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**Mobilizing Resources and
Capacity Building: Improving
Program Cost-Efficiency**

Benchmarks and Financing for Adult Literacy

by David Archer

Action Aid

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Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

International Institute for Educational Planning

7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix

75116 Paris, France

Tel.: +33(0)1 45 03 77 57

Fax: +33(0)1 45 03 39 65

adea@iiep.unesco.org

web site: www.ADEAnet.org

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1. ABSTRACT

1. In 2005 ActionAid and the Global Campaign for Education undertook the largest-ever survey to systematise experience of what works in adult literacy and how much quality literacy programmes cost. We analyzed *67 successful literacy programmes in 35 countries* and then developed 12 core benchmarks in consultation with *142 respondents in 47 countries*.

2. These are designed as a starting point for policy dialogue between governments, funding agencies, NGOs, and those adults who have been deprived of their right to education. The benchmarks cover the following 12 areas:

1. Building an expanded understanding of literacy
2. Breaking myths about magic lines / supporting sustained learning
3. Asserting government responsibility and decentralised partnerships
4. Supporting ongoing feedback and evaluation
5. Prioritising payment / incentives for facilitators / teachers
6. Providing quality training and professional development
7. Ensuring flexible timetables and regular and sustained contact
8. Addressing needs in multi-lingual contexts
9. Promoting participatory methods at all levels.
10. Linking work on the literate environment
11. Ensuring US\$50 and US\$100 per learner per year for three years.
12. Making the case for literacy in government and donor budgets

3. The calculation of the costs of adult literacy was a crucial part of this process, both in respect of the costs per learner in different contexts and the costs for achieving the globally agreed goal on adult literacy, set in Dakar (World Education Forum, Dakar 2000). We recognised that costs cannot be established in isolation of a clear set of principles about how programmes should work. Only by establishing reference points or benchmarks on key issues like facilitator pay could we reasonably define the costs of programmes per learner.

4. Costs also need to put in the context of the benefits that come from literacy so our work also documented the outcomes of literacy programmes, ranging from their impact on gender equality, children's education, health and hygiene, fighting AIDS, economic, social and political development. We conclude that adult literacy is the fertilizer needed for development and democracy to take root and grow. It is the invisible ingredient in any successful strategy for eradicating poverty – and it is certainly affordable. It is a scandal that in recent years the right to literacy has been so systematically violated.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1. Introduction

5. There are nearly one billion adults who cannot read and write, according to UNESCO statistics. The real figure is probably nearer to two billion¹ and still more if numeracy and the actual use of these skills are taken into account. Most of these are people living in extreme poverty. Almost two-thirds are women, and nearly 1 in 5 is a young person between 15 and 24 years old. Yet these people have been abandoned in recent decades. Although governments worldwide have signed up to a United Nations (UN) goal that promises a 50% reduction in illiteracy by 2015, they are investing scandalously little in programmes to deliver that goal.

6. In 2005 ActionAid and the Global Campaign for Education (GCE) undertook the largest-ever survey to systematise experience of what works in adult literacy and to determine how much it costs. We analysed **67 successful literacy programmes in 35 countries** in order to see whether they shared any common features that could be simplified into concrete, hands-on benchmarks and costings for policy-makers. Although no one, least of all the GCE, would advocate a ‘blueprint’ approach to literacy, there was remarkable consensus among the practitioners we surveyed as to the basic ingredients for success. This was reinforced by the positive feedback we received to early drafts of these benchmarks from **142 respondents in 47 countries** (including policy makers and practitioners from governments, NGOs and universities). It turns out that we do know what works in adult literacy programmes and there is no great mystery to it. There are clear steps that can be taken to design and manage good quality, cost-effective programmes – and where this is done they can yield exceptional results.

7. Our starting point for **determining costs** had to be determining the key characteristics of quality programmes for example in respect of:

- the duration and intensity of learning programmes
- the way in which budgets are managed
- whether facilitators are paid and how much
- the ratio of facilitators to trainers and supervisors
- the approach taken to materials development
- the length of training programmes
- the choice of languages
- the level of importance to be attached to wider issues of the literate environment.

