Perspectives on adult literacy and livelihood: A review with reference to the National Literacy Programme in Namibia (NLPN)

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Abstract

Literacy, when defined as learning to read and write, has always been considered as an avenue of expressing learners' realities and values, hence individual learning is shaped by social contexts (Thompson, 2002). In other words, a literate person should be able to apply what has been learned to his or her own context. Namibia has taken the view that literacy is not an end to itself. Instead, it is a tool for empowerment, and a catalyst for economic development. However, the transferability of learned skills to address daily challenges concomitant to improving adult learners' livelihoods, has recently dominated the debate on the value of adult literacy learning (Likando, 2011). Borrowing from the critical literacy theory, this review article aims to generate debate on the link between literacy and livelihood in an attempt to address the question: Can adult literacy enhance livelihood activities? Using secondary data, we examined the National Literacy Programme of Namibia (NLPN) as a case study.

Introduction

It is globally acknowledged that illiteracy and the inability to improve one's livelihood are interlinked. It is for this reason that literacy programmes, particularly at national government level, are targeted at the poor and rural communities. Other studies suggest that being literate should not be simply defined as the ability to read and write; literacy must be in relation to something – to the presence or absence of a skill to perform a function – the functional perspective (Prins, 2016; Prins, 2010; Commonwealth of Learning, 2005; Alam, 2004; Openjuru, 2004; Rogers 2003).

The functional context to literacy has gained popularity in literacy programmes in developing countries recently where formal education has not reached a significant proportion of the adult population, particularly in the rural areas (Kagitcibasi, Goksen & Gulgoz, 2005). Although no one questions the vital role literacy plays in improving people's livelihoods, evidence that link improvements - people's wellbeing and accumulation of wealth – to literacy programmes, is debatable. Based on published literature, this article explored the context and extent to which literacy programmes are seen as a catalyst for economic de-

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velopment. The national literacy programme in Namibia is used as a reference point (Ministry Education and Culture, 1993). It further examines the claim that literacy "… education [programmes] transforms lives" (UNESCO, 2014, p.13). This is especially important because it is now known that the transferability of skills learned from the classroom, to daily life has been characterised as a major challenge, particularly in the NLPN (Likando, 2011).

If the foregoing observation is true, why should basic and functional literacy programmes continue to be encouraged? Research (Openjuru, 2004) has revealed that *functional literacy*, also referred to as 'life-oriented skills', must be at the epicenter of development initiatives because literacy enables communities to go beyond narrow economic concerns to broader issues of nutrition, health, family planning, and so on.

Following from the above, Rogers (2003) argues that literacy is now conceived in the plural as, '*literacies*', and is embedded in a range of life and livelihood situations. Torres (2002, p. 17) asserts that "… literacy differs according to purpose, context, use, script and institutional framework required". This is, however, not surprising; literacy has never been aimless and without purpose, however narrow or broader it may be. For instance, literacy and basic programmes that were promoted by missionaries were not only resulting from goodwill. The purpose of such literacy programmes was to ensure converts are able to internalise new values and beliefs, while also guaranteeing the steady supply of labour. Rogers (2005) equates this functional view of literacy to '*embedded literacy*' recognising that there are many literacies embedded within one's occupation, and *ideological literacy* (Street, 2003), which posits that literacy is a social practice, not a simple technical and neutrally, gained skill.

The implication of this standpoint is that for the literacy programme to be relevant to learners/participants, it has to consider the *multiple nature of literacy in context*, since it is the learners' practices that should inform programme planning and development, and not a programme that enlighten its beneficiaries. In most cases, as Papen (2005) observed, it is difficult to come up with an adult literacy curriculum that is responsive to the learners' diverse needs due to the circumstances of adults and the number of role players in the planning and development of these programmes. In the case of the NLPN, where planning and development of curricula is centralised, questions have been raised: What functional contexts have informed curriculum development of the literacy programme in Namibia? How are the acquired skills of reading and writing used by the learners in order to contribute to their livelihood?

