

## Promoting Literacy: Eritrea's Farsighted Vision



shabait.com | Fathers and mothers, youths and adults in general who never received to education due to different reasons have been called upon to take maximum advantage of literacy programs organized by Eritrea's Education Ministry.

A compulsory education for all children of school age has also made due contribution in the decline of illiteracy.

As Eritrea's society gives too much credit to knowledge and wisdom and thus prioritizes the intellectual rather than material benefits of education, a number of people have been actively taking the advantage that could be obtained through education. Such initiative of the Eritrean people and the urge towards knowledge has by far reduced the country's illiteracy range.

There is no doubt the more illiteracy is prevalent, the more negative impacts in socio-economic, cultural, historic, and linguistic aspects would be. Thus, literacy is a multi-faceted tool that could positively affect development of any sort in any given nation.

Bearing the aforementioned fact into consideration, Eritrea has been diligently working to educate its people as much as possible and also to the extent that seems impossible. Apart from the programs that used to be carried out in the pre-independence period in the then liberated areas, as of independence literacy programs have been regularly carried out in all six regions of the country.

The impact of the literacy programs has now become vivid and the overall outcome is very promising. A research conducted in 2008 by the Ministry of Education indicates that 65% of the people of Eritrea is literate and capable to read, write, and understand concepts. Another research conducted by the Ministry in 2010 shows a growth in the number of literates by 10%.

According to a research of 2010, seventy five percent of the people of Eritrea are literates. This result has been attained though the concerted efforts that have been exerted to educate mainly the female population of the country and all children of school age. What awaits to be achieved, however, allows no relaxation.

Even though eradication of illiteracy has been Eritrea's all time goal, as of 2000 the country sets to reduce the illiteracy level to a nominal stage. Despite the promising accomplishment, there is

still a huge gap between the urban and rural areas as well as between the male and female population. Illiteracy among the female population particular need to be addressed urgently.

If the overall picture of illiteracy prevalence in the country is to be considered there is still a gap from one region to another, from one sub-zone to another, and from a village to a village. What has so far accomplished has narrowed the gap dramatically, as the country's commitment towards providing equal access to education is still prevalent, there is high expectation to achieve much more.

As the disadvantaged areas of the country has been identified, taking measures that aim at narrowing the gap of educational access is what to be accomplished in the upcoming two years and after. Recognizing the benefits of education towards accelerating development, efficient healthcare, generating increased incomes and effective use of technology among others, "Education for all" has been the slogan chosen to combat illiteracy.

In the commemorative event of World Literacy Day 2013, the Ministry of Education reiterates its regular plan to work under the leading principle "literacy for all" but also plans to ensure that there should be no village with illiterate population. Accordingly the Ministry is planning to meet the setout plan through the guiding principle that says "Let's work together to ensure literacy realized in any village."

This year's World Literacy Day was different in its organization. Besides, a two-day conference towards promoting literacy, the Ministry of Education staged an exhibition that highlights the ongoing efforts towards promoting literacy throughout the country and particularly the efforts exerted towards adult education.

Extensive reports and discussion points were forwarded in the conference held in connection with World Literacy Day from 7 to 8 September 2013. This year's conference has indeed gave an overall view of the country's illiteracy situation. What indeed has so far been accomplished towards promoting literacy? What were the deficits and what has to be done so as to address the challenges?

The actual literacy rate in Eritrea is 64.6 as per the research conducted in 2010 and this figure is expected to rise by more than 20% by 2015. To meet such a goal, complementary primary school education for out-school children between the age groups of 9 and 14 have been offered in different areas of the country. This education program have also been enhanced through the opening of community rural libraries. Apart from children of 9 and 14 age groups, the educational opportunity has also been open for adults without age restriction.

According to an End Decade Assessment on Adult literacy program conducted by the Ministry of Education in 2011, centers for adult literacy used to be 31 in the wake of independence and this number grew to 57 in 2010, the number of newly opened centers for adult education were increased from only 103 to 842, the number of literacy program participants also increased from just 4500 to 36,000, and if literacy program was given by only three local language, by 2010 the education program was offered in eight Eritrean languages. What is more is that if there were only 33 libraries in 1999, this number reached ninety two in 2010, and if there were only 11 text books written in Tigrinya during the period of the struggle for independence, there were 120 books written in eight languages of the country have been used in primary through secondary school until 2010.