We therefore went through an extensive process to define 12 core benchmarks from which we could define reasonable projections of costing (as well as drawing on actual costs of existing successful programmes on the ground).

8. In order for this costing to make sense we then had to look at the **outcomes** of the programmes we documented – to see whether finances put into literacy would be a good investment. Whilst we believe that literacy is an integral part of the fundamental human right to education we also wanted to provide compelling practical reasons for governments and donors to invest now in adult literacy. The following emerged clearly:

Literacy is vital to reducing gender inequality.

¹ Official UNESCO statistics put the figure at 785 million but the figures are notoriously unreliable, depending on self-reporting. Wherever rigorous measurements are taken the figures are significantly higher.

Adult literacy is critical for the healthy development and education of children, especially girls.

Literacy is vital to human and economic development.

Literacy is vital for fighting AIDS.

Adult literacy programmes work.

9. Literacy, in short, is the fertilizer needed for development and democracy to take root and grow. It is the invisible ingredient in any successful strategy for eradicating poverty. Unfortunately, in recent years it has become all too invisible as people have refused to make this sound investment. Funds have been channelled into primary education but very little has gone into adult literacy even though there are strong returns and the investment seems to make good financial sense. We hope the full benchmarks below can help us make the case for literacy afresh and help countries and donors project the cost of developing an effective programme.

2.2 The Full Benchmarks

10. The benchmarks that are set out below are designed to facilitate serious planning to achieve the Dakar 'Education for All' goal of a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy by 2015. We hope these benchmarks will provide a starting point for policy dialogue between governments, funding agencies, NGOs, and those adults who have been deprived of their right to education. They might also be used as a checklist against which a government or donor might ask questions about an existing or proposed programme. However, they are not intended as a blueprint or a set of conditions. Our research affirms the widely shared insight of experienced practitioners that the success of any literacy programme depends on flexibility to respond to unique local needs and circumstances.

11. Literacy is about the acquisition and use of reading, writing and numeracy skills, and thereby the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality. The goals of literacy programmes should reflect this understanding.

12. Literacy should be seen as a continuous process that requires sustained learning and application. There are no magic lines to cross from illiteracy into literacy. All policies and programmes should be defined to encourage sustained participation and celebrate progressive achievement rather than focusing on one-off provision with a single end point.

13. Governments have the lead responsibility in meeting the right to adult literacy and in providing leadership, policy frameworks, an enabling environment and resources. They should:

- ensure cooperation across all relevant ministries and links to all relevant development programmes,
- work in systematic collaboration with experienced civil society organisations,
- ensure links between all these agencies, especially at the local level, and
- ensure relevance to the issues in learners' lives by promoting the decentralisation of budgets and of decision-making over curriculum, methods and materials.

14. It is important to invest in ongoing feedback and evaluation mechanisms, data systematization and strategic research. The focus of evaluations should be on the practical application of what has been learnt and the impact on active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality.

To retain facilitators it is important that they should be paid at least the equivalent of the minimum wage of a primary school teacher for all hours worked (including time for training, preparation and follow-up).

15. Facilitators should be local people who receive substantial initial training and regular refresher training, as well as having ongoing opportunities for exchanges with other facilitators. Governments should put in place a framework for the professional development of the adult literacy sector, including for trainers / supervisors - with full opportunities for facilitators across the country to access this (e.g. through distance education).

16. There should be a ratio of at least one facilitator to 30 learners and at least one trainer/supervisor to 15 learner groups (1 to 10 in remote areas), ensuring a minimum of one support visit per month. Programmes should have timetables that flexibly respond to the daily lives of learners but which provide for regular and sustained contact (e.g. twice a week for at least two years).

17. In multi-lingual contexts it is important at all stages that learners should be given an active choice about the language in which they learn. Active efforts should be made to encourage and sustain bilingual learning.

