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# **Literacy and local languages**



# Literacy and local languages

## Teaching literacy: Literacy and livelihoods in Uganda



Paul Mundy

Walk down the street in Cairo, Tokyo or Bangkok, and unless you speak Arabic, Japanese or Thai you will probably feel thoroughly lost. The shop signs are in a foreign language – one where you cannot even decipher the letters. Same with the newspapers, the road signs, the destinations on buses, the instructions on public telephones, the advertisements on billboards. Go into a supermarket and pick up a packet of soup, and the only way to tell whether it's tomato or chicken is from the picture on the packet. Got a headache from trying to work out the recipe? Take an Aspirin – but first make sure that it's not a sleeping tablet or a pill against constipation.

That's about as close as it's possible for an educated person to get to understand what it is like to be illiterate. Of all the skills we learn in school, perhaps the most important is the ability to read and write. It opens doors and windows onto the world. It enables us to learn. It allows us to communicate with others. It is indispensable to modern life.

But what if we hadn't learned to read and write in school? What if we had never been to school, because our parents were too poor, there was no school nearby, or the teachers had been killed in a war? And what if the only books and newspapers were in a language we couldn't understand? That's the situation that many people in the developing world find themselves in.

Literacy is so basic to development that it is amazing, and sad, that it gets so little attention from governments and development agencies. Worldwide, 876 million people, two-thirds of them women, are thought to be illiterate. Education attracts a fraction of the resources spent on the military. According to Unesco, adult literacy rates in sub-Saharan Africa range from under 10 percent for men and around 20 percent for women in Zimbabwe, to nearly 80 percent for men and a massive 94 percent for women in Niger.

Yet the evidence in favour of promoting literacy is overwhelming: literate people are more likely to be employed, and live longer, than those who cannot read and write. Literate women are likely to marry later, and to have fewer, but healthier, children. Countries with a literate population are generally better off than those where large numbers of people lack basic education.

### Promoting literacy in Uganda

LABE (Literacy and Adult Basic Education) is one of the organizations trying to change things in Uganda. This Kampala-based NGO provides training and services in literacy to other organizations. It does not run its own projects; instead, it collaborates with other organizations already working in agricultural production, marketing and other themes.

An agricultural extension worker explaining how to grow sweet potatoes to literacy students in Kamuli District, eastern Uganda  
(Photo: LABE)



LABE focuses on two main areas: teaching trainers how to teach people how to read and write, and teaching them how to create reading materials in local languages.

### Teaching teachers...

There are no accurate figures for literacy in Uganda, but Patrick Kiirya, LABE's director, says that something like 56 percent of adult men are literate, and only 38 percent of women. With a small staff but a large number of potential learners, LABE uses a three-step method of reaching them. The first step is to find people who want to become "literacy-instructor trainers" (LITs). LABE works with 15 NGO associations in Uganda, each of which is made up of several community organizations such as women's clubs and youth groups (one of these associations is MTEA, see pp. 85–88).

The community groups identify aspiring LITs: a man and a woman from each community. LABE staff visit the NGO association and give these would-be trainers a week's course in the necessary skills: teaching methods, understanding how adults learn, writing materials to read, translating existing materials into the local language, and community organizing. The district agricultural officer and other local government staff also contribute to the course, ensuring their interest and involvement early on.

### ...to teach teachers

After the course, the new LITs go back to their communities to begin the second step: teaching other people to become teachers. The community groups select instructors, and the newly fledged trainers repeat the course they have just attended, teaching perhaps 20 or 25 people each.

It is these "literacy instructors" (LIs) who then do the third step: offering classes to village people. Classes typically meet twice a week for a couple of hours after farm work has finished for the day.

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This cascading approach – where LABE teaches LITs, who teach LIs, who in turn teach rural people – enables LABE to reach far larger numbers than would be possible if it relied on its own staff alone. In December 1999, there were 413 LITs (about half of them women) and 1296 LIs teaching 677 literacy classes in 46 districts throughout Uganda. Nearly 15,000 people attended the classes; over 80 percent of the learners were women.

