

ALEF

Strategy, method and approach

Adults able to use reading, writing and numeracy to take charge of their lives, economically as well as socially, carry out income generating activities, claim their rights and fulfil their duties, and participate in decision making processes in the family, in the local community and on a national level.

1. Introduction: Why Adult Literacy?

Literacy is in itself a human right. Without basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy, it is hard to know and claim one's rights in all areas of life, in the family, the local community as well as nationally.

According to Unesco, there are 750 million illiterate youth and adults in the world. There are approximately 800 million people living in extreme poverty. These are more or less the same people. In spite of this, only approximately 0.2% of international development funding is spent on adult literacy.

People lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills are especially vulnerable to corruption, to being cheated in business transactions and to miss important information. They are unable to monitor their children's school work. They risk misusing medicine because they cannot read dosage instruction or dates. They are exposed to being disregarded and mocked in their local communities, to being subjected to power abuse, discrimination and violence. They lack the skills to control their own economy and to participate actively in civil society organisations, or take leadership roles in their communities.

It is not a humane strategy to simply wait for an illiterate generation to die out, and in the meantime put every effort into educating children. One reason is that children to illiterate parents tend to be disadvantaged in their school work, and the problem risks being transmitted from one generation to the next. In many low income countries, almost all children start primary school, but five years later, at least a third have dropped out, especially girl children. The reason for this is above all the parents: parents who cannot afford paying the school fees, parents who do not understand the value of education for their girls, parents who cannot assist and support their children in their school work.

Another reason for adult literacy is this: It takes around 10-12 years to educate at child. Adults who participate in an ALEF empowerment group start implementing important life changes after less than one month of participation, and are fluent readers after two consecutive courses of 6 months each. The results in terms of improved economy, improved health and improved ability to claim and defend one's rights are immediate results of adult education, and will directly spill over on the living conditions and the education of the children.

2. What is ALEF?

ALEF, Adult Learning and Empowerment Fund, is a Swedish non-profit organisation founded in May 2010. ALEF's mission is to provide local development actors with a method and skills for running adult education programs in the mother tongue, enabling these local actors to assist illiterate youth and adults in acquiring skills and knowledge so that they themselves are able to:

- take control over their economy and their health care and improve their living conditions,
- understand and defend their rights and take action to change the mechanisms behind oppression, discrimination and poverty,
- gain access to decision processes, community services and common arenas,
- use their mother tongue in writing for a variety of purposes, thus preserving their cultural heritage and identity.

Our strategy is to build partnerships with local Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) who are well integrated in the local culture and language, with a passion for assisting their own people to escape poverty. ALEF provides the expertise in adult literacy and empowerment, helps develop materials, and trains the local CBOs to carry out the projects.

ALEF currently has three ongoing partnerships with local NGOs in East and West Africa. Our first partnership started in 2010 with a Togolese NGO, Acatbli, working since many years in the Ifè language of Togo and Benin. Since 2013 we have a project in the Mashi language of South Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo with ADECK, an NGO working in the Kabare territory. In Uganda we cooperate with CACI, Change African Child International, working with Luganda speakers in the Wakiso district of Uganda.

ALEF has a board of 8. The founder and executive chair, Hélène Boëthius has 30 years' experience of working in Adult Literacy, first for 15 years in Togo, West Africa, then from work involving project planning, monitoring and evaluation, adult education and literacy with several Swedish development agencies, including the Swedish Medical Mission (Läkarmissionen) and PMU InterLife.

ALEF has a Swedish charity account (90-konto). All accounts and activities are controlled and audited annually by a chartered accountant. A maximum of 25% of the revenue can be used for administration and fund raising.

3. Strategies for partnership

Scalability and maximum effect to lowest possible cost are key elements in ALEF's strategy, as well as the ambition to ensure local ownership and participation from the start. We build partnerships with NGOs working in rural or sub-urban areas, who are familiar with the local language, culture and specific socio-economic situation, and with a passion for bringing about development among people living in poverty. We are also open to cooperate with governmental agencies and international development actors.

We are interested in two different types of partnership:

"I thought that school was only for boys. When I started attending the study group and learnt to read and write, I understood that girls also need to go to school, so I enrolled all my girls in the local primary school."