18. A wide range of participatory methods should be used in the learning process to ensure active engagement of learners and relevance to their lives. These same participatory methods and processes should be used at all levels of training of trainers and facilitators.

19. Governments should take responsibility for stimulating the market for production and distribution of a wide variety of materials suitable for new readers, for example by working with publishers / newspaper producers. They should balance this with funding for the local production of materials, especially by learners, facilitators and trainers.

20. A good quality literacy programme that respects all these benchmarks is likely to cost between US\$50 and US\$100 per learner per year for at least three years (two years initial learning + ensuring further learning opportunities are available for all).

21. Governments should dedicate at least 3% of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programmes as conceived in these benchmarks. Where governments deliver on this, international donors should fill any remaining resource gaps (e.g. through including adult literacy in the Fast Track Initiative).

2.3. Evidence Base and Rationale for Benchmark 11 on Costs

22. Below is the feedback that we received on the question of average costs per enrolled and successful learner. We asked for detailed breakdown of these costs but most people provided only a total figure. Some people struggled to give us this information at first and needed to be chased to provide the figures.

23. The results show a significant diversity across regions but perhaps not as large as one might expect. We find that **the average cost per learner in Africa is US \$ 47, in Asia it is US \$ 30 and in Latin America it is US \$ 61.** The costs are higher for “successful” learners (US \$ 68, US \$32 and US \$83 respectively). Understandably costs in countries like Canada, Belgium and the UK are much higher per capita.

Organisation	Country	Enrolled learner	Successful learner
Asia / Pacific			
Average (N=3)		\$30	\$32
International Nepal Fellowship	Nepal	16	18
Bunyad Literacy Community Council	Pakistan	30	30
ActionAid Vietnam	Vietnam	35	38
Literacy Assoc. of Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands	40	40
Latin America / Caribbean			
Average (N=12)		\$61	\$83
National Literacy Program	Peru	61	125
Ministry of Education	Brazil	38	38
SESI	Brazil	57	73
Fundacion IRFA	Bolivia	20	29
Fondacion de Poblacion	Bolivia	22	27
Comite nacional de alfabetizacion	Guatemala	19	53
Fundacion Ayuda en Accion	Peru	90	110
ESCAES	Peru	67	72
Projeto Escola Ze Peao	Brazil	125	167
Ayuda en Accion	Bolivia	167	199
Centro de Alfabetizacion	Ecuador	31	40
Centro Josue de Castro Estudos e Pesquisas	Brazil	56	58
Africa			
Organisation	Country	Enrolled learner	Successful learner
Average (N=14)		\$47	\$68
ActionAid International	Tanzania	50	51
AAEA	Angola	30	36
Community Skills Dev. Project	The Gambia	60	80
People's Action Forum	Zambia	22	31
ActionAid	Ghana	20	31
Africa Educational Trust	Somalia	28	X

TOSTAN	Senegal	32	38
TINTUA	Burkina Faso	20	X
EPID	Kenya	43	80
Jeunesse et Développement	Mali	55	89
Work for Rural Health	Malawi	63	100
VIE	Niger	39	118
ADRA	Sudan	75	115
Univ. Witwatersrand	Lesotho	118	178
Other			
East End Literacy	Canada	2,646	2,646
Lire et Ecrire	Belgium	1,423.00	X
NALA	Ireland	742	742

24. The figures given are not entirely reliable as few people completed the detailed breakdown so we do not know if we are comparing like with like. We do not know what indirect costs have been included in each calculation. Some respondents gave the same figures for costs per learner and costs per successful learner. This suggests a 100% success rate, which may seem implausible - but it may be that practitioners refuse to accept that any adult learner “fails” if they are participating in the process (who are we to question the value of it if learners themselves see the value)? To get a fully accurate calculation of costs of literacy would clearly require much more work and intensive communication with respondents. The timeframe did not allow us to enable to complete this. We strongly recommend that more work be done in this area.

