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and human
rights

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One must first be able to read

Extracts from the address delivered by Mr. René Maheu, Director-General of Unesco, in Teheran on 23 April 1968 on the occasion of the International Conference on Human Rights organized by the United Nations

Illiteracy

A major obstacle to the effective enjoyment of human rights

Text of the paper presented by the Unesco Secretariat at the World Assembly for Human Rights held in Montreal, 22-27 March 1968

A resolution

Text of resolution IV adopted by the Second Committee of the International Conference on Human Rights, organized by the United Nations at Teheran, 22 April to 13 May 1968
One must first be able to read

Extracts from the address delivered by
Mr. René Maheu, Director-General of
Unesco, in Teheran on 23 April 1968 on
the occasion of the International
Conference on Human Rights organized
by the United Nations.

Before man can truly make his responsible freedom a reality, he must be able to understand the world around him, to communicate with others, to receive, transmit and compare experience, knowledge and intentions.

To try to understand, in order to try to choose and to determine what one wants, one must first be able to read. In times when men are more and more dependent on the intermediary of signs, to be unable to read means isolation in the world; and this is true despite the proliferation and propagation of images—and incidentally we do not realize sufficiently to what an extent those images refer to ideas which cannot be handled with precision without the written word. Isolation from the world, and therefore isolation in the world, solitude, darkness, impotence, without command of any means of finding a place in accordance with one's own ideas in the environment, of choosing one's own work, of defending one's rights, of ordering one's needs and, a fortiori, of influencing by deliberate choice the changes taking place in that environment.

... An illiterate is unaware of the law which could protect him, for example, of the guarantees provided for in the Universal Declaration in matters relating to policing and justice, marriage, work, participation in and supervision of the management of public affairs. He is completely at the mercy of others, or rather of the impersonal machinery of production and management. For those who cannot read, modern society constitutes a world as incomprehensible as was the world of nature to our earliest ancestors, cowering in their caves, and the helplessness is about the same in both cases.

... Our sincerity in the matter of human rights is therefore to be judged by the breadth and efficiency of what we are doing to promote literacy, upon which the effective exercise of most of the rights proclaimed in the Universal Declaration depends. And let us not forget that, even today, illiteracy is keeping more than 700 million adults out of the main stream of modern life.
Illiteracy
a major obstacle to the effective enjoyment of human rights

Text of the paper presented by the Unesco Secretariat at the World Assembly for Human Rights held in Montreal, 22-27 March 1968.

It is in the nature of law to be frequently in advance of facts. And if there is any branch of juridical reflection or legislative action in which the distance between norms and realities is particularly evident it is human rights.

It is safe to say that not a day goes by without making us more aware that the necessary conditions and elementary means essential for the enjoyment of these rights and giving them effect, are unfortunately wanting or are cruelly inadequate at both the national and the international levels. This is felt all the more keenly now that we are going through a difficult but exalting period in which the conquests of modern science and technology, resulting in tremendous economic and social progress, make the violation of rights of individuals and peoples and the inequalities existing between them even more accentuated and revolting.

Leisure, freedom and plenty are to be found alongside poverty, injustice and discrimination. However, despite the failures, unrest, setbacks, ill-will and opposition, the history we are living can be seen as the expression of an immense collective striving towards a higher degree of freedom and the gradual elaboration of practical content for the human rights which the universal conscience has progressively realized and accepted.

These contradictions, peculiar to our world and time, disconcerting though they may be, are evidence of the immense task yet to be done if the rights are to be not only proclaimed but fully achieved.

A fundamental right of man

The right of everyone to education is universally recognized. It was proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of 1948; it is guaranteed by the law or the Constitution in many countries.

