LITERACY, A UNESCO PERSPECTIVE
Preface by the Director-General of UNESCO for the brochure ‘Literacy – a UNESCO perspective’

Literacy is about more than reading and writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Literacy – the use of written communication – finds its place in our lives alongside other ways of communicating. Indeed, literacy itself takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs. Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today’s world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of ‘literacy as freedom’.

This is the reason why the United Nations has launched a Literacy Decade. Together, we must make a concerted effort to ensure that everyone has access to literacy in ways that are relevant and useful in their own context. We must be creative and innovative in facilitating that process.

This booklet presents a perspective on literacy – one that will inform and shape UNESCO’s ongoing commitment as the organisation charged with coordinating the Decade. By highlighting the status of literacy in today’s world and reviewing the international commitment to literacy over previous decades, we encourage everyone to take the challenge seriously. By showing how the concept of literacy has evolved and how it connects with broad areas of social development, we ask everyone to consider how literacy may be linked to their own engagement in development.

In introducing this booklet, I would like to acknowledge the contribution made by Dr Clinton Robinson in its preparation. I take this opportunity to re-affirm UNESCO’s historic commitment to literacy and to express the earnest hope that the perspective presented here will further encourage and inspire our common efforts to secure literacy for all.

February 2003

Koichiro Matsuura
Director-General of UNESCO
Literacy: a UNESCO perspective

Literacy is at the heart of UNESCO’s mandate - ever since its creation in 1946 a concern for promoting literacy has been high on its agenda. Literacy is a tool for learning, as well as a social practice whose use can increase the voice and participation of communities and individuals in society. It is a scandal and blight on humanity that one in five adults living on this planet do not even now have access to literacy.

As the world works to implement the goals of Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the use of quality literacy practices occupies a place of importance. The United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) provides a special focus for enhanced collective endeavours and is a chance that must not be lost.

This brochure traces the way in which the international community has developed momentum and the way in which the concept of literacy has evolved, thus situating UNESCO’s role and activities in literacy. A number of critical social and educational issues have a bearing on literacy and its promotion - these are presented as the framework within which UNESCO undertakes its work.
1. Global concern for literacy: an overview

1.1 World literacy status

The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002 estimates that the overall world adult literacy rate in 2000 was 79.7% – women 74.2% and men 85.2%. Past and projected improvements in world literacy rates are shown below:

The figures mask large regional differences, with the lowest overall rate in South and West Asia (55.3%), and the highest in Central Asia (99.6%). Sub-Saharan Africa showed the biggest increase over two decades. The following chart projects trends to 2015 on the basis of past experience:
The gender gap in literacy has narrowed in all regions, and is expected to continue that trend to 2015:

If these trends and projections inspire a measure of hope and optimism regarding progress in literacy, the absolute numbers of illiterates remains obstinately high. Literacy efforts have not kept pace with population growth – in South and West Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa numbers of illiterates have increased since 1990. The following table compares numbers of male and female illiterates by region for 1990 and 2000:

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1.2 International momentum

For almost 40 years international gatherings have pleaded for more commitment to literacy. UNESCO played the role of both facilitator and participant in many of the events presented below—each one was a chance not only to raise the profile of literacy, but to engage an ever-widening circle of stakeholders and participants in literacy efforts.

- World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, Tehran 1965

By the time the World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy took place in Tehran in September 1965 there had been a growing consensus at the United Nations and across the regions of the world that some broad worldwide action was necessary to tackle the illiteracy problem. A universal view of the literacy enterprise was married to a concern to integrate literacy fully into economic development, and so the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) was born. Based on the notion that literacy was a fundamental aspect of training for work and for increased productivity, the Programme was launched in eleven countries for five-year period. The Tehran meeting also established the International Literacy Day which has been celebrated ever since on 8 September each year.

- International Symposium on Literacy, Persepolis 1975

Ten years later the Declaration of Persepolis adopted by the International Symposium for Literacy reflected some of the lessons learned through the EWLP, as well as more recent approaches to literacy. While retaining a concern that literacy should be closely linked to economic development, the Declaration added social and political dimensions, with the re-assertion that literacy is a fundamental human right. Participation, mobilisation, political will and attention to context eclipsed productivity and training for work as leading concepts. The Persepolis Declaration did not result in further initiatives on a global scale, but rather served to re-orient international discourse around literacy.

- International Literacy Year 1990

The decision to designate 1990 as International Literacy Year (ILY) grew out of an initiative of UNESCO’s member states and was adopted by the UN General Assembly. Its aim was advocacy and mobilisation of partners in the struggle for a fully literate society. With a secretariat based in UNESCO the ILY developed synergies with

other parts of the UN system, with NGOs and with national governments. In the short space of one year, it focused on raising the profile of literacy issues through publications, newsletters, the media, and other means of information flow.