## Learning problems

The learners start off with very broad aims: they want to read newspapers or become village leaders. After the classes start, however, their goals tend to become narrower. Parents want to be able to read their children's schoolbooks, understand what they are learning in school, and perhaps help them with homework. Learners want to understand posters that have been put up around the village, fill in forms for a loan or for immunization at the local clinic, vote, or just write their own name. Farmers want to be able to read the instructions on pesticide containers (though these are almost always in English or Kiswahili), or work out how much they have made from selling crops. Wives want to be able to write to their husbands working in town; mothers want to keep in touch with their children at boarding school.



A learner practising her newly acquired reading skills, in Kamuli District, eastern Uganda  
(Photo: LABE)

These are ambitious goals for a twice-weekly class. Understandably, learning is often slow and tedious. Motivation falls. The teacher, unpaid and with very limited training and support, finds it hard to stay enthusiastic. Many learners drop out.

But enough carry on to encourage LABE to continue its work. There's no easy solution to the twin problems of sagging motivation and poor instructor skills. Many learners are sufficiently motivated to want to pay for their lessons; this helps keep the instructors interested. Local councils could provide them with a modest salary. Community groups provide basics such as blackboards, simple silkscreen duplicators, and consumables such as paper and ink, and these groups lobby district authorities to fund the production of literacy materials.

LABE provides one-day refresher courses to boost the instructors' skills. It also organizes regular feedback sessions with learners, instructors and trainers to discuss and revise LABE's programme. The participants are not afraid to say what they think. "Those are stormy sessions," says Godfrey Sentumbwe, LABE's training manager. And LABE also produces a twice-yearly newsletter filled with news, ideas for literacy training, and visual aids.

## But what will they read?

LABE's approach also is trying to overcome the other main problem with literacy in Uganda: the chronic lack of reading materials in the local languages that rural people speak. Most books and newspapers are in English or Kiswahili, but many people in rural areas do not understand these languages, or don't speak them well. Asking them to study another language at the same time as learning to read is a bit much.

There is yet another hurdle to overcome. Much of the information on subjects that rural people might find useful is not only in English: it's in scientific or technical English. So a double translation job is necessary: from English into the local language, and from jargon into simple language that normal mortals can understand.

LABE trains the LITs to do this translation and to write their own materials that they can use in classes. Some of the skills are covered in the first week of training. A second phase of training goes into more detail. This course is tailored to local needs: the LITs and NGO associations choose subjects and bring along existing materials. LABE staff walk the LITs through the process of designing, writing and producing materials in the local language.

## Plenty to write about

The participants find there is a lot they can write about. There is a wealth of indigenous information, local stories, folk tales and songs. Some of these can be rewritten to give them a development angle: an agricultural technology or a health lesson. Participants may develop a calendar showing the timing of farming activities, write a newsletter, or design a wall display. LABE reproduces the best materials and sends multiple copies to the community for use in the literacy classes. It also adds them to "book boxes" that the LITs in each community group have to help them in their training work.

The training goes beyond the printed word. The instructors learn how to use radio as a potent tool for instruction. Classes listen to programmes together, then discuss the content and convert it into visual or written form. Learners are encouraged to write to the radio station – a valuable form of feedback for the programme producers.

Many of LABE's partner community groups are involved in other activities apart from literacy. They are in an ideal position to tie the literacy work in with practical problems in farming, health or employment. The Nakisene Literacy Association is also involved in agricultural production and theatre. During literacy classes, members study improved farming practices and prepare cards showing the key ideas. They devise songs and dances on the practices to perform to the whole community. They have even been invited to perform in other villages, and can charge a fee for their shows.

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## The LIT kit

Trainers need materials to use. LABE provides each LIT with a box of ideas and resources to help with training. There's a guide book on how to do training, and envelopes containing handouts, cards, charts, photos, visual aids for teaching counting, a cardboard clock for telling the time, a guide to participatory-appraisal techniques, ideas for producing visual materials, pictures to stimulate people to tell and write stories, games, and forms to help monitor progress.

The whole thing is about the size of a file box: small enough to carry easily on a bicycle, but packed with useful materials for dozens of lessons.

