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Grassroots Dissemination of Adult Education Research in Africa: Results of Recent Experience in Benin and Botswana

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Abstract: Adult education research is a very small industry in Africa, one whose products are underutilized in practice. This paper describes an initiative designed to promote "grassroots dissemination", in which African researchers and NGOs help target groups to work through relevant research results and compare them with their own experience.

Adult education research is a very small industry in Africa, though one with close connections to the continent's future. The challenges of decentralization, privatization and demo-cratization have created situations in which local African communities and businesses must acquire in a short lapse of time a variety of skills and abilities that the still-deficient formal educational systems of their countries have generally not provided (Easton et al., 1998). A variety of adult and nonformal education programs are called upon to fill the gap. Applicable lessons of experience are at a premium, but mechanisms and resources to accumulate and compare the knowledge gained by African practitioners are severely lacking, whereas strategies borrowed whole-cloth from abroad or confected by foreign aid and international NGO institutions have demonstrated severe limitations (ADEA, 1997).

The problem is how not only to build up capacity for relevant adult education research on the continent, but equally how to ensure that the results of these inquiries are disseminated *laterally* to other practitioners and researchers in the same and neighboring countries and that an upward spiral of locally-rooted interaction and reflection is thereby initiated. A certain number of regional networks of educational researchers B like the Educational Research Network of West and Central Africa (ERNWACA) and the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) -- have come into being in recent years with support from international donors, but the research they have conducted has not been widely disseminated on the continent itself. In particular, adequate means have not yet been found to promote either its policy application within Africa or its assimilation and use by practitioners in the field.

This paper presents and analyzes results of a program designed to reverse the trend, the Grassroots Educational Research Dissemination (GERD) Project, funded by US Agency for International Development's "Advancing Basic Education and Literacy" (ABEL II) endeavor in four African countries: Benin, and Botswana (where work is already completed); Kenya and Senegal (where it is currently underway). GERD represents the second phase of an effort designed to promote generation and application of innovative adult education research both *within* Africa and *by* African researchers. The first phase, in which the authors of the proposed

paper were likewise involved, entailed inviting African researchers in eight different countries to propose and implement small-scale research projects focusing on some aspect of three themes selected as priority emphases by the Working Group on Nonformal Education of the ADEA:

- (1) How local communities, associations and businesses acquire the skills needed to meet the challenges of decentralization and privatization;
- (2) New strategies for collaboration between adult basic education and formal primary schooling on the continent;
- (3) New models for cooperation between public and private sectors in the delivery of nonformal education services.

Twelve different studies were conducted on different facets of these topics on a performance contract basis. A large degree of latitude was accorded research teams to determine their own use of funds and their own methodologies, though technical support was provided throughout. Studies were not all of equal quality, but most produced findings and insights of great potential interest to the larger community of policymakers, researchers and practitioners in Africa as well as very valuable experience for their authors (Closson and Capacci, 1997).

The second phase of the work is devoted to promoting the dissemination of these findings within Africa itself. Both traditional means of dissemination (books, journal articles, conference presentations) and recent electronic ones (Internet publication, e-mail networking) have distinct limitations in Africa, where few of the people most concerned may have regular access to these media. Print and electronic transmission is still important and can serve as a complementary mechanism for dissemination, but other avenues must be pioneered in order to ensure exposure of and assimilation by key stakeholder groups.

GERD has developed an innovative solution to the problem, one which combined new means for research dissemination, more active approaches for engaging stakeholder groups in the inquiry, and parallel means for promoting capacity building and institutional development among the groups involved.

Background

The entire program of research described here was in a sense initiated five years ago in a study of "Decentralization and Local Capacity Building in West Africa" (Easton et al. 1998) carried out by Florida State University and teams of African researchers under the joint auspices of the Club du Sahel/OECD and the Interstate Committee for Drought Abatement in the Sahel (CILSS). That work was recently completed but proved highly innovative in both substantive and methodological respects and led to further efforts in both dimensions.

Substantively, the study focused on the ways in which local businesses, associations and communities in five West African countries (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal) have managed to acquire -- or mobilize -- the skills and knowledge required to assume a variety

of new development functions and responsibilities. Forty case studies were conducted on local groups that had taken self-management initiative in domains as varied as natural resource management, crop marketing, financial intermediation and health service delivery, and had done so despite generally low levels of available schooling or even prevalent conditions of adult illiteracy. Three key findings of the study proved particularly provocative of further reflection and research.

(1) One was that success in these ventures could be attributed in good part to the way in which the groups in question managed to the ability of the groups to draw on and mobilize the real but highly disparate and often hidden sources of existing competence in their communities -- primary school dropouts and leavers, graduates of local literacy programs, participants in Koranic or biblical instruction, beneficiaries of extension or apprenticeship programs, out-migrants willing to return home, initiates of traditional forms of education, etc.