These questions are complex and require longitudinal studies. For instance, the policy guidelines of the NLPN equate stage 4 Adult Upper Primary Education (AUPE) of the literacy programme to grade 7 of primary education, but evaluations by the implementors on the impacts of the NLPN are not aimed at establishing the link between literacy and functional skills. Instead, the assumption is that those candidates or learners who have completed stage 4, are equivalent in terms of knowledge gained to those of grade 7 learners. Papen (2005) has found that, even if the attained skills at stage 4 would be equivalent to grade 7 of primary education, it would not be sufficient condition for individuals to gain a satisfactory level of functionality suitable for self-employment or the labour market. This weak link, reveals that conceptually, adult literacy in Namibia – at least when it was planned – was considered as simply the acquisition of the three (3) R's (*reading, writing and arithmetic*) which limits its functionality. Durgunoğlu, Öney and Kuşcul, (2003, p. 20) call this state of affairs a "deficit model". This is not in line with current trends and reality. The educational needs of Namibian adults today require provisions which respond to their situation and could potentially support them to develop their individual potential in order to contribute to their immediate, mid-to-long term economic or social needs. Kaja-Kaere-

ho's (2013) case study on the perceptions of the graduates and beneficiaries of the Adult Upper Primary Education and Adult Skills Development for Self Employments (ASDSE) in the NLPN in the Windhoek area ascertains that the current literacy programme requires enhancement. Although the study has revealed that AUPE and ASDSE had enhanced participants' livelihoods (Kaja-Kaereho, 2013), the two programmes still needed revamping, particularly in the area of curriculum development to meet beneficiaries' expectations. These findings, even though they cannot be generalised, provide an insight in the need for the introduction of more forms of relevant literacy in Namibia that respond to particular local contexts.

Research Problem

Viewing literacy as learning to read and write, has always been considered an initial step to attain other literacies that improve livelihood (Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Petkova-Mwangi, & Sall, 2002). However, this narrow conception has created an impression that literacy is a panacea for overcoming social exclusion, poverty, economic enhancement and social wellbeing. Consequently, many countries, including Namibia, that have adopted this narrow view of adult literacy education, have always measured their achievements in quantitative terms ignoring the qualitative dimension: how the learned skills could be applied in real life contexts (Likando, 2011). While literacy is multifaceted, the social context in which the learning takes place, is paramount in the process of learning. Unfortunately, many literacy programmes, including the NLPN, were designed following the *literacy-first* approach (Rogers, 2005), which often ignores social contexts. This approach has posed a challenge to adult learners because, in most cases, the skills learned are divorced from day-to-day livelihood activities. Given the shortcomings in the NLPN, this review paper provokes a debate on the link between literacy and livelihood.

Methodology

In this qualitative study, a literature review was used as the method of gathering information, by employing a critical discourse analysis (Alborn & Mukherji, 2010). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is referred to in some literature as critical language (CL), and Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosely, Hui and Joseph (2005, p. 366) assert that the central focus of CDA is "… on how language as a cultural tool mediates the relationship of power and privileges in social interactions". In the context of this study, it is considered as an approach that represents a critical perspective that "… studies discourse and its functions in society and the ways society and, especially, forms of inequality are expressed, represented, legitimated, or reproduced in text and talk" (Ulinnuha & Wijaya, 2013, p. 263). Therefore, literacy must be understood as a social practice used as an empowerment tool to increase the capacity of individuals or groups in order to make choices, and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes (Abadzi, 2005).

For literacy learning to be meaningful, the literacy process should find its expression in engaging and participating in authentic social change that leads to one's improved standard of living. As a result, authentic social change can be achieved when literacy education is designed to promote critical consciousness that leads to empowerment (Freire, 1990). The CDA approach enabled the researchers to understand that there is a link between literacy and conscientisation, which Paulo Freire calls "liberation education" (Freire, 1990). Individuals that engage in literacy learning should be able to challenge forms of discrimination and marginalisation that may hinder them to significantly contribute to the socio-economic, cultural and political development in their community or society. As a methodological approach, CDA enabled the researchers to understand that literacy in not a purely linguistic activity, which is independent on social factors (Youngman & Mpofu, 2001). This approach guided the critical examination of relevant literature on the link between literacy and livelihood.