## Building capacities

District-level and local organizations call on LABE's help in areas apart from literacy education. LABE responds to their requests for training to improve their technical, managerial and organizational capabilities, and for material and logistical support. Where possible, LABE identifies relevant agencies within the district to help provide such training, which may cover fundraising, participatory appraisal, negotiation and advocacy skills. The training is structured in the same way as the literacy-skills courses: LABE trains district-level trainers, who in turn train community facilitators and local-government extension workers, who go on to train self-help associations, traditional clan-based groups, and ordinary villagers.

LABE is just one of many efforts to fight illiteracy in Uganda. Alone, it can reach only a small percentage of Uganda's people. But its training approaches mean it is able to reach a far larger number than its modest staff would seem to allow. Clearly an example to be emulated if the scourge of illiteracy is finally to be defeated.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Godfrey Sentumbwe, LABE's training manager, with the LIT kit, Kampala, Uganda (Photo: Paul Mundy)

# Literacy and local languages

## The Multi-Purpose Training and Employment Association: Demand-driven learning in Uganda



Paul Mundy

It's hard to find MTEA if you don't know Iganga, a dusty town in eastern Uganda. Drive along the main road from Kampala, turn right at the roundabout in the centre of town, then right again, then left, and carry on until the track is more of a sand-pile than a road. Turn right, and there it is: a signboard announcing the "Multi-Purpose Training and Employment Association" in front of a modest one-storey building.

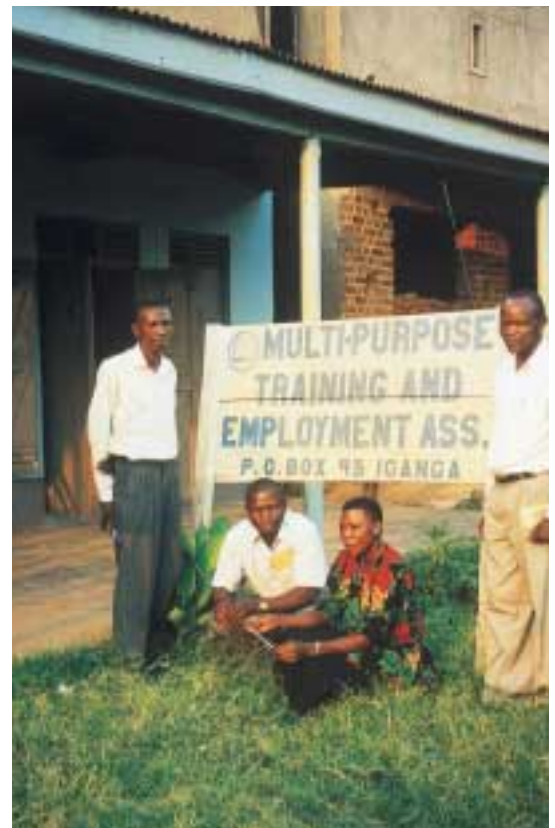
Originally founded in 1986 as a youth organization, this NGO aims to raise the standard of living in communities around Iganga. It has expanded to include older people, and is now composed of over 60 partner groups – women's groups, literacy circles, craft and farming organizations – scattered in the villages in the surrounding districts. Each group has an average of 25 members, so MTEA has a total membership of something like 1500 people in all.

As its name implies, MTEA is involved in a wide range of activities: from farming and environment, to marketing, networking and lobbying. There's a nutrition and child-care programme for mothers, literacy training for people who want to learn to read and write, and a resource centre where people can come to read or study.

### Farmer-managed trials

The agricultural training programme is particularly active. MTEA organizes field tests and demonstrations of new farming techniques. The farmers themselves – who are members of MTEA's partner organizations – provide the land, decide what they would like to have demonstrated or tested, and provide the labour and manage the plots.

Of course, it's not quite as simple as it sounds. A lot of organization is needed – and that is where MTEA comes in. Its workers begin by discussing problems in detail with the farmers, and help them work out what causes the problems and how they might be solved. Together, they draw a "problem tree" (a diagram showing the problem and its causes and effects) to help them work out how the problem arose, and how to solve it.