- **World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), Jomtien 1990**
  The WCEFA had basic education as its focus, rather than literacy as such, but literacy, both through schooling for children and through non-formal programmes for adults, was crucial to its message. The conference was sponsored by five international agencies – the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Bank – and thus marked a new multilateral approach to basic education. Setting basic education in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the World Declaration on Education for All named literacy and numeracy as essential learning tools in order that “every person – child, youth and adult – shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs.”

- **Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, Hamburg 1997**
  In 1997 the UNESCO Director-General convened the fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) in Hamburg, Germany in partnership with 13 multilateral and regional agencies. A significant innovation was the full integration of NGOs into the conference process – an indication of their crucial role in adult learning and literacy work. The resulting Hamburg Declaration defined literacy broadly as “the basic knowledge and skills needed by all in a rapidly changing world”, as a "fundamental human right", and as a necessary skill in itself and one of the foundations of other life skills.” It set literacy in the context of adult education, lifelong learning and the learning society. The commitment to literacy articulated in the
Agenda for the Future built on earlier conceptions in its three specific commitments: linking literacy to the social, cultural and economic development aspirations of learners, improving the quality of literacy programmes, and enriching the literacy environment by promoting local knowledge production and its links with the global knowledge society.

**World Education Forum, Dakar 2000**

Preparations for the World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 included the most thorough assessment of the state of basic education that has ever been conducted. This showed plainly, for literacy as for other aspects, that the ambitious goals of Jomtien had not been met, although substantial progress was recorded. Over the previous ten years the overall world adult literacy rate rose from 75% to 80%. However, the absolute number of illiterate adults declined only slightly from 879 million to 861 million. The Forum confirmed the Jomtien expanded vision of basic education and set six goals with a deadline of 2015; for literacy this meant “achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults”. However, a tendency is visible in planning, financing and implementing EFA to give priority to formal schooling for children with a corresponding neglect of adult literacy. The *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002* highlighted the fact that, of the Dakar goals, it is the literacy goal which is unlikely to be reached in the largest number of countries – 79 countries are at risk, 40 seriously so, of not achieving the Dakar literacy target.

This overview of international events and commitments on literacy reveals two tensions: first, while the rhetoric of concern to address the literacy issue remained strong and clear, actual progress was disappointing – a number of targets were set and missed.
and yet no substantial increase in investment or effort could be observed. Second, while literacy remained at the heart of UNESCO’s mandate and UNESCO engaged deeply with the international process, it did not result in moving literacy to the centre of the international educational debate. Resolving these tensions is a necessary part of future action.

1.3 Literacy: an evolving concept
The following brief summary of progress in understanding literacy provides a rapid overview by which UNESCO’s action can be situated, but in no way attempts to trace fully the development of literacy as a concept or a practice. Other publications, some of which are referred to in the further reading list, offer greater explanation and further insight.

At the time of UNESCO’s founding, literacy was seen predominantly as the skills of reading and writing and arithmetic - the so-called three R’s. Promoting literacy was a matter of enabling individuals to acquire the skills of decoding and encoding language in written form. Adults were thus treated very much like children and the learning process reflected the practice of the school classroom: a hierarchical relationship between teachers and learners, little learner participation and a curriculum which may or may not have been relevant to daily life. Thus UNESCO’s role at this time was to enable as many people as possible to be initiated into reading and writing, with an emphasis on reading. This initiated the period of mass literacy campaigns, whose influence is still observable today.

As the lack of correspondence between literacy teaching and the needs of adults became evident, governments and UNESCO moved in the 1960s to a functional view of literacy. Literacy was promoted as a response to economic demand with a focus on the
reading and writing skills required to increase productivity, be it in agriculture, manufacturing or other jobs; it was often linked to vocational training. The Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP), in which UNESCO was a prime mover, became the clearest manifestation of a functional approach to literacy – analyses of its impact have pointed to the resulting narrow focus which did not give adequate consideration to socio-cultural and linguistic context in which learners acquired and used literacy. It was closely bound up with the needs of national economic development, not with the needs of learners in their local context.

In the 1970s Paulo Freire experimented with new literacy methods which started with key words of immediate relevance to the learners. This conscientisation approach focused on literacy as an educational process which teaches people to ask why things are the way they are and to take autonomous action to change them. Learners were no longer to be seen as mere beneficiaries – 'objects' in Freire's parlance – but as actors and 'subjects'. Although Freire's approach was initially seen as a literacy acquisition method, its impact moved literacy out of the classroom and into the socio-political arena. UNESCO recognised these developments by awarding one of its literacy prizes to Freire in 1975. A further development of Freire's thinking took shape as critical literacy, viewed as the capacity to participate as an active citizen in a democracy, to critique institutional practice, to claim rights and to challenge power structures. This includes but goes beyond the ambit within which UNESCO has traditionally operated – nevertheless, 'critical literacy' provides insights into the use and abuse of literacy which any promoter would be wise to take into account.

