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## **Resourcing for quality: adult literacy learning**

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## RESOURCING FOR QUALITY: ADULT LITERACY LEARNING<sup>1</sup>

Adult illiteracy continues to loom large in many countries, but especially in the region of South Asia. Several of the countries here belong to the E 9 group of high population countries, the climate abundantly hospitable to the mutually reinforcing trinity of poverty, illiteracy and gender inequality. Although there have been renewed efforts at international, national and local levels to improve girls' and women's education in these countries and elsewhere, much remains to be done. In 2000, at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, governments promised to:

- Ensure that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.
- Achieve a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women.
- Eliminate gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieve gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to, and achievement in, basic education of good quality.

This was reinforced later in the year by the adoption of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which put both gender and education as high priorities – though it did not specifically focus on women's literacy. In order to meet the Goals, donor countries would need to provide \$5.6 billion a year – just over two days' worth of global military spending.<sup>2</sup>

Enlightened policy prescriptions notwithstanding, girls and women continue to bear the brunt of underdevelopment in tandem with patriarchal tendencies. Females constitute about 2/3 of the total number of illiterates. Only 9 countries account for more than 70 per cent of the total adult illiterates in the world; of this, India alone accounts for one third. Female literacy in South Asia, at 40.8 per cent, remains lower than anywhere else in the world and has shown the lowest rate of increase between 1997 and 2002.<sup>3</sup> Of course there have been improvements but it has been observed that these are likely to be exaggerated since, as widely acknowledged, the available statistics are likely to overstate the evidence for complacency, since measures of literacy attainment tend to rely on sampling of self-reports, and do not reflect retention of what has been learnt.

The limited success of many adult literacy campaigns is often attributed to inadequate resources, as well as to other factors. Thus all those concerned about the quality and effectiveness of adult literacy learning programmes (ALLPs) will be anxious that such programmes should be resourced on an *adequate enough* basis to be successful. That throwing money and other resources at problems does not automatically resolve all quality issues is stating the obvious; but, equally obvious, no programme can be successful if the resources devoted to it are inadequate. Perhaps there is a justification for employing concepts from the pragmatic world of business – for instance, can we import the notion of a 'break even point' that will express without quibbling the resources required to buy the desirable level of quality?

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<sup>1</sup> Through this paper ASPBAE aims to set out some parameters on the discourse on the quality-resourcing relationship in adult learning. This paper was developed mainly from a discussion paper prepared by Prof. Alan Rogers for an electronic email discussion of ASPBAE members and other CSOs active in the UNESCO NGO CC/EFA network in the last quarter of 2004; and drawing largely upon material listed in the select bibliography. It is also informed by reflections from several ASPBAE face to face consultations on adult literacy in the course of the last year. The conclusions underscored here are ASPBAE's own.

<sup>2</sup> The EFA and MDG goals have been the ones in the spotlight; unfortunately, CONFINTEA V and its follow up has been largely moribund, perhaps a sign of the low priority accorded to adult education even in the relatively more dynamic arena of international policy.

<sup>3</sup> GMR 2003/4

Assuming agreement on the relation between quality and financing, there are several problems that arise in **operationalising** it:

- The first is - what do we mean by **'adequate'** resources? Are there any norms or benchmarks which can be applied to every adult literacy learning programme, as there are (for example) for primary education/schooling?
- A second relates to the **source/s** of these resources – governments, donor bodies, local communities or the literacy participants themselves – and the relative proportions of their contributions
- And thirdly, how can we **persuade** governments and other agencies that ALLPs need adequate resources in order to deliver?

There are then two main sets of questions to this paper, with a cross-cutting theme of the rights and priorities of women's literacy:

- A. what resources are needed and in what quantity and quality?
- B. how can we convince those who command such resources to release enough of them for adult literacy learning?

## **A. RESOURCES REQUIRED FOR A QUALITY ADULT LITERACY LEARNING PROGRAMME**

What resources are needed for the programme to be successful? It is important to determine the kinds of resources and their *quality* and *quantity*, which are necessary to make for a really effective adult literacy learning programme. A major criterion of an 'effective' programme is one which helps the literacy learners to engage permanently in literacy practices. Current notions on quality include evidence of development in cognitive as well as non-cognitive areas; the latter include those behaviours, attitudes and values that are the basis of good citizenship and effectiveness in one's community.<sup>4</sup>

How can *adequate quality* be understood in terms of resources? Some of the broadly agreed categories of resources are discussed below.

