

**Contribution of Literacy Training to Development in the Context  
of Tanzania: Emerging Issues and Research Implications**

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**Abstract**

Most of what is known about the effects and benefits of literacy training in Tanzania is based on the perspectives of policy makers, or researchers utilizing the official state perspective, while the participation of adult learners in the evaluation of adult literacy training activities has remained minimal. The response of adult learners to the state adult education and literacy training policies has not been adequately studied, while the impact of the latter on the former has tended to be overvalued. At the same time the scope of analysis has been too global to illuminate the actual practice at the grassroots level. Presenting the state of the art review on the contributions of literacy training to development in the context of Tanzania, this paper argues for more in-depth analyses of the social, political and economic consequences of literacy training, particularly at the grassroots level. Since in third world societies it is the state which plays a predominant role in managing societal learning processes, the paper underscores the need to make it an object of analysis as well. Then, participatory action research is considered to be the most appropriate research paradigm in such studies which seek to illuminate the more intricate social and political realities.

**Introduction**

Since independence in 1961, the literature on education in Tanzania has been characterized by a strong faith in the capacity of education to promote development. In fact, as early as 1954, the Tanganyika African National Union

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(TANU) pressed the colonial government to establish technical schools for Africans to ensure the provision of primary education for all school-age children, and to expand facilities for higher education (Komba and Temu, 1987).

This emphasis on education partly emanates from the type of conception of development espoused by the Tanzanian state, at least at a theoretical level: a man-centred and multi-dimensional process including economic growth, distribution and redistribution of resources in society, reduction of poverty of the majority of the population, creation of structures for enhancing self-sustaining economic growth, minimization of dependence on major industrial states, and people's participation in decision-making processes (Samoff, 1974).

The initial concentration of government effort on the provision of expanding formal education to children, to the exclusion of adult population, increasingly proved to be inadequate for the purposes of rapid economic and social development. With the birth of the Arusha Declaration in 1967, the social, economic and political rationalities became more apparent, namely

- (a) eradication of illiteracy and creation of a basic foundation to enable each citizen to search for more knowledge and skills so that he or she can function effectively in society;
- (b) improvement of vocational and professional competency of peasants and workers to help them raise their level of income and increase their capacity to contribute to national economic growth; and
- (c) the raising of the general level of awareness of the citizenry regarding local, national and international issues so that they can become more effective participants in the polity.

This paper makes a modest attempt to examine critically some of the major studies done on literacy training and development in Tanzania, a country widely praised for both the extensiveness and economic/political/social relevance of its adult literacy programmes. This paper is divided into four sections. The first introduces the debate on what constitutes literacy, while the second summarizes the main benefits of literacy. The third section focuses on studies done on literacy training in Tanzania at various levels of analysis, namely national, district and village level. The last section provides some concluding remarks.

### **Toward a Definition of Literacy**

Although frequent reference is made to "literacy" in the literature, there is not

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yet a generally accepted definition of the concept. Literacy has tended to remain a social construct. This is partly due to the fact that literacy training programmes use several different methods and strategies, in addition to having a broad range of goals (Torres, 1987).

Any understanding of literacy, therefore, has to be contextualized since it is relative and culture-bound. Gray (1956:24), writing for UNESCO within the framework of “functional literacy”, popularized the relativistic conception of literacy by defining a literate person as one who “has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group.” Following that definition, Hunter and Harman (1979:7) defined literacy as “the possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and members of social, religious, or other associations of their choosing.”

This debate is further compounded by different levels of literacy. Bhola (1980) pointed out three levels of literacy; illiteracy, pre-literacy and literacy. Among the literates themselves, some may have better literacy skills than others, while the literacy levels are arbitrarily determined. Thus, Bhola cautioned, although the criteria for judging one to be literate should be functionality, the latter ought to be defined “carefully, concretely and contextually” (p.4).

