

Failing Adult Learners: Why Rwanda's Adult Literacy Education Policy is Not Delivering

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Abstract

Having a literate society has been a policy objective of the Rwandan Government for 20 years. However, in practice, it has never been a high priority, although investing in adult literacy education has the potential to contribute to socio-economic transformation. This paper reports on findings from a survey, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. We show that learners rarely benefit from attending literacy classes. Extreme

poverty, lack of a 'culture of reading' and the poor delivery of literacy classes are the main barriers to student learning. Without more investment in training tutors, infrastructure and learning resources, the policy implementation gap will persist.

Key Words

Adult literacy education, Rwanda, Empowerment, Social practices, Community tutors, Literacy environment

1. Introduction

Literacy is a fundamental human right as well as being essential for socio-economic development (Colclough et al., 2005; UNESCO, 2019). However, in 2018, around 807 million adults (13.7%) globally were unable to read and write a simple sentence about their everyday lives¹; two-thirds of them were women (Stromquist, 2016). The highest proportion of people classified as illiterate live in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO, 2015). Literacy empowers people, giving them more confidence in themselves and enables them to think critically and make purposive choices about how they live their lives (Aksornkool, 2003; Freire, 1970; Sen, 1999; Williamson and Boughton, 2020). It opens up new opportunities for people to lift themselves and their families out of poverty, improve their self-esteem, stand up for their human rights and participate actively in politics (Colclough et al., 2005; Wolhuter and Barbieri, 2017). There is a close synergy between enabling adults to gain literacy practices and their children's educational attainment (Cheffy et al., 2016) and improved health and psychological outcomes for themselves and their children (Claire, 2010; LeVine et al., 2012; Sørensen et al., 2012).

The importance of investing in adult literacy education (ALE) was acknowledged with the international adoption of the 2009 Belém Framework for Action, which holds that adult education is critical for 'a viable future for all', and the 2015 Incheon Declaration which encapsulates the SDGs recognition of the importance of life-long learning. The 2030 SDGs Agenda includes 'ensure(ing) that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy' (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010; United Nations, 2015), as well as substantially increasing the numbers of young people and adults that have the necessary capabilities for decent employment and increasing the supply of qualified teachers.

Despite this global recognition of the importance of literacy skills for individual wellbeing and community development, adult basic education has remained low on governments' and the development agenda, with few donors providing funding (Cheffy et al., 2016; Robinson and Vü, 2019; Savonitto and Oral, 2019; Stromquist, 2016). This is partly evidenced by the large numbers of adults in the Global South who have yet to develop basic literacy skills. Few countries have managed to reduce adult literacy rates in line with the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 'Education for All 2015' target of a 50% reduction, as ALE has lost ground as a priority in governments' agendas (Post, 2016; Stromquist, 2016; Wolhuter and Barbieri, 2017).

Recognising the importance of literacy, one of the aims of Vision 2020, Rwanda's long-term development plan, was to have 100% of adults literate by 2020 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000). However, by 2016/17 over a third (36%) of women² and a quarter (26%) of men could not read and write a simple note or do a written calculation (authors' calculation from EICV 5 data). In this paper, we use the findings from quantitative and qualitative research carried out in the Western Province of Rwanda in 2017-18 to explore why the literacy rate among adults remains so low. We consider the motivations of learners, the learning environment and the cultural environment in which Rwandans live, as possible factors explaining why adults may not gain literacy skills (Thomas et al., 2020).

2. Literacy and Adult Basic Education

There is no agreed definition of literacy, but in measuring progress to achieving internationally agreed universal adult literacy, the target is reduced to something that

¹ Calculated from the World Development Indicators

² The literacy rate is usually reported for those aged 15+ years but our research focused on those aged 18 or over as this is the target group for adult literacy provision in Rwanda.

someone has or does not have (Addey, 2018). Literacy rates are generally based on the self-report of the ability to read and write a simple passage, consequently overestimating the proportion of adults that can read and write (Post, 2016) and these reporting requirements influence adult education policies so that ALE focuses on teaching people to read and write. (Grotlüschen et al., 2019). However, being able to read and write a simple passage is unlikely to give adults the literacy skills they need for living in the 21st Century, as UNESCO has pointed out:

Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world (UNESCO, 2019).

It is increasingly recognised that literacy is a continuum and that people need to be able to use their literacy skills to access relevant information and use it in everyday life (Cheffy et al., 2016; Stromquist, 2009; Wedin, 2008) and that there are multiple literacies.

There are several approaches to ALE which are underpinned by different pedagogies. The traditional approach sees literacy education as enabling learners to gain a set of technical skills using traditional teacher-centred methods in a classroom. This is the model used in international policy which emphasises enabling people to move from being 'illiterate' to 'literate' and monitoring performance by collecting data on the ability to read, write and do written calculation. The functional approach is an extension of the 'literacy as skills' model, with functional literacy seen as a set of reading, writing and numeracy skills that learners can use in their everyday lives. Both of these approaches assume that learners will gain the promised benefits of an improvement in their socio-economic lives from learning literacy skills in a classroom - that literacy skills have an effect (Bartlett, 2008). The 'literacy as social practice' approach argues that the aim of a literacy education should be to enable learners to gain the multiple literacies that they want and that are useful to them in their everyday lives, empowering them, giving them more confidence in their abilities and enabling them to gain social recognition (Rogers, 1999; Street, 2016; Trudell et al., 2019; Wedin, 2008). In this approach, a student-centred pedagogy is used, with tutors enabling learners to gain the literacies that they need in their daily lives.

