



**REFRAMING
LITERACY
IN CRISIS
CONTEXTS
SUMMARY**

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**OXFAM
IBIS**

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CREDITS

Written by: Jessica Oddy,
Consultant for Oxfam IBIS
Design and Layout: Not by Gerd
Cover photo: Ricardo Ramirz

ABSTRACT

The hypotheses of this study sought to explore if Literacy interventions, when implemented with livelihoods and protection, community engagement and empowerment activities greater collective outcomes can be achieved? This report affirms this and suggests on broader scale, literacy skills could contribute not only to gender equity but also enhanced humanitarian action. The full report draws on global promising practices and five in-depth case studies of literacy interventions by Oxfam and partners in South Sudan, Mozambique, Chad, Central African Republic (CAR), and Sierra Leone. The section below covers the key findings and recommendations from these case studies.

INTRODUCTION

Recent figures indicate that an estimated 86 per cent of adults and 92 per cent of youth are literate.¹ Whilst COVID-19 has laid bare and exacerbated inequalities, discrimination and division,ⁱ prior to the pandemic, those most likely to be excluded from education² were disadvantaged due to language, location, gender and ethnicity.ⁱⁱ The consequences of exclusion are immense, **today 773 million youth and adults globally lack basic levels of literacy and numeracy, two-thirds of them (493 million) female.**ⁱⁱⁱ Even though the size of the global illiterate population is shrinking, the female proportion has remained virtually steady at 63 per cent to 64 per cent.^{iv} Among youth, 123 million are illiterate, of which 76 million are female. Data suggests that **3 in 10 young people aged between 15 and 24 years old – 59 million – living in countries affected by conflict or disaster are illiterate.**^v The analysis also noted that girls and young women are at the biggest disadvantage when it comes to reading and writing, with 33 per cent of them in emergency contexts failing to learn even the basics, compared to 24 per cent of boys.^{vi}

WHAT IS LITERACY?

Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication (using printed and written materials including on-line), as well as the ability to solve problems, in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world.^{vii} This definition articulates the multifaceted interfaces, and many 'literacies' that people navigate in today's world and moves away from the 'literate/illiterate' dichotomy.^{viii}

¹ These figures include new estimates for 72 countries, including 21 for which the previous national literacy rates were from 2010 or earlier. In 25 countries with relevant data, the adult literacy rate for those with any kind of disability is lower than for other adults. The number of adults who have not completed primary school will continue declining relatively slowly and may remain above 10 per cent in Africa until the 2050s, even if universal primary completion is achieved by 2030, which means adult literacy will remain a challenge.

² The COVID-19 pandemic has caused "the largest disruption of education in history, having already had a near universal impact on learners and teachers around the world, from pre-primary to secondary schools, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments". By mid-April 2020, 94 per cent of learners worldwide were affected by the pandemic, representing 1.58 billion children and youth, from pre-primary to higher education, in 200 countries".

WHY LITERACY MATTERS IN CRISIS CONTEXTS?

Literacy matters in crisis contexts due to the length and multilayered systemic nature of emergencies. While humanitarian response is usually associated with short-term assistance and recovery support, many crises can be prolonged and span many years. According to OCHA, the average humanitarian crisis in which there is an UN-coordinated response now lasts more than nine years. Unfortunately, in most crisis contexts the dearth in post primary opportunities and subsequent low or no educational or professional qualifications facing displaced youth often results in higher risk of poverty, aid dependence, and vulnerability to crisis.^{ix}

Arguably, **it is time for a reexamination, reprioritization and reframing of literacy, going beyond the narrative that literacy is a problem for the education sector alone.** Within Oxfam, this correlates with wider calls of integrated programming to be enhanced in crisis contexts. Renewed efforts are therefore needed to reach the new literacy target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): “by 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy”.^x The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development pledge to

leave no one behind and strive for a “just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most disadvantaged are met”.^{xi} It is here the intersectional impact of illiteracy upon other SDGs comes into play because ultimately, the goals of gender equality, climate change and partnerships have large and unrealized synergies with education³, of which literacy is the foundation.^{xii}

This is critical as evidence suggests that digital literacy could open a plethora of opportunities for people affected by crisis. Mobile- and digital-based learning can offer an alternative education to women and girls, who may be more likely to be excluded from formal education in recovery phases of crisis contexts. For example, the Vodafone Instant Network Schools provides young refugees in seven camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tanzania and South Sudan access to internet and digital educational content—benefitting more than 43,000 refugee students each month.^{xxxi} Beyond education, other findings suggest that for women, digital content can offer a safe place to access information about health issues.