The 1980s saw the further elaboration of literacy theory, building on Freire's work. A distinction was made between 'autonomous' and 'ideological' literacy – autonomous in the sense of a skill considered independent of values and context, a ideological in the sense of a practice necessarily defined by the social and political context. Literacy is one aspect of the way power operates in society and is institutionalised in modes of schooling and other established patterns of knowledge transmission. UNESCO has engaged little with this debate; as the study of the International Literacy Prizes shows, efforts to promote literacy have either continued with standardised delivery systems reminiscent of an 'autonomous' approach, or groped unconsciously towards new and more flexible models but without clear recognition of social and political implications.

One of the reasons for this is the high profile of state-run literacy campaigns. Such programmes have often been conceived as standard approaches where one size fits

all. The content of literacy programmes may have included a range of topics – health, agriculture, appropriate technology, income generation, and so on – but it was delivered to everyone in the same way. Curriculum and materials tended to promote gender stereotypes – women portrayed in reproductive and domestic roles, men as breadwinners – or solidify ethnic and cultural prejudice. Such programmes continue to exist in certain places, but UNESCO input, when requested, now challenges such standardised methods.

State intervention in literacy was particularly prominent in socialist states, where ideological considerations led to high investment in mass literacy. Some campaigns were successful, at least initially, for instance in Cuba, Nicaragua, the Soviet Union and Tanzania. Political and other incentives – in China, for example, the need to be literate to obtain a marriage licence, or the rivalry between villages to be the first ‘fully literate’ community in their region – led to large numbers attending literacy classes. However, lack of a sustainable literate environment, changes of regime and the collapse of centralised planning led in many cases to a subsequent decline in the use of literacy.

The view of literacy as a human right derives directly from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which enshrined education as a basic right in 1948. This has been re-asserted more recently in two ways. On one hand, literacy is seen as a right in itself or as part of basic education – witness the Persepolis Declaration (1975), with comparable pronouncements from Jomtien (1990), CONFINTEA V (1997), and the World Education Forum (2000). On the other hand, development discourse now endorses a rights-based approach, for example in the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000. The 2004-2005 UNESCO planning document makes the promotion of “education as a fundamental human
right in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights” the first contextual parameter for its work.

An increasing focus on literacy practices, on the uses of literacy and on the contexts of its acquisition led to the recognition that literacy serves multiple purposes and is acquired in multiple ways. Thus literacy came to be seen not as a single concept, but as plural: literacies. In individual literacy practices and in community literacy use its plural nature was evident: bureaucratic, religious, personal, cultural, in the mother tongue or official languages, acquired in school or out of school. This approach emphasises that literacy is always embedded in other social realities: work, family, religion, relationships with the state, and so on. In terms of acquisition, the ‘real literacies’ method sought to use the local patterns of written communication as source materials for learning, for example cinema posters in parts of India.

The linguistic dimension of literacy, fundamentally a language-based concept, is one of the most salient aspects of multiple literacies. The term “biliteracy” was fashioned after bilingualism – the use of different languages in written communication as they are used orally. However, as socially embedded practice, biliteracy is not only about language use, but about how literacies in different languages are structured in terms of power relations, voice, empowerment and social participation.

UNESCO has recently begun to take note of multiple literacies – the 2004-2005 planning document aims to “nurture a better understanding of the various literacies” through

demonstration projects and policy briefs, together with the development of “sustainable models of literacy and NFE”. UNESCO recognises that a literacies approach has implications for its member states in terms of promoting literacy acquisition and undertaking literacy assessment. The latter issue is high on the agenda since current ways of assessing literacy and the statistics thus generated are unreliable. Recognising multiple literacies makes assessment even more complex, since there is an implication that literateness will be defined differently according to local practice and socio-political context.

As the understanding of literacy has evolved, how is this reflected in UNESCO discourse about literacy? The general comments of the International Literacy Prize Jury provide a record over 35 years (1967-2001) of references to the literacy issue. Early references put literacy into the context of overall development (1967-1971), but from 1972 the Jury adopted military imagery. This included expressions such as “combating illiteracy”, the “decisive battle against ignorance”, intensifying the struggle against illiteracy”. This disappeared in the 1980s, with the term “illiteracy” used for the last time in 1988, though it continued to appear in citations regarding particular prize winners. Words such as “light”, “illumination” and “empowerment” signalled a move in the 1990s to more positive discourse, while still indicating that the UNESCO Jury saw literacy in black-and-white terms – people either had it or did not. However, UNESCO’s own planning now integrates more recent perspectives, even though much practice among its member states has yet to do so.