A measure of literacy which has been in operation for some time is the assessment of a person’s ability to read and write at a level equivalent to that of a particular school grade. Such measures may appear attractive, but there is little evidence to show that a person who completes a given number of years (such as six years) of school is literate, or that equivalency scores suffice for performance in real life reading and writing tasks (Fisher, 1987). Lictman (1974), for example, focused on the performance of reading tasks which were directly related to practical and life experiences, such as the ability of subjects to read 45 items selected from nine common daily reading activities like food store advertisements, directions for preparation of food, leases and maps. In 1975, a similar study was conducted in Texas, known as the Adult Performance Level (APL), to find out how many people did not have the requisite skills to “manage” and “survive”. A literate person was defined as one who achieved a certain number of objectives emanating from “predetermined living requisites” (Kozol, 1980:54).

Although Tanzania has tended to attach a broader meaning to literacy, (Lind and Johnston, 1986) has at the same time adopted the narrow criteria for judging literacy as the ability to:

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- (a) read and write a letter within the family;
- (b) read a newspaper to keep up with current happenings and obtain information or to read “little” books on better living, better foods, better ways of farming, etc;
- (c) complete various forms (like bank, birth and job application forms), as well as the ability to keep simple records (Mpogolo, 1980).

Four levels of adult basic literacy have been identified, each one with specific criteria for judging an individual to have reached the respective level. It is at the fourth level of literacy that an individual is considered to be functionally literate.

These assessment criteria do not appear to adhere to the broader conception of literacy. They tend to gauge the ability to handle written language skills (particularly reading and writing) at the expense of other communicative skills, such as speaking, listening, and comprehension which, in a context like that of Tanzania, may be even more important. Second, they do not take into account the changing literacy needs of both individuals and societies in time and place. As Fisher (1987:46) cautioned:

---to describe literacy skills necessary for survival in terms of the completion of particular forms is to fail to acknowledge the wide range of important uses for literacy skills and to assume that the completion of particular forms is more critical than other activities.

Third, the criteria imply a particular conception of a literate person, one who has the ability to read, write and comprehend signs, instructions, labels and orders given to him or her by others - a conception which is usually rooted in the thinking and value systems developed by academics or bureaucrats, and *not* by adult learners themselves.

Freire and Macedo (1987) criticise such a conception of literacy by stressing that a literacy process has to involve not only mastery of specific skills and particular forms of knowledge, but also a creation of social and cultural conditions for eventual human liberation. This position was well articulated by Giroux in his introduction to the book by Freire and Macedo (1987):

Central to Freire’s approach to literacy is a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language and transformative agency, on the other. Within this perspective, literacy is not approached as merely a technical skills to be acquired,

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but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom. Most importantly, literacy for Freire is inherently a political project in which men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society (p.7).

Thus, any attempt to define literacy is made complex by semantic, epistemological, as well as ideological ambiguities embodied in the concept. As Fagan (1988:231) advised, it is useful to define literacy in terms of the circumstances (economic, social, geographic, etc.) of the people involved and their needs, whether immediate or long-term. Nevertheless, in its simplest form, literacy denotes the ability to read and write, *with understanding*, as short, simple statement on one's everyday life, and it is intended to enable individuals to function within their specific social contexts (Thomas, 1989).

### **Benefits of Literacy**

While many writers do not claim an absolute and deterministic role for literacy in development, they argue that literacy is an essential component of individual and societal development (Bhola, 1984). Blaugh (1966:394), for example, explained that literacy provided people with additional means of communication, and that it can contribute to economic development by:

- (a) raising the productivity of new literates;
- (b) raising the productivity of individuals working in association with literates;
- (c) expediting the flow of general knowledge of individuals;
- (d) stimulating the demand for vocational training and technical education;
- (e) enhancing occupational mobility; and
- (f) strengthening economic incentives.

For Bhola (1984:254), literacy is a new symbolic skill for the new literates; it transforms the attitudes of new literates so that they can become "better adopters of innovations"; it enables individuals to be "better consumers of media", and "dynamizes culture in its broader sense as the newly literates partake of their heritage and renew it."

At the societal level, Bhola continued to show that there are several positive

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effects when a high enough percentage of the population becomes literate. For example, where there is a high literacy rate of about 75 percent, there will be low infant mortality, low birth rates, and improvement in children's health status. Second, in literate environments it is easier to learn many of the modern skills of production and income generation. And, third, the literacy class can turn out to be a centre of community education and social action at the community level.

