Failing Adult Learners: Why Rwanda’s Adult Basic Education Policy is Not Delivering

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Abstract

The study reported in this paper examines the provision of adult education in Rwanda. Illiteracy is a severe problem for sub-Saharan Africa and a significant barrier to eliminating poverty. To have no or few literacy skills is to be excluded from socio-political activities, forms of employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. Eradicating illiteracy has been a policy objective of the Rwandan Government for the last 20 years. However, in practice, it has never been a high priority, not least because it would require external development aid and very few funders are interested in it. This paper reports on a survey of one of Rwanda’s five provinces, key informant interviews and focus group discussions. We illustrate the problems for literacy classes, and their tutors and organisers, of extreme poverty and of the lack of a ‘culture of reading’ in which learners can apply what they have learned. Severe deficiencies in organisation, infrastructure, tutor training and learning resources are also reported. Running adult literacy courses in a low-income country is not easy, but what has been delivered in the past has failed to meet adult learners’ expectations or to make a sufficient improvement in their lives.
1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enshrine a global commitment to work together to eliminate poverty and improve the quality of life for all through inclusive development. The SDG for education is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (SDG Education Steering Committee, n.d.). The 2030 target for literacy is for all youth and a substantial proportion of adult men and women to achieve literacy and numeracy skills relevant to their daily lives. Literacy is a fundamental human right as well as being essential for socio-economic development (Colclough et al., 2005). It enables people to think critically and make choices about how they live their lives (Aksornkool, 2003; Freire, 1970; Sen, 1999). It opens up new opportunities for people to lift themselves and their families out of poverty, improve their self-esteem, stand up for their human rights and participate actively in politics (Colclough et al., 2005; Wolhuter and Barbieri, 2017). There is a close synergy between enabling adults to gain literacy practices and their children’s educational attainment (Cheffy et al., 2016), improved health and psychological outcomes for themselves and their children (Claire, 2010; LeVine et al., n.d.; Sørensen et al., 2012). A further demonstration of the importance of investing in adult literacy education is the international adoption of the Belém Framework for Action which holds that adult education is critical for ‘a viable future for all’ (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010).

Recognising the importance of literacy, one of the aims of Vision 2020, Rwanda's long-term development plan, was to have 100% of adults literate by 2020 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000). However, by 2016/17 over a third (36%) of women' and a quarter (26%) of men could not read and write a simple note or do a written calculation (authors’ calculation from EICV 5 data). In this paper, we use the findings from quantitative and qualitative research carried out in the Western Province of Rwanda in 2017-18 to explore why the literacy rate among adults remains so high. We consider the motivations of learners, the learning environment and the cultural environment in which Rwandans live, as possible factors influencing why adults do or do not gain literacy skills (Thomas et al., 2020).

2. Literacy and Adult Basic Education

In 2018, 807 million adults (13.7%) globally were illiterate; that is, they were unable to read and write a simple sentence about their everyday lives (calculated from World Development Indicators); two-thirds of them were women (Stromquist, 2016). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the proportion of adults that lacked these necessary skills is much higher - 34.3%, 164.2 million. Globally there has been a reduction in the number and percentage of people that are unable to read and write a simple sentence. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the number increased from 164.2 million in 2000 to 211.4 million in 2018, although the proportion decreased from 43.3% to 34.3%.

These figures, however, are not a very good guide to literacy levels. They are likely to be an underestimate because of how data are collected and how literacy is defined. In many countries the literacy rate is calculated from responses to questions in household surveys
rather than a test of ability, with the former overestimating the proportion of adults that can read and write (Post, 2016). Being able to read and write a simple passage is unlikely to give adults the literacy skills they need for living in the 21st Century, where among others, digital competency is of increasing importance, as UNESCO has pointed out:

Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world (UNESCO, 2019).

It is also increasingly recognised that literacy is what enables people to access relevant information and use it in everyday life (Cheffy et al., 2016; Wedin, 2008). Education enables people to develop problem-solving and socioemotional skills and, above all, it empowers them, giving them confidence in themselves and their ability to influence decision making and to take control of their own lives (Freire, 1970; Williamson and Boughton, 2020).

Despite the global recognition of the importance of literacy skills for individual wellbeing and community development, adult basic education has remained low on governments’ and the development agenda, with few donors providing funding (Cheffy et al., 2016; Robinson and Vù, 2019; Savonitto and Oral, 2019; Stromquist, 2016). This is partly evidenced by the large numbers of adults in the Global South who are yet to develop basic literacy skills. Few countries have managed to reduce adult illiteracy rates in line with the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) ‘Education for All 2015’ target of 50%, with adult literacy losing ground as a priority in governments’ agendas (Post, 2016; Stromquist, 2016; Wolhuter and Barbieri, 2017).

There are several approaches to teaching adult literacies. The traditional approach sees literacy education as enabling learners to gain a set of technical skills. The functional approach sees it as enabling learners to learn literacy and numeracy skills they can use them in their everyday lives. The New Literacies studies have advocated a social practices approach to literacies. This approach recognises the need for learners to gain multiple literacies that they can use in their everyday lives, empowering them, giving them more confidence in their abilities and enabling them to gain social recognition (Wedin, 2008). Such an approach not only provides quality education but also gives learners the skills that they want and that are useful to them in their everyday lives (Trudell et al., 2019). However, learners may reject such an approach if the teaching methods are not congruent with learners’ expectation of how they should be taught (Papen, 2005). Whatever the teaching method, if learners are not able to use the skills they gain from literacies education in their everyday lives, they risk losing them (Trudell et al., 2019) and disengaging with adult literacy education.

