

## Literacy and Local Governance in a Rural Community: The Experience of Nwodua, Ghana

**N**wodua is a small town of 640 residents located 20 km from the city of Tamale in northern Ghana, and 3 km by what was previously a dirt path from the Tamale-Kumbungu highway. Until the early 1980s, Nwodua remained largely cut off from regional commerce and had few community facilities and no schools. The route linking Nwodua to the highway is now paved, and the town has a pipe-borne water system. The community also features a tree nursery, two grinding mills that produce weaning food for infants, a primary school, an adult vocational training center, much-increased agricultural production and an innovative mode of community governance. This last accomplishment may be a, if not the, key to all the others.

In 1979, an illiterate farmer from Nwodua decided that it was time to bring instruction in the ways of modern Ghana to his community. He started by convincing a middle school leaver from a nearby village to come develop literacy in Nwodua. Instruction was given in the mother tongue, which did not satisfy most of the young people recruited. They wanted English and dropped out. But the farmer responsible for getting the program going and a close friend persisted, remunerating the teacher by working on his fields when they could offer him no salary.

### Making literacy work

The first teacher soon left to attend Teacher Training School and get a better job. His two students simply recruited another in his place and managed at the same time to bring some of the dropouts back into the fold. They used this moderate success as leverage to convince the Bishopric of the Catholic Church to establish a primary school in Nwodua in 1984. Two years later, both were able to pass the national literacy test and qualify to open their own literacy centers in the immediate vicinity.

Their success in the effort led to further responsibility and opportunity. The two were chosen as field supervisors by the new Dagbani Functional Literacy Project just then getting under way and soon had seventy-six classes going in communities throughout the region. By virtue of its role as literacy

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headquarters for the region, Nwodua was able to open in 1989 a full-scale Adult Primary School where more than fifty residents of the community succeeded during the following years in getting their primary leaving certificate, some continuing on to secondary education. At the same time, the literacy effort increasingly became the fulcrum for a whole series of local development activities.

First among these was the establishment of a Primary Health Care Committee, which sent a team of residents for training with the National Health Service in Tamale and thereafter sponsored campaigns to eliminate malnutrition and childhood convulsions. These efforts attracted attention from Unicef, which assisted the Committee in establishing a grinding mill to prepare weaning mixture for infants. The Committee made sure at the same time that proceeds from rental of the mill and sale of its products paid for a second unit, thus launching the community towards a self-sustaining food processing industry.

### Restoring the environment

The next initiative was in the area of agro-forestry and likewise stemmed from lessons learned and topics explored in the literacy and Adult Primary Education centers. Five participants attended a UNDP-sponsored seminar in Tamale on the problems of desertification in northern Ghana and what local communities could do in the way of reforestation. On their return to Nwodua, they convinced a critical mass of their co-residents to undertake the establishment of a nursery for tree seedlings. Though all the groundwork was accomplished in 1991 and 1992, it soon became evident that the initiative would fail from water scarcity if a way were not found to bring more water to the community.

The Nwodua Young Farmers' Club enlisted the leadership of the Dagbani Literacy Program in approaching UNDP with a proposal for extending the water pipelines supplying Tamale to Nwodua itself, a distance of about 5 km. UNDP agreed to underwrite the effort and the villagers dug 5 km of trenches to prepare the way. The hookup was successful and the Nwodua Water Committee manages to pay monthly fees from the Sewerage Commission by levying fees on each household in the village using water. At the same time, water availability removed the main bottleneck to the development of the Nwodua nursery and reforestation effort. The nursery began distributing seedlings of a variety of commercial and shade trees to Nwodua residents free of charge and selling them to outsiders. In 1995, for example, more than 2000 grafted mango and 4000 cashew seedlings were placed with groups and individuals throughout the immediate region, including institutions like the Kumbungu Sub-district Assembly. The nursery now has a growing capital fund for the initiation of new projects.

This increased commerce with the exterior made it imperative to upgrade the track leading from Nwodua to the Tamale road. A Road Committee was formed in 1991 and by the following year World Bank officials had been approached and convinced to support construction of a motorable road over the 3 km link, provided that the village would furnish manual labor and board for the specialized workers and technicians sent in to work on the job. The road was successfully completed the following year and the Road Committee made

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responsible for its maintenance and for planning new improvements to access routes.

### Starting with adults

The ease in exporting products from Nwodua meant also ease in accessing it, and the community began, in a series of ways to play a role as hub of extension activities in its immediate region. An additional one was the constitution in 1999 of an impressive vocational-technical center funded by Danish foreign aid. With its advent, the village boasted quite a cluster of educational facilities – three for adults (the literacy center, the Adult Primary School and the Vocational-Technical Center) flanking a more modest public elementary school for children.

The Nwodua Development Committees are frequently asked why their educational program thus far seems to have given more importance to adults than to children. Their response is simple: It's the best way to go in previously poor rural communities like ours. If more adults start encountering new opportunity and learning how to benefit from it, more will be eager to send their children to primary school.

### Renewed governance at the core

As remarkable as these diverse efforts are, the heart of innovation at Nwodua lies at their core – in the renewed form of community governance gradually elaborated by village authorities and the young participants in the new initiatives to provide a basis for managing and extending their activities. The initial leaders of the literacy movement sought concurrence from the traditional chief of Nwodua and his council to set up a General Development Committee (GDC) with over-

all responsibility for ensuring orderly implementation of the projects and preservation of community interest. This group in turn has established the working committees that take care of each of the sectors of local development and report back to it. The GDC is chaired by a sixty-five year-old illiterate farmer well respected in the community, but of the other eight members only one is over forty-five and seven are graduates of literacy or adult primary school classes.

The GDC works through eight sectoral committees, one each for adult literacy, primary health care, food processing, agro-forestry, vocational instruction, agricultural training and road construction/maintenance. In the process of developing this networked structure of oversight, two things have happened. First, the sustainability of initiatives has been virtually ensured by this monitoring and sponsorship mechanism. Second, by incremental steps, the GDC has become the operational village government in Nwodua – though not the ceremonial one – and has succeeded in creating an environment that both facilitates local entrepreneurial initiative and is supportive of improved public service delivery.

But the success of the GDC must in turn be traced back to two other factors – on the one hand, the rich stimulus for change created by the succession of adult training and non-formal education sessions held in and around the village; and, on the other, the driving force furnished by the two previously illiterate residents who started the whole process almost twenty years ago and refused to be defeated by obstacles. Individual initiative plus the continuing availability of new training and opportunities to apply it provided the fuel for successes in local development that seemed impossible twenty years ago. But the invention of new forms of local governance furnished a framework without which none of this might have come to pass.

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