The report of the ministry of education mentioned earlier gives a clear picture about literacy status in Eritrea. The decrease of illiteracy rate from 80% to only 35% is a vivid indication of the achievements registered in literacy program starting from the wake of independence and particular in the period between 2000 and 2010.

As of 1998, the number of participants of adult education and generally literacy program has grown in a number of folds in all regions of the country but with an exception to the central region.

The major achievement registered in adult literacy program was in the academic years between 2002/2003 and 2005/2006. But the programs has not progressed in the same pace it started like that of the aforementioned academic years. If a major progress was registered in just three years, there is a huge possibility for the program to register a redoubled achievement in the upcoming two years by just adhering to the procedures that were found instrumental towards promoting and increasing the country's literacy rate.

The literacy program was planned to give access to education to people under 15 years of age and up to 45 years of age. But, this is not a strict rule and thus the program is open for people above 45 years of age too. So, the participation was 7% under 15 years of age, 14% between the age groups of 15 and 19, 25% between the age groups of 20 and 24, 46% between the age groups of 25 and 45 and there was an eight percent participation of people above 46 years of age. What such rate shows is that there is encouraging participation on the part of literacy program target groups. Hence, the number of participants with an emphasis to the age groups between 24 and 45 was 15,000 in 2010 alone which is a good indication of a promising progress.

The use of mother tongue as a means of instruction particular in primary school and in adult literacy program is what contributed most in the growth of the country's literacy rate. As mentioned earlier, the adult literacy program has been offered in eight local languages and this accords with the educational policy that favors the use of mother tongue particularly in primary schools.

Access to literacy program has now been reached to all sub-zones of the country, there are of course, some villages within some sub-zones which have not yet become beneficiaries of the program. The adult literacy program was very successful in all villages that have become beneficiaries and 650 villages in particular have eradicated illiteracy.

As per the report in the research conducted by the Ministry of Education, Southern Red Sea and Gash-Barka regions and some areas of the Anseba region are still lagging behind due to different reasons. In the last decade, there was encouraging outcome in the literacy programs carried out in the central and southern regions of the country.

The most exciting progress registered was, however, an increase in the participation of children who missed the opportunity of getting educated at the time they reached school age due to different reasons. Since the inception of the program and until 2010, more than 17,000 children have gained an opportunity to pursue education in their locality. Most of these children do not only become regular students but some of them have joined secondary schools. What we have seen so far has been about the participation of literacy program beneficiaries; but how about engagement of teacher? Is there a possibility for such an achievement to be registered without due role of teachers is also what needs to be posed as a question?

Eritrea's literacy program has been showing steady progress. There are certain factors which contributed most towards its promotion. An increasing eagerness of students from different age groups and particularly that of the age group between 15 and 45 has been the most contributing factor. No matter how powerful the educational background at individual level is, the Eritrean society gives utmost priority to education. Both the educated and uneducated individuals give due credit to the benefits of education. So, if there is active engagement of teachers, it only stems from the common understanding that gives due value to education.

Teachers who engaged in the eradication of illiteracy have been members of national service or members of any community at a village level or else regular teachers of adult literacy. Involvement of teachers from within each respective community constitute the most portion of the overall number of teachers. In most villages those to teach and those to get educated are from the same community. Such teachers from among the communities could understand the needs of the beneficiaries other than any teacher assigned to work in some hard-to-reach areas.

But, there have been concerns about the competence of teachers who received no training of any sort and thus teaching in a traditional manner.

There have been a growing number of 3rd graders, and this people need ways to gain access to skill acquiring training program that could help them improve their livelihood. A number of parents who gained access to adult literacy program, are now able to read, understand, and sign by themselves during parental visit to schools. A great deal of those educated through literacy program are now able to engage in private and governmental jobs where reading and writing ability is compulsory. Thus, the effect of the literacy program that have been carried out thorough out the country is somehow encouraging.

However, the success achieved in Eritrea's literacy program has to tackle challenges that could negatively affect its progress. Some among the challenges include: deficiency of educational materials, lack of effective archiving system, and insufficient number of mother tongue teachers in some areas. Despite such like and other shortcomings, the literacy program has been succeeding steadily if not in the same manner as expected.