³Education in Emergencies (EiE) practitioners have long advocated on the importance of supporting crises affected children with education. However, whilst a tremendous amount of advocacy has seen global funds such as ECW and donors increase funding for EiE, adult literacy programs are chronically underfunded in emergency contexts with EiE stakeholders tending to focus on basic education.

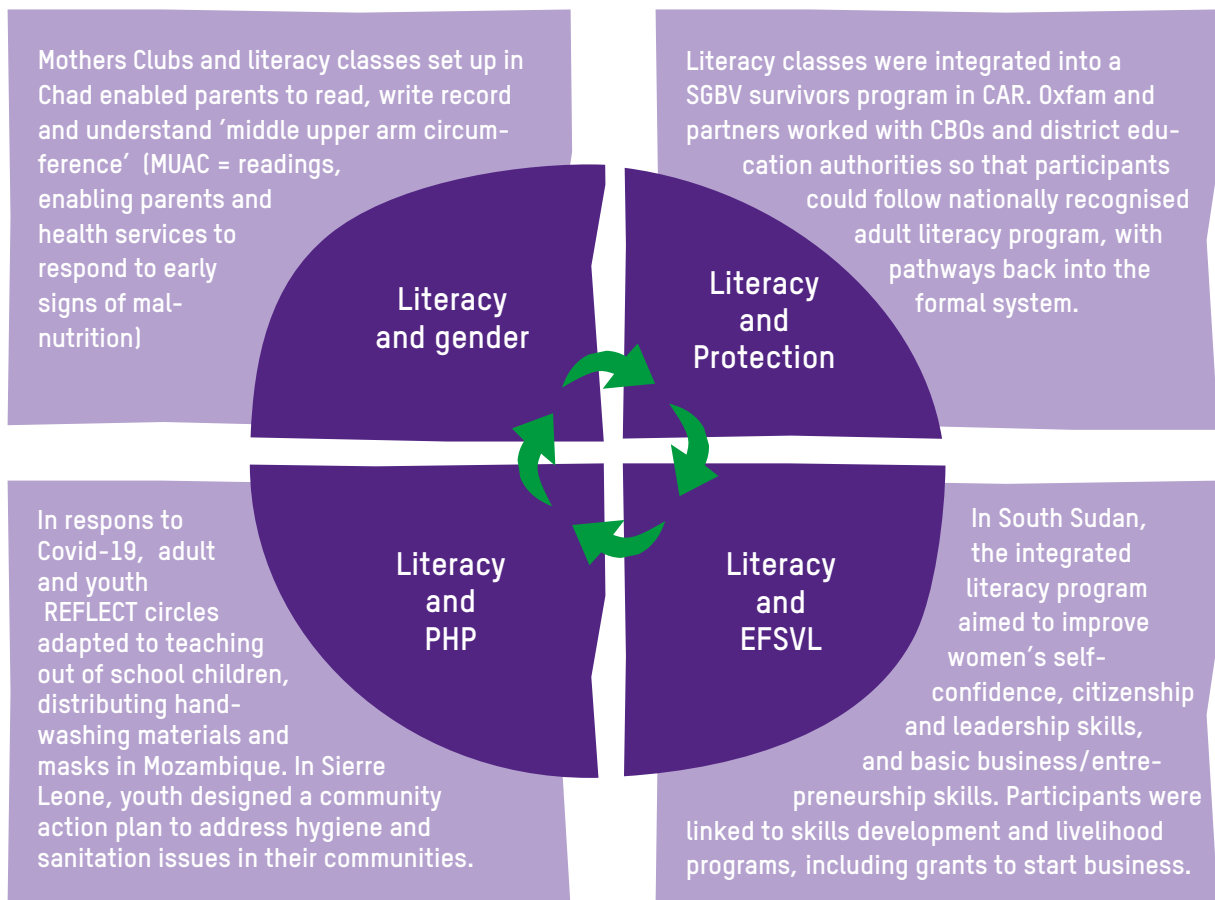
KEY FINDINGS FROM CASE STUDIES

Oxfam has a unique approach to literacy in crisis contexts. By collaborating with national NGOs, CBOs and ministries of education with expertise in literacy, the case studies underline how literacy contributes to gender, Emergency Food Security and Vulnerable Livelihoods (EFSVL), Gender based violence (GBV), Public Health Promotion (PHP), Education and Protection outcomes for adults and youth in crisis contexts. **Learning opportunities for youth and adults in crisis contexts are systematically deprioritized yet Oxfam has developed an innovative approach to include the most marginalized.** The table below illustrates a few of the key innovations explored in the full report.