However, there is a need to improve adult literacy education if learners are to access it and gain skills that will enable them to improve their quality of life (Habou, 2017). Adult literacy classes generally have a limited impact on literacy, with low enrolment, high dropout rates and low retention of learning, and there is little robust evidence that gaining literacy capabilities improves income or health (Blunch, 2017). For adult literacy education to make a difference, there needs to be government commitment and adequate funding, training of adult literacies tutors and improving their conditions of employment. It is also critical to make the adult literacy education curriculum relevant to learners’ lives, teaching in local languages, gender mainstreaming and supporting women and other underprivileged groups in getting access to literacy classes; and certificating learners’ achievements (Habou, 2017). In sum, there is a need to ensure that adult literacies classes are: designed to be congruent with the life of learners; that tutors are motivated; that there is a high quality of instruction; and that learning is sequenced to enable learners to move from low/no literacy to fluent literacy (Savonitto and Oral, 2019) recognising that there is a continuum from emerging to fluent
literacy (Thomas et al., 2020). Learners need to be motivated to learn, engaged in their learning, able to practice what they have learned and prepared to put in the necessary hard work.

The provision of adult literacy education faces many challenges in low-income countries. These challenges include literacies tutors who have little or no training in teaching adult literacy learners and are themselves poorly educated, who have no security of tenure and are often volunteers (Gizawa et al., 2019; Rogers, 2005). There is frequently a high turnover of tutors, for example, one study in Ethiopia found that 21% of tutors left before the end of the course they were teaching because of multiple issues mainly related to low pay and other conditions of employment (Gizawa et al., 2019). There are also often high dropout rates because courses fail to live up to expectations and do not enable learners to improve their socio-economic situation. Furthermore, adult learners learn how to read, write and do calculations in a decontextualised fashion rather than learning how to apply these skills in their daily lives, with what they are taught having little relevance to what they do (Rogers, 1999). However, if learners gain knowledge that is useful to them in their daily lives, literacy education can have high impact irrespective of whether graduates retain literacies skills. Their children are more likely to go to school, they are more empowered, and their civic participation increases (Blunch, 2017).

3. Rwanda Context

Rwanda is a least developed, aid-dependent country, despite having made significant socio-economic progress since 2000 with one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and achieving or nearly achieving its MDG targets (Abbott et al., 2016; Abbott, Sapsford, et al., 2015a, 2015b; Abbott, Tsinda, et al., 2015). Eighty-three per cent of the population live in rural areas, 69% of adults are agricultural workers, and over 70% of households are dependent or mainly dependent on subsistence agriculture, with 75% of these having land insufficient to feed a family (authors' analysis of EICV 5 data set)). Productivity is low due to degraded soil, low levels of modern inputs and labour-intensive farming, with most of those working on the land underemployed. Poverty remains high, with 56% living on less than $1.90 (2011 PPP) a day in 2016, although this was a significant decrease compared with 2000 when it stood at 77% (WDIs). Levels of educational attainment are relatively low 17% of adults have never been to school; only 42% have completed primary school, and only 16% have a post-primary qualification (EICV 5 data). Just under 10% of adults say that they are computer literate, with the same proportion saying they use the internet. Only 48% say that they own a mobile phone. Rwanda is a multilingual country even though it has a common mother tongue, Kinyarwanda. English, French and Kiswahili are official languages along with Kinyarwanda. In 2009, English replaced French as the language of instruction in schools from primary grade 3 and from 2020 it is the language of instruction from primary grade 1.

Western Province, the location of our research, is the poorest province in Rwanda, with 69% of the population living on less than $1.90 (2011 PPP) a day (WDIs). It is more rural than the Rwanda average, with 88% of the population living in rural areas (EICV 5). A higher proportion of those aged 18+ work in agriculture than the national average - 75% (17% waged, 30% independent farmers, 28% dependent family workers). Educational attainment is lower than the national average, 20% of adults have never been to school; only 36% have completed primary school, and 14% achieved any post-primary qualification. Only seven per cent say that they are computer literate, with the same proportion saying that they use the internet. The ownership of mobile phones is marginally lower than the national average at 44% (EICV 5).
4. Literacy and Adult Basic Education in Rwanda

The Rwandan Government’s long-term policy, Vision 2020, identified adult literacy education as a high priority and set a target of 100% literacy by 2020 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000). The 2003 education law (Republic of Rwanda, 2003) and the 2003 Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2003) both emphasised that adult basic education was a priority. Increasing the adult literacy rate was seen as essential for poverty reduction, for improving health, encouraging family planning and increasing participation in community development (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2002).

In 2005, a paper set out the Rwandan Government’s policy and strategy for adult literacy education (Non-formal Education Unit Ministry of Education, 2005). It defined literacy as being able to use reading, writing and numeracy skills in everyday life. An adult basic education policy promised for 2009 was eventually published in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2014). It indicated that literacy courses should enable learners to:

(a) read, write and interpret information and...[understand] diverse types of texts in real-life situations; (b) compute and use the four basic mathematical operations...; (c) be able to cope with and solve real-life problems; and (d) apply the skills they have learned to income-generation activities and entrepreneurship (Ministry of Education, 2014: 3).

The policy reiterated the objective of having a literate society and put in place a structure for developing and delivering literacy education in Rwanda. The Ministry of Education was to be responsible for the development and review of policy, and the Rwanda Education Board for developing a curriculum, ensuring that tutors were trained and undertaking quality assurance. Districts were to be responsible for delivery and NGOs, religious institutions and other development partners were to run literacy classes. The College of Education at the University of Rwanda was to include teaching adults on its Bachelor of Education degree, which trains tutors for the teacher training colleges, and teaching adult literacy was to be included in the curriculum for pre-service primary-school teachers. However, there was no requirement for training literacy tutors and no standard set for the training. There was recognition of the need for a significant increase in funding for implementing the policy. However, the government was yet to identify a source for financing it.

