

Knowledge Network
Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation
Research Brief #8

*The impacts of the
Functional Adult Literacy
program on people's lives
and livelihoods*

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This brief is part of a series of research briefs of the DCR consortium. The purpose is to communicate lessons and corresponding recommendations for program quality improvement. For information on the research methodology please refer to the full report, available upon request.

Since 2011, DCR Liberia has been implementing the Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) program through ZOA Liberia, one of the three DCR member organizations that are collaborating to implement DCR activities in Liberia and its two local partners, NAEAL and SHIFSD¹. The adult literacy program consists of two different phases of Functional Adult Literacy (FAL) circles.

The first phase (FAL 1) lasts for 9 months with classes lasting 1h30, 2 to 3 times a week. Classes are aimed at illiterate people eager to learn the English alphabet, short words and short sentences, numbers and basic calculations. The second phase (FAL 2) lasts for 6 to 9 months and consists of 2 to 3 classes per week. It is mainly meant for people who have completed FAL 1 circles, but is also open to people with relevant skills. In order to attend FAL 2 circles, candidates must pass a test which verifies their basic knowledge of literacy and numeracy as presented in the FAL 1 curriculum. FAL 2 focuses on the candidates' advancement in reading, writing and numeracy. It also adopts a REFLECT approach to social analysis where participants are encouraged to discuss issues experienced in their communities. This reflection can stimulate the candidates to get involved in relevant social issues.

At the start of this research in September 2013, 1336 students were enrolled in FAL 1 in 70 communities, and 1564 students were registered in FAL 2 in 67 communities. The majority of the students were women (85% of FAL 1 participants, 68% of FAL 2 participants). This research aimed at determining how adult literacy impacts people's lives and livelihoods. The overall research objectives include, 1) improve the intervention and increase the effectiveness of FAL, 2) use the research findings for advocacy and fund-raising and, 3) potentially expand FAL throughout the program of the DCR and ZOA by adding FAL to their other activities.

As a result, the study focused on the following research questions:

1. How do the Functional Adult Literacy circles affect people's lives?
2. What is the impact of the Functional Adult literacy circles on people's livelihoods?

This study was conducted in eight communities in the counties of Montserrado, Margibi and Bong, among which four are remote communities, four are close to a main road, and four are market towns (being remote or close to a main road). The research findings are mainly based on 31 in-depth semi-open interviews and 7 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with FAL 1 and 2 participants, 8 FGDs with the community leaders², and 8 individual interviews with the facilitators of the FAL circles. Complementary information was given through 15 interviews conducted with FAL 1 and 2 participants' relatives and neighbors, and 14 interviews with FAL 1 participants who dropped out.

¹ NAEAL: National Adult Education Association of Liberia
SHISD: Self Help Initiatives for Sustainable Development

² The community chief, members of the Literacy Management Community (LMC), the development chairperson of the community and the representatives of the elders' group, the women group and the youth group

The results of this study show that FAL has substantial impacts on the health of FAL participants and their surroundings, on the education of FAL participants' children, on empowering FAL participants as well as social cohesion and peace within the community. It also helps people to improve their use of opportunities to get financial assets and to manage them. FAL also helps, to a certain extent, its participants to improve the management of their Income Generating Activity (IGA), especially for those who also participate in a Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA). However, the teachings of FAL and the impact on people's farming activities are limited. The extent of FAL's impacts on people's lives and livelihoods also seems to be influenced by a number of factors including the community's access to health and education facilities, whether there are economic opportunities (e.g. markets, being close to a main city), FAL participants' knowledge of their literacy environment and the quality of FAL.

Lesson 1: FAL helps participants to improve their health conditions as new health knowledge acquired in the circles becomes applicable. It could have a higher impact on people's access to health related knowledge outside the circles.

Through the content and discussions raised in FAL, participants gain new knowledge about the causes of diseases, how to prevent them and how to treat them. This encourages FAL participants to change their health and hygiene behaviors, showing that they apply their new knowledge and understanding of health issues. As a result, most of the FAL participants and their household members report less sickness caused by malaria and diarrhea in comparison to before enrolling in FAL courses³.

Additionally, a few participants have shown that FAL can also enhance the effects of health talks and oral advice given in health centers and sometimes on the radio, as people start to take them more seriously. However, apart from this, FAL does not appear to largely help people to access health information outside the FAL circles. This was an expected indirect impact of their newly acquired literacy skills. However, FAL participants mainly use them in relation to practical matters of health consultations (e.g. identifying their number in the queue). While this impact should not be overlooked as it may encourage people to go to the hospital, acquiring literacy skills has a higher potential for helping people to improve their health conditions. Indeed, it can increase people's access to health knowledge outside the FAL circles such as reading books, articles or posters in health centers and hospitals. It could also help people to know their rights concerning health and encourage them to demand these rights. The fact that the expected outcomes of an adult literacy program do not happen may be due to the low literacy levels of FAL participants and a lack of awareness of their literacy environment where health posters

³ However, this information could not be checked with the health centers.

