

## THE CHALLENGE OF ERADICATING ILLITERACY IN A LITERATE WORLD: THE 'YO, SI PUEDO'-PROGRAMME IN BOLIVIA AS AN EFFORT

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between socioeconomic status and literacy achievement has become clear worldwide. Illiterate people are generally also marginalised and poor people and literacy work is directly linked with social inclusion and human dignity (Mora 2008:7). The perception of literacy as a requisite for basic survival, first stated in The Universal Declaration of Human rights of 1948, article 28, united the international community in the Education for All (EFA) movement in 1990 and reaffirmed "the right of all people to education" (EFA Jomtien 1990). In the year 2000, education for all became one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) thereby recognizing that literacy is important to development and to eradicate poverty. The Education for All Monitoring Report of 2006 states that "literate societies are better geared to meet pressing development challenges" (UNESCO 2006:5). In order to lay greater emphasis on literacy, the United Nations declared the years 2003 to 2012 the 'Literacy Decade' under the slogan 'Literacy as Freedom'. The aim is to "increase literacy levels and to empower all people everywhere".<sup>1</sup> The EFA Report of 2008 recognising the centrality of adult literacy to reaching the other MDG's by 2015, exposes that "illiteracy is receiving minimal political attention and remains a global disgrace, keeping one in five adults (one in four women) on the margins of society" (UNESCO 2008:1). The report for 2009, further summarises that "illiteracy remains a neglected goal" (UNESCO 2009:93).

Since 2006, Bolivia is one of the few countries that have been making an effort to alphabetise its population. The high rate of illiteracy and poverty among the indigenous population was a challenge to the country's first government led by an indigenous president, Evo Morales, with several ministers of indigenous background. After only a few months

in office, they launched an intensive literacy campaign, *Yo, sí puedo*, (Yes, I can), aimed at eradicating illiteracy as an instrument for combating of poverty within thirty months (*Ministerio de Educación* 2008:37). In December 2008, the president declared Bolivia ranked as the third state on the continent without illiteracy (*La Razón*, December 20, 2008). However, Bolivian people whom I interviewed about that claim in 2009 and 2010 did not agree to his description of the situation. In February 2009 the government launched the post literacy programme *Yo, sí puedo seguir* (Yes, I Can Continue) aimed at engaging 1.000 000 participants (*La Razón*, February 12, 2009).

My knowledge of the situation in Bolivia is based on fieldwork with students carried out about four to six weeks a year over six years where I have attended lectures, interviewed government officials, workers in literacy programmes and teachers.<sup>2</sup> The article is also based on newspapers and literature including the first evaluation of the programme published in December 2008 by Jaime Canfux and Tamara Liendo, and information from the internet.<sup>3</sup>

In the article I examine the literacy-programme and analyse the achievements. I define literacy, draw some historical lines on the state policy to combat illiteracy and describe the situation in Bolivia when the campaign was initiated. Then I present the background and the method of the literacy programme *Yo, si puedo* and how it has been completed before I discuss how the government has worked with the programme and what kind of obstacles have they had to overcome in order to succeed. My research questions are: Is Evo Morales' claim that the country now has only about four per cent illiterates correct? Is it possible to say that illiteracy has been eradicated in the country?

## II. CONCEPTUALIZING LITERACY

What is meant by literacy? I find the definitions used by UNESCO in EFA documents most adequate. According to 'The World Declaration on Education for All' literacy includes "literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving" as essential learning tools that comprise the basic learning needs of every person (EFA Jomtien 1990 Art. I.1). Thus literacy consists of reading, writing, calculating and oral skills acquired through teaching by different methods. One does not become literate only by learning the letters, a literate person is able to use the skills acquired and reads with understanding. The UNESCO's General Conference in 1978 defines functional literacy as:

A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community

and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community's development (UNESCO 2006:22).

Illiterates then are persons that participate in a literate society without having the opportunity to become literate (Freire 1985:14). On the basis of the UNESCO definition illiterates may be divided into two categories, absolute illiterates and functional illiterates. Absolute illiterates are adults who have never attended school or a literacy course. Functional illiterates are the result of discontinued schooling or literacy-campaigns that have focused only on teaching, reading and writing without cultivating the ability to acquire further education and the possibility for people to continue the training process practising and preserving the new knowledge; "Literacy is inextricably linked to a process of continual education or lifelong learning" (UNESCO 2008:137; Ministerio de Educación 2008:36). While a great deal of people in Bolivia are able to write their names and spell simple words, many have problems understanding a text or are unable to fill in simple forms. The Director for Adult Education and Literacy in La Paz, Fernando Bernal, says that some vendors at the market are obliged to seek help to do official paperwork (interview, March 6, 2007). Willer Tellez, regional director of *Alfalit* literacy organisation in Chuquizaca says that many participants who attended school for two to three years as children need further training to be able to use the knowledge they then acquired (lecture, February 25, 2005). In UNESCO's 'LAMP5 levels literacy' this would correspond to level 1: "The individual has very poor skills and may, for example, be unable to determine the correct amount of medicine to give a child from the label on a package".<sup>4</sup>

