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Literacy campaigns in Mozambique: Why did they fail?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines literacy campaigns in Mozambique (1978-1982) after the country's independence in 1975, looking at their strengths and the weaknesses. It shows that the literacy campaigns failed mainly because of factors such as the language used as the medium of instruction, the language policy of the country, the absence of clear a definition of objectives and functions, and a lack of community involvement. The paper suggests a practical and useful solution that could have helped to prevent the failures.

INTRODUCTION

Mozambique became independent from Portugal in June 1975, an achievement which, for Mozambicans, meant not only the liberation of the country from colonialism, but also facing the challenge of economic and cultural recovery. These important tasks could not be undertaken unless the people freed themselves from the darkness of illiteracy, then estimated at about 93%. Therefore, the first efforts the Mozambican government made were to improve the education system and expand the school network throughout the country. Literacy and adult education programmes, first as local initiatives (1975-1978) and then as organized nationwide campaigns (1978-1982), enjoyed special

attention from the government. As a result, in 1980, five years after independence, the illiteracy rate had decreased from 93% to 71.1%, at a rate of 4.2% per year. If the fight against illiteracy had continued at the same pace of 4.2% from 1975, it would have taken about twenty two years to eradicate illiteracy in Mozambique. At present, twenty four years after independence, Mozambique still has a long way to go in its struggle to eradicate illiteracy.

In 1983, with the introduction of the new Education System in Mozambique, which included a Subsystem of Adult Education, new and improved materials — based on methodological modifications — were introduced in literacy and adult education programmes. The literacy cycle was expanded from a previous one year cycle during the campaigns to two years (Velooso et al. 1991). These changes created new expectations in terms of the results the Literacy and Adult Education programmes could produce. However, the increase of the war in the mid-eighties impacted seriously and negatively on the development of the objectives of education and other equally important national development projects due to displacement of people in the rural areas, and a total breakdown of the school network. It is therefore difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the new and improved materials introduced by the Subsystem of Adult Education in 1983. All we know is that illiteracy decreased from 71.1% in 1980 to 56.7% (Direcção Nacional de Estatística 1995), ten years later. This means that the rate of illiteracy reduction had decreased from 4.2% per year from 1975 to 1980, to 1.44% per year from 1980 to 1991. In other words, as the war increased, the participation in literacy classes decreased, the number of literacy centres also decreased, and many of those people who had mastered reading and writing before 1980 became illiterate again. This return to illiteracy suggests that other factors played an important role in the low development of literacy in Mozambique. That is, while the war played a major role in preventing people from concentrating on development activities, literacy programmes may have had different results if other factors had not been involved. In the following section of this paper, we consider

other factors responsible for the failure of the literacy (pre-, during and post-) campaigns in Mozambique. We also discuss different responses to the question "Why did the literacy campaigns fail?", and suggest some solutions.

WHY DID LITERACY CAMPAIGNS FAIL?

Despite the goodwill of the government and the massive participation of the population, literacy campaigns in Mozambique failed to deliver the expected results. Apart from the war we have mentioned, three major reasons can be identified as having been responsible for the failure: (a) the language adopted as the medium of instruction; (b) the language policy of the country; and (c) the objectives and functions of literacy. Our discussion in this section will be limited to these three problems.

Language

Mozambique is a multilingual country where more than twenty Bantu languages co-exist with Portuguese, the language of the former colonial power. Although in terms of number of speakers some of the Bantu languages are larger than Portuguese, which is spoken by 24.4% of the population, this European language is the sole official language of the country. Portuguese is the only medium of formal education, which is paradoxical if we consider the revolutionary nature of FRELIMO, the liberation movement that freed the country from colonialism and claimed to be the movement of the people. However, if we consider FRELIMO's project of nation-building which motivated the adoption of Portuguese as official language, the decision might not sound so paradoxical. FRELIMO chose Portuguese as the language of "national unity" because it is "neutral" to the majority of Mozambicans, and does not serve as a mark of ethnicity in the country. Therefore, it was the only suitable candidate as the language of the nation FRELIMO wanted to build.