Recommendations:

- 1.** To help formulating a curriculum and methodologies explicitly in line with specific goals, **develop a theory of change** which defines clearly:
 - the outcomes expected from the FAL circles
 - the channels through which change in people's lives and livelihoods is expected to happen following participation in FAL

- 2. Make sure everyone can participate** if they are willing to:
 - Sensitize men about importance of FAL and to allow their wives to participate
 - In large communities, decentralize FAL circles
 - Choose with the participants the right season/month to start the FAL circles so as to make sure they are available

might actually be part of their learning process, and a lack of concrete action planning sessions during the FAL circles⁴.

Health conditions of neighbors and friends also seem to improve, as they observe new behaviors of the FAL participants and/or FAL participants try to advise them. Several limits were observed: some FAL participants appear not to share directly this knowledge, but rather encourage other community members to go learn it in the circles. FAL participants' advice is not always accepted, as people can get offended and upset that FAL participants try to give them a lesson. Additional community awareness campaigns and increased collective actions could enhance these health impacts at the community level.

Lesson 2: FAL helps people to value the education of their children, but they have limited capacities to follow it up. Poor literacy levels and limited strategies to continue learning after FAL raise sustainability issues.

FAL participants value more the education of their children after their own participation in FAL. Nearly all the FAL participants report that they were already sending their children to school before FAL⁵. However, sometimes they used to ask them to work on the farm instead of going to school. FAL participants also have an increased interest in following up their children's education but have limited capacities to do so. They can now read whether their children have a passing grade or not and most of them can help with learning the alphabet and numbers. However, a large majority cannot help their children at higher levels of education than kindergarten or grade 1 level. This results in an increased number of people sending their children to extra hours of schooling ("study class") for which parents have to pay.

These limited capacities are directly related to the poor literacy levels observed among the FAL participants interviewed for this study. The majority of FAL participants whose reading and writing skills were tested for this study (58.3%; n = 24), cannot write or read a short sentence. Only 5 individuals (20.8%) can do both. Many FAL participants still want to improve their reading and writing skills, as well as numeracy skills for some. Yet, only a few want to join a regular school; more want to join a night school but few seem able to for practical and financial reasons. Issues of sustainability and development of literacy skills were raised, as FAL participants mostly did not have concrete collective plans for continuing learning together and for using other materials than FAL books to practice after FAL ends.

⁴ This is further explained in Lesson 6 concerning the quality of FAL.
⁵ This is the case in 7 communities. One community along the road does not have any school, thus children are sent to school at an older age.

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- 3. Enhance positive side-effects of FAL:**
- Encourage participants to share directly the knowledge from circles
 - encourage the **design of action plans** for sharing knowledge and raising awareness

Lesson 3: FAL increases people's self-respect and self-confidence, encouraging them to speak out in their household and/or in the community. This can benefit their household and the community development.

FAL participants' self-respect increases substantially once they have learned to sign their name instead of using their thumbprint. This is highly related to (their perception of) how other community members consider them. They also become more self-confident in the FAL circles as they acquire new knowledge, speak up in front of others and improve their English.

As a result, FAL participants feel able to speak out among friends, in VSLAs, in church and/or in town meetings. This has enhanced their active participation in meetings as well as their attendance to meetings and workshops (now being able to register themselves by writing their name). However, higher literacy levels may be necessary so that they can really benefit from the workshops. Attendance to community meetings by other community dwellers also increases to some extent as FAL participants can encourage them to come. Yet, in some communities, especially the furthest ones from Monrovia, it is still hard for women to speak out, in particular in workshops held in English. Moreover, FAL might have negative side effects on illiterate people's attendance to meetings, who may feel even more isolated and ashamed of not being able to sign their name.

Concerning women's empowerment at the household level, their household is still mainly financially dependent on their husbands' incomes, and the traditional role of women as housewives seems reinforced. However they have a new role: deciding together with their husband on how to manage the household incomes, which helps household projects to be realized for the improvement of their lives. Husbands seem to consider this empowerment of their wives in a positive way.

Finally, contrary to our expectations based on the literature, only a few FAL participants have been able to access new positions in the community. FAL also has limited impacts on people's knowledge of their rights and capacities to claim for them. The low literacy levels acquired following FAL, together with the fact that it is not the main goal of FAL as formulated by DCR/ ZOA Liberia, can explain these results.

Lesson 4: FAL substantially helps to reduce and/or solve conflicts in the households and the communities

Through FAL, people acquire problem-solving skills; they now can look at issues, analyze and try to understand and solve them. This encourages change in household behaviors and in the community. In households, there is increased understanding and listening which leads to fewer conflicts. In the community, FAL participants handle issues with other community members differently and avoid aggression. FAL participants also try to help solve issues with other community

4. Enhance the sustainability of the knowledge and skills acquired in the FAL circles, so that FAL participants do not forget and continue learning.