This seems to indicate that the Bolivian authorities understand the literacy work as the first stage in a general training process aimed at changing and liberating the people (Canfux 2008:21). The Bolivian policy regarding adult education is based on the ideas of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire who views illiterates as oppressed men and women. Teaching, thus, is but a way to freedom and justice (Freire 1996, 1985). Since the 1970s his work has influenced adult literacy education. His essential contribution to adult education is integrating the notions of active learning within socio-cultural settings, and emphasising the importance of bringing the learner's socio-cultural realities into the training process (UNESCO 2006:152; cf. Freire, 1996, 1985). "Literacy is then not considered a condition, but the beginning of a continual and permanent educational lifelong process" (*Ministerio de Educación* 2008:35,37). In the following I will outline the Bolivian State's role in combating illiteracy in the population.

### III. STATE POLICY TO COMBAT ILLITERACY IN BOLIVIA

Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and one with the highest rate of indigenous<sup>5</sup> population (Luykx 1999:1). In the census of 2001, 61 per cent<sup>6</sup> claimed to belong to one of more than 30 indigenous groups of which the largest are Quechua (31 per cent), Aymara (25 per cent) and Guaraní (1.5 per cent). For 2010 the Bolivian Statistical Institute (INE) estimates the population to be about 10.4 million.<sup>7</sup> According to an inquiry in 2006 in 10 cities, the nine capitals of the departments and El Alto, 65.5 per cent claimed to belong to an indigenous group while at the same time 68.9 per cent considered themselves mestizo<sup>8</sup> (*La Razón*, October 10, 2006). This confirms the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth's definition of ethnicity as a social process with the ethnic boundary defining the group, rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses (Barth 1969/1996:32f). As Canessa states: "The Bolivians are much more likely than before to identify as indigenous, or, at the very least, as belonging to an indigenous group (such as 'Aymara' and 'Quechua') even if they do not identify as indigenous per se" (2006:242).

During colonial time and also through the republic up to the Revolution in 1952, the leading mestizo class excluded the indigenous peoples from the civil society keeping them away from universal rights as health, political participation and education (Choque 2006:20; cf. Klein 2003; Luykx 1999). For more than one hundred years Bolivia has figured with one of the highest rates of illiteracy in Latin America. In the year 1900, it was ranked among bottom positions internationally with 85 per cent absolute illiterates; in 1950, the rank dropped to 70 per cent (Reyes 2006:15).

Before 1905, the indigenous masses were not taken into consideration at all in the national educational system. From then on there were discussions as to whether they could ever be taught or how it would society if the educated indigenous citizens would refuse to work in agriculture; "The discussion about education turned on the utility of the indigenous people" (Choque 2006:54; cf. Larson 2005). Even though a liberal educational reform initiated the implementation of indigenous education it had to be done in secret because local authorities and landowners often put obstacles to teaching indigenous people to read and write (Choque 2006:52; cf. Luykx 1999; Larson 2005; *Ministerio de Educación* 2008:31).

The education act of 1955 in theory gave every inhabitant access to education, to a school based on the language and the ruling culture with the aim of assimilating and civilising the indigenous peoples (Luykx 1999:48). The pedagogy was poor as was the training of the teachers. The result was

incomplete schooling, poor distribution and content and high desertion rates especially in the indigenous population (Drange 2007; cf. Larson 2005; Choque 2006). During the first part of the 19th century, the State only had good intentions fighting illiteracy, the first steps to combat it were not taken until 1955 under the slogan “A teacher that alphabetises is a teacher that gets wage increase” (Reyes 2006:15). The constitution of 1967 ascertained the State’s function to supervise and urge rural education (*Constitución* 1967 Art. 174) seeing literacy as a social necessity that the State should provide for all inhabitants (Art. 179). In 1968 literacy was defined as an instrument for development and improvement of the quality of life and the government decided that all students ought to teach an illiterate person to read and write to get the high school certificate. Thus changing governments have initiated many literacy programs and the Ministry of Education in various administrations has presented several plans to eradicate illiteracy. Despite these efforts, the public school system has not prevented illiteracy (*Ministerio de Educación* 2008:29).