3.1. Direct partnerships with local NGOs

ALEF offers direct partnerships with a limited number of local NGOs. Prospective partners are invited to submit their documentation including references to donors and other partners. An important aspect is that the partner organization has competence in handling outside funding, having well established routines for financial management. They need to have ongoing activities in the field, and be familiar with the local language and culture.

In an initial workshop with the partner organization, ALEF's approach, method and basic values are presented. A background study is made of the overall life situation of the prospective participants in the project. This includes visits to locations and meetings with the population and local leaders, as well as discussions with local authorities and other key stake holders.

In this first workshop, a plan for a pilot project is drawn up and a tentative time frame is established for the training and production of course materials. A memorandum of understanding is drawn up and signed. Usually these MoUs are made for one year at a time, and are renewed if the cooperation proves satisfactory. ALEF has a zero tolerance of corruption, embezzlement and financial irregularities, and will always stop any cooperation with immediate effect if such practices are discovered.

For each new cooperation, external funding has to be found. When funding is secured, a series of workshops for training begins. Over three years, a program for three consecutive levels of adult education courses is designed in month long workshops offered by ALEF to the staff of the local partner organization. For each of the three levels in the program, a group leaders' manual and a participant's booklet are created. The group leaders' manual contains detailed instructions for each group session. All manuals and booklets are written in the local mother tongue.

When a manual and participants' booklet for the first level course have been produced, the partner organization trains group leaders and runs a pilot project with a limited number of groups. A mid-term evaluation visit is usually made by ALEF. When the group have completed the first level, the local NGO participates in another workshop with ALEF, where the manual is revised and a manual for the next level is produced.

Once the materials have been developed and tested by the local NGO, other NGOs working in the same mother tongue can be invited to receive training to use the manuals by the local NGO trained by ALEF. In this way, one set of course materials in a mother tongue can be used by a large number of stakeholders working with that particular mother tongue.

Scalability is an important part of ALEF's strategy. If mother tongue literacy is to be established in any given language community, it is important that a substantial proportion of the speakers actually are able to use their language for written communication. This requires that the non formal education is in the hands of multiple local actors.

"I used to go and work on my fields whenever I felt like it. When I learnt to use a calendar, I started to plan my farming and write down in my calendar when to do what. I managed to double the yield of my fields."



3.2. Partnering with other national or international development actors

ALEF's ambition is to ensure that there are materials based on ALEF's approach in as many as possible of the world's mother tongues where there is a need for adult non formal education and literacy. We will never be able to reach this goal if we only continue to run our own projects. Therefore, we offer our services to other development actors with development programs where adult literacy is or can be an important component.

In these partnerships, ALEF can provide trainers who facilitate a series of workshops (4-5 weeks each) for a small group of staff from the development agency. In an introductory workshop, the life situation of the future participants is studied, and the orthography and sound system of the local language, and the ALEF approach is introduced and discussed in terms of local needs. In the second workshop, a first year course is created, and a group leader's manual and participants' booklet are produced. In two more workshops, materials for levels 2 and 3 are created. In a fifth and final workshop, all materials are revised. ALEF can also carry out monitoring visits in the field to assess how the method is applied and the effects on the participants.

In such a partnership, ALEF's responsibility is purely technical. It is assumed that the implementing organisation has established funders and partnerships which will ensure that an ongoing program can be established. The contracting organisation will be responsible for funding the project, including the ALEF workshops, and for personnel costs for ALEF.

4. The ALEF method

4.1. The theoretic framework

The ALEF method is based on long experience of adult literacy programs. Elements have been incorporated from a number of different methods, like the "conscientization" method of Paulo Freire, later redesigned as REFLECT, but also the phonic method, and the Whole Language or Text Based approach (Swedish "läsning på talets grund", French "Pédagogie des textes")

But above all, the ALEF method starts where the learners are, with their specific life situations and challenges. We firmly believe that the learning situation has to be immediately relevant to the lives of the learners. Ideally, they should be able to go home from each group session and practise something which they have learnt, either in terms of reading and writing or numeracy, or ideas and decisions from the discussions held during each session.

An important aspect of ALEF's method is that all learning takes place based on texts which are natural and complete (a minimum text consists of one complete sentence), and that there are no drills of syllables or even isolated words used in the learning process. Meaning and relevance take precedence over simplification and mechanical practise. Reading is best learnt by sounding out real words in a real and relevant text, not by mechanically practicing syllable drills.

