



UNESCO

Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India

UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Literacy

**Addressing Literacy Challenges in South, South-West
and Central Asia: Building Partnerships and Promoting
Innovative Approaches**

29-30th November 2007

*Vigyan Bhavan
New Delhi, India*

Report of the Conference

Key Partners

Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India; UNESCO Headquarters, UNLD Coordination Unit; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL); UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education; UNESCO New Delhi Office; UNESCO Almaty Office; UNESCO Dhaka Office; UNESCO Islamabad Office; UNESCO Kabul Office; UNESCO Kathmandu Office; UNESCO Moscow Office; UNESCO Tashkent Office; UNESCO Tehran Office.

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Section I: Synthesis

“Global literacy is the most important long-term investment we can make to secure the world’s peace and prosperity for all generations.”

Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States of America, and Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade

“Literacy is a fundamental human right, a prerequisite to transformation, a force against bigotry and injustice, and a great liberator”

Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson, United Progressive Alliance, India

“The struggle for literacy is, simultaneously, a struggle for sustainable development, justice and equality, and the recognition of the dignity of each and every human being.”

Koïchiro Matsuura, Director General, UNESCO

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Background

A regional conference on global literacy was held in New Delhi, India, on 29th and 30th November 2007, organised jointly by UNESCO and the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. Focusing on the theme of *“Addressing Literacy Challenges in South, South-West and Central Asia: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches”*, the conference was the fourth in a series of six regional literacy conferences organised by UNESCO worldwide, following up on the White House Conference on Global Literacy that was held in New York City in September 2006. Thus far, similar conferences have been organised in Qatar, Mali and China, covering the Arab States, Africa, East Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific regions respectively; the remaining two conferences will be held in Azerbaijan and Mexico, covering in turn, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Participating countries in the New Delhi conference were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Some of these countries account for the highest number of illiterates in the world, with an estimated 388 million illiterate adults within their borders. Three of them—Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, all highly populated countries—continue to face major literacy challenges, including the

sheer numbers of illiterates. In addition to the serious gender gap, there are considerable urban-rural disparities. In Central Asia, although overall literacy rates are high, the gender gap remains an area of concern, with as many as 72.5 per cent of total illiterate adults being women.

The regional conferences on literacy are being facilitated by UNESCO in the background of the UN Literacy Decade (UNLD) and the Literacy Initiative For Empowerment (LIFE). It would be recalled that the UN Literacy Decade was launched in 2003 with the slogan “Literacy as Freedom”, with the aim of increasing literacy levels and empowering people everywhere. In declaring this Decade, the international community recognised that the promotion of literacy is in the interest of all, as part of efforts towards peace, respect and exchange in a globalising world. At the request of the UN General Assembly, UNESCO coordinates the Decade and its international activities.

Attended by leaders, policy makers, academics, representatives of civil society, universities, private foundations and other donors from these countries, as well as participants from UN and other multilateral and bilateral agencies, the New Delhi conference considered issues of importance for improving and sustaining literacy in the region. As in other regional conferences, the New Delhi conference also had the following objectives:

- Advocacy for literacy
- Identification of challenges and achievements in the region
- Dissemination of effective literacy practices
- Facilitating cooperation among stakeholders
- Mobilisation of partners and resources for concrete interventions
- Agreement on directions for the future

Held over two days, the conference considered various aspects related to these objectives, focusing on certain themes common across all conferences. Five Round Table discussions, including Ministers of Education and/or Finance as discussants, were held on the themes of Literacy Policies and Strategies, Costs and Financing; Programme Content and Delivery; Literacy and Gender; Literacy Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation; and Coalition and Partnership Building for Literacy and NFE. Effective practices and innovative approaches were disseminated through panel discussions on Literacy for Economic Self-Sufficiency; From Literacy to Lifelong Learning; Literacy for Health; Mother-Child Literacy and Inter-Generational Learning; and ICTs and Literacy. The conference also discussed the twelve generic benchmarks and indicators for literacy recently developed by ActionAid as well as the means to contextualise these to meet individual country requirements.

Summary of the deliberations of the Conference

The opening ceremony, addressed by a distinguished set of dignitaries, set the tone for the deliberations of the Conference. Pointing out the wide disparities in this region, it

was noted that the situation in South and South West Asia is very different from that of Central Asia. Three countries of South Asia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, account for more than half of the 770 illiterate adults worldwide, with two-thirds of these being women. Even though the rate of increase of female literacy in many of these countries has been higher than the increase in male literacy, this has not been enough to bridge the gender divide. In Central Asia, although overall literacy rates are high, there are significant gender gaps, with more than 70 percent of all illiterate adults being women.

Speakers pointed out that despite the fact that literacy is crucial to accessing other human rights, governments have paid far too little attention to this area, partly because of the non-inclusion of literacy in the MDGs, tending instead to invest their time and resources in primary schooling. Even here, while enrolments have increased significantly in recent years, the quality of schooling and the continuing gender gap remain issues of concern, particularly in the context of their eventual impact upon adult illiteracy.

As a result, literacy has become the most neglected EFA goal, one that the majority of countries are at risk of not achieving by 2015. The inaugural speakers also noted that literacy is essential for survival in an increasingly globalised world; while globalisation has led to rapid economic development, its benefits can only be shared equitably if the divide between literates and non-literates is reduced and eventually eliminated. An important point made by several of the speakers was the fact that governments need to take the lead in the provision of literacy as a basic human right; civil society and donors can only supplement, not supplant, the efforts of national governments in this process. Yet the strengthening of community structures remains important if we are to ensure that there is a sense of local ownership of literacy programmes and their benefits.

The discussion on policies and strategies agreed that although the definition of literacy has undergone a change over the years, methods of measuring it have not, tending to remain based on self-assessment or household declaration. As a result, there is a serious possibility that illiteracy figures are grossly underestimated. Speakers noted that in this region, the race to achieve the goals of literacy is one not only against time, but also against rapidly increasing populations. These demographic pressures are also compounded by frequent natural disasters and conflicts, all of which have an impact on children and youth, often pushing them out of school and into the ranks of the illiterate. Given that the increase in literacy rates in the region is likely to slow down to only about 10 percent till 2015, this implies that achieving the goal of literacy for all will become increasingly difficult.

Decentralisation would seem to be a key factor in improving the delivery of adult literacy programmes. Many countries in the region have witnessed increased decentralisation, helping to make literacy programmes more participatory and locally-owned. Participants agreed that in most countries, experience has shown that community involvement and ownership of literacy and schooling programmes were critical to their success.