Research suggests that ALE rarely use pedagogical methods appropriate for adults or use group work approaches (Stromquist, 2009). Similarly, there is no good evidence on the effectiveness of different types of literacy programmes or systematic evaluations of what works under what circumstances and for different learners (Carpentieri, 2013). Nevertheless, the failure of adult literacy programmes to deliver the targeted outcome, a reduction in illiteracy rates, suggests that there is a need to improve ALE if learners are to access it and gain skills that they can use to improve their quality of life (Habou, 2017; Trudell et al., 2019). Adult literacy classes generally have a limited impact on literacy, with low enrolment, high dropout rates and low retention of learning, and there is little robust evidence that gaining literacy capabilities improves income or health (Blunch, 2017). Blunch (2017) argues that for ALE to make a difference, there needs to be government commitment and adequate funding, training of adult literacy tutors and improvement in their conditions of employment. It is also critical to make the adult literacy education curriculum relevant to learners' lives, teaching in local languages, gender mainstreaming and supporting women and other underprivileged groups in getting access to literacy classes, and certificating learners' achievements (Habou, 2017). In sum, research findings suggest that there is a need to ensure: that adult literacy classes are designed to be congruent with the life of learners; that tutors are motivated; that there is a high quality of instruction; and that learning is sequenced to enable learners to move from low/no literacy to fluency (Savonitto and Oral, 2019), recognising that there is a continuum from emerging to fluent literacy (Thomas et al., 2020). Learners need to be motivated to learn, engaged in their learning, able to practice what they have learned and prepared to put in the necessary hard work. If learners are not able to use

the skills they gain from literacy education in their everyday lives they risk losing them (Trudell et al., 2019) and for this, they need to live in a literate environment (Easton, 2014).

There is, however, some evidence that innovative approaches can benefit learners even if they do not gain and retain literacy skills. When learners gain knowledge that is useful to them in their daily lives, literacy education can have a high impact: their children are more likely to go to school, they are empowered, and their civic participation increases (Blunch, 2017). While the emphasis has been placed on the importance of gaining 'useful' and 'relevant' literacy skills, there is evidence that being able to 'read for pleasure' can also be a motivator (Shiohata, 2009).

The provision of ALE faces many challenges in low-income countries. These include literacy tutors who have little or no training, and are themselves poorly educated, have no security of tenure and are often volunteers (Gizawa et al., 2019; Rogers, 2005). Turnover of tutors is often high; for example, one study in Ethiopia found that 21% of tutors left before the end of the course they were teaching because of multiple issues mainly related to low pay and other conditions of employment (Gizawa et al., 2019). Dropout rates are often high because courses fail to live up to expectations and do not enable learners to improve their socio-economic situation. Furthermore, adult learners learn how to read, write and do calculations in a decontextualised fashion rather than learning how to apply these skills in their daily lives; what they are taught has little relevance to what they do (Rogers, 1999; Stromquist, 2009).

3. The Rwandan Context

Rwanda is a least developed, aid-dependent country, with aid making up 62% of government expenditure in 2018 (World Development Indicators [WDIs]). Eighty-three per cent of the population live in rural areas, 69% of adults are agricultural workers, and over 70% of households are dependent or mainly dependent on subsistence agriculture, with 75% of these having insufficient land to feed a family (authors' analysis of EICV 5 data³). Agricultural productivity is low due to degraded soil, low levels of modern inputs and labour-intensive farming, with most of those working on the land underemployed. Poverty remains high, with 56% living on less than \$1.90 (2011 PPP) a day in 2016 (WDIs). There is a lack of decent employment, less than 10% of workers are in formal employment and most non-farm workers engaged in precarious, low-skilled day labouring (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, 2020). Levels of educational attainment are relatively low: 17% of adults have never been to school, only 42% have completed primary school, and only 16% have a post-primary qualification (EICV 5 data). Just under 10% of adults say that they are computer-literate, with the same proportion saying they use the internet. Only 48% say that they own a mobile phone. Progress to modernising the economy has been slow, mainly because of difficulty in attracting foreign direct investment (Abbott and Sapsford, 2020). One of the reasons for this is because of the poorly educated workforce. This means that the tax base remains shallow and narrow, limiting expenditure on education, social and health services. Spending priorities in the education sector have been basic education and more recently technical and vocational education with Official Development Partners (ODPs) providing aid for these sectors (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2017, 2013, 2002). Increasing adults' literacy skills would make good economic sense. It would increase the pool of educated workers, ensure that the next generation of workers are educated as educated parents are more likely to encourage their children to do well in school (Cheffy et al., 2016), and potentially increase the tax base. Rwanda has been relatively successful in meeting development targets and widely praised for its technocratic approach to development, but this means that it concentrates on achieving targets rather than transformative development (Ansoms and Rostagno, 2012; Debusser and Ansoms, 2013; Klingebiel et al., 2016).

³ Unless indicated otherwise, all data from EICV 5 are based on the authors' own calculations.

Western Province, the location of our research, is the poorest province in Rwanda, with 69% of the population living in poverty (WDIs). It is more rural than the Rwanda average, with 88% of the population living in rural areas (EICV 5). A higher proportion of those aged 18 and above work in agriculture than the national average – i.e., 75% (17% waged, 30% independent farmers, 28% dependent family workers). Educational attainment is lower than the national average, and only seven per cent say that they are computer-literate, with the same proportion saying that they use the internet (EICV 5).

4. Literacy and Adult Basic Education in Rwanda

ALE has been identified as a priority in successive government policies and strategies, with Vision 2020 setting a target of 100% literacy by 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2018, 2014a, 2003; Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000; Republic of Rwanda, 2003). Increasing the adult literacy rate has long been seen as essential for poverty reduction, for improving health, encouraging family planning and increasing participation in community development (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2002). However, an adult education policy was not published until 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014b).