### **The situation today**

In the 1990s, with the UN International literacy year as a motivator the Bolivian government launched a new plan the goal of which was to eradicate illiteracy by 2006. Including adult education as state policy in the education act of 1994 was an element in reaching the goal. However, the figures of the 2001 census<sup>9</sup> show that despite all the literacy-campaigns over 50 years, Bolivia was still marked by a population characterised by little schooling and a high rate of illiteracy. The rate was officially reduced to about 13 per cent but in rural areas the numbers were much higher, 25.8 per cent compared to 6.9 per cent in urban areas, and the difference of sex was 19.4 per cent in women and 6.9 per cent in men (*Ministerio de Educación* 2008:6). One also has to consider statistical defects; the questions are not always the most appropriate, they were asked orally, often in the presence of the family and it may be difficult for adults to admit their illiteracy. The ability to read and write was not tested (Reyes 2006:18). Self-assessment or third-party assessments “provide inaccurate and, in many ways, incomplete depictions of literacy levels” and may produce overestimation of literacy rates (UNESCO 2006:164). Another factor is that poorly paid interviewers, on foot, are not always motivated to visit all houses in all weather conditions over large distances (Reyes op.cit.). Based on an evaluation in 1999 Gregorio Iriarte asserts that the absolute and functional illiteracy in Bolivia amounts to 70 per cent in rural areas and 30 per cent in urban areas.<sup>10</sup>

In Bolivia's large urban/rural areas there are disparities. All important factors, such as a significant indigenous population, a growing migrant population and striking disparities between women and men, have to be accounted for in order to address access to formal education and literacy programmes (UNESCO 2006:23). While the cities are experiencing rapid growth, about 40 per cent of the population still live in the countryside partly in remote areas with poorly developed infrastructure and few schools. The situation agrees with the EFA Report saying that the out-of-school children generally have poor, rural and uneducated mothers (UNESCO 2007:27).

When the last literacy campaign *Yo, sí puedo*, (Yes, I can), was launched in 2006 with aid from the Cuban and the Venezuelan governments the illiterate population was estimated to be about 823256 persons (OEI, April 10, 2008)<sup>11</sup>. The aim of the program was to eradicate both absolute and functional illiteracy through bilingual literacy training in the major indigenous languages and Spanish in thirty months (*Ministerio de Educación* 2008:37).

### **Financing the Program**

As in other countries, there have always been limited budgets for adult education in Bolivia, concurring with the EFA Report that, "learning opportunities for youth and adults, including in literacy, have suffered because of continued neglect from national governments and the international community" (UNESCO 2008:13). According to teachers at the centre for adult education, *Centro Técnico Ayacucho*, in La Paz, literacy training has not been emphasised by the government for at least twenty years (interview, March 6, 2007). Even at the teachers' college of adult education, *Instituto Normal Superior de Educación Alternativa*, in Serrano, there was no teaching in literacy training when I visited the institution February 23, 2005. According to Pablo Quisbert, the national coordinator of the *Yo, si puedo* program, the program is now included in the curriculum for aspiring teachers (interview, March 10, 2008).

The Bolivian government has depended on international support and non government organisations (NGO) for literacy projects which tend to focus on reading and writing skills, rather than on functional literacy (UNESCO 2006:158). However, *Alfalit* is an exception with a program that focuses on functional literacy, and has since the 1960s been one of the governments main partners engaged in literacy training in Bolivia (BEPS 2002:3). According to the *Alfalit* worker, Willer Tellez,<sup>12</sup> the money received from foreign sources has not always benefitted de illiterates as

much as was intended; it has often been spent on high wages for the administrators, expensive cars and so forth, while the instructors have been poorly paid affecting the outcome of the investment (interview with Tellez, March 15, 2005). He also says there has been a tendency to inflate the performance of the programs in the reports in order to receive continued support from external sources (*ibid.*, March 11, 2007). This time the program was made possible and its life maintained because of support from the Cuban and Venezuelan governments. According to *Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos* all the costs are covered by those governments and the support for this project comes mainly as personnel and material (OEI, April 10, 2008).<sup>13</sup>

#### IV. 'YO, SI PUEDO'

Yo, si puedo is a Cuban program aiming at eradicating illiteracy in the world. It is developed by the Cuban teacher Leonela Relys at the request of Fidel Castro: In year 2001, in March, the Commander in Chief gives us the idea of preparing the literacy using television, where numbers were combined with letters. She (*sic!*) suggests us to do a sheet of four or five pages. Very excited he told us:

'get ready that we will alphabetise from Cuba for the world' (Ortega 2007).

It is a state to state supported program and an example of South-South cooperation and international solidarity. Through the government initiated institute *Instituto Pedagógico Latinoamericano y Caribeño* (IPLAC) Cuban results in education have been dispersed internationally. IPLAC has cooperated with many countries in eradicating illiteracy. The program emphasises the Freirean commitment to reflection-action-reflection as well as at other contemporary trends in pedagogy and sociology<sup>14</sup> (cf. Freire 1996, 1985). In 2006 IPLAC received the 'King Sejong Literacy Prize' for its work in spreading the program and meet the need for literacy:

With more than two million people alphabetised, the prize Rey Sejong 2006 of UNESCO, French, English, Portuguese, Aymara, and Quechua versions, are the presentation credentials of the radio and television Cuban program of literacy which is successfully applied in more than 15 countries of Latin America and Africa (Ortega 2007).