Staff of MTEA outside their office in Iganga  
(Photo: Paul Mundy)



A field day organized by MTEA for the Nawampendo farmers' group (Photo: Paul Mundy)

For example, the farmers may say that the lack of food is their main problem. They may reason that this is caused by a shortage of land and by infertile soil. It may not be possible to increase the amount of land available, so the obvious solution is to find ways of improving soil fertility. That in turn may lead to a discussion of the merits and prices of fertilizer, and to the idea of testing different forms of compost and manure that don't cost the farmer anything.

MTEA works closely with the district administration's agricultural extension workers and the community development office to organize demonstrations of the new technologies. "Extension workers like to work with us because we have experience with mobilization," says Ajab Waiswa, the secretary of MTEA. "The extension workers have the agricultural skills they learned in university. Our groups are together, and extension workers will find it easy to work with them, so they are interested in working with us."

The farmers are keen to have such a demonstration on their land, and the plots can be quite large: up to several hectares. MTEA sets some criteria, including that the plots must be on a road so that many people will be able to see them as they pass by. The farmers themselves contribute cash, labour, land and management; donors contribute the balance of the cost. Since the farmers have asked for the demonstrations and have helped decide what should be tested, they look after them carefully. MTEA sponsors between 25 and 30 such demonstrations each season for crops such as maize, plus another 50 or so plots of perennial crops such as coffee, banana and pineapple. Side-by-side plots may allow the farmers to compare different varieties of maize, or green manure with a liquid fertilizer made from dung.

MTEA workers visit each site at least three times during the season: at planting, when the crop is knee-high, and at harvest. They help the extension workers organize field days at these times: ideal opportunities not only to check on the plots, but also to discuss pests, diseases and other problems with the farmers. Typically 40 farmers take part: more women than men, because the women do the farm work, especially the planting and weeding. As one MTEA worker put it, "The woman bears the whole burden of feeding the family; she has to work hard to have food security in the house."

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## Training the trainers

Training is another key part of MTEA's work. It provides training in many subjects, from literacy to reproductive health, farming to business management. MTEA offers about five one- or two-week courses each year, with up to 30 participants in each course. The trainers may be extension workers, specialists from the government health service, or MTEA workers themselves.

The site of the training is rotated among different locations to make it easier for people, especially women, to attend. The partner groups can nominate people to attend. Afterwards, these representatives must in turn train the other members of the group. As they gain skills and experience, the trainees can be promoted to become trainers in their own right. There are now more than 120 of them, specializing in different subjects. MTEA periodically offers them refresher courses to update their knowledge and skills.

MTEA itself has developed the skills of its workers. Many are "multi-purpose": they can answer questions on many aspects of farming and rural development. That gives them credibility in the eyes of the people they work with.



MTEA's activities include training of trainers, assisting local NGOs, and coordinating research and demonstrations with farmers  
(Photo: Paul Mundy)

## Every day is not a Sunday

MTEA is successful in large part because of the commitment of its staff. Actually, the word "staff" is probably wrong: all are volunteers; their expenses are covered, but no one receives a salary. They each have their own farm or other business. "Other groups come from up-down, but we come from bottom-up," was one worker's picturesque description of the MTEA approach.

There are always challenges and problems. "Every day is not a Sunday," says one worker: members of staff have to work hard to keep the programme going. Monitoring and supervising the partner groups is particularly difficult because of the time it takes and its cost.

MTEA charges its members a fee: 20,000 Ugandan shillings (about €13) a year for a group, or 1000 shillings (€0.67) for an individual member. It also charges for training notes and leaflets that it produces: 100 shillings a sheet, so readers attach a value to them, and don't just throw them away. Income from these sources isn't enough to keep the organization going, so it relies on well-wishers and support from Vredeseilanden Coopibo, a Belgian NGO.