In our view, the major problem with this approach to nationhood is that it marginalized the majority of the people who do not speak

Portuguese and do not need it in their everyday lives. Unfairly and wrongly, it was thought that compulsory learning of this language would allow more people to become part of the new nation, making it possible for them to participate in the everyday affairs of the country. For example, although many studies from countries where literacy programmes have been successful, have shown that the best language for literacy programmes is the mother tongue, in Mozambique this principle was ignored. Portuguese was used as the medium of instruction in literacy classes where the facilitator was the only one who had some grasp of the language. That is, there was no communication in the classroom. As is widely known, there cannot be any teaching-learning process without communication. Therefore, we believe that the language factor was to a large extent responsible for the failure of literacy in the country. In other words, if the mother tongues of the target people had been used as languages of instruction, it would have been less likely than those who had mastered reading and writing would have reverted to illiteracy. This point has been corroborated by other studies, for example, Veloso (1996:1) shows that the adoption of Portuguese as the sole medium of instruction in literacy programmes is responsible for the drastic decrease of the number of participants in literacy campaigns. INDE's (1984) report on *A Problemática da Alfabetização em Moçambique* (Issues on Literacy in Mozambique) concludes that "under the present conditions, the use of Portuguese as the language of instruction hinders seriously the process and affects negatively its results".

The government's intentions in undertaking literacy campaigns in Portuguese in order to allow the population to access this language in the hope that it would in turn allow their participation in the process of reconstruction of the country were not realised. In fact, the government succeeded in denying its own people the opportunity to participate in the development of the country. This is one of the ways we can interpret the adoption of Portuguese as the only language of access to a better life, although it is spoken by less than 25% of the population (and by only 1.2% as their mother tongue). Literacy campaigns failed because they were intended to perpetuate the

hegemony of the Portuguese-speaking elite at the expense of the majority of the people.

Apart from this political problem, literacy campaigns failed also because of methodological factors. Ngunga and Machungo (1990:43) point out that "For linguists and experienced educationists in matters of literacy, it was already clear before 1978 that literacy campaigns in Mozambique would not be successful" because literacy was conceived and badly realized as second language teaching. As is known, literacy is not second language teaching. Literacy is the acquisition of reading and writing abilities in a language already known by the target people. The adoption of this approach in Mozambique where literacy has so far meant teaching people to read and write in Portuguese, would require that two kinds of instructors be trained, namely, (1) those who would teach literacy to native speakers, and (2) those who would teach Portuguese as a second language. For many years, what was called literacy in Mozambique tried to combine literacy development and second language teaching. No wonder it failed. Thus, in order to avoid future failure, we are advocating the use of the mother tongue in literacy and adult education in order to get "positive results quickly" (Simbine 1991:11). This approach is presently being adopted by INDE through pilot projects in some languages spoken in the country, and preliminary results are very encouraging. Hopefully, if funds are available, the experience will be expanded to other languages. Let us look next at another problem.

Language policy

In their project on Bilingual Education for Women, Veloso et al. (1991:8) claim that the introduction of mother-tongue educational programmes in Mozambique is hindered by three major factors, namely, (1) insufficient dissemination of the existing information on Mozambican languages, (2) the incipient stage of research on Mozambican languages, and (3) the absence of a clear language policy. In this section we will limit our discussion to the third point, the language policy. First, it is important to make it clear that actually, what we find in Mozambique is not an absence of a clear

language policy. It is simply that, contrary to what most of us had expected in 1975, no changes were made to the colonial language policy. The Mozambican policy makers decided that there was no need to change the colonial language policy that marginalized the African languages. In this way, although they talked about the need for participation of all Mozambicans in the process of development of the country, they succeeded in excluding more than 75% of the population from taking part in the programmes. In effect, those who wanted to be part of the elite had to learn the colonial language, the language of prestige, which was the sole way to achieve higher social status in the country. As seen, the language policy of Mozambique needs to be thoroughly rethought in order to make it adequate to the new challenges of our development. Mozambique cannot dream of mass education if the medium of instruction remains a language which is foreign to more than 75% of the people who need to learn reading and writing abilities, a language which is only barely known by the facilitators. Policy changes should ensure that the status of all languages spoken in the country is clearly defined and their function officially acknowledged. Everybody should use his/her mother tongue in the acquisition of the reading and writing skills or, if s/he chooses, another language s/he already knows. Nobody should be punished, as is currently the case in primary schools, for using her/his mother tongue at school. What we need now is a statement which clearly changes the current colonial language policy into a Mozambican language policy we can all be proud of. We believe that such a change, at least for literacy purposes, will contribute to the success of literacy programmes in Mozambique. Let us move on to the third problem.