The concept and practice of literacy are in constant and dynamic evolution, with new perspectives reflecting societal change, globalising influences on language, culture and identity, and the growth of electronic communication. In this developments, two fundamental notions are clear. First, literacy is ambiguous, neither positive nor negative in itself, its value depending on the way it is acquired or delivered and the manner in which it is used. It can be liberating or, to use Freire’s term, domesticating. In this, literacy matches the role and purpose of education more broadly. Second, literacy links with the broad spectrum of communication practices in society and can only be addressed alongside other media, such as radio, TV, computers, mobile phone texting, visual images, etc. The massive development of electronic communication has not replaced paper-based literacy, but provides a new context for it; graphics have an increasing place alongside text; computer-based learning and play occupy both children and adults and displace the reading of books – all these phenomena are changing the way we view literacy. The implications for UNESCO’s role in literacy are huge.


LITERACY, A UNESCO PERSPECTIVE
2. UNESCO's approach

UNESCO sets its educational work in the context of three major elements and five principal functions:

- Promoting education as a fundamental human right
- Recognizing that literacy practices and a literate environment benefit from inputs at an early age and span a whole lifetime, UNESCO sees its role as promoting the acquisition of literacy in primary schooling for children and through non-formal education for youth and adults.

In formal education, UNESCO works to strengthen literacy opportunities for children in primary school, based on the firm conviction that all children who attend school should learn to read and write, recognising that literacy is a key learning tool — literacy remains essential to achievement throughout the primary and secondary school cycle. Teachers play a central role in creating an effective learning environment for reading and writing achievement. Such an environment must aim to:

- cater for the needs of children with reading disabilities;
- have sufficient and varied teaching and learning experiences;
- have sufficient and varied reading materials;
• provide opportunities for children to share with each other and work together;
• provide opportunities for children to express themselves orally and in writing;
• offer experiences that apply to the multiple intelligence of children;
• have a small library with children’s books.

The UNESCO response is double-pronged: building capacity to teach literacy, and strengthening the literate environment. UNESCO works with relevant actors (teacher trainers, head teachers, inspectors of schools and teachers) in Uganda and Tanzania to identify issues of reading and to develop training materials for trainers of trainers, particularly for teacher trainers. With respect to developing appropriate literate environments for children and families, UNESCO assists Burkina Faso, Guinea, Malawi, Mongolia, Namibia, Tanzania, and Uganda to strengthen book development policies, fostering dialogue between the public and private sector in book provision, creating national mechanisms for monitoring book development. Lowering the cost of books, ensuring their quality, tracking distribution mechanisms and surveying national capacity are key areas of focus.

Historically, UNESCO’s literacy has focused on adult literacy. This focus is based on two related convictions: first, adult literacy has an impact on the next generation since adult learning makes education a high community value and so reinforces schooling for children. Second, adult learning can provide a springboard for participatory citizenship, voice in the wider society, empowerment and expression of identity, especially where literacy acquisition is embedded in broader learning purposes. Alongside adult programmes, UNESCO recognises the need for special programmes for adolescents and youth, particularly for girls and young women.
UNESCO also supports innovative practices in literacy and non-formal education. In the 1980s, for example, it supported a series of four operational projects on literacy and civics education for women in India, Peru, Cape Verde and Syria in experimenting with the simultaneous training of women and their children. The project, for example in India, experimented with parallel teaching of women in the afternoon and their children in the morning. It achieved an interesting outcome in that the women's children, both girls and boys, were all enrolled in schools. The integrated nature of the content addressed women's multiple responsibilities and was well received, resulting in learners' enhanced motivation to learn. In addition, their quality of life improved. They ate better, fed their family better, earned more income, consulted health workers, enjoyed more decision-making power in the family and showed greater self esteem. The non-formal and more participatory character of the project made learning enjoyable. Children's writing samples, such as poetry about their dolls or dreams, reflected that their interests were taken into account in the planning of their learning. In India this project also offered an equivalency programme through which young girls who participated in the project could take exams to enter primary school.

The upsurge of international recognition of the contribution of women to development and the blatant disparity gap between male and female literacy rates made it necessary for nations to shift the focus of literacy work on women. Myriads of projects and activities were organized and supported by UNESCO in all regions giving priority to women as a group. The two decades that followed witnessed the gradual shift from the approach which viewed women as mere beneficiaries of development, to engaging them as initiators of the process of development. UNESCO adopted the empowerment approach as the underlying principle of its literacy work. At the same time, the growing awareness that literacy needs to go beyond the three R's and be embedded in all aspects of life gave impetus to an integrated approach to literacy. Based on identified needs, literacy programmes link their content to a wide range of sectors as determined by learners and their communities. Hence, a canvas of literacy content of a farming community could include the three R's, agro-technology, health and nutrition, citizenship, petty trade, micro-credit, handicraft and religious literature. There is no fixed curriculum as it is shaped by the conditions, needs and aspirations of learners. With regard to micro-credit, in more recent times UNESCO has begun to support activities integrating literacy and basic education with micro-credit activities in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The underlying assumption is that vulnerable populations who enjoy economic activities may be less vulnerable to abuse.
Over the last ten years, UNESCO has placed a strong focus on areas of the world where literacy needs are greatest and on the most vulnerable population groups. Sub-Saharan Africa, the nine high population countries (E-9) and the least developed countries (LDCs) continue to feature strongly in UNESCO plans.