Nevertheless this right remains a dead letter for more than 700 million illiterates spread throughout the world, struggling against a hostile nature or living and working in modern cities, on the edge of the desert or in gold
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... An illiterate is unaware of the law which could protect him, for example, of the guarantees provided for in the Universal Declaration in matters relating to policing and justice, marriage, work, participation in and supervision of the management of public affairs. He is completely at the mercy of others...
... It has been stated that men and women are entitled to 'equal rights as to marriage', but what meaning have such rights so long as the illiteracy rate in certain societies is 86 per cent for women and 51 per cent for men and so long as the number of illiterate women between 15 and 45 years old is almost double that of men of the same age group?...
... To promote literacy is to change man's conscience by changing his relation to his environment ... literacy as well as enriching individual freedoms and rights is an integral part of the emancipation of communities and nations....
mines, in backward country areas or in ultra-modern factories, in abandoned villages or crowded shanty towns. These men and women have no means of communicating or entering the world of ideas by means of the written word.

Further, the number of people deprived of this right is constantly increasing: each year tens of millions swell the huge army of illiterates and semiliterates. No doubt the development of education has led to a decrease in the illiteracy rate, but is has not yet managed to reduce the total number of illiterates. Then again the right to elementary education must be regarded as meaningless for all those who each year lapse into illiteracy for lack of practice of their skills, prospects of development and reading material.

Unesco estimates show that:
In 1950, of 1,579 million adults, 700 million were illiterate;
In 1960, of 1,881 million adults, 740 million were illiterate;
In 1970, of 2,335 million adults, 810 million will be illiterate, if the rate of eradication of illiteracy is maintained.

On 8 September 1967, on the occasion of International Literacy Day, the Director-General of Unesco stated, 'Even now, the number of young people reaching the age of 15 without having been able to learn to read and write in primary school is still higher every year than the number of people over 15 years old who have been taught to read. To reverse this trend, it has been estimated that it would be necessary between 1960 and 1970 to double the efforts made for the promotion of literacy during the previous decade. Once this level was achieved the number of illiterate adults should at last diminish. Unfortunately, up to 1966 this does not seem to have been happening...'

'The social and psychological, the technical and financial conditions are now satisfied for it to be possible first to reduce and then, before the end of the century, to wipe out illiteracy.

'May Unesco's work to promote literacy awaken men's consciences and enlist their best energies!... To stamp out illiteracy in our age is a moral duty. It is an essential condition of human progress. It is one of the foundations of true peace, that is a peace based on the freedom and dignity of man.'

The gravity of this situation and its consequences for the realization of human rights cannot be sufficiently stressed. Without literacy training a high proportion of human beings will continue to be deprived of the most fundamental rights. A man who cannot read or write cannot fit into society or take part in building or improving it for he cannot understand its mechanisms.
An obstacle to other human rights

Bereft of the basic tools of instruction, almost half of the adult population of the world is still denied exercise of the inalienable right of man to education and is condemned to live in ignorance of the new prospects held out to humanity by the progress achieved in knowledge, science and technology to facilitate his struggle against poverty, hunger and disease. Instead, this half of the adult population is sentenced to live in complete separation from this common heritage of moral, cultural and artistic accomplishments, which embodies the noblest aspirations of all countries.

Not only is illiteracy a violation of the right to education: it is one of the major obstacles to the effective enjoyment of the other human rights.

For more than 700 million illiterates, and also for some 250 million semi-literates, the article of the Universal Declaration to the effect that everyone without distinction of any kind is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration remains a vain hope.

The greatest inequality is still to be found not only between countries but also between citizens of the same country.

It is all very well to proclaim that ‘everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind’, but this statement is meaningless when in one part of the world 30 per cent of the young people can enter a university and have access to the realm of knowledge, while in another part of the world only 3 per cent of adults can read and write. Similarly, it is vain to say that no distinction shall be made on the basis of racial differences when we know that the illiteracy rate varies considerably in certain countries, precisely in accordance with race or colour.

What is the use of stating that all ‘are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law’ when it is obvious that an illiterate is not in a position to use this protection in the same way or with the same effect as an educated person? An illiterate is incapable of acquainting himself with the papers and documents so frequently used in administration and judicial proceedings. He will not grasp the full significance of any accusation that might be levelled against him or questions put to him and will not be able to see whether his replies were correctly and impartially recorded. Under these conditions he is entirely in the hands of others and cannot appreciate the effectiveness of a defence on which his freedom and his life may depend.