From all the case studies discussed, literacy **is an integrated intervention**, built into programmatic design from conception. In all the case studies, literacy responded to needs identified by affected populations, demonstrating a commitment to

accountability to affected populations and giving people influence over the type of humanitarian assistance delivered.

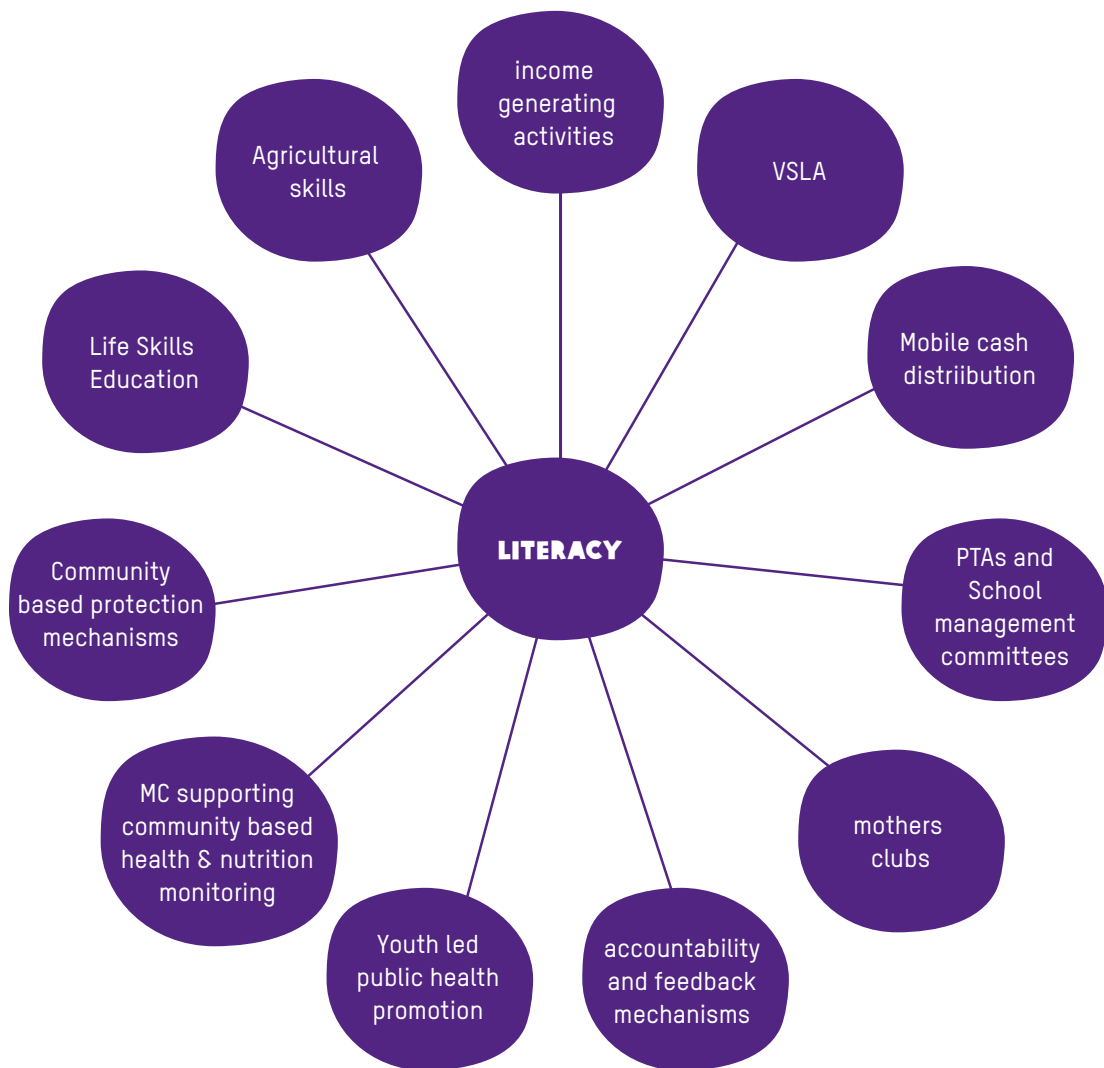
As a result, Oxfam **has a unique approach to literacy in crisis contexts.** By collaborating with national NGOs, CBOs and ministries of education with expertise in literacy, the case studies underline how literacy contributes to gender, Emergency Food Security and Livelihoods (EFSVL), Gender based violence (GBV), Public Health Promotion (PHP), Education and Protection outcomes for adults and youth in crisis contexts. In a sector that routinely underserves adult and youth learning opportunities, Oxfam **has developed an innovative intervention** to serve some of the most marginalized people in emergencies, forging greater **complementary and collaboration amongst local, national and international partners responding.**