In the mid 1990's special projects involving literacy and non-formal education were carried out. The Special Project for women and girls in Africa put strong emphasis on using post-literacy combined with radio programmes for enhancing people's life skills, livelihood, sense of self, knowledge of health, hygiene and HIV/AIDS, attitudes towards girls' and women's education, and facilitated redressing prevalent attitudes and traditions detrimental to the female sex. The project’s major activities in non-formal education focused on personnel training for integrating gender concerns into reading materials and hands-on preparation of these materials. The materials produced responded to pressing local issues and problems. Some of the telling titles of these materials include: *Parents Should Go to School, You, Me and AIDS, Home, The Best Medicine, Real Men, Take Responsibility, Stop This Violence, Give Girls A Break, Tomato-Growing for More Money, From Tears to Cheers, Exposing Witches—General Hygiene, Women and Property Rights.*

Another special project for marginalised youth addressed emerging and unique issues facing such groups. In 1996, UNESCO set up its *Special Project for the Enhancement of Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth* with the objective to meet the educational needs of excluded youth, and develop innovative, alternative learning programmes catering for their specific learning needs. The Special Youth Project worked with the assets of the marginalized, using their original skills to develop sustainable livelihoods, which, in turn, were supported by credit and income-generating activities. The popular economy was identified as the
economic sphere most appropriate to meet the immediate living needs of marginalized youth. The project worked with the values of the local cultures, respecting the languages, practices and traditions of the communities. The project sought to support education programmes that facilitated young people's own solutions to poverty and deprivation. Based on these principles, a large variety of projects was implemented in over twenty countries, including Egypt, Georgia, Guinea, Haiti, India.

Upstream work in policy and planning has included conferences and seminars, for example with the E9 countries in 1993 and 2001, and the International Seminar for women’s education in the LDCs in 1995. These often result in policy guidelines or plans of action. The design of appropriate policies and strategies, for instance on gender, community-based learning and language issues, has been supported by action-oriented research in UNESCO’s Institute for Education (UIE). UNESCO gives attention to training in all aspects of literacy work, with an emphasis on support for training trainers in Member States and civil society organisations. Areas of focus include planning, management and evaluation of literacy and non-formal education programmes, pedagogical approaches, material development.

In addition UNESCO also pays special attention to minority populations. In the 1980s, projects were operational in all parts of the world covering populations as diverse as the Hmong (Viet Nam and northern Thailand), the Dai, the Xani and the Zhuang (China), and the Kechua (Peru). A UNESCO project in the mountainous Ha Tuyen Province of Viet Nam offers training of local minority youths undergoing pre-service teacher training in non-formal education. This includes approaches and techniques in teaching literacy to adults, as well as in developing programme content relevant to the conditions, needs and aspirations of these special groups of populations. The project initially lowered the entry qualifications of the trainees to enable enough people to participate in the programme. This was a significant move as the country could no longer depend on the lowland Vietnamese educators who often moved away from the areas due to the harsh weather and life conditions. This project also promoted what is now known as community participation in non-formal education as the trainees were partially supported by the communities which they served, providing them plots of land to grow their own food and a hut to live in.

In more recent times, innovative approaches to literacy and non-formal education such as community learning centres (CLCs) have increasingly received attention. Through this approach, learning as a lifelong process is centred within the community itself, which shapes the what and the how of learning. In this way, learning will be
more easily sustained as the community itself owns it. In collaboration with the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO, UNESCO initiated a programme for community learning for women in nine countries in Asia and the Pacific. The project has taken firm root and helped enhance the quality of the CLCs through the training of personnel to manage them, and the production of learning materials, notably for women and girls. To date, 21 countries in the region participate in the scheme. In addition, UNESCO is facilitating the sharing and exchange of this experience with southern African countries.

One of the most serious obstacles to successful literacy and non-formal education work is the lack of relevant and interesting reading materials. More broadly, there is little or no supportive literate environment to help new readers sustain their newly acquired skills. The lack of a literate environment has cost countries dearly in terms of lost investment, as new learners have no opportunity to engage with writing or reading and soon relapse into illiteracy. In part, this is the result of an over-emphasis on reading to the neglect of self-expression through writing. In recognition of this dire problem, UNESCO launched a major effort in promoting the development of post-literacy materials through intensive training workshops at which participants learned together to prepare materials based on the real-life problems of learners. Often, the training involved the learners themselves as ‘resource persons’. As literacy closely intertwines with gender, this training involves gender orientation, principles of material development and hands-on material preparation. At the end of each training session, each participant will have prepared a draft of post-literacy materials. The materials will then be revised, tried out and translated into appropriate local languages for use in literacy programmes, evening farming schools or as supplementary reading materials in primary schools. The resulting materials cover a vast range of subjects as new needs arise in each locality. A particular lesson learned through these activities is that despite the superficial differences of appearances, gender concerns across countries ultimately have broad similarities.

