

The Challenges Of Adult Education

— Francis Bartels

WHILE there is evidence that African countries have come fully to accept the concept of universal life-long education as a national necessity, there is still hesitation about putting emphasis on adults and their education for rural development. There seems to be greater faith in Africa in education provided to the young in school and college.

The obstacles to success in education are numerous. They include insufficient political will in a number of countries, ill-organized efforts that discourage adult education workers; inadequate arrangements for training such workers and for conducting research to support their work. Then adult education continues to be considered something outside the real work of education and so it remains less-favoured and less-valued.

But there have been achievements. Among these are Zimbabwe's effort to create a permanently literate nation and its newspapers in such national languages as Shona and Ndebele; Kenya's rural newspapers; the Ivory Coast's experimental work at the Institute of Appl-

Here is an article dealing with the problem of illiteracy and attempts to remove it in the countries of Africa. Some of these problems are not exclusively of Africa's. It will be of help for countries like Bangladesh also to know what is being done there to overpower the giant that illiteracy is.

ed Linguistics; and Niger's centres for training young farmers. The people usually marked out to receive adult education are broadly speaking members of one of three groups: working adults, the urban unemployed, and urban illiterate youth. There is a case for looking more closely into the needs of other groups. These include the rural poor, 'the forgotten people'; graduates of third level education from whose ranks advisory posts, previously held by nationals of the former colonial powers, are being filled; and primary school-leavers. These groups differ widely; but they have one thing in common—lack of interest in adult education and awareness of their need for it. The rural needy and the

shanty town dwellers, estimated at half the population of Africa—and whose numbers are being swollen by thousands in flight from conflict or hunger in drought-stricken areas—constitute a challenge of enormous size to adult education.

In the 1970's two projects showed that people can begin to make their way into the development process which had by-passed them. One was a Community Development Project at Ramdullah in Burkina Faso, supported by the World Bank. The other was the Unesco/Unicef assisted Project in Basic Education in Ethiopia. At Ramdullah, adult education was geared to the learners' survival. It comprised instruction in digging deep wells to ensure a constant water supply;

in building better stores to protect the harvest from termites; in constructing modest roads to link villages with the main highways and so enable villagers to get their produce to the market more easily; as well as scores of minor land and water improvements, such as to control erosion. All this went with growing food to consume as small dams and earthworks locally and to sell.

The Ethiopian Project sought to apply the maxim: 'Begin with what the people know and what they have'. Goals grew from the villagers, who lived in conditions of poverty, looking at their problems, determining their needs, setting out their priorities and deciding what they would like to achieve.

In due time Peasant Associations were constructing schools for their children, selecting, appointing, paying, and lodging the teachers and sharing in preparing educational programmes. They could say: 'Now, we are washing our eyes. What we need more than anything is education'. They were expressing in their own

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idiom the same view as President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia when he said: 'Education opens new horizons. It makes people see things they would otherwise not see'.

As for those with a third-level education, holding positions of responsibility, their work needs to be continually strengthened by research leading to understanding of problems among others of rescuing dwindling forests, combating drought and the growth of the desert, food cultivation and the needs of the African farmer; handling national debts and foreign exchange controls; and dialogue between universities and governments in which dissent can be voiced without it being subversive. It should be the task of adult education to encourage and develop such an interest in understanding such problems where it exists and to see to it that such interest emerges where it does not yet exist.

The third group—primary school-leavers—represent perhaps the strongest argument for a well thought-out scheme that seeks to bring together school and out-of-school education, with adult education giving the lead.

Before and after political independence, primary school-leavers slowly became the section of society possessing the power to effect its change. Their limited formal education has kept them closer to the majority of the African people than are the fortunate minority who went on to post-primary institutions.

EXERTING INFLUENCE

Full of energy and with some understanding of national issues primary school leavers in civilian life exerted considerable influence. For the more mature political analysts who sought change through debate, they represented a potentially disturbing element. They also inspired confidence in the unschooled masses for whom they became interpreters of the political events in progress. Primary school leavers who joined the armed forces became part of institutions whose ranks were swelled with a steady stream of graduates of post-primary institutions.

The importance of the two, civilians with a primary education and the military, cannot be over-stated in the light of African history during the past two decades. Adult education has been concerned justifiably with helping keep the primary school-leavers gainfully occupied. But it has not dealt sufficiently with continuing education that will help him to maintain literacy, and develop management and decision-making skills, including those required for assisting the emergence of wise leadership. A challenging question to adult education workers is: how can the African primary school-leaver, either in civilian life or in the armed forces, be more closely involved in producing a society which is always learning to do things better?

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