends and thereby wean classes from financial overreliance on NLAC. (This built on the Archives' concept—borrowed from the classes of the 1950s—of using the sites as "model villages" where many types of development innovations could be piloted.) We tried a number of strategies, including (1) having staff from various agencies visit pilot villages to provide training or other services (NLAC, April 7, 1978). For example, EAU sent media-equipped Land Rovers to show films and play music to entertain and educate villagers. These presentations included a slideshow of photos of participating villages, which was a big hit with villagers who rarely

saw photos of people who looked like themselves; (2) securing funding to support several IGPs (income-generating projects) like poultry projects and community gardens managed by local committees who received basic training in project management; and (3) publicizing literacy activities on Radio Gambia to encourage and inform current and potential literacy-program villages.

Logistics

NLAC field-tested strategies for practical tasks like printing, purchasing, and transporting of instructional resources (e.g., benches, chalkboards made from black-painted plywood, lamps, chalk, printed materials) to remote sites, working around the limited availability of raw materials, equipment, and transportation.

Collaborating with non-Gambian supporters

NLAC members drew on their networks of foreign governmental and nongovernmental partners to secure financial and in-kind supports (e.g., technical advice) to fill short-term project needs while building capacities for longer-term adult education efforts. Examples included seed funding from UNDP, visits by a UNESCO consultant from Tanzania and representatives of Senegal's nonformal education unit, an April 1979 conference facilitated by the University of Manchester (described below), overseas training and study tours for NLAC staff in several countries, U.S. Peace Corps Volunteers who each provided two or three years of administrative and materials development services, foreign funding for income-generating projects, and CRS rice as in-kind payments to VFs (Ministry of Economic Planning & Industrial Development, 1979).

Post-NLAC transition: 1979–1981

1979

In April 1979, a Workshop on Nonformal Education as a Component of Integrated Rural Development was organized in Banjul by the Gambian Ministry of Economic Planning and Industrial Development. Facilitated by University of Manchester faculty, the two-week event assembled 50 individuals from agencies involved in the NLAC project and other development initiatives. Conferees participated in workshop discussions and visited village literacy classes to better understand why and how nonformal (especially literacy) education might support rural development efforts. They agreed that a new national center for nonformal education be created, building on lessons learned in the NLAC and other projects inside and outside The Gambia (Ministry of Economic Planning & Industrial Development, 1979).

By later 1979, the Ministry of Education was moving toward launching a new Nonformal Education Services Unit (NFESU) (NLAC, 1977). They identified potential staff with relevant training and experience from within the NLAC project and other sources (e.g., Gambians who had studied linguistics or adult education overseas). In NLAC meetings, veteran NLAC members and newcomers to adult literacy discussed how to move forward with a new national effort. Several government officials—including individuals who had

helped launch the NLAC pilot—returned from overseas training, ready to get involved (Tarawalle, 1980).

The Department of Co-operation (DOC) was now also preparing to launch a new Member Education Program (MEP) for farmer co-operative members. DOC representatives had been among the most active participants in NLAC meetings in 1977 through 1979 and in the international conference in April 1979. The new MEP would consist of several non-formal education activities, including job-specific numeracy/literacy training (NLT). MEP (described in more detail below) would help farmer co-op members actively participate in co-op activities, to benefit themselves, their families and communities, and the larger economy and democracy (Member Education Program, 1983).

1980–1981

As an outgrowth of NLAC's work, in early 1981 two University of Massachusetts researchers studied the "specific literacy" requirements of selected occupations in The Gambia's informal and formal sectors. Anzalone and McLaughlin (1983) summarized their findings, which informed the NFESU, MEP, and Indigenous Business Advisory Service (IBAS, a Gambian government program providing technical supports to small business owners). During this period IBAS developed a numeracy curriculum focusing on financial transactions and record-keeping.