Theoretical framework

Critical literacy, sometimes referred to as critical social theory (Maruatona & Cervero, 2004), was adopted as a theoretical framework to examine the link between literacy and livelihood. It explores the larger systems in society as they shape adult learning (Fasokun, Katahoire, & Oduaran, 2005). Participation in an adult literacy programme, for instance, may partly be influenced by encouragement or discouragement received from the larger community, as Fasokun, Katahoire and Oduaran (2005, p. 55) assert: "… individual learning is shaped by the learner's culture, structure and history".

According to Maruatona and Cervero (2004), one attribute of this theory is that it explores power relations as a positive as well as a negative force for creating potential for social change. The theory is deemed 'critical' because it looks at how learning programmes, including literacy programmes, are organised to enable learners to ask critical questions and even assess basic assumptions. Critical theorists, such as Paulo Freire, believe that adult literacy programmes should not be confined to teaching specific literacy skills, but should instead contextualise instruction within a framework of social activism and societal transformation (Degener, 2001).

In other words, for Freire (1990), a critical literacy programme is designed around the backgrounds, needs, interests of learners, and the contexts in which the learning takes place. Such a programme does not simply teach literacy and other basic skills, but also show learners how they can use these skills to transform their lives and the society in which they live.

Although some practitioners within adult education often view the ideas of critical theorists as too theoretical and impractical (Kanpol, 1998), it should be noted that within the critical literacy framework there is not just one literacy but many (Street, 1993), and an individual may need to practise many kinds of literacy in order to fulfill his or her roles in society. Lankshear and MacLaren (1993, p. xviii) remarked:

> … these literacies are socially constructed within the political contexts: that is, within contexts where access to economic, cultural and political and institutional power is structured unequally. Moreover, these same literacies evolve and are employed in daily life settings that are riven with conflicting and otherwise competing interests.

Analysis of the programme objectives of the NLPN using the critical literacy framework questions whether the establishment of this programme took into consideration the 'pluralistic' nature or 'multiple' uses of literacy (Street, 2003), seeing that they are still limitations in the AUPE and ASDSE functional levels of the programme.

Literacy, Livelihood, and Development

A critical examination literacy, livelihood and development demand us to examine the question: Is literacy education or is literacy development? Drawing from the definition of literacy we can infer that literacy is both. On the one hand, literacy is education because, by simple definition, a literate person is, "… someone who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life" (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005, p.16). On the other hand, literacy is also development because, if a literate person uses his or her skills to enhance livelihoods, he or she has achieved the purpose. What has been difficult in linking the three concepts, is how the concept *livelihood* has been conceived by people, most particularly, literacy programme developers. Depending on the type of literacy, a participant may have developed life skills to meet a generic set of skills for living, for example, teamwork, negotiation, problem-solving, communication, networking and so on. Here, literacy technically refers to a contextual skill such as: livelihood, vocational skills, family life skills, health skills, and skills related to environment (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005, p. 18). In other words, contextual skills should be acquired in ways that link them with these other skills - generic and literacy skills.

Perhaps another issue that warrants discussion in this paper, is the concept of development, and how it relates to literacy. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report of 2001 gives a very lucid definition of human development:

> ... human development is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. ... fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities – the range of things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living, and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible (UNDP, 2001, p. 9).

Certainly, literacy improves the quality of life of people in many and most profound ways. Based on this understanding, some see adult literacy in terms of adult schooling within the education sector, while others perceive adult literacy as firmly rooted in social and economic development (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005). However, these ideological differences in literacy as education, or literacy as development, are not just semantic approaches; they have influenced the pedagogy in the field of lifelong learning.

Crucially, in many literacy programmes of several countries, including Namibia, literacy is conceived as education, while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies opt for *literacy as human development approach*. This is not the case with the NLPN where literacy is still conceived in an isolated manner. Strong emphasis is placed on acquisition of basic skills (reading writing and arithmetic). Where literacy is defined functionally, it appears to be sporadic and uncoordinated with very few initiatives on access to literacy skills that improve livelihoods.

According to Abadzi, (2005, p. 20) literacy that enhances livelihood serves as a source of empowerment, which he defines as "a process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes".