Literacy training can also be used for political education. Immediately after the revolution in China, for example, literacy classes were started in villages to raise the political and educational levels of the masses, with the assumption that "without the popularization and upgrading of the worker-peasant education, there would be no high tide of cultural construction" (UNESCO, 1983:9). The reduction of illiteracy was expected to create conditions conducive to further understanding of politics, general knowledge, and science for the training and academic upgrading of cadres in the rural areas.

Similarly, in Cuba, elimination of illiteracy was conceived by the leadership not simply as a technical or pedagogical problem, but mainly as a profoundly political effort, one intimately tied to the revolutionary transformation of society and the economy (Leiner, 1987:173). In order to achieve those goals, it was felt necessary to extend the literacy campaign to enable the new literates to obtain at least a minimum grade level (sixth grade), if at all they were to participate effectively in the process of social construction.

However, most studies which have been done to test the contributions of literacy training have not always produced encouraging results. It was postulated in the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) co-sponsored by UNESCO and UNDP, for example, that functional literacy had the capacity to transform the new literates' relationship to their socio-economic milieu, as well as the milieu itself. But among other things, the results indicated that only less than one-third of all the socio-economic changes stipulated in the various programmes were *ever* adopted by the participants (UNESCO/UNDP, 1976). Second, it would appear that the narrowly economic and individualistic nature of the EWLP's logic diverged from - if not contradicted - the type of development pursued and cherished by some of the participating countries (UNESCO/UNDP, 1976). As the evaluation team observed, there is a need:

... to avoid viewing or designing literacy as an overwhelmingly technical solution to problems that are only partly technical. A broad, multidimensional approach to both development and literacy is required. Indeed, it would seem that literacy programmes can only

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be fully conducive to literacy - if they accord importance to social, cultural and political change as well as economic growth (p.122).

Studies by Bhola (1984), Lind and Johnston (1986), and Arrove and Craff (1987) have further illuminated the political and ideological character of literacy training activities, stressing the point that the most fundamental issues involved are motivational, mobilizational, political and organizational, rather than simply technical and pedagogical (Husen and Postlethwaite, 1989:465). While the studies have made an invaluable contribution to the theory and practice of comparative adult education, they have tended to be too broad to reflect the actual practice at the level of the individual adult learner and his or her immediate community. In some cases, notably in the analysis of Bhola (1984), no effort is made to analyse the social formations of the countries studied, thus rendering the comparative dimension merely descriptive and analytically incomplete. In the next section we shall critically examine some of the main studies done on literacy training and development in Tanzania, thereby illuminating further the limitations of macro studies.

### **Research on Literacy Training in Tanzania**

#### ***National-level studies***

The literature available on literacy training in Tanzania, and elsewhere, reveals a great deal of optimism for the utility of literacy at the macro level: a general hypothesis could be made that the larger the scope of analysis the stronger the claim for the role of literacy in development one is likely to encounter. Ngw'andu (1973), for example, carefully described and analysed the role of adult education in the building of ujamaa villages in Tanzania. He discovered that adult education as a whole had contributed to the implementation of ujamaa villages policy by creating among the people a general awareness and willingness to accept innovations. The content of adult education programmes reflected local needs, thereby enabling adult learners to solve some of the problems they were confronting in their rural setting.

Hall (1975) wrote an interesting study on adult education and the development of socialism in Tanzania. He observed that there was a greater emphasis on the role of adult education in development, particularly after the promulgation of the Arusha Declaration (1967). This was reflected in the increase in the number of official statements on adult education in public speeches, newspaper articles, political meetings, and government directives.

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Subsequently, there was a proliferation of adult education agencies and programs in the country, with a substantial increase in the enrolment figures for the various adult education programmes in the post-Arusha Declaration period. In 1964, for example, there were only 304,794 adult learners in literacy classes. By 1973, enrolment had risen to about two million, with another 600,000 pursuing some other types of subject (p.131).