25. Nevertheless the above figures gave us enough confidence to develop this benchmark. In general we increased the costs that people reported, given that so many respondents listed a range of extra things they would do if resources permitted. We also anticipate that fulfilling all the commitments in these benchmarks would add costs to most existing programmes (e.g. engagement in providing further learning opportunities / generating reading materials and a literate environment / paying facilitators properly and giving them professional development options).

2.4. Level of Support for Benchmark 11

26. 85% of the 142 expert respondents we consulted agreed with this benchmark (A good quality literacy programme that respects all these benchmarks is likely to cost between US\$50 and US\$100 per learner per year for at least three years (two years initial learning + ensuring further learning opportunities are available for all)).

Most people who commented reinforced the benchmark, agreeing that their programmes or ones they knew of were within this range of costs or not far outside it.

“A good quality literacy program is possible with a unit cost between US\$25 and US\$40”.
Roshan, World Education, Nepal

“Depending on cost of living in each country and literacy programmes, our average cost is between US \$ 30 and US \$ 60 per learner per year.”
IRFA Bolivia

“The estimated costs are correct”
National Commission for Adult and Non Formal Education, Nigeria

“Depending on the cost of living in each country and the type of literacy programmes. Our average cost is between US\$ 30 and US\$ 60 per learner per year in our radio literacy programmes (distance education).”
Fe Y Alegría, Latin America (programmes across 15 countries)

27. Whilst there is broad agreement, clearly this benchmark might be to set too high or too low for some countries and for some contexts where the cost of living is very different:

“It is unaffordable for countries like China to provide this amount (50-100US\$ per year) for a learner. It is estimated that nearly 30-50 US\$ would be spent for each learner within 3 years in China.”
Basic Education Department, the Ministry of Education of China

Based on our experience the cost varies between 10 US\$ and 150 US\$ depending on the country of work in the Arab World.”
EPEP, Arab Countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan & Morocco)

“In certain locations, for example in the North (Tombouctou, Gao and Kidal), literacy work has to be connected to economic activities especially when targeting women or young men – and this means the cost is usually between US\$100-US\$200 per participant”. ASG Mali

“If facilitators are paid more and trained more, and if much more effort is made to supply good reading materials including newspapers, the costs may well be higher”.
Bob Prouty, World Bank

2.5. Evidence Base and Rationale for Benchmark 12 on Financing

28. The Fifth CONFINTEA Conference and Mid-term Conference (Hamburg 1997 / Bangkok 2003) argued for a minimum of 3% of government education budgets to go to adult learning. Although this seems modest, most countries fall short of it.

29. There are problems in establishing a figure for all contexts when literacy rates vary enormously from one country to another. Surely a country with low adult literacy levels should be investing substantially more? There are also of course problems in using a percentage of the education budget as a reference point as much then depends on the adequacy of the education budget in the first place (for example, if countries are not dedicating 6% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education then resources are unlikely to be sufficient). Despite this our feeling was that the education budget should still act as the central base of funding for literacy – as this makes clearest sense to most policy makers. It may be that governments can find creative ways to secure a balance of resource inputs from all ministries and this should certainly be encouraged.

30. We were keen to draw on the Dakar Framework for Action to remind donors of the commitment that they made that any country with a viable plan to achieve Education For All (EFA) by 2015 will not be allowed to fail for lack of resources. Unfortunately, since the World Education Forum (Dakar, 2000) that pledge has not been kept. Many countries have come up with education sector plans but donor support has been largely through the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) that was founded with a narrow focus on universal primary schooling. Following advocacy work by the Global Campaign for Education, the FTI has promised that it will open up to the full EFA agenda though this has not yet led to clear guidance or a change in the indicative framework of the FTI. Recent developments suggest that FTI may well be reformed to become a genuine “Global Compact” mobilising funds for EFA, as envisaged in Dakar. If this happens FTI will need to develop benchmarks or “assessment guidelines” on adult literacy. We believe that this research and consultation process provides a solid foundation for establishing these.