(2) A second provocative finding was that assimilation of these varied "human resources" and their enlistment in common self-management and development tasks posed problems of retraining and standardization that had been most often handled by local nonformal adult education programs, which served *de facto* as the training system and "homogenizer" for the new enterprises.

(3) A third result of major interest was that a growing number of local women's associations constituted one of the most dynamic elements in the mix and one that made the most systematic use of nonformal and adult education, given the inequities from which women

and girls have suffered to date in the formal education system of most of the countries involved.

Figure 1 pictures the scheme for mobilization of competence and "recycling" through adult and nonformal education that appeared in most successful cases studies.

Methodologically the studies also proved innovative and stimulating to new efforts. Research was carried out by a tandem of national and local research teams, supported by a group of international consultants drawn from Africa, Europe and North America. Most significantly, actual execution of the studies was confided in teams of African researchers on a performance contract basis, who then analyzed and compared results among themselves.

The problem of research dissemination

It was this work that helped give birth thereafter to an initial round of additional research carried out by African researchers on topics deriving, in part, from the PADLOS-Education Study and

adopted by the Working Group on Nonformal Education of the ADEA as unifying themes for study and inquiry over the two year period from 1995-1997.

Results of this biennium of work made clear both an immense and largely unrecognized potential and some real procedural problems. The potential was abundantly illustrated by the energy and productivity of participating African researchers, who were highly interested by the opportunity for modest funding to carry on their own research, coupled with technical support in its execution and the chance to exchange results with colleagues. Such opportunities remain exceedingly rare in the countries concerned. An increasing number of West African educators are completing degree programs, either on the continent or overseas, that include training in research, but most funding for research continues to be controlled by donor countries, and the lion's share of that goes to outside-directed studies. Opportunities for African researchers to practice and develop their skills are therefore few and their capacities dwindle, through no lack of will on their own part. The ABEL and ADEA research programs therefore elicited a great deal of interest.

But they also posed a further problem. Western educational research practice is based in large part on a "perfect information" postulate from neo-classical economics: namely, that researchers build on each other's efforts and that the results of their work influence and are tested in the crucible of practice thanks to optimal circulation of information. In other words, study results are assumed to be disseminated along multiple networks and brought to the awareness of other researchers and of policymakers in relatively rapid order. Each new study and each instance of major policy making in the related area of practice is supposedly informed to some degree by the fruit and synthesis of all previous work. Though this model is scarcely perfectly applicable in the United States or Europe, it approximates what happens and what people thinks is supposed to happen closely enough to prove serviceable. But in sub-Saharan Africa, as in many developing areas, impediments to the lateral circulation of information and lack of resources for communications are such that this image of research dissemination is nearly inapplicable. The payoff to building on the results of previous work is no less and -- arguably -- the need for articulating continent-specific paradigms is even greater. But other means must be found to accomplish this goal in the short- and medium-term.

The second phase of the worldwide ABEL Project has been targeted at accomplishment of just this goal, as it is principally devoted to issues of research dissemination. Under the aegis of this renewed funding, the African research program just described moved to a new stage as well, embodied by the Grassroots Educational Research Dissemination Project, initiated in 1998.

A democratic solution

GERD involves both a focus on supporting dissemination by and to African stakeholders of research conducted by African researchers themselves, and a further "institutionalization" of the process on the African continent. Interested National Working Groups on Nonformal Education in African countries issue a "Request for Proposal" or solicitation to in-county adult education institutions (universities, research institutes, NGOs) inviting them in turn to study the set of findings so far issuing from the ABEL and ADEA research programs and then to propose "proactive" dissemination projects. Each project is required to pinpoint findings of particular

interest to the country in question as well as a specific stakeholder group -- whether policymakers, adult education providers or local communities -- to whom the proposing institution feels these results are especially relevant. The proposers must also indicate how they plan to expose the stakeholder group to the material and work through its significance and potential policy implications with them, plus the results they hope to attain in this manner and the fashion in which these outcomes will be evaluated.

Researchers and institutions in several African countries rapidly expressed interest in this undertaking. It had been decided, however, in consultation both with ABEL Project personnel in Washington and coordinators of the international Working Group on Nonformal Education of the ADEA that, as an additional measure of institutional development and capacity building, submissions would only be accepted from duly constituted National Working Groups (NWGs) of the ADEA. Every encouragement was therefore given to respondents from countries not yet having such a body either to form one with joint participation from public and private sector stakeholders or to entrust these functions in some existing organization or consortium in the country that met the criteria of focus on NFE and public sector-private sectors partnership.