While these post-NLAC activities were underway, The Gambia was rocked by a bloody attempted but unsuccessful coup d'etat in July to August 1981. International agencies responded with emergency aid and in some cases support for new development initiatives. Some individuals who had participated in NLAC and DOC activities were among the many Gambians temporarily detained in the months after the uprising (Bakarr, 1981; Dash, 1981; Jome, 1981).

To inform the launch of the new NFESU, newly-hired staff (who included former NLAC members) visited NLAC and other rural adult literacy sites in later 1981 to clarify the status of those programs and lessons to learn from them. A resulting report (Nonformal Education Services Unit, 1982, p. 2) stated:

> Such new innovations (as educating the rural mass, particularly of adults)…would have an immediate impact on the overall development of the nation…[and] would go a long way in enabling the Department of Community Development to achieve its goal in developing the community…on [a] *Tesito* [self-reliance] basis through providing them with a type of education that would establish popular participation among the people for individual and societal development.

Case study #2: Member Education Program's Numeracy/Literacy Training for farmer co-operatives: Early 1980s

As DOC planned to launch the MEP in 1980, it understood that the NLT component would be key. DOC believed that successful, modern co-ops needed members who had basic numeracy, literacy, and oral communications skills, allowing them to learn new concepts and procedures, solve problems, and work in groups. MEP built directly on the NLAC project and added its own unique strengths, including a focus on financial literacy

and self-reliance, significant financial and in-kind investments by multiple partners, and a wider range of instructional practices.

With funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and guidance from the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), MEP would be run by the DOC in partnership with the Co-operative League of the USA (CLUSA), a nongovernmental organization with a long history of supporting diverse co-operatives in the U.S. and other countries. CLUSA would provide a full-time expatriate Co-operative Education Advisor and occasional consultants (all U.S. citizens) to support the project components described below. (I served as numeracy/literacy consultant for two years.)

In 1982, 17 to 20 Co-operative Inspectors/Education (CIEs) were each assigned to teach two NLT groups composed of co-operative members in selected villages. After one year, about 25 percent of learners were at the advanced level. In late 1982, 32 advanced-level students were then trained to serve as Village Facilitators for the groups, allowing the original CIEs to move on to establish NLT groups in other communities. These advanced-level learners (and others who, though possibly not as advanced, nonetheless showed commitment to supporting fellow villagers) served as helpers to other villagers when it came time to weigh their crops. By the end of 1982, NLT classes had served about 476 individuals in 34 communities (i.e., 34 groups averaging 14 participants). (This represented 83 percent of the groups and 58 percent of the participants proposed in the original project plan.) About 17 new groups were started in 1983, but their performance was curtailed when the CIEs were reposted before the classes were completed (Member Education Programme, 1984).

Adapting practices from NLAC and other nonformal education programs

MEP adapted many elements of the largely-successful NLAC project, including multiple villages as pilot sites, young men (most of whom had grown up in village communities) as Village Facilitators, supervisors who visited villages and provided guidance to facilitators and class members, and capacity building for adult educators (through staff training focused on observed program needs and relevant, adaptable curricula). CLUSA consultants also introduced practices adapted from nonformal education in other countries.

Focus on a priority felt need

MEP responded to a request commonly made by Gambian farmers, which NLAC staff had also heard many times from villagers: farmers wanted to know how to perform the numeracy/literacy tasks required to sell their primary cash crop. Many feared—likely for good reason—they were being underpaid by traders who purchased the large (90 pound) bags of peanuts and provided farmers a major source of income (Member Education Program, 1983; Member Education Programme, 1984).

A team mentality and structures

MEP was, from the start, very team-oriented in how staff worked together to plan, implement, and continuously improve activities. Regular staff meetings, site visits, and training allowed sharing of information and expertise, building on prior experience, problem-solving, and building of trust. Collaboration was also manifest in the respectful relationships between staff and project communities and in the DOC's work with ICA, USAID, and CLUSA. DOC staff participating in the MEP from the beginning tended to be very

committed to the project's success. However, in some cases staff lacked the technical background or commitment to co-operative principles to support the project effectively and thereby undermined project efficiency. Trust and efficiency were also hampered by the project being implemented in a post-coup-d'état environment, which gave us a heightened sensitivity to avoiding being perceived as critical of government decision-makers. (See Paulo Freire's comments on these issues in Jurmo [1985]). Also, some expatriate staff sometimes focused on personal "pet projects" rather than on priority project needs and longer-term capacity building of local staff.