The policy reiterates the objective of having a literate society and putting in place a structure for developing and delivering literacy education in Rwanda. The Ministry of Education is responsible for the development and review of policy and the Rwanda Education Board (REB), for developing a curriculum, ensuring that tutors are trained and undertaking quality assurance. Districts are responsible for coordinating delivery and NGOs, religious institutions, and other development partners for running literacy classes. However, there is no requirement for training literacy tutors and no standard set for the training. There is recognition of the need for a significant increase in funding for implementing the policy. However, the government has yet to identify a source for financing it, with ODPs and the Government prioritising basic and technical and vocational education, and with development assistance to Rwanda declining (Abbott and Mugisha, 2017; Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2017, 2013)

Rwanda has low levels of literacy, lacks a reading culture, and this harms people's lives and their children's educational attainment (Friedlander, 2020; Ruterana, 2012, 2011). Rwandans generally live in an environment where there is little, if any, access to reading materials. A situational analysis of adult literacy educational needs in 2005 (Okech and Torres, 2005) found that: literacy centres were mostly run by the voluntary sector (mainly churches), they lacked facilities such as blackboards, and nearly a sixth of classes were held in the open. More literacy centres and tutors were needed to increase access, given the number of people who did not have basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. Literacy classes were often funded on a project basis by international aid, meaning that when the funding ceased the centre stopped delivering courses. Tutors are mainly volunteers, primary school graduates with no training in teaching adult literacy. Literacy centres were not regulated; there was no set curriculum or even guidance on delivering adult literacy education. Teaching was mainly of literacy skills, learners did not find the classes interesting, and there was inequitable access to provision. The review concluded that there is a direct relationship between poverty and illiteracy and that prejudice against the poor, women, elderly people, and those with special needs meant there was a reluctance by donors to invest in it. Learner expectation that literacy education would enable them to increase their income often led to frustration and dropout when this did not happen. Adults lacking literacy skills were said to be unaware of the broader benefits of gaining them, such as greater autonomy and problem-solving skills.

The situation in Rwanda indicates that the government has failed to deliver on its plans for adult literacy education. There has been little improvement in literacy rates since 2005 (Figure 1) and these rates are probably an overestimation of the proportion of adults who can use reading, writing and numeracy skills in their daily lives. When required to read a

simple sentence rather than just asked if they can, a significantly smaller proportion can do so - 76% compared to 83% of men and 63% compared to 80% of women, for those aged 18 to 49 (authors' analysis of Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2013/14 and EICV 5).⁴

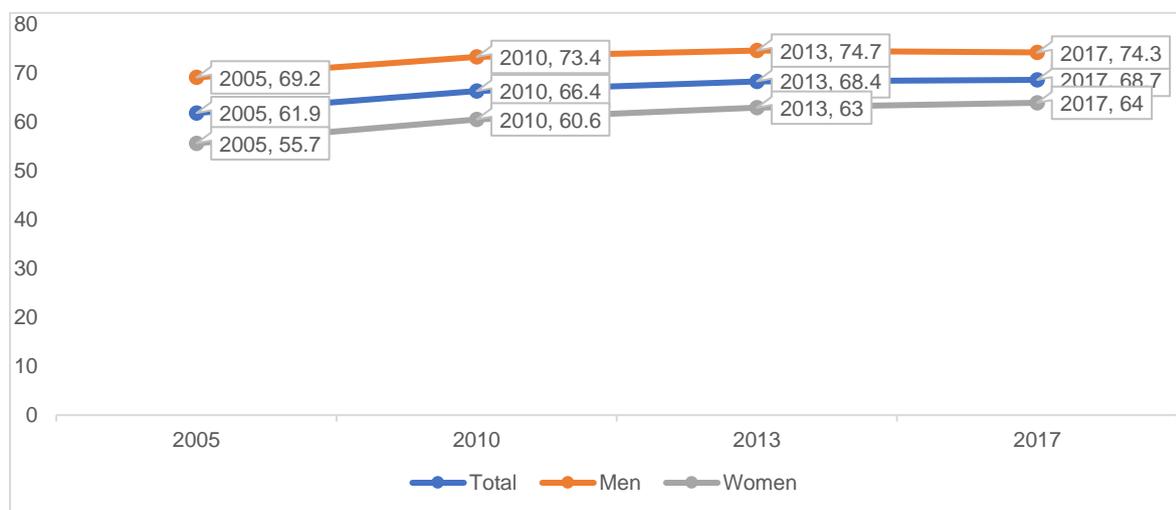


Figure 1: Trend of adults' (over 18) ability to read and write a simple note and do a written calculation

Source: EICV II, III, IV, V (authors' analysis)

There is little evidence of any increase in numbers of adult literacy centres, tutors or learners since 2012; the numbers fluctuate from year to year (Ministry of Education, 2019, 2012). There is also a relatively high non-completion rate - averaged over the three years 2015-17 about 30% of adults who enrolled for a class did not graduate - and learners tend to lose the skills they have gained. In 2017, only eight per cent of adults aged 18 or over had participated in an adult literacy course; of these, only 42% (53% of men, 34% of women) said that they could read and write a simple note and do a written calculation (EICV 5 data).

5. Research Questions

In this paper, we consider four interrelated issues that potentially explain the reasons why adult literacy education provision in Rwanda is failing learners:

1. What adult literacy education is on offer?
2. What are adult learners looking for, and what do they expect to gain from taking adult literacy classes?
3. To what extent and in what ways do adult literacy classes meet the expectation of learners?
4. What is the literacy environment in which people live their daily lives?

6. Methodology

The research used mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative research to answer 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions about the adult literacy education provision on offer. The target population was residents in Western Province aged 18 or over. The paper draws on four data sets.