Objectives and functions

Another factor that played a role in the failure of the literacy campaigns in Mozambique is that the government was too involved in the literacy issues. The government defined its own objectives and learners were never asked whether they were interested in learning reading and writing and in which language. Literacy campaigns in Mozambique were compulsory mass activities which did not consider

the motivations and needs of the target people. Literacy was managed the same way as the formal school system, with a rigid school calendar. The adults were subject to the same treatment from the government as school children, with an examination period which frequently coincided with periods of rural activities (farming, local traditional cultural events, etc.) that no peasant could afford to postpone or miss because of literacy examinations. Consequently, in many cases the learners did not take the examinations and were obliged to repeat the same level the following year, which was frustrating. In our view, literacy campaigns should not be too formal. They should be fairly informal, and receive government support, without being compulsory. Literacy development should be an informal activity of the community and the community members should define why they need it, how they want it to be done, and seek the necessary support from the government or non-government organizations. For instance, if a community feels that its members need to develop reading and writing abilities in order to register its history or other important aspects of the community's life, the members should be able to seek the necessary support for that purpose. In this way, the intended functions or purposes of literacy would allow the organizers (government agencies, NGOs, religious organizations, etc.) to define the objectives, means and methodology to be used.

If the major objective of teaching people how to read and how to write is to allow them to play an active role in the social-cultural and economic development, then a better strategy should be adopted. For instance, since the objective of literacy in Mozambique was to teach people reading and writing in Portuguese, the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction would assist learners to acquire basic literacy. This knowledge could then be transferred to the learning of Portuguese, which would be taught as a second language. Thus, literacy in the mother tongue would serve the function of allowing the learners to acquire reading and writing skills before starting to learn the target language (Portuguese). Apart from serving as a means through which reading and writing skills are acquired, the use of mother tongues in literacy programmes would help the standardization

and development of local languages as well as widen the scope of their use in everyday life (e.g. writing letters to friends and families in other villages and radio broadcasting). Literacy in a mother tongue can also have the function of instilling in the people the sense of cultural value that the languages represent. All these facts, which were ignored in the Mozambican literacy campaigns, are important sources of motivation which help learners to take literacy development seriously and regard it as an important activity.

We believe that the lack of a clear definition of the functions of literacy in Mozambican communities also contributed to the failure of what was in spirit a revolutionary project. Therefore, we suggest that the responsibility to define such functions be returned to the communities themselves since they are the ones who know their own needs. Once literacy programmes become less formal or completely informal, so that adults are not treated the same way as school children, the programmes would not interfere with the everyday lives of the learners since they would take into account the other occupations and roles of the participants in the programmes. In short, there should not be a national literacy calendar because different communities have different activities during the year. There should be different local (provincial, district, etc.) school calendars which meet the needs and occupations of the different communities. This means that the functions and objectives of literacy will vary from one community to another.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we have analyzed literacy programmes in Mozambique after independence in 1975. We have demonstrated that what could have been a great success ended up being a failure not only because of the war that affected the country for sixteen years, but also because of the language used as the medium of instruction, the language policy of the country, the objectives and functions of literacy programmes, and the role of the communities. We suggested that in a country where the language policy is not adequate to the needs of the people, for educational purposes there should be some tolerance on language

usage, making it possible to reflect the complementary relationships that exist between the languages of a multilingual country. Thus, bilingual literacy with the mother tongue being used in the first stage and the official language later, or monolingual education (in the mother tongue) could better meet the needs of the communities and satisfy the objectives of the government i.e. to make the society literate. The official language should not have a monopoly over literacy in particular and formal education in general. In a country like Mozambique where there is no official sensibility towards local languages, there is a need to move towards a situation whereby being literate does not necessarily imply possessing reading and writing skills in the official language. We need to move into the next century by accepting the fact that for most people in the country there are other languages which are more used and useful than the official language. These languages deserve to be respected, developed and acknowledged as important means of communication, and should be used as the medium for the acquisition of reading and writing abilities.

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