Effective instructional strategies

MEP developed effective strategies (i.e., literacy task analysis, Indigenous languages as medium of instruction, and instructional practices and materials promoting active learner participation) for planning and implementing instruction.

In its initial planning, MEP used literacy task analysis (LTA) to identify numeracy and literacy skills co-op members needed when selling their crops. A CLUSA consultant visited sites where farmers were selling their peanuts, observed their equipment (e.g., scales), documents (e.g., receipts), and procedures, and created mock versions of the equipment (e.g., a small wooden scale, copies of sales receipts) to use as realia in instructional activities. This LTA informed both curriculum development and teacher training, ensuring instructional activities focused on priority learner-identified learning needs (Taylor & Lewe, 1990).

Because MEP classes focused heavily on numeracy rather than reading and writing, participants generally saw it as natural that the language of instruction would not be English. Many already knew basic arithmetic in their local languages (which in this case included both Mandinka and other languages spoken in participating villages) and could build on that fluency to learn specific uses of numeracy for crop sales (e.g., reading a scale or completing a produce receipt).

With input from their U.S. consultants, the MEP team intentionally developed participatory (learner-centered) instructional strategies such as authentic uses of numeracy and literacy, simulations, popular theater techniques, and collaborative "fun activities". Learners were encouraged to offer ideas, ask questions, share strategies, demonstrate how they might carry out a task, and encourage each other. They learned how to read the produce scale (using both an actual scale and the small mock version made of wood) and produce receipts, use a price book to calculate the monetary value of crop weights, count money (real and simulated), and sign receipts. Other teaching materials included a basic numeracy book and small chalkboards on which learners could practice adding numbers and signing their names. Facilitators were also supplied with a collection of "support activities" (e.g., word problems and fun activities such as games related to farming, extension work, and urban jobs; and activities with titles like "poll-taking", "simplified accounting/bookkeeping", "connecting problems with reality", "storytelling", "numbers in nature", and "concentration"), and materials such as flash cards, picture stories, "local objects" (e.g., stones, bottle caps, matchboxes, fruits, sticks, cigarette packets), tapelines and measuring sticks, paper and pencil, and a mock model clock. To encourage practice outside the classroom, VFs had learners copy into their notebooks addition, subtraction, and real-world tasks like filling in produce receipts. Learners were then to use these problems as "homework assignments" in which they would complete the tasks and report what they did when they returned for the next class session (Member Education Program, 1983).

Integrating numeracy/literacy with other activities

NLT classes were home bases for other activities within the larger MEP for farmers who in most cases had low levels of literacy and limited formal education. The overall MEP was designed to strengthen basic skills, content knowledge, support systems, and access to resources that farmers needed for economic security, self-reliance, and co-op management. MEP's integrated system included about 25 Income Generating Projects (IGPs) of various types (e.g., sheep-rearing, guineafowl- and chicken-raising, gardens, group farms, and women's tie-dye and soapmaking) spread across participating villages, 20 of which received support from the U.S. Embassy's Self-Help Fund. NLT learners also had opportunities to participate in Co-operative Thrift and Credit Societies, committee member training, promotional activities (e.g., "popular theater" performances to promote public awareness related to public health, environment, basic education, and other community issues), and various discussion groups (e.g., Radio Learning Groups in which participants listened to a co-op radio program and then discussed the contents). Based on their success in the NLT classes, many learners expressed interest in additional education in literacy and related skills such as simplified bookkeeping (Member Education Program, 1983, 1984).

