

Adult basic literacy “initiatives” in Ethiopia: change and continuity

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Abstract

The major purpose of the study was to look into change and continuity in the policy and practices of adult basic literacy initiatives in Ethiopia and to deduce lessons that can be drawn from the experiences for the future of adult basic literacy program in the country and elsewhere. Data was obtained through critical review of documents on the pre-revolution literacy initiatives; the two campaigns during the socialist revolution; the 1994 Education and Training Policy document; the 2008 National Adult Education Strategy; statistical abstracts and reports of the post-1991 adult literacy activities and available samples of newspaper articles. Interviews were also conducted with 48 individuals who directly participated at various capacities in the previous adult literacy efforts of the country. Snow-ball sampling approach has been used to select the interviewees. Analysis of the data generally indicated that the adult basic literacy initiatives were founded on erroneous conception of literacy - the deficit model of literacy- which assumes an absolute state of literacy/illiteracy. The literacy initiatives also lacked continued commitment from the governing bodies and were largely in response to external drives rather than local needs. Ideological motives rather than actual needs of the beneficiaries have guided the initiatives. The lesson that can be drawn from the previous initiatives and the implications it may have on the future of adult basic literacy programs at large has been discussed.

Key terms: adult basic literacy, literacy campaign, functionality, and literacy and ideology

1. The problem

Ethiopia, a country with over seventy-three million people (CSA, 2007), is known for the very poor performance of its economy. Highly

subsistence and traditional agriculture is the major economic sector and a livelihood for about 85% of the population. Whereas it is over a century now since the critical role of literacy in national development as well as individual growth has been recognized; only about 42.7% of the population can read and write. This figure is 50.3% for males and 35.1% for females (DHS, 2008). The country started somewhat formally organized education program particularly intended for adults in 1948 by establishing the *Berhanih Zare New* (literally meant ‘your light is today’) Institute (Inquai, 1998; Wirtu, 2005 and Kebede, 2005), an institute intended to support the education of adults. Since then, there has always been some kind of adult education (mostly adult literacy) activities run at times by the Government alone and at other times by both the government and non-governmental organizations. Nonetheless, adult illiteracy remained a critical challenge to Ethiopia (MoE, 2008). Thus, it is both academically and practically sound to question what lies behind the continued ineffectiveness of the adult literacy initiatives and what has been changed in the process over the years. Unfortunately, there are only very few attempts made to study adult literacy provisions in Ethiopia (e.g. Hoben, 1984 & 1991; Wirtu, 2005; Kebede, 2005, which are cited in this paper) and almost all of them concentrated on describing ‘what happened’ and could not examine the successes and failures particularly from an ideological stance. The present study, attempts to examine the major adult basic literacy initiatives of the three regimes that ruled the country since the beginning of the 20th century, namely, the pre-revolution (pre-1974), the socialist revolution (1974 to 1991) and the post-1991 period) with the aim to:

- Identify the drive behind the initiatives;
- Sort out changes and continuities in the initiatives
- Deduce lessons that can be drawn for future adult basic literacy initiatives in Ethiopia and elsewhere.

In doing so, the arguments of the study are inspired by the social practice view of literacy, a view, as will be discussed below, that goes beyond the conception of literacy as just set of skills to be acquired through discrete steps of teaching-learning process.

2. Conceptual framework: literacy

Any one browsing across the literature, may easily realize that there are multiple conceptions of literacy. For instance, Papen (2005) discusses the functional, the critical and the liberal conceptions of literacy.

According to this writer, the functional model assumes that literacy is a list of skills with externally set requirements to become functional. Critical literacy refers to potentiality of literacy as enabling the person not only 'reading the word' but also 'reading the world', an understanding of literacy advanced by Paulo Freire in the 1970's. The liberal view sees literacy as a welfare activity by the middle classes for the disadvantaged sector of the society. This is informed by the humanist view of education which emphasizes personal development and individual goals. Seen from the practical point of view, all of these conceptions are very relevant. Development of the literate both as an individual and a member of a group, the capability to function at a required standard in a socio-economic setting and the ability and attitude to question one's situation are all desirable outcomes of education and are not mutually exclusive.

According to Papen's (2005) conception of literacy as a social practice, reading and writing are not only simple skills but also social activities that are always situated in particular cultural and historical context. Literacy is part of the social activity in which people engage and such social activities give meaning to literacy. Thus, when someone becomes literate (be able to read, write and compute) and where s/he starts to integrate it into her/his social activity; then some changes happen to her/him, for example, related to her/his social relationships, morality, empathy, scope of thinking, power and economic wellbeing.

