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Literacy and development -- an enquiry --

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1. Introduction

Wherever socioeconomic development is pursued the question of education and knowledge is raised. Literacy, as a basic tool, is frequently seen as the first rung on the educational ladder, offering access to wider opportunities and improvement in the quality of life. The relationship between literacy and development is therefore of interest both to national planners and to local practitioners. If the impact of development is ultimately to be felt by people in local communities, then literacy practitioners at the grassroots level particularly need to understand how the two activities may be brought together.

At first glance a relationship between literacy and development is easily established on the basis of worldwide indicators. The International Task Force on Literacy presented an illiteracy rate of 48.9% for women, 27.9% for men in developing countries, as against 2.6% for women and 1.7% for men in developed countries (ITFL 1990). Other literacy-related indicators such as the number of book titles published and newspapers available strengthen the impression that there must be a link between literacy and development. However, such stark figures, telling as they are, mask basic questions. Attempts to show whether increased literacy facilitates development, or vice versa, have demonstrated how complex and contradictory the relationship is (IBE 1990). It is therefore essential to ask what kind of development is being promoted and what use is expected to be made of literacy within that particular development paradigm.

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Before examining those questions, three related perceptions in the literacy-development debate must be borne in mind. These are not necessarily contradictory (though they may be), but are possible starting points in the debate. They need therefore to be made explicit at the outset, so that different coloured spectacles are recognised.

First, the debate may focus on development as the context of literacy. Where literacy is seen primarily as the acquisition of skills, these may be obtained by people in any environment, developed or developing. Such a perception may seek to adapt methods and materials to the context of the developing country, but leaves open the question of how such literacy will foster development. This lack of linkage was noted by Cairns (1987) in his evaluation of SIL adult literacy programmes in Cameroon. Second, development may be seen as the content of literacy materials. Messages and ideas designed to increase capacity in, for instance, health, farming, or income generation are offered to new literates with the expectation that they will be able to apply the benefits of such new knowledge. Functional literacy is based on such an approach (UNESCO/UNDP 1973). Third, literacy may be seen as development in itself. This perception sees the skills and uses of literacy as part of a wider educational process of development. The very acquisition of literacy, the relationship of learner and animator become part of the search for what literacy and development mean for a group of people in a particular sociocultural context. Freire sought to develop this approach as he made conscientisation the goal of the literacy process.

Whatever initial perceptions we may have, it is clear that all three - context, content and process - impinge on how literacy relates to development and therefore beg the question of what the aim of development is. In general terms, this paper presents a view of literacy whose acquisition and use are seen as a step towards greater awareness of oneself and of the surrounding world. This in turn is set in the context of development centred on participation, communication and human relationships.

2. What is development?

The term 'development' is itself problematic since it implies the opposite, 'undevelopment' or 'underdevelopment'. A human being, in and of themselves, can hardly be said to be more developed than another, as each is created in the image of God, with the capacity to relate, communicate, learn and grow. This rather obvious remark is important as the tendency to classify the world into developed and developing easily colours attitudes to people as well. There are of course huge differences in the opportunity to realise and express human potential, and it is here that the terms 'developed' and 'developing' may be appropriately used. The disparities are essentially economic, political, social and educational - and all of these constrain cultural expression. An unfortunate and often implicit assumption has been that some cultures are more developed than others, with identities, cultures and languages relegated to the underdeveloped category. This is plainly not the case, as each community organises and perceives itself in ways that ways that are internally valid and consistent. Again, this is obvious, but important as an indication of the way the term 'developed' is frequently defined according to Western/Northern perceptions.

The two most prevalent development models in the past 30 years have both suffered from this narrow perspective. On one hand, modernisation saw the West as the model which developing countries should aim at, primarily through industrialisation and the transfer of the knowledge and technology of the North. On the other hand, dependency theory identified the cause of much underdevelopment in the unequal relationships of the South with the North, and proposed structural change in societal relationships as a way forward. Such changes must be operated at every level, but particularly at macro (national and international) levels where inequalities and exploitation are most evident (at least to the outside observer). Both models emphasise the nation-state as the basic unit at which development should be organised, and as such, betray their roots in a capitalist and socialist view of society respectively (Long 1977). Neither model has succeeded in breaking the cycle of poverty, though the structural insights associated with dependency theory have indicated some latent causes of it. Neither model has moved initiative into the hands of those most concerned

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by their plight - the local populations, rural and urban, of the so-called developing world. As a result, neither has given attention to local culture as a significant parameter in the design of development intervention (Maiava 1988).