Paid extension agents as facilitators

Using CIEs as MEP facilitators mitigated the problem encountered by the NLAC when it tried to rely almost exclusively on unpaid young VFs with limited formal education who understandably felt the need to earn income for their families. MEP's use of a combination of paid CIEs and local (unpaid) VFs who took over classes after studying under a CIE for one year proved to be a promising model.

Adequate funding

NLAC had been limited by a lack of funding and a heavy reliance on in-kind and financial supports pieced together from various partners as the project got underway. In contrast, with more lead time to plan and cite lessons learned in NLAC's project, MEP was able to secure substantive funding from the start. This provided MEP with more qualified staff, transportation (including a pickup truck and driver for supervisors and motorcycles for CIEs), curriculum development and staff training, and facilities (e.g., office space and a radio studio at DOC's headquarters in the capital) to support the project.

Co-operatives' role in democratization

The MEP was launched soon after an attempted coup d'etat. The fact that co-operatives were seen by many inside and outside The Gambia as supportive of collective, democratic decision-making and self-reliance might have put the MEP in the dual position of being appealing to some and a perceived threat to others.

Recent international guidelines for adult basic skills education

Though carried out four decades ago, the NLAC and MEP projects are valuable models for those wishing to develop adult basic skills programs today. Drawing on lessons learned in adult literacy efforts of the previous four decades, several international education agencies (United States Agency for International Development, 2018; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2019) have called for not just increased *access* to basic education for out-of-school children, youth, and adults, but an increase in the *quality* of educational opportunities through holistic (comprehensive), integrated education systems. They argue for systems that:

Broaden the definition of basic skills from reading (and perhaps writing and numeracy) to other fundamental skills such as digital literacy, problem-solving, and others needed for a variety of life roles.

Increase access to quality basic education for more learners—including children, youth, and adults, especially those from vulnerable populations—through provision of more learning opportunities, including face-to-face instruction, self-directed learning, and situated learning. This might require:

- adding and/or upgrading facilities—both classrooms and other venues for learning, like workplaces—and using electronic technologies for learning and other purposes, such as professional development and administrative functions;
- strengthening parental and community support for basic skills development, both at school and in home and community contexts.

Improve the quality, efficiency, sustainability, and transparency of basic skills development systems through:

- contextualized, engaging curricula customized to the practical (e.g., work, family, civic), academic, and socio-emotional needs, strengths, and contexts of diverse learner populations;
- coordination and integration of educational activities with financial and in-kind supports available from other governmental and nongovernmental development efforts (e.g., for health, economic and workforce development, democratization, environmental sustainability, and peace);
- ongoing evaluation and research to document and inform efforts;
- professional development for educators and other stakeholders to enable them to plan and implement integrated systems of support for learners;
- innovative funding strategies (e.g., drawing on resources from multiple sources).

Lessons learned in the Gambian projects

Summarized below are strengths and limitations of the two Gambian programs as assessed against the above international guidelines.

Strength A: Human resources

Strength A.1: Leadership

Leadership at all levels generally:

- was open to new ideas and committed to creating and implementing innovative, quality services;
- was able to "sell" (explain, advocate for) the program to communities, partners, and funders;
- was able to document and communicate information within networks, to keep stakeholders informed and up-to-date about what was happening and what needed to be done;
- was able to devote long hours to the project, which included travel to remote villages and staying in modest accommodations;
- had both long-term and short-term goals and strategies, resources, and multi-year commitment for achieving them;
- included a mix of local and foreign personnel and built on significant strengths among team members (e.g., prior research and experience in relevant fields inside and outside The Gambia; networks of resource persons; and access to funding and in-kind resources such as vehicles, printing equipment, and office and classroom space);
- invested in leadership development and collaboration at national, local, and institutional levels. They created efficient teams in which members knew their roles and received resources to carry them out; had opportunities and encouragement to get field experience, reflect on it, and problem-solve with supervisors and peers in formal and less-formal discussions; and engaged in ongoing, regular, timely communication in face-to-face meetings and written reports circulated to those involved. These interactions were consistent with Gambian cultural practices, which emphasized collaboration.