There has also been a concerted effort regarding the use of mother tongues in literacy and non-formal education programmes. Training resource materials, material development in local languages, prototype literacy/NFE technical resource packages – these are part of UNESCO’s ongoing action to ensure adequate, appropriate, relevant and gender-sensitive materials, particularly for under-served groups such as women and girls, minority or marginalised groups, through training seminars and production workshops. Key areas, such as HIV/AIDS, have received special attention through workshops in Southern Africa and parts of Asia. UIE’s documentation

Distance education also includes literacy promotion, for both remote rural groups and nomadic populations, as for example in Mongolia. UNESCO provides support for developing the content of distance learning for radio and TV broadcasts, as well as for the design of appropriate learning strategies, for example, facilitation of listening and learning groups, and support from community learning centres.

Political support for literacy work cannot be taken for granted, neither at national level, nor in the international arena. UNESCO is uniquely placed to raise awareness and mobilise support for literacy. Advocacy efforts include the annual International Literacy Prizes (from 1967 to the present), the biennial Literacy Research Prize and the celebration of the International Literacy Day and, more recently, Adult Learners’ Week. UNESCO produces and distributes advocacy materials for use in these celebrations and for public awareness-raising. These include videos (eg. Educate to Empower, Literacy as Freedom), a website, films, Powerpoint presentations, pins, posters and postcards and calendars. The recent Living Literacy (2003), On the Ground: Adventures of Literacy Workers (2002) and The Pursuit of Literacy: Twelve Case-studies of Award Winning Programmes (1999) are but some examples.

A new campaign links the UN Girls’ Education Initiative (UNGEI) with the UN Literacy Decade, which itself includes a significant advocacy component. Regular messages and conferences at international and regional levels challenge partners and UNESCO to greater literacy efforts; the Roundtables on Literacy as Freedom (2002), Literacy: Is it Worth an Investment? (2001) and Literacy for Empowerment and Poverty Reduction (1998) serve as examples.

In building partnerships for literacy UNESCO has a key role as facilitator of networks and among governments, civil society and NGOs, among multilaterals and other UN agencies, and with the private sector. UNESCO’s role is to ensure that these partnerships
reinforce political commitment, build professional exchange and cooperation, and mobilise appropriate support for literacy as one of the international goals in education. Professional groups include the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA (CCNGO/EFA) and the Adult Learning Documentation and Information Network (ALADIN); political mechanisms include the E9 grouping, the EFA Working Group and High Level Group, as well as inter-agency consultative groups as part of UNGEI and the UN Literacy Decade.

Assessing world progress in literacy is a complex and multifaceted task. Systems of record-keeping, collecting and analysing data, making cross-national and cross-regional comparisons and interpreting the results must be built and maintained. UNESCO engages in this work directly through its Institute for Statistics (UIS) which also offers training. Together with UIS, UIE and other partners, UNESCO has projects to improve on literacy assessment, for instance the Literacy Assessment Project looking at the possible use of household surveys. The UIE publication *Sharpening our Tools* provides a useful resource, and the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* presents an annual analysis of overall progress with respect to the Dakar goal on literacy.

3. Literacy – a key factor in social development

**Literacy is a social phenomenon** and cannot be promoted in a vacuum. Part of UNESCO’s ongoing concern is therefore to understand how best to promote literacy in connection with the current and changing issues in today’s world. Communication is the key element of development cooperation of all kinds and in any context, so it is essential to examine where literacy – communication involving text – fits alongside other forms of communication. UNESCO considers these links crucial to increasing the effectiveness of literacy work, and thus they require attention in terms of research and practice; no efforts in literacy can afford to ignore these aspects.

**Poverty reduction** is currently the primary institutional paradigm for development relations, within a human rights framework. Literacy promotion is linked integrally to these processes through the EFA goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, circumstances differ widely around the globe, so the implementation of literacy must consider rural, peri-urban and urban environments, the relationship to orality and so-called ‘oral’ cultures, relevance to the lives of female and male farmers and to the informal economic sector. The direct benefits of literacy are often felt first in intangibles such as greater self-esteem, enhanced mobility or participation...
in community life, increased respect of women – these are fundamental to local initiative in fighting poverty and powerlessness.