The early 1990s have witnessed the predominance if not of the capitalist model, then at least of the role of market forces in the economic arena. The collapse of centralist régimes in Eastern Europe is testimony to this. As market forces are also increasingly applied to the developing world as solutions to poverty and other problems, the question needs to be asked how far such principles can be applied to deprived and marginalised sectors of the population, and particularly to the promotion of an educational process among such groups. While the accompanying democratisation movement, particularly in Africa, shows promise for the increased visibility of minority groups and respect for their identity, such a movement could be jeopardised by a reliance on market forces where the poor and powerless are further deprived.

In the light of these global trends, it is all the more important consciously to choose and promote a model of development which puts people at the centre. For the literacy practitioner such trends form the larger policy context which constrain and open up possibilities for local action. Changes of emphasis at the global level do impact local people through their governments and other agencies, but the positive potential of such changes needs to be carefully thought through before appropriate new action at grassroots level can bear fruit. The democratisation movement, for example, ought to bring new opportunities for initiative, self-expression and people's organisations; how this may be best achieved in a particular sociocultural environment will vary and requires positive reflection and debate in the local community, and with (self-)aware change agents and animators.

In terms of an emerging development model, it is only by putting local communities at the heart of the development process that the new world

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climate will offer people any more hope than previous decades. As the recent South Commission put it:

...development is a process which enables human beings to realize their potential, build self-confidence, and lead lives of dignity and fulfilment. (South Commission 1990:10)

Such a view sees the problem of underdevelopment above all as a matter of social relationships and of control over one's own destiny. It does not give pride of place to economic considerations, though these will be important sectors of activity and indicators of development (Ghai 1988). The process of development is, as Haque et al. (1977) argued, an "enhancement of personality" where the crucial issues are "distinct identity, self-confidence, creative ability, an ability to face the world with purpose, poise and pride" (p.15).

If such lofty goals are to be more than empty words then those who are least self-confident, most deprived and marginalised must become the beneficiaries of development intervention. Chambers (1983) argued that much development intervention has in fact contrived to conceal rural poverty and to ignore those sections of rural populations which are the poorest, e.g. remote groups, women, the unschooled, linguistic and ethnic minorities. An approach which has received a great deal of attention in recent years has emphasised the empowerment of such groups through their increased participation in development processes (Bhasin 1976; Rahman 1987).

A participatory approach identifies the problem of deprivation as one of social structure. This not only addresses the more obvious inequities such as the relationship of colonies to their colonial power, but also recognises the fact that there are exploitative relationships within rural societies (Chambers 1983). This is true, for instance, in the African context even though the alienating influence of foreign models at the macro level is frequently foregrounded as a development problem (Ngoupande 1988). In order to promote the well-being and full development of human potential, strategies are adopted which will enable powerless (underdeveloped, deprived, exploited, minority, oppressed) communities not only to express

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their needs, but also to achieve enough bargaining power in the wider society so that they are able themselves to obtain resources to meet their needs. This very process of empowerment is frequently seen as the most important and urgent need to which other kinds of more traditional interventions contribute and are subordinated. Similarly, participation becomes not merely a means towards an end, but also a goal, since full participation of the local population is an expression of the fact that the community is in charge of its own development. Participation in particular interventions or projects is not the ultimate aim, but in fact contributes to the community's capacity to mobilise and use its human resources to the full.

Participation (is) the *fundamental dynamic* of the project. In such projects, and whatever the specific objectives, the whole approach is participatory. An emphasis on less technical activities is apparent in these projects and there is often a much stronger educational element. (Oakley 1991:160)

This educational element builds on Freire's notion of conscientisation as a means of creating awareness of the underlying sociostructural causes of underdevelopment. Self-sustaining development can only come about where the full participation of local people is a goal and where this is manifested by awareness-building dialogue with and between the villagers.

A participatory approach to development puts responsibility for development into the hands of local people, and input from outside is structured to further that process. Communication becomes, therefore, the basis of that process - between local people themselves, and between the local community and those providing stimulus and support from outside (Mister 1988). Communication refers here to the process of interaction between people, and not primarily to the means of communication (cf. Savio 1990). In studying development, many have assessed the usefulness of various forms of mass media in the transmission of information to rural populations. Such concerns may be important at the macro (national or international) level (cf. South Commission 1990), but they do not address the quality of interaction at the grassroots level. This is not to exclude the mass media

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from rural development intervention. However, a participatory approach cannot ultimately treat people in the mass, since the aim is to stimulate individuals and groups of individuals to respond to their own needs with their own potential. This means that communication for such purposes must essentially be face-to-face, between the facilitator and the local people:

The reversal of roles is profound. It means that the great bulk of all development communication that can carry through to end-use at the community level must be done on the ground, in group settings. (Childers 1990:9)

Such a view of development requires - and makes sense of - an approach involving long-term commitment to the development of human resources at the grassroots level. It also requires that communication take place on the terms of the local people - within their social, cultural and linguistic context. The implications for designing literacy programmes are clear - local responsibility, local material, local language. Such have been the guiding principles of much of SIL's literacy work. The question remains, however: what place does literacy have in the context of a development process which is people-centred, participatory and based on communication?