Strength A.2: "Worker bees" who carried out important tasks

At the national level, Field Officers served as liaisons between field-level activities and the national office. Headquarters staff designed and printed teaching materials and prepared and disseminated reports. Drivers transported staff and materials.

At local levels, Village Facilitators organized and ran instructional activities, maintained classrooms, promoted the program within their villages, and recruited and supported learners practically and emotionally. Other community members, including village leaders and learners and their families, saw the potential value of the proposed program, supported and participated in program activities, and provided classroom space and other in-kind supports.

Strength A.3: Funders and other partners

Funders (e.g., UNDP, USAID) and other partners (e.g., Gambian agencies such as the Department of Co-operation and Extension Aids Unit and foreign entities like the U.S. Peace Corps, U.S. Embassy Self-Help Fund, Catholic Relief Services, Co-operative League of the U.S.A., and International Co-operative Alliance) recognized the potential of

the proposed projects and invested financial and in-kind resources to enable program activities to be launched and to build capacities for longer-term use of the program. In addition, they learned from the experience and made constructive, continuous improvements.

Strength B: Use of innovative and effective practices

Strength B.1: Collaborative, evidence-informed goal-setting, planning, and continuous improvement

Each program was planned and carried out by a thoughtful, insightful project team that focused on particular skills judged to be relevant to village adults and achievable within the resources and time available. NLAC was composed of representatives from multiple Gambian and foreign agencies who developed strategies responding to short-term and longer-term goals relevant to multiple stakeholders. The teams organized project components in systematic ways to ensure quality, impact, and sustainability of efforts. They prepared plans for initial rounds of activities, implemented those plans, and adjusted them in light of observations and feedback in the field. NLAC's plan drew on the experiences of Gambian adult literacy programs in previous decades (in which key NLAC members had participated) as well as on international models developed by UNESCO's Experimental World Literacy Program and on ethnographic research about Gambian culture conducted by the Gambia Cultural Archives (whose director led NLAC's Technical Sub-Committee). MEP built on DOC staff's three years of observing the NLAC project as well as farmer education models in other countries.

Strength B.2: Understanding of and respect for cultural values and practices

Both projects were careful to respect and work within common norms and practices of Gambian culture. Examples included asking village elders for their input and moral and practical support, using local languages and traditional stories in the curriculum, recruiting local young men as Village Facilitators, and scheduling activities according to daily and annual cycles of participating communities.

Strength B.3: Integration of education with other development services

Both projects integrated basic education with other relevant development activities, to help communities achieve a number of benefits. Activities included income-generating projects, training on co-op management by Co-operative Department staff, and strengthening community connections through learning about cultural history.

Strength B.4: Use of engaging instructional practices

Both projects used Indigenous languages as the medium of instruction, to foster learner understanding of and involvement in learning activities. The projects further promoted active learning in different ways. NLAC focused on an introductory-level curriculum to teach basic reading and writing skills using a research-informed, Roman-script orthography; attractively designed teaching/learning materials; and instructional activities simple enough for relatively inexperienced teachers and learners to carry out. Beginning with the most-commonly-used letter and syllable sounds in Mandinka, the curriculum steadily

introduced simple, familiar words and then expanded to other sounds and the reading of phrases, sentences, and stories around topics taken from traditional culture and "technical" themes (e.g., common hand tools). MEP, in contrast, focused on specific numeracy (and some reading and writing) skills that farmers needed to sell their crops. MEP had the advantage of adapting elements of the NLAC model as well as a wider range of participatory activities (e.g., games) introduced by outside specialists with expertise in learner-centered approaches. The result for MEP was a more robust range of instructional materials and activities that emphasized active learner participation in group problem-solving and application of numeracy both to the immediate task of selling their produce and to other everyday uses. Both models provided introductory curricula that laid a foundation of basic skills that learners and programs could build on further.