⁴ Given that the ability to read a sentence/a simple passage declines with age, we estimate that the proportion of women aged 18 or over that can read a simple passage in Rwanda is just under 50% and the proportion of men 67%.

1. *Scoping Study*: Interviews with six of the seven District Directors of Education in Western Province and Professionals in Charge of Adult Education, the Director of Planning in the Ministry of Education, the Deputy Director of the Rwanda Education Board, and representatives of NGOs delivering literacy classes.
2. *Survey*: a stratified probability survey with sampling of areas proportionate to size. (margin of error 2-3% and standard error 95%), stratified by district and by urban/rural location in each district. The sample of villages and households were randomly selected from lists provided by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR). At the household level, the adult member who had most recently had a birthday was interviewed. NISR issued a Survey Licence approving the design of the survey, the questionnaire, and the sample. The target sample was 2,420 individuals, and the achieved sample was 2,391 (98.8%).
3. *Qualitative research 1*: 24 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), each with eight participants representative of gender, age, and educational attainment and employment in Western Province, to explore participants' everyday social practices and understanding of literacy.
4. *Qualitative research 2*: 14 FGDs, each with eight participants representative of men and women who wanted to join or were already attending an adult literacy class. Twenty key informant interviews (KIIs) with district education officials, heads of literacy centres and literacy tutors.⁵

The questionnaire collected demographic data and data on education and employment, literacy and numeracy skills, use of literacy in everyday life and demand for literacy classes. The FGD agendas included the following topics: everyday life, use of literacy skills, ALE provision, demand for ALE and barriers to uptake. The scoping exercise was designed to find out what the provision for ALE was, the extent to which it was a priority and what difficulties the districts were experiencing in delivering it. The agendas for the KIIs included questions on the challenges people with poor literacy skills face in their daily lives, the benefits of gaining literacy skills, the ALE provision in their district and the barriers to attending literacy classes.

Trained researchers and data collectors carried out the research. Apart from the Scoping Study, which was carried out mainly in English, all interviews and FGDs were in Kinyarwanda. The survey questionnaire and the agendas for the FGDs and KIIs were drafted in English and translated into Kinyarwanda by a native speaker, with translations quality-assured by two other native speakers. The questionnaire and agendas were piloted and amended in the light of feedback from the pilots. The research took place between November 2017 and October 2018.

All participants gave informed consent after being read or reading a project information sheet. They were told they could withdraw consent at any time during the interview and up to the 30th October 2018. Quality assurance of the survey included accompanied interviews, daily checks of the interviews and 10% call-back. We use mainly frequencies and crosstabulations, with χ^2 and Cramer's V to test differences for significance. Statistical significance was set at the 99% level, given the sample size. The Wealth Scale is based on the Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey Scale (Rutstein, 2015).

KIIs and FGDs were audio-recorded, with note-takers making contemporaneous notes. Notes were transcribed into English, with the recordings used to fill in any gaps. Transcripts were quality assured by the FGD facilitators. The transcripts were analysed thematically, taking into account the purpose of the research: how people live their daily lives; use of literacy in daily lives; ways that people without literacy skills compensate for not having

⁵ Districts are responsible for the oversight of the delivery of education across the district, and sector officials are responsible for supervising the delivery of pre-school, primary school, and adult education in a sector.

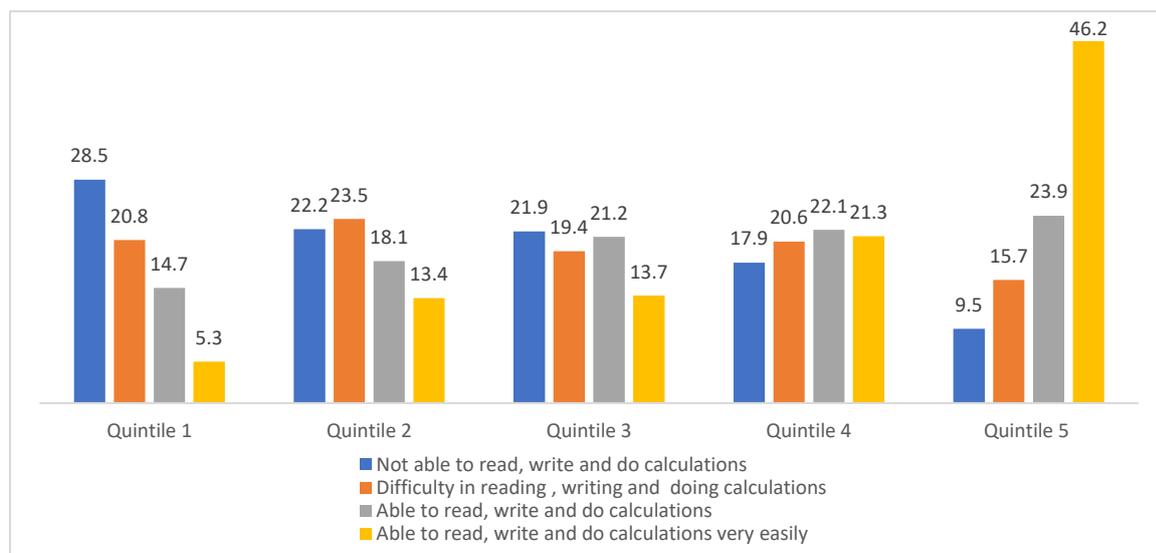
these; motivation for joining a literacy class; satisfaction with literacy classes; and the literacy environment.

Ethical approval for the research was secured through the ethical review procedures of the University of Aberdeen.