IPLAC has developed some principles for cooperation: there has to be a political decision behind a desire to adopt the method and the country's own public institutions have to administer the program. One has to work as cost-efficient as possible, including training of experts and teachers.<sup>15</sup> The program functions through the work of volunteers and it

may be administered by lay people after rudimentary training in the use of the technical equipment. In Bolivia the instructors need to be a college graduate, find 15 to 20 illiterates to form a group, find a place to give classes and receive half a day of instruction in the method before starting the course (*Hablando de Educación* 2007:103). It is not the task of the instructor to teach, but to operate the media of instruction and attend to the participants and ensure that they understand (interview with Cuban coordinator, February 26, 2007).

Venezuela was the first country to use the method in its totality and in less than a year the country was declared free of illiteracy in 2005 (*ibid.*). According to Relys this was possible because

The campaign in that country had very special characteristic and it was engrossed by a great political determination. It was directly monitored and supported by President Hugo Chávez. Besides in that country was attained the union of the civil and military society. Armed forces in Venezuela had a paramount role in the transfer of audiovisual materials, televisions, videos, ABCs (Ortega 2007).

The Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs then launched the program ‘Robinson International’ to support literacy-work in countries in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>16</sup>. The Bolivian government has received support with personnel from Venezuela and the Cuban state has supported educational material and personnel through IPLAC. The Bolivian Ministry of Education is responsible for adapting of the program to language and culture. According to Relys the idea behind her method is that it “has a marked Latin American and universal character, hence it can be easily adjusted to every context of the countries where applied” (Ortega 2007). The adjustment is done in Cuba where the material is printed and the TV programs recorded with Bolivian participants (interview with Cuban coordinator, February 26, 2007).

### **Method of ‘Yo, Si Puedo’<sup>17</sup>**

The method is built on the assumption that adults know the numbers (Archer and Cottingham 1996). Thus it starts with the familiar, the numbers, and goes to the unknown, the letters by associating numbers with letters. The texts are built on the experiences of the participants (cf. Freire 1996, 1985).

It is an integrated method with three main stages fitting well together: *training*, *writing reading teaching*, and *consolidation*. Every class owns a global quality; therefore it is suggested to the participants to observe it in its wholeness first. The writing/reading teaching’s essential support is the *audio-visual aids* together



with the *reading primer*; the latter follows the route of three logotypes: eye-ear (see and hear), book-ear (read and hear) and, pencil-ear (write and hear).<sup>18</sup>

The material consists of a small reading primer, a manual for the instructor and 16 videocassettes where the 65 lessons for 65 class hours are recorded. In every class a 30 minutes video is played. The advantage of the video cassettes is that they may be used over and over. In the case of absence the participants may be able to see the video on a subsequent day. The Bolivian Ministry of Education has approved literacy-points in all provinces, in prisons, schools, homes, in different institutional premises and in churches.

## V. IS ILLITERACY ERADICATED IN BOLIVIA?

The high rate of illiteracy in Bolivia has its roots in both historical and ethnic factors. It is also the outcome of many literacy campaigns with little follow up to create functional illiteracy. Since the conquest the main problem has been the relation between the minority in power and the majority of indigenous people in the country, a relation strongly marked by exploitation and discrimination. In Tellez' opinion the relation between ethnicity and development is "an insoluble conflict" (interview, March 15, 2005). The statement was based on experiences with governments from the Spanish-speaking elite, before Morales became president. In order to create a solution to this conflict, it was important for a government with strong indigenous representation from the party *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) to start its reign by declaring combat against illiteracy. Also mentioned in Bolivia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) was the need to reduce illiteracy and increase the quality of educational services. From 2001, "The Dialogue pointed out the need to strengthen human capital to improve the capacities of the poor to take advantage of economic growth opportunities, particularly related to education, health, and basic sanitation services" (PRSP 2001:47). The Morales government is making an effort to change the situation for the people of indigenous descent since they are the ones who constitute the poor section of the population. Poverty affects six of ten inhabitants with a much higher incidence in rural areas (*Ministerio de Educación* 2008:6).

It has been of utmost importance for the government to fulfil the promise to eradicate illiteracy and to keep a high profile on the literacy project during the years of its reign. When the third Minister of Education, Magdalena Cajías, was installed in June 2007, Morales told her to "fall in love' with the literacy and the educational changes' (*La Razón*, June 9, 2007). According to the new Constitution of 2009, the function of the State is not only to "supervise and urge rural literacy" but the State and the

society are given the “obligation to eradicate illiteracy through programmes that are in accordance with the cultural and linguistic reality of the people” (*Congreso Nacional* 2008, Art 84).