Kassam (1978) recorded major developments constituting what he called the “adult education revolution” in Tanzania. He wrote that “of all the development programmes, adult education (which includes political education) probably served as the greatest means of mobilizing people for development” (p.106). Noting a proliferation of different programmes and institutions, such as the national literacy campaign, the mass radio study group campaigns, education by correspondence, workers’ education, folk development colleges, community education centres, and rural libraries, Kassam emphasized the point that all the decisions taken and all the policies formulated in adult education “have been guided primarily by the objective realities and conditions of Tanzania, rather than by concepts such as ‘international standards’ and ‘models’” (p.106).

Relying almost entirely on documentation analysis, Kassam was not able to analyse systematically the social, political and economic effects of adult education and literacy training at the level of an individual, or a village, to see whether “adult education revolution” had initiated a socio-economic revolution in the Tanzanian society. He noted, however, that there was a general “apathy to change, lack of conviction or clarity on the developmental and liberational potential of adult education, lack of recognition of the need for life-long learning, the inclination to equate education with formal schooling and certificate oriented tendencies” (p.107).

Perhaps the largest study on the impact of literacy training in Tanzania was one done by the Ministry of Education (1983). The study involved interviews with over 5,000 new literates and 1,680 relatives of the students. Additional data were collected through questionnaires which were administered to over 1,000 teachers, adult education coordinators, government administrators and experts, as well as party officials. It found that literacy and post-literacy training had enabled adult learners in Tanzania to make use of modern agricultural methods, to participate in various political activities, and to adopt better health practices. The study further showed that literacy and post-literacy training had contributed to the development of Kiswahili proficiency and elimination of certain undesirable cultural beliefs.

The problem with such studies is that they have not adequately analysed the

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Tanzanian social formation which provides the context of educational policy formulation and implementation. Focusing mainly on attitudinal change as a pre-requisite for successful implementation of any development programmes, the studies have overlooked the importance of collective political and economic action.

There are also methodological problems. For example, in the Ministry of Education study (1983), the researchers asked about current farming behaviour in an attempt to examine the impact of literacy training on farming practices, without finding out whether or not the change in behaviour occurred during or since the literacy classes (Unsicker, 1987). Some of the effects which they attributed to literacy training, on the basis of what they were told by the respondents, could have been brought about by other development agencies, such as the work of party activists and various extension agents in the villages and in the towns. As a whole, the scope of analysis of these studies is so wide that it is likely to adversely influence the validity of the findings.

### ***District-level Studies***

Studies done at the district level have revealed a number of social and economic constraints which adversely affect the smooth running of literacy training programs, thereby minimizing their impact on development. In a 1971 study on a literacy campaign in six districts, Hall and Mhaiki (1972), for example, discovered the following problems, among others: inadequate supply of instructional materials, poor quality of teachers, adult learners not convinced of the importance of the 3Rs, poor attendance and drop-out from classes, interruption of literacy classes by social functions, workers from other development ministries and departments not fully cooperating in literacy work, adult learners' preoccupation with domestic chores and/or farming activities, and the literacy training curriculum failing to address the specific problems of the pastoralists.

Some studies have also indicated that the state adult education policy is not always understood in the same way by all the actors in a given area. For example, in a 1975 study on policy and practice in Tanzanian adult education (in Hinzen and Hundsdorfer, 1979), Mlekwa found out that different categories of people in the district studied had different interpretations of adult education, its aims and objectives, as well as its organization. The professional adult educators understood adult education to include literacy, functional literacy and continuing education. The party, government, parastatal and religious officials tended to

understand adult education mainly in terms of functional literacy. Adult learners, on the other hand, conceptualized adult education as merely literacy.

The different perceptions of adult education had a bearing on the manner in which adult education policy was implemented, as well as the motivation of adult learners. The party, government and parastatal officials who interpreted adult education as meaning mainly functional literacy tended to believe that literacy training was the responsibility of the Ministry of Education alone. Thus "the broader dimension of adult education was not vividly portrayed and the importance of co-ordinating the activities of the various adult education agencies did not seem to be an issue of much concern" (p.219). On the other hand, since the adult learners viewed adult education as simply literacy training, they were not much convinced of the importance of adult education or literacy training in their own lives. Hence, the general response to the question, "why do you attend adult education classes", was, "because we have been told to" (p.219).