Two-thirds of the world’s non-literates are women – this situation requires urgent and targeted attention. Maternal and child health, child well-being, the likelihood of children attending school, reduction in fertility rates, and greater political and productive roles in society – all these are enhanced by literacy and other appropriate learning opportunities. There is however a need for a better understanding of barriers to women’s literacy, and close attention in each situation to designing programmes which are both accessible and relevant to women. Out of school girls and adolescent young women would benefit from learning literacy in ways which are inspiring and for purposes which offer hope of a different life. Women-focused delivery mechanisms and gender-sensitive materials and pedagogies will be part of the approach – for all learners, female and male. Both men and women, their families and their communities benefit from this emphasis.

Schooling must deliver self-sustaining literacy skills to every child, as a fundamental aspect of a quality education. Links between adult learning and schooling of children are clear – in a learning community where adults and children both access learning opportunities there is greater reinforcement between school and community. Adult literacy materials and methods can enhance children’s learning, and cultural identity can be strengthened by local literacies which bring local knowledge into the school curriculum.

Literacy is about knowledge – its creation, storage, retrieval, transmission and use – knowledge from the local environment and knowledge from elsewhere associated with global communication. In an age where instant electronic communication sets a framework within which social and political structures operate, the role of literacy in both global dialogue and local cultural validation is central. Literacy can and must serve as an expression of universal human values as well as local identities and ethnicity. Literacy – on paper or on the computer screen; hand-written, typed or...
published; in book, pamphlet, poster or print-out – must serve both purposes for everyone, not give power to one over the other.

The **cultural context** shapes literacy: a key lesson of past years of adult literacy promotion is that the closer and more relevant a literacy programme is to the circumstances of learners, the more effective it will be. Sensitivity to local cultural context must underpin material design, representing local values, relationships and physical circumstances, history, inter-generational dynamics, and intangible cultural heritage. Modes of learning – animator-learner relations, the learning environment and timetable, ways of assessing progress – should reflect local patterns, sending the message to learners that learning belongs to them.

Literacy is a **language**-based activity, so the choice of language(s) for literacy will widen or restrict access to literacy; literacy use will promote or sideline the use of languages. Initial learning must take place in the mother tongue or the language best known to the learner – with the addition of other languages as necessary. Most situations require a multilingual approach to literacy, recognising that people use literacies in different languages for different purposes; multilingual literacy should take existing oral language use as its pattern and plan learning accordingly.3

**HIV/AIDS** is a huge challenge which the promotion of literacy must help face: though AIDS does not recognise rich or poor, when it affects the poor, treatment is not available and prevention is more problematic. The role of education is crucial – to combat taboos, stereotypes and misinformation, to enable open dialogue to take place, to develop materials which are culturally sensitive. Literacy acquisition, as an educational process and a social event, is a place to fight HIV/AIDS with all those affected: sufferers as well as carers and society at large.

The many situations of conflict, emergency, and displaced people and refugees present particular challenges: how to enable literacy learning to continue in such circumstances and how to make it relevant? For example, what content for demobilised soldiers? What languages for refugees far from home? What materials where infrastructure and supply lines are destroyed? This requires special efforts, both to get the approach right, and to provide necessary resources (animators, place to learn, materials) rapidly. How can literacy be combined with physical and psychological rehabilitation and re-integration into society? Each situation will require different answers to these questions and will demand creative thinking and action.

Literacy is one of the tools which can give greater voice and participation in political processes, and thus contribute to peace, democracy and active citizenship. Given the ambiguous nature of literacy noted earlier, it can also do the opposite: domesticate and indoctrinate. The way literacy is acquired — such as an emphasis on writing as much as reading — and the social models of literacy practice must include self-expression, dialogue and debate, as well as critical reading and appreciation of diverse points of view, if it is to serve to build greater openness and democracy.

Literacy is part of spiritual and religious expression, and spirituality is often a powerful factor in shaping decisions and actions, giving a sense of power and hope. Literacy is frequently associated with religious practices, such as learning, collective self-expression, or personal devotion. Literacy learning must take a holistic approach, offering opportunities for spiritual and religious expression while enabling such practices to be informed by other uses to which literacy may be put.

Early childhood and family literacy is an important aspect of a learning society and a literate environment. Promoting family literacies and linking literacy efforts with

early childhood care and development policies will build a strong basis for a child’s learning, enhancing the ability to gather and process information, creative writing and the sense that learning is lifelong.

Literacy learning programmes are too often conceived as standardised packages of classroom-style delivery – recent experience has shown that attention to learning approaches pays dividends in stimulating effective adult learning. Following recent innovations such as ‘real literacies’ (mentioned above) and various approaches derived from participatory development (eg ‘Reflect’), literacy learning needs to be designed with learner input and focused on real learning needs at the local level. Many methods depend on adequate training and in-service follow-up of adult literacy animators or teachers; this is vastly neglected as an area of government investment. Rather than being an add-on function of primary school teachers, religious teachers or other community workers, adult literacy facilitation requires its own training track.