The idea of multiple literacies (e.g., Fransman, 2008) rejects limiting literacy to simply reading and writing; differentiates between illiteracy and ignorance and give high value to functional literacy/illiteracy. This generally reveals the fluidity of the meanings attached to literacy and the importance of context (or purpose) under which the term is made use of. Bhola (1992) stresses the same when he writes; literacy is always contextual and somewhat arbitrary and does not expect universal

literacy. Surely, there is every possibility for me (the present writer) to become illiterate due to the next technology. This situation was experienced with the written forms of some local languages introduced in Ethiopia (after 1991) whereby many people became illiterate because they could not use the new scripts and they had to start literacy class ‘allover again’.

The present study assumes that the illiterates are those who lack the skills of reading, writing and numeracy and who are by no means ignorant. It also accepts that meaningful literacy is that which enables the beneficiaries to function in a certain social context (not literacy for its own sake) and yet not simply limited to the skills view of literacy. It also accepts that a literacy program is both emancipator and compensator. It is emancipator because it would help bring a better world (of justice, democracy and equality). It is compensator because it makes education available to adults who are without schooling. In doing so, the study fully subscribes to Lind’s (2008) view that literacy is instrument for liberation+, human right of the adults and is instrument of economic growth for the community/society and the individual

This writer argued that whatever the rationale for a literacy program is, the curriculum (why, what and how it is provided) is more often influenced by the objectives (or intents) of the providers than by the demands of the learners themselves.

3. Methods of the study

Critical review of documents on adult basic literacy in Ethiopia and in-depth interview of adult education practitioners (experts) and participants are the main methods used to collect data for the study. The documents included the pre-revolution literacy initiatives; the two campaigns during the socialist revolution; the 1994 Education and Training Policy document; the 2008 National Adult Education Strategy and statistical abstracts and reports of the post-1991 adult literacy activities. Besides the program and related legal documents, available samples of newspapers and official reports have been examined. Snow-ball sampling has been used to select the interviewees whereby first the

members of the national coordinating committee of the adult literacy campaign (1979 – 1991) were accessed and based on the information (suggestion) from them other respondents were identified. As I had been a participant in the campaign for about seven years as a literacy ‘teacher’ (1979 – 1985), I could identify some of the people in the national literacy coordinating committee and this has served for initial contact. Accordingly, 48 individuals who directly participated in the previous adult education efforts of the country as coordinators (#9), experts (#12), ‘literacy instructors’ (#12), and learners (#15) were interviewed. Six of the coordinators and all of the experts have also participated in some way in the recent (post 1991) adult education activities. Two of the respondents were also active in some of the pre-revolutionary (pre-1974) literacy initiatives. The interviewees were invited to freely narrate their *lived experiences* on any topic of their concern and discuss the major achievements and drawbacks of the adult basic literacy programs of the country from insiders’ perspectives. The interview process stopped when the responses seemed repeated. Each of the interview session lasted for 45 to 60 minutes during which a thick note was taken. The analysis took the major literacy initiatives seen during the three regimes as reference or cases to be discussed. The information from the various sources has been triangulated in carrying out the analysis.

4. Result

From the end of the 19th century, the time when it took its present geographic shape, until 1974, Ethiopia had been under monarchical rule. This period is referred to as the pre-revolution period. From 1974 to 1991 a Military Socialist Government ruled the country, a period referred to as the revolution period. By 1991 the Military Socialist Government gave way for a new coalition force that came to power after seventeen years of armed struggle. During these three regimes Ethiopia experienced various types of education in general and adult literacy initiatives in particular. Highlights of the major adult literacy initiatives are presented below followed by critical discussions.

<i>Era</i>	<i>Major adult literacy initiatives</i>	<i>Relevant legislations</i>
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<p>1) <i>Pre-revolution (from Italian evacuation in 1941 to 1974)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Establishment of Berhaneh Zare New Institute in 1948</i> • <i>The formation of the Army of the Alphabets (Yefidel Serawit) in 1954</i> • <i>The Work-oriented adult literacy program introduced in 1968</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Memorandum on Educational Policy for Ethiopia; August 1944</i> • <i>The 1955 public notice on fundamental education/adult literacy</i>
<p>2) <i>The Military Socialist period (1974 – 1991)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Development through Cooperation, Knowledge and Work Campaign (from 1974 - 1976)</i> • <i>The National Literacy Campaign (1979 - 91)</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A proclamation on the same (issued in 1974)</i> • <i>No legal provision for the longer campaign, just directives</i>
<p>3) <i>The post-1991 period (time of pro-market economy)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>No typical literacy initiative from the centre during the first ten years. The decentralized education provision as a cover.</i> • <i>Functional literacy suggested, though no observable initiative</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The 1994 Education and Training Policy</i> • <i>The National Adult Education Strategy</i>