With respect to the acquisition and utilization of functional skills in daily life activities, Mushi (1986) showed that there were significant differences in the acquisition and utilization of health, agricultural and industrial functional skills in Moshi Urban and Rombo districts. Moshi Urban adult learners who had achieved higher levels of literacy (54%), were utilizing less modern agricultural inputs and technology than were their counterparts of Rombo District who had attained a lower level of literacy (23%).

Two major implications can be drawn from these studies. First, a well intentioned educational innovation may be misconceived and subsequently misimplemented. Historical, economic, political, sociological and at times geographical factors may come into play. People's experience accumulated throughout history, the type of social organization and various cultural patterns which people have developed and cherish, will have a direct or indirect bearing on the manner in which an educational policy will be perceived. Much more will depend on the extent to which the people themselves participate in the process of policy making. For once they participate in policy formulation, they will more easily understand it and implement it accordingly.

Second, it would appear that higher literacy rate by itself is not likely to be directly related to higher utilization of new technology. As Mushi pointed out, the difference may be attributed to factors exogenous to literacy, including the availability of agricultural and industrial inputs, the types of agricultural plots, the level of political mobilization of adult learners to put the skills into operation, existing state policies on prices for the commodities produced, or salaries for

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services rendered.

These district-level studies, too, had important delimitations. While the six districts' literacy campaign research team (1971) and Mlekwa (1975) sought to analyse the achievements and the bottlenecks in the implementation of adult education policy in the districts, without probing into the contribution of literacy training to the development of either the adult learners or the districts studied, Mushi (1986) addressed the impact of literacy training on development in the absence of baseline data that would help in isolating the effects of literacy training from those of other development agencies.

### ***Village-level studies***

At the village level, the gap between policy and practice becomes even more apparent. In his study of the perspectives of the graduates of the post-functional literacy curriculum in Tanzania, Kinshaga (1985) showed that the adult learners were not always ready to adopt the innovations advocated by the functional literacy curriculum. Utilizing an ethnographic approach of participant observation, he was told by the adult learners that they had learned many things from the programme, such as the importance of constructing and using latrines, garbage pits, planting crops in rows, drinking boiled water, and planting trees. However, he discovered that:

Most graduates did not take any initiative to apply their acquired knowledge until the village government directed them to do so. The village government, under its socio-economic development program, intervened in order to bring the changes needed or to arrest crisis in case of cholera which occurred in 1982/83. But the graduates applied their acquired knowledge only when they perceived it to be beneficial to them and compatible with their value system (p.vii).

The graduates learned the importance of planting trees where there were none, but they did not plant any trees until they were directed by the village government to do so (p.20). Some resisted the adoption of modern agricultural methods, such as using manure on the black cotton soils and planting millet in rows, arguing that there was no need to do so. Some cultural beliefs impeded the adult learners from utilizing the functional literacy skills to improve the quality of their lives. One good example was the use of oxen ploughs. The idea seemed interesting to the adult learners, but in practice none of the functional

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literacy graduates owned or used one. The villagers felt that the use of oxen for cultivation would be too brutal to the animals. Consequently, the oxen ploughs lay idle in the village.

In a comprehensive study of the practice of adult education in relation to the task of socialist transformation in Tanzania, Kweka (1987) further demonstrated the limited capacity of adult education to promote development. Using the participatory approach, coupled with informal interviews, documentation analysis and participant observation, he analysed the following dimensions in one of the villages that he studied:

- (a) the socio-economic system of the village and how it related to the national and international systems,
- (b) the relationship of the socio-economic system at the village level, and the historical development of school education and adult education in the area,
- (c) the views of peasants and leaders on various programmes of adult education, and
- (d) the political system and its involvement in adult education and development at the village level.