It was also stressed that EFA should be viewed holistically, rather than in its component parts; this was considered essential in order to be able to address the learning needs of the

entire family. Linking literacy to primary education and to programmes for youth and adolescents would help to place it in a long term framework, moving away from a project mode. An important point made was that governments need to adopt literacy policies to cater not only to current adult illiterates, but also to those future illiterate adults who may be enrolled in school today but are at risk of dropping out. Literacy policies could therefore be targeted to specific groups to meet specific needs. The twelve benchmarks developed recently by ActionAid could provide a starting point for a national dialogue on literacy and the manner in which it should be achieved.

On the question of financing literacy programmes, participants agreed that the primary source of funding should continue to be governmental. Based on an estimated requirement of \$50-100 per learner per year, governments would need to increase their spending from the current 1 percent of national education budgets or thereabouts, to at least 3 percent. Where there is a shortfall, the international donor community, which has so far confined itself largely to supporting primary education, should be prevailed upon to meet the gap. Sustaining the gains of literacy also needs the support of a literate environment, and governments can help to create this through stimulating the market for development and distribution of material for new learners.

Issues of content and delivery also engaged participants, and reference was drawn to studies showing that learners seem to prefer reading skills to writing and numeracy. This has important implications for content development, particularly if such skills can be linked to vocational training. Mono-linguistic and mono-cultural approaches do not work any longer; it is necessary instead to be responsive to cultural and local needs. This becomes even more important in the context of minorities, who have often been ignored. The development of appropriate learner material remains an important challenge and success in doing so will depend upon the extent to which capacities of stakeholders can be built and the degree to which they can be involved in the process.

In addition to traditional delivery methods, the use of ICT has become increasingly prevalent; in particular, radio has proved to be a successful mode of delivery. The exploration of new technologies that can help deliver literacy more efficiently is thus an essential strategy of renewing delivery mechanisms. It was also felt that recognition and accreditation are as important for new learners as they are for primary school students and it is essential therefore to provide opportunities to new learners for revitalising their skills.

On literacy and gender, participants pointed out that women are not a homogeneous group, but suffer from multiple axes of disadvantage. One-size-fits-all kind of programmes are therefore unlikely to be successful; instead women need programmes that provide them with literacy relevant to their context and roles. Dovetailing literacy programmes with other initiatives in livelihoods, micro-finance, etc., therefore becomes important. In particular, gender has to be seen from the larger perspective of the need to change existing gender relationships, particularly in this region, where women often continued to be at the receiving end of discrimination and inequity.

Convergence with other programmes for health, livelihood generation and micro-finance was also considered important to do away with the disconnect between women's literacy and their empowerment. Longer term investments, moving away from project mode approaches, is now imperative, with soft inputs being as important as creation of infrastructure or skill development. Continuous and sustained monitoring and evaluation are particularly important for success, with a special emphasis on the gathering of qualitative data covering such aspects as why do women drop out of programmes, what do they do with their skills, do they benefit and if so, in what way, etc. A continued exchange of best practices in the region was identified as useful, perhaps under the auspices of the one UN initiative that is currently under way. Participants suggested that as a multilateral agency, the UN could facilitate such exchanges under a neutral, non-partisan umbrella.

On the issue of lifelong learning, while presenting the situation in their respective countries, panellists noted that lifelong learning is integral to the democratisation process and to ensuring equity. The challenges in ensuring lifelong literacy include the integration of formal and non-formal education systems and bringing about greater community involvement. It was pointed out that follow up programmes are necessary to prevent learners from relapsing into illiteracy. The role of Community Learning Centres in motivating learners to continue learning thus becomes important, and their flexibility in responding to learners' needs can make all the difference. The relationship between vocational education and literacy also needs to be encouraged as a strategy to ensure lifelong learning, providing learners with marketable skills that in turn, act as the incentive for them to continue learning.

Discussion of the link between literacy and livelihood focused on the fact that a significant number of those targeted by literacy programmes are often those who also face a struggle for day-to-day survival. Literacy for them becomes relevant and interesting only if it is integrated with livelihood and literacy and economic empowerment go together. Publicly-funded, NGO-run initiatives are often successful, but need significant support in order to be upscaled. Accreditation of courses run by such organisations is important in order to provide learners with access to labour markets. Challenges include the need to be aware of changes in social relationships (as between empowered women and their men), provision of CE opportunities and building capacities of facilitators. And of course, longer term donor engagement continues to remain an important issue.

Participants agreed that health and health services could serve as an entry point for literacy by taking it beyond mere reading and writing. In particular, mothers could play the role of change agents for improving both health and literacy. The challenge would lie in integrating the two and in encouraging communication within the family.

The panel on inter-generational learning stressed the relationship of school retention with literate parents, pointing out that investment in mothers' education was as important as that in the education of children. Involving mothers in learning programmes that include their children helps to create a relationship in which they encourage each other to learn.

Successful family literacy programmes usually have strong collaboration with local communities which support the participation of mothers in these programmes, which means that it is important to work with male members of the family/community too.

The discussion about ICT and literacy noted that while these modes have great potential in promoting literacy and broadening access, they also need to be made invisible and non-threatening. ICT can help in content development and delivery, as indeed has been the experience of several countries in the region. Innovative projects using mobile phone technology hold the promise of helping to create enabling literate environments that can respond to the needs of learners on a real-time basis.

Monitoring and evaluation were held to be essential for evidence based policy making, with panellists pointing out that the cost of not investing in these systems was in the long run very costly. There was general agreement that self declaration of literacy is no longer adequate - a point made earlier by some participants in the policies round table - and that there should be some form of testing to confirm levels of literacy. Finally for greatest effectiveness, the results of monitoring and evaluation exercises should be widely disseminated and publicised so that stakeholders could be properly informed.

Speakers in the round table on building coalitions and partnerships agreed that although the primary responsibility for literacy remains that of government, it cannot always meet this obligation, particularly in last mile situations. This implies that there is a role for private sector and non-governmental organisations; however we need to move away from viewing such groups as mere contractors or implementers, developing meaningful partnerships instead that allow them to contribute to the development process. Similarly, treating private sector groups as mere cash cows is unproductive, and it would be preferable to invest time in reaching out to them as partners in the true sense of the word. Although there is unfortunately a great deal of mistrust between the two parties in many countries, one way of dealing with it would be to enter into clear memoranda of understanding that set out the roles of respective parties. It should almost go without saying that policy frameworks that facilitate the process of private sector and NGO involvement are essential.

The discussion on literacy benchmarks developed by ActionAid and agreed through consensus in Abuja, Nigeria, recently focused on the fact that while these are a good starting point for a national dialogue on literacy, they need to be contextualised to meet specific needs of different countries. In addition to the areas presently stressed by these benchmarks, there is a need to look at outcomes also, helping to create conditions that facilitate these outcomes. Finally it was suggested that the benchmarks should include some reference to cultural mobilisation involved in building people's organisations, since these types of processes are important in providing sustainability and meaning to literacy.