Source: adapted from Inquai(1998); Wirtu (2005); Kebede (2005); Woldemeskel (2005); and Sandhaas (2009)

4.1 The pre-revolution (pre-1974) adult literacy initiatives

Even though some kind of formal education is said to have been introduced to Ethiopia in 1908, it was accessible to a handful of elites. As a result, only about 7% of the population were reported to be literate

by 1974 (MoE, 1980; and Hoben, 1994). Regarding this situation, Papen (2005: 55) writes:

The selection and distribution of literacy to different social groups is not something that happens neutrally... above the interest that pattern the society. Instead, they are embedded in its infrastructure of power relationships. Literacy is deeply and inescapably bound up with producing, re-producing and maintaining unequal arrangements of power.

Adult basic literacy initiatives during the period had been sporadic and lacked any policy frame, and started after the end of the Italian invasion in 1941. During the period, education in Ethiopia had been in a very adverse condition: the few schools that started prior to Italy's invasion in 1935 were closed, the few foreign educated Ethiopians were lost in the war for independence (Bekele, 1966; Trudeau, 1964) and, as a result, there was an acute shortage of human resource for the new 'free' bureaucracies. The British, who were instrumental in supporting Ethiopia to end the war for independence, had to fill the existing gaps. This terrible situation had significant impact on the Government's attention to education in general and adult education in particular. One important progress was the issuance of the 1944 Memorandum on Educational Policy for Ethiopia. The memorandum provided free education for all at all levels (Trudeau, 1964). The policy, though apparently responsive to the prevailing needs of the time, was ambitious. It seemed ahead of the time since the national capacity was not adequate to shoulder such mass education: human resource was meagre, everything was to start from scratch and the public attitude towards education was not yet developed. According to some writers (e.g., Sandhaas, 2009 and Bekele, 1966) the policy was introduced (or had been influenced) by the British who were here presumably to assist the national reconstruction. The policy was only stated, not implemented, a further assurance that it was not home grown. Nonetheless, it had significant influence by creating increased attention to adult education in general and adult literacy in particular. For instance, the *Berhaneh Zere New* Institute was opened by the government and financed by the emperor with the aim to

promote evening education for adults. Evening classes were started in almost all schools in the capital city and in Addis Ababa University College (Sandhaas, 2009 and Bekele, 1966).

In 1954 a voluntary ‘organization’ called *Yefidel Serawit* (literally, army of the Alphabets) was formed by university students, with the purpose to expand education to the rural mass. This is a stage of growing volunteerism by students who could recognize the adverse state of illiteracy in the country and the adult literacy movements in other parts of the world. The approach seemed to be campaign (“army”) type and yet there were multiple constraints including restrictions from the imperial government towards formation of such organizations, the limited capacity of the university students (in number, finance and time) and the receptivity of the population (very weak awareness of the value of education).

The formation of *Yefidel Serawit* coincided with the 1955 public notice on fundamental education/adult literacy which was published in the Amharic Newspaper – *Ye Etophiya Dimtsi* (literally, voice of Ethiopia) on the 17th of November 1955. The 4th paragraph of the public notice provided that ‘all illiterate persons between the ages of 18 and 50 to acquire, in their spare time, through their own efforts/arrangements; the knowledge of Amharic reading and writing.’ The notice also expected the clergy and all employers to assist in the process and the Ministry of Education to coordinate the effort. The genuineness of this notice is questioned due to the fact that the major responsibility had been left to the illiterate adults themselves. It was very early to give responsibility to the Ethiopian adults of the time because their awareness of the value of education, as noted above, was not yet developed. And were the adults to become literate through their own efforts; what was to be coordinated by the Ministry of Education? It was also premature in terms of the country’s economic capacity (Wagaw, 1979). This public notice coincided with the growing critique of the Government’s poor commitment to educate the citizens. It seems that the government passed the notice merely to freeze the growing questions against the regime (Kenea, 1996). Particularly, the fact that university students took

literacy as an essential public agenda and started to voluntarily involve in combating illiteracy, irrespective of restrictions, must have instigated the government to issue the public notice. Unfortunate, and yet revealing of the nominal nature of the public notice, is the fact that it was not published in the national *Negatit Gazetta*, an official channel for publication of all binding legal provisions.