The policy identifies two levels of adult education: basic and post-basic. At present, literacy classes prepare students to pass a level 1 examination equivalent to passing the Primary 1 examination. It is estimated that it will take an adult learner three years to complete basic education, the equivalent of completing primary school (personal communication from the Professional in Charge of Adult Education, Ministry of Education). Kinyarwanda is the medium of instruction, but there is a syllabus for an English module. However, the medium of instruction in primary schools is English from Year 1. As most volunteer literacies tutors have themselves only completed primary school and completed it before English became the medium of instruction, it seems unlikely that adult learners will be able to learn English any time soon. The lack of education in English may make it difficult for learners who complete the basic course to take courses at vocational training centres or otherwise continue their education.

There is, in general, a lack of a reading culture and low literacy levels in Rwanda, and this harms people’s lives and their children’s educational attainment (Friedlander, 2020; Ruterana, 2011, 2012). Rwandans generally live in an environment where there is little, if any, access to reading materials. A situational analysis of adult literacy educational needs in 2005 (Okech and Torres, 2005) found that: literacy centres were mostly run by the voluntary sector, mainly churches; they lacked facilities such as blackboards; and nearly a sixth of classes were held in the open. More literacy centres and tutors were needed to increase
access to literacy classes, given the number of people who did not have basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. Literacy classes were often funded on a project basis by international aid, meaning that when the funding ceased the centre stopped delivering courses. The tutors were mainly volunteers, primary school graduates with no training in teaching adult literacy. Literacy centres were often funded on a project basis by international aid, meaning that when the funding ceased the centre stopped delivering courses. The tutors were mainly volunteers, primary school graduates with no training in teaching adult literacy. Literacy centres were not regulated; there was no set curriculum or even guidance on delivering adult literacy education. Teaching was mainly of literacy skills, and learners did not find the classes interesting, and there was inequitable access to provision. The review concluded that there is a direct relationship between poverty and illiteracy and that prejudice against the poor, women, elderly people and those with special needs meant there was a reluctance by donors to invest in literacy education. Learner expectation that literacy education would enable them to increase their income often led to frustration and dropout when this did not happen. Adults lacking literacy skills were said to be unaware of the broader benefits of gaining them, such as greater autonomy and problem-solving skills.

The situation in Rwanda indicates that the government has failed to deliver on its plans for adult literacy education. In 2018, realising that there was no possibility of it reaching its 2020 target of 100% adult literacy, it set a revised target of 85% by 2023-24 (Ministry of Education, 2018). There has been little improvement in literacy rates since 2005 (Figure 1) and these rates are probably an overestimation of the proportion of adults who can use reading, writing and numeracy skills in their daily lives. When asked to read a simple sentence rather than just asked if they can, a significantly smaller proportion can do so - 76% compared to 83% of men and 63% compared to 80% of women for those aged 15 to 49 (authors’ analysis of Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey 2013/14 and EICV 5).

There is little evidence of any increase in numbers of adult literacy centres, tutors or learners since 2012; the numbers fluctuate from year to year (Ministry of Education, 2012, 2019). There is also a relatively high non-completion rate: averaged over the three years 2015-17 about 30% of adults who enrolled for a class did not graduate. Furthermore, there is a tendency for learners to lose the skills they have gained from attending classes. In 2017, only eight per cent of adults aged 18 or over had participated in an adult literacy course; of these, 37% said they could not read a simple note, 52% that they could not write a simple note and 53% that they could not do a simple written calculation (EICV 5 data). In total, only 42% (53% of men, 34% of women) who had attended a literacy course said that they could read and write a simple note and do a written calculation.

![Figure 1: Trend of adults (over 18 years) ability to read and write a simple note and do a written calculation](image)

Source: EICV II, III, IV, V (authors’ analysis)
In 2018, the government’s strategic plan for education indicated that: adult education provision needed to be increased; there was a need to train existing tutors; to recruit more tutors; to encourage greater uptake; and to provide reading materials for graduates so they could continue to use their newly acquired skills (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, the Government’s programme for 2017-24 does not refer to adult literacy education (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2017).

5. Research Questions

In this paper, we consider four interrelated issues that potentially explain the reasons why adult literacy provision in Rwanda is failing learners:

1. What adult literacy education is on offer?
2. What are adult learners looking for, and what do they expect to gain from taking adult literacy classes?
3. To what extent and in what ways do adult literacy classes meet the expectation of learners?
4. What is the literacies environment in which people live in Rwanda?

6. Methodology

The research used mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative research to answer ‘what’, ‘why’ and how’ questions about the provision on offer. The target population was residents in Western Province aged 18 or over. The paper draws on four data sets.

1. Scoping Study: Interviews with six of the seven District Directors of Education in Western Province, the Professional in Charge of Adult Education and the Director of Planning in the Ministry of Education, the Deputy Director of the Rwandan Education Board and representatives of NGOs delivering literacy classes.
2. Survey: a stratified probability survey with sampling of areas proportionate to size. (margin of error 2.3% and standard error 95%) stratified by district and by urban/rural location in each district. The sample of villages and households were randomly selected from lists provided by the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda (NISR) At the household level, the adult member who had most recently had a birthday was interviewed. NISR issue a Survey licence, approving the design of the survey, the questionnaire and sample. The target sample was 2,420 individuals, and the achieved sample was 2,391 (98.8%).
3. Qualitative research 1: twenty-four (24) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a purposive sample of adults, representative of gender, age, and educational attainment in Western Province, to explore participants’ everyday social practices.
4. Qualitative research 2: fourteen (14) FGDs with a purposive sample of men and women who wanted to join an adult literacy class and a purposive sample of men and women attending classes in Karongi, Rubavu and Rusizi Districts. Ten key informant interviews (KIIs) with district education officials, including ones at district and sector levels.

