4.1.1 Somalia literacy campaign

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Somalia is culturally, ethnically and religiously a homogeneous collectivity. Inspite of the fact that the Somalis speak one language, before 1972, English, Arabic and Italian were the administrative languages and the media of instruction. In 1972, the Somalia language was scripted with a modified Latin script.

I. Background and context

At that time the illiteracy rate was 95 %. The military government that came to power in 1969, made the eradication of illiteracy a priority item in its first and second charters, rightly believing that eradication of illiteracy was a prerequisite for social and economic development. Immediately the language was scripted and a number of steps were set in motion. I would like to state here that the literacy campaign was the climax of several campaigns launched prior to it, namely, political sensitization campaign, environmental sanitation campaign, and campaign against tribalism. The literacy campaign was only started when the masses had been politicized.

The steps taken were:

(a) The civil servants were taught how to read and write the Somali script. They were given 3 months to pass an examination or else face dismissal from service. As a result of this, Somali was possible to be made the official language of the country on January 1, 1973.
(b) In March 1973, an urban literacy campaign was launched which reached 400,000 people in urban areas.
(c) In August 1974, the rural development and literacy campaign was launched. My discourse will be limited to the highlights of this campaign.

First, it was declared that illiteracy will be eradicated within two years, during the first year from urban areas and during the second year from rural areas.

The Rural Literacy Campaign was renamed the Rural Development Campaign to include objectives of development programs, though literacy remained central to the total set of objectives. The Rural Development Campaign included as part of its objectives: (a) The eradication of illiteracy from among rural populations; (b) Public health improvement; (c) Animal health training; and (d) Census of people and animals.

The Rural Development Campaign was more difficult compared to the urban one. Some of the factors that contributed to its difficulty and complexity were:

(a) The nature of the population that had to be served was composed of nomads and semi-nomads who were: (i) perpetually on the move in search of water and grazing for their animals; (ii) patterns of their movement was not charted; and (iii) few among them, if any, could be mobilized as literacy workers.

(b) The environment was harsh and a very severe draught necessitated that the campaign be somewhat prematurely closed, i.e., seven months after it had been started.

II. Political framework

The launching of the campaign was conditioned by the socioeconomic situation of the country, and the necessary impetus was provided by the political commitment of the military government.

As previously mentioned, the illiteracy rate then was 95%, the per capita income was $ 70, and for hard currency earning the country largely depended on the exportation of livestock. In order to make any headway in our development efforts, we had to raise the standard of living and productivity rate of our rural people who are the backbone of our economy.

In such a situation it is difficult to imagine a set of conditions which will preclude the launching of a mass literacy campaign, provided the political will exists. In our case it did. The government rightly believed that since the political will is there, organization can be built and public and private resources can be mobilized.

III. The administrative and organizational setting

The organizational framework developed from the needs of the campaign. The following committee structures were formed:

1. A Central Committee was the policy making organ.

2. A Central Office, manned by professional representatives of the agencies concerned, served as a co-ordination and clearing house for literacy information and logistics.

These committees were replicated at the Regional and District levels, but since the District was the operational center of the campaign, there was a District Inspection Committee which was to supervise the operation.

3. To facilitate work and to guarantee effective communication with the front-line workers, each District was sub-divided into smaller units which had their committees. These committees were composed of community representatives and teachers and were chaired by the community headman.

The committee structure for the campaign in integration with the political and administrative structure already established, made possible both vertical and horizontal co-ordination within governmental institutions as well as mass participation.

IV. The plan and preparation

By way of planning and preparation, the following steps were taken:

(1) A campaign law was enacted.
(2) A symposium for all local administrative personnel was convened.
(3) A publicity campaign in urban areas, targeted towards students, parents, teachers and voluntary literacy workers, was launched. The orientation centers were used to organize symposia, lectures and plays on the campaign. Radio, newsletters, newspapers, and street displays were all put to work to drive home the importance of the campaign and the need to contribute to its success.
(4) Simultaneously, mobilization of the potential learners continued in the rural areas. Symposia were conducted for rural community leaders to prepare them for mass mobilization and to impress upon them the value of self-help for self-development.
(5) The learning material was printed in conjunctin with a teachers guide.
(6) A teaching kit, containing chalk, pen, pencil, rubber and sharpener; a small water container; and a blackboard made in the form of a folding box which will contain all these items were provided to each teacher.
(7) A law for universal primary education was enacted.

V. Community participation

The masses as communities and as individuals participated and considerably contributed to the success of the campaign. Representatives of communities were involved from planning to implementation stages of the campaign. Out of 60,000,000 Somali shillings estimated for the campaign expenditure, 25 % was paid by the masses in terms of feeding and giving abode to the campaign workers.

VI. Problems encountered

The following set of problems were encountered:

(a) The initial public mistrust of students as literacy teachers, and worries of students' parents
(b) Serious shortcomings of instructional materials
(c) The mobility of the target group, and
(d) Communications.

VII. Follow-up programs

Because of the experiences gained from the mass campaign, we opted that any follow-up programs undertaken be selective in nature and content. For the time being we are involved in:

(a) Women education
(b) Nomadic education
(c) Skill development programs
(d) Adult evening classes
(e) Educational radio programs.

To implement these selective programs, we are extending support facilities to Regional Adult Education Centers in the regions.

H. S. Bhola
in collaboration with
Josef Müller and Piet Dijkstra

The Promise of Literacy

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