What achieved in the last 10 years, which is from 2000 to 2010, was through fighting against all odds. A research conducted by the Ministry of Education about the progress made in the last decade in adult literacy program, highlighted the need for enhancing the program so as to achieve more through the introduction of remedial solutions that could address different sorts of challenges, and about the necessity of introducing crash course programs to most affected areas so as to narrow the existing gab among regions, sub-zones and villages. Opening community libraries to prevent illiteracy from reoccurring and the significance of reinforcement mechanisms so as to encourage teachers of adult literacy program with incentives, as well as skill upgrading programs for teachers who lack required competence and particularly those teaching in their communities were among the findings of the research.

In line with the efforts that has been exerted to fight illiteracy in the country, a new program known as Complementary Elementary Education(CEE) has been introduced in four of the six regions of the country such as in Northern and Southern regions, as well as in Anseba and Gash-Barka regions. The CEE is an intensive and regular literacy program that goes for 3 years and the effect of which equals with that 5th graders.

The primary aim for introducing the CEE is to ensure equitable educational access as much as possible. Having a look at the experiences gained from the introduction of such like program and particularly that of Anseba region.

The CEE has been carried out in the Anseba region since 2007 in 33 teaching centers. In this program medium of instruction has been Tigrinya, Tigre, and Hidareb languages. The CEE of the Anseba Region is known as “E’riyot” in Tigre language. E’riyot roughly means “hurry up and exert redoubled effort so as to achieve what you missed.” The program’s name was coined by one father in certain administrative areas of the Anseba region.

Since its inception, the CEE has been introduced in eight of the eleven sub-zone of the region. The ECC has been playing due role in the promotion of literacy program in the regions mentioned earlier. Extension programs have been also introduced in some area of the country and that of Afabet in the Northern Red Sea is an exemplary initiative taken to speed up the literacy program.

Complementary Elementary Education (CEE) has been introduced in different regions and administrative areas of the country. The experience of the Anseba region coupled with such like initiatives in different parts of the country have been making due contribution towards the realization of the setout plan of promoting literacy.

Reports of Education Ministry’s branch office in the Anseba region indicate that encouraging outcome has been registered in educating children who missed schooling in due time. The CEE program is aimed at covering five years of school time in just three years so as to enable those who missed school pursue education parallel to children of their age group. Through the CEE, which is named Ariyot in the Anseba region, 6435 children of whom the 2945 are female students have been registered in the past seven years as first graders. During the launching of the program in the academic year 2006/2007 a total of 219 students were enrolled as first graders. It is not hard to see the progress registered in this program by just making comparisons between the 1846 students registered in the academic year of 2011/2012 with that of the 2006/2007 academic year.

A total of 585 who pursued their primary school through Ariyot have now joined to junior schools. Similarly, this year, 651 students have scored results that could enable them pursue their education in junior schools. Another instance which indicates the success of the program is an increase in the number of students who participated in national junior school general examination. A total of 187 students have, for instance, participated in this year’s national examination. All of the Fifty three students who participated in the national examination from Filfle and Orotta schools and of whom 30 female students have passed while 24 students from among 34 students of Afhimobl Junior School promoted to Secondary schools.

Upgrading people’s awareness and particularly encouraging families to send female students and thus pursue junior and secondary education has been a demanding task. Owing to the concerted efforts of concerned bodies, an encouraging outcome has now been registered the desired end has not yet achieved though. There have been deficits of English language teachers and particular in places where less trained community members have themselves been teachers.

Another shortcoming that need to be addressed is the issue of distant schools. Students who successfully completed their primary school through the Ariyot program have difficulties to pursue their junior and secondary school and particularly female students from distant areas. Attempts are being made to solve such challenge through sending the students to boarding

schools.

Twenty students from hard-to reach villages have, for instance, been sent to Asmat Boarding School. The twenty students have participated and in the national junior school leaving examination and all of them have been promoted to secondary school.

Despite deficits, the CEE has been further enhanced for the outcome registered so far is very encouraging. What has so far been accomplished is a step forward towards realizing Education for all.

While discussing the achievement registered in literacy programs of the country, it is important to see the efforts that have been exerted in the development of curriculum for adult literacy in mother tongue education as well as initiatives that have been taken to enable students complete their primary through secondary schools through different mechanisms. An extension educational program that introduced in Afabet is an instance which opened a perfect opportunity for a number of nationals to pursue their education and even to join tertiary level. Let's see the activities of curriculum development and the educational access that has been opened in Afabet. Since curriculum development is the base of any educational success registered in the country, it would be better to see the steady progress in the development of adult literacy curriculum and then the opening of an extension program in Afabet.