All researchers and data collectors had previous experience of doing quantitative and qualitative research and were specially trained for this project. Apart from the Scoping Study, which was carried out mainly in English, all interviews and FGDs were in Kinyarwanda. The survey questionnaire and the agendas for the FGDs and KIIs were drafted in English and when agreed, translated into Kinyarwanda by a native speaker of Kinyarwanda, with
translations quality assured by a second native speaker. The questionnaire and agendas were piloted and amended in the light of feedback from the pilots. The research took place between November 2017 and October 2018.

All participants gave informed consent after being read or reading a project information sheet. They were told they could withdraw consent at any time during the interview and up to the 30th October 2018. Quality assurance of the survey included accompanied interviews, daily checks of the interviews, 10% call-back in the field and 10% call-back after the completion of fieldwork. Data was transferred to SPSS Version 23 and the data quality assured. This paper uses mainly frequencies and cross-tabulations, with $\chi^2$ and Cramer’s V to test differences for significance. Statistical significance was set at the 99% level, given the sample size and wanting to be certain that reported differences were not likely to be due to chance. The Wealth Scale is based on the Rwanda Demographic and Health Survey Scale and constructed using the DHS guidelines (Rutstein, 2015).

Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were facilitated by experienced researchers, digitally recorded, with two note-takers also making contemporaneous notes. Notes were transcribed into English, with the recordings used to fill in any gaps. The facilitator quality-assured each transcript, with the fieldwork director giving final approval. The transcripts were analysed thematically, taking into account the purpose of the research: how people live their daily lives; use of literacy in daily lives; ways that people without literacy skills compensate for not having these; motivation for joining a literacy class; satisfaction with literacy classes; and the literacy environment.

Ethical approval for the research was secured through the ethical review procedures of the University of Aberdeen. All data were anonymised and linking data stored in a separate, secure location from the survey data and the qualitative transcripts. All linking data and recordings were destroyed once all quality assurance checks had been completed.

7. Findings
7.1. The State of Literacy in Western Province
The 2014 literacy policy defines literacy as the ability to read and write and use the four numeracy rules and equates this with having completed primary school (Ministry of Education, 2014). In Western Province, 67% of adults have not completed primary school; only 30% of women and 38% of men have done so (Cramer’s V sig <0.001). In the survey, we asked participants if they could read and write at all, with difficulty, easily or very easily and if they could do calculations using the four rules. Our findings show that only 40% of adults can easily or very easily read and write a simple passage and do a written calculation using all four rules. There is a strong correlation between literacy and primary-school completion: 80% of adults who say they cannot read and write a short passage easily in Kinyarwanda and do calculations using all four rules have not completed primary school. Conversely, 80.6% of those that have completed primary school say that they can read and write a simple passage in Kinyarwanda and do arithmetic using all four rules. There is a significant relationship between age and literacy ($\chi^2$ sig<0.001), with the proportion that are not able to read and write a simple passage easily and do calculations using all four rules increasing with age. However, even among 18-25-year-olds only 62% can easily read and write a short passage and do calculations using all four rules, and the proportion declines to 20% of those over 55, with 46% of those aged 26-40 and 43% of the 41-55 years saying they can. Women are also less likely than men to be able to read, write and do written calculations - 35% of women compared to 47% of men (Cramer’s V sig <0.001).

There is also a clear relationship between poverty and literacy, those that lack literacy and numeracy skills are significantly more likely to be in wealth quintiles 1 and 2 and those that have these skills more likely to be in quintiles 4 and 5 (Figure 2).
7.2. Supply of and Demand for Literacy Education

It is essential to make a distinction between those who may need adult literacy education according to the government and those who want to attend classes. The findings from the survey suggest that there is a potentially high demand for literacies classes in Western Province. In the survey, 71% of those that cannot read and write a simple passage easily and do arithmetic using all four rules say that they would like to attend an adult education class in the future to learn basic skills, improve their existing skills or learn new skills. However, only 12% of respondents who had not completed primary school had ever attended an adult literacy class, suggesting that there may be a large gap between interest and take-up.

During the scoping exercise and interviews, district education officials said that they were having difficulty meeting their targets for adults completing literacy classes. In some cases, this was due to lack of demand, but more frequently, it was because of limited supply, poor attendance, and high dropout rates. Government support for adult literacy classes is minimal; there is a national syllabus, the Rwanda Education Board supplies teachers' manuals and textbook, and the districts mobilise learners, oversee examination arrangements and award certificates to learners who pass. Districts rely on non-governmental organisations and faith-based groups to deliver classes, and there are no international development partners consistently supporting local organisations that provide courses. Provision is, then, neither consistent nor evenly spread across the districts, so not all potential learners have access. Furthermore, tutors are untrained volunteers who at best receive a small motivation fee, making it challenging to recruit and retain them.

The Pentecostal Church (ADEPR) was the most frequently mentioned provider of adult literacy classes in the FGDs, although protestant and catholic churches were mentioned. In the interviews with the heads of ADEPR literacy centres as well as in the FGDs, the problems of funding literacy provision and of keeping literacy centres open were frequently mentioned. Some programmes are funded 100% by international organisations such as Care International and the Swedish Government (Programme National d’Alphabétisation – PAN) but only for a few years. When the funding stops, it becomes more difficult for ADEPR Churches to continue to support classes and especially to pay teachers and provide learning materials.
Given this, the approach of the districts is technocratic. They focus on setting targets for students completing adult literacy classes to meet government targets rather than focusing on making provision that will meet the needs of learners. The aim is for every adult with ‘literacies difficulties’ to attend an adult literacy class.