Section II: Session-wise Details

Day 1: 29th November 2007

OPENING CEREMONY:¹

The Opening Ceremony was addressed by the following speakers:

Mr M A A Fatmi, Minister of State for Human Resource Development, Government of India

Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO

Mr Arjun Singh, Minister for Human Resource Development, Government of India

Ms Shiranthi Rajapakse, First Lady of Sri Lanka, Guest of Honour

Ms Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights, Government of India

Ms Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson, United Progressive Alliance, India

Mr A K Rath, Secretary (School Education & Literacy), Government of India

ROUND TABLE 1: LITERACY POLICIES AND STRATEGIES, COSTS AND FINANCING

Moderator: Mr Sheldon Shaeffer, Director, UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education

Panellists: Mr R. Govinda, India
Mr Aaron Benavot, UNESCO
Mr Harbans S. Bholra, India
Mr David Archer, ActionAid

Discussants: H.E. Mr Mohammed Haneed Atmar, Minister for Education, Afghanistan
H.E. Mr Shams Kassim Lakha, Minister of Education, Pakistan
Smt Ms D. Purandeswari Minister of State, Ministry of Human Resource Development, India
H.E. Mr Abdul Razique Samadi, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Finance, Afghanistan

Introducing the panellists, Mr Sheldon Shaeffer stated that strong clear literacy programmes were needed, and it was necessary to focus on policies and strategies as well as the costs and financing. He described the structure of the session, and then invited panellists to make their initial presentations.

¹ For the full text of speeches, refer Annexure 2.

Mr. R. Govinda, India

The situation in this region is very varied—Sri Lanka, Maldives and Central Asia have literacy rates in excess of 90 percent, but India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have very low rates of literacy. One of two adults in the world live in the South Asian region alone; 40 percent of out of school children are to be found in this area. Gender disparities are high, and while improvement in female literacy in recent years has been faster, this has not been enough to bridge the gap.

The situation of the region should also be examined in the backdrop of frequent natural and manmade disasters and conflicts which affect youth and children and their education the most. Achieving the goal of literacy for all by 2015 is a race against time and against population; demographic pressure in countries of this region is a serious pressure and strategies to be adopted depend upon this. Estimates show that in some countries in this area the demand for school places will continue to increase even in 2015, indicating that education systems may not be able to handle the demands of increasing populations.

Literacy activities in the region have picked up post-Jomtien, with the nineties witnessing an emphasis on social mobilisation. This has gradually moved from mobilisation to institutionalisation, as for instance in the idea of Community Learning Centres (CLC) or *Jan Shikshan Sansthan*s in India. Most countries with low literacy levels have gone beyond basic literacy programmes to connect with livelihood and income generation activities. This indirectly relates to linking literacy with poverty reduction.

Greater emphasis is being placed on youth literacy now; in India the focus is on the age group of 15-35 years, and many countries are doing similar things. It is however, necessary to link literacy with primary education programmes—the question is how—and of improving the efficiency of delivery of programmes of adult education. Gradual decentralisation taking place in the region, from district to local self government levels, and this has been accepted as necessary to making literacy programmes more participatory and involving local communities.

Literacy programmes should not be seen only in cost-benefit terms. If EFA is to be pursued from a rights-based perspective, there is a need to look at the needs of the family as a whole and not in separate compartments. Thus a link can be created between the learning needs of children and adults in the same family, establishing the connection between primary education and literacy. In relation to economic growth, the question to be asked of countries in this region is whether they are allocating enough to adult literacy. We need to move away from the tendency to look at literacy programmes only as projects.

Mr Aaron Benavot, UNESCO

While the definition and conception of literacy has evolved and changed over time, the measurement of literacy has changed very little. Assessments of literacy tend to be based on conventional, simple ideas (such as self-assessment), and there is therefore underestimation of illiteracy. We need to move beyond the kinds of assessments that

exist today, and have more nuanced and better articulated policies to convince funders and others of the importance of literacy.

The definition of literacy has moved from looking at small sets of skills independent of the context and it is now widely understood that literacy is very much rooted in the context. In this background, language becomes even more important. Literacy is also an active and lifelong learning process, and not a one-time event. It enables people to reflect critically on their own lives, society, etc.

Indicators from countries in the region show that all literacy statistics are based on household declarations; this often exceeds actual abilities, leading to an underestimation of about 20-25 percent. This tendency is especially pronounced in groups/countries where access to schooling is limited. A slowing down of the rate of increase of literacy rates is likely in the next decade, and these are not likely to increase by more than 10-15 percent. In these circumstances, reaching the literacy goals of EFA by 2015 may become a difficult proposition.

Even countries that have committed themselves to adult education do not have information about the numbers of people who complete various literacy programmes and whether they retain these skills over a longer term period. It is important for governments to adopt policies that cater not only to adult illiterates, but also to future adults, many of whom may be in school today. It is equally important to understand that policies may be oriented to general or specific populations; in the case of literacy, a case can be made for targeting literacy policies at specific groups, such as ethnic, cultural, linguistic, nomadic, religious, gender groups, etc, since illiteracy rates tend to be much higher in these groups.

Mr Harbans S Bhola, India

The present conference is a historic marker for the powerless poor; although the event itself is short, it is of a sufficient duration to mobilise moral and material resources to address literacy challenges.

Many norms and yardsticks of literacy are available from practice and theory. The important thing to recognise is that State treasuries are important for supporting literacy, and the lead in the area of literacy has to come from government, not civil society. While the private sector can play a role, it often tends to restrict itself to immediate gains instead of staying engaged for a longer duration.

Mr David Archer, ActionAid

A process of consensus was followed in arriving at the twelve benchmarks for literacy, with discussion between civil society, INGOs and governments. These can be a starting point for national dialogues on literacy. It is important to expand the definitions of literacy, particularly since there are no magic lines between literacy and illiteracy. Literacy has to be recognised as a continuum and not a one-time change. The example of Kenya was cited, where a survey using this philosophy showed that the challenge was much greater than thought earlier on the basis of self-assessment.

As far as government roles and responsibilities are concerned, there has been a tendency in recent years to move away from dealing with adult illiteracy to primary schooling. There can be no getting away from the fact that governments have the lead responsibility in providing leadership, financing, and an enabling literate environment. While collaboration with civil society organisations is essential, budgets need to be decentralised to enable local participation and empowerment. The example of the National Literacy Mission in India and its district level committees was cited.

