

## PRACTICE NOTE

# Promoting Literacy and Protection with Solar Lamps in Yemen

Jerry Farrell\*

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By distributing solar lamps to vulnerable rural women in Yemen, we promoted enrollment in literacy programs, as well as reading among their children. We saw a number of secondary benefits as well: safer households where dangerous kerosene lamps were used less frequently in the evening; a number of livelihood activities - cooking, husbandry, handicrafts - continued safely into evening hours; children found it easier to work on their homework using the solar powered lamps; and children found it easier and safer to walk in dark, rural streets in the evening with the solar lamps slung around their necks.

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Yemen is at a crossroads. The revolution in 2011 led to a transitional government and vibrant national dialogue, but also to a collapsing economy, increased instability, and heightened insecurity throughout the country. Nearly half of the population is under 16 and an estimated 1.3 children work, two to three million children are out of school, and unemployment among youth is over 50 per cent.

Save the Children (SCI) has worked in Yemen for 50 years, focused for the bulk of that period on child protection, education, child rights, and small-scale health projects. In 2008, the agency began emergency programs in health, nutrition, and food security while continuing its programs in child protection and inclusive education. Currently, Save the Children runs large-scale humanitarian programs in food security, health, nutrition, and livelihoods. The agency manages smaller ones in water, sanitation, hygiene, and child protection. Save the Children also runs some

longer-term health programs in newborn care, family planning, and capacity building with colleagues at the Ministry of Health.

Shortly after I arrived in Yemen, I learned that the rate of illiteracy among rural women was about two thirds. That meant that the very basis of household learning, the foundation of our idea of a 'social asset,' was impaired because most rural women could not read or write. It also meant that mothers could not read labels on bottles, count money in the market, or help their children with homework. It also suggested that one of the reasons that Yemen comes in last year after year in the UNDP Gender Development Index is that rural women cannot read and write.

While working again in Darfur in 2008, I had realized early on that most of our cooks and cleaners, over 100 staff members, were illiterate. I asked a few of them if they would be interested in enrolling in an after-work literacy program and the response was more than enthusiastic; every single cook and cleaner signed up. Within a few months, they were able to count, read simple text, and navigate

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**Figure 1:** School children received lamps as incentives to borrow books to read at home. Although sitting on the floor, children were thrilled to receive the lamps. Photo: Save the Children (SCI).

their daily lives with more confidence and control. Traders took notice and no longer attempted to short-change the students. Many commented about their enhanced self-respect because they now could help their young children with their homework, read simple bulletins, and understand the labels on food products and medicines.

But in Yemen, I could not get donors interested in funding such an activity even though the knock-on benefits were so obvious and the cost per person was very low. However, a generous corporate donor, the Swedish furniture company IKEA Foundation, sent us a sea-container full of desk-top solar lamps and a bit of money to distribute them in mid-2012. Although the original idea was to hand the lamps out to children in IDP and refugee camps, it became clear after a few visits and conversations in these communities that the lamps would disappear into the market

shortly after distribution. There would hardly be any positive impact for children if we took this approach. Why not use the lamps to promote literacy among rural women and reading among their children? That is the simple idea that occurred to me in early 2013 shortly after we finally wrangled the shipment out of customs. I then found a viable partner, the Yemen Reading Association, a local NGO that promoted reading.

We discussed the idea, and started the initiative in April 2013. I told the donor towards the end of the project that we had changed the goal and distribution approach, but I do not think they were unduly upset because the outcomes far exceeded the original purpose.

### The Project

The project was to use a gift of solar lamps to promote literacy among illiterate rural women in Yemen. Indirectly, we aimed to



**Figure 2:** Karima, 11, uses the lamp to do her homework. Photo: Save the Children (SCI).

promote the value of reading among their children as well (**Figure 1**).

### Why we did it

The high illiteracy rates among rural women in particular constitute a challenge to both humanitarian and development assistance in all sectors. Not only are illiterate mothers limited in their capacity to help their children learn, but also they lack the capacity to read important, and sometimes critical, information related to the nutrition, health, and/or overall wellbeing of their children. This can result in poor nutrition, hygiene, feeding and health practices. Therefore, the government of Yemen has put in place a program to encourage rural women to join literacy classes. However, due to conflicting priorities for illiterate rural women and weak institutions, these programs have not attracted enough girls and adult women. The solar lamps program had two primary objectives: 1) promote literacy and encourage rural illiterate women to enroll or re-enroll in literacy classes; and 2) provide a safe alternative to the kerosene lamps and generators

for rural women enrolled in literacy classes in areas where electricity is not available. A secondary objective was to increase reading among children (**Figure 2**).

### How we did it

Before implementing the program, we considered two essential factors that affect interventions in rural areas: 1) how we would enter target areas and 2) the accuracy of data about the number of beneficiaries. Therefore, among many options, Save the Children decided to partner with a local NGO that has presence in the targeted areas and capacity to network with different stakeholders; this would ensure acceptance and understanding of the local context as well as help to collect and analyze data about beneficiaries. Information about this potential partnership was shared with local NGOs working in the field of education. The Yemeni Reading Association (YRA), a local NGO focused on literacy, proposed to implement the project by creating further local partnerships with other NGOs and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working in each gover-





**Figure 3:** Girls in “Alamal” school in Taiz (for Muhamasheen, a disenfranchised group) received the lamps and books to read at home. Photo: Save the Children (SCI).

norate. YRA would also reach out to the local councils in each district.