The “Work-oriented adult literacy program” was an adult literacy project introduced to Ethiopia in 1968. This is different from the early efforts because it brought the idea of ‘functional literacy’ center stage where the early initiatives were in the main focused on enabling the adults to master the three R’s and get ‘liberated from the darkness of illiteracy’. The work-oriented adult literacy programme was an external, donor-driven experimental program; a result, as Fisseha (2000) argued, of the expansion of the liberal Western economy and increase in development funding to developing countries as a strategy to combat the expansion of communism to these countries. The work-oriented adult literacy programme accentuated vocational/functional literacy especially within the agriculture and industrial sector. Though centrally some structural organization was worked out (e.g. a Director general appointed to coordinate the program within the Ministry of Education (MoE)) the structure did not go down beyond the provincial administration (see Sandhaas, 2009). The MoE had neither the resources nor the authority to coordinate other line ministries, a situation very essential to run a functional literacy program. This situation, and the fact that it was introduced in a phase of political unrest, must have contributed to the failure of the project in Ethiopia.

The scope of adult literacy during the pre-revolutionary Ethiopia was only for those who volunteered to learn. No means were in place (at least from the Government side) to deal with the social disequilibrium connected to wealth, cultural and ideological power relations. Hence, literacy was practically limited to the reaches of the upper (aristocratic) class, male and was for those whose attributes the system most values. In terms of intent, the pre-1974 literacy initiatives had been limited to acquisition of simple skills of reading and writing, and later, to acquisition

of functional skills – all of which were not actually successful. Critical literacy, which takes the liberation of adults at its core, is not part of the adult literacy agenda of the time.

Provision of literacy in the mother tongue is believed to shorten the way towards acquisition of literacy (Benson, 2004; Baker, 1996, Walter, nd.). However, in a multilingual context, deciding which language to use for literacy is not usually straight forward. There are experiences where the literacy language is centrally decided (e.g. to use one literacy language for maintaining national unity) or there are instances where local factors (e.g. promoting cultural identities of local ethnic groups) are taken into account to make such decisions (Baker, 1996, Wangoola in Abbagidi, 2009). According to Fordham, *et al* (1995), the choice of language for literacy is a crucial one and needs to be decided at local level. For these writers, it should take into account both the long-term and the short-term needs of learners, the available material and financial resources, national policy, and the status of the language in question. The pre-revolutionary Ethiopian adult literacy policy/initiatives never took cognizance of the linguistic diversity of Ethiopia. It was not even an issue for discussion for the Government and the program designers. It seemed that the ideological purpose of using Amharic (the present official language) as a means to maintain ‘one-Ethiopia’ (Trudeau, 1964) seemed to have over-shadowed the choice of language for the literacy initiatives. Even though Amharic was the sole language visible in every sphere of the public life (Schools, offices, court and elsewhere), and therefore using it may seem logical, considering the local languages as initial inputs could have been more fruitful for the non-Amharic speaking majority.

4.2 The Revolution period (1974 – 91) adult literacy initiatives

The 1960s revolt against the imperial regime ended in 1974 with a replacement of the regime by a socialist government mainly led by military officers. The new government sensed the need for campaign approach to move the country forward – a lesson probably acquired from countries in the Eastern bloc (e.g. Cuba, USSR, and Vietnam). As a

result, two major campaigns were launched early during the few years of the military's term of office. These were the *Development through Cooperation, Knowledge and Work Campaign* (from 1974 - 1976) and the *National Literacy Campaign* (1979 - 91). Where the former was provided as a national development program and therefore had a legal recognition (Woldemeskel, 2005), the latter was only based on what was called the "Revolutionary Directives", directives issued wherever the need arises (*Addis Zemen*, the 26th of September 1979). That means the longest literacy campaign in Ethiopia which reached every corner of the country and knocked almost every door was not legislated in the proper sense of the term.

In the national adult literacy campaign the expressed purpose was total eradication of adult illiteracy where illiteracy was seen as a primary limitation to development efforts and literacy as a tool towards alleviation of poverty. The literacy initiatives that took place during this period had clear advantage for the great majority of Ethiopian populations who were devoid of educational opportunity. According to Molla (2008) and Kebede (2005) the three major advantages or benefits of the literacy initiatives were (i) the literacy program was reported to have reached over 22 million 'illiterate' Ethiopians; (ii) it raised the expectations of millions of people for formal education; and (iii) about 15 local languages were used as media of literacy for the first time in a traditionally 'monolingual' education system. Even if these benefits are there, the actual motive behind the Socialist government's effort to promote literacy was said to be ideological. Regarding this Woldemeskel (2005) noted that the actual objective of the literacy campaign was to use adult education to indoctrinate the people with *Military Socialist* propaganda. This has been supported by an interviewee (Gosa) who said that, "*Literacy is seen by the government as a tool for political mobilization.*" This situation is almost similar to many of the former Soviet bloc countries which tried literacy campaigns (see Fransman, 2008: 57). The same had been published in the Amharic Newspaper – *Addis Zemen* (February 02/ 1980: 2):

