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# Literacy and Agriculture

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Several years ago, in a meeting, an ECHO staff member wondered aloud about the importance of literacy as it relates to agriculture. We received feedback from a few network members on this topic; their thoughts are shared below.

## ***How does literacy affect openness to change?***

**Miriam Noyes**, working in Congo with her husband Ed, commented “I am working on writing a literacy component into an agriculture project right now, upon invitation. People in development are very intrigued with the fact that it is educated, literate (the two are not necessarily inclusive) women who are most open to change, whether in the area of family planning, agricultural practices, health, etc. Uneducated, illiterate women are most likely to fear change and cling to ancestral tradition, as they see it. And they tend to decide and act as a group by largely invisible, not classically logical processes. Literate change agents tend to have difficulty entering these modes of thought to communicate effectively with uneducated, illiterate women.”

## ***What is the cost of adding literacy training to an agricultural development project?***

**Financial cost:** Noyes also commented on the costs of literacy. “The problem with including literacy classes in a development program, though, is that it takes significant time and money and is not directly related to the goals of the program. It can be seen as an unacceptable diversion with unproven dividends—even though higher-level classes, where classes can read material together and discuss it, are perfect venues for the dissemination of information in a community, whatever the subject matter. The UN estimated that teaching literacy required an investment of \$10 per person. It is probably a good estimate, which we get around only by largely volunteer work. We have estimated that it takes a minimum of a year of fairly concentrated classes to make an illiterate person functionally literate.”

**Minimum time commitment:** Noyes went on to share, “In this project I have been asked to write for, they are only willing to invest six months [of project time] in literacy. It might be enough time, though, for permanent reading clubs to get introduced into the village, to serve the agriculture project's goals of disseminating the information they want to share, and bringing the women to a place where they

decide to implement specific actions as a group. In terms of literacy, these clubs could serve to conserve and consolidate the women's reading skills, increase their vocabulary in diverse subjects, and help them to comprehend things that they read –major functional literacy goals.”

## ***Is literacy necessary for success in agricultural projects?***

**Joann Noel** works in Tanzania in the area of literacy, mostly with church planting pastors and their wives. She wrote, “I have been involved in literacy ministry here since 2014. I help train teachers mostly within our church planter course. Keep in mind our church planter families plant churches in areas where there is no church. Quite often this is in a remote place. Most of my experience has been working with adults who can read, [teaching them] to teach other adults who cannot. But I also have spent time helping teach four men and two women who could not read.”

Noel commented that she does not believe literacy is necessary for successful agricultural development. She said, “I do not think [people] necessarily need to be literate to learn new skills such as good agricultural practices. I know there is group thinking here. But the group can also help each other remember. I am not opposed to encouraging reading skills obviously; I just do not think we have to wait for people to be literate to move ahead. [As an example, my husband] Mike teaches Bible story telling. In a 45-minute session, he teaches people how to learn a story almost word perfect. Readers and non-readers alike are able to do this. Time is spent engaging the story so that in the end the students see how it applies to them. In the end they own it because they have invested time and effort.”

## ***What are some obstacles to incorporating literacy into agricultural programs?***

**Challenges women face:** Noel believes literacy is important, and shared several obstacles to literacy, especially for women. “My personal opinion is that Tanzanian women may have more desire to learn to read than [Tanzanian] men. Our numbers support [this opinion;] there tend to be more women in the class than men. But it is more difficult for women to find the time to devote to class or study. From the perspective of a teacher I will use one of the illiterate women I taught as an example. We were in an ideal situation. I gave her lessons one on one. She lived very close to the classroom. There was no charge for lessons. I only required she bring her own notebook and pencil. But she has many children to feed, water to haul, animals to tend and outside work to do. After a few months she gave up. I truly believe the reason she stopped coming to class was because her husband pressured her to remain home. By the way, he had been agreeable to the arrangement in the beginning.”

**Potential lack of confidence in learning:** Noel added, “Another reason I believe she stopped [coming to class] was a new reason I have been made aware of just recently for [some] illiterate people, and that is their belief that they cannot learn. If it is [reinforced] by others, this falsehood becomes their reality.”