Resources:

- a) *human resources*: what kinds of persons do we need as administrators, supervisors, or teacher-facilitators, and what kinds of systems and structures (administrative, developmental and academic etc) do they need to be framed within, to make a programme successful?

Insights from past programmes indicate that the model that builds on institutionalised systems has most long term value, as compared with one that is programme based and thus defined in terms of time – which also includes relatively rigid norms on outcomes and achievements. Therefore insofar as the human resources are concerned they would consist of a group of people whose business is adult education in its different aspects – whether in teacher training or in teaching, in production of reading materials for neo-literates or curriculum development. This is not as obvious a conclusion as it may seem – many literacy programmes, being programme-based and thus timebound, have made use of a pool of interested people who have often been dragged into the work and as often abandoned once the programme is over in terms of duration and finances; it is not uncommon for them to shift to elementary education or even sanitation when the funding priorities change. Given that even a successful programme does not affect the demand more than marginally, such an approach can only be considered astonishingly profligate.

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<sup>4</sup> GMR 2005

b) *physical resources*: what kinds of facilities (e.g. somewhere to meet; teaching aids etc) are essential, and what are highly desirable to make for an effective learning programme?

These will vary somewhat according to the programme design but the basic requirements of space and materials will be the same. It has been seen that where there are more permanent facilities and structures, even established bodies for developing materials or seeing to their production, the programme has a life of its own; it develops a flexibility in responding to diverse and evolving needs over time and becomes a part of the community which can refer back to it in an ongoing rather than a time-bound fashion.

c) *financial resources*: what financial resources do we need and where should these come from?

The quantum of these is really an outcome of decisions made on all other aspects of the programme and should therefore take all these into account as expressed through micro level planning. The source has been a matter of debate and even contention given the tendency for the privatisation logic that now prevails in many governments, even in countries where a sizeable population is welfare-dependent, to spill over into social sectors. This is obviously not an acceptable outcome; a rule of thumb may be that the sources of funding may be various, and requirements for learner contributions must take into account the resources, if any, that learners have to spare.

This is of course not just an issue of quantity but also of quality. For example, we may need more resources in general and also more financial resources, but we may also need a **better quality** of resources, and quality comes at a cost. There is no point in having more of poor quality resources – more instructors who are inadequately trained or who lack confidence or who are unable to respond to the changing needs of their learners, more supervisors who have no experience of what they are supervising and no commitment to the task, more managers who see this simply as a job to be done until they can get onto more rewarding tasks in their careers. So, for each of the resources listed above, we need to try to assess both the quantity and the quality of the resources that will be necessary to make the programme into a really quality one.

### **Politics of literacy and programme design**

In addition there are other more intangible factors which can make for a quality learning programme, such as political commitment and learner participation: if we adopt the wrong *approach* to learners once they come to the learning programme (such as a nonparticipatory approach), their participation will be adversely affected. Also, ALLPs where the learning activities are connected with the *use* of literacy skills are generally more appreciated by the learners and therefore have a better ‘success’ rate than if learning is confined to the classroom or learning group and is not extended into the daily life of the learner – such a premise could be central to programme design. Basically, learning for adults (or indeed for children) can only be effective if the learners are active, generating their own learning activities, instead of passive and only good at following instructions. What could have empowered if done ‘well’ could very well go wrong. This has been seen in every development programme. For instance, the formation of women’s groups for income generation could be empowering or could turn into a merely profit making enterprise, where those who are already advantaged, such as the literate women in the group, take on leadership and simultaneously get greater exposure and training; sadly enough, this process does not encourage such groups to actively enable all members’ literacy skills.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nirantar, 2004, Micro-Credit and Women’s Empowerment: Dilemmas and Questions, a seminar report from the World Social Forum, Mumbai, January 19, 2004.