The ALEF method is also based on the fact that people use several different strategies for reading and understanding written text. Most literacy programs have focused on only one reading strategy:

1. Decoding words and meaning by **reading each individual letter** or **syllable** one at a time from left to right, sounding them out and unravelling the meaning.

However, there are two other reading strategies which are just as important and "correct" when reading a text:

2. **Reading whole words** by looking at the entire shape of the word, without deciphering the individual letters and syllables. This is the way most fluent readers read words which they are familiar with. That's why they can read and understand text which contains spelling mistakes, often without even noticing them.
3. **Filling in and guessing** through the grammatical context and from their knowledge of the world. This is what allows us to skim through a text, only hovering over some of the most important words on each line, guessing the rest as we go along.

ALEF's method imitates a learning style familiar for people in many traditional societies, where reading, writing and explaining things verbally are not commonly used as learning strategies. In these societies, people learn by *watching* a task being performed over and over again and finally start to *imitate* it, gradually building up skills and competence. We believe that it is possible to use the same learning style in acquiring literacy skills. It is also important that learning is done as a group and not individually. Literacy is about communication, and the focus should be on interacting around text, using text for everyday purposes and relating to the contents of the text. "Reading books" is not what literacy is all about, but rather communicating, agreeing, planning, remembering and expressing thoughts.

This is why the ALEF method is based on using only grammatically correct whole sentences in the mother tongue. Each lesson takes its starting point in such a sentence written by the group leader on the blackboard. The group creates texts together, based on group discussions, texts which are used for reading practice. This allows the group to have ownership of their own texts, and stimulates their own creativeness and reflection. As participants watch their group leader write down the spoken language, they learn how to form thoughts into written words, one letter at a time. When in later levels, these texts are printed and posted on village notice boards, people feel the pride of being authors, and being able to communicate to the community.

4.2. How an Empowerment Group works

Groups learning through the ALEF approach are called Empowerment groups. An Empowerment Group is a non formal adult education group. It is not a school, and is not part of the country's formal school system. An Empowerment Group consists of up to 25 participants aged 15 to 40 years. The groups can be either gender specific or mixed, depending on the focus of the partner organisation and the socio-cultural context.

The Empowerment groups arrange their own meeting places, sometimes by asking local leaders or other civil society actors to provide them with meeting places, sometimes simply meeting in a home, under a tree or under a simple shelter which they build themselves. Groups meet twice or three times weekly for a couple of hours each time. One level usually takes 6 to 7 months to complete.

A group leader is identified for each group. The group leader should live locally and be a speaker of the language to use. In each project, a profile is drawn up for the qualifications of a group leader. Usually they have at least 9 years of school, and are fluent readers in their mother tongue. Group

"We discussed in the group about mosquito nets. I thought they were only for pregnant women. After the discussion I started to sleep under my net, and I have stopped getting malaria all the time."



leaders receive a two week full time training course provided by the project staff (usually those who participated in creating the materials and learnt the method from ALEF in the workshops).

The local organisation is recommended to recruit a number of coaches, who make monitoring visits to the groups once or twice monthly. One coach is usually responsible for 5 to 10 groups. The coaches report to the project leader.

4.3. The steps of an ALEF lesson

In all three levels, each lesson is built on a series of steps which are roughly the same in each lesson. This makes it easy for group leaders to conduct the sessions. Group meetings are highly participative.

STEP 1: The theme text

Each lesson starts with a theme text. The text describes an everyday situation without giving solutions or value judgments.

In level 1 the text is usually a one sentence statement. The group leader writes the sentence on the blackboard while the participants watch. The group leader then reads it, and the participants repeat it word by word as she points to the words. The theme texts are printed in the participants' booklet. The theme texts describe a life situation typical for the learners context, but without offering a value judgement or a solution. A typical theme text in level one is "Mary's child had diarrhoea for four days before it died." or "John wanted to buy a new bicycle, so he married off his 13 year old daughter" or "Tamale's wedding may never take place, because his fiancée wants him to test for HIV".