3. What use is literacy?

Development depends on many social and economic factors - most of which relate to the distribution of power and resources. Literacy is one of the tools of communication which can serve development purposes. Rather than asking what the nature of this tool is, it needs to be established what it may be used for. Where development intervention starts with a local community the use of literacy will be defined within the local culture. This will entail an investigation of communication patterns and of the role of written communication specifically. As Street (1990) argues, what literacy means will vary in differing social contexts. Many minority communities, in Africa for example, use overwhelmingly oral communication for their everyday needs, while written communication is reserved for interaction with government authorities and other official bodies. The absence of written communication within the local community is therefore not due to unfamiliarity with literacy as such, but may be due to cultural

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and linguistic factors. The potential uses of literacy in such circumstances must be determined by the need to express as well as to receive messages and ideas.

Language can be a major problem in literacy - the only written materials being available in a language the majority of the community does not understand. However, the introduction of local-language literacy may not in itself be the solution. There are two questions as far as development intervention is concerned: firstly, how much is the local language used in development communication? Secondly, how much is the written medium used, in any language? Where the answer to the second question is negative, literacy must be treated as an innovation which, when shown to be viable, can help meet some of the community's communication needs and introduce hitherto undiscovered possibilities. The introduction of local-language literacy in a multilingual environment must provide possibilities for the written use of each language for different purposes and in varying proportions by different sections of community.

Literacy is both social and individual. At one level, literacy is undoubtedly an individual skill. As such it can be exercised by the individual to facilitate advancement in society, in competition with others. However, the social environment determines to a large extent the uses to which literacy is put and controls access to literacy through the educational system. Thus the individual skill is always used in a particular sociocultural environment; so it is essential to understand how the environment conditions the acquisition and use of literacy where it is introduced as an innovation.

The same relationship of the individual and social levels can be applied to development. The individual may pursue her own development, but can only do so within the possibilities available within society. It was this relationship between the individual and the social which Freire (1973) sought to call into question through literacy. Literacy was seen as a means of apprehending and structuring reality (conscientisation), thereby questioning the social structures which limit learning and development. For

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Freire, literacy was intimately related to development - indeed some of his analysis of educational models was based on his experience of agricultural extension services in Brazil. The learning of reading and writing was used as an opportunity to identify and 'problematise' oppressive social structures, such as the large and powerful landowners in Latin America. In this framework literacy is seen as an aspect of power distribution. Promoting literacy amongst the disadvantaged has the purpose of increasing their bargaining skills, and therefore their power vis-à-vis exploitative structures and people. The ideological links with the dependency model of development are plain.

Pursuing Freire's notion of conscientisation Lankshear and Lawler (1987) went so far as to say that the only 'proper literacy' is the development and exercise of critical consciousness in the ongoing power struggle of society. At this point the use of 'literacy' seems overworked and leads off into diverse kinds of social action. However, there is no doubt that literacy, as a communication tool, can empower people where they face unequal power structures.

Such reflections move away from a purely functional view of literacy where a community is 'prepared' through literacy to receive certain messages offered by those with the means to produce them - such agencies might be government, development, church or political party. If literacy is seen as a communication tool, then writing must receive as much attention as reading - people must be as able to express their own cultural heritage and views on the world as they are to receive those of others. The transmission of new ideas, frequently associated with literacy in marginalised communities, has its place, but must be perceived as part of a cultural exchange and mutual learning process. Existing ideas, particularly in the agricultural sector, have been shown to be as valid as new ones introduced from outside, and they are a better starting point for innovation.

There is no basis in a people-centred model of development for using literacy for the one-way transmission of ideas and knowledge. In defining what use literacy is the perspective of the local community must be sought,

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and this must structure the literacy practitioner's activity - in material preparation, pedagogical approach and, above all, in relationships. There is no general answer to the question: what use is literacy in development? Asking the question leads to further questions about the sociocultural context in which literacy is promoted. Literacy therefore has various faces, or, to use Street's (1990) terminology, there is not one literacy, but several 'literacies' - each defined by the uses which individuals and communities make or wish to make of reading and writing.

4. Literacy (and development) as process

The notion of several literacies defocuses outcomes. It becomes impossible to define what literateness is, including the skill level required, outside of the context in which the literacy is to be organised and used. Literacy can be best seen as a process whose structure is as important as its results. If this is so, then the results will depend on the process. The uses to which literacy may later be put depend on the way it has been acquired. This puts the literacy process squarely in the field of relationships; what is modelled between learner(s) and animator(s) becomes a pattern. The way literacy practitioners go about their task becomes central.