A propaganda meeting for *Yo, si puedo* was arranged in June 2006 to celebrate the first 1001 participants to receive their certificate of acquired literacy and to launch the campaign for the whole country. There the president stated for the first time in Bolivian history that literacy was for all without exception and handed the diploma to a man in a wheelchair who expressed his gratitude for the possibility to learn to read (*La Razón*, June 7, 2006). Participants from the mentioned centre for adult education in La Paz assisted in this celebration. The oldest participant was 69 years old and there were also a couple of new literates who were afflicted with Down’s syndrome. Their teacher declared that the method was functioning and that numbers are a good starting point since they are familiar to the people. She also conceded that there had been some desertion during the course; some women were inhibited from participating by their spouses (interview, March 6, 2007). According to several informants over time, many men feel threatened by the increasing independence of their wives (Tellez and others, personal communication). Latin American machismo gives men the advantage to keep control over both wife and daughters by preventing them from acquiring an education. A young woman in her twenties studying in an adult educational programme said her father had kept her away from school until she herself opposed him because she wanted to learn something (interview). Quisbert says machismo has been one obstacle the literacy programme had to face as husbands have hindered wives to receive education for sociological and cultural reasons “In Bolivia illiteracy has a female face” (*Rebelión*, December 17, 2008).

People with disabilities and those living in remote places are also included in the program. The Venezuelan authorities have financed solar panels to make it possible to spread the programme to municipalities without electricity and Cuban ophthalmologists have attended to participants with eye problems and provided glasses to those in need (OEI, April 10, 2008). Venezuela also provided pick-up trucks to bring instructors to remote places.

In December 2008, Morales declared Bolivia free of illiteracy but there are many who disagree with this declaration. Several informants tell about maids and others who cannot read even after attending the course (interviews, 2009 and 2010). In the light of this, there are serious questions to be asked regarding who comprises the group of literates and at what point an individual may be deemed literate.

## **Debunking the statistics of literates**

As we have seen, it is not easy to calculate the number of illiterates in the country, there are many possibilities for errors in the statistics. The 2001 Census that was based on self-assessment considers only the absolute illiterates thus neglecting the category of functional illiterates. A stipulation in 2006, before the start of the programme, is based on information from different sources such as teachers, university students, militaries and the number is also said to include functional illiterates (interview with Cuban coordinator, March 13, 2009). The statistics for illiterates seem low compared to Iriarte's stipulation and leaves one to wonder whether it really includes the combined numbers of absolute and functional illiterates. By November 14, 2008, the Government announced that 800194 participants were alphabetised. This means a success rate of 99.8 per cent among the analphabets according to the 2006 assumption (Canfux 2008:13). But does the assumption include all possible participants in the courses? Tellez mentions that it has become less of a taboo to be illiterate (interview, March 11, 2007), and according to the director of adult education in La Paz, Fernando Bernal V. many people who had not admitted their lack of literacy earlier now felt it was more legitimate to do so. When these people attend the courses the number of illiterates would increase during the programme. Bernal also questioned the possibility of reaching the goal in only three years, but one would get on the way, he said (interview, March 6, 2007). When further questioned on this statement a year later, he affirmed they would reach the goal through the intensifying of the campaign (interview, March 4, 2008). Other informants such as Tellez questioned the official attendance statistics. According to some municipalities literates were also included in the lists or some from other literacy programmes were counted also in the governmental program which indicates double counting (interview with Tellez, March 18, 2008). The evaluation shows that not all participants were illiterates; instructors say that 10 per cent "do not know how to read or write" before taking the course and after completing the course 10.1 per cent "know how to read and write and are able to write small letters" (Canfux 2008:37f.). One may wonder about the other 90 per cent that attended the courses, the evaluation says nothing about their literacy level or acquirement.

Since it has been of vital significance to succeed in the project, it was expected that the government would come up with statistics indicating that the goal is reached (interview with Tellez, March 11, 2007). On the other hand one will never be able to have zero illiterates, some people are impossible to alphabetise, says Quisbert. The goal is to get under 3,7 per

cent which according to him is the UNESCO measurement (interview, March 10, 2008 and *La Razón*, December 20, 2008).

### **Critique of the implementation of the method**

The method has won international prizes and seems to have been used in many countries with good results. Also in Bolivia there are many testimonies about the efficiency of the method. A participant in the program, Filiberto Villanueva, declared after having received glasses as part of the program “before I lived in darkness, people deceived me since I was illiterate. Now I have hope, I can read and write and sign with my name” (*La Razón*, March 23, 2007).

Under debate has been the question about the way the program has been carried out. The course was supposed to last seven weeks during which there were teaching two hours daily over five days for a total of 65 hours. It is a flexible program that may be extend for a period up to three months if the participants are not able to meet every day. According to Bernal there was a demand for week-end sessions of the course, two hours on Saturday and two hours on Sunday (interview, March 6, 2007). Quisbert reveals that the course never lasts only three months (interview, March 4, 2008). However, I have learned from instructors, that since they are paid for only three months they are motivated to finish the course in that period (interview, February 27, 2009). During the autumn of 2007, apparently the government realised it would be difficult to reach the goal as in October they had reached only 45.55 per cent in the 18 months of the campaign with only 38 municipalities declared free of illiteracy. The campaign was intensified using students on vacation as instructors. The teaching-period would then have to coincide with the student’s vacation.