Feedback mechanisms are important, as are research and evaluation, and an assessment of how people use their skills for livelihood, active citizenship and improved productivity. Literacy facilitators should be paid at least as much as primary school teachers since volunteerism and “honoraria” are no longer enough. At the same time, regular training and capacity building programmes are essential.

Learners should have an active choice of what they learn, and a balance needs to be struck between mother tongue learning and national languages. Connecting the learning process with the lives of learners is essential, and a larger literate environment has to be created to sustain learning. Governments need to stimulate the market for development and distribution of material for new learners in order to facilitate the creation of a literate environment.

It is estimated that between US\$50-100 per learner per year is required to sustain learning. Governments must dedicate 3 percent of the national education sector budget to adult literacy so that this figure can be met. Where there is a shortage, international donors should step in. Sadly, international donors, especially those like the World Bank, have tended to limit themselves to primary education. For instance, the EFA Fast Track Initiative (FTI) has only supported the latter so far; a major breakthrough was achieved this year in Benin where US\$79 million has been pledged for adult literacy programmes through the FTI.

H.E. Mr Mohammed Haneed Atmar, Minister for Education, Afghanistan

More research and analytical work in the area of definitions would be most welcome. The utility of literacy is often seen in the context of livelihood, citizenship, etc. Peace and stability should also be added as important results of literacy. Responding to remarks about the need to redefine literacy and literacy assessments, the Minister pointed out that shifting goal posts often make things difficult for governments. While governments are comfortable with a broad definition of literacy, this should not become an impediment to the implementation of regular literacy programmes.

Afghanistan will not achieve the MDGs and EFA by the stipulated target dates and is already thinking of 2020. The country needs to address the backlog of millions and of the many years of conflict. Nearly half the illiterates in Afghanistan are children of school age who are out of school for various reasons. Literacy programmes alone cannot succeed in countries like Afghanistan; it is essential to expand primary and secondary programmes, particularly addressing dropouts.

The Government of Afghanistan places great importance on the 11th benchmark addressed to international donors, and would look forward to greater engagement with these agencies in bringing about an improvement in development in the country. Development cannot happen unless it is owned by those to whom it has to happen, yet recipient states are often bypassed. In this situation, development programmes, no matter howsoever well designed and intentioned, are unlikely to be owned by the people.

If school education does not improve, adult literacy cannot be sustained. In the case of Afghanistan, there are many languages, some whose scripts have been lost; reviving these through literacy programmes is difficult, and the country will have to examine strategies that can address these kinds of issues as well.

H.E. Mr Shams Kassim Lakha, Minister of Education, Pakistan

The Government of Pakistan is well aware of the challenges facing the country, and realises that there is a need for innovative approaches. In the field of education, there are significant gender disparities, differences between urban and rural areas, high rates of dropout at the primary stage, problems of access, etc. We all have our own issues, culture, religion and traditions; if one is not mindful of these, there will be a complete disconnect between policies and implementation. The government of Pakistan is attempting to move forward while being sensitive to these matters.

The literacy rate in the country increased from 34 percent to 56 percent literacy in the last 5 years. The government realises however, that despite all efforts and the level of resources made available, the scale of problems in Pakistan is such that it will not be possible to reach the EFA goals within the agreed time frame. Several initiatives have been taken up by the government recently, including the setting up of a National Commission for Human Development, which focuses on literacy among other things. This is a statutory body in the shape of a public-private partnership; while 70-80 percent resources have been made available by the government, the rest have been raised from the public at large including the Pakistani diaspora. The NCHD has set up 73000 adult literacy centres so far, and proposes to set up 300000. 70 percent of the beneficiaries of these programmes are women.

Similarly, the National Educational Foundation has been given a major endowment by the government and USAID. The Foundation has established 11000 NFE centres for adult education covering 300000 learners so far. The Children's Resource Centre has been established as a model for linking mother's literacy and that of children. As a pilot project, one whole district (400 public schools) has been funded by USAID. The financing costs vary between US\$2-4 per learner per month, depending on the context and skills sets, etc.

H.E. Ms D. Purandeswari Minister of State, Ministry of Human Resource Development, India

Literacy programmes have been taken up in India since the 1950s, and the country has a wide ranging experience of how these programmes can be made successful. The

challenges in India include low literacy levels in some areas, especially due to social factors that cause exclusion. In recent years, there has been great emphasis on universalising elementary education (UEE); however UEE and literacy need to go hand in hand.

The government has been concentrating on enrolment and attendance, but realises the need to address the challenge of quality education, and of linking it to adult literacy. Given that the general resource crunch does affect literacy programmes, it is opportune that India is hosting the present conference, being on the eve of finalisation of the next Five Year Plan. As things stand, the government is likely to approve a five-fold increase in allocations for adult literacy programmes.

Adult literacy has unfortunately not received the kind of attention it deserves; there is a need to focus more attention on these areas, and on sustaining basic literacy skills for neo-literates, etc. It is in this background that the Government of India has identified low literacy areas for special focus programmes, with a particular emphasis on women and adolescents. To make such programmes more effective, the government is examining how lifelong learning and awareness programmes can be clubbed with various other programmes; for instance, inter-Ministerial clubbing with the Ministry Health and Family Welfare is being examined, to strengthen linkages between health and literacy.

There is also a need to encourage more private participation in these programmes. The effective use of ICT for literacy programmes, especially radio, has been established world wide, and private participation in programme using modern technology helps to increase its reach as well as bring down costs. To encourage literacy programmes, equivalency programmes could be a new initiative that helps to draw participants in on the basis of equivalent certification with the formal education system. Teaching in local languages should be balanced with the demand to learn in the national language or in English.

H.E. Mr Abdul Razique Samadi, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Finance, Afghanistan

It has been estimated that the requirements to meet educational needs in Afghanistan are US\$2.6 billion. Although the Ministry of Education developed policies and strategies and monitoring indicators to measure progress, the shortage of resources continues to remain a major issue. The government is trying to use output-based budgeting methods for these programmes instead of the usual input-based systems.

The country is faced with huge demand for other social services - transport, health, higher education, etc. Security requirements demand far greater resources than available to the country at the moment. Long term support from the international community and donors is considered essential, at least for the next 5-10 years. At the same time, the government needs to decentralise programmes to ensure that they are owned by local communities and people.

ROUNDTABLE 2: PROGRAMME CONTENT AND DELIVERY

Moderator: Mr Adama Ouane, Director, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)

Panellists: Ms Vandana Jena, India
Ms Catherine Young, SIL International
Mr Shahnewaz Khan, Pakistan
Ms Anita Priyadarshini, India

Discussant: H.E. Mr Mohan Singh Rathour, Minister of Education, Nepal

Ms Vandana Jena, India

Regardless of the nature of a literacy programme, its content is important and demands attention. The question to be asked in developing content is “literacy for what?”

