*Review*

# Literacies and development in African countries

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**Over the centuries, literacy has been both identified and eulogised as a harbinger of both individual and social development. Yet, African nations that have regularly posted high literacy rates are yet to show any sign of meaningful development. Which type of literacy then brings about development? None of the myriad of typologies of literacy currently existing has been found to bring about a type of development that will significantly raise the Human Development Index of African nations. Consequently, a special literacy programme capable of impacting positively and meaningfully on the Human Development Index of African nations was designed and proposed here as a panacea to African development crisis; that special literacy programme is known here as the Human Development Index Literacy Programme.**

**Keywords:** Literacy, social development, Human Development Index, African nations.

## INTRODUCTION

Apart from the fact that it is a most important human skill, literacy has equally been linked to individual, social and economic development (Fagan, 1997; Coulombe et al., 2004).

If the theory that any society that achieves at least 40 percent literacy rate is at the threshold of development (Smith, 1965) is to be accepted, then Africa may now be said to be fairly developed; this is because according to UNDP (2009) and Wikipedia (2011), 46 of the 54 African countries (including South Sudan), between 2000 and 2011 have posted between 40 and 88 percent literacy rate.

Yet, it is currently known that Africa is yet to achieve any noticeable measure of development; for example, "Africa [remains] the world's poorest inhabited continent" (Wikipedia, 2011) with 25 nations (about half of its constituent countries) ranking lowest among the nations of the world in 2003 (UNHDR, 2003); by 2010, the best African nation (Libya) ranked 53rd on the world Human Development Index (HDI) and the worst country (Zimbabwe) ranked 169th out of the 175 countries whose HDI measures were available (Wikipedia, 2011).

As I write this piece, that country, Libya, which was retained as the country possessing the highest 2010 Human Development Index in Africa is being reduced to rubbles through NATO bombardments and internal revolts coming from the four cardinal points of that Islamic Republic; this signifies that the Human Development Index of Africa has now deteriorated beyond the 2010 reported figures and that living conditions have become even more dire than earlier reported.

Yet, by 2011 many African countries continue to post high rates of literacy and literature continues to be replete with the fact that literacy does promote economic, social and individual development (Fagan, 1997; Green and Riddell, 2001; Coulombe et al., 2004).

Why then, is Africa not developed in spite of its high posted literacy rates? First, it is because of the nominal and personalised method employed in collecting data about literacy and literacy rates by United Nations organs; second, between 1965 when Adam Smith first established a correlation between literacy and economic development and 2011, there has been an explosion of typologies of literacy; third, economic and HDI-related development correlates tend to run along specific typologies of literacy only.

### Theories of Development

If between the 19th and middle of the 20th centuries, emphasis has been laid on economic development of nations as computed by egg-head economists, beginning from the middle of the 20th century, emphasis has shifted

to social and educational indicators which ultimately bring about not only economic progress but also measurable social well-being. Consequently, discussions about development nowadays emphasise and target social development instead of hard figure economic development since a development that generates plenty money for governments and multi-nationals without positive side effects on citizens is unfair development or to put it more radically, is no development at all.

Hence, it was said that:

"Social development consists of two interrelated aspects-learning and application...society develops in response to the contact and interaction between human beings and their material, social and intellectual environment. The incursion of external threats, the pressure of physical and social conditions, the mysteries of physical nature and complexities of human behaviour prompt humanity to experiment, create and innovate (Jacobs and Cleveland, 1999)".

Also, as a result of this shift from hard figure economic development to the concept of social development, a development measurement indicator known as "Human Development Index" (HDI) was developed in 1990 by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, the first, a Pakistani economist and the latter, an Indian economist (Wikipedia, 2011).

Within the context of this discussion, by development, it is implied, the broad idea of social development and particularly that form of development that lays emphasis on Human Development Index.