Is it possible to become literate for an absolute illiterate person of age in only 65 hours? In an evaluation of the *Alfalit* literacy programme it is stated that an average of 115 hours of study is necessary for the participants to be able to read, write and do basic arithmetic: “Although three months are allotted for each of the three courses, students are actually taking an average of 4-5 months to complete the initial literacy level” (BEPS 2002:10). According to this evaluation participants spend about 10 months on an average to complete the courses because of language problems, seasonal demands for participants in agricultural areas, and the fact that absolute illiterates also need more time than functional illiterates (Ibid.). The evaluation of the government’s programme concludes too that participants and instructors see the necessity of prolonging the duration of the courses (Canfux 2008:78, 99, 130). According to Tellez, one *Alfalit*

group in Sucre had first been alphabetised through the program *Yo, si puedo* program but having learned no more than to write their names continued the literacy process through *Alfalit*. However, according to the instructor they had to start over the literacy training to acquire the prerequisites to proceed to the next level (interview with Tellez, March 18, 2008).

Bolivia has special challenges when it comes to language. In the 2001 census 63 per cent of the people expressed that their first language was not Spanish. There is sufficient research showing that the best way to learn to read and write both for adults and for children is by use of the mother tongue. However, illiterates are often alphabetised in a foreign language which produces a barrier to success in the training process (Mora 2008:9). During the first year of the *Yo, si puedo* program the material was available only in Spanish, during the second year it was provided in Aymara and Quechua and in 2008 also in Guaraní (interview with Quisbert, March 10, 2008). One informant told about his 75 years old mother who had learned to read through the *Yo, si puedo* program having been taught in Aymara. This was achieved after several failed attempts to alphabetise in Spanish (interview, March 6, 2007). The evaluation also asks for expanding the programmes to various native languages (Canfux 2008:54). However, several informants argued that people living in the cities are not interested in being taught in indigenous languages. The director for adult education and literacy in La Paz, Fernando Bernal, maintained that as Spanish is the dominant language people need to know it is the best language for teaching literacy. People tend to set aside Aymara when they migrate to urban areas and prefer to use and improve the proficiency in Spanish (interview, March 6, 2007). However, the instructors often have to explain in the participants' mother tongue since their knowledge of Spanish is poor. According to an instructor in Sucre the language should be adapted to the context, in the countryside the medium of instruction should be the local language, in the cities Spanish is best (interview, February 27, 2009).

It is a problem in literacy training to use a not very well dominated language and the majority of the indigenous peoples in Bolivia do not dominate Spanish well. "When literacy is only offered in languages that people do not know or know only a little, the outcome can be that neither good language skills nor good literacy competence are achieved" (Robinson 2005:15). It is a challenge in Bolivia to convince people about this fact when they have experienced for so long that their mother-tongue does not count in the greater society. One way to value native languages is to use them for teaching and to produce written material in them.

### **Literacy versus functional illiteracy**

When is a person literate? Traditionally people in Bolivia have the conception that literacy is to ‘know the letters’, know the alphabet (Reyes 2006:16). They have learned to write their names and are able to sign papers, but are not able to read and understand a text. This is supposed to be different with the *Yo, si puedo* program since at the end of the program the participants have to write a text to be declared literate (orthography is not emphasised). The text is sent to the Ministry of Education for registration and issuing of the course diploma (interview with Cuban coordinator, February 26, 2007). It is filed and used for compiling the statistics (interview with Bernal, March 6, 2007). According to the Cuban coordinator minimum knowledge after a *Yo, si puedo* program would be the ability to read and write one’s name, the name of the country, a few words and to write a letter consisting of a minimum one sentence with a meaningful message (op.cit.). I was assured by persons responsible for the programme that every participant had to compose the text themselves. However, Tellez was not sure that it always was written by the participants. He expressed the possibility that it could have been done by other people like children or grandchildren (interview, March 18, 2008). Instructors admitted that it was also possible to use a text copied from the blackboard (interview, February 27, 2009). The evaluation shows that 30.2 per cent of the participants indicate that they have “learned the letters and to write my name” while only 5.5 per cent reply that they “can write and communicate themselves by letters with family and friends” (Canfux 2008:32). According to this evaluation I would question whether all illiterates in Bolivia have reached level 2 in ‘LAMP5levels literacy’ “Respondents can only deal with simple, clearly laid-out reading material and tasks. At this level, people can read but test poorly. They may have developed coping skills to manage everyday literacy demands but they find it difficult to face new challenges, such as job skills” (see note 4). They have initiated a process, but would it be correct to say that they now are literate?

