

An Exploration into the Contributions of Literacy for Development: Focus on How Literacy is Necessary for Social, Economic and Health Development

Wondimu Tegegne

Wolayita Soddo University, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of English Language and Literature

Abstract

The concept of development is broad which might include advancements in political, economic, social and cultural facets. However, literacy is defined as something that enable individuals to be engaged in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group or society and it enable individuals to actively work for development of his/her society. Thus, Literacy is the key tool to make the workforce efficient. Thus, it can be said that literacy directly or indirectly enhances the working capabilities of people by providing them with the skills necessary for development. For this reason, literacy is considered as a central component of a country's development. The main purposes of this article to explore how literacy is necessary in the development of a country by focusing on three pillars of development: Social, Economic and Health.

Keywords: Capabilities, Country, Development, Economical, Education, Health, Individual, Literacy

1. INTRODUCTION

It is argued that illiteracy is the barrier to full participation in different societal affairs. Poor literacy skills lead to a lifetime of economic, political and social insecurity for individuals and their country. In connection to this, Nasira(1999:150), stated “--- yet illiteracy is intimately interconnected with, and reinforces, poverty and marginalization. Three quarters of adults who are unable to read and write consider their lack of education both a defining feature of their poverty and barrier to achieving the kind of social and economic progress they require to escape from that poverty.” On the other hand the immediate outcomes of literacy are knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes which enhance job performance. Desjardins (2004) identifies the final outcomes of literacy as follows:

- Psychological well-being: self-respect, happiness, identity, decision-making;
- Economic well-being: financial support, productivity, wealth;
- Physical well-being: health, nutrition, safety;
- Social well-being: friendships, empathy, civic involvement, democratic empowerment.

For this reason it is believed that literacy play a great role for the development of a country. Specifically, it has political, social and economical significances. Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to show how literacy is necessary in the development of a country. To do so the paper is organized in five main sections. The first section presents short introduction to the paper, while the second part explains the basic concept of literacy. The third section provides a brief overview of the term development. The fourth section discusses the link between literacy and development in various aspects. The last section provides a conclusion of the whole discussion.

2. THE BASIC CONCEPT OF LITERACY

There are various definitions of the term literacy. The existing definitions of literacy differ in several ways such as in their content, area of focus, criteria and level they set for literacy and on the views they hold towards the concept literacy. Traditionally, literacy is commonly considered as the ability to read and write at a designated level of proficiency (Encarta, 2008). However, currently it is argued that literacy should be defined within certain context in which it functions(Teshome Demissie,2010).Accordingly it is defined as something that enable individuals to be engaged in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group or society and it enable individuals to actively work for development of his/her society. Thus, Literacy is the key tool to make the workforce efficient. It follows from discussion then, that literacy directly or indirectly enhances the working capabilities of people by providing them with skill development.

3. THE MEANING OF DEVELOPMENT

The definition of development has changed over the past decades with economic, political and social trends. Generally development means real progress which includes health and well being of all, education for all, fair rewards for labors and improvement in both standard of living and the quality(Captal,1994).Thus the concept of development is broad which might include advancements in political ,economic, social and cultural facets. In support to this Nwangwu(1999:45) stated that, development of course in this case is broadly interpreted as

improvements of life, which translates into poverty alleviation for people.” Further, Seya (2005:97) described development as deliberate efforts made by individuals, members of the society and governments aiming at improvements on economic, social health or political. The next section show how these improvements are achieved through literacy and leads to the developments of a country.

4. THE LINK BETWEEN LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT

Literacy enables individuals to get access to knowledge and information that facilitate all round development of individuals. It is useful in areas such as health and sanitation, small saving schemes, nutrition, income generating, natural resource conservation, etc. Improvement in these areas leads to a development of a country. Thus, literacy is a central component of a country’s development. However, in this paper an attempt is made to show how literacy is necessary in the development of a country by focusing on three pillars of development: Social, Economic and Health.

4.1. The Role of Literacy in Social Development

As stated earlier, literacy plays an important role in the development of the society .When a person is literate, he/she is equipped with the necessary skills for life. He or she will have the capacity to cope with setbacks as well as to seize opportunities. More specifically, Linden and Rungo(2006) indicated four issues why and how literacy is important for society in the eyes of the participants of literacy. The participants said that they are: surviving, improving the quality of life, making informed decisions, living and working in dignity, participating fully in development, developing one's full capacities after literacy class. Family life is the first issue that appears when talking about the importance of literacy. The interviewees said that *"literacy helps to understand things of life"* and to *"solve problems of daily life"*.

In addition, literacy leads to the improvement of family life by increasing family income. In general, this is about *"having a better life"*, *"quitting poverty"* and *"stopping the suffering"* according to the interviewees (Linden and Rungo, 2006). Making individuals to actively participate in society is the other role of literacy in social development. Literacy enables the members to be equipped with different skills and abilities which are important to actively participate in different social affairs.

The fourth issue, which is closely related to the third, has to do with personal development. Interviewees spoke about *"learning new things"*, *"having knowledge of the things one does"*, and *"increasing my level of knowledge."* One participant said that *"Literacy is opening the mind of people, who for a long time have been living isolated"* (Linden and Rungo, 2006). Thus, it makes individuals to be part of the knowledge society. By doing so literacy improves the lives of families’, leads to the well being of individuals and there by brings social development. From the discussion, it can be said that literacy is the basic and useful way for escaping from poverty and dependency.