## Literacy and Human Development Index

The aspects of HDI include measures of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living. Within this composite, literacy is a most important factor as it plays a catalytic role in insuring the attainment of an impressive level of life expectancy, in generating motivation for further and/or higher education and in providing the basis for aspiration to high standards of living.

An above average level of literacy combined with the existence of a critical mass of individuals possessing this above average level of literacy is a prerequisite for development in any society. The level of literacy ought to be measured to ascertain both its level and the percentage of persons that may be at each level of literacy; unfortunately, the data collection method used by United Nations organs is not fault-proof as these organs mainly employ nominal or personalised method for the collection of literacy data.

## Nominal or Personalised Data Collection Method

Although final literacy figures are usually derived from a combination of directly collected national data and national and global estimates, respondents are usually asked to just indicate whether or not they can read and write simple sentences; no attempt is made to corroborate what respondents may have said.

This method of collecting data is known as a personalised data collection method and it tends to leave all countries with higher than realistic percentages of literacy with many African nations posting between 50 and 80 percent rates of literacy.

Additionally, the type of literacy measured through this method is known as traditional literacy; whereas between the period man had directed its attention to the study of literacy, many other types of literacy have been uncovered; these include in addition to traditional literacy, work-oriented literacy, literacy for conscientisation, civic literacy, cultural literacy, computer literacy, internet literacy, tourism literacy, sign literacy and functional literacy; others include real literacy, political literacy, prose literacy, document literacy, quantitative literacy, ritual literacy, musical literacy, moral literacy, visual literacy and cinematic literacy.

What does each of these types of literacy mean?

## Traditional Literacy

Traditional literacy is also sometimes referred to as conventional literacy. This form of literacy is labelled traditional or conventional because it is the most common type of literacy sought after by most societies. For instance it is the type of literacy with which formal primary school pupils are equipped. It is the type of literacy which enables people to read, write and compute in any language (Asiedu and Oyedeji, 1984; Omolewa, 1981).

All societies value traditional literacy because it is widely believed that the acquisition of reading, writing and numeracy skills tends to accelerate the acquisition of other forms of knowledge and skills.

## Work-oriented Literacy

Work oriented literacy is a concept of literacy made popular by UNESCO. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is an agency of the United Nations Organisation (UNO) through which the latter carries out its educational, scientific and cultural projects throughout the world. While the United Nations Organization was established in October 24, 1945, UNESCO came into being a little later.

Since its inception, UNESCO has rendered technical assistance to numerous educational projects. But it committed itself to the eradication of illiteracy in the world only in 1962 with the publication of a document entitled "World Campaign for Universal Literacy."(UNESCO, 1962). In 1964 UNESCO improved the methods and tools with which it intended to assist in the promotion of literacy

projects and between 1965 and 1970 it sponsored the most famous and extensive experimental work-oriented literacy projects ever known to the world.

These literacy projects were located in Mali, Guinea, Sudan, Algeria, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Madagascar, India, Ecuador, Iran and Syria. Using the national languages of these countries, agricultural and vocational skills were taught to thousands of illiterate farmers, artisans and jobless youths; the teaching of reading, writing and numeracy was integrated into the teaching of agricultural and vocational skills.

Although the level of reading, writing and numeracy skills acquisition was found to be below expectation, the rate at which agricultural and vocational skills were acquired and/or improved was quite impressive. As a result of this outcome, the UNESCO experimental literacy projects were adjudged to be generally successful. Consequently, work-oriented literacy schemes spread like wild fire through the world.

## Literacy for Conscientisation

Conscientisation is the process of conscientising an individual or group of individuals. To conscientise an individual is to make that individual aware of the dynamics operating within his social environment (Freire, 1970); these dynamics include the type of government, the types of social institutions, the kinds of interest groups and the kinds of pressure groups that interact to create the type of society the individual lives in. after this awakening to one's social reality may have been brought about through a process of personalised analysis of the information made available on the forces at play within one's milieu, it is expected that the individual would wish to create his own force and exert such a force on pre-existing forces with the view to obtaining from his social environment needed energy for survival and needed incentive to continue his contribution towards the growth of society.