Adult and youth literacy programs in all the five case studies contributed to Gender Justice, often primarily targeted women and highlighting the unique platform literacy provides for reaching the most vulnerable and ensuring no one is left behind. Projects with literacy components were effective in reaching some of the most marginalized groups, including transgender, people with disabilities, youth, survivors of GBV, single headed households, widows, IDPs, returnees, and food insecure environments. The projects that were inclusive of youth address the dearth in post primary opportunities and subsequent low or no educational or professional qualifications facing displaced youth often resulting in higher risk of poverty, aid dependence, and vulnerability to crisis.^{xiii}

As projects worked with the most marginalized groups, safeguarding and accountability needed to be an integral part of the programmatic design. In South Sudan, CAR and Sierra Leone, facilitators signed nationally endorsed codes of conduct. In the wake of COVID- 19, programs adapted, for example in Mozambique REFLECT circles were able to continue, adhering to social distance guidelines and distributing masks and soaps.

Interestingly, literacy programs did not focus on reading, numeracy and writing skills only. Context-relevant Life skills or citizenship-type content was integrated into all the literacy interventions.^{xiv} This was done in several ways (see diagram), from PHP education with youth in



Sierra Leone, nutrition and health education in Chad and agricultural education in Mozambique. **REFLECT** was used as a teaching and learning methodology in Sierra Leone and Mozambique (and as part of the participatory design in South Sudan) and was associated with higher enrollment and retention rates than traditional adult learning provision. REFLECT uses participatory design principles which is a conflict-sensitive approach that are rooted in the lived experiences and actual needs of communities integrated into teaching and learning.