Encourage FAL participants to continue gathering in groups so as to exercise and develop:

- writing skills: use Sonie stories to continue inventing the story, write traditional stories of the community, write regularly a newspaper for the community and/or write letters

- reading skills: read together newspapers, government and community announcements, books available in the community. Organize a small community library to increase people's access to reading books.

- socio-analysis skills: discuss radio announcements and news

5. Reduce negative side effects (1):

Sensitize FAL participants about not laughing at people who are still literate, but rather encourage them to come to meetings/ workshops where they can learn useful knowledge even if they need to use their thumbprint to register.

members as their understanding of peace is heightened along with conflict resolution skills and an increase in self-confidence.

Overall, a reduction of conflicts and an improvement in conflict resolution at the community level were observed by a large majority of the respondents. An increased solidarity was also noticed in several communities, which is also a sign of improved togetherness. These impacts appear to be more important than expected, as the literature tends to consider these as long-term impacts of literacy. It can be explained by the fact that FAL participants strongly relate to the stories read and discussed in FAL 2, which stress the importance of peace and helping to solve conflicts.

Lesson 5: FAL helps to use opportunities to access financial assets and to manage them. However, FAL participants face challenges to improve their economic activities while following FAL, especially their farming activities.

➤ Access and management of financial assets

FAL participants’ access to financial assets has improved, especially in terms of credit and loans in the VSLAs. The majority of FAL participants interviewed also participate in a VSLA, and most of them joined after starting FAL. This is related to the content of FAL. Although not focused on financial literacy, it develops people’s knowledge of money management practices, emphasizing the importance of saving and credit management, as well as budgeting. FAL helps people to understand how a VSLA functions and how to calculate their capital and interests, which increases their trust in the VSLAs. As a result, a majority of the FAL participants interviewed now have loans; most of them were not doing so before FAL. This has also helped the FAL participants who already had loans, as they are now able to identify numbers and make mental calculations. However, the majority of FAL participants still do not record debts on paper. Finally, FAL participants learned about managing their income and saving objectives, for example growing a business as to improve their livelihoods.

➤ Management and evolution of IGAs (other than agriculture)

FAL has helped people to improve their IGA, through knowing simple calculations so as to calculate change and not be cheated, knowing how to calculate profit, and to a lesser extent, increasing people’s attractiveness of their business and enabling people to make their business more cost-effective. However, some people are still limited in improving their IGA. This is especially the case of the FAL participants who do not have access to financial funds. Some communities do not offer opportunities to save and gain credit in VSLAs; other people are unable to save their share every week in a VSLA because their income is too low. Apart from participating in a VSLA, living in a market town and close to a road would favor FAL participants as they would have more economic opportunities to apply their new knowledge towards starting or improving their IGA. Some people also seem to lack numeracy skills in

6. Implement VSLAs in the FAL communities.

FAL and VSLAs are complementary.

order to know which activity is most profitable, and thus to be able to diversify their IGAs.

To diversify and increase their incomes, nearly all the respondents asked for a livelihood skills training, such as baking, sewing or soap making. This would enable them to apply their new knowledge to reach their goals. It would also increase retention and encourage people to participate in the FAL circles. However, most of them have limited opportunities to access such training. In general FAL participants seem to lack marketing skills, negotiating skills and knowledge about market analysis. This could substantially limit their livelihood improvement if they were to start such a livelihood activity.

➤ Management and evolution of farming activities

Results are mixed on whether FAL has helped people to improve their farming activities. Half of the FAL participants who are farmers say that FAL has helped them in learning farming techniques that are now used in the fields. However, the other half says FAL was not helpful in improving their farm. No trend was found between people's literacy levels and having acquired knowledge and applying it in their farming activities. Differences could be due to the fact that the FAL curriculum leaves little space for discussion about farming techniques, the use of different crops, pest control and the type of tools used. Some facilitators and participants may spend more time on this lesson than others.

Moreover, FAL does not show an improved access to agriculture knowledge outside the FAL circles. Incomes are not evolving enough for FAL participants to access fertilizers. FAL does not help participants in being aware of the quality of seeds used, contrary to our expectation of an increased reading comprehension of product labels. FAL participants do not seem to know how to use their numeracy skills⁶ in their agriculture activities which could result in improved farming activities and livelihood. However, harvest management has improved. This seems to stem from the newly found knowledge in the circles about not spoiling food, and to share the harvest between consumption, selling and conservation for the next season. Yet the share of the harvest is done approximately rather than relying on calculations.