7. Findings

7.1. The State of Literacy in Western Province

In Western Province, 67% of adults have not completed primary school; only 30% of women and 38% of men have done so (Crammer’s V sig <0.001). Our findings show that only 40% of adults have basic skills, that is, can easily or very easily read and write a simple passage and do a written calculation using all four rules. There is a strong correlation between literacy and primary-school completion: 80% of adults who say they do not have basic skills did not complete primary school. There is a significant relationship between age and literacy (χ^2 sig<0.001), with the proportion that do not have basic skills increasing with age. However, even among 18-25-year-olds, only 62% can do so, and the proportion declines to 20% of those over 55. Women are less likely than men to have basic skills - 35% of women compared to 47% of men (Cramer’s V sig <0.001). There is also a clear relationship between poverty and literacy: those that lack basic skills are significantly more likely to be in wealth quintiles 1 and 2 and those that have these skills more likely to be in quintiles 4 and 5 (Figure 2).



χ^2 sig<0.001

Figure 2: Wealth Quintile and Literacy Skills (%)

7.2. Supply of and Demand for Literacy Education

The demand for literacy classes is potentially high. In the survey, 71% of those that cannot read and write a simple passage easily and do arithmetic using all four rules say that they would like to attend an adult education class in the future. However, only 12% of respondents had ever attended an adult literacy class, suggesting a large gap between interest and take-up. District education officials (DEOs)⁶ said that they were having difficulty meeting Government targets for adults completing literacy classes. This was partly due to lack of demand, but also because of inadequate funding, limited supply, poor attendance,

⁶ We have not named the districts/sectors from which KIs/tutors were drawn, to protect anonymity.

and high dropout rates. They indicated that Government funding for ALE is minimal and that they are unable to raise local revenues to supplement this. The Rwanda Education Board (REB) supplies teachers' manuals and textbooks, and the districts are responsible for mobilising learners and overseeing examination arrangements. The DEOs pointed out that none of the ODPs provide support for literacy education and that there are no international NGOs that consistently support ALE. Given this they rely on non-governmental organisations and faith-based groups to deliver classes with provision being neither consistent nor evenly spread across the districts and on tutors who are untrained volunteers⁷ and at best receive a small motivation fee, making it challenging to recruit and retain them. This is compounded by the generally low level of education in the Province, with many tutors themselves only having completed primary school education and with no curriculum or funding to provide training.

The Pentecostal Church (ADEPR)⁸ was the most frequently mentioned provider of ALE, although other churches were mentioned. In the interviews with the heads of literacy centres, the problems of funding literacy provision were frequently mentioned. Some programmes are funded 100% by international organisations but only for a few years. When the funding stops, it becomes more challenging to offer classes, especially to pay tutors a motivation fee and provide learning materials.

Given this, the approach of the districts is technocratic. They focus on achieving targets for students completing the classes set by the Government⁹ rather than focusing on making quality provision that will meet the needs of learners. All the DEOs emphasised that what was important for them was meeting the targets for students passing the examination set by the Government annually in line with Rwanda's results-based approach to development,

'Every sector has got a target to train adult learners so 635 pass the examination and graduate. We send a letter to the sectors requiring them to identify "adults with learning difficulties". We follow this up with a letter instructing them to organise classes by a given date, and we (the district) then follow up to make sure that lessons are being delivered'. (DEO)

The district education officials blamed poor attendance and dropout on learners choosing to work rather than attend classes, failing to recognise that learners had often been pressurised into attending classes at their request,

'The number of learners is small in this district because we are close to the border with Congo [DRC], and they prefer to engage in cross-border petty trading. Getting learners to enrol in classes is difficult, and many of those that enrol in classes don't attend regularly or drop out'. (DEO 1)

However, FGD participants indicated that there were several reasons for adults not enrolling in literacy classes, including not knowing about them, being too old to learn, having age-related poor sight, and not liking to admit that they are not literate. The main reasons, however, were churches of which they are not members providing the classes; no literacy centres near to where they lived; classes held at inconvenient times; and because of poverty. As a participant in one FGD said,

⁷ Tutors are referred to as 'volunteers' but are paid a motivation fee. Citizens have to agree each year with their village leaders what they are going to do over the coming year to support the development of Rwanda and 'volunteering' is one of the activities that is encouraged. .

⁸ Association d'Entraide des Eglises de Pentecotes du Rwanda (ADEPR)

⁹ Every year districts sign a performance contract with the government that requires them to meet targets for the services they deliver. The relative performance of districts in meeting these targets is announced annually at a public ceremony chaired by the President of the Republic.

'If there were centres at village, cell or sector levels, then participation would be good'. (FFGD 18-29, Muhororo)

Another pointed to the lack of local provision due to problems with funding,

'The Pentecostal Church [ADEPR] started an adult training programme in 2016. However, when they failed to raise the allowance for teachers and the learners could not raise the amount for the teachers [£1.00] the classes stopped'. (MFGD 18-29 years, Ruharambuga)

The provision by religious organisations was problematic for some potential learners as they felt that religious practices took up too much time, with insufficient time given to teaching literacy. Others did not want to go to classes taking place in a church of which they were not a member.

I did not like the fact that the priests wanted us to pray all the time (MFGD 18-29, Gisenyi).

'Because religious denominations own these training centres, church members are the ones that participate. A Catholic can't join a programme provided by the Pentecostal church'. (FFGD 18-29, Muhororo)

Literacy centres scheduled classes at times when premises were available rather than to suit the needs of learners. Women, for example, generally work on the farms in the morning and have domestic work and childcare responsibilities in the evenings, as a participant in one of the women's FGDs pointed out,

'Like us who are parents, we go to work in the morning to provide for our families, but if the programmes were to take place during the afternoon, we could attend'. (FFGD 18-29 years, Mahembe).