In most of the countries discussed, the literacy component ran for a minimum of 3 months although ideally, interventions with literacy should be funded for at least 12 months. This should not be a deterrent as multi-year funding in crisis contexts becomes more prevalent, **contributing towards the 'triple nexus'** and policy makers increasingly calls for humanitarian and development initiatives that **strengthen intercommunal bonds and resilience.**^{xv}

In terms of assessing literacy outcomes, in Sierra Leone, Mozambique and CAR, Oxfam and partners all mentioned using local or national assessment methods, at the end of the project cycle, to gauge literacy attainment. Literacy is a multi-dimensional skill that exists on a continuum and globally **there is no standardized assessment to measure literacy proficiency** in a systematic way⁴. Whilst all the case studies are promising, there is a dearth of documented rigorously robust evidence specifically on the effectiveness of integrated literacy interventions in crisis contexts.

In all the contexts, Oxfam **works closely with partners**, including the national and/or local education authorities. Often, this involved partnering with Community based organisations (CBOs), education authorities and women's networks who had an existing footprint on the

ground and expertise in literacy. In Mozambique, the success of the REFLECT circles has led to new partnerships with the Ministry of Education (MoE), who are now considering revising their national adult literacy approach. In Sierra Leone, there are tentative steps to lobby the government to invest in adult literacy and regular engagement with district education authorities and partners coordination. In Chad, the mother clubs have been commended for their work in supporting efforts to tackle malnutrition. In CAR, literacy linked with IGA has meant that survivors of SGBV have been equipped with livelihood opportunities. **All these strategic alliances at national level enable Oxfam and its partners to influence the literacy landscape.** Furthermore, these partnerships (at micro and macro-level) could provide **examples of ways forward with the localization agenda**, and how organizations recognize and support local communities in being the leaders, decision-makers, and implementers of solutions impacting them.

Country offices shared a **wide range of donors who were funding integrated literacy projects.** This demonstrates that a variety of donors will fund literacy in crisis contexts, and that literacy does not and should not be only palatable to traditional education funding streams. This is where advocacy could play a key role.

Whilst Oxfam and its partners are active in national platforms, and in the case of Mozambique, have integrated advocacy skills training into REFLECT circles, to date there has not been significant advocacy efforts to mainstream literacy across all humanitarian interventions. This could be a cost-effective method, building upon promising practices for Oxfam to achieve its ambition for a just and sustainable world.^{xvi}

⁴Large cross-country assessment surveys have been developed to overcome the challenges of producing comparable literacy data. Two important examples are the Program for the International Assessment of Adult (PIAAC), which is a test used for measuring literacy mostly in rich countries; and the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), which is a household assessment aimed at measuring literacy skills in developing countries, while remaining comparable across countries, languages, and scripts. Notwithstanding, there is a danger of using literacy levels as a proxy for other phenomena, such as socio-economic level or participation in society. In developing countries where literacy use is less widespread it is easy to assume that literacy opens doors for individuals and communities because of a superficial correlation between literacy and, for example, level of income.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The hypotheses of this study sought to explore if literacy interventions, when implemented with livelihoods and protection, community engagement and empowerment activities greater collective outcomes could be achieved. **This report affirms this and suggests on broader scale, literacy skills could contribute not only to gender equity but also enhanced humanitarian action.** Undeniably, the case studies that have been explored in this report demonstrated by addressing illiteracy and the multifaceted way it interacts with life trajectories is a tangible step towards ending inequality and achieving this vision. The theory of change in the diagram below is an example of how literacy contributes to enhanced humanitarian action.

