UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Written Declaration by
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(UNESCO)

to International Literacy Day

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I should like first of all to welcome all of you to this ceremony to mark International Literacy Day, which we are now celebrating for the thirty-first time. At UNESCO, International Literacy Day traditionally coincides with the opening of a new academic year in September. Because this is a week during which, in France and in most countries of the northern hemisphere children are going back to school, our reflection on the goals of education and our tribute to the women and the men who, through the exceptional quality of their work, have made an enlightened contribution to the progress of literacy throughout the world, take on a symbolic importance.

The word ‘literacy’ was not invented by l’UNESCO. However, no account of literacy work or of the movement to promote literacy throughout the world can ignore the efforts of UNESCO. From the very moment it came into being, our Organization grasped the vital role of literacy as a key to participation in the life of the modern world - a true rite of passage from tradition to modernity, from non-existence as a civic being to democratic citizenship. It is to UNESCO’s credit that it proclaimed the importance of literacy and worked without respite to promote literacy for decades before its importance was widely acknowledged. In this year of UNESCO’s fiftieth anniversary, at a time when a general climate of suspicion, not without suggestions of cynicism, has gathered round public institutions - including the United Nations - it may serve some purpose to reflect on how the world might have developed if UNESCO - along with others - had not firmly and systematically drawn attention to the right to education for everyone.

Literacy is both a goal in itself and a vital part of basic education. In Jomtien, the world community pledged itself to meet the basic learning needs of every individual. Literacy, which serves as the foundation for effective and continuous learning throughout life, is perhaps the most essential of all such learning needs. Also, when we speak of literacy, as Paulo Freire has so often reminded us, we are thinking not only of mastering an alphabet, but also of gaining a better understanding of the world in which we live. Literacy includes numeracy. Increasingly, it also extends to political literacy, social literacy, health literacy, environmental literacy and much more. Thus, we are not talking about a narrow concept, about learning the ABC’s, but about the mastery of the skills and knowledge that are the basis of successful living and lifelong learning.

We need to be clear as well about the relationship between EFA, basic education and literacy. In essence, EFA is a commitment to provide basic education - education that meets basic learning needs - to people of all ages through schooling and other modes of delivery, including adult literacy programmes. The world community committed “itself to that goal in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. UNESCO’s Global Action Programme on EFA is designed to work with other partners, including funding agencies, to encourage them to pursue the goals set in Jomtien. The action of the EFA programme is, of course, closely linked to and supportive of the activities carried out in the Basic Education Division which conducts UNESCO’s programmes in primary education, adult education and literacy and those intended to serve the young child and the family.
Illiteracy or functional illiteracy, understood in the broad sense that I am using, is by no means limited to the developing countries of the world. It is a problem that all nations face in one degree or another. Functional literacy requires not only that we know how to read, but that we be able to read fluently and with understanding, and, I would also add, with pleasure. In my visits to many industrialized countries, adults have often mentioned to me that their children do not get the same joy and sense of discovery out of reading that they did when they were young. They are concerned about this and are right to be. People who find reading to be a joy become lifelong readers. Those who find it an ordeal will probably read as little as possible throughout the course of their lives and may well even relapse into illiteracy. Thus, it is not only important that we teach all children to read, it is equally essential that we make children lovers of reading: people who pick up books with a deep sense of pleasure and adventure. Literacy, like education in general, is not only a matter of knowledge and skills, it also involves our feelings and sentiments about reading.

While it is our practice and tradition to honour those engaged mainly in adult literacy - because in the past they have often been overlooked - we are keenly aware that for most people literacy skills are achieved in the primary school. So when we speak of literacy workers, we should remember that we are talking not only about those who promote adult literacy, but also about the world’s 50 million teachers whose task it is to bring an understanding and love of reading to children and adolescents. We will, of course, have much more to say about teachers at the 45th session of the International Conference on Education in Geneva at the start of next month, which will be concerned with finding ways to strengthen the role of teachers in a rapidly changing world.

One of the most striking realities of modern life is, of course, the communication revolution. It is clear that we have hardly begun to exploit the potential of this revolution for education, especially in areas such as literacy where reaching the learner and adapting educational provision to his or her schedule are so critical to success. This is an area where I am convinced UNESCO has to do more and in which I intend to take new initiatives.

To increase the effectiveness of our efforts in literacy, it is important that we involve the three major UNESCO institutes in different aspects of literacy and adult education. Already, the International Institute for Educational Planning is providing support to the planning of non-formal education programmes. The UNESCO Institute for Education in Hamburg has taken the main role, working closely with the Literacy and Adult Education Section at Headquarters, in organizing the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. The International Bureau of Education in Geneva, which specializes in comparative education, has in the past and should in the future integrate literacy fully into its activities.