Among other things, the results indicated, first, that the peasants did not see the manner in which adult education programmes could help them improve their living conditions. Second, and related to the first, the literacy primers used in the village did not impart new knowledge to the learners - they dealt with agricultural techniques already known to the villagers. Third, while the literacy primers dealt with biological and chemical innovations such as type of seeds, seedlings, planting, weeding and the use of fertilizers and insecticides, they did not disseminate knowledge of seed production particularly because the seeds were sold to the peasants by a parastatal and some private companies. Further, peasants' participation in decision making was greatly limited: there was no genuine dialogue between the bureaucrats and the peasants on issues which affected the living conditions of the workers and peasants. This led to a situation whereby:

peasants and workers had begun to see that the programmes that came from above were not for their interests. Some peasants observed that they were urged to join adult education classes so that teachers should get honoraria (p.127).

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While Kweka has made an important contribution to existing knowledge about policy and practice of adult education at a micro (village) level in Tanzania, his attempt to analyse all adult education programmes in the village minimized his attention on literacy training which, in the context of Tanzania, has been accorded the greatest priority among all non-formal education programmes.

It was against such a background that Mlekwa (1990) carried out a study aimed at investigating how literacy training, as designed by the Tanzanian states, related to the daily life activities of adult learners, and to the development programmes and plans of villages. Two villages in Morogoro Region were investigated utilizing the qualitative research paradigm. Data was collected through documentary review, participant observation and unstructured interviews. Six adult education coordinators, eight literacy teachers and twenty-two adult learners were interviewed. Sixteen party and government officials and ten village elders were also interviewed to generate information on the socio-economic context of the study.

Among other things, Mlekwa found out that:

- (a) different actors defined (functional) literacy differently, while the coordinators and literacy teachers defined it in a broader sense, adult learners defined it simply as reading, writing and counting;
- (b) the coordinators and literacy teachers pointed out that literacy training was directly related to the daily life activities of adult learners, but the latter thought that it had neither significant connection to, nor beneficial influence on their daily lives or future prospects;
- (c) the coordinators and literacy teachers also indicated that literacy training was addressing the cultural, political and economic aspects of the villages, while adult learners did not see such a relationship.

Thus, the findings illuminated further the limitations of state sponsored literacy training as a vehicle for individual and societal development, and tended to suggest a literacy training curriculum primarily based on the needs and interests of adult learners.

### ***Individual-level Studies***

Research done at the level of an individual adult learner is the most scanty. Perhaps the best known is the one which was done by Kassam (1979), who sought to capture the new literates' own perceptions of the benefits of literacy. Through dialogues with eight new literates from four regions of Tanzania,

representing what he called “a fair cross-section of people from within the workers and peasants” (p.16), he found out that in almost all cases literacy had made a powerful and positive impact on the qualitative aspects of development, such as enhancement of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance.

In this study, too, Kassam did not analyse the Tanzanian social formation, the nature and character of the Tanzanian state, the social, political and economic institutions purported to serve the interests of the peasants and workers, or even the views of the new literates about these factors. In the absence of such analyses, he may have ended up romanticizing the benefits of adult education and literacy training.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the light of the literature reviewed, it would appear that the role of the state in adult education and literacy training has not been adequately studied in Tanzania. This is unfortunate because in developing countries virtually all forms of education and training are controlled by the state. The state, therefore, becomes an important intervening variable mediating between education and development. As such, it must also be an object of analysis in any study aimed at analysing the contributions of any form of education - in this case literacy training - to development.

Second, some studies have tended to confuse correlation with causation. Correlation refers to the degree of association between two variables, or as Vanhonacker (1983:82) put it, “the amount of reduction in error in predicting values of one variable from values of the other”. A perfect statistical relationship between two variables, however, is not an appropriate indicator of causation. The latter occurs only when the following three criteria are fulfilled:

- (a) the independent (cause) and the dependent (effect) variables have to be empirically related to one another.
- (b) the independent variable must precede the dependent variable in time,
- (c) the observed relationship cannot be attributable to the effects of another earlier variable (Babbie, 1986:65).

Studies by Hall (1975) and Ng'wandu (1973) showed, for example, that there was an increased awareness of the role of adult education in development after the Arusha Declaration, and where ujamaa village policy had been “more fully accepted” respectively. These studies claimed a causal relationship between

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