Multiple facets of literacy programmes

There is a widely asserted view by UNESCO that literacy is a basic skill, fundamental to all learning and development (UNESCO, 2013). The reader may recall that advocates of this school of thought claim that literacy brings with it automatically a range of cognitive changes and understanding (Rogers, 2003). The disadvantage of adopting this narrow definition is that it reduces literacy to a neutral skill taught in a universal learning programme. Although this notion has been challenged in the past, Rogers (2003) claims that the proponents of this school of thought still hold ground, because there are different kinds of literacy, for example: literacy for health; for income-generation; for citizenship; for environmental development; for the work place, and for family, and that these can only be achieved after the learning of literacy. This approach to literacy is termed in New Literacy Studies (NLS) as the '*literacy first*' approach. This approach may be useful in Namibia, particularly if literacy is meant for the acquisition of basic skills, such as reading a hospital prescription, trading at a market, visiting the bank, and other skills related to basic functional literacy. Beyond that the next approach has a comparative advantage.

Further to the above, another school of thought, the '*literacy comes second*' approach, or the '*literacy and livelihoods*' approach (Commonwealth of Learning, 2005) as a counter ap-

proach, has developed. Although not fully grasped by literacy programme designers, this new approach detaches adult literacy from the educational sector and firmly locates it in social and economic development activities. In other words, this approach advocates that an individual or a group can initiative a community development programme and through that activity, develop *usable* as opposite to *useful* literacy skills. Understood this way, literacy and livelihoods programmes will have a different form than an adult literacy class. Achievements would not be measured quantitatively – the number of participants who learned literacy skills - but qualitatively – the extent to which acquired skills have led to achievements in terms of livelihoods activities and benefits.

Reflections on the NLPN

Since its inception in 1992, a significant number of adults have participated in the NLPN. The most recent comprehensive data on this subject is found in the 2012 Report of Directorate of Adult Education (DAE). The report indicates that 22, 587 participated in the NLPN during that year, compared to 31,126 in 1992, which constitutes a 27 per cent decrease in the enrolment figures (DAE Report, 2012). Although there was a significant decrease in enrolment figures between 1992 and 2012, the 2015 EFA Global Monitoring Report reveals that by 2015, Namibia had attained a 76 per cent enrolment rate in adult literacy, which was already above the 50 per cent globally projected figure (UNESCO, 2015, p. 324). The emphasis on achieving 50 per cent improvement in the level of adult literacy by 2015 was stressed at the Dakar World Education Forum where literacy was explicitly adopted as part of the six EFA goals (UNESCO, 2004).

Considering the current interventions and their impact, the reported achievements might have been measured quantitatively, because by 2015 significant progress was to be made in terms of achieving Education for All (EFA) goals; specifically goal 4 that postulated 50 percent improvement in the levels of adult literacy, and goal 6 that lists literacy and numeracy as integral parts of educational equity (Robinson, 2005, p. 437).

In spite of these achievements, the question that still remains relevant, is how the issues of livelihoods are addressed in the literacy programme, particularly when available literature gives the impression that 'livelihood' can include more than one set of knowledge, skills and methods. In addition, that "… programmes that start from livelihood skills seem to stand a stronger chance of success. This concurs with Oxenham, Diallo, Katahoire, Petkova-Mwangi and Sall (2002, p. 3), who claimed that "… after all, such programmes demonstrate an immediate reason for learning".

While we argue that context and purpose are present in the NPLN, it is constructed as a means in itself, which is a result of *under-informed* policy formulation. In order to transform the NLPN with an aim to be responsive to the needs of the participants, the current Curriculum Guidelines for Adult Upper Primary Education (AUPE), which is designed to be the functional stage of the literacy programme, needs to be revamped. Five core categories are identified regarding the manner in which the curriculum design could respond to the needs of the learners: 1) personal and social development; 2) development and work related skills; 3) competencies and attitudes; 4) social integration and nation building; and 5) quality of life improvements (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5). It will be interesting to follow how these categories have been translated into measurable curriculum outcomes.