‘What we contribute is mobilising and encouraging citizens who are illiterate when they are attending community meetings and parenting classes (akagoroba kababyeyi)\(^v\) to join the literacies classes where they are taught how to read and write so they can be good citizens’. (District Educational Official [DEO] 1)\(^vii\)

‘Every sector has got a target to train adult learners so 635 pass the examination and graduate. We send a letter to the sectors requiring them to identify “adults with learning difficulties”. We follow this up with a letter instructing them to organise classes by a given date, and we (the district) then follow up to make sure that lessons are being delivered’. (DEO 2)

The district education officials blamed poor attendance and dropout on learners choosing to work rather than attend classes,

‘The number of learners is small in this district because we are close to the border with Congo [the Democratic Republic of Congo] and they prefer to engage in cross-border petty trading. Getting learners to enrol in classes is difficult, and many of those that enrol in classes don’t attend regularly or drop out’. (DEO 1)

However, FGD participants indicated that there were several reasons for adults not enrolling in literacy classes, including: not knowing about them; being too old to learn; having age-related poor sight and; and not liking to admit that they are not literate. However, the main reasons were because: churches of which they are not members provide the classes; there are no literacy centres near to where they live; classes are at inconvenient times; and because of poverty. As a participant in one FGD said,

‘If there were centres at village, cell or sector levels, then participation would be good’. (FFGD 18-29, Muhororo)

Another pointed to the lack of local provision due to problems with funding.

‘The Pentecostal Church [ADEPR] started an adult training programme in 2016. However, when they failed to raise the allowance for teachers and the learners could not raise the amount for the teachers [£1.00] the classes stopped’. (MFGD 18-29 years, Ruharambuga)

The provision by religious organisations was problematic for some potential learners as they felt that practices took up too much time, and insufficient time given to teaching literacy. Others did not want to go to classes taking place in a church of which they were not a member.

I did not like the fact that the priests wanted us to pray all the time (MFGD 18-29, Gisenyi).

‘Because religious denominations own these training centres, church members are the ones that participate. A Catholic can’t join a programme provided by the Pentecostal church’. (FFGD 18-29, Muhororo)

Another issue was the timing, with classes put on at inconvenient times for learners. Literacy centres scheduled classes at times when premises were available rather than to suit the
needs of learners. Women, for example, generally work on the farms in the morning and have domestic work and childcare responsibilities in the evenings, as a participant in one of the women’s FGDs pointed out,

‘Like us who are parents, we go to work in the morning to provide for our families, but if the programmes were to take place during the afternoon, we could attend’. (FFGD 18-29 years, Mahembe).

Some participants in FGDs thought that poor attendance was because of lack of motivation. In most FGDs, participants raised the issue of incentives to learners for attending classes, arguing that this would encourage more people to enrol in classes and turn up regularly. This suggests that the motivation to gain literacy skills is not high and that at least some learners enrol because of pressure from local leaders.

However, the most frequently mentioned barrier to joining classes was poverty. The participants in the FGDs said that it was difficult to attend classes because they were struggling to provide for their families. If there was a possibility of earning money, then that was prioritised over attending literacy classes.

‘Poverty, in general, is what prohibits us from attending school’. (FFGD 30-49, Muhororo).

‘We do not have time to attend classes because we spend the whole day working to be able to get food to feed our families.’ (MFGD 30-239, Gisenyi)

7.3. Literacy Education Provision – What is on Offer?
There are two issues relating to what is on offer – what the classes offer learners and the quality of the provision. At present Rwanda’s only provision for adult learners is the first level of adult basic education, equivalent to the first year of primary school. District education officials told us that the curriculum is based on a functional view of literacy enabling learners to gain useful knowledge such as hygiene, running a household enterprise, caring for their children as well as learning to read, write and do calculations.

There is no fee for learners attending literacy classes, and those successfully passing the examination are awarded a certificate. The quality is said to be poor, and there are no dedicated classrooms for adult education, so classes take place in churches, primary schools, sector offices and in the open. Not all centres (rooms) even have chairs and desks for learners and, where they do, they are not sufficient for the number of learners. Most centres do not have a blackboard, and few have any learning materials beyond a small number of textbooks supplied by the Rwanda Education Board. Classes are often overcrowded because of a shortage of tutors, and lack of classrooms, and learners with different levels of literacy competencies are taught together. Tutors are mainly primary-school graduates and have little, if any, training; they use didactic teaching methods, and there is little supervision of their delivery. Mothers often bring their babies and young children to classes with them because they have no alternative. There is no adult education provision to which graduates can progress, to improve their skills further.

The learners, the tutors and the district officials all agreed that the accommodation provided for literacy classes was far from ideal and that the learning resources were inadequate. One district education official pointed out that

‘The books we provide are insufficient for the learners to use in class, and they can’t take books home to practice reading. There is also a lack of blackboards for tutors to use when teaching classes. (EO)
Graduates argued that a lack of learning materials impacted negatively on the quality of the education,

‘The quality [of the education] was not good because there were not enough learning materials, like books to be used by students in class’. (FGGD, Rubengera).

‘There were a few books we used while we were in class, but we couldn’t take them home with us, and even in class we had to share one book between three of us. (FGGD, Mururu)

One of the tutors pointed to the contrast between the inadequate resources provided for most adult learners and those provided for adult learners able to attend classes that were funded by an international development partner.

‘People who are sponsored by CARE have exercise books, pens, textbooks provided for them but those that are sponsored by the Government have no materials provided for them’. (VT Rusizi)

The poor quality of teaching was said to be because tutors were themselves poorly educated, had not been trained for teaching adult literacy classes and were not motivated because they received little or no remuneration for taking classes. Some of the funded projects pay the teachers, but this is not sustainable when the funding stops. Tutors then stop delivering classes. Potential tutors are deterred from volunteering by the lack of any payment. Tutors pointed out that volunteering as a literacy tutor has costs:

‘Because trainers have no allowance, they become reluctant to continue teaching. To go to the adult training centre, you need to dress smartly and to be clean. This requires soap which we cannot afford to buy. Our shoes wear out and we need to get them repaired but we do not have the money, and when we go to the literacy centre we have to do without food because we cannot afford to buy a meal in a café’. (VT 2)

There is no national syllabus for training adult literacy tutors, and there is no requirement that tutors should have any training before they take classes. Some of the funded projects train tutors for a few days, but most have no training, as one of the district educational officials pointed out

‘We have a problem because we are not able to train the teachers that are willing to teach. They are not well educated and need training because most of them have only completed primary school.’ (DEO)

Graduates from literacy courses also raised concerns about the poor quality of teaching

‘The teachers are not well trained in how to teach literacy to us, most of the teachers have only completed primary school, which means they do not have enough skills to give us good quality teaching.’ (FGGD Rubengera)

Others pointed out that because tutors are unpaid volunteers, they are not committed to teaching the adult learners. They just turn up when they want to, when they do not have other things to do. However, the tutors argued that they are poor and need to provide for their own families and cannot turn down an opportunity to earn money.