Some participants in FGDs thought that poor attendance was because of lack of motivation. In most FGDs, participants raised the issue of incentives to learners for attending classes, arguing that this would encourage more people to enrol in classes and turn up regularly. This suggests that the motivation to gain literacy skills is not high and that at least some learners enrol because of pressure from local leaders. As we have already discussed, DEOs put pressure on local leaders to recruit learners because they are under pressure to meet district targets.

However, the most frequently mentioned barrier to joining classes was poverty. The participants in the FGDs said that it was difficult to attend classes because they were struggling to provide for their families. If there was a possibility of earning money, then that was prioritised over attending literacy classes.

'Poverty, in general, is what prohibits us from attending school'. (FFGD 30-49, Muhororo).

'We do not have time to attend classes because we spend the whole day working to be able to get food to feed our families.' (MFGD 30-39, Gisenyi)

7.3. Literacy Education Provision – What is on Offer?

There are two issues relating to what is on offer – what the classes offer learners and the quality of the provision. At present Rwanda's only provision for adult learners is the first level of adult basic education, equivalent to the first year of primary school. DEOs told us that the

curriculum is based on a functional view of literacy enabling learners to gain useful knowledge such as hygiene, running a household enterprise, caring for their children as well as learning to read, write and do calculations. However, they acknowledged: that the quality is poor; that REB is unable to supply sufficient textbooks and teachers' manuals for tutors and learners; and that there are no dedicated classrooms for adult education. Not all centres even have chairs and desks for learners and, where they do, they are not sufficient for the number of learners. In some centres classes are held in the open. Most centres do not have a blackboard, and few have any learning materials.

The DEOs and the KIs stated that classes are often overcrowded because of a shortage of tutors and lack of classrooms, and learners with different levels of literacy skills are taught together. Potential tutors are deterred from 'volunteering' by the lack of any payment. Tutors are mainly primary-school graduates and have little, if any, training; they use didactic teaching methods, and there is little supervision of their delivery. Mothers often bring their babies and young children to classes with them because they have no alternative. There is no adult education provision to which graduates can progress, to improve their skills further, which demotivates some learners.

The learners, the tutors and the DEOs agreed that the accommodation provided for literacy classes was far from ideal and that the learning resources were inadequate. One district education official pointed out that,

'The books we provide are insufficient for the learners to use in class, and they can't take books home to practice reading. There is also a lack of blackboards for tutors to use when teaching classes. (EO)

Graduates argued that a lack of learning materials impacted negatively on the quality of the education,

'The quality [of the education] was not good because there were not enough learning materials, like books to be used by students in class'. (GFGD, Rubengera).

'There were a few books we used while we were in class, but we couldn't take them home with us, and even in class we had to share one book between three of us. (GFGD, Mururu)

One of the tutors pointed to the contrast between the inadequate resources provided for most adult learners and those provided for classes that were funded by an international development partner.

'People who are sponsored by CARE have exercise books, pens, textbooks provided for them, but those that are sponsored by the Government have no materials provided'. (VT Rusizi)

The DEOs and KIs said that the poor quality of teaching was because tutors were themselves poorly educated, had not been trained for teaching adult literacy classes and were not motivated because they received little or no remuneration for taking classes. Some of the funded projects pay the teachers, but this is not sustainable when the funding stops. Tutors then stop delivering classes. Tutors pointed out that volunteering as a literacy tutor has costs for which they are not compensated:

'Because trainers have no allowance, they become reluctant to continue teaching. To go to the adult training centre, you need to dress smartly and to be clean. This requires soap which we cannot afford to buy. Our shoes wear out and we need to get them repaired but we do not have the money, and when we go to the literacy centre we have to do without food because we cannot afford to buy a meal in a café'. (VT 2)

There is no national syllabus for training adult literacy tutors and no requirement that tutors should have any training before they take classes¹⁰. Some of the funded projects train tutors for a few days, but, as one of the DEOs pointed out

‘We have a problem because we are not able to train the teachers that are willing to teach. They are not well educated and need training because most of them have only completed primary school.’ (DEO)

Graduates from literacy courses also raised concerns about the poor quality of teaching,

‘The teachers are not well trained in how to teach literacy to us, most of the teachers have only completed primary school, which means they do not have enough skills to give us good quality teaching.’ (GFGD Rubengera)

Others pointed out that because tutors are unpaid volunteers, they are not committed to teaching the adult learners. They just turn up when they want to, when they do not have other things to do. However, tutors argue they cannot turn down an opportunity to earn money because they, like the learners, are struggling to provide for their families.

‘Sometimes, when we go to the class, we find that the teacher has not turned up. When we ask him at the next class why he did not come the previous week he says, “do you think I get paid? I am teaching you as a volunteer. Therefore, if I can get some work so I can provide food for my family, I will not come to teach you because I have my family to take care of”. The problem is that teachers are not given a motivation fee’. (GFGD Rubengera).

Difficulty in recruiting tutors means that their numbers are insufficient to meet the needs of learners. If a tutor does not turn up, there is no one to cover, and learners become discouraged. Classes are often large, the districts require that learners be permitted to join classes at any time during the year, and learners are in the same class irrespective of level. Most literacy centres only have one volunteer tutor and space for one class of students.

‘How I see it, the quality was not bad, but also it was not good. This was because we were mixed in the same literacy class, yet we were not at the same level, some of us had dropped out of primary school while others of us had never been to school.’ (GFGD, Rusizi).

7.4. Literacy Demand - What Do Adults Learners Want?

Based on the responses to the survey by those that said they were interested in going to a literacy class in the future, the main demand is for gaining/improving reading and writing skills, with 80% saying that acquiring these skills is a high priority. Fifty-three per cent said that numeracy skills were a top priority and 30% skills in English. Beyond this, there was some demand for learning French (18%) and Kiswahili (14%), but fewer than 10% said that they wanted to learn skills related to farming, running a household enterprise, financial literacy, helping their children with homework or improving the health of their families.

