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The article by Christo van Rheede "The Literacy Crisis" we published last week, generated much discussion amongst readers. Andrew Miller, CEO of Project Literacy wrote: "As CEO of a large ABET service provider I must take issue with some of the points raised by Christo van der Rheede in his article 'The Literacy Crisis'... Sadly it is often the client and often, in our case, state departments (!) who refuse the mother tongue first option."

## Project Literacy Responds to Christo van der Rheede's Article

2 October 2008

Ms Janine Moolman  
Editor  
SangoNet NGO Pulse

Dear Editor

Further to the SANGONeT NGO Pulse Newsletter issue No. 144 dated 1 October 2008, I would like to comment as follows:

As CEO of a large ABET service provider I must take issue with some of the points raised by Christo van der Rheede in his article "the Literacy Crisis". For over thirty years Project Literacy has been at the forefront of those who argue for "mother tongue first". In all our presentations to potential clients we suggest this approach. In the Western Cape we have been strong supporters of teaching and learning in Afrikaans for example. In KwaZulu Natal for obvious reasons we even teach Maths in isiZulu. Sadly it is often the client and often, in our case, state departments (!) who refuse the mother tongue first option. The overwhelming attitude from mother tongue speakers themselves is that it's a waste of time(!) and "they" (the learner) must do (!) English only. This leaves the service provider with two options. To try and act within the direction given in an honourable way or to walk away from the job.

In post apartheid South Africa donor funding for ABET work has reduced dramatically and one has seen the demise of leading agencies such as TELL, USWE, ELP, Learn and Teach, Wits Workers School, ECALP, and NASA to name but a few. At the same time, one has seen the rise of profit making companies in this arena, many offering quick fix solutions and quick fix certificates at rather high prices. Project Literacy's ability to navigate its way through this mess is something I am enormously proud of. Whilst many agencies died as they could not or would not adapt, we have ridden the waves of the white waters with our principles intact. Our dependence on contracts has meant that we inflate and deflate our staff complement on an ongoing basis depending on budget and need. Winning and managing large contracts has meant we have maintained a small core of some 40 full time employees at all times and at present have around 80 full time staff with some 400 contract educators on our books. Through prudent management of monies and with the support of a strong and talented Board we have also been able to build up small reserves to see us through the lean times. Big jobs have also enabled us to maintain (even in the bad times) an in house

curriculum and materials department and the very necessary quality assurance division. As we are not driven by profit but organizational well being, we have been able to maintain and expand these units which profit making companies either outsource or do not have.

Another question to raise is the inability of various bodies (UMALUSI, the SETAS and SAQA) to police the sector. Increasingly we meet small providers with bastardized materials and no accreditation who use non recognised assessment agencies who actually get government contracts. In a strange "win win" situation learners pass, the HR Committee can put a tick next to staff development, the provider makes a quick buck and quality flies out of the window. The fact that learners do not actually progress is conveniently swept under the carpet.

The Kha Re Gude campaign, which to date has not involved civil society in any significant manner but has been driven by an enchanted circle of friends, former colleagues and students of the incumbent director, will be a complete waste of money if urgent attention is not given to the public adult learning centres who are to open their arms to those newly inspired by a world of figures and words. In the main, they are dysfunctional, poorly staffed with few materials, and a most unwelcome place for those who Kha Re Gude will excite into a world of learning and formal education.

To suppose that all government programmes will sing with one voice to one tune is to wish for too much. In fact it often surprised me that programmes run by other departments (Labour, Correctional Services and Health, for example) are often better funded and more innovative than those managed by the Dept o Education. Personally, I find working with a mixed salad more interesting and invigorating than just eating lettuce!

Van der Rhee's concern about young school drop outs is one I share. We have for sometime been engaging with a range of stakeholders and continue to do so to see how one can meet the needs of this group. I think it has to be an accessible, exciting programme not linked to ABET as we see ABET now. This group certainly do not want to sit in a school classroom for 4 hours everyday rehashing what they did not do well the first time at school. We have to have different strokes for different folks! As I drive around South Africa the sight of mainly young black men lounging on lamp posts at 10 in the morning with nothing productive to do for the entire day is all too plentiful. Not only is it demoralizing for the individual it is a political and social time bomb too.

Project Literacy will continue to seek different revenue streams (government, corporate and donor funding) in order to ensure that a viable non profit organization survives and grows. We will continue to engage with government structures and offer other voices and opinions when we think it important, strategic and relevant. We will continue to collaborate with government when we think it important, strategic and relevant. Despite being personally warned by then Minister Kader Asmal "not to bite the hand that feeds you", Project Literacy has maintained the distance and the willingness to speak truth to power.

Andrew Miller  
CEO Project Literacy

2 October 2008