## Not just a library

MTEA's resource centre, next door to the office, is a small room lined with shelves and filled with chairs and reading tables. Books donated by LABE (see pp. 79–83) and BookAid (a British NGO) line the shelves. There are encyclopaedias and school- and college-level textbooks, as well as magazines such as *Footsteps*, a practical development newsletter published by the Tear Fund in the UK. Some of the books are not hugely relevant: bizarrely, there are several copies of *Principles of Oceanography* – hardly likely to be a winner in landlocked Uganda. But many do appear useful, and are well thumbed.

Michael Bazira, who runs the resource centre, explains that the room is not just a library. It's also where MTEA holds a lively series of training courses in practical subjects such as English letter-writing, grammar and business skills such as book-keeping and business administration. Michael Bazira is hoping to get accreditation for the courses from the Ugandan National Examinations Board so that learners can be awarded formal diplomas. He also hopes to offer computer training using MTEA's lone (and underpowered) computer.

The "E" in MTEA stands for "employment". Course participants have gone on to start schools or poultry farms: a fitting tribute to the success of this organization's grassroots development efforts.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Multi-Purpose Training and Employment Association, PO Box 93, Iganga, Uganda. Tel. (256) 43 242204

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# Literacy and local languages

## Local-language publications for neo-literates: What good is literacy if there is nothing to read?



Jacques Sultana

### Creating a literate environment in villages

Newspapers are hard to find in Tanghin Dassouri. The village is only 30 km from Ouagadougou, on the main road to Bobo Dioulasso, but newspapers pass it by.

They are even rarer in villages away from the road; there, the radio provides the sole, tenuous tie to the outside world. And many villages in Burkina Faso are too far away from a transmitter to receive a radio signal at all.

For several years, literacy campaigns have taught many village people in Burkina Faso how to read and write in their own language, opening the door to information, culture, training and self-help. But the campaigns do not last long enough to ensure that the learners will keep their skills. Occasional training courses cover practical subjects, such as how to process shea butter or breed livestock. But they are not organized on a regular basis.

Without anything to read, neo-literates become disheartened and quickly forget their new skills.

### “Those Willing to Arrange”

To respond to these problems, a group of literacy teachers in Tanghin Dassouri has formed an association they call Ratamanegré (“Those Willing to Arrange”). They have established a community information and training centre that collects and distributes materials in local languages.

The collection includes the major newspapers in the Mooré language, technical booklets on agriculture, small-business management and milling, and materials on health, family planning, female excision, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. It also has village narratives, local histories and humorous stories written by local people themselves.

The literacy teachers sell these materials to the villages. The resulting income goes into the association’s funds and pays for newspaper subscriptions. Ratamanegré also raises money by organizing shows and events during village fairs and market days.

## Roving libraries

Ablasse Zongo, president of Ratamanegré, says that thanks to support from GRAD, a European NGO, the association has added to its collection of literacy and training materials, and can now circulate them more widely. The association has made boxes to carry the books from village to village on a bicycle.

The villagers welcome these miniature, roving libraries, since they give neo-literates something to read. Some users travel several kilometres to meet the library when it passes through the village.

“We are now more able to make reading materials available to the villagers,” says Ablasse Zongo. “With these resources, we will even build our own office so we can be independent and will not have to pay rent.”

Ratamanegré’s book-exchange system also enables the association to gather manuscripts written by the villagers themselves, and to submit them for publication in local-language newspapers.

## What role do local-language newspapers play?

The Ratamanegré approach could be copied throughout Burkina Faso, says Evariste Zongo, who manages an association called AEPJLN (Association des éditeurs et promoteurs des journaux et revues en langues nationales).



Literacy campaigns and democratization have created an important potential audience for newspapers in rural areas, he says. In just a few years, more than 20 new periodicals have appeared: monthlies, bi-monthlies, quarterlies or semi-annuals, in seven different languages. They cover the main areas of the country, with print runs ranging from a few hundred to 8000 copies.

Evariste Zongo, manager of AEPJLN, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso  
(Photo: Jacques Sultan)



The Ratamanegré trainers in Tanghin Dassouri, Burkina Faso, and some of the literacy materials they have produced  
(Photo: Jacques Sultan)

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But do these newspapers really provide information to rural areas? asks Evariste Zongo. Do they bind society together, as one would expect a newspaper to do? Are they sustainable?