For literacy programming

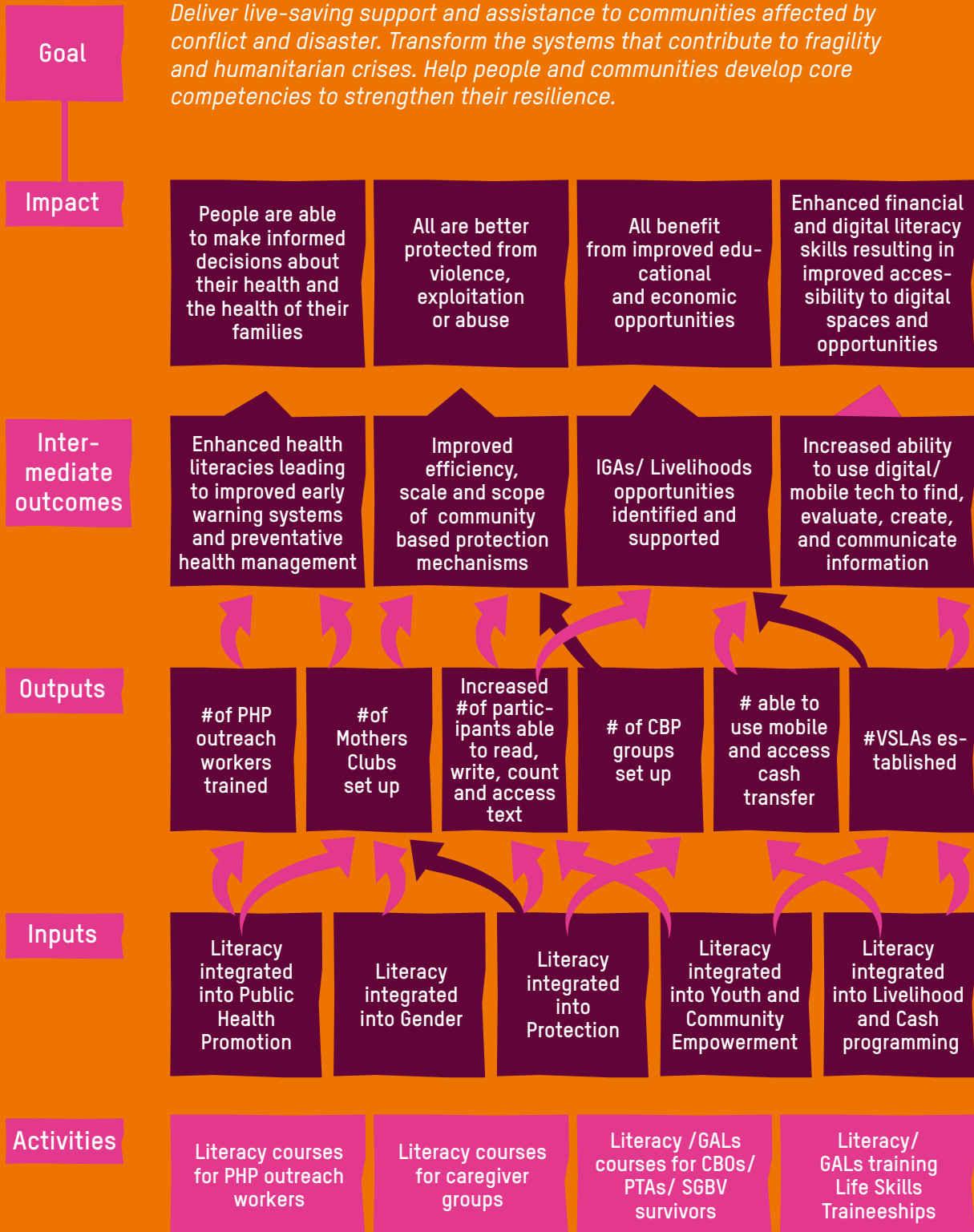
- Literacy programming requires knowledge, expertise and funding. Thus, it could be considered investing in a dedicated literacy specialist position. This role could support online training and a data and resource depository to support Protection, Livelihoods, PHP, GBV and CASH specialists integrate literacy into multisectoral responses.
- Integrate literacy questions into initial rapid, multisector needs assessments on the onset of humanitarian crises. This would be a key indicator for assessing household/affected population literacy levels and if a literacy component is needed.
- Using REFLECT, co-create the literacy component with affected populations and through working with multisectoral teams. This will ensure content is culturally relevant as well as underpinning multisectoral programmatic theories of change.
- Continue and strengthen focus on gender in integrated literacy programming and utilise feminist approaches supporting gender transformative learning to empower women to actively participate in community development.
- Create opportunities for inclusion of youth (who faces higher risk of poverty, aid dependence, and vulnerability to crisis) in integrated literacy programming to support pathways for further professional qualifications and self-provision of livelihoods.
- Apply a conflict sensitive approach, as issues such as language politics and physical presence of learning centre may exacerbate conflict and influence decisions about medium of instruction and inclusive participation in literacy programming. Conflict analysis must include a consideration of the multiple relationships among language, ethnic groups, conflict, and crisis.^{bx}
- Work with local partners to ensure a comprehensive coaching and mentoring approach for literacy facilitators is embedded into all projects with literacy components. Many facilitators will need training and support in (a) the core components of literacy, (b) literacy pedagogy, (c) continuous assessment, (d) the needs of multilingual learners, (e) socio-emotional needs of learners, and (f) classroom management (with attention to opportunities to learn). Attention must also be paid to psychosocial needs, support, allocation, and sustainable remuneration approaches.