According to this approach, YRA made a list of strong local NGOs and CSOs and agreed with SCI on criteria for selecting the partners and mode of cooperation with each one. The final list of partners included the largest two organizations affiliated with the two most influential (and rival) political parties in the country, the Ministry of Culture, a local NGO implementing a livelihoods project for the UN IFAD, a small NGO working in the underprivileged governorate of Hajja, and, most remarkably, the Al-Saeed Foundation representing the largest business group in Yemen, Hayel Saeed Group of Companies. Each of these partners verified the data on beneficiaries and distributed the lamps in the areas where they managed their own literacy programs. Al-Saeed Foundation’s involvement was very effective

in the most populated governorate of Taiz due to the influence of the family, but also because of the respect for and good reputation of the foundation among the citizens. Once Al-Saeed Foundation launched the program and news spread on TV and through other media outlets, there was immediate demand for more solar lamps for literacy all over the country. That is when YRA activated the rest of the partnerships with all other actors. Since these actors had worked for years in their respective communities, their contribution increased community involvement and decreased the concerns previously held by YRA and SCI about the accuracy of the data about beneficiaries. Their deep connections with the respective communities allowed them to double check and verify the beneficiary data. Additionally, YRA representatives as well as local council representatives attended and supervised

the implementation process in each governorate, thus increasing transparency. The political balance between the two largest organizations, Al-Saleh Foundation and the Charitable Society for Social Welfare (CSSW) made the project more popular and appreciated by people across the political spectrum.

The methodology devised by YRA and refined by SCI, Yemen was based on prioritizing the most unlikely learners and most vulnerable in the most electricity-deprived areas. Therefore, young girls, 15-18 enrolled in literacy classes, being used as a bridge to enter into the general education system, became the first priority beneficiaries. This is because it is at this age that uneducated young girls become targets for early marriage (**Figure 3**). The second priority beneficiaries were all other women in literacy centers in the electricity-deprived areas.

YRA staff members collected names and other information about the beneficiaries from the Bureau of Literacy in the governorates, cross-checked them with the local councils, and verified identities during distribution. Data on study/reading practices and time was collected before and after the distribution of the lamps in the form of pre- and post-surveys and data was analyzed using simple statistics of means and percentages. YRA also used t-tests to measure the impact of the incentive on the reading time and practices. YRA and partners also collected qualitative data on the impact of the lamps on the overall livelihoods of the recipient mothers and young girls.

### What we expected

- Increase in enrolment in literacy centers among rural illiterate women and young girls;
- Increase in retention in literacy centers, reduction in dropout rates;
- Improved attitudes towards learning among women in literacy classes;
- Awareness of and advocacy for girls' and women's education among the influential figures and the general public in the targeted communities.

### What actually happened

- On average, the time women spent reading or doing homework increased by 10% after the distribution of the lamps;
- 32 per cent of the beneficiaries shifted their study time from afternoon, when rural women are usually busy with their daily chores, to the night when they are relatively less busy. The availability of light from the solar lamps allowed the women to move their study-times to the evening;
- More than 75 per cent of the beneficiaries reported using the lamps beyond reading and studying. For example, individual cases have been identified where the lamps have improved mothers' ability to respond to the needs of their babies during the night;
- Among the other uses of the lamps include various forms of childcare and daily chores: attending to crying babies, changing diapers, giving medicine to children, checking on domestic animals, cooking dinner, among others (**Figure 4**);
- Children in households where lamps were distributed used them to study or do their homework as well. This was only possible by having a solar powered lamp to illuminate their homes at night.

### Anecdotal, 'softer' results

- Many women showed an increased motivation to continue their learning. This will have positive implications for raising the marriage age for rural girls if they follow the example of their mothers;
- Children whose mothers were enrolled in the solar lamp-enhanced literacy program seemed to value education to a greater extent than children whose mothers were not enrolled.
- Women spoke about being able to better manage and control their own lives. Women enrolled in the program will likelier participate more actively in health, nutrition, protection, and water/sanitation/hygiene programs because they can read and understand simple brochures and texts;



**Figure 4:** A child “wears” the lamp round his neck to walk at night so his hands are free. Although not trained to do so, this unusual use of the lamp made it an essential item for the safety of children in electricity-deprived villages. Photo: Save the Children (SCI).

- Possible initiation of a paradigm shift, one in which we bring more mothers into literacy programs and see fewer children dropping out of school – only time will tell.

### **What we could do better**

Due to the lack of credible and well-documented data on the number and location of the literacy students, we had to wait for a few weeks before obtaining the final validated lists of beneficiaries. Therefore, the distribution took place very close to the end of the school year and at the beginning of the new school year. One lesson learned from the experience is to start well before the school year begins so that there is ample time to assess the impact of the project on the learners. Another lesson learned is that the inclusion of the local councils is

a strength that was not necessarily well-utilized in all locations. Although we included the local community and elected local councils in the distribution efforts, their early inclusion during the planning phase would have resulted in a greater sense of ownership from their side.

We should have included some kind of donor visit during the lamp distribution process to create more interest and fund-raising possibilities. It would have been better to have 300,000 lamps rather than the 33,500 lamps that we had to distribute. It should have been obvious to us that that demand would far exceed our supply.

### **Author Information**

Jerry has served as the Country Director in Yemen for Save the Children International since January, 2012.

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