Curriculum development for adult education which started in the pre-independence period has been further rectified in the post-independence period. What has been done in the independence period is therefore a sequel of what started in the period of the struggle for independence.

A curriculum that was developed in 1977 with an aim to educate children was revised in 1979. This first educational curriculum was used to educate children as well as adults until a new curriculum for adult education was prepared in 1983.

It would be a repetition to say Complementary Elementary Education (CEE) has been introduced in different regions and administrative areas of the country. However, it is significant to mention the CEE and other programs time and again for it is a cumulative result of different literacy campaigns and particularly development of curriculum which contributed most to the reduction of the country's illiteracy rate. What is more is that in the course of the phase by phase development of curriculum for adult education two books titled Social Studies for Adults (volume one and volume two) were published. The two books published in the period of the struggle for independence were in use for 15 years. First grade through third grade adult education program was then given three days a week. The first graders used to attend three classes in three hours while the second and third graders used to attend four classes in four hours of time.

A curriculum developed in the pre-independence day became a foundation to the development of a revised curriculum in the post-independence period. Thus, a curriculum that gives due attention to the economic and social fabric of the Eritrean society came in to being. A book that comprises basic numeric and construction of sentences were prepared in 1997. A set of fourteen consecutive books in seven languages of the country were published and distributed in 1998. After seven years of the first publication, which is in 2005, a revised book which evolved linguists in the seven languages of the country was also published in 2007. All these books were made to be reviewed by language experts.

Information and views shared in a survey made in 2009 about literacy and suitability of education played due role in the development of well-revised curriculum. Apart from the development of adult education curriculum, books and other educational materials including English language text books for CEE were published and distributed.

All the books published in the pre and post-independence Eritrea have made due contribution in promoting literacy. What has been achieved so far and educational programs that has been carried out throughout the country including extension programs are vivid indications of what the prospect of literacy rate in the country would be.

Extension programs have been instrumental in providing educational opportunities for a number of nationals. Some citizens who pursued their education through extension programs have not only eradicated illiteracy but also made it to territory education with an impressive result. An extension program that has been introduced in Afabet is an instance of the different mechanisms introduced to open a venue towards increasing literacy rate.

Afabet urban city is an epitome of successful extension programs of education. Many students who educated themselves through such programs have now been able to participate in the National Secondary school leaving matriculation exam.

Afabet sub-zone has 39 institutions of education that range from kindergarten through secondary school, twenty two centers of illiteracy eradication, eight CEE centers and a night shift class that educates from 6th through 12th grade.

The night shift educational program was started in 2006/2007 academic year with the collaboration of NUEW and initiative of interested students. The encouraging outcome achieved through the introduction of the program has attracted the attention of the Ministry of Education and PFDJ. Hence, NUEW, PFDJ and the Ministry of Education worked hard to boost the number of students. Major contribution of NWEW in encouraging students, upgrading women's awareness as regards what benefits could be achieved through education and in ensuring sustainability of the program deserves due appreciation.

Owing to different motivation mechanisms, the night shift education program which started with only five students has now, in the 2012/2013 academic year, reached to 170 students who are learning from 6th to 12th grade. What makes this program very successful is women's participation. Out of 35 students who participated in the secondary school national examination the 32 were female students.

The night shift students have been pursuing success no matter where their initial starting point was. These are students who longed for success for a long period of time and the places where they are from have a very limited educational access but they moved to a place of wider opportunity and thus become successful in their endeavors. What makes the experience of Afabet unique is that the student who have been scoring impressive results are mothers in their forties, and others are patents who shoulder heavy familial responsibility.

She is an exemplary woman who fought against societal pressure, difficulties of maternity and other challenges of wedlock, Amna Mohammed Omar. Even though she attended regular education from primary through secondary school, she was forced to get married leaving aside her dreams of pursuing her education until it reaches a targeted aim.

Amna have completed 12th grade with full collaboration of her husband and of course motivation of her teachers. She finally seats for secondary school matriculation exam. It was in the middle of the examination room that labor pains started. Her teachers were anxious about her and about the incomplete examination paper, and asked her what she would do. Her answer was “I will finish it while I am in the maternity hospital” and she did so. Such like initiatives of individuals and an intensified eagerness to get educated in what contributed most towards a successful literacy campaign. Thus, “Education for All” continues to win over illiteracy.