Many are also questioning the possibility for the new literates to continue to use and conserve the knowledge they have acquired or this campaign again will create functional illiterates. “Once participants learn the mechanics of reading and writing, it is critical that they practice these skills in order to strengthen their reading comprehension and develop a habit/enjoyment of reading” (BEPS 2002:21). For people in rural areas there is limited availability to textbooks and other reading materials in Spanish and even less in indigenous languages. Many informants have expressed concern about the lack of follow up of the participants. Also an

editorial in *La Razón* expresses the fear that despite the government's intention to do what is necessary to eliminate illiteracy, in the end the country again will revert to an increase in the rate of functional illiteracy because of the lack of funding for further training (*La Razón*, November 23, 2007). According to Bernal, when the participants have finished the course they receive a little book, 'Now I can read', and are then invited to participate in the post-literacy program (interview, March 4, 2008). *Yo, si puedo seguir* (Yes, I Can Continue) is developed to avoid functional illiteracy. Leonela Relys, who developed the *Yo, si puedo* programme, says:

Once the first stage of Yes I Can was finished, a post-literacy program was thought. It was necessary to give those people a continuation of studies. Nowadays is not sufficient knowing how to read and write, but rather a technological knowledge must be had (Ortega 2007).

This post-literacy programme was not introduced in Bolivia until February 2009 since the Bolivian government did not apply for it till after initiating the first stage of the program (interview with Quisbert, March 10, 2008). As the material had to be adapted to Bolivian geography, history and society, a work that is done in Cuba, it was not available for the participants when completing the first stage. For some people there would pass at least three years from finishing the *Yo, si puedo* program until they might continue the literacy process. For newly alphabetised people this may result in losing the motivation and to have to start all over again.

However, in many places there were possibilities to continue the training process both in private programmes and in the state's adult education program. Teachers in adult education were concerned with the lack of motivation from the government regarding to continuation of the training process immediately after ending the literacy programme. The teachers at the centre in La Paz wanted the new literates to continue in adult education courses and wanted the government to consider adult education as post-literacy (interview, March 6, 2007). Tellez saw the danger that once again the campaign would produce functional illiterates (interview, March 11, 2007), while Bernal was of the opinion that since the participants have to produce a text, it is more likely that they have really learned to read and write (interview, March 6, 2007). Nevertheless, both one of the Cuban coordinators and the director of 'Prodeli', *Proyecto de alfabetización Bilingüe*, Ernán Pari, shared the concern that the government would reach the goal only if the participants would continue the process in post-literacy programmes (interview, February 26, 2007). The results of the evaluation show that there is great interest in continuing the literacy process and also conclude that continuing programmes should be given

immediately after completing the literacy programme (Canfux 2008:53). However, it would be interesting to do an evaluation of the literacy programme to examine the reading skills of the graduates and the numbers continuing in the training process after four to five years.

The right to literacy is met not only by learning letters and numbers. As has generally been the result of state-initiated literacy programmes in Bolivia there is a legitimate fear that the present process will result in more functional illiterates than literates. The main reasons are the rate of the process, the lack of immediate follow up with post-literacy programmes and lack of finances. When it takes three years or more from being alphabetised until the next step is offered there is a danger that the newly acquired knowledge is lost as is the motivation for continuing. As Mora says: "one should not see the process of literacy and post-literacy as two separate moments, they have to be seen as one and unique process to avoid the turn back to illiteracy" (2008:9). Finally it has to do with finances. Adult education programmes are not available all over the country and are poorly handled by the State financially. Alphabetising a population is a continual process including elementary school for everybody avoiding exclusion and desertion and permanent development of local, regional and national literacy programmes with immediate follow-up in post-literacy programmes (Mora op.cit:7f.).

## VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Since The Universal Declaration of Human rights in 1948 and through the different later declarations, literacy has been recognised as a right. Earlier the Bolivian state has ratified these declarations without prioritising adult education. The present government is making an effort to change the situation with significant support from Cuba and Venezuela. It has become less of a stigma to be illiterate and many illiterates have the possibility to learn to read and write during the campaign period. People living in remote places and especially women have, may be for the first time, the opportunity of becoming literate. Eight of ten of the alphabetised are women mainly the ages of 35 and 50. The aim of the post-literacy programme is for the new-literates to continue the training process and reach primary school level educationally.

According to the EFA evaluation, Bolivia apparently is doing well by emphasising literacy. The 2008 Monitoring report places Bolivia as one of the countries with good chance of achieving universal literacy by 2015. In the words of the report, they are "moving towards the goal with steady progress" (UNESCO 2008:182). To reach the goal the Report lists some measures to be taken by the national governments. Related to adult literacy



it is necessary to give “top priority on boldly expanding adequately staffed and funded literacy and skills-training programmes for youth and adults, harnessing all forms of media” (UNESCO 2008:3). Is this a description of the Bolivian governments’ effort to alphabetise its population? Or is the effort more an attempt to give people the impression that promises are fulfilled?