**Lack of trained teachers:** Noel highlighted the importance of training, stating, “Perhaps the greater challenge is placed on finding teachers with a heart and passion for teaching. If a teacher sees this as a ministry opportunity to serve, then money is not necessarily required.”

Noel also commented on challenges faced by women who want to teach. She shared, “My helper has observed that [Tanzanian] women have more of a heart to teach. Here again, female teachers in Africa have a unique challenge. Depending on their tribe it [varies] how long they stay at home after delivery of a child. We have two very capable, devoted teachers who recently had babies. They stopped teaching for months! No provision has been made for their students to continue learning as far as we know. The solution seems to be to find another teacher. But the possibility remains the same that the teacher, if she is a woman who gets pregnant, will need to stop teaching. I suppose if [teachers] coordinated their efforts, there could be coverage [through a maternity leave situation].”

**Realities faced by farmers:** Sometimes agricultural realities make learning a challenge. Noel shared, “A very big problem [faced by] our teachers and students alike is drought and hunger. Nobody is coming to class if there is no food to eat. But by the same token, if there are crops to plant or crops to harvest, people will be missing from class. My helper made a suggestion that I want to seriously consider: he said to encourage the teachers to only hold classes during the months of June through October. His thinking is that people will be more free [to attend classes]. [Also,] with no rain, classes can be held outside. This would be a solution to a big problem we face in the bush, of no facilities.”

## ***Is literacy a cause or effect of agricultural development?***

When looking online for information about literacy and agriculture, I did not find many references to the topic; for example, the executive summary of a 2006 Unesco publication on literacy (*Education for All Global Monitoring Report: Literacy for Life*) does not mention agriculture in relation to literacy. The closest reference in that document is a comment that, generally speaking, literacy levels are lower in rural areas.

However, I found an article by Barnes, Fliegel and Vanneman (1982) called “Rural Literacy and Agricultural Development: Cause or Effect?” The authors summarize three historical stages regarding the role of literacy in development. In the 1950s, literacy was viewed as a “transforming force.” In the 1960s, the role of literacy was not seen as quite so crucial. The authors write, “[Several studies during the 1960s] highlight the fact that, although literacy definitely can benefit farmers, developmentally relevant information can be transmitted in a variety of ways so that non-literates can achieve the same ends.” The authors also point out that literacy education can leave learners with “information and perspectives which are not conducive to development.” During the 1970s, literacy came to be seen as one of many “causes” of development, one that helps people access helpful information. Though literacy might not transform people, it can have an indirect effect on adoption of agricultural practices.

In their research, Barnes *et al.* tried to “determine whether literacy is one of the causes or the effects of agricultural development.” They specifically wanted to know what impact literacy had on agricultural productivity. Over the ten years between 1961 and 1971, “the proportion of literates in the rural population of India’s districts increased by 5 percent during the decade.” (Barnes *et al.* 1982). Agricultural production also increased--in terms of total production (of the 12 most common crops), production per unit of land, and production per worker. However, according to the authors’ analysis, “literacy does not cause increases in agricultural production or productivity.” Upon further analysis, they determined that “the short-term effect of increases in production on literacy...is actually negative” but that “the exclusively long-term effect of production is definitely positive.” They concluded that “agriculturally productive regions provide a conducive social and economic environment for the long term growth of rural literacy....[and] agricultural development may be one important way to increase the standard of living in rural areas which may in turn result in the long-term increase in ‘human capital.’”

## Now it’s your turn

In your work with smallholder farmers, have you seen connections between literacy and agriculture? We would love feedback from more members of our network! Please let us know by emailing [echo@echonet.org](mailto:echo@echonet.org) (<https://members.echocommunity.org/general/Default.asp?type=CONTACT>).

## References

Barnes, D.F., F.C. Fliegel, and R.D. Vanneman. 1982. Rural literacy and agricultural development: cause or effect? *Rural Sociology* 47(2):251-271.

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