## Functional Literacy

It should be noted from onset that work-oriented literacy and literacy for conscientisation are sometimes designated by the term "functional literacy". Indeed when in the 1960s UNESCO got involved in literacy work, it labelled its literacy programme, "functional literacy". This is because through its literacy programme, UNESCO planned to ultimately make all beneficiaries, functional individuals in society. Similarly, since literacy for conscientisation aims at creating an enabling

environment within which man would realise its full human potentials, it is equally accepted to be a functionally oriented literacy programme.

However, the implementation of UNESCO's experimental literacy project having revealed on the field that the true worth of the programme was its ability to equip and/or increase professional and vocational competencies, the prefix 'functional' was quickly and naturally dropped in favour of a more appropriate prefix which was unanimously selected by literacy experts to be "work-oriented". As for literacy for conscientisation, its concept is based largely on existentialist philosophy; as such the need to emphasise and preserve its uniqueness, eventually dictated the maintenance of its original identity (conscientisation) against subsuming it under a generic term such as "functional"

These clarifications, having been made, it should be said that functional literacy is that type of literacy which enables a person to function within his society. To function within his society, a person would need to master the medium and means of communication most commonly used; he should also be able to read and understand the most common signs and symbols in common use within society. By medium, it is meant the lingua-franca or in other words the language adopted for use in carrying on day-to-day activities; by means, it is meant the form (written or oral) and the instrument (simple telephone, tele-conference, internet etc) used in carrying on communication; signs and symbols on the other hand are things such as road signs, signs usually found on public buildings or places or symbols indicating religious issues or places or other issues and places of reverence.

Functional literacy therefore is a process of continually equipping the individual with skills that would be needed by him or her in his/her effort to adjust to the ever changing demands of society and living (Knowles, 1980).

## Civic literacy

Civic literacy is one type of literacy which informs and educates the citizenry on their civic responsibilities and obligations (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008). These responsibilities and obligations themselves are dynamic and this form of literacy is to help citizens keep track of such a dynamism.

## Cultural literacy

Cultural literacy introduces all persons of a society to those things they need to know about their own people

and society (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008). The knowledge of these things which are in the main, social practices of their milieux, makes them acceptable as valued and valuable members of society.

## Computer literacy

The computer is a machine used in processing and storing information. It is a 20th century invention which has come to make the management of exploded information fairly easy. In order to succeed in business, learning, politics and other fields of human endeavour, all persons must know something about the existence and use of the computer mouse, computer keyboard, computer programmes and more.
Computer literacy enables such ambitions to be realised.

## Internet literacy

The Internet is a network of computers holding organised information for the purpose of serving as a learning web, a library, an interactive machine and a public shop for knowledge. It also serves as courier carrier and in this respect; it is currently the fastest messenger available.

In addition to being computer literate, all persons that wish to succeed in their areas of practice would do well to learn about Internet modems, composing Internet mail, sending mail, spams and other Internet related expressions and practices.

## Tourism literacy

The world having been globalised through revolutionary means of communication, the desire has increased among people of all races to get in touch with one another with the view to sharing knowledge and information about environmental, culinary, dressing, health and other experiences.

With this desire, has evolved a science of helping people feel at home even when they are far away from home. The acquisition of this science and know-how confers on learners tourism literacy (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008).

## Sign Literacy

In modern societies, signs have been invented to facilitate communication and to safely guide individuals and whole communities through life.

The understanding and ability to use adequately these signs constitute one aspect of sign literacy (Lindmark and

Erixon, 2008). The other aspect has to do with the mastery of the special signs which physically challenged communicate with.