In the FGDs, the participants generally agreed that people wanted to learn literacy skills so that they could improve their lives. They thought that if they gained literacy skills, they would be more confident and able to manage their finances better. They would also be able to read the Bible, use a mobile phone, read road signs, learn to speak foreign languages, help their

¹⁰ The 2014 Education Policy says that sector education officers are responsible for the training of adult literacy tutors. However, they themselves have had no training in adult basic education, nor do they have any resources for providing training.

children with their homework and stop being cheated. They wanted to get paid employment and become like their literate neighbours who were not poor. They wanted to be respected and not discriminated against in employment and local leadership roles because they did not have literacy skills.

‘Our literate neighbours have nice houses, good jobs and educated children. You feel small when you meet them. The literate person in the community is more respected than the illiterate one.’ (FGD WJC, Rusizi).

‘I was hurt a lot because I can’t read and write. I was elected as a local leader, but I found I couldn’t do the work because of my inability to read and write’. (FGD JLC Rusizi).

Becoming literate was seen as the key to opening opportunities for a better life. FGD participants thought literacy skills would enable them to improve the productivity of their farms, get a job or start a household enterprise, enabling them to move out of poverty.

‘Generally, we have no jobs.... It is for this reason that we would like to attend literacy classes to improve our lifestyles. We will know how to do a job that requires knowing how to read and write.’ (FGD JLC, Nyakiriba)

‘Knowing how to read and write can help us to be able to learn to do different skills like tailoring or using a computer.’ (MFGD 18-29, Gisenyi)

‘I need basic skills on how to read and write in Kinyarwanda If I am skilled in reading and writing plus calculations, this can help me start up my own business, like a clothes shop or a restaurant’. (FFGD, 18-29 Muhororo)

‘In general, we need help regarding farming; they can teach us how to improve our farming practices.’ (MFGD 30-49 years, Hindiro)

There was also much interest in learning English to help children with their homework.

‘After learning reading and writing, you can also add English because our children know it, so that we manage to communicate with our children and help them with their homework.’ (FFGD, Muhororo).

In every FGD, the issue of being cheated because of not being literate and numerate was raised and seen as very problematic. Participants gave examples of how they or people they knew had been cheated. For example:

‘I went with a friend to buy a bull. We wrote an agreement and all the parties signed it. However, I realised later that my friend was on the agreement as the buyer, so I was not the owner of the bull.’ (FGD JLC, Nyundo)

‘You can start a business with another person who you think is a person of integrity. But he takes advantage of you because you have literacy difficulties, he cheats you.’ (FGD JLC, Rusizi).

7.5. Do Adult Literacy Classes Meet the Expectation of Learners?

Nine per cent of respondents to the survey were attending or had attended an adult literacy class. The main reason why they had joined a course was to learn to read (90%) and write (75%). Of those who had attended a literacy class, 50% said they could not read and write a simple passage and 40% that they could not do calculations using the four rules. Only 25% could confidently read and write a short note, and 26% do calculations using the four rules,

with only 15% able to do all this confidently. Just over 50% said that they had not gained any of the skills, and only 14% felt that they had gained all the skills they had hoped to learn. There were no significant differences by gender. During the scoping exercise, the DEOs noted that most learners who graduated from literacy classes could not still read a year after they had graduated. It seems that few adults in Western Province who attended adult literacy classes are benefitting.

In the FGDs a few learners seemed confident that gaining literacy skills would enable them to get employment and one of the organisers of a literacy centre thought that going to literacy classes had enabled people to transform their lives.

‘It’s changed people’s lifestyles. Some graduates move from farming to other livelihood activities, for example, being motorcyclists, others improve their cattle keeping, and they are also able to use the knowledge they gained, for example how to fight malnutrition and to plan their family size’. (Church Pastor, Rubavu).

However, most participants in the FGDs were sceptical. They pointed out that graduates from literacy classes did not very often get paid employment and that they did not have the finance for setting up a small enterprise.

‘Graduates [from the literacy classes] do not get jobs. It would be better if they were helped to start small business to use their skills, for example, by buying them sewing machines’. (VT, Rusizi)

‘Most people think that even those who have had some education do not gain anything from literacy classes, and this discourages people from going to classes.’ (FGD JLC, Nyakiriba)

The participants in the FGDs, especially the male ones, did not think that literacy alone was sufficient for improving their lives. They wanted vocational training schools (VTCs) that would enable them to learn a trade so that they could either get employment or start a small business.¹¹

‘We lack schools that can provide practical skills for people to learn and create jobs’. (MFGD 30-50 years, Rusizi)

‘It should be possible for literacy graduates to go on to learn vocational and technical skills after they have finished a literacy class’. (GFGD, Mururu)

7.6. The literacy environment

It was clear from the FGDs that, while people wanted to improve their lives, most did not see taking literacy classes as likely to enable them to do this. This is not surprising given that most people in Western Province do not use literacy skills in their everyday lives, even those that are fully literate. Most people live in rural areas where they are unlikely to see written signs or notices, to see newspapers or to have books. Only seven per cent of respondents to the survey live in urban areas where there are written signs and notices and newspapers on sale. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that a majority say that they do not use literacy and numeracy skills. Only around a fifth of respondents said that they ever used these skills, 23% reading (44% urban, 20% rural), 18% writing (38% urban, 16% rural) and 21% calculations (54% urban, 19% rural). Even fewer use them every day - two per cent reading, one per cent, writing and nearly five per cent doing calculations. Only 13% of those in employment need to be able to read and write to do their job. Participants in the FGDs also

¹¹ VTCs charge adults fees and the minimum entrance requirement is a primary school leaving certificate.

said they had little need for literacy and numeracy skills in their daily lives; as a respondent in one group pointed out,

‘In our daily lives, we do not often read and write because we are farmers, so we do not require it’. (MFGD 50+, Ruharambuga).