In addition, Namibia needs to rethink of an overall approach to the current adult literacy programme with a clear defined aim, considering that adults learn for a purpose and literacy is multi-faceted. Creating a balance between cognitive changes and socio-economic values of literacy, is critical in the process of addressing the needs of the participants.

Conclusion and Discussion

The adult literacy education's impact on livelihood has been a subject of debate by many scholars (Prins, 2010; Rogers, 2005; Commonwealth of Learning, 2005). Prins (2010, p. 419), citing Brandt (2001), cautions that:

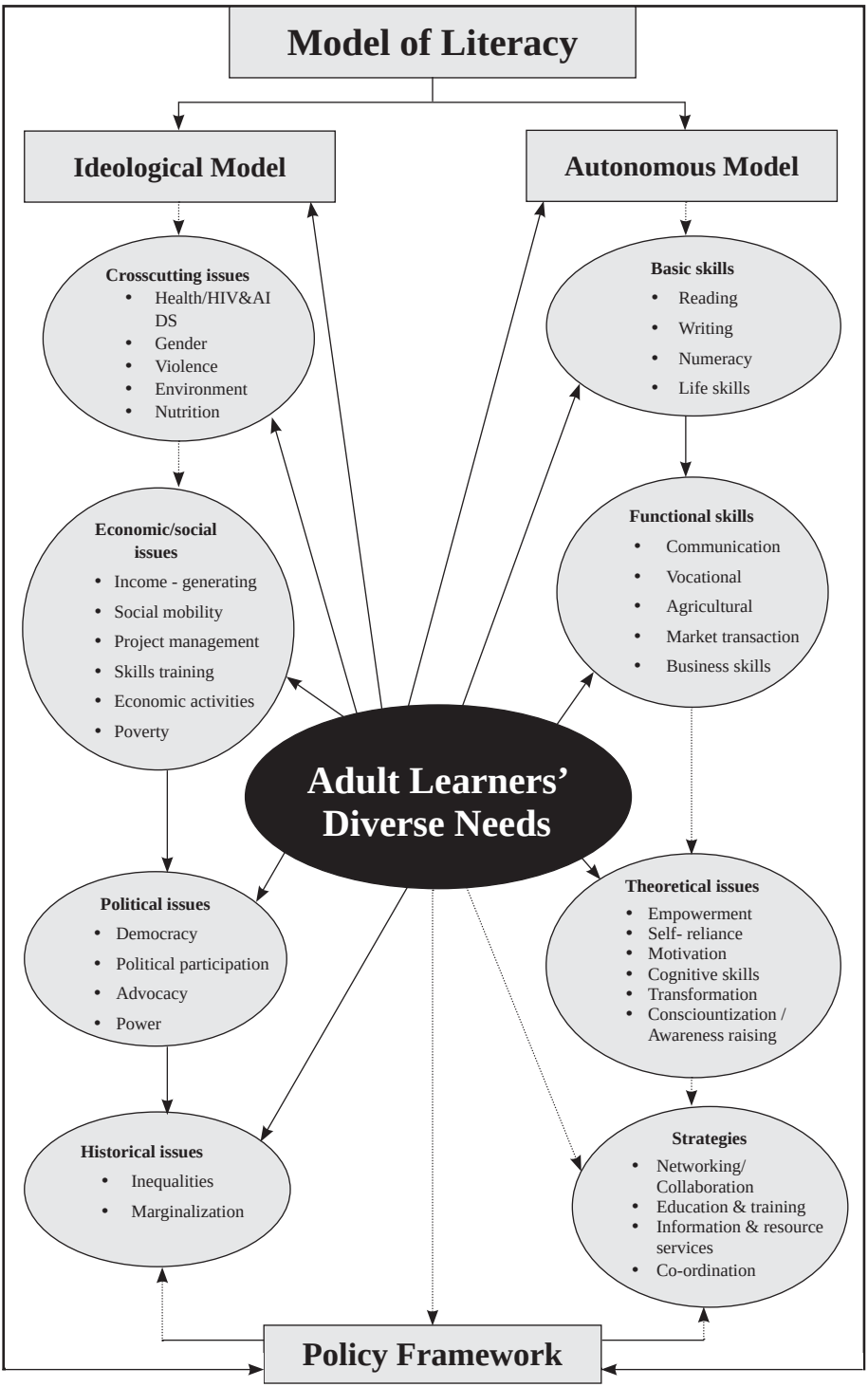
> Just as illiteracy is rarely self-chosen and rarely self-created, the literacy that people practice is not the literacy they necessarily wish to practice. Focusing merely on the uses of literacy as they seem to arise from local goals and interests can obscure these complications.