## Real literacy

Real literacy is the literacy that is real to the learner (Rogers, 1985); it is that type of literacy which the individual acquires under the force of necessity. For example, if an illiterate Senegalese lives and runs a transport business in any part of Anglophone Africa, he may wish to display on one of his Lorries the philosophy underlying his business for his hosts and customers to appreciate. He may then write:"no food for lazy man"

Having lived in this English speaking environment for sometime, he has heard people say this and he has come to adopt this as his philosophy, as this is one thing that touches greatly his soul and encourages him on in his business. He has not been to school; therefore the correct spellings are not his priority; rather, the general meaning of whatever he wishes to express is of greatest concern to him. Consequently, through self-learning, real literacy acquired by people may be displayed in the following writings:
NO MAN PASS GOD
NO KING AS GOD
LET THEM SAY
LET MY ENEMY LIVE TO SEE WHAT I BECOME

## Political literacy

When acquired, political literacy equips the individual with the ability to discern technicalities in political party formation, the rules of political operations and the spirit of politicking (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008).

It also equips the learner with the knowledge of the different types of political conceptions existing and their nuances.

## Prose literacy

Prose literacy is ability to read any text written in prose fluently and without hesitation or/and ability to carry out correctly an instruction through the guidance of a written text (ETS, 2011). Examples of text written in prose are newspaper, magazine, public notice and journal contents.

It has recently been discovered that even with a high level of traditional literacy in European and American societies, a large portion of the populations are suffering from prose illiteracy as many persons can no longer read newspapers and public notices as effectively as it is expected of them.

## Document Literacy

The acquisition of document literacy enables an individual to complete effortlessly and with minimal errors, all official documents such as application forms, driving license forms and other such documents (Kirsch and Mosenthal, 2011).

Many persons both in developed and developing worlds are now found to be falling in the category of document illiterate persons as the completion of official documents is now found to be difficult by them.

## Quantitative literacy

Quantitative literacy is in a way, numeracy; in another way, it is ability to conceptualise correctly, weight, length, breadth and height measures (ETS, 2011). In other words any person who is able to count fluently and carry out simple arithmetic and who is also able to interpret accurately weight, length, breadth and height measures expressed in any measurement systems (e.g. metric system or other systems), is said to be quantitatively literate.

By the close of the $20^{th}$ century, many persons in the world including persons in the developed world were found to be quantitatively illiterate.

## Ritual literacy

Ritual literacy enables the individual to read without being able to interpret or understand what he or she is reading (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008). The ritually literate individual is good in matching sound with symbol and vice versa but he is not often able to explain to another person what he is reading or reciting.

This is an example of learning taking place in Quranic schools and in a number of traditional Spanish speaking societies such as Mexico and other such communities in Latin America.

## Musical literacy

Musical literacy equips the individual with the skills to match music symbols with sounds (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008) and to sing at many levels of competence and performance.

## Moral literacy

Moral literacy equips the individual with the ability to master and to exhibit the principal tenets of a particular set of approved values and morals (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008). In traditional societies in which morality still holds

sway, this is an important type of literacy, the acquisition of which is sine qua non to the individual's acceptance within society.

## Visual literacy

Visual literacy trains the eyes to differentiate various shades, lights and pictures. It is a specifically technical and professional type of literacy.

## Cinematic literacy

Cinematic literacy is literacy applied to the cinema (Lindmark and Erixon, 2008). It is partly visual literacy as it concerns the cinema; however, in addition, it is a type of literacy that teaches technicalities about cinematography.

## Oral literacy

Although oral literacy still remains a very useful tool for the historian and the anthropologist, its value has been reduced in modern times by explosion of knowledge and the commensurate scientific inventions concerning classification and storage of knowledge.

Oral literacy finds its roots in oral tradition and it is considered a fountain of knowledge kept in the memory of specialised personalities who have developed over time, techniques and systems for recording and storing history for posterity.