As people acquire practical marketable skills or vocational training, what does the literacy component look like? The use of literacy is embedded in any number of productive activities, both manual and information based. However, some vocational training, particularly for so-called income-generating activities, is often supply driven and irrelevant. Literacy should neither be over-emphasised nor under-estimated in terms of its usefulness as part of such training.

Flexible policies need to be developed at national level and, perhaps more crucially, at the level of employers and work sites/institutions, in cooperation with training providers.
4. Future challenges and opportunities

It is paramount that literacy efforts are implemented on a sound basis of common understanding and commitment and that the real needs of learners in today’s world are addressed through appropriate, feasible and practical measures.

- Talk of the ‘knowledge society’ suggests that human endeavour is increasingly characterised by the creation, storage, transmission and use of knowledge and information. While this is true for the wealthier parts of the world and for the wealthier sections of the populations in poorer countries, it is hardly true for millions who have neither the means nor the infrastructure to benefit from the ‘digital revolution’. In the face of this digital divide, what kinds of literacy are most empowering? How can the newer ‘electronic literacies’ be matched with older literacy practices so that the divide is bridged? What links must literacy workers create to give maximum opportunity to the most disadvantaged to enter and make productive use of digital media?

- Literacy is only as valuable as the use to which it can be put – this means giving attention to use in the local context, where learners’ insights guide the design of programmes. The local use of literacy is not static but will enable people to access other literacies – in other languages, in other media, in new institutional settings. What kind of local institutions will best carry this process forward? Issues of governance and decentralisation are necessarily raised by literacy promotion – what are the best governance structures to ensure adequate space for local decision-making and design? What kind of framework and resources should central government provide to facilitate appropriate literacies?

- Relevant literacy efforts will be the fruit of multi-dimensional cooperation – between communities, government, civil society and NGOs, the private sector, and individuals. What forums are needed to facilitate dialogue between these partners? What kinds of social space can be created to ensure that literacy is linked productively with other spheres of human activity?
• The UN Literacy Decade, in the context of international efforts to implement Education for All, provides one arena where resources can be marshalled: funds, expertise, exchange of experience, capacity-building. Each EFA goal implies adequate levels of literacy to enable quality learning outcomes at all ages. How can sufficient momentum be generated around literacy in EFA forums? A first step in the Decade must be to lay out feasible strategies for sustainable literacy efforts, at national and regional levels, with international support.

• Literacy has been the neglected child of educational efforts in recent years, receiving miniscule amounts of national and international funding when compared to investment in school systems. Literacy needs must be costed at national, regional international levels, in a realistic way and allowing for the fact that literacy work requires a flexible system of funding and resource provision. UNESCO and its partners recognise the strategic value of investment in literacy, both for current adult learners and for the learning opportunities of the next generation. Funding to literacy has often been withheld because there is no clear system through which to channel it – this must not be an excuse for not developing innovative, flexible and appropriate ways to channel the needed resources to the point at which literacy is acquired and used.

5. A renewed vision for literacy

Literacy contributes to freedom and equity; it is part of any social project which aims at a fairer and more just society. Open and democratic systems of governance require open and adequate communication channels; no society in today's world can function without the written dimension of communication – text on paper, on the computer screen, on the TV, coupled with images and icons of all kinds. Literacy is more or less important in relation to visual and oral communication, but it is an inescapable part of life in today's world. In his book Development as Freedom,\(^7\) Amartya Sen

observes repeatedly that the expansion of literacy, especially female literacy, has a positive effect on basic aspirations such as life expectancy and political voice.

For UNESCO and other partners in the promotion of literacy, practical efforts must be underpinned by a vision – a vision of people using written communication in ways that strengthen their place in society, give expression to their identity, facilitate learning, and enable open and respectful dialogue with neighbours of the local village and the global village. This calls for self-sustaining, interlocking, multiple literate environments in which everyone can participate and leading to:

- literacy for democratic participation: 'voice for all'
- literacy for fulfilling potential: 'learning for all'
- literacy for expression and sharing of identity and knowledge: 'creative and reciprocal literacies'.
Suggestions for further reading


UNESCO Publications


Literacy: a key to empowering women farmers. 2001. Paris, UNESCO

Living literacy. 2001 by Namtip Akornkool. Paris, UNESCO


Literacy is a dynamic concept – one that continues to evolve in the many and varied contexts around the world where written communication is part of life and a key to learning. And yet over 800 million people at the start of the twenty-first century have no access to the literate environment. The United Nations launched the Literacy Decade (2003 – 2012) to tackle this persistent challenge through a renewed and expanded vision of literacy – a vision that will be taken up by communities, governments and international organisations.

This brochure presents UNESCO’s perspective on literacy at the start of the Decade, tracing the lines of international commitment, explaining how the concept of literacy has developed and showing how it is closely linked with social development. The work of promoting literacy is far from finished – the search for new ways forward in partnership together is an essential element of ending the exclusion of those for whom literacy is still a closed book.