What good is it to guarantee the free election of the representatives of the people and to declare that the will of the people should express itself ‘by universal and equal suffrage’ in a world where the legislation of certain countries still maintains distinctions between the literate and the illiterate and where millions of people cannot exercise their right to vote with a full knowledge of the facts because they cannot read or write.

It has been stated that men and women ‘are entitled to equal rights as
to marriage', but what meaning have such rights so long as the illiteracy rate in certain societies is 86 per cent for women and 51 per cent for men and so long as the number of illiterate women between 15 and 45 years old is almost double that of men of the same age group? It is evident that the rights which fix the conditions of marriage or lay down the rules for its dissolution, as proclaimed in Article 16 of the Universal Declaration, will be exercised in a very unequal fashion, depending on the educational level of the individuals and the resultant state of dependence and intellectual inferiority, not only in relation to the marriage partner, but also with regard to the restraints which families and social groups try to impose. Moreover, the illiteracy of a very large number of women cannot but accentuate their subordination within the family, thus making the principles of equality illusory.

The unity of societies is also in danger of being affected by the situation in which the illiterates find themselves. Their social position is in fact becoming progressively inferior; thus their fate is that of humiliated beings of lowered cultural rank, and their condition appears to be veritably that of sub-humans.

**Literacy and the exercise of human rights**

The situation of inferiority to which ignorance reduces men in modern life and the obstacles it puts in the way of the enjoyment of their basic rights are even more apparent if we refer to the principal provisions of the Universal Declaration.

This is true, for instance, of the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely-chosen representatives. The illiterates are in fact necessarily limited in their conception of the world and their understanding of public affairs. The road to reliable, well-documented information is irremediably barred. That shows the great limitations placed on the exercise of their civic duties. It is not surprising therefore that the first thing done by a government which wants its regime to be founded on a solid democratic basis is to ensure adult literacy.

The same considerations apply to the access to information referred to in Article 19. To be informed is not merely to receive messages but to be capable of sorting them, of discerning among the uninterrupted flow of communications those which are important and those which do not count, those which appear possible and those which have no regard for truth. There is no information without full, solid and continuous training of the informed, whose literacy and post-literacy constitute indispensable elements.

In all societies, the right to work and to the free choice of a vocational activity is increasingly governed by the same factors. The lowest-grade work, calling for the lowest qualifications, in which the prospects of promotion are the most hazardous, which is the most dangerous to physical and moral
well-being, is reserved for those who cannot read or write. So soon as the economic activity slackens, the least educated members of the population are the first to be affected. On the other hand, as soon as a country introduces economic and social development programmes, the need for a wider and deeper literacy—particularly work-orientated literacy—is strongly felt. A minimum ability to read and write will be increasingly necessary to anyone who wants to find a place on the labour market and not be relegated to marginal posts, with their characteristic dangers of insecurity of employment.

The problem of participation in cultural life arises in similar terms. It is true, however, that the roads to culture are many and complex, and that it is not necessary to be able to read and write to have access to numerous sectors of cultural life and artistic expression. It is certain, for example, that image and sound are powerful vehicles of a large number of cultural productions. They have exceptional powers of suggestion, mobilization of attention and motivation, but their violent impact, which imposes the subject of the communication without its being outdistanced, reinterpreted or restored by reflexion, presents a serious danger to a civilization which is already threatened by the ascendency of technology and advertising propaganda.

Nor should we omit to mention the vast riches of oral traditions, rite and ceremonies which, in their own way and in their own place, provide individuals and groups with a certain degree of cultural participation. But as societies develop, abandon their traditional forms for new ways of thought, feeling and communication, the written expression tends to become an increasingly privileged means of access to the cultural life of a people.

**Literacy and development**

Illiteracy therefore endangers the principle of the equality of man. It establishes a barrier between two categories of the population by reducing the illiterate to a marginal situation corresponding to an inferior economic, social and political position.

This same danger applies to the relations between countries. There is a risk that it may divide the world into two groups of States and of opposing the privileged and the outcasts.