In connection with oral literacy that was and still is important in Africa, Ousmane (1963) said "When an old man dies in Africa, it is a whole library that has gone up in flames" (Pp.7)

## The crux of the matter

Of all these many types of literacy, which of them would promote social development? Is it true that mere acquisition of the skills of reading, writing and numeracy would equip beneficiaries with an enviable life expectancy or with higher standards of living than their economic realities would allow? Would work-0riented literacy improve a population's life expectancy, education standard and standard of living? Would civic literacy or tourism literacy improve a nation's life expectancy or standard of living?

The answers to these questions are necessarily in the negative because while the acquisition of traditional literacy may raise the prospect for improved life expectancy, educational achievement and standard of living, the mere skills of reading, writing and numeral alone cannot improve life expectancy and raise standard
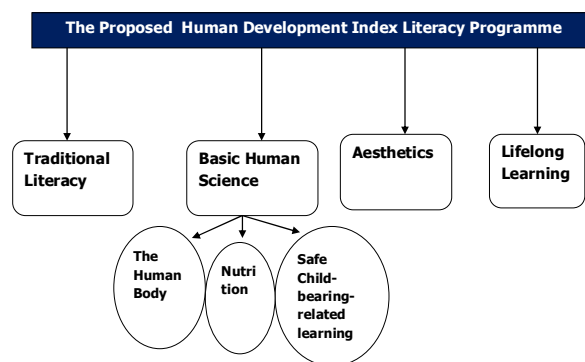
**Figure 1:** The proposed human development index literacy

of living.

Additionally, while work-oriented literacy can definitely improve skills on a chosen vocational enterprise, it cannot in itself elongate the beneficiary's life or raise the beneficiary's standard of living even when the beneficiary becomes obviously wealthy or materially affluent as a result of a display of better skills in his chosen vocation. The ability to improve one's life expectancy or the raising of one's educational achievement or standard of education or the raising of one's standard of living all demand something more than money or wealth.

Equally, acquisition of civic education or tourism education would not necessarily improve life expectancy or raise living standards or grant acquisition of higher education unless some deliberate efforts were deployed towards achieving these things.

While traditional literacy remains an excellent foundation for all learning and while all the myriad of typologies of literacy discussed here are laudable and do serve their purpose, they cannot either singly or collectively bring about improved life expectancy, or raise educational achievement in a significant manner or even raise standards of living.

In order to achieve an impressive Human Development Index, African countries need to package a special literacy programme which will be responsive to the constituents of Human Development Index, that is, a programme that will address those factors that will bring about impressive life expectancy, improved educational achievement and high standard of living.

**The Proposed Human Development Index Literacy Programme**

Such a literacy programme must necessarily be an eclectic one. It must lay its foundation on traditional literacy; in other words, it will begin by equipping learners with the skills of reading, writing and numeracy; it shall then be followed with basic human science knowledge including child bearing-related knowledge; it will be followed by enlightenment on aesthetics and it will end with a learning which itself is never ending that is known as lifelong learning; this lifelong learning will be dual in nature as one aspect of it shall concern itself with renewing basic human science knowledge and the aesthetics knowledge of learners while the other aspect of it will truly be education without end. This implies that while traditional literacy, basic human science knowledge and aesthetics knowledge form the core of the HDI Literacy Programme, learners will be at liberty to keep taking up any other types of learning of their choice throughout life.

The following is the diagrammatical representation of the proposed HDI Literacy Programme:

Figure 1 displays the special literacy programme that may bring African countries to achieve a high Human Development Index. This learning programme is made up of four main pieces of knowledge, namely, traditional literacy, that is, reading, writing and numeracy; but also basic human science made up of the knowledge of the human body, nutrition and safe child bearing-related knowledge; the programme is equally to be made up of aesthetics that aims at raising the level of cultural appreciation and practice of learners; last, comes lifelong learning which is expected to keep improving the knowledge base and learners' understanding of the world till their last days.

**CONCLUSION**

While literacy is important for a successful living, it is not any type of literacy that may bring African nations to achieve a high Human Development Index. A special literacy programme such as the one proposed here is

one answer to current African development crisis.

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