An AEPJLN study in 1993 provided some answers:

- Most of the local-language newspapers were created by NGOs, projects or local associations. They aimed to carry technical messages on farming or livestock, or to increase readers' awareness of health, hygiene or environmental issues. They did not play an interactive or social-bonding role;
- The volunteers who ran them lacked training in the necessary skills;
- They were dependent on their donors, and appeared irregularly because they lacked a business plan to promote reader loyalty, sales and sustainable partnerships;
- Distribution was a problem, except for those periodicals that were supported by organizations with a field-level network;
- They did not respond to readers' demands for social, political and cultural information.

## Emancipating the press

AEPJLN decided to try to emancipate these newspapers to improve their service to readers. With support from the Swiss and Burkina Faso governments, it formed a small team with desktop-publishing and training capabilities. It tried to show the newspaper managers how they could better meet readers' wishes for information and self-expression, and how to deal more effectively with local and national issues as they affected rural areas.

The AEPJLN team ran a series of courses for newspaper managers and journalists to upgrade and refresh their skills in information-gathering, editing, design and newspaper management. This training resulted in a noticeable improvement in the newspapers' contents and appearance.

Most of the newspapers established editorial boards with literate farmer-members to assist in gathering information. These have brought the newspapers closer to their readers, and have ensured they include local experiences and deal with real problems.

"After we had built this base, we became more selective in recruiting members," says Evariste Zongo. "To belong to AEPJLN and receive its support, the newspapers must now satisfy certain professional criteria: they must have an active network of local correspondents, they must manage their distribution system, they must use management and administrative tools, and they must be published regularly."



Some local-language newspapers supported by AEPJLN

## Improving distribution

In the long term, AEPJLN hopes to consolidate the professionalism of the local-language press in three areas: distribution, enterprise and partnerships.

The first of these, distributing the printed copies, is the main problem faced by most of the newspapers. To overcome it, they must work through organizations that have branches or representatives in each village, such as farmers' organizations, NGOs, cotton firms, banks, credit agencies and traders. Literacy teachers are especially important. Every village has one or two voluntary literacy teachers. As in Tanghin Dassouri, they can gather news as well as distribute newspapers and other reading materials.

## Becoming a press enterprise

Many local-language newspapers are funded by larger organizations: an NGO, a cotton company, a credit agency or a development project. It can be difficult to transform them into autonomous press enterprises. Their "parents" are reluctant to let them go. They fear an independent editorial line: they want to restrict coverage to technical extension messages and avoid debate about their own activities. This is particularly the case where the parent is a large company in an industry such as cotton.

AEPJLN is negotiating with several of the parents. It is trying to persuade them that democratic debate is a basis for mutual respect among economic players. Independent newspapers can provide a forum for this. They can guarantee balance and transparency in a debate that is both desirable and inevitable. For this to happen, the newspapers must become more professional. They must be able to work with the many players in rural society, providing these players with the opportunity to express their views, at the same time maintaining the newspapers' independence. (See Box 9).

## Developing media partnerships

Developing partnerships with other media is AEPJLN's third focus area. Community radio stations are multiplying, and they are a natural complement for the newspapers. The two media can help each other in important ways. Radio stations can promote the newspapers, for

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## BOX 9

### Cyberpriest

Everyone in Koudougou knows Maurice Oudet. He lives with his fellow priests of the Frères missionnaires d'Afrique order in this town 85 km west of Ouagadougou. Involved for many years in local-level development, Father Oudet bemoaned the lack of printed material in local languages, and the lack of information this represented for rural people in Burkina Faso.

#### Documents for farmers

So he decided to use his order's resources to set up a publishing service for the local languages. He has desktop-publishing equipment (computer, scanner, digital camera) and a digital duplicator. He works with a network of partners to collect and translate materials in various local languages, and to write original texts based on village experiences.