Strength B.5: Creative use of appropriate technologies

The Gambia at that time had very little telephone service or electricity outside the capital, no Internet service or computers, and limited buildings that could house adult literacy/numeracy classes in participating villages. Villages could only be reached by car or motorcycle. Staff of the two projects worked around these constraints by using a small number of vehicles to transport messages, supervisors, and teaching materials between project headquarters in the capital city and village sites; used mimeograph and similar simple printing devices to make documents; provided plywood and black paint to Village Facilitators to create blackboards; supplied lumber and nails so villagers could build benches for classrooms; and in some cases helped villages secure grants from foreign donors to refurbish old structures or build new ones to serve as classrooms.

Strength B.6: Use of efficient administrative practices

Borrowing from previous project management experience, staff of the two projects created policies, practices, and products that served as an infrastructure of supports for field-level work. Examples included creating national-level advisory groups to oversee project activities; building partnerships with other stakeholders who could provide in-kind and financial supports; monitoring, documenting, and reporting activities to guide future work; hiring and supporting staff to implement activities; purchasing and transporting supplies to village classes; and reliable financial management policies and procedures that ensured ongoing supports from funders and other relevant stakeholders. These supports ensured efficiency of project activities, encouraged the motivation and persistence of all involved, and served as mechanisms that others could adapt for ongoing work (Member Education Programme, 1984).

Strength B.7: Continuous monitoring and improvement

Both projects built in formal and less-formal mechanisms for getting input from instructors, learners, and other stakeholders to inform decisions for improving and expanding program activities. These mechanisms included classroom assessments to monitor participants' achievement of learning objectives, site visits in which Field Officers conducted interviews and observations, and problem-solving sessions in staff workshops. Such informed and timely decision-making was vital to enable staff to respond to needs and opportunities as

they emerged in multiple remote sites and in keeping within annual cycles of farming and cultural activities.

Limitation A: "Job readiness" of some personnel

Personnel at all levels sometimes lacked the attitudes, expertise, and/or access to resources described above. In some cases, they slowed down, felt threatened by, and/or resisted the innovative, fast-paced, collaborative model of the two projects. These performance gaps could be attributed to any number of factors, such as simple lack of experience doing such work, lack of training and supervision, and the sending of high-performing staff to training in other countries and replacing them with less-experienced staff who were not yet up to speed with the time-sensitive projects already underway. Some individuals might have been motivated too much by a desire to get resources for their institution, their own career advancement, or their families or a particular ethnic group.

Limitation B: Collaboration strategies

Though both projects tried to collaborate with other partners, they might have done better to use other strategies to facilitate stakeholders' understanding and support. For example, stakeholder representatives might have been invited to help create relevant curricula or visit classes where they could observe activities, talk with participants and facilitators, and serve as guest speakers. In a few cases some government officials who had not been actively involved in NLAC's work were more adversarial than co-operative in their relationships with NLAC. They may have seen NLAC's leadership and accomplishments as threats to those officials' bureaucratic turf or their desires to assume leadership of the proposed new national Nonformal Education Services Unit that was being considered as a follow-up to NLAC's pilot (NLAC, February 4, 1978).

Limitation C: Reading materials

NLAC's simplified Mandinka-language orthography was used to teach basic reading skills and was fundamentally sound as a starting point. But it would have been helpful to have additional, more-advanced reading materials on relevant themes ready prior to the launch of the program to demonstrate to actual and potential learners (especially more-advanced ones) that learning to read in Mandinka could eventually enable them to read more-advanced, meaningful materials. (NLAC later did eventually generate such materials when time permitted.)

Limitation D: Strategies to serve learners who could not attend classes

Despite NLAC's considerable efforts to provide relevant and engaging services to learners, many potential learners were never able to participate in classes or had to drop out after starting classes because they had to seek work elsewhere during the dry season. These scheduling problems were not easily resolved during the two years of NLAC classes.