Although most countries are also focusing on numeracy, research shows that people are more interested in reading skills rather than writing or numeracy. Learners are interested in literacy and vocational skills together. As far as delivery is concerned, ICT has been effectively used in India, with radio and satellite as popular media. There are many solutions and we should be open-minded to explore various possibilities. It is equally important to be open-minded for innovation in content.

Insofar as delivery mechanisms are concerned, most literacy programmes tend to depend upon volunteers as facilitators. It is perhaps time to review this practice and to consider whether volunteerism for literacy programmes is sustainable in the longer term.

Ms Catherine Young, SIL International

Access and opportunity to education are key to making literacy programmes successful. So far, mono-lingual, mono-cultural approaches have been followed, largely inherited from the Western world. There is however a need to make education responsive to local and cultural needs. Flexible and responsive content will accommodate more students and learners at school, and allow them to learn more. Current research shows that the number of years in education in the first language is directly related to later success in education and that people tend to be more easily literate in their mother tongue.

Ethnic minorities have been abandoned by the mainstream education system. Guidance and facilitation are needed to meet the needs of minority communities all over the world. Survey data and information mapping are essential, as is an enabling policy framework. Research shows that implementing multilingual education assures more participation for minorities.

The policy for teacher identification and deployment is very important in minority language education. Local teachers could be more creative, innovative and helpful for people with the same language. These sorts of initiatives should be promoted and

encouraged at the regional level. Developing writing systems for minority languages is a huge challenge. The emotional and social environment is equally important for better learning. Cooperative efforts among governments, community, civil society and others are essential to address these kinds of issues.

Mr Shahnewaz Khan, Pakistan

Learning material is the most important component in any programme. Accurately identifying the needs of people is essential in the development of these materials. ICT can certainly be more widely used, since it is capable of being used flexibly in a variety of situations, addressing diversity concerns also. It has been observed that learning materials are becoming more learner-centered. It is a given fact that the competence of learners varies from person to person, and this should be reflected in the development of learning materials. While interactive learning materials have been popular, it has been observed that the most effective materials are those that are made by learners themselves. Appreciating the interests of learners therefore becomes key; visual and ICT materials could thus be promoted in this context. Capacity building in developing materials at the local level is also very important. More stakeholders need to be involved in actual material development.

Ms Anita Priyadarshini, India

While ensuring that learners receive literacy skills, this is not enough by itself. Recognition and accreditation are both important, especially for new learners. While the primary education sector has focused on these issues, this has not happened in the area of literacy. It is important to provide second and third opportunities to revitalise literacy skills. To make sure that we have a wide system for all to learn, adequate funds should be provided for alternative education.

As far as equivalency programmes are concerned, flexibility is important, and lifelong learning is a necessity. Equivalency makes it possible for people to move from one institution to another. People who have dropped out of schooling programmes or children who may be out of school for a number of reasons should be appreciated and provided more chances for flexible learning. This is why programmes offered by the National Institute of Open Schooling in India have become so important, because they constitute a parallel system for secondary, vocational, and other kinds of education.

H.E. Mr Mohan Singh Rathour, Minister of Education, Nepal

There are many challenges and issues in Nepal, such as the political situation, the existence of an interim government, etc. The people of Nepal take these challenges positively. While we have many experts and human resources, we continue to see disparities in gender, class, and others.

Budget allocations for education and literacy have been increased in Nepal. The government seeks innovative approaches, partnerships and collaborations with donors. Possible suggestions to the government are to increase allocations, to provide mother tongue education, and to undertake baseline surveys to understand the literacy situation.

Political stability is a most important condition to ensure that literacy policies are successfully implemented.

Mr Adama Ouane, Moderator

It is important to find better strategies to provide fair choices at the beginning. Currently, the choice available to many learners is to learn in a major/national language or not learn at all, even though it is well known that learning in the first language helps establish strong learning foundations. Language is not always a source of conflict, as is often made out by some.

ROUNDTABLE 3: LITERACY AND GENDER

Moderator: Ms Susan Durston, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Nepal

Panellists: Ms Malini Ghose, India
Ms Shaheen Attique-ur-Rehman, Pakistan
Ms Suchan Acharya, UNICEF Nepal

Discussant: H.E. Mr Ahmed Ali Didi, Deputy Minister of Education, Maldives

Ms Malini Ghose, India

Gender has to be seen as a cross-cutting concern; it is not linear in nature, but a complex issue. One may take the case of India—although progress has been made in many areas, the gender gap in literacy remains of the order of 20 percent, even though the literacy rate of women has been increasing at a faster rate than men’s literacy rate. Women are not a homogeneous category, they suffer from multiple axes of disadvantage. Yet, dwindling political commitment over the last few years has particularly impacted women and their status in society.

Despite substantial motivation, especially of women in the field, the failure of continuing education programmes has discouraged them greatly. Establishing literacy as a right in and of itself, particularly for women, is important, and there is a crying need for demonstrable commitment, not just rhetoric. Despite several years of discussion, there continues to be a lack of connection between women’s literacy and women’s empowerment and it is difficult to find these linkages in practice. A study of 2500 self-help groups recently found that while 61 percent members were non-literate, 69 percent of the leaders were literate, and 46 percent of group leaders were able to access large loans even though they were only 13 percent of the total population. Of the 45 NGOs that participated in the survey, only 3 were offering literacy programmes. Clearly, literacy packages should be designed to dovetail with self-help groups and micro-credit programmes to enable empowerment of women.

Generic literacy programmes are not wanted by most women; what they want is literacy that is relevant to their contexts and roles. While gender has become a mainstream term,

it is often not understood fully. In reality, and particularly in this region, the whole gender question is actually about tackling existing power relations.

In traditional literacy programmes, allowances are often not made for mobilisation and capacity building. There is a need for longer term programmes and committed investments, with infrastructure, etc. to be accompanied with soft inputs to enable the transformation of gender relations. It should be realised that changing attitudes takes time, and we need to make space in our programmes for such commitments.

Similarly, although the need for a literate environment is often mentioned, no concrete details are usually available since this is a matter that falls between various Ministries/Departments. Learning material for women is often prepared at a superficial level without allowing for critical reflection or enabling reading for pleasure. There are no black and white boundaries between literate and non-literate, and we need more comprehensive mechanisms to collect accurate and qualitative data to inform policies and strategies, covering such issues as why do women drop out of programmes, what do they do with their skills, do they benefit and if so, in what way, etc.