Father Oudet started out by founding a quarterly magazine on rural life in Mooré and Dioula. The French version, entitled *Les amis de la terre* ("Friends of the Soil"), aims to publicize the magazine among French speakers. The magazine is sold for 150 CFA francs (€0.22). It is in high demand from villagers, but distribution problems limit the print run to 2000 copies of the Mooré version and 1000 of the one in Dioula.

Father Oudet also offers translation, formatting and publishing services for outside organizations wishing to publish in local languages. CESAQ, an NGO based in Bobo Dioulasso (see p. 66), is one user of this service. Several of its "rural notebooks" have been translated and published in local languages through the service. Another user is Assistance écologique, also an NGO, which has published a rural almanac in cooperation with the priests.

#### Teaching computers the local language

The local languages in Burkina Faso use several characters and accents that cannot be produced on a standard computer keyboard. No problem for the cyberpriest: Father Oudet has written a programme that allows a user to type these characters on the computer. He is also a member of a group that promotes the use of African languages on the Internet.

Father Oudet's publishing service is growing rapidly. It has produced articles and books on a range of farming topics, including soil erosion, compost-making, the use of manure, village extension, post-harvesting management, and high-yielding crop varieties.

The young people of Koudougou and NGO managers visit the priests for training in computers, desktop publishing and e-mail.

(continued overleaf)



Above: Stapling booklets published by the Frères missionnaires d'Afrique in Koudougou, Burkina Faso  
*(Photo: Jacques Sultan)*

Below: Maurice Oudet, the cyberpriest of Koudougou, Burkina Faso, editing a local-language publication  
*(Photo: Jacques Sultan)*



Father Oudet is working with the Koudougou radio station to publish a bulletin that will reinforce and give further details about radio programmes. The bulletin is in the local language, of course.

#### **Collaborating to solve distribution problems**

To make their services more cost-effective and to reach more people, the priests are exploring partnerships with the rural organizations, especially FENOP (Fédération nationale des organisations paysannes du Burkina), a national federation of rural organizations. They are negotiating setting up a joint editorial board with FENOP. This would make it possible to plan a series of bulletins, handbooks and files containing information and training materials for farmers.

The publications would be produced in Koudougou using the priests' equipment; FENOP would handle the distribution through its network, which covers the whole country.

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example, by reporting on their contents and telling listeners where to find them. They can organize public forums and can broadcast debates about the issues aired in news articles, so reinforcing their impact and stimulating discussion.

For their part, the newspapers provide information in a more permanent form than a broadcast. They can offer radio listeners a printed discussion of subjects covered in a programme. They can provide longer, more complete information on subjects of interest to rural people, such as decentralization, land reform, land tenure, and the rules governing farmers' associations.

Technical booklets and extension manuals can complement both newspapers and radio. They contain more complex information and outline a range of options, in a format that eases training and extension work.

Evariste Zongo sums up AEPJLN's approach in this way: "We are convinced that printed and audio communication tools must be used in a complementary way, to give farmers the information to which they have a right, in their own languages, so they can control their lives and make their own decisions. That is our goal."

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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# Literacy and local languages

## Farmer-journalists in Burkina Faso: Speaking our language



Jacques Sultan

“Is it really honest to go to farmers, collect information from them, process it and spread it around the world, but deprive them of it?” asks Souleymane Ouattara, the journalist in charge of Agence Syfia, an agricultural information network in Burkina Faso.

“All year long,” he adds, “we comb the villages to write reports, conduct studies and do interviews about local people’s activities, their problems, their questions, their lives. We often gather this information in the local language. We translate it into French and distribute it to over 100 newspapers that serve French-speaking readers. But what do the farmers, our sources in the field, what do they get out of it?”

He answers his own question: “Not much: they don’t speak French, and the newspapers don’t reach them. But it would be right if they could know what is being said, and if they could learn how farmers elsewhere solve problems like the ones they face. What can be done to make this feedback actually happen?”

Souleymane Ouattara is one of a group of African journalists working with Agence Syfia who founded JADE (Journalistes africains pour le développement) in 1994. JADE aims to answer these questions, analyse problems in the media, and redefine the relationship between the media and the rural people who are their main source of information.