One set of assumptions that are crucial to the design of literacy programmes relate to differences in prevailing notions of **replication, decentralisation and standardisation**, and the extent to which each of these are adopted. The difficulty lies in the levels of disaggregation the programme rests on. Some planners want a broad and generalised national programme, others want a diversity of specific, highly localised and varied programmes. Some want literacy to be in a national language, others in the mother tongue, and yet others in a more widely used local language, and some would want a combination of all three. All these choices must be available and the decisions should be taken by the learners through consultation with those experienced in the field; the latter would be able to advise, for instance, that a national language provides a link to enable access to information, knowledge and resources available at the macro level, but that, at the same time, the mother tongue is important not only as the best means of starting the literacy process but also to preserve and develop an individual's cultural identity and heritage.

In addition, in estimating resources required, the model adopted often involves some form of replication and upscaling of an innovative project. Insights from literacy programmes have revealed that much of the vigour of the original project is lost in this. Part of the reason is that the participatory approach and context specific planning followed in the original project are bypassed and only the outcomes retained. It is thus necessary to decentralise not just implementation but the processes of planning as well, and to ensure that these essentially organic processes are retained.

**Size** of the programme is thus an issue – is it a single national or regional programme that is being considered? This is often the starting point of planning, and thereby definitive. However, to lay down too specific parameters at macro level, e.g. the exact frequency of classes and contact hours required, is not only to misunderstand how adults learn, especially how they learn *outside* of any classroom situation, but carries with it the danger that more flexible models such as short intensive residential programmes or literacy within health or agricultural or credit and savings programmes will be regarded as inferior and no longer entitled to funding – which would not be a desirable outcome.

Related to size is the question of **location** of such a programme, for this will influence the kind of standards of resources to be allocated to these programmes. In most countries, adult literacy is located within some branch or sub-branch of the Ministry of Education, but there are countries where it is located within a more generalised department or within the Ministry of Labour, Women's Affairs, Social Development and so on. In this case, models of resourcing based on the education sector are inappropriate; for these countries, models would probably be better drawn from the health or agricultural or women's extension services; that is, from a *development and education* rather than a purely *education* perspective.

The relevance of these issues percolates down to every aspect of a programme. For instance, one of the differences of opinion in relation to learning materials relates to who should produce textbooks and other reading materials and how. This once again harks back to issues of decentralisation: some query the need for a textbook, arguing that a generalised textbook will quickly be seen to be irrelevant to the particular lifeworld of many adult learners, and that the best form of literacy learning materials are those which the learners find for themselves or create for themselves; others, equally legitimately, find such a textbook valuable. Some programmes assess their achievements in terms of tests of what the learners *can* do, others by the actual *use* of literacy in daily lives like keeping records of children's growth points. Obviously, there can be no single prescriptive norm.

There are also differing ideas on the **format** to be adopted; for example, some people argue that adult literacy should be promoted within a context of adult basic education, the provision of a kind of flexible schooling for adults similar to that of primary education for children and leading to some equivalent forms of qualification. Schooling (even flexible schooling) is not always the

best model for adult learning programmes. Although rampant adult illiteracy is surely linked with the failure of formal primary education systems, experience shows that this format does not adequately address the needs of individual adults and may seem largely irrelevant to many adult learners who also belong, we must not forget, to that group of people who are marginalised in other ways, most notably socioeconomically, not just educationally. For this group of people who are struggling to survive on poorly paid jobs or irregular wage labour, a relatively decontextualised learning of literacy and numeracy skills may not hold out much attraction. It is likely that the other format would be more successful, one where adult literacy learning programmes take place in a context of development or livelihood activities in which schooling and qualifications are irrelevant – through self-help groups or credit and savings groups, or through farming programmes, income generation activities, legal rights education or health/HIV/AIDS education.

In other words, literacy can best be learned by adults through a highly contextualised, even individualised programme in which the literacy learners are engaged in doing their own daily life literacy activities – ‘learning by doing’ rather than ‘learning in preparation for doing’; or, as an eminent African adult educator has put it, “breaking out of the education silo” into what has been called a ‘literacy second’ model, a programme starting with a developmental activity and including informal literacy learning within it.