Ms Shaheen Attiq-ur-Rehman, Pakistan

The situation in regard to female literacy in Pakistan has not been very good; in 1961, the rate of female literacy was only 6 percent, which rose to 32 percent by 1998 when the last Census was held. One of the reasons for this continuing low rate of literacy is the fact that the formal education system tends to receive the maximum allocation of budgets, with NFE and literacy receiving the leftovers; in general, less than 1 percent of the education budget goes to literacy. 70 percent Pakistanis live on less than \$1 a day; 42 percent of these are below 14. The country has a high number of dropouts, with nearly 30 percent girls failing to pass primary school and only 4-5 percent reaching college level. In an attempt to rectify matters, Ministries of Literacy have now been set up in two out of four provinces.

However, there continues to be a lack of consistency in funding literacy internationally, and most support is short term and/or project-oriented. As a rule, donors do not consider literacy relevant, even though it has the potential to make such a significant difference to the lives of so many. Generally speaking, the MDGs receive greater priority with governments as opposed to the EFA goals.

Decentralisation in the implementation of literacy programmes is important to ensure that rural people can benefit. Community ownership of these programmes is important to ensure their involvement and successful implementation.

The LIFE programme is not very effective at the moment and there is a need to focus it on adolescent girls through leadership roles as well as to accelerate it. Issues such as safe motherhood and action for violence against women are important and can be integrated with literacy programmes. One of the things that could be taken up under the auspices of the one UN reform programme would be an exchange of best practices, particularly in this region, so that countries may benefit from each other's experience.

Ms Sushan Acharya, UNICEF Nepal

Women's literacy has been a priority of both the government and non-government sectors for a long time. The nature of women's literacy programs is usually grounded in the understanding that if women are educated it would help in achieving other social and economic goals. Therefore in Nepal, literacy models of the government and non-government sectors are predominately guided by functional perspectives with few examples of programs guided by a critical perspective.

Although the government and non-government sectors have been investing in women's literacy programs for several decades, their literacy status has not changed much. The gender gap in literacy status in general is still remarkable on one hand and on the other the gap in women's literacy across caste and ethnicity is also significant. Institutional factors such as policy, planning, programming and coordination have also contributed significantly to this lop sided improvement. Women are no longer a homogeneous group in Nepal too, and there is therefore a need for literacy programmes that address varying needs. The curriculum for adult literacy in the country has not been revised, and there are no gender inputs as in the case of primary education.

The intangible benefits of women's literacy are often not observable, particularly in terms of family benefits, which is why it sometimes tends to be left behind. Many women prefer the NFE route to accessing other streams such as health, livelihood, inoculation, etc. The government in Nepal has now become aware of these realities and is therefore focusing on decentralisation to address some of these issues. Community Learning Centres (CLC) are being established in the country in low literacy districts, but functioning local governments are not available just yet.

Monitoring and evaluation tend to be mostly input based, and do not consider process or impact. Research needs to be linked to gender issues, particularly through action research, and linking literacy with everyday life is extremely important. Local knowledge and practices are often ignored or not taken into account; and no effort is made to link new knowledge with existing knowledge. Doing so would be a useful means to increase the self esteem of learners.

H.E. Mr Ahmed Ali Didi, Deputy Minister of Education, Maldives

There are two reasons why gender in Maldives is comparable—firstly, for historical reasons, Maldivians have placed a high value on education, and no distinction was traditionally made between women and men. Secondly, a national campaign was launched to eradicate illiteracy after 1978 involving schools and local volunteers, which has had a very visible and successful impact. Since communities were small, it was possible to reach illiterates relatively easily, and alternate arrangements were made for those who could not be reached (such as fishermen).

The national curriculum was revised to remove gender specific roles. The establishment of a Ministry of Gender helped in placing emphasis on post-literacy programmes and on women's literacy. However, monitoring and evaluation needs strengthening as over the

years this has become a little weak. There is a natural tendency to give more attention to primary and secondary education, which has unfortunately diluted the focus on adult literacy.

Ms Susan Durston, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Nepal

Summing up the discussion, suggested the following for consideration as outcomes of the session:

- Literacy should be seen as a tool and a process, not a goal, apart from being a fundamental right.
 - Family structure and relations should be used for literacy, especially in areas where girls and women cannot participate due to social reasons.
 - There is a need to be cautious about the construction of society in this region; when implementing literacy programmes, it is necessary to be careful about reactions from entrenched interests.
 - There is a need to give women the voice and the choice.
 - Apart from decentralisation, we need to engage in more qualitative research. Multiply correlated data is needed; women are not a homogeneous group, multiple disparities exist.
 - Substantial documentation and creation of a network for sharing and exchange of best practices under the auspices of the One-UN reform should be encouraged.
 - There is a need to concentrate on adolescents and youth given the nature of population demographics in the future.
 - UN agencies, particularly in Pakistan, could look at how they view literacy for women, since different agencies tend to look at different aspects.
 - There is a case for learning from India and its experience with the World Bank and literacy programmes.
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Day 2: 30th November 2007

Panel 1: From Literacy to Lifelong Learning

Moderator: Mr S. Y. Shah, Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

Presenters: Mr Shahidul Hasan, BRAC, Bangladesh
Mr Khaliollah Cheraghi, Literacy Movement, Iran
Mr C. Krishna Mohan Rao, State Literacy Mission Andhra Pradesh, India
Mr Karma Yeshey, Ministry of Education, Bhutan

Mr Shahidul Hasan, Bangladesh

Commonalities exist between primary and post-literacy programmes. For instance, non formal primary programmes, primary education programmes for specific ethnic groups and/or capacity building for government formal schools. In Bangladesh, the government and BRAC have collaborated for teacher education and are focusing on retention issues. The programme involves training of teachers on subject matters.

The NFE programme of BRAC depends on contributions from the community. More than 50,000 students of BRAC's NFE programme have gone on to secondary education.

Mr Khaliollah Cheraghi, Iran

The Literacy Organisation in Iran was established in 1979, for out-of-school children, adults and others. Today there are 9.8 million illiterates in Iran for whom various programmes are being implemented. A number of follow-up programmes have been taken up to prevent relapse into illiteracy, and Iran is determined to reduce the gender gap as quickly as possible.

Community Learning Centres (CLC) have been established throughout the country to help in the delivery of literacy programmes. Ownership of the community of the programmes and indeed of the CLCs has been critical to the success of these programmes. The CLCs employ a participatory approach in involving all key stakeholders. The flexibility of CLCs has motivated learners to continue learning.