‘Sometimes, when we go to the class, we find that the teacher has not turned up. When we ask him at the next class why he did not come the previous week he says, “do you think I get paid? I am teaching you as a volunteer. Therefore, if I can get some work so I
can provide food for my family, I will not come to teach you because I have my family to take care of’. The problem is that teachers are not given a motivation fee’. (GFGD Rubengera).

Sometimes, if the tutors are not getting any incentives from the literacy centre or the district, they ask the learners to pay. As a participant in one FGD remarked,

‘Sometimes they ask us to pay, and that is a big challenge for us because we have no money to pay.’ (MFGD 50+, Ruharambuga)

Difficulty in recruiting tutors means that their numbers are insufficient to meet the needs of learners. If a tutor does not turn up, there is no one to cover, and learners become discouraged,

There should be an increase in the number of teachers so that there is a teacher to cover if one does not turn up. It discourages learners if they turn up for a class and the teacher does not’ (GFGD, Rubengera)

Classes are often large, the districts require that learners be permitted to join classes at any time during the year, and learners are in the same class irrespective of level. Most literacy centres only have one volunteer tutor and space for one class of students.

‘How I see it, the quality was not bad, but also it was not good. This was because we were mixed in the same literacy class, yet we were not at the same level, some of us had dropped out of primary school while others of us had never been to school.’ (GFGD, Rusizi).

7.4. Literacy Demand - What Do Adults Learners Want?

Based on the responses to the survey by those that said they were interested in going to a literacy class in the future, the main demand is for gaining/improving reading and writing skills, with 80% saying that acquiring these skills is a high priority. Fifty-three per cent said that numeracy skills were a top priority and 30% skills in English. Beyond this, there was some demand for learning French (18%) and Kiswahili (14%), but fewer than 10% said that they wanted to learn skills related to farming, running a household enterprise, financial literacy, helping their children with homework or improving the health of their families.

In the FGDs, the participants generally agreed that people wanted to learn literacy skills so that they could improve their lives. They thought that if they gained literacy skills, they would be more confident and able to manage their finances better. They would also be able to read the Bible, use a mobile phone, read road signs, learn to speak foreign languages, help their children with their homework and stop being cheated. They wanted to get paid employment and become like their literate neighbours who were not poor. They wanted to be respected and not discriminated against in employment and local leadership roles because they did not have literacy skills.

‘Our literate neighbours have nice houses, good jobs and educated children. You feel small when you meet them. The literate person in the community is more respected than the illiterate one.’ (FGD WJC, Rusizi).

‘I was hurt a lot because I can’t read and write. I was elected as a local leader, but I found I couldn’t do the work because of my inability to read and write’. (FGD JLC Rusizi).
Becoming literate was seen as the key to opening opportunities for a better life. FGD participants thought literacy skills would enable them to get a job or start a household enterprise, and they would gain respect. Subsequently, they would move out of poverty and have a better life.

‘Generally, we have no jobs…. It is for this reason that we would like to attend literacy classes to improve our lifestyles. We will know how to do a job that requires knowing how to read and write.’ (FGD JLC, Nyakiriba)

‘When I learn to read and write, I will be able to start a business and run it well. I will also be able to go to Uganda or Goma on my own for business purposes’. (FGD, JLC) Rubengera

‘Knowing how to read and write can help us to be able to learn to do different skills like tailoring or using a computer.’ (MFGD 18-29, Gisenyi)

‘I need basic skills on how to read and write in Kinyarwanda …. If I am skilled in reading and writing plus calculations, this can help me start up my own business, like a clothes shop or a restaurant’. (FFGD, 18-29 Muhororo)

‘In general, we need to help regarding farming; they can teach us how to improve our farming practices.’ (MFGD 30-49 years, Hindiro)

Many of the participants hoped that literacy education would help them improve the productivity of their farms, learn how to use a mobile phone, and learn practical skills to enable them to get employment or start small businesses.

There was also a lot of interest in learning English to help children with their homework.

‘After learning reading and writing, you can also add English because our children know it, so that we manage to communicate with our children and help them with their homework.’ (FFGD, Muhororo).

In every FGD, the issue of being cheated because of not being literate and numerate was raised. In all the FGDs, participants gave examples of how they or people they know had been cheated. For example:

‘I went with a friend to buy a bull. We wrote an agreement and all the parties signed it. However, I realised later that my friend was on the agreement as the buyer, so I was not the owner of the bull.’ (FGD JLC, Nyundo)

‘You can start a business with another person who you think is a person of integrity. But he takes advantage of you because you have literacy difficulties, he cheats you.’ (FGD JLC, Rusizi).

7.5. Do Adult Literacy Classes Meet the Expectation of Learners?

Nine per cent of respondents to the survey were attending or had attended an adult literacy class. The main reason why learners had joined a course was to learn to read (90%) and write (75%). Of those who had attended a literacy class, 50% said they could not read and write a simple passage and 40% that they could not do calculations using the four rules. Only 25% could confidently read and write a short note, and 26% do calculations using the four rules, with only 15% able to read and write a short note and do calculations confidently. Just over 50% said that they had not gained any of the skills, and only 14% felt that they had
gained all the skills they had hoped to learn. There were no significant differences by gender. During the scoping exercise, the District Directors of Education noted that most learners who graduated from literacy classes could not still read a year after they had graduated. It seems that few adults in Western Province who attended adult literacy classes are benefitting.