Ownership issues become central here, particularly as they relate to finances; community ‘ownership’ has become widely acknowledged as desirable, but what this means is not clear – does it mean that the community plans and manages as well as finances its own programmes? Evidence from the formal system shows that in most countries that have made considerable progress in promoting gender parity and equality in education the state has played a major role; this is not likely to differ in nonformal systems that provide adult literacy programmes. In fact, in developing countries, where poverty and illiteracy go hand in hand there is little justification for governments to abandon financial responsibility; however, the extent of government control over funds should be reviewed.

The answer probably lies in decentralised planning and implementation so that learner groups can make their own decisions based on their own needs. However, decentralisation has become another of those broadly accepted but inadequately analysed concepts. While context-specificity and local involvement can only be expected from greater rather than less decentralisation, there are pitfalls to too sweeping an application of this principle, particularly in tandem with that of ‘ownership’. Without succumbing to paranoia about state heavy handedness, it is nonetheless a fact that there is an explicit trend for governments in the region to reduce budgets for adult literacy programmes, and call for greater participation by communities and NGOs and thus curtail their own already diminished role.

Thus the most important element for all adult learning programmes is that the participant learners need to determine what *they* want. In literacy learning, as in all other aspects of development, a ‘participatory approach’ is the key element essential for success. And participation in adult literacy reveals that the potential literacy learners again speak with many different voices. Some want to engage in semi-formal schooling, while others reject this and prefer informal and task-oriented development or livelihood groups. Some continue to want ‘literacy first’ although most may want ‘literacy second’.

This suggests that a national adult literacy learning programme cannot take a single model and ask what resources are needed for that model. Rather it needs to be highly diversified - unlike formal schooling. A ‘one-size-fits-all’ programme is now recognised by many agencies as being a recipe for failure. Urban, rural, nomadic, tribal, linguistic, dairy or arable farming, fishing and other occupational groups will all need their own specific approach, young and older men and women, different caste, class, racial and ethnic communities call for their own learning programmes; even within the same community different individuals will have different priorities.

The nature of the community and the use of participatory approaches will determine what kind of literacy learning activity will take place within each local context. In some places, adult literacy learning will look like schools, in other places it will be very different. Many of the learning groups will follow a common programme with agreed textbooks, but others will follow their own path, setting their own goals and determining for themselves when and how those goals will be reached. Indeed, in some cases, there may not even be groups at all if the programme takes the form of an ‘each-one-teach-one’ model or a drop-in centre to assist individuals.

To conclude, it is necessary to address the issue of usefulness and viability of defining **common benchmarks** to assess and measure quality ALLP. Some feel that such benchmarks will only be appropriate where a **standardised** kind of programme is the norm, and cannot apply where more flexible approaches are adopted such as literacy learning within farming, health, legal rights or developmental activities, or through the use of ICT or residential ‘literacy camps’ or drop-in centres or adult schools with a wider and standardised curriculum as in the Philippines (and South Africa).

We believe, however, that developing some benchmarks will be useful in the quality-funding loop. In recognition of the complexity of local conditions and individual needs, they should tend towards defining a *range of possibilities*, rather than a single prescriptive norm. To begin with, commitment to and understanding of adult learning – how adults, especially poor marginalised adults learn – are the two very broad, yet basic *provider* benchmarks for all adult learning programmes, including literacy. This encompasses the acceptance that adults and children, although both attending to their ‘basic education’ needs, learn very differently, and should be approached and provided for differently. Learner control is the benchmark from the point of view of the *learners*. Other benchmarks can be developed within these broad parameters; these should have a comprehensive sweep, encompassing parameters from programme design to material production to implementation.

There is also some value in defining the limits of the arena within which these can and should be developed – as have been described in the earlier sections. Therefore we believe it is possible, once there is agreement on the detailing of resources required, to develop these into broad, indicative benchmarks with the proviso that, ideally, these need to be surfaced through every programme rather than being automatically applied or sought. For instance, there would probably be agreement on the idea that cost per learner must be of a certain higher rather than lower value, but the exact value must be, ideally, arrived at through assessment of the programme needs in a particular place, for a particular learner group. Obviously this is not to say that policy and programme planning cannot proceed until each learner has had the chance to express their learning needs and these have been translated into a quality programme - but to argue for development of a set of indicative norms expressed as a range based on the requirements arising from agreement on what constitutes quality provisioning.