Mr C Krishna Mohan Rao, India

The basic literacy skills acquired by millions of non-literates are at best fragile. There is a greater possibility of neo-literates regressing into partial or total illiteracy unless special efforts are continued to consolidate, sustain and possibly enhance their literacy levels. The first phase of basic literacy instruction and the second phase of consolidation, remediation and skill up-grading are now therefore treated as one integrated project, to ensure smooth progression from one stage to another to achieve continuity, efficiency and convergence. The National Literacy Mission (NLM) aims at ensuring that the Total Literacy Campaigns and the Post-literacy Programmes successfully move on to Continuing Education, which provide life-long learning.

NLM prepares teaching learning material after taking into account the local needs and the specific requirements of the target group. The Continuing Education Scheme provides a learning continuum to the efforts of Total Literacy and Post Literacy Programmes in the country. The main thrust is on providing further learning opportunities to neo-literates by setting up Continuing Education Centres (CECs) which provide area-specific, need-based opportunities for basic literacy, upgrading of literacy skills, pursuit of alternative educational programmes, vocational skills and also promote social and occupational development. A number of programmes have been specifically designed for women to meet their requirements.

Mr Karma Yeshey, Bhutan

Bhutan has followed the path of imparting basic and post literacy to reach a self-learning stage. The self-learning programme has many themes, including HIV, sanitation, civil rights, etc., and is imparted through specially set up self learning centres. These centres include reading corners, income generation training, and the like. Many of these NFE centres are located within the formal education infrastructure.

Community ownership and commitment in these literacy programmes is very strong. One of the interesting discoveries in Bhutan was the fact that senior citizens (over 60 years old) were highly motivated to learn, and this was used to make literacy programmes more successful. Decentralisation of implementation has also ensured strengthening of the community involvement. The curriculum has been revised continuously to meet changing requirements. The only major snag has been in some areas where lack of electricity has impacted the delivery of literacy programmes which are usually delivered in the evenings.

Panel 2: Literacy for Economic Self Sufficiency

Moderator: Mr Abdul Hakeem, Director APPEAL, UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education

Presenters: Mr Ehsanur Rahman, DAM, Bangladesh
Ms Arun Grover, Jan Shikshan Sansthan, India
Ms Bidhya Mahat, ADRA, Nepal
Mr Bashir Khaliqi, ANAFSAE, Afghanistan

Mr Ehsanur Rahman, Bangladesh

The Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) of Bangladesh has had substantial experience of working with adolescents, particularly girls. The Mission has implemented a programme called “Empowering Adolescents for Social Transformation” (EAST), which recognises that while economic self sufficiency is a prime need, it cannot be attained in isolation. The choice of trade/activity that an adolescent makes is usually influenced by social and other factors. The EAST programme uses the CLC approach through which the community is mobilised to accept that adolescent girls can be agents of change. Basic needs of livelihood, etc., are identified and met through the programme.

It is important to follow the perspective of developing a person and not just providing education. Literacy and skills training can go hand in hand or be sequential, but need to be complemented by finding job opportunities. Among the questions that must be asked is how the capacity of NFE providers can be increased. Thanks to the Mission’s partnership for job placement, cooperation with local industries were developed courses planned on the basis of the demand of the local market. Community support for girls’ participation has increased due to the results achieved.

What has been done is much less than what needs to be done - coping with the business world is difficult, and capacities of skills trainers need to be developed in this area. General experience has been that such programmes are more successful in urban areas, and there are difficulties in rural areas, especially since skills instructors are not available.

Ms Arun Grover, India

A major challenge is that of linking literacy with livelihood to enable learning and economic empowerment. A majority of the people who are illiterate struggle for survival, and literacy is often not relevant to them unless linked to livelihood. Most formal institutions tend to overlook the needs of special groups like former working children, rag pickers, street adolescents, etc. The Indian Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) model has been found to be useful in addressing these issues and target groups, providing a range of courses and skills, from hospitality to traditional skills.

Life enrichment and life skill education have been added as components of all JSS courses, and accreditation through the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) and the National Literacy Mission (NLM) obtained to address the challenge of recognition in the labour exchange/market. Women have been significant beneficiaries of these programmes, leading to their empowerment. The JSS has good convergence with other programmes, enabling learners to access benefits from non-literacy development programmes as well. The challenge is to ensure that JSS, which are allocated by the government to NGOs, are given to organisations that have the capacities to run them, since convergence, collaboration and coordination are key to success.

Ms Bidhya Mahat, Nepal

With a literacy rate of only 46 percent in Nepal, it is necessary to take up different types of literacy programmes, particularly those focused more on women, since their voice is usually not heard and they have limited or no knowledge of civil rights, etc. The

objective of programmes is to arrive at empowerment through literacy, which becomes the first entry point for all programmes. A special focus is maintained on micro-finance and empowering women to use financial and other resources, especially locally available ones.

Such projects have had a very positive impact on the lives of women; they are more economically independent now and able to sustain themselves. Linkages with other organisations have been developed, enabling them to participate in many activities such as cooperatives and Community Based Organisations. An interesting observation has been that the skills of women covered through such programmes tend to be higher in math than in reading or writing, particularly because of the stress on market equations and financial matters. A great sense of solidarity, along with thrift and saving habits have been developed among learners.

Challenges arise vis-à-vis men when women are made literate; literacy leads to a change in relationships, as well as greater demand for literacy, skills and micro-finance programmes for men. There is thus a need to be sensitive to traditional practices and knowledge, and strengthening them may become necessary. In this context, it is unrealistic for a donor strategy to focus only on short term projects, and there is a need to look at longer term engagement.

Mr Bashir Khaliqi, Afghanistan

The educational system in Afghanistan is very traditional, and not one that would motivate children to attend. School primers were not interesting enough, drop out rates were high, and infrastructure had been destroyed. In general, there is a lack of participation of men and women in education. To make education more interesting, new programmes have included components of civil education, which teach learners about democracy, rights and citizenship. Some of them have been able to generate income through the production of soap, candles, etc., as well as provide literacy to adults, particularly women.

There is a diversity of needs and of people that must be recognised, which implies that traditional literacy classes may not necessarily be successful; a one-size-fits-all strategy does not work. Qualification needs of trainers are important, as indeed is flexibility of training material. Insofar as continuing education programmes are concerned, they need more support from the government, donors and communities, and facilities need to be developed in rural areas too.

Panel 3: Literacy for Health

Moderator: Mr Davison Munodawafa, Regional Adviser, Health Promotion and Education, WHO

Presenters: Ms Mari Takano, ACCU
Ms Nandini Kajuri, State Resource Center West Bengal, India

Mr Harun-ur-Rashid, PROSHIKA, Bangladesh

Ms Mari Takano, Japan

The project 'SMILE' is a pilot project on maternal and child health which has taken up literacy classes as well. Implemented in Bangladesh and Nepal, through various CLCs, the project focuses on integration of maternal and child health issues with literacy. There is a thrust on creation of an environment that promotes the objective of the project. Community libraries have been set up with the community learning centres.

