

### BEYOND LITERACY

The thing, which seems to bind all of these case studies together, is not just their innovativeness in literacy learning approaches, although they all have some innovative features. Rather, it is the fact that they all go beyond literacy learning to encourage the use of literacy. Every one of these case studies realised that the learning of literacy skills without using these skills in real life would achieve very little indeed.

Each person will of course look at these seven case studies differently; each will take from them what he/she feels is appropriate to them at this stage of their personal development in the light of their own experience and current situation. What follows is a personal view of some of the conclusions, which can be drawn from these particular case studies.

All of the case studies seem to suggest that literacy learning on its own is not enough. Each of them has located its literacy-training programme within a particular context. Sometimes it is literacy + 'something'. Sometimes it is 'something' + literacy. Sometimes it is both combined more or less equally. But always there is that 'something' extra. It may be possible to identify some of those 'somethings'.

### What is Literacy plus?

Some of the case studies reveal the use of the word 'literacy' in a wider sense than is normally the case. The Mel Trust example talks about 'environmental literacy', reading the environment (perhaps we could do with more being said about 'writing the environment'). The MARG case study concentrates on 'legal literacy'. From the other case studies, we could talk perhaps about 'health literacy' and 'agricultural literacy' and 'income-generation literacy'.

Now, there are both problems and value in this use of the word 'literacy' to mean more than

reading written and printed material and writing texts. One of the problems is that this use of the word can on occasion lead us to say that 'the [textually] illiterate are [legally] literate' (for example) - which would sound nonsense to someone who does not know what we are talking about. Some of the case studies understand this; so they talk about 'print literacy' or 'text literacy', to distinguish this literacy from the kind of literacy they are talking about.

But there is also much truth in this use of the word, if we analyse it more carefully. What is meant by legal literacy, for example, is 'awareness' plus knowledge and understanding. MARG is clear about this: the aim of their project is to help the women participants to become more aware of their legal rights and to know about the law and to understand some aspects of it: this is what they mean by 'legal literacy'. MelTrust also intend to revive traditional ways of being aware of the environment, to know it and to be able to 'read' it. ADAPCA again seeks to help the farmers to become aware of and knowledgeable about the issues relating to pest control.

Thus we can see that the word 'literacy' can mean more than simply deciphering letters and words on a page. In this sense, it means 'making sense of **and** 'being able to use' (the law, the environment, the farming practices etc). So too for textual literacy: the idea of literacy does not just mean being able to decipher more and more words on a page, but 'making sense of these words **and** 'being able to use them' in a particular context.

Traditional approaches to teaching literacy skills to adults usually include some awareness elements, mainly through discussion groups which are attached to the literacy classes. But this is not the same as helping the participant men and women to understand the meaning of

words and sentences in their own context. Most of the discussions on awareness concentrate on other subjects like health or poverty; they do not talk about being aware of and understanding *literacy* itself as it is practised in their own communities. Most adult literacy learning programmes simply teach letters and words, not their varied meanings and their varied uses. All of these case studies are very clear about this. Their goal is wider than simply helping people to read words in a literacy primer; it is to help them to understand the meanings of those words and the way those words are used in their own context.

The lesson from this then would seem to be that programmes which seek to help adults to learn literacy skills need to concentrate on the way words and sentences are being used in a particular context, not just teach the letters and words divorced from a situation.