Providing a kit of materials that learners could use for self-study (or study with literate friends or family members) might be a strategy for allowing more individuals to study at times and locations convenient to them. Customizing classes to the particular needs (e.g., income-generation and family health) and schedules of women might also have been a way to recruit and serve more women and out-of-school girls (Member Education Programme, 1984). At that time—and possibly still today—girls typically had less access to formal education and for cultural reasons were often not encouraged to pursue nonformal education or participate in mixed-gender classes.

Limitation E: Supports for village facilitators

The results of using VFs were generally positive though mixed. Most shouldered their responsibilities with a positive attitude, perseverance, and efficiency, but the performance of many was hampered by limited training and supervision and their need to perform other family responsibilities (e.g., attend to emergencies, special events, and family budgets). Their limitations were particularly evident in their teaching abilities. While the NLAC and MEP curricula had many positive, innovative elements, they were being introduced at a time when participatory, learner-centered models were still in their infancy in most countries. Thus, those involved—as practitioners or learners—might simply not have been exposed to such models and therefore naturally gravitated to over-relying on rote memorization, sounding out of syllables with limited emphasis on comprehension, undifferentiated learning, and other less-than-effective instructional practices. While VFs did receive initial training (and some ongoing guidance from Field Officers) in basic instructional methods, it eventually became clear that VFs also needed training, practice, and mentoring in using a broader mix of participatory activities to better engage learners in the learning process. VFs needed to know how to differentiate instruction, to customize it to the particular strengths, needs, and interests of individual learners. Such strategies would help them avoid over-using the "one size fits all" and "rote memorization" activities they were familiar with from their own days in primary school and/or Koranic school (Member Education Programme, 1984).

Limitation F: Formative and outcome evaluation

Considering the newness of this work for all involved, the two projects did a fairly good job of evaluating and improving their processes (e.g., instruction, logistics, professional development). They achieved this through continuous monitoring and improvement of activities at national and village levels, although often improvements were done in a reactive way—responding to problems as they became apparent. Future projects might develop a checklist of things that need to be in place (e.g., adequately supported Village Facilitators with needed expertise, instructional materials, and facilities) to ensure efficient, quality services and to guide program monitoring, professional development, and administrative supports.

The projects were less effective in defining and evaluating *outcomes.* Future projects should identify various desired outcomes (i.e., impacts on learner basic skills, content knowledge, social-emotional strengths, and application of those assets to meaningful tasks; and other positive program results for learners, their communities, and the agencies involved). For each desired outcome/goal, more-specific, incremental, and achievable

objectives and indicators should also be developed (Member Education Programme, 1984). Programs should also continuously document the information produced by formative and outcome evaluations in reports that can be used by program staff, funders, and other stakeholders to guide future such work. This would help new programs avoid the tendency of having to start from scratch and reinvent the wheel rather than building on lessons learned in previous work.

Limitation G: Funding

As a first-ever, new project that was started from scratch, NLAC had to secure small amounts of seed funding (from the UNDP) and in-kind help (from Peace Corps and various Gambian agencies) based on the reputations and connections of key leaders of the project. Because NLAC was seen as a pilot project that might inform eventual creation of a national adult literacy program, it never received much funding and relied heavily on time donated by officials who had significant other job duties. NLAC also depended on inexperienced young people and in-kind donations of office space in an old building on the grounds of the Gambia Cultural Archives office and of classroom spaces provided by participating villages.

Because it had the advantages of three years of learning from the NLAC's experience and connections to international co-operative development agencies, the MEP was able to secure significant upfront, outside investments which allowed it to hire foreign and Gambian staff, purchase and maintain a pickup truck for supervisory staff and motorcycles for the co-operative extension agents working at the village level, and build a new MEP office (with a radio studio) in the Co-operative Department's headquarters. This experience of the two projects demonstrated both the importance and challenges of providing adequate seed funding and ongoing supports to allow such programs to get launched, produce results, and be expanded and sustained.