The NLPN's emphasis on the generic/basic skills (autonomous approach) and the claim that practising these skills will lead to quality of life improvements, among other benefits (Ministry of Education, 2009), overstresses the benefits of the programme. Although participants may experience some psychological benefits, Prins' (2010), emphasis on the acquisition of basic skills to address psychological challenges, may be short-lived because reasons for participating in a literacy programme go beyond the acquisition of basic skills.

The Policy Guidelines for the AUPE put emphasis on the functional approach to literacy (Ministry of Education, 2009) that urges the consideration of perspectives that appreciate the context of the learner's reality (Subban, 2008). While the functional approach is a highly favoured approach in most adult literacy programmes, including the NPLN, it has not escaped some criticism leveled against other literacy approaches. Subban (2008) argues that the functional approach often ignores structural issues that result in low-level literacy, since both the materials for instruction, and the methods used by teachers are imposed on the participants. As a result, participants simply become objects.

Notwithstanding the limitations of both the autonomous and functional approaches to adult literacy learning, taking a holistic view that integrates both approaches in order to create an interactive relationship between generic skills and skills for livelihoods, is a practical choice. Figure 1 below, as adopted from Likando (2011, p. 212), depicts this relationship.

Figure 1: An Integrated Model of Literacy that could be applied in the NLPN



What is significant about the proposed model is that it stresses the harmonisation of policy and practice that puts emphasis on the transferability of skills from one context to another. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that the major tenet of any organised adult literacy programme is to provide life skills. These life skills include basic skills, functional skills, socio-economic skills, political and psychological skills that can be acquired through a variety of activities (Alam, 2004). The integrated approach presents an opportunity for the Directorate of Adult Education (DAE) in the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture in Namibia to ensure that programme designers build into the NLPN activities that may enhance the skills of the programme beneficiaries. In order to do this, adult literacy education should not be solely left in the domain of the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture. Other relevant stakeholders, for example, the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry, the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, the Ministry of Industrialisation, Trade and SME Development, the Ministry of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, and the Private Sector and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs and Civil Society) should play an active role in the designing and implementation of the literacy programme, and the defining of the beneficiaries, so that qualitative improvements in livelihoods become the programme desired outcome.

Such a policy decision will require investment in resources. In addition, adequate financial resources, a well-targeted literacy programme, and the innovative use of technology, are essential for the programme to be effective. Critical observation of the current situation shows that in the absence of the National Council on Adult Education, as proposed in the National Policy on Adult Learning (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2003, p. 37), the intention of revamping the current NLPN may be a far-fetched dream. The responsibilities of the Council, as outlined in the National Policy on Adult Learning include, among others: 1) the formulation and review of policy on adult learning and advise government accordingly; 2) the developing mechanisms for policy implementation; 2) the monitoring of policy implementation; 3) the establishment of targets (especially in qualitative terms), indicators and monitoring procedures with respect to equitable access to adult learning opportunities; and 4) the facilitation and encouragement towards the networking and co-ordination at all levels, and between ministries and agencies involved in adult literacy.

Until such time as Namibia puts relevant structures in place and adopts an integrated approach, adult literacy will continue to be conceived as a generic set of skills that leads to development. The limitation of such a conception is that it ignores the multi-faceted nature of literacy, the context under which it takes place, and the variety of livelihood needs it aims to address. It is evident from this review paper and other research reports, that purpose, learners' needs, outcomes and contexts are important in designing a literacy programme. For the future, a comprehensive longitudinal study will be needed in order to establish hard evidence about whether current and future changes in livelihoods improvements in the NLPN beneficiaries can be attributed to existing policies.

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