We have learned from the great socialist leader V. Lenin the fact that it is impossible to build a Socialist system in a situation where illiteracy is rampant. Among the major issues such Socialist

countries as the USSR, Cuba, Vietnam and others have paid attention to as soon as they started their revolution was eradication of illiteracy. (Translated from Amharic)

This paragraph clearly indicates that the system’s major motive to embark on the ‘eradication of illiteracy’ was the belief that socialism flourishes most among literate society – stressing the ideological purpose of the literacy campaign.

The system saw illiteracy as one of the social problems inherited from the past system (*Addis Zemen*, February 02.1980:2) and as something to be eradicated. It symbolized illiteracy as a ‘black curtain’, a symbol of ignorance, that had to be torn apart if the illiterates were to see the light of development (literacy), implying an absolute state of illiteracy. The designers seemed to have taken no time to think whether it was really possible to eradicate illiteracy given the situation of the country at the time (and also in terms of the alarming rate of population growth). Basically, there is no magical line to be crossed to transit from illiteracy to literacy; it is a continuous process of becoming, once the opportunity is in place. There is also every possibility to be labelled as illiterate at any point in one’s lifetime given the fact that the world is in a change process.

Regarding the management of the campaign, there was strong central control. Everything – program plan, implementation, and evaluation, support consignments – was centrally planned to make all actors of the various levels tune their acts according to directives (Woldemeskel, 2005; Abbagidi, 2009). Hence, the management clearly reflected the military dictatorship approach – with its label of ‘democratic centralism.’ Similar to most of the adult literacy initiatives seen prior to 1974, the 3Rs constituted the core of the adult literacy campaigns.

Even though a campaign approach basically understood as a targeted attack, the Ethiopian literacy campaign was extended over a long period of time -over ten years with about twenty-five rounds. Regarding this, after comparing the situation of the Ethiopian literacy campaign at two

points (i.e., 1984 and 1991), Hoben (1994) noted that there was a decline in the movement of the campaign, which she expressed as a *growing battle fatigue* (emphasis added). She further noted that the campaign format, effective in the early stage of a development effort for mobilizing resources, had lost its clout over the long run. A number of factors might have contributed to this situation. For instance, a respondent (Zegeye) stressed;

The campaign partly depended on contributions from the community and such contributions went on declining over time as the life situation went on worsening. Besides, due to the civil war in the north, the national military service was introduced in 1983 and this required double commitment from the youth. The extended civil war had also an impact on the literacy campaign because it negatively affected foreign assistance to the literacy campaign.

As this respondent noted, the two unfortunate occurrences during the 1980s (i.e., the worsening civil war and the 1985 tragic famine) had significant negative impact on the movement of the literacy campaign, and may at least partly explain what Hoben noted as a 'growing battle fatigue.'

During the early phase of the period, particularly from 1974 – 78, the tradition of the pre-revolution period continued as far as language use is concerned. Amharic, the country's official language, continued to be used irrespective of the linguistic diversity of the population. The respondents indicated several problems with the practice of literacy language choice of the time. One of the problems the respondents emphasized is the difficulty of learning a new language for the adults. Asked to comment about this, one respondent (Beyene) said,

The adult literacy programs of the pre-revolution as well as that of the early phase of the post-1974 took Amharic as the sole language of literacy. Well, adults may want it from practical reason. Nevertheless, andragogically it was not easy for adults to learn a new language and learn other literacy skills through that.

Similarly, another respondent (Tola) who himself was a literacy learner in 1976/77 remembered,

Many of the adult learners in my class were eager to learn Amharic for they wanted it for practical reasons. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to learn it. Many even forced to withdraw due to the discouragement from failure to learn the new language.

Later on along the way about 15 languages started to be used as medium of instruction. The use of multiple languages was also not without problems. One of these was the gap between literacy languages on the one hand and school and official language on the other.

Regarding this a respondent (Kedir, who was a literacy instructor in a linguistically diverse region) said,

There were two concerns of the adult learners who attended the literacy program in the non-Amharic languages. One is the issue of utility of what they learn in their local languages in dealing with official matters because the official working language was still Amharic at all levels throughout the country. The other concern was the transition from literacy class to primary school. It was very difficult for someone who attended basic literacy in a non-Amharic language to transit to formal schools due to language gap.