Postscript: November 2023

Forty years after I left The Gambia when my time in the Member Education Program ended, I returned for a three-week visit to the country where I lived and worked for five years. A lot had changed—both potentially good and not so good—in the interim (e.g., mobile phones, expansion of urban centers, new job and educational opportunities, migration of youth from villages, plastic waste, physical fitness programs, tourism), while some things remained similar if not exactly the same (e.g., family and community identities and structures, education as a stepping stone to something better).

I conducted a limited, informal survey of government officials and citizens to ask what had become of the adult non-formal education efforts described in this article. I was told that (a) some versions of adult literacy activities have continued off and on in the intervening years with support from the Non-Formal Education Services Unit and other agencies but (b) the NLAC and MEP models and materials have for the most part been forgotten and the agencies that created them are generally no longer doing this kind of work. My sources agreed that some version of adult literacy/numeracy education was still needed in the country and might be updated and expanded to make it more relevant to current social and economic conditions (e.g., the growth of unemployed urban youth, interest in women's

and children's well-being, the widespread use of mobile phones, the need for Gambians to be able to navigate newly improved public health systems and to operate small businesses).

Mr. Sillah Manneh, a participant in the very first NLAC site (in the village of Pakalinding), said that during the late 1970s and into the early 1990s, he and other villagers had kept adult literacy classes going in the community. Those villagers initially worked with NLAC staff, then kept classes running largely on their own for another decade. Students supported community members who served as teachers in the classes, providing them with small payments or in-kind help and helping with classroom tasks. About 15 to 20 villagers (fifteen women, five men) attended classes regularly, four nights a week. Mr. Manneh observed that the women learners were caregivers for their families and were particularly motivated to know how to best use their family budgets to purchase items in the nearby regional market and then re-sell them locally in Pakalinding. They wanted to know how to track their inventories and calculate their earnings. Mr. Manneh pointed out that, at a Parent-Teacher Association meeting at the Pakalinding primary school the previous day, almost all of the many participants were women, an indication of the leadership women are now taking in education and other local affairs.

He said that his participation as an adult education learner and coordinator had many benefits for him personally. It gave him confidence, skills, and other knowledge to use a mobile phone (e.g., communicating for social or work purposes via texts in Mandinka). Adult education also equipped him to attend workshops and get employed by a non-governmental development agency which supported beekeeping, soap making, and other community-development activities. He has begun to establish a bee-keeping business on the main highway that runs through the village. He hopes to sell honey to the many drivers who now pass through on their way to and from a new bridge built over the nearby Gambia River. He proudly reported that all of his children have remained in school, an outcome of his understanding of the value of education. He has become an active, respected leader in his community, as an equal with other villagers who had attended formal schools.

I suggest that a more comprehensive "40-years-later" study be done of the longer-term impacts of the two projects. I am also donating this article and a newly-digitized collection of curricula, assessments, reports, and photos from the NLAC and MEP projects to the Gambia National Center for Arts and Culture (formerly the Gambia Cultural Archives) and to representatives of the Gambian Women's Bureau and other agencies (e.g., the U.S. Peace Corps) with the hope they might inform and inspire a new version of non-formal adult basic education for The Gambia.

Conclusion

These two Gambian adult education initiatives undertaken four decades ago represent tremendous efforts by dedicated, creative individuals and teams on behalf of a small and beautiful but resource-limited nation. Both projects were innovative and in many ways exemplary for their time. They produced early, substantive examples of thinking, spirit, and practices now recommended by international adult education experts. NLAC and MEP developed the capacities of participating village communities while creating building blocks for subsequent basic education efforts. They also provide us with inspiration and useful information about the benefits, strategies, and challenges of adult basic skills development.

I thank and salute the many people who did this important work and remember them with respect and fondness. As nations continue to struggle with how to support

well-equipped workforces, families, communities, and lifelong learners in a multi-challenged world, we can still learn much from our Gambian friends.

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