The World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy held at Teheran in September 1965 recommended unanimously that the fight against illiteracy should be linked very closely to the development plans of their countries, describing adult literacy as "an essential element of overall development, very closely linked to economic and social priorities and to present and future manpower needs".

Literacy appears to the modern world not only as a measurement of development and an imperative of justice but also an essential condition of the effective realization of human rights and progress.
Above all, literacy is not just a humble accessory. A literate person is not only an illiterate person who has learnt to read and write. He is another person, he is different. We have thus progressed from literacy learnt at night school to work-orientated literacy and 'consciencization'. We have associated literacy with the improvement of living and working conditions. We have realized that to promote literacy is to change man's conscience by changing his relation to his environment. We have come to understand that literacy as well as enriching individual freedoms and rights is an integral part of the emancipation of communities and nations.

The promotion of literacy is therefore an undertaking on the same plane as the recognition and incarnation of the fundamental human rights. The latter, once stated, should be translated into positive acts. One of these acts is the promotion of literacy, linked to work and development priorities.

What is a right for an individual is a duty for society. It is not surprising therefore that the heads of many countries considered it their duty, immediately after the attainment of national independence, to organize national literacy campaigns and programmes for their illiterate populations. They have met with a certain success, but also with many failures for numerous reasons, economic, social, financial, educational, administrative. Special mention should be made of the following: the different levels of development between the countries, the existence of political or social forces hostile to the emancipation of the peoples, the legacy of the past in the social structures and in mentalities, faults in institutions and national legislations, the absence of motives to acquire fresh knowledge.

The more the movement of ideas and their consequent realization aims at linking adult education and especially literacy to productivity and the implementation of plans for economic and social development, the stronger will be the feeling of adults in the developing countries that they have a right to education and society a duty towards those who are victims of the dangerous, serious gaps in development.

On the other hand, peoples' efforts to improve their living conditions and their active participation in their community's developing programmes will find solid support in the realization that literacy constitutes a fundamental right for every illiterate person and a priority requirement for developing societies.

By deciding, at the request of the United Nations, to work out and undertake an experimental World Literacy Programme, the international community has renewed its undertaking and determination to pursue with the maximum efficiency the fight against illiteracy, within the framework of Unesco action, in order that fundamental human rights can be based on real achievements which give them concrete value and meaning.
A resolution

Text of resolution IV adopted by the Second Committee of the International Conference on Human Rights, organized by the United Nations at Teheran, 22 April to 13 May 1968

The International Conference on Human Rights,

Considering that literacy is a vital condition for the effective enjoyment of human rights, both civil and political, and economic, social and cultural,

Noting with regret that, despite efforts made by States and international organizations, there are still over 700 million illiterate persons throughout the world,

Considering that illiterate adults are defenceless in a society whose workings they cannot understand, into which they have no means of entering; and in which they are unable effectively to exercise or to defend their rights as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration,

Considering that the right to education is solemnly proclaimed in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in many other international instruments, including the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,

Recalling the conclusions of the World Congress of Ministers of Education held at Teheran in 1965.

Bearing in mind the recommendations of the Consultative Liaison Committee for Literacy set up under the auspices of Unesco, and the solemn appeal made by its Chairman,

Invites

(a) The governments of all countries in which illiteracy is still widespread to increase the intellectual and material resources marshalled to combat illiteracy, with a view to expediting the gradual elimination of this scourge;

(b) The governments of all countries, including those not faced with the problem of illiteracy, to intensify their co-operation with and support for programmes for the education of millions of illiterate men and women;

(c) The General Assembly of the United Nations to draw the attention of organs having responsibilities in the area of human rights to the
importance of combating illiteracy as a means of ensuring the effective
and positive enjoyment or rights possessed by every human being;
(d) The United Nations and its Specialized Agencies, especially Unesco, to
do their utmost to increase the contribution which literacy can make in
the contemporary world to the safeguarding of peace, economic and
social development, the emancipation of peoples and the promotion of
rights and freedoms.