For Advocacy, Research and Evidence

- Given the ripple effect of literacy, further make the case for Literacy integration with multi-sector programmes. This can only be done however with additional programmatic research and evidence.
- Ensure evaluations and research are built into integrated projects that explicitly assess the impact of literacy courses. This could be built into standard monitoring and evaluation budget lines and would address the dearth of data and evidence around adult learning and literacy in crisis contexts.
- Use a variety of monitoring and evaluation methods to gather data (Most Significant Change, Positive Deviance Inquiry, Participatory action research (PAR) and impact evaluations) to gather rigorous and robust data.
- Share findings with Education, Protection, CASH WG and FSL cluster/ working group coordination mechanisms at national and global level to advocate for Literacy mainstreaming in multisectoral responses.
- Explore research funding opportunities such as Dubai Cares E-Cubed, partnerships with academic institutions and private literacy foundations to build data and evidence around functional adult and youth literacy.
- Collaborate with the fundraising team to engage donors on the importance of funding literacy in crisis contexts.

ENHANCED HUMANITARIAN ACTION

RECOMMENDATIONS



NOTES

- ⁱ Wilkinson, A. (2020) 'Covid- 19: A Social Phenomenon requiring diverse expertise' Social Sciences in Action <https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/blogs-and-news/covid-19-social-phenomenon-requiring-diverse-expertise/>.
- ⁱⁱ Global Education Monitoring Review (2020) 'Education and Inclusion' <https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/thematic/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ UNESCO (2020) ' Covid- 19: A wake up call to invest in literacy' <https://thelifelonglearningblog.uil.unesco.org/2020/07/21/covid-19-a-wake-up-call-to-invest-in-literacy/>.
- ^{iv} UNESCO (2013) Literacy Programmes with a focus on women to reduce gender disparities Case studies from UNESCO Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database (LitBas), <http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/>.
- ^v UNICE (2020) '3 in 10 young people in conflict or disasters are illiterate', <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/3-10-young-people-conflict-or-disaster-stricken-countries-are-illiterate-unicef>.
- ^{vi} *ibid.*
- ^{vii} <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy>.
- ^{viii} *ibid.*
- ^{ix} <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/brochures/5baa3b984/youth-education-programme.html>.
- ^x Unesco (2020) Literacy map <https://tellmaps.com/uis/literacy/#!/tellmap/-601865091>.
- ^{xi} UNESCO, (2020). 'UNESCO strategy for youth and adult literacy (2020-2025)' <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy/strategy>.
- ^{xii} Global Education Monitoring Review (2020) 'Education and Inclusion <https://gem-report-2020.unesco.org/thematic/>.
- ^{xiii} <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/brochures/5baa3b984/youth-education-programme.html>.
- ^{xiv} USAID (2014) ' Literacy in Conflict guidance note' <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2155/Literacy%20in%20Conflict%20Guidance%20Note%20FINAL.pdf>.
- ^{xv} <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/05/13/triple-nexus-peace-development-security-humanitarian-policy>.
- ^{xvi} Oxfam (2020) 'Global Strategic Framework 2020-2030', externally available in November 2020.
- ^{lx} USAID, <https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2155/Literacy%20Education%20in%20Crisis%20FINAL.pdf>.