Together with farmers and rural people, the JADE journalists in Burkina Faso explore ways to provide information to the villages, and to promote exchanges among villages, among regions within a country, and among countries.

Farmers producing and managing their own information: is this a dream?

### A village debate

“We did the first experiment in Tanghin Dassouri, a village about 30 km from Ouagadougou. A group of literacy trainers had formed an association to spread information in local languages in the surrounding villages.” (See p. 89)

JADE gave the trainers a set of articles produced by Agence Syfia, and suggested that they choose the articles that most interested them. The trainers selected topics with the biggest impact on the everyday life of the community – although many of the articles had been

collected in another area, or even in another country, such as sexual abuse of girl pupils by teachers in schools in Benin, pig diseases in Chad, or female excision in Mali.

The selected articles were translated into the local language – carefully, to avoid misunderstandings due to poor translation. The translated articles were then given to groups of farmers.



Collecting farmers' opinions for a radio programme in Burkina Faso  
(Photo: Souleymane Ouattara, JADE)

That stimulated some passionate debates. The articles covered issues that the local people faced, but which they were not used to discussing openly because of social and cultural taboos. If the starting point is somewhere else, it is easier to begin discussing subjects that are relevant to the village itself.

### Broadcasting the debates

The discussions were recorded and broadcast as a series of programmes by the local radio stations. The listeners were enthusiastic. They asked that the programmes be continued because they covered crucial issues, and because people like themselves were involved.

West Africa has seen a marked increase in the number of rural radio stations. But it is not enough to establish new stations, says Souleymane Ouattara. It is also necessary to ensure that people participate in the programmes, and that the programmes serve their needs. "It's not about just creating radios or newspapers; it's also about the content that they carry," he points out. "This aspect is very often neglected."

"If there were people on the spot to do this, the radio would speak to people and they could recognize themselves in the programmes. That is what JADE wants to do. We are convinced that it is possible, using simple methods, to train farmers to make good radio, good newspapers. If they can read and write in their own language, they have an important asset. They only need the right tools, appropriate training, and enough backup."

### Farmers on editorial boards

Two rural newspapers are trying to do something similar. *Venegda* (written in the Mooré language) and *Hakilifalen* (in Dioula) have been published for seven years with the support of INADES Formation—Burkina Faso (see p. 92).

# Literacy and local languages

The production of these newspapers has undergone an important shift. The newspapers decided to involve their readers in their operations by organizing farmer-editorial boards and by stimulating the writing of articles by readers.

Forty such boards were set up in the areas where the newspapers were distributed. These boards analysed the contents and format of the papers and proposed changes to adapt the editorial content to their needs. The farmers on the boards were given training and technical support, and they began to contribute articles based on grassroots-level information. The various boards are being linked through a series of coordination workshops.

## A rural press agency

Both the newspaper and radio experiments are encouraging, and there are many similar local initiatives throughout Africa. These initiatives open possibilities for developing the rural press and radio by involving their readers and listeners more actively. Rural areas are a rich source of information, and rural people feel attached to their newspapers and radio stations. With the right training and support, they can contribute to programmes and can write on subjects important to them.

Organizations in rural areas could form editorial boards, choose topics of local interest, collect information in the villages through interviews or debates, process this information and provide it to the media through a clearing house.



Using an improvised boom microphone to interview women farmers in Burkina Faso  
(Photo: Souleymane Outtara, JADE)

The members of these groups could be seen as local media correspondents in rural areas. Such a system could be the beginning of a rural press agency that would disseminate this information to local-language newspapers and radio stations.

These local correspondents could become true professionals. They could be paid according to how much they produce. They could also distribute newspapers and other publications in remote areas. They could also use other media such as video, audiocassettes and posters.

A rural press agency, able to provide authentic local information, would be invaluable for local-language newspapers and radio stations. It would enable them to offer richer, more relevant local content and win new audiences. Indeed, such a vision is a basic element of the

communication strategy of many organizations focused on rural development, such as FENOP, the national federation of rural organizations in Burkina Faso (see Box 9).

Farmers producing and managing their own information? Not a dream: it is becoming a reality.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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