

# IK Notes

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## Grassroots Dissemination of Research in Africa: Collecting and Connecting

**H**ow often does the still-limited quantity of research carried out by African researchers actually reach an African audience that is ready and able to use its results? By what channels does this communication pass and by what means can it have the most positive effect?

Methods for grassroots dissemination of the results of African research are being worked out at local levels through a USAID-funded endeavor, the ABEL Project (Achieving Basic Education and Literacy),

The project involves disseminating studies carried out by African researchers around the theme “decentralization and local capacity-building,” but doing so in a manner that includes both the disseminators and the target audience in critiquing the studies, documenting and analyzing their own related experience, and drawing practical policy conclusions from the results.

### Carrying out research worth disseminating

The original studies for this experiment were conducted between 1996 and 1998, through previous ABEL funding, by teams of African researchers in several countries. This approach was innovative in a number of respects, notably by the highly developed form of subcontracting. Rather than engage the researchers as “hired guns” to carry out studies directed by a northern institution, the entity with the

ABEL contract (the Florida State University) contracted with research teams on a fixed-price basis to propose and carry out studies on a series of topics. The topics were drawn from a list of priority research targets established by the Working Group on Nonformal Education (WG/NFE) of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).

ADEA is a consortium of all African Ministers of Education and representatives of all principal donor agencies. It functions primarily through working groups of different sub-sectors of education directed by consortia of African educators and donor representatives. The Working Group on Nonformal Education and Training—established after the ADEA biennial meeting of 1995 and sponsored jointly by the Swiss Agency of International Cooperation and the Ministers of Education of Ghana, Mali and Senegal—met for its first plenary in spring 1996 in Dakar

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and adopted a list of priority topics for research.

The policy adopted was to invite African research teams to submit proposals on one or more of the topics selected, and to enter into agreements with those able to do research through a performance contract mechanism. This approach required the researchers to produce work of agreed-upon quality within definite time limits *and* gave them a great deal of flexibility — so necessary under the uncertain conditions for research that exist in Africa — in order to decide how best to allocate the sums to achieve those ends. Strict accountability for expenditures was required *ex post*, but teams did not have to adhere to the originally proposed budgetary breakdown.

A number of very interesting studies were conducted, several of them spanning more than one country and including portions carried out by separate research teams, who then had an opportunity to compare results. Subjects investigated included (a) the acquisition of skills in the informal sector of the urban economy, (b) the practical uses of Koranic literacy, (c) means for building competencies in women's coopera-

tives, (d) new formulas for NGO-government cooperation in providing nonformal education, and (e) experiments in informal primary schooling.

### Getting the word out

The question now was how to disseminate this research to those at the local level who would use it. With ABEL funding, a series of studies on skill acquisition in women's cooperatives and the problems encountered in meeting their management challenges had been done in rural Ghana and Mali in 1996-1997. The results were compiled, written up, reported in conferences, and made available both in hard copy in the two countries and via the Internet. But these modes of distribution did little for women in similar situations across West Africa who might benefit from the Ghanaian and Malian experience, but who evidently neither attended professional conferences, nor perhaps had access to the Internet.

Project staff therefore decided to think "outside the box" in developing the dissemination phase of the activity. The idea was to involve researchers in other potentially interested African countries in

- culling through the studies
- identifying studies most relevant to local problems in each country
- proposing target audiences who might benefit from the research results
- developing a methodology for making these people aware of the results and helping them to compare and draw conclusions from the Ghanaian and Malian experiences.

The intermediate institutional structure to accomplish this task was the newly formed National Working Group on Nonformal Education — a consortium of public and private agencies (NGOs) involved with nonformal education and affiliated with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).

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## Results in Benin

In Benin, the embryonic Working Group on Nonformal Education went through the entire collection of studies done by African researchers under Phase I of the ABEL Project and selected three of interest to local educators: (a) skill creation in women's cooperatives, (b) the practical uses of Koranic literacy (described in IK Notes 11, August 1999), and (c) knowledge acquisition in the informal sector of the urban economy. It then invited its own constituent groups and other teams of researchers within Benin to propose methods for disseminating these studies in the field. The Benin NGO "RAMPE" proposed taking the Malian and Ghanaian studies on women's cooperatives to officers and members of similar institutions in the Toviklin region of northern Benin who, despite initial successes, were having difficulty developing their own movement.

Researchers took a summary of the nature and results of the study to leaders of the different cooperatives, and made a first discovery. Out of more than 100 entities listed as members of the network, only 21 actually were women-directed enterprises. Out of these, the research team identified ten that would be interested in the exercise and available to carry it out. They proceeded to develop a methodology for presenting the essential nature and results of the Malian and Ghanaian studies to members of each of the ten cooperatives. They then gathered their leaders to discuss how the experience of these two other countries compared with that of Toviklin and what practical conclusions might be drawn from the exercise.

The activity provoked a genuine effort of self-evaluation and situational analysis by the Beninois groups, which were so fascinated by news of progress made by their "sisters" in these two neighboring countries that they moved to identify several areas of blockage in their own situation that had prevented them from achieving autonomy. Principal among these was a deficiency in training and a consequent inability to handle the fiscal management of their new enterprises. They resolved to seek early integration—on their own terms—into a centrally sponsored literacy campaign then underway in northern Benin, and to decide on securing training for their elected officials. A number of details regarding the organization of women's cooperatives in Mali and Ghana — and

the roles played in them by men—were also discussed and compared with conditions in Benin.

## Social marketing as a two-edged sword

This approach has evolved into both a means for social marketing and action research and a strategy for disseminating innovation. Its strength lies in the active involvement of target groups and their appropriation and ownership of the subject material—as well as in the potential cascading effects and learning consequences. But experience in both phases of the ABEL studies demonstrates that it has an impact at two levels: within the communities involved, and among the cadre of researchers responsible for facilitating the exercise.

This research is different than that usually taught and practiced. It is research as a conversation about indigenous knowledge, its refinement, and its practical applications. Those responsible for the work must struggle to make existing studies understandable in practical terms and help their "clients" recognize the fruit of their own experience as research worth comparing with work done elsewhere. In addition, a difficult and innovative aspect of the undertaking was the degree of management responsibility, including budgetary oversight and accountability, devolving to the researchers involved. Deploying staff to accomplish objectives as complex and integrated with local reality as the ones assigned to this dissemination scheme was an adventure in its own right, since few of the participating researchers had experience managing such an intervention. However, the responsibility was motivating, and the challenge instructional.

The style of dissemination in Benin has not been the only one developed. In Botswana, the National Working Group performed similar activities—selecting once again a set of studies by African researchers that spoke to issues of local interest—but resorting instead to a strategy of bringing leaders of NGOs together around each topic to pool national experience and compare it with the data and conclusions of the studies. Though a step more removed from the field, this approach had the virtue of creating a setting favorable to policy decisions and new forms of collaboration among the actors involved.

### Where next?

Next efforts are under way in September/October 1999 in The Gambia and Chad, and focused on studies conducted in five other West African countries around the theme of decentralization and local capacity building—that is, how local communities, enterprises and associations have acquired the competence to assume new development functions in an era of government decentralization. Gambian and Chadian researchers—drawn this time both from the countries' nonformal education working groups *and* from the ranks of their Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development—started by doing an inventory of the many sites where local groups had begun identifying those that might participate in dissemination and comparison. Results will be available by the end of the year.

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