The use of new agriculture methods, which led to a yield increase and/or an improvement in post-harvest management, has enabled some farmers to sell more than before participating in FAL. However, the majority of FAL respondents who are farmers did not observe any increase in incomes provided from their farming activities.

Finally, most of the current FAL 1 and 2 participants do not face challenges to find time to both cultivate and participate in FAL; it even

⁶ Numeracy skills were not tested through the literacy tests conducted for this study; yet, first indications show that people have higher numeracy skills than reading and writing skills (e.g. mental calculation abilities for managing their IGA). Numeracy skills could be used to measure the size of their field, and the quantities of seeds to be used relatively to the size of the field, so as to increase farms' productivity.

9. Reduce negative side effects (2): Include a session in the FAL curriculum about time planning and organization

10. Improve the literate environment of FAL participants:

- Facilitator should **make FAL participants aware of all the opportunities that require literacy skills**. This could help motivating FAL participants to practice their literacy skills.

- **Use a real literacy approach** in at least some sessions: Encourage learners to search for real literacy objects of their everyday life, bring them to the circles and practice literacy skills based on them

- Encourage **discussions about the use of literacy skills in people's everyday lives, and the design of individual action plans**, showing how FAL participants are going to use their skills and what other knowledge do they need in order to reach their goal

11. Need for an external literacy expert to conduct a short assessment on the quality of the FAL circles and to give recommendations for improvement

- Pay particular attention to the methodology, the quality of the facilitators, their supervision, the curriculum and potential language issues.

- Conduct literacy tests with all selected respondents among FAL 1 and 2 participants

helped some of them to better organize and increase their efficiency as to manage all their activities. However, the main reason for those who dropped out of FAL was not having enough time to cultivate especially for women who are alone in supporting their household.

Lesson 6: The literacy environment and the quality of FAL seem to influence the impact of FAL on people's lives and livelihoods

Apart from the community where people live (in terms of economic opportunities and access to facilities) and the participation in a VSLA, two other factors seem to affect the extent of the FAL impact on people's lives and livelihoods: being aware of their literacy environment, i.e. the existence of accessible literacy materials and everyday life activities in which literacy skills are needed, and the quality of FAL. When asked about their needs for literacy and numeracy, most of the interviewees mention situations that do not need extensive skills; their initial motivations and expectations of FAL also mainly did not require the learning of extensive literacy and numeracy skills. A majority do have access to literacy materials other than FAL materials in their home, confirming that this literacy environment does exist to some extent. However, because they are limited in their reading/writing skills, they seem to be unaware of opportunities that they could have access to if they were fully literate.

Additionally, the low levels in literacy achieved by most of the FAL participants are an indicator of quality issues. While the knowledge (e.g. on health, valuing education) acquired through the circles is easily applicable to people's lives, some links appear to be missing so that FAL participants know how to best use their literacy and numeracy skills to improve their lives and livelihoods. First data on FAL quality also shows that some facilitators are using top-down approaches to teach literacy, but use participatory approaches to teach topics related to health, hygiene, children's education and conflict-resolution. This difference in teaching methods could help to explain why FAL has substantial results in domains such as health, taking care of the family and conflict resolution while not having substantial impact literacy among people.

Implication of research findings for DCR program implementation

ZOA Liberia has been implementing Functional Adult Literacy since the end of 2011 under the DCR program. Through DCR, ZOA enabled two local NGOs, NAEAL and SHIFSD, to implement FAL in more than 100 communities. After 3 years of implementation, this research will be used as a reflection on the direct and indirect impact of FAL intervention. The information will be used to improve the existing FAL activities and to sell FAL to potential donors. The findings will be shared with the implementing partners of FAL, as well as with program staff of ZOA.

Partner organization NAEAL has developed the FAL curriculum. Currently they are updating the curriculum for both FAL 1 and 2. The findings of this research will contribute to the process of improving the shortcomings of the curricula and build on the benefits of FAL for the participants. In

12. To improve FAL quality based on first results:

- **Reinforce the use of participatory teaching methods that are adapted to adults:** Train facilitators and sensitize FAL participants about their advantages contrary to top-down teaching approaches even for learning how to read and write
- **Encourage the learners to practice literacy skills outside the FAL circles and make sure the facilitator checks homework**
- **Enhance facilitators' understanding of their role in discussions:** difference between merely moderating and facilitating the discussion

particular FAL 2 has to be further developed. Currently this curriculum exists of books with stories and as the research shows, the effectiveness of the implementation highly depends on the approach of the facilitators. ZOA expects to see the first improvements of FAL 2 in the 2015 program.

Finally, the research helps ZOA to better explain the benefits of FAL to (potential) donors and partners. It gives clear examples of how FAL has contributed to the lives of people in target communities and how FAL complements other interventions, such as VSLA. From the beginning, complementarity and harmonization formed the basis of the implementation strategy of DCR, however, at this point in time evidence can be provided on the actual benefits of this strategy.