As many of you are aware, the International Consultative Forum on Education for All, of which Mr Lakin is the Executive Secretary, organized a global Mid-Decade Review of Progress towards Education for All in Amman from 16 to 19 June of this year. This was an extremely important conference attended by some 250 participants from over 75 countries and senior officials from UNESCO’s partner agencies in the EFA movement. The purpose of the review was to answer two basic questions:

What have we accomplished in the six years since Jomtien? Are we closer now to meeting the basic learning needs of all than we were six years ago?

What have we learned from our successes and set-backs and how can we use that knowledge to improve and accelerate our progress towards EFA?
In 1990, our hope was that Jomtien would be a turning-point in the quest to make Education for All a reality. In retrospect, we can see that this hope has - in large measure - been fulfilled:

Over 100 countries developed EFA action plans, setting goals and strategies for accelerating progress towards education for all. Special mention needs to be made of the so-called E-9 countries, the most populous developing countries, which have undertaken to work together and with the international community to promote EFA. The importance of this initiative is underscored by the fact that nearly three-quarters of the world’s adult illiterates inhabit these nine countries.

Primary-school enrolment in the developing countries increased by 50 million in the six years between Jomtien and Amman. This represents an enormous achievement. Moreover, for the first time in decades, perhaps in history, between 1990 and 1996 the number of out-of-school children declined by some 20 million. This would certainly not have occurred without the special efforts brought about by the Jomtien initiative.

The progress - slow and uneven though it was - in closing the gender gap at the primary level could also be cited as an achievement, but here, I think, we have to stress the slowness far more than the progress.

Outside the formal school system, an impressive range of new approaches to learning are under way, not only extending the range of available education but giving new vitality to ongoing efforts. Pre-school programmes and family literacy efforts, for example, are better preparing children for school and in this way, making primary education more effective. Youth training and adult literacy and education programmes are developing job skills and enabling individuals to apply and pursue learning.

Although the adult literacy rate increased by only about two percentage points in the years between Jomtien and Amman, it has to be remembered that the reduction in out-of-school children, by 20 million, will lead to further reductions in the number of illiterates in the near future.

Thus, while progress has been uneven - rapid in some countries and painfully slow in others, strong in certain areas such as primary education and weaker in adult literacy - significant gains have been made overall. Yet, in many ways, six years is too short a period to observe the full impact of what is being achieved. To get the full story, we have to look at developments and processes as well as at outcomes. The increasing commitment of international agencies and bilateral donors to education is, for example, only now becoming evident in educational indicators and statistics. The trends are in the right direction and the reform movement is gaining momentum.

One major achievement of Jomtien was to spread the awareness that Education for All cannot be achieved without the efforts of all: learners, parents, communities, non-governmental organizations, institutions, the business community, the media and many others’ Governments, of course. have a major role to play, but they can’t do the job alone. It calls for an overall effort by the society as a whole and for the support of the international community. I might note here how extremely pleased I am that we have representatives of the NGO community among us in this room. I wish to extend to them a warm word of welcome as they are very much part of the EFA movement.
Amman confirmed that the spirit of Jomtien is very much alive; it reaffirmed the international community’s commitment to EFA and took note of both the gains and the shortfalls. But, above all, it pointed to the enormous effort that must be made before an education of good quality is available to all. The real conclusion of the Amman meeting is that progress is possible: on condition that we make the needed efforts and investments, not only of money but also of moral commitment and innovative thought. We have not only to keep up our efforts, but also to considerably increase them. If EFA is to become a reality in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The emphasis in Amman was indeed not so much on past successes as on challenges to come. The Amman Affirmation, the final communiqué adopted by the Conference, points to five emerging challenges that the EFA movement will be called upon to address:

The need to emphasize forms of education that develop the capacity to cope with changing conditions and environments.

The need to recognize the growing reality of multicultural societies and to design education systems that balance local with universal content. The importance of initial instruction in the mother tongue was given special emphasis.

The urgent need in a world beset by ethnic conflict and escalating violence to ensure that education reinforces mutual respect, social cohesion and democratic governance. In effect, we must learn how to do better, the essential task assigned to UNESCO in its Constitution: building peace in the minds of men.

The world community must find the wisdom and courage to change its habits and priorities: to reduce the debt burden that weighs so heavily on poor countries and to invest less in preparations for war and far more in education in order to enable people to build better futures for themselves and their children.

Given the growing number of youth at risk, often alienated from society and facing unemployment, it is imperative to find ways of responding to the needs of these youth and enabling them to look to the future with hope and confidence. Hem. 100, education is the key.