It was noticeable that respondents living in urban areas were more likely to talk about the need to be able to read. They pointed out that you needed to be able to read signposts to find your way about town and to travel to other parts of Rwanda, but they also said that even those living in urban areas were able to manage without using literacy skills.

Those that had difficulty with reading and writing were aware that there were things they cannot do which those with literacy skills take for granted and may not even consciously think about when asked about the use of their literacy skills. These include reading signposts, text messages, invitation cards and the Bible and avoiding being cheated when they pay for goods and services or are involved in other financial transactions. However, most people do not need to use these skills in their daily lives, and when they do, they have found strategies to deal with the problem.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis of survey data shows that there has been little improvement in literacy rates since the mid-2000s when a review was carried, that the official statistics overestimate the proportion of adults that have even basic literacy skills and that graduates from literacy course do not retain the skills they learn. The approach taken to literacy provision is technocratic: DEOs and the Government are more concerned with meeting national and international targets than they are with enabling people to gain skills that will help them to transform their lives. DEOs’ priority is to meet the target rather than improve the quality of delivery. The provision in place in 2018 showed little improvement over that in 2005, when a situational analysis was critical of the poor quality of ALE provision (Okech and Torres, 2005).

The findings indicate a disconnect between ALE policy and practice. As in other countries (see, e.g., Cheffy et al., 2016; Robinson and Vü, 2019) despite the Government saying that adult literacy is important for poverty reduction and economic development, in practice, it has been a low priority for both Government and ODPs, as is the case more generally (see, e.g., Post, 2016; Stromquist, 2016). Both Government and ODPs are aware that investing in basic education and Technical, and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is much more likely to produce a labour force with the skills to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and drive economic development and transformation. This has been made clear in the government’s development strategies since 2000 and in the allocation of donor funding (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2017, 2013, 2002; NISR, 2007).

‘Volunteer’ literacy tutors are hard to recruit not only because they are not adequately compensated, but because the general level of education is low in the Province. Those with post-primary education are more likely to be in employment and not available to volunteer. ALE, as delivered, may enable some learners to gain skills that enable them to improve their quality of life but will not produce workers equipped to work in a modern economy. As UNESCO has pointed out in the 21st-century learners, need a range of cognitive and communications skills that goes well beyond having basic reading writing and arithmetic skills (UNESCO, 2019). Funding is inadequate, and there is a reliance on NGOs to deliver ALE and on untrained ‘volunteer’ tutors to do the teaching. Provision is of poor quality and inadequate, with many learners having no literacy centre within easy travelling distance, and the centres poorly resourced. Classes are delivered at times to meet the convenience of the NGOs rather than at times when learners can attend.

Demand from learners for ALE is low; DEOs report having to 'police' the setting up of classes and the recruitment of learners. In the rural areas where most people live, there is little use for literacy skills. Literacy centres are unevenly spread across the districts and so are not accessible to all learners. While those with poor literacy skills aspire to the lifestyle and respect that those that are literate have, they are well aware that taking a literacy class is unlikely to enable them to transform their lives. While DEOs blame students for poor attendance, dropping out of classes and failing examinations, the main reason that learners give is poverty; they are struggling to provide for their families, and they have to prioritise making a living over attending literacy classes. Similarly, for the 'volunteer' tutors turning up to teach a literacy class for an inadequate 'motivation payment' loses out when paid work is available.

There is general dissatisfaction with ALE provision. Classes are often large and of mixed ability, combining complete beginners with those who have picked up at least some literacy practices before dropping out of school. Learning resources are inadequate, and tutors are criticised for having poor literacy skills, didactic teaching, and the skills that learners acquire are not useful to them in their everyday lives. While learners' motivation for taking classes is so they can get paid employment and gain more respect in their communities, their expectation of finding a decent job or starting their own business is rarely fulfilled. Our FGD participants were well aware of the likelihood of being disappointed with the outcome if they took literacy classes, from observing the fate of others as well as from their own experience.

In conclusion, as in other low-income countries, adult literacy provision in Rwanda is of poor quality and poorly resourced. The tutors are volunteers who, for the most part, are poorly trained (if at all), and there is inadequate provision to meet the needs of learners. Most graduates from literacy courses have not gained the skills that they sought, and they quickly lose those gained. While more evidence is needed on what works in ALE (Carpentieri, 2013), there are some indications of promising strategies (see, e.g., Blunch, 2017; Trudell et al., 2019). Within the resources available there is scope for Rwanda to learn from these and make considerable improvements in (a) the training of tutors, and of those who train them, (b) the provision of teaching and learning resources, (c) the reorganisation of delivery to meet at least the majority patterns of parenting, paid work and subsistence farming, and (d) to teach the literacy and arithmetic in an interactive, learner-centred manner and through real-life examples which will allow some chance for generalisation beyond the classroom to the world of work and social relations, its problems and its opportunities. Literacy has the proven capability to raise communities out of poverty, but only if the students have learned how to apply it and have the confidence in themselves to use it.

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References

Data Sets

EICV data sets available to download at:

<https://microdata.statistics.gov.rw/index.php/catalog>

Literacy Survey Data Set: available on request from the corresponding author

RDHS data sets available to download at: <https://microdata.statistics.gov.rw/index.php/catalog>

World Development Indicators: available to download at:

<https://databank.worldbank.org/databases.aspx?pagenumber=1>

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