From the concerns expressed by the respondent, it could be learnt that the adults’ purposes were not taken into account in deciding the type of language to be used for literacy. The response also indicates some kind of policy incoherence where the government generally encouraged the neo-literates to continue their education via the formal system (Hoben, 1994: 635), there was huge linguistic misfit between literacy centres and schools. This could have been addressed by putting in place some kind of transition from mother-tongue literacy to Amharic, the official language and medium of instruction for primary school. This situation approves Cohen’s (2006) assertion that the literacy language choice of the socialist government was narrowly focused and mainly meant for political correctness. In general, literacy initiatives of the revolution era clearly modelled the very characteristic of the Military Socialist Government. The literacy initiatives were used to indoctrinate and to create a

submissive mass that accepted the military dictatorship. Hence, the critical – emancipatory role of literacy, as propagated by Paulo Freire, had not been acceptable to the designers of the Ethiopian literacy campaigns of the period.

4.3 Post-1991: decades of ‘silence’ and fragmented provision

Ethiopia saw major change in its political landscape in 1991 when the *Military Socialist Government* was replaced by coalition of armed fighters. The new government came to power in an era when major changes have been noted globally: end of the ‘cold-war’; the ‘Education for All’ (Jiometen 1990 and Dakar 2000) and the ‘Millennium Development Goal’ initiatives; and such requirements from multilateral organizations as the structural adjustment. The post-1980 world saw a significant attention and priority shift to universal primary education with major attention to aids provided by multi-lateral, bilateral and local institutions. Immediately after coming to power, the first thing the new Government had done was the formulation of a new Education and Training Policy, presumably, with major departures from the educational program that existed before it. Unfortunately, adult literacy was not taken as an important issue in the policy.

The post-1991 period, however, saw an increasing involvement of non-governmental organizations in adult education in general and adult literacy in particular; which partly modelled the pre-1974 adult literacy approach. Claiming that the Regional Education Bureaus should devise their own means to run adult literacy, the Federal Ministry of Education seemed to have pulled out from the business. As a result, adult education management at all levels was constrained, very much like in pre-1974 days, by the lack of institutional framework; human, material, financial resources; and, topping it all, by lack of political commitment and clear policy. Regarding this one insider (Zinash) stated:

The negative views of literacy program that was created among the then opponents and some sections of the public during the socialist Government must have influenced the way issues of adult education have been treated by the current government.

Associating adult literacy with a defeated part could be one major reason behind the attention the present government pays to adult literacy. As Lind (2008) eloquently stated, lack of political will towards adult literacy results from a) association of adult literacy with socialism; b) the liberating function of literacy is taken as a threat to national ruling elites and c) the illiterates are powerless to publicly express demand for literacy. Kedir (a respondent) had also to say the following on the same:

The institutional memories of the previous adult literacy efforts have been intentionally and forcefully dismantled by the new leaders. This is to deprive the present generation of the possibility of learning from the previous experiences. Where there have been several weekly programs on the mass media about bad deeds of the previous government, there is nothing about the ‘contributions’ of the literacy campaign.

Adult literacy hasn’t attracted significant attention in the situation analysis made in designing the poverty reduction strategy nor in planning the Education Sector Development Programs. Since 1991, the organizational structure of the adult education has shrunk, and budget allocation diminished (Woldemeskel, 2005 and Desu, 2005), which indicates that adult education in general and adult literacy in particular has not been one of the priority agenda of the present government. There have been training programs organized for farmers on various issues mainly targeting increasing productivity (e.g., water harvest, irrigation, environmental protection, etc). With all these are forms of adult education, they exclude adult literacy (Woldemeskel, 2005). The question is then can exclusion of literacy be afforded in grass-root development efforts of this sort? If the concern is bringing about sustainable development through empowering the communities, the issue has to be beyond implementing extension packages through day-to-day follow up and ‘prescriptions’ of extension workers. Parallel to the skills training, the farmers have to be helped to develop the related skills of reading and writing so that they can go further than the ‘prescriptions’ they get from the extension workers who will not be with them forever.

As noted above, there has been a general tendency to see that adult literacy is not a priority for the government and a tendency to push it away towards the non-governmental organization. However, such organizations are basically there to assist the national government and not to take over and run the business of the government. Besides, their scope is very much limited and cannot reach all those who want the service. Stressing the same, Archer (2006) underscored that it is only government alone that ensure *education-for-all*.