## **B. OBTAINING THE RESOURCES**

**The central question here is:** Even if we were able to determine the nature and levels of the assistance needed to run such a programme, how can we convince donors and other funders and providers (government departments, NGOs etc) that adult literacy learning programmes are not a waste of money and other resources, and – if provided at all – ought not to be run on the cheap?

Quality of programmes is a core concern – unless enough funds are provided, quality will suffer, but conversely, unless there is a good chance of programmes being successful, many agencies will see the provision of yet more resources for ALLPs as being a waste of money, of ‘throwing good money after bad’.

Many agencies, when exploring the possibility of providing adult literacy learning programmes, are put off by seeing such disagreements and grey areas as described in the preceding section, and they point out that there are few alternative models which can be found to be successful. In addition, many agencies cite past history of ALLPs having not succeeded when viewed over the longer term. Even those national campaigns which claimed large successes in the past (Russia, Tanzania, Cuba and many more) had few lasting results – the numbers of non-literates in all of these countries have remained stubbornly high. Some point out that even if many people learn literacy skills, the numbers of those who *use* literacy in their daily lives is still relatively few; this group argues that this does not justify the cost of providing ALLPs. In particular, many people argue that when resources for education are limited, it is best to spend most of them on children's education (schooling) rather than on adults who are believed to learn with much greater difficulty than children. So how can we persuade them?

The response to such questions can probably be found under three heads:

**The instrumental uses of literacy:** It can be argued that literacy skills are directly useful both to the individual and to the nation; that the use of literacy can increase independent communications (e.g. letter writing), reduce vulnerability to some kinds of cheating, enhance direct access to information (e.g. reading texts) and help the individual to engage in modern activities such as paying bills and taking out loans.

These instrumental benefits should not be exaggerated, however, for it has been pointed out on many occasions that many adults who have learned literacy skills through ALLPs in fact do not use them in their daily lives; so that if, out of a learning group of (say) 25, 20 participants stay to the end of the course and pass the test but only 10 of them ever use literacy in the course of their life activities, it can be argued that the effective success rate is only 10 (40 per cent), not 20 (80 per cent). It is well known that many men and women, having attended a literacy class and learned literacy and having started up their own business, still keep all their accounts in their heads and not on paper! At the same time, ethnographic research has shown that many non-literate persons already engage in independent communications (e.g. letter writing), manage to avoid many forms of cheating, access information (including health and agricultural information), and so on, all *without* personal literacy skills. And thirdly, there is research evidence that a significant number of adults develop literacy skills on their own to fulfil their personal and individual ambitions and aspirations without attending primary school or adult literacy class.

But there is no doubt that many adults do use ALLPs to learn literacy skills and use these skills to achieve their own goals – to secure promotion in a job, to keep records of their own finances, to correspond, to enhance their religious activities, to access information and services, to participate in commercial and democratic activities, to work with their local communities, and so on. The problem here is that the range of such activities is so wide that it is impossible to provide precise statistical information about which or what part of these achievements are direct outcomes of learning to use literacy. But all of these are worthwhile activities from the national economic, political, social and cultural development point of view, which their not being conducive to statistical manipulation does not detract from.

**The secondary values of literacy:** There have been very large claims for the secondary benefits of adult literacy learning programmes (particularly for women), even if the participants do not develop usable skills for themselves: for example, that more children go to school; that the literacy learners enjoy better health; that they get out of poverty; that they can think better; that they gain in confidence; or that they participate in other developmental activities more than before. The 'spin-offs' or by-products of ALLPs make the expenditure worthwhile, it is suggested.

Again, we need to be careful that these spin-offs are not exaggerated. Some claim that there are fewer such benefits than are claimed. Others suggest that these benefits come, not from literacy

itself but from joining a learning group and engaging in the activities of those groups, and therefore that we do not need to provide *literacy* learning programmes but more generalised development activities such as self-help groups, development circles, or micro-credit groups to achieve these outcomes. Or even if we agree to provide *literacy* learning groups since these are often more acceptable to some societies than an active self-help group, the question arises: is it justified to spend *education* money on activities which will have *other non-literate* outcomes? Should this not be done by (for example) a Women's Ministry or a Health Ministry?