The first two countries to qualify and seek funding were Benin and Botswana. The dissemination work was therefore undertaken with them starting in the summer of 1998. A contract was drawn up with each providing funds for the work of the WG/NFE itself (preparation of the RFP to local institutions, dissemination of initial materials, selection of subcontractors, organization of inaugural workshop and final conference, supervision of field work) and for its subcontracts with the in-country institutions that would be carrying out the work in the field. Participating institutions in each country were to cull through the body of studies carried out by African researchers under ABEL and ADEA aegis and select the ones they felt most critical to disseminate and discuss. The three eventually selected by subcontracted institutions in Benin were ones on acquisition of skills in the informal sector of the economy (originally carried out in Senegal and Chad), on learning in women's economic cooperatives (Ghana and Mali), and on the practical applications of Koranic schooling (Niger, Mali, Guinea and Senegal). In Botswana, on the other hand, the choice went to alternate strategies of primary education (study executed in Uganda), accelerated literacy for out-of-school youth (Burkina Faso) and, once again, skill acquisition in the informal sector.

Capsules of the implementation of the dissemination activities in each country will give the reader a sense of how the new method worked and the initial results attained. One example is selected from each country:

In Benin, one of the local institutions with which the WG/NFE subcontracted was "Recherche-action en matière de production économique" (RAMPE), which proposed an activity devoted to disseminating the results of the Ghana/Mali study on learning in women's cooperatives to units of the women's enterprise federation of Toviklin in the Valley of Ouémé, northern Benin. There are 21 women's cooperatives in this federation, and RAMPE focused on 10 of them. Questionnaires and discussion guides were used to help members of each cooperative to review the results of the Mali-Ghana study and compare it to their own experience. The questionnaires also served to gather some additional

information about the overall situation of the Toviklin federation that might fuel broader comparison. RAMPE staff report that women's federation members greatly appreciated this insight into the work of women elsewhere in West Africa and the occasion created in this way to articulate and analyze their own experience. Quite a list of resolutions and conclusions were generated by the participants, including recognition that their cooperatives had not advanced as far in the direction of credit management and local governance initiative as had those highlighted in the outside studies and could learn from them; and that the issue of functional literacy in local African languages was every bit as critical in Toviklin as it appeared in Mali and Ghana, and renewed efforts should be made to ensure female participation in these programs, as well as their application to the current management tasks of the cooperative.

The Botswana WG/NFE subcontracted for part of the work it had assumed to the Department of Adult Education of the University of Botswana. The Department had proposed to invite all youth organizations in the country listed with the National Youth Service to a workshop to examine the findings of a Uganda study on that country's COPE Project ("Complementary Opportunity for Primary Education"). COPE is an alternative schooling formula targeted at out-of-school youth and young adults. Copies of the Uganda study and questions regarding it were sent to 50 organizations. Nineteen people representing fourteen organizations participated in the workshop itself and -- in the concluding evaluation -- were unanimous in finding the proceedings relevant to their work and clear. A critique of the Uganda study and a list of recommendations for action by the participating youth organizations were among the products of the workshop. In his opening remarks, Dr. Stanley Mpofo, coordinator of the Botswana WG/NFE, intoned, with only a bit of hyperbole, that "for the first time in the history of research in Africa, an initiative has emerged to bring research knowledge to the people who utilize it."

Conclusions

First results of the grassroots dissemination activity are therefore encouraging, though it is not yet a year old. Work is now underway to undertake similar initiatives in Senegal and Kenya as a second round. At the same time, the experience gained thus far, added to outcomes of the previous phases of PADLOS-Education and ABEL/ADEA work described above, serve as the basis for a few interim conclusions that will be of interest to adult educators and African researchers:

- (1) *Going for it* -- The model proposed, and particularly the transfer of initiative and responsibility to African researchers and the provision of a modicum of funding on a contract basis, proved extremely motivating for the participants.
- (2) *Learning comparison* -- It was at times difficult to get across the methodology proposed. People tended to want to do their own

studies rather than to help stakeholder groups to compare their experience with the fruits of an existing study; but in all cases those involved caught on to the methodology in fairly short order and did creditable work. Explicit guidance in approaches to eliciting stakeholder experience and comparing it with previous research proved useful.

(3) *RFPs* -- The aspect of the methodology that proved the most problematic and difficult to implement was the "request for proposal" strategy. The competition dimension of this approach did not initially appeal to African counterparts, most of whom preferred to attribute responsibility for the subcontracted work by some other means. However, the performance criteria included in the work -- with which they basically agreed -- began gradually to drive the model back toward some compromise formula that at least required aspiring subcontractors to demonstrate competence and responsibility.

(4) *Participatory/action research* -- The involvement of local stakeholders in the activity proved in fact to be a stimulant both for better quality in the work of the official researchers and for more practical content in the studies.

(5) *Opportunities for training* -- The experience was extremely rich in these, and offered at the same time a chance to assess where outside support and trial-and-practice are most useful in the development of local research capacity. Three of the most important areas proved to be operationalizing research questions; getting beyond rhetorical language and generalities; and learning to manage an actual funded research project, including on-time production of deliverables.

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