While some learners seemed confident that gaining literacy skills would enable them to get employment, most thought that they also needed practical, mainly technical skills. Some participants were aware of people that had attended literacy classes without getting employment when they graduated.

‘I know some people that still use the skills they learnt [attending literacy classes]. Some of them are now teachers [volunteer literacy tutors], and others are evangelists.’ (FFGD Mahembe).

One of the organisers of a literacy centre thought that going to literacy classes had enabled people to transform their lives.

‘It’s changed people’s lifestyles. Some graduates move from farming to other livelihood activities, for example, being motorcyclists, others improve their cattle keeping, and they are also able to use the knowledge they gained, for example how to fight malnutrition and to plan their family size’. (ADEPR Pastor, Rubavu).

However, most participants in the FGDs were more sceptical. They pointed out that graduates from literacy classes did not very often get paid employment and that they did not have the finance for setting up a small enterprise

‘Those who have graduated have not been able to use the skills they gained. There is no-one to finance them to start a business’. (VT, Rusizi)

‘Graduates [from the literacy classes] do not get jobs. It would be better if they were able to start small business to use their skills, for example, by buying them sewing machines’. (VT, Rusizi)

The general view was summed up by a participant in a FGD:

‘Most people think that even those who have had some education do not gain anything from literacy classes, and this discourages people from going to classes.’ (FGD JLC, Nyakiriba)

The participants in the FGDs, especially the male ones, did not think that literacy alone was sufficient for improving their lives. As a participant in one FGDs said,

‘There are no schools that can help us change our lives positively’. (MFGD, 18-29 years, Gisenyi)

They wanted vocational training schools that would enable them to learn a trade so that they could either get employment or start a small business.

‘We lack schools that can provide practical skills for people to learn and create jobs’. (MFGD 30-50 years, Rusizi)

‘It should be possible for literacy graduates to go on to learn vocational and technical skills after they have finished a literacy class’. (GFGD, Mururu)
They pointed out that even when there were vocational training schools near where they lived, they could not afford the fees.

‘We do not have money to pay schools [vocational training centre]. They are too expensive for us’. (FFG 18-29, Mahembe)

7.6. The literacy environment

It was clear from the FGDs that, while people wanted to improve their lives, most did not see taking literacy classes as likely to enable them to do this. This is not surprising given that most people in Western Province do not use literacy skills in their everyday lives, even those that are fully literate. Most people live in rural areas where they are unlikely to see written signs or notices, to see newspapers or to have books. Only seven per cent of respondents to the survey live in urban areas where there are written signs and notices and newspapers are on sale. It is, then, perhaps not surprising that a majority say that they do not use literacy and numeracy skills in their everyday lives. Only around a fifth of respondents said that they ever used these skills, 23% reading (44% urban, 20% rural), 18% writing (38% urban, 16% rural) and 21% calculations (54% urban, 19% rural). Even fewer use them every day - two per cent reading, one per cent, writing and nearly five per cent doing calculations. Only 13% of those in employment need to be able to read and write. Participants in the FGDs also said they had little need for literacy and numeracy skills in their daily lives as a respondent in one group pointed out,

‘In our daily lives, we do not often read and write because we are farmers, so we do not require it’. (MFGD 50+, Ruharambuga).

It was noticeable that respondents living in urban areas were more likely to talk about the need to be able to read. They pointed out that you needed to be able to read signposts to find your way about town and to travel to other parts of Rwanda, but they also said that even those living in urban areas were able to manage without using literacy skills

‘Most bicyclists know the road rules and regulations very well in their heads, but they don’t know how to put it on paper’. (MFGD 20-29 years, Gisenyi).

Those that had difficulty with reading and writing were aware that there were things they could not do which those that can take for granted and may not even consciously think about when asked about the use of their literacy skills. These include things such as reading signposts, text messages, invitation cards and the Bible and being able to avoid being cheated when they pay for goods and services or are involved in other financial transactions. However, most people do not need to use these skills in their daily lives, and when they do, they have found strategies to deal with the problem.

8. Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the Rwanda Government saying that adult literacy is an important issue to address, in practice, it is a low priority. It is underfunded, with districts not having the funds necessary to carry out their duties; No Official Development Partner works in the sector, although some international NGOs fund literacy programmes. However, funding is usually for a relatively short term, and providers find it challenging to sustain when external funding stops. There is no reference to adult education provision in the Government’s most recent strategic plan (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2017), although poverty reduction is a strategic aim and the Government has previously argued that increasing literacy rates is essential for poverty reduction. Perhaps not surprisingly, our analysis of national survey data shows that there has been little improvement in literacy rates since the mid-2000s. What improvement has occurred is most likely due to generational shift, given that more young people now have
been to school. The magnitude of the problem of poor literacy skills is rarely acknowledged. While the Government uses a functional definition of literacy and equates being literate with having completed primary school education, the measure it uses to report literacy rates is the proportion of adults who say they can read a simple note. This results in an overestimation of literacy rates.

Encouraging adults to gain literacy skills is difficult because of the lack of a culture of reading among individuals and (particularly in rural) communities. There will be no books in a village, apart from a Bible in some households if there is someone who can read it, and the newspapers are not much available outside the towns. In the villages, people are not surrounded by street signs and notices which they need to be able to read, and they visit people with whom they need to talk rather than writing or receiving letters. They depend for their existence on what they can grow, what surplus produce they can sell and, for those who have no access to land, agricultural or other day-labour; reading and writing are not something they use in their working lives. The skills they do need are numeracy and record-keeping when they have goods to sell or buy on the market. Here they depend on alternative strategies, of which the most common is to ask someone else to read or count for them; unremarkably, they are often cheated, but this is usually accepted as unavoidable.