In level 2, the theme text is a short paragraph. In this level the participants read the text in their booklets. The level 2 theme texts introduce both a current life situation and a mathematical problem to be solved later in the lesson. The text is usually three or four sentences long, and increases in length during the course.

A typical level 2 text can be "Jane's mother sent her to buy 9 eggs in the market. On the way home, she started to play with the other children and broke 4 eggs. When she came home her mother beat her with a stick, and hurt her so badly that she had to take the child to the hospital." The numeracy problem hidden in the text is $9-4=$

STEP 2 : Learning a new letter or a new maths operation

In level 1, the group leader then isolates a word from the theme text, and a new letter is isolated and learnt from this word. Participants then underline all known letters in the theme text, starting with the one they just learnt. After 15-20 group meetings, there are always several words in the text where all letters have been learnt/underlined, and participants start decoding words and sometimes the whole text, using all three reading strategies.

Participants also practice writing the new letter, both in isolation and in words containing the new letter. Towards the end of the course, they write sentences, by taking dictation as well as writing down their own thoughts.

In level 2, a mathematics problem is constructed from the theme text, and a new mathematics operation is taught. The participants practise the new mathematics operation learnt, first on the blackboard and then in their note books. There are exercises noted in the group leaders' manual and in the participants' booklets.

STEP 3 : The discussion

In all levels, a discussion is always held about the situation described in the theme text, using three questions:

- ✓ Do you have similar experiences?
- ✓ Why is it like this?
- ✓ What can we do about it?

The group leader is trained to encourage all group members to participate. No opinions or ideas are condemned as “wrong”, and the group leader should not tell people what they ought to do or think, or pronounce value statements when participants tell their experiences or state their ideas. Usually the discussions end up by groups taking decisions together on how they want to act to handle the specific life situation discussed. Peer pressure and mutual encouragement reinforce behaviour change in the participants. They check on each other and support each other to actually start acting on what they discuss.

STEP 4 : Text creation

In level 1, the participants finish each meeting by creating a text about what they have discussed. The participants tell the group leader what to write, and watch as she writes the text on the blackboard. The group leader rereads the text, and participants suggest additions and changes, until they are happy with the text.

The participants then go to the blackboard and underline all the letters they have learnt. They look for words where all letters are underlined, and read them out loud. After about half the course, many can read the whole text without help.

In level 2, the groups either create a text together on the blackboard like in level 1, or write a short text on their own in their note books.

STEP 5: Learning a second language

Learning a second language often starts in level 2. In some projects, 10 minutes are spent at the end of each lesson learning oral English or French. Then in level 3, participants learn to read and write English/French, and increase their vocabulary considerably.

In the project in DR Congo, participants in level 2 read a sentence in Kiswahili at the end of the lesson. This sentence is a summary of the theme text. Virtually all participants already speak and understand some Kiswahili. Since the orthography is similar to that of the mother tongue, this helps them realize that they already know how to read Swahili as well as the mother tongue. In level 3, they read and write texts in both languages.

Level 3

In the third level, groups read longer texts, discuss them as before, and write texts like in the earlier levels, but with the ambition of getting the published on the notice boards which are set up for this purpose in all locations where there are level 3 groups. They also continue practising the four mathematics operations. Texts cover three domains: creating a good life, learning to understand and defend one’s basic human rights, and learning to create and run a civil society group. Contents of texts and specific subjects vary from project to project. The aim is that all groups will transform into some type of permanent civil society group, like a savings and loans group, an income generating group or an association. We have found that groups often join other ongoing development schemes, profiting from what is being offered, using their new literacy and numeracy skills to take advantage of what other development actors offer.

"People ask why we learn to read in our own language. I ask them if they have ever heard of someone who climbs a tree from the top down"



5. Language choice

ALEF wants to confirm the right of every ethnic group to have their own cultural way of expression. We are committed to *using the mother tongue* of the participants in all adult basic learning projects, both as the language for instruction and as the first language to read and write in.

Research shows that the mother tongue is the best language for learning to read. The learning is faster and easier, the knowledge becomes more deeply engrained in the person's cognitive processes, and it is easier to apply the skills to daily life activities. Reading and writing become part of the person's language skills and are associated with the primary means of expression and thought of the person. The culture can now be expressed both orally and in written form.