It is here that literacy and development very definitely meet. Development is also about relationships - of the kind which foster dialogue, negotiation, mutual respect and equity. Whatever the level of skill acquired, literacy can be deemed to have led to a successful outcome where it empowers people to make dialogue (in written form specifically) a basic and permanent strategy in their relationships. Moving towards this outcome has implications for the learning process and for the animator.

The learning process will be characterised by an emphasis on what the learners have to say, and therefore to write. Self-expression will have priority over the consumption of pre-packaged messages, and pedagogical materials will be rooted in the local culture. Producing and reading such materials is an important aspect of building self-confidence and cultural self-esteem. Where minority groups have long been used to consuming

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messages packaged in other cultures and languages such self-esteem may be largely eroded, and a feeling of cultural inferiority may have developed. It is on the basis of restored self-esteem that new ideas can be introduced, not as something to be unquestioningly adopted, but as an element to be creatively confronted with local reality.

Literacy acquisition will be a process of interaction and mutual learning. It is important that a climate of open and equal exchange be established between the animator and the learner(s). Learning is not a matter of absorbing information - Freire's 'banking system of education' - but of dialogue:

...since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person's 'depositing' ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be 'consumed' by the participants in the discussion. (Freire 1972:61)

The animator will then be as eager to learn as to teach and will base pedagogical method on shared discovery and insight. Freire spells out the love, faith, humility and trust which such an approach demands.

Such dialogue in the literacy process will counter the attitudes mentioned earlier towards 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' cultures. Since the process addresses local cultural realities, those realities themselves are shown to be of value and as instructive and meaningful as those of any other culture. Where the animator represents a different socio-cultural background, the dialogue will engender a creative cultural debate.

What has such a literacy process got to do with development? At this point we can say that the literacy process is development of the type defined earlier - where people control the process, which promotes the participation of all and which sets communication at its centre. Development projects of the traditional kind (poultry, wells, clinics, ...) may well accompany or grow out of such a process; indeed, they will

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strengthen the process of self-confident participation, but they will not be the finality of development.

The mere capacity to read and write will not in itself bring about development of any kind. The use of that capacity is crucial - and so the development purposes for which reading and writing are used become the central determining factor. The literacy process can become part of those purposes where it shares the same goals. Where literacy differs from or ignores development goals, it will at best create a limited readership of certain prepared messages and at worst show reading and writing to be irrelevant. Literacy practitioners adopting a people-centred process may face a hostile policy environment, for example, where institutions or governments seek to control the development process tightly. In such circumstances, the exercise of a growing local capacity to take charge of their own development may have limited scope; however, at least the ground will be prepared through the promotion of the self-confidence and equitable relationships without which human development ultimately cannot proceed.

5. Some implications

I have sought to highlight some general principles in the relationship between literacy and development and to show that what may be observed on a macro (national, international) level affects what happens at the micro (community, village) level. What are the implications for the literacy practitioner?

Awareness of the local, national and global context of development and literacy activity is crucial. It will determine the perspective which the literacy practitioner brings to his/her work. The larger context also shapes the possibilities and constraints on development and the use of literacy in local communities.

The basis for literacy promotion is the relationships which the literacy practitioner forms. These will determine how local initiative and responsibility develop and will affect the pedagogical method.

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Relationships are more determining than any technical aspect of the literacy task.

Communication patterns - oral/written, in what languages, ... - must be investigated to understand how written communication will serve the community. This will involve identifying and relating also to all the local actors on the development stage. As literacy becomes a viable means of communication there must be ongoing sensitivity to new needs which may emerge.

The viability of literacy must be demonstrated. This may be a problem of lack of confidence in the ability to learn to read, or a belief that a particular language is unsuitable for the written medium. Showing people that literacy is possible will be based as much on the practitioner's relationships as on technical success.

The literacy practitioner must monitor the social and political implications of literacy promotion and make them the subject of ongoing dialogue with the community. In a dynamic environment of this kind the role of the practitioner will change and develop, with initiative moving steadily into the hands of the local community.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion the following axioms are offered:

1. No person, no culture is underdeveloped (or all are); people need enlarged choices.
2. Development is a learning process for all involved.
3. Communication and human relationships are the basis for participation in development.
4. Dialogue-centred literacy is people-centred development (which is also...)

5. Literacy is no more and no less than a communication tool.
6. The process of literacy promotion is as determining as its results.
7. The acquisition and use of literacy can affect the distribution of power in society; literacy is political, so is development.

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