Our research shows that many who sign up to classes drop out or are not able to attend and ‘do homework’ on a regular enough basis to achieve a pass. Poverty is often at the root of this problem. If people have no land or insufficient food to feed their family, then working for other people is what keeps the family fed. If there is the opportunity of a day’s paid work, the would-be literacy student must take it instead of attending classes. Similarly for volunteer tutors turning up to teach a literacy class for an inadequate ‘motivation payment’ loosens out when paid work is available. For the adult learner, ‘homework’ is important, but there will be little opportunity for the typical literacy learner to read or write after sunset: light may be lacking, given that electricity in the house is not on the whole available for the peasantry, and books are not available to take home from the classes to practice reading.

Some other, mostly organisational factors mitigate against the success of the classes in delivering literacies which can make a difference to people’s lives. Delivery relies on NGOs and churches. There are no premises dedicated to adult basic education; classes take place in churches, or schools, or inappropriate rooms in district administrative offices, or even in the open air. There are few teaching resources – classrooms are often equipped with too few desks and chairs to accommodate the learners, and frequently there is not even a blackboard. Where a scheme does not receive external funding, the norm is shared textbooks for use in class and a shortage of writing materials. Classes are run when the premises are not being used for another purpose, and when the ill- or unpaid volunteer tutors can make themselves available. Often classes take place in the mornings or evenings, but the predominant working pattern of subsistence agriculture in Rwanda is work on the fields in the morning, before it becomes too hot, and work in the early evening gathering a second ‘crop’ of fodder for cattle and other animals, collecting wood and water and/or preparing the evening meal, which leaves only the afternoons relatively free to attend classes. (Even this is a problem for those who depend on day-labour for their subsistence; they tend to spend the morning looking for it and, if successful, they are still working at it in the afternoon, leaving only weekends and perhaps evenings available for classes.) Classes are often large and of mixed ability, combining complete beginners with those who have picked up at least some literate practices before dropping out of school or at previous adult classes. Most Districts in Western Province also have the policy of allowing people to enrol at any time of the year, joining classes as a beginner which have already had weeks or months of instruction. The tutors tend to have little or no training in teaching adults; there is no requirement for classes to be taught by trained tutors and no recognised qualification or even syllabus for training adult literacies tutors. Most tutors are primary school graduates and may themselves not be fully fluent in spoken and written Kinyarwanda. Some learners
praise their tutors, but others do not hesitate to point out their deficiencies; the predominantly didactic teaching of many untrained tutors does not readily translate into literacy that can be applied in people’s daily lives. Many of these problems were identified by a situational analysis carried out back in 2005 (Okech and Torres, 2005); our findings show that little has yet been done to address them.

Of those learners who do attend the classes and pass the assessment, their expectation of finding a decent job or going into business for themselves in a small way is not fulfilled. It takes more than a level equated to the end of Primary Year 1 to guarantee this, and little has been done to facilitate student progress from basic classes to improve their skills further and use them to acquire substantive, marketable skills and knowledge. Literacies learners mostly expected to be given marketable skills as well as just command of language and arithmetic. However, they often find that the examples through which literacy is taught are not marketable nor even necessarily relevant to what they do out of class. Many of those who spoke to us have benefited from learning. Still, our participants’ were well aware of the likelihood of being disappointed with the outcome if they took literacy classes from observing the fate of others as well as from their own experience. Even parents’ expectations of being able to help their children with school homework are unrealistic; even if the parents have become functionally literate in Kinyarwanda, their children’s homework and schoolbooks are in English.

In conclusion, adult literacy provision in Rwanda is of poor quality and poorly resourced. The tutors are volunteers who are for, the most part poorly trained (if at all) and there is inadequate provision to meet the needs of learners. Most graduates from literacy courses have not gained the skills that they hoped to, and they quickly lose those gained. There is scope for considerable improvement (a) in the training of tutors, and of those who train them, (b) the provision of teaching and learning resources, (c) the reorganisation of delivery to meet at least the majority patterns of parenting, paid work and subsistence farming, and (d) to teach the linguistic and arithmetic material in an interactive, student-centred manner and through real-life examples which will allow some chance for generalisation beyond the classroom to the world of work and social relations, its problems and its opportunities. Literacy is a proven capability for raising communities out of poverty, but only if the students have learned how to apply it, know that they have learned this and have the confidence in themselves to do it.

References

Data Sets

EICV data sets available to download at:

Literacies Survey Data Set: available on request from the corresponding author

RDHS data sets available to download at:

World Development Indicators: available to download at:

Other references


The literacy rate is usually reported for those aged 15+ years but our research focused on those aged 18 years or over as this is the target group for adult literacy provision in Rwanda.

ii Unless indicated otherwise all data from EICV 5 is based on the authors’ own calculations.

iii Given that the ability to read a sentence/a simple passage declines with age, we estimate that the proportion of women aged 18 over that can read a simple passage in Rwanda is just under 50% and the proportion of men 67%.

iv Districts are responsible for the oversight of the delivery of education across the district and sector officials are responsible for supervising the delivery of pre-school, primary school and adult education in a sector.

v Association d’Entraide des Eglises de Pentecotes du Rwanda (ADEPR)

vi Monthly meetings, organised at village level, facilitated by trained volunteers, to discuss good childrearing practices and learn how to make toys for children to play with as part of the Government’s programme to promote the wellbeing of all children (Abbott and D’Ambrosio, 2019).

vii We have not named the districts/sectors from which education officials or the tutors were drawn, to protect anonymity. We have used district education officials (DEO) to refer to all district staff.
The 2014 Education Policy says that sector education officers are responsible for the training of adult literacy tutors. However, they have had no training in adult basic education nor do they have any resources for providing training.