A recent development in Ethiopian adult literacy initiative is the new National Adult Education Strategy. As part of the new effort, planning of the implementation of a nationwide functional adult literacy was completed in 2009. However, the national adult literacy strategy document lacks clear specification of funding scheme, benchmarks to start with and targets to be achieved (see also Weriqneh, 2011). Hence, some respondents were cynical about the seriousness of the Government. They question if at all the Government formulated the strategy for the instrumental end of breaking the sharp words of the critic or out of serious concern for adult education. The absence of adequate moves to implement the plan seems to strengthen the sceptical attitude.

In general, the post-1991 situation of adult literacy initiative in Ethiopia seems to have perfectly matched the following description of the global trend by Lind (2008: 62):

The neglect of adult literacy was reinforced by the neo-liberal model that accompanied structural adjustment programmes in the poorer countries in the mid-1980's; it envisaged a new, more restricted role of the state and decentralization trends, and often allocated fewer resources for implementing social services.

The question is whether Ethiopia can afford leaving over 42% of its population in illiteracy (at least not able to read, write and do some basic computations) and still claim that agriculture-led industrialization is its development strategy.

Overview of the Ethiopian adult literacy initiatives vis-à-vis Agneta Lind’s (2008) description of the evolution of adult literacy on the Globe:

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Global trend: Lind’s characterization</i>	<i>Situation of adult literacy in Ethiopia</i>	<i>Gap</i>
<i>Stage 1: 1945 - 1964</i>	<i>Reading and writing in the mother tongues</i>	<i>Reading and writing in the national official language;</i>	<i>Mother tongue as a medium of learning was not there.</i>
<i>Stage 2: 1965 – 1973</i>	<i>Work-oriented functional literacy</i>	<i>Work-oriented functional literacy</i>	<i>Lack of experts and data base in the country</i>
<i>Stage 3: 1974 – 1980</i>	<i>Literacy as a means of liberation</i>	<i>Mass campaign to eradicate illiteracy.</i>	<i>The liberation and social justice agenda were excluded.</i>
<i>Stage 4: 1980’s</i>	<i>Mass campaign for the eradication of Illiteracy. Social justice as an issue.</i>	<i>Mass campaign continued</i>	
<i>Stage 5: 1990’s</i>	<i>Vagueness and NGO-ization</i>	<i>State of neglect; absence of significant policy</i>	<i>No strong alternative to adult literacy was presented at least in the policy discourses.</i>
<i>Stage 6: 2001 plus</i>	<i>Contradictions and inconsistencies: lifelong learning, multiple literacy and literate societies</i>	<i>discourse over adult literacy, government ‘pull out’ of the sub-sector. Adult literacy as ‘free territory’ of NGOs. Exception is the formulation of national adult education strategy.</i>	

Exclusion of literacy in and through the mother tongues (during the pre 1974), disregard for the liberation and social justice agenda (during the 1970s and 1980s) and absence of serious policy discourse on

alternatives in the post-1991 period made Ethiopian adult literacy initiatives different from what Lind (2008) described based on review of adult literacy around the world, particularly based on her experience in the developing world. As discussed earlier, all of the exclusions have serious ideological motives.

5. Conclusion: Change and continuity during the three systems

Adult literacy received a laissez faire treatment during the imperial regime (pre-1974); was approached with strong 'revolutionary zeal' during the revolution period; and almost neglected during the early phase of the post-1991 period. The imperial government's ambivalent approach was a result of a wish to have an 'ignorant' mass of tenants on the one hand and the need to silence some change seekers on the other. This paradoxical situation made the government fail to take bold steps to implement strong literacy initiatives while at the same time issued some policy provisions (such as the 1944 public notice and the 1954 Memorandum). In fact behind the policies and the initiatives were also some external pressures (for instance, the British behind the 1944 policy and the UNESCO behind the Experimental Functional Literacy). The military Socialist Government wanted to have citizens who could understand and accept the military re-interpretation of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and wanted to use adult literacy as an avenue to promote its ideology; a view which Papen (2005) labelled as the social control function of literacy. Hence, as is the case with almost all military-dominated socialist governments, the then Ethiopian Government used its strong hands to coerce citizens to attend the literacy program. This led the implementers to focus on the number of people who 'could' read and write (said to be liberated from illiteracy); not on the liberation that comes from being literate. The present (post-1991) government of Ethiopia neglected adult literacy in response to the global focus on universal primary education, association of adult literacy with the defeated party and, probably, due to considering a literate population as a threat to its rule.' The Government repeatedly outlined that *agriculture-led industrialization* is its main development strategy. As is mentioned earlier in this article, 85% of the population is in the agriculture sector,

more than half of which cannot read and write. Then how can the government depend on this for its core development strategy when it takes no time to make this population at least read and write? In general, it can be noted that ideological reasons continued to be behind the attention or lack of attention Ethiopian governments given to adult basic literacy since the 1940s.