It is of supreme importance for the people of Bolivia that literacy is prioritised. But the actual project seems to have been carried out without the necessary preparation and one wonders whether prestige is playing a part when it comes to fulfilling the promise. The teachers at the *Centro Technico Ayacucho* in La Paz regarded the government’s actual concern for the illiterates politically determined to promote votes (interview, March 6, 2007). There has been significant political rhetoric around the literacy projects. It appears central for the new government to implement projects that are of importance to the main voters, the poor and the indigenous population to keep their interest. Still, it is a well known political strategy to keep the masses from participating in the public debate by not providing the necessary education. One wonders how the reaction from these groups will be if they one more time experience that they have not got the possibility to be sufficiently literate to take active part in politics and to participate in the society as legitimate citizens.

Based on UNESCO’s definition of functional literacy it is difficult to determine whether the Bolivian population today is literate. However, according to the Bolivian definition that regards literacy as a process, many people are now on their way to reaching the goal if the government continues to emphasise the post-literacy programme and receives sufficient support for it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>UNESCO, *United Nations Literacy Decade (2003 - 2012)*, accessed at <http://www.unesco.org/en/literacy/un-literacy-decade/>, May 4, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Informants include director for adult education and literacy in La Paz Fernando Bernal; main coordinator of *Yo si puedo*, Pablo Quisbert; director of ‘Prodeli’, *Proyecto de alfabetización Bilingüe*, Ernan Pari; regional director in Chuquizaca of Alfalit, literacy organisation, Willer Tellez; Cuban workers and coordinators; literacy teachers and instructors at *Centro Tecnico Ayacucho* in La Paz and in different training programs in Sucre; as well as lecturers, teachers and other people I have met. The interpretations are the author’s responsibility.

<sup>3</sup> Translations from Spanish are done by the author.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO, *Institute for Statistics 2006*, accessed at [http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=6411\\_201&ID2=DO\\_TOPIC](http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=6411_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC), May 4, 2010.

- <sup>5</sup> In Latin America, indigenous peoples are descendants of the peoples who populated the western hemisphere prior to the arrival of the Europeans and have maintained some or all of their linguistic, cultural and organizational characteristics (UNESCO 2006:177; cf. Luykx 1999).
- <sup>6</sup> Of those over fifteen years. *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas, Censo 2001*, accessed at <http://www.ine.gov.bo:8082/censo/entrance.jsp>, May 6, 2010.
- <sup>7</sup> *Estadísticas Nacionales*, INE, *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas*, accessed at <http://www.ine.gov.bo/indice/visualizador.aspx?ah=PC20410.HTM>, May 3, 2010. Other figures are based upon the census of 2001, if not other reference is given.
- <sup>8</sup> *Mestizo* traditionally signifies an individual presumably of both Hispanic and Indian descent. Today the term signifies more a social group of people one chooses to join than an ethnical term, cf. Barth (1969/1996).
- <sup>9</sup> The numbers only take into account the population that answered the questions about education in the census of 1992 and 2001. INE, accessed at [http://www.ine.gov.bo/pdf/Anuario\\_2004/302.pdf](http://www.ine.gov.bo/pdf/Anuario_2004/302.pdf), May 4, 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> *Análisis crítico de la realidad* (1999) referred to by Tellez in a lecture, February 25, 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> OEI, *Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos*, “Bolivia – ‘Yo, sí puedo’ alcanzó medio millón de alfabetizados en Bolivia”, accessed at <http://www.oei.es/noticias/spip.php?article2391>, May 6, 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> Willer Tellez is working in a private NGO and has been working in the field since 2001, experiencing cooperation with many municipalities and other NGO’s.
- <sup>13</sup> Information about the budget and support from abroad has been varying. Quisbert says that the programme is financed 50 per cent by support from Cuba and Venezuela, and 50 per cent by the Bolivian state (interview, 2008). Other informants state that it is financed only from abroad.
- <sup>14</sup> *Instituto Pedagógico Latinoamericano y Caribeño* (IPLAC), Cuba, accessed at <http://www.alfabetizacion.rimed.cu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=16>, June 11, 2009.
- <sup>15</sup> *Instituto Pedagógico Latinoamericano y Caribeño* (IPLAC), Cuba, accessed at <http://www.alfabetizacion.rimed.cu/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=11&Itemid=31>, June 11, 2009
- <sup>16</sup> Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, Misión Robinson I,II accessed at [http://ceims.mre.gob.ve/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&catid=23&id=51:mision-robinson-i-ii](http://ceims.mre.gob.ve/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&catid=23&id=51:mision-robinson-i-ii), May 5, 2010
- <sup>17</sup> *Programa cubano de alfabetización para Sevilla*, ‘Yo, si puedo’, accessed at <http://yosipuedosevilla.wordpress.com/programa/>, May 6, 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> Robinson Internacional, accessed at <http://www.misionrobinson.gov.ve/>, May 15, 2007

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