31. Unfortunately there is a second fundamental problem with the FTI, which is not about the scope but about the funding. Donors have not provided adequate funding even for the initial batch of approved FTI countries. Major new momentum is needed on this urgently. The promises of new aid made at the G8 meeting in July 2005 and repeated in the UN Summit in New York in September 2005 suggest that this resource gap may well be filled. However, sustained pressure will be needed to ensure substantial amounts of new aid are earmarked for education and channelled through a reformed FTI.

32. Drawing significantly on the data from our survey, Jan Ravens and Carlos Aggio did some further analysis of costs for the EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) in June 2005. They concluded that the total cost of achieving the Dakar goal on adult literacy (to halve illiteracy by 2015) in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia would be about US\$10 billion - US\$1 billion per year which would need to be mobilized through international aid. As present aid to education is about US\$1.5 billion annually this certainly requires a significant increase.

2.6. Level of support for Benchmark 12 on Financing

33. 83% of respondents agreed with this benchmark (Governments should dedicate at least 3% of their national education sector budgets to adult literacy programmes as conceived in these benchmarks. Where governments deliver on this, international donors should fill any remaining resource gaps (e.g. through including adult literacy in the Fast Track Initiative) though some people felt unqualified to answer.

“Donors should stop supporting short-term programmes associated with ‘magic lines’ that only contribute to reinforcing restricted visions of literacy.”

National Institute of Adult Education, Mexico

“Agree; our adult education spending is almost 3% of the national education budget. We are convinced that the pledge made at the World Education Forum is not honoured by all the Donors”.

Ministry of Education, Namibia

“Our government spends less than 1% of the national education budget on adult basic education.”

Farrell Hunter, ALN, South Africa

“International communities and such powerful agencies as the World Bank, major bilaterals and regional banks should take a more active role in literacy development.”

Akihiro Chibo, Unesco, Japan

“The government should be able to coordinate a common basket approach at country level to ensure that all local donors’ contribution are coordinated and channelled to priority areas”.

Andiwo, Kenya

“The percentage of the national education budget that is spent on adult literacy must be defined based on the level of literacy. The lower literacy rates are the higher the budget should be”.

Avodec, Nicaragua

“This seems too small relative to its importance”.

Dan Wagner, US

“Agree as an ideal but in practice 3% for adult literacy is a distant dream for a country like ours”.

Maarifa, Tanzania

“Actually in Mali adult literacy gets less than 1% of the total education budget.”

ASG, Mali

“With only 2 % given to education, we shall be lucky even if we get 0001% from here for Adult Education!”

Bunyad, Pakistan

“This would be quite an achievement. At this stage adult literacy programs are not even recognised by the government nor funded in any shape and therefore falls on the shoulder of NGOs to do so”

EPEP, Arab Countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan & Morocco)

“In the present economic crisis the State has not been able to finance this sector. For example, the budget for the national plan of action on adult literacy for 1999-2003 was less than US\$500,000”

IIZ-DVV Guinea Conakry

“I disagree. This is context-dependent. Some countries will need to dedicate far more. Some may need less. I would use the development of a national strategy as the starting point, not some arbitrary dollar figure. Also, not sure why the benchmark should be education sector budgets when all sectors have a role. But the broad principle is right--there should be a dependable source of financing based on nationally determined needs and existence of a sound program to address those needs.”

Bob Prouty, World Bank

“3% of national education sector budget to adult literacy is a desirable one. Actual contribution by most developing countries is far less than that.”

Basic Education Dept, Ministry of Education, China

2.7. Final Words

34. In most countries youth and adult literacy have suffered from years of under-investment and poor quality provision. Yet there is growing recognition that the realization of a wide range of poverty reduction and development goals depends on countries making significant progress towards adult literacy of all. For very modest investments countries can see dramatic benefits. The case for new investments in adult literacy is compelling.