The conception of literacy continued to be the same in the literacy initiatives of both the imperial regime and the revolutionary government. For both, literacy is the capacity to do the three R's without much regard to functionality. The only exception to this was the experimental adult functional literacy introduced by UNESCO. In both systems, the deficit conception of literacy wherein illiteracy was equated to ignorance and an absolute state of being illiterate or literate has been assumed. The present National Adult Education Strategy seems to start with the economic development paradigm and sees, at least theoretically, in terms of functionality. Yet, this is only stated, not implemented, as discussed above. Critical literacy has not been part of the intent of any of the adult literacy initiatives of the regimes.

Equally ideological was the choice of literacy language during the three regimes. The melting pot sort of language policy wherein language was hoped to serve as national glue was behind the choice of literacy language during the imperial regime. The official language (i.e., the language of the ethnic group to which the aristocracy most belonged) was taken unquestioningly as a medium of instruction for all the literacy initiatives. No effort was made, at least officially, to form a sort of transition for the adults from home language to the literacy (target) language. The effort made to use local languages during the revolution period was not without a problem, a problem equally ideological. During this period the decision to use local language as a literacy language was made without due regard to the utility of the literacy: there was misfit between the literacy languages on the one hand and the language used for official purpose and at school on the other. This situation might have been instigated by the ideological end of getting literate citizens who can read political messages in the local languages and to compile enough

reports on the number of literate citizens as quickly as possible. Where the major purpose of the adult literacy initiative is ideological indoctrination rather than functionality, the choice the government made seem workable –once again affirming the ideological nature of the literacy initiatives.

Participation was voluntary and only for those who wish to learn in Amharic (the national official language) during the imperial regime. It came to be compulsory for all citizens eight years and above during the socialist period. It has been apparently up to the citizens to attend literacy classes; if the program is there at all, during the post-1991 period. It is true that voluntary participation of the learners is very essential in all learning programs, and most of all in adults' learning. Yet, there is a need to create a situation where all those external factors which limit adults' decision to learn are overcome. The Ethiopian situation is not ready for that. Given this, the idea of 'free-will' by the adults (without any further intervention to create favourable conditions for them) can only indicate the Governments' laissez-faire attitude towards adult education in general and adult basic literacy in particular.

6. Lessons to be drawn and Implications

- Adult literacy initiatives are political rather than need-based particularly when the initiator is the government. This may explain the poor success of literacy initiatives, particularly in such developing countries as Ethiopia, where everything of national initiatives rise and fall with the political tone.
- Comparing the three systems, it may be learned that the adult literacy initiative has been relatively successful during the socialist period, irrespective of the fact that it was not legislated and there are flaws in the implementation of the initiatives. This implies that the commitment from the centre (the federal government) is very essential in moving the literacy program forward. And, legislations and official strategies may not take a literacy initiative anywhere unless there is real commitment that supports implementation. Yet, the initiative from the centre needs to be supported by strong initiative at the local level to make the literacy activity sustainable

even when the central commitment may cool down. The Ethiopian literacy campaign could not do so. A consultative and dialogical approach between the centre and the local level leadership is very essential to overcome this situation.

- The choice of literacy language has to be more pragmatic and meaningful to the adult. Connecting to official and mainstream instructional language is very essential. Doing this may need the devising of strategies for smooth transition from home (local/mother tongue) language to the target language instead of frustrating the adult with a totally new language from the outset of the program.
- ‘Eradicating illiteracy’ should be seen in terms of who benefits most from such efforts. Based on that, there is a need to identify target groups by being equally sensitive to peculiarities of each and every situation/local contexts of the targeted adults. For instance, such an exercise may start by determining what percentage of the members of a certain social unit/group (e.g., family) are to be literate if literacy is to be said ‘eradicated’. The Ethiopian adult literacy campaign taught us that a hundred percent coverage is not feasible in poorly performing economies.
- Localization of literacy may appear workable in a market-bound and globalized economy under the global neo-liberal agenda. Yet, that has to be caution taken because in a very poor economy such as Ethiopia, where the social infrastructure is at a very rudimentary stage, the citizens are very poor and where some sections (such as the rural communities) not even adequately aware of the value of education; expecting a local initiative to run strong literacy programs may not work. Therefore, central and local governments’ joint intervention and support is crucial.

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