And there is a further conclusion: Does this mean that we should measure the success of ALLPs and justify them in terms of these other (non-literacy) benefits rather than literacy per se? If the aim is to increase confidence, should we not measure the confidence and forget about measuring the literacy skills?

The most important conclusion here, however, is that for many adults, literacy has symbolic value. It changes their sense of identity and their feelings of confidence about themselves within their local and national community, it removes in large part their feeling of exclusion. And such feelings of worth are an important element in the national consciousness, the confidence with which any nation faces the global challenges of today. Enhancing adult literacy will do much for the national identity within the global community.

**Human rights:** Modern approaches to development have moved from an instrumental 'needs' based to a 'rights' based approach (e.g. as set out in Amartya Sen's book, *Development as Freedom* 1999). Even if people do not use literacy skills, even if there are no indirect benefits from learning literacy, it is still a matter of justice that governments and others should provide ALLPs for adults as well as schooling for children, and thus that adequate funding should be made available for those who cannot otherwise afford the facility. The GMR 2003/4 uses a 3 stage analytical model to deconstruct the rights argument in relation to girls and women: the right *to* education, rights *within* education, and the rights to be obtained *through* education; this is a fittingly broad understanding of 'rights', based on the understanding that 'gender disadvantage in education is particularly high among marginalised groups and increases with poverty and social disadvantage' (p 134). It brings a more tangible frame to the somewhat abstract sounding 'rights' language, and can be usefully applied to the rights of all adults to literacy learning.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, there are important benefits for the individual and society as a whole from increasing the number of persons within any society with personal literacy skills which would justify any country developing a national adult literacy learning policy.

As earlier argued, there are several things to 'unlearn' in the mainstream policy approaches to adult literacy learning. Though principles of participatory planning and decentralisation have become de rigueur it may be necessary to take them further than is customary (while remaining alert to the possible pitfalls), so as to ensure that flexibility which is a hallmark of a relevant programme for adults. Another existing premise that may require unlearning is the clubbing together of 'basic' education for adults and children, not only because the learning patterns of adults are distinct from those of children, but because their needs and priorities are an expression of the array of experiences that constitute each individual history and resultant aspiration. None of these come cheap. In addition, what emerges from the analysis is that there are a range of trained professionals required to see the job through. That this is an often *nonexistent* pool of talent, or is not adequately appreciated and therefore bound to have a short shelf life, is one half of the problem; the other is that the encouragement and facilitation required to build this resource requires not just an effort to promote basic and primary education but also to focus on broader development issues of development. This is most imperative in relation to women's literacy and education; as long as women continue to lack social, political and personal rights, they will not

benefit much from any literacy intervention; moreover, the prevailing inequalities will most likely be reinforced systemically through the systems – and the people within them – that design and implement programmes; finally, there will be a conspicuous absence of inspiring female role models which will make the path to empowerment that much steeper. This means that the commitment to adult literacy can only be taken seriously if there is at the same time a commitment to improving women's entitlements in every sphere of life. One way of understanding this is to say it is a lot to ask; another way is to accept that these are basic requirements.

Unfortunately the politics of affirmative action have been outpaced by the logic of globalisation, with glaring inequalities and widening disparities being somehow brushed under the carpet, and the carpet declared a level playing field. Needless to say, affirmative action, state subsidies and welfare measures are still the need for many countries of the world, and the role of the state in education is particularly crucial, given the role of education in eradicating poverty and ensuring social justice. As we have seen, international policy is quite enlightened in its language; this has to translate into greater funding for literacy, if not available from national governments then from the international community. There is thus a need for careful analysis of national budget allocations to properly understand whether policy makers are truly unable to find the moneys required – or whether, as seems more likely, moneys are spent in abundance in areas like expansion of military capability but cannot be found for low priorities like education, and within it, adult literacy. The role of national governments is crucial, because if their attitude is one of indifference this will translate into weak and unmotivated policy and programmes.

Governments must be convinced to commit to adult literacy, and a commitment to adult literacy learning is a commitment to quality – which is a commitment to quality funding, or funding for quality.

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