4.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY IN IMPROVING THE HEALTH STATUS OF A COUNTRY

There is also close relationship between literacy skills and health status of members of a society. This can be understood from the impact that low levels of literacy may have on their health status and ability to obtain health services. That is community with low levels of literacy has low level of awareness about diseases and their cause, and the importance of sanitation and nutrition. Thus, they are affected by different diseases, malnutrition and improper sanitation (Nwangwu, 1999). For the lack of awareness they can not make attempts to prevent themselves from diseases and might fail to visit a health center when they are sick. It is argued that illiteracy is a major barrier for those who seek improvement in health status and quality of life. For this reason literacy is seen as an integral part of any national strategy for improving the health condition of the most vulnerable groups.

Thus, there appears to be a relationship between literacy and some health outcomes. Literacy enables individuals to acquire basic skills for the application to their living and environment. Specifically, it equip them with the knowledge and skills they needed to protect and improve their health status of house holds by focusing on nutrition, sanitation, prevent disease, respond to illness, children rearing and protection and immediate physical environment. By doing so, literacy leads to the better health status of a society.

However, better health is not an end in itself, but it also brings sustainable economic development by increasing workers productivity and decreasing the number of days they are ill. Therefore, it can be said that literacy plays a very important role in improving the health status of a society and leads to the overall development of a country.

4.3. The Role of Literacy in Economic Development of a Country

Further, literacy plays another major role in the economic development of a country (UNESCO,2005). It leads to good employment opportunities (Online source). Literacy enables members of a community to acquire new skills, techniques and knowledge that make them to generate income and get employed (Rogers, 2004). Literacy make individuals to participate on different income generating activities such as producing and marketing food and

house hold products .It also help them to get access to new technology of performing activities (Nicaragua, 2004), which in turn help them produce more products with limited labor and with in short period of time. Literacy build their capacity and make them self reliant. By doing so literacy reduces poverty and improves the living condition of the poorest section of the population. An individual interviewed by Nicaragua (2004:12) said that, “Everything that we’ve learnt has substantially improved our lives and our families’ lives “. Consequently literacy reduces unemployment.

In border sense, as more people continue to generate more income, they will establish their own enterprise. That is, if literacy level is high in a nation, then there will be more number of entrepreneurs and the flow of money will be huge. If new enterprises come up, the economy of the country grows with the amount of tax collected. New enterprises lead to more employment generation and in turn reduce the unemployment rate (Online source). A Nation with a low unemployment rate will develop very rapidly. That is why a literate country is a developed country

While societies with high literacy rate are likely to boast of developed economies, countries with poor literacy rate as found in sub Saharan Africa are likely to be among the least developed economies. Therefore, the need to fast track economic development appears to be behind efforts made to raise the literacy rate in the country. For this reason it is argued that literacy is directly related to economic development of a country (UNESCO,2005).

In addition, literacy brings all the positive changes in variable factors of production as well as in infrastructure development; it also minimizes or may wipe out negativities (JOSTOR, 1966). It can be said that literacy is a pillar on which the major part of an economy stands, if the pillar is strong enough to hold the economy, the anomalies can be reduced very easily and the economy will multiply. For the better economic development it is more important to strengthen the pillar of literacy.

From an analytical point of view, therefore, it can be said, the economic prosperity and literacy are the two directly proportional procedures which have a great influence on each other. As a country’s workforce is educated, skilled, organized, competitive and wanting to go ahead, no one can stop such an economy from being prosperous.

In general the improvements in the three pillars is important for natural resource conservation and social stability .They lead to better living condition and infrastructure such as clean water, roads, schools, health, electricity and telecommunication facilities-all show the developments of a country .

5. CONCLUSION

Lack of literacy in a society cause problems for living, working and survival in every area of life and leads to different crisis. However, literacy is a key means of change and a practical tool of empowerment on each of the three main pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development and health status improvement. With regard, Nwangwu (1999:45) indicated that“literacy has often packed in development and poverty alleviation terms” Experience and research show that literacy can be a major tool for eradicating poverty, enlarging employment opportunities, advancing gender equality, improving family health, protecting the environment and promoting democratic participation. By enabling a society to get these advantages, literacy becomes necessary in the development of a country. I end up my discussion with two slogans stated by Rogers (2004:62) “*Without literacy, there is no development and literacy is key to health, wealth and happiness.*”

REFERENCES

- Caplan, P. (1994).The Meaning of Development: the Example of Mafia Island .London:Gold Smiths College .
- Desjardins, R. (2004). Learning for well-being: Studies using the International Adult Literacy Survey. Stockholm University: Institute of International Education.
- JOSTOR: The School Review:Literacy and economic development .Vol.74,No.4.(Winter ,1966) pp.393-418.
- Linden,J.V.and Rungo (2004). “Being Literate means being Somebody: Perceptions of Participants of Literacy Programs in Mozambique.” In Adult Education and Development, Vol 66. German: DVV International.
- Nasira,A.(1999). “Community Development through Adult Education. ” In Adult Education and Development, Vol 53. German: DVV International.
- Nawungwu,R.(1999).” Marketing Literacy at the Grass Root: the Myth and Realities.” In Adult Education and Development, Vol 53. German: DVV International.
- Nicaragua.(2004). “What we learn improves our lives”. In Adult Education and Development, Vol 62. German: DVV International.
- Rogers ,A.(2004).”Adult Literacy –Adult Motivation.” In Adult Education and Development, Vol 61. German: DVV International.
- Seya ,P.(2005). “Adult Education and African Development in the context of Globalization.” In Adult Education

and Development, Vol 65. German: DVV International.
Teshome Demissie(2010).Module on literacy and development .AAU(Unpublished Lecture Note)
UNESCO (2005). Literacy and Sustainable Development. Thailand: Bangkok .
ONLINE SOURCES.
Literacy and Economic Development. Retrieved from <http://quarratulianwordpress.com/about/>
Downloaded on June 23, 2010.