Let me add to this list a critically important continuing challenge: education of women and girls. This was an issue that was examined carefully and critically in Amman and led to one conclusion: we have to do better in this area. As Mr Yousif pointed out in his presentation, when we speak of the estimated 885 million adult illiterates, we often overlook the fact that 565 million of them are women. And when we speak of the reductions in the number of illiterates, we tend to overlook the fact that while the number of illiterate men has declined, the number of illiterate women has, in fact, increased between 1980 and 1995. The literacy gap between men and women is widening, not closing. To be certain, in schools we are gradually increasing the enrolment of girls and closing the education gap. But gender remains a critical educational issue: not only because discrimination against girls and women is unjust, but also because it is so costly and damaging to society. The evidence is clear: education of girls and women is the best investment we can make in the future of our societies.

To sum up, in Amman we looked back at what had been achieved during the past six years and found it. On balance, significant and promising. But we also looked ahead a decade or more and acknowledged how vital it is that we act now, if we are to be able to meet the
challenges of the coming years and decades, And the action that will do most to prepare the future is TO EDUCATE. To provide education of quality and relevance to all.

THE LITERACY PRIZES

Let me now turn to the principal reason for which we are gathered here: to announce the literacy prizes. I am extremely pleased that the President of the International Reading Association, Professor Richard Vacca, and the Association’s Executive Director, Dr Alan Farstrup, are able to be with us today. The International Reading Association, an organization that represents 100,000 teachers of reading, is of course the donor of the oldest UNESCO Prize currently awarded: the International Reading Association Literacy Award. In addition, I am pleased that Ambassador Kim of the Republic of Korea is here with us representing the donors of the King Sejong Prize. I also welcome Mr Julian Behrstock representing the Noma Prize. I should like, once again, to express the appreciation of UNESCO to the donors of the three UNESCO literacy prizes.

I should also express UNESCO’s deep appreciation to His Holiness Pope John Paul II for his inspiring message on the occasion of International Literacy Day.

As you are aware, this year - for the first time - the actual literacy prizes are being awarded in ceremonies in the countries that won them. Certain of these prize-giving ceremonies took place yesterday, others are occurring today. Most, however, will be held on dates that have a particular educational significance in the countries concerned. Our reasoning in making this change was that we should celebrate literacy work where it takes place - often in the rural areas of the countries concerned. It is important that we honour the winners here - as we are doing today - but it is far more important that the winners be honoured by the communities and countries they have served. In taking part in quite a number of literacy ceremonies in countries around the world, I have been greatly impressed by the strong enthusiasm that these events provoke. It, thus, seemed to me that it was a bit selfish of us to hold the ceremony each year at Headquarters, where only a few people can participate in it, whereas if held in communities and countries of the winners thousands of people could be actively involved.

The winner of the International Reading Association Literacy Award for 1996 is the MINI-SCHOOLS Project in La Saline District of Port-au-Prince, Haiti - a country that, today more than ever, needs a very rapid process of education for all. The excellent work of this and other winners is briefly described in the prize list.

The Noma Prize, which honours the memory of Mr Soichi Noma, a distinguished Japanese publisher and philanthropist, and is donated by his family, is awarded this year to the STATE CRUSADE FOR ADULT EDUCATION of the State of HIDALGO in Mexico.

The King Sejong Literacy Prizes, of which there are two, is named after the fifteenth century Korean monarch who was responsible for developing the ‘HANGUL’ alphabet in which the Korean language is written. This year, I might add, marks the 550th anniversary of the invention of the ‘HANGUL’ alphabet. The prizes are endowed by the Republic of Korea. This year, they are awarded to the CULTURE AND EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMED FORCES of the Ministry of Defence and Aviation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and to the UNESCO CLUB DIBWA DIA DITUMBA in Zaire.
Honorable mentions

In addition to the prizes, the International Literacy Prize Jury, which is ably chaired by Mrs Martha Mvungi of Tanzania, has decided to award two honorable mentions to each prize.

The honorable mentions of the International Reading Association Literacy Award go to TEHILA, an adult education programme in Israel, and to the DIRECTORATE OF LITERACY AND BASIC EDUCATION in Senegal.

The honorable mentions of the Noma Prize go to the ADULT SELF-LEARNING DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM operated by Radio San Gabriel in Bolivia and to the GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN in the Syrian Arab Republic.

The honorable mentions of the King Sejong Literacy Prize go to the LALMONIRHAT MASS LITERACY ASSOCIATION of Bangladesh and to the READING IS FREEDOM project conducted in a Women’s prison in Madrid, Spain.

Citations

In addition to the prizes and honorable mentions, the Jury pays tribute in the prize list to:

the BB-EDUCAR Project of Brazil;

the ZANU Project of Burkina Faso;

the ’231‘ Programme in China;

the DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION OF THE MUTICULTURAL-INTERCULTURAL Project in Portugal;

and to Dr Attila Nagy of Hungary.

I wish to add my own congratulations to the winners of all these prizes, honorable mentions and citations. At the same time, I should like to pay tribute to all those - men and women, but particularly women - who are working every day for literacy and education in the world. They are mostly unknown but, in this as in so many fields, they are the key to the progress of our societies.