

# Addressing inequalities: Breaking the cycles of illiteracy

John Mugo <sup>1</sup>

In August 2011, Zippora, Grace and I visited ASER from Uwezo East Africa. The experience in Delhi was refreshing, providing a taste of what Pratham and ASER are doing to promote learning in the various states in India. But besides the walk through Safdarjung, or the night train ride to Lucknow, or even the breath-taking visit to the Taj Mahal, one memory lingers vivid - the contrast I experienced in one rural village, around 30 kilometers from Delhi.

As I cowardly walked behind my ASER friends to test children in this village, unsure whether the buffaloes would attack (the Kenyan buffalo is extremely wild), some children and mothers disappeared behind doors, not sure what our mission was. Getting them to direct us to a certain household took time as they could not understand well, nor could they read the list of names we attempted to present to them. But anyhow, we always got our feet into the right households. The encounter with so many non-literate parents openly revealed the hard time their children had, trying to break the chains of illiteracy in households without role models. Adults and children looked curiously at me, wondering perhaps which state of India I was from, but lacking the confidence to ask. On a number of occasions, I volunteered, through a translator, to reveal that I came from Africa, a country called Kenya. More often than not, this was followed by plain nods of appreciation, with no further discussion.

But a little bit later, we walked into a well-built home, met a neatly-dressed father. Before I could sit down, he requested his daughter to offer me a glass of water. Hardly did I know the hospitality awaiting me. As we rose to proceed to the next household, the man quickly called in Hindi - ask this visitor to remain with us, and tell us more about Africa! This caught me off-guard, after the rhythm of under-confident and non-literate parents. I was confused, since I wanted to experience a little bit more of households and children. But my colleagues were quick to come to a decision - you remain, we will come back to collect you. I sat down again, the man disappeared behind the curtains and reappeared with a bowl of sweets and more water. I learned that he was an advocate. We held discussions in English (with translations for the daughter) comparing learning in India and in Kenya, and analyzing the various challenges related to poor quality of education. The confident and brilliant daughter informed me that she wanted to be a world badminton star, but her priority was also to get good grades in school.

The contrast between these families was very familiar to me, as this is often the inequality between the urban and rural, the poor and the wealthy in most parts of Kenya. But the most disturbing observation relates to the extent to which these inequalities are affecting learning. In Kenya, we have established that children of educated mothers and fathers are by far more likely to remain in school and acquire basic learning competences, as compared to their counterparts whose parents have not completed the primary school cycle. Indeed, girls whose mothers have no schooling are 7 times more likely to be out of school than their peers whose mothers have completed primary education. Yet, the Uwezo Kenya findings reveal that 15% of fathers and 19% of mothers had never been to school. This is truly the biggest challenge of literacy. In both Kenya and India, a certain cycle is definitely prevailing - recycling illiteracy down the generations.

My thought is that just as we consider orphans, children with disability and girls as vulnerable children and children with special learning needs, I would argue that children of non-literate parents need to be included in this category. Only if we focus on breaking the illiteracy cycles within these households, can we truly break the illiteracy cycles in our countries.

But thanks for the water and the sweets!

<sup>1</sup> John Mugo is Country Coordinator, Uwezo Kenya. Adapted from the ASER model, Uwezo is a four year initiative that aims to improve competencies in literacy and numeracy among children aged 6-16 in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, by using an innovative approach to social change that is citizen driven and accountable to the public.