Having access to reading only through another (usually European) language, indirectly conveys the message that the own language is of less worth; it is perceived as a "dialect", poor in vocabulary and badly suited for written communication. Hence the speaker's culture and identity are also devalued. This indirectly communicates that to "become somebody" you must leave your own ethnicity behind and embrace the culture of "the white people". ALEF would like to reinforce the idea that all languages are perfectly good vehicles for communication, for culture and for self expression, and can be used for all practical purposes of a given ethnic group.

However, adult non formal education is not complete without **also** learning to speak and write a second language. This is best done after having mastered reading and writing in the mother tongue. In the ALEF approach a second language is introduced in level 2 and continued in level 3. Reading and writing in the mother tongue continues throughout all three levels. The idea is not to gradually replace the mother tongue with the second language, but to be equally confident in using both.

6. Results and effects

Basic skills in reading, writing and numeracy are important tools for interaction in any society. The skills in themselves do not make a person more intelligent; they are tools, which facilitate daily living. They give access to shared arenas and contexts inaccessible to a person lacking these skills. The skills also give status and self esteem to people who earlier were considered as less important or who saw themselves as inferior.

Most participants in adult learning courses are women. For them, the course becomes a means to increase equality. Participation in an Empowerment Group increases the participants' self-esteem, and gives them tools and courage to claim and use their rights in relation to their spouses and in the community. Mothers who participate in such a course are more likely to ensure that their children, including their girls, attend school and do well in school.

A basic course in reading, writing and maths does not give a single ticket out of poverty, but it provides tools for handling income generating activities, and for taking better control of the family economy and to increase production. When people can use a calendar to plan activities, keep a cash book and make simple calculations, they will be able to handle their everyday activities in a way

which leads to decreased expenses and increased income. Many African women engage in some type of marketing of goods or produce. Being able to calculate prices which ensure a reasonable profit is key to their economic survival. A simple thing like writing down the names of people who buy on credit can make the difference between profit or loss in a week's work.

The Empowerment Group discuss topics relating to health and hygiene, such as diarrhoea, malaria, HIV/Aids, etc. Understanding how some major diseases are transmitted and how to treat them with simple methods, such as rehydration fluid for diarrhoea, and learning to recognize symptoms which need medical care, can save both lives and money, and improve health in the learners' families. Hundreds of participants in ALEF's projects now sleep under the mosquito nets which they had already been given by other programmes, thanks to a discussion during the group session. Others have plucked up the courage to test for HIV, and are now on retroviral drugs. Many households now wash their hands before they eat and after visiting the toilet. Many have started boiling their drinking water. Housewives in Congo have realized that serving cold food can cause dysentery, and have started to serve the food warm.

A society where more people are literate has better chances for a good democratic development, and for developing a strong civil society. By using dialogue and reflection in the group meetings, participants are motivated to take action for positive change in their local communities. Reading and writing skills open the possibility for active citizenship by people who are informed about their rights and duties. There are numerous examples of how Empowerment groups have taken action to claim their rights by writing letters to relevant local authorities, or by visiting the local leaders as a group. The training and experience given to group leaders creates new leaders in the local communities and in the civil society organisations. Many group leaders and also group members have been able to take up local leadership positions in the civil society or in government offices.

A vast majority of the participants in Empowerment groups make real and lasting changes in their lives. Many start small micro enterprises, or some income generating activity, often in a small group with some of their friends from the Empowerment Group. Several groups have transformed into cooperatives producing craft or other cottage industry products for sale. Other groups have started saving money together, and give small short term loans to members, either for paying children's school fees for starting income generating activities. We see a change in mentality in the participants, from being passive and defeated to beginning to take action and change their lives. The support of the group members provide the courage and strength to start handling life situations which seemed impossible. Hope and courage replace despair and low self esteem.

ALEF believes that non formal adult literacy and numeracy is the missing foundation which will make it possible for the world's 750 million illiterate adults to start profiting from the many development programs offered in their countries, and to take charge of their lives and start taking steps out of poverty and into full participation in society. We would like to form partnerships which makes it possible for many more to experience this transformation.

"Our group discussed the military road blocks. At each road block we have to pay. There were six road blocks on the way to our market, so we never made any money. We wrote a letter to the traditional chief and complained about this. Two weeks later, three of the road blocks were taken down."