Ms Nandini Kajuri, India

The project taken up by the State Resource Centre (SRC), West Bengal, India focuses on the sustenance of literacy along with efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. The vision of the project is that only if literacy is sustained is it possible to build and strengthen the knowledge and practices of people pertaining to the area of health. Persons covered under the project are commercial sex workers, and their adolescent daughters, as they are more susceptible to HIV/AIDS. The project is further supported through training interventions for building the vocational skills of these women.

Mr Harun-ur-Rashid, Bangladesh

The project of PROSHIKA in Bangladesh perceives literacy as an important instrument for empowering people. Literacy becomes instrumental in making people aware of their rights and duties and in building their capacities to fight against the systems that exploit them. The project's approach focuses on the family rather than the individual and special learning packages have been developed for the project. The programme holds opportunities for education for all age groups in the family and deeper learning is associated with each learner who participates.

Points to be communicated to the Conference

The presenters agreed that the following issues were important when considering the relationship between literacy and health:

- There is a need to treat mothers as 'change agents' as family health is a major concern for them and they can be effective in motivating the others in the family as well as within the community
- Community learning centres should be further developed as key institutions at local levels
- Health can be taken as the entry point for literacy as it relates to the personal life of the community
- Interaction and discussion should be the key approach not only for imparting literacy but also for generating need based health curriculum
- Learning can be effective only when we treat the whole family as learners and ensure that there is learning content for all on various health issues

However, this throws up several challenges, not the least of which are:

- Up-scaling of these projects is not so easy as health concerns differ
- Cultural barriers also need to be taken into account and addressed tactfully
- Finding appropriate facilitators and building their capacities is a major issue

- The provision of honorarium is too meagre as compared to the work involved

Mr Davison Munodawafa, Moderator

While literacy can be effective in leading to health awareness, accessibility and availability of health services is essential. Capacities of health providers have to be taken into account and building capacities of other stake holders and ensuring their participation is equally important. Literacy can never be effective if it does not help people develop their capacities for coping with problems related to their lives. Even organisations like WHO realise that for development, education and health have to be the core contents of any strategy that is adopted. International organisations need to understand and come forward to support line ministries and allow leadership to grow and be effective for change.

Panel 4: Mother-Child Literacy and Intergenerational Learning

Moderator: Ms Benita Somerfield, Executive Director, Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy

Presenters: Mr Iqbal ur Rehman, National Commission for Human Development, Pakistan
Ms Mehnaz Aziz, CRI, Pakistan
Ms Derya Akalin, ACEV, Turkey
Ms Uday Laxmi Pradhananga, UNICEF, Nepal

In the context of learning, the home is the child's first school. Investment in mothers' literacy is therefore as important as investing in the education of children, since an educated mother is far more likely to have educated children. Successful programmes that follow this approach usually have strong collaborations with local communities.

Mr Iqbal ur Rehman, Pakistan

Pakistan has high illiteracy rates and is very low on the HDI (Human Development Index) ranking list. Achieving the EFA and MDG targets seems a very steep goal. The National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) was set up to help achieve EFA goals in Pakistan. It has been realised that a multi-pronged approach is needed, using line departments without creating parallel structures.

Analysis showed that the mother's role is extremely important in educating children, and that there is a strong relationship of the rate of dropping out of children with illiterate parents. The country therefore started literacy programmes for mothers using formal lessons. A national campaign was undertaken, using media on Oral Rehydration as a component of the literacy programme, and including other preventive health care measures. Private partners, non-resident Pakistanis and others help to raise as much as 20-30 percent of funds required through telethons, gala events, etc.

Ms Mehnaz Aziz, Pakistan

The education situation in the country is very diverse; while the State is responsible for education, government schools continue to coexist with elite institutions. State schools are poorly equipped, have corporal punishment, lack teachers, books, etc., and therefore lead to high drop out rates. In a project undertaken by the NGO and supported by USAID, technical assistance was provided to the government, working with 400 schools in one district.

Programmes undertaken included parental involvement and family literacy programmes, which facilitated the development of a relationship between mothers and children so that they encourage each other to learn. Schools are used for these programmes as they are seen as “safe” from a social point of view (given the conservative nature of Pakistani society), as opposed to setting up parallel systems or CLCs. Pre- and post-evaluation testing of mothers was carried out, and it was observed that their confidence increased when children saw their mothers coming to school. There is adequate evidence that children whose mothers were involved in the programme showed improvement in their school results, which is considered a significant achievement of getting the families together. Overall drop out rates have reduced as a result of the programme.

Ms Uday Laxmi Pradhananga, Nepal

Nepal’s experience was that parents were not involved with children’s learning. To remedy this situation, family literacy programmes were started to try and address issues of engaging parents and children together. These programmes were targeted at rural and marginalised communities to provide an inter-generational approach, and were specifically designed to be relevant to community life. All programmes were grounded in the community using strong partnerships, and both qualitative and quantitative measurement was carried out through the administration of pre- and post-programme evaluation tests.

Panel 5: Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Literacy

Moderator: Mr N.K. Sinha, Joint Secretary (Distance Learning), Ministry of Human Resource Development, India

Presenters: Mr Kesav Nori, Tata Consultancy Services, India
Mr Ahmed Shafeeu, Center for Continuing Education, Maldives
Ms Thanuja Rajakaruna, Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka

Mr Kesav Nori, India

The use of ICT for education raises several challenges. While the technology itself can be useful, the purpose of educational programmes can quite often be defeated if it cannot be kept simple. People should only need simple knowledge of computers and not need to be computer experts in order to benefit from the use of ICT. In the specific context of India, there are about 26 languages in the country, and development of ICT tools for so many

languages is therefore quite a challenge. The number of illiterates is also very large and reaching them all is a difficult task.

ICT cannot be a substitute for the teacher and should not in any manner be considered as a means of replacing him/her. When considering ICT, computers are only one mode of technology; other types of easily accessible technology like mobiles, radio, TV, etc., may also be used. In India, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) has developed and implemented a computer-based Functional Literacy Technology for 100,000 adult illiterate learners. The programme supplements the efforts of the Government of India in promoting literacy and providing classes in various Indian languages and is aimed at providing technology to speed up delivery, improve productivity of teachers, and provide for a minimum quality of instruction.

The TCS project follows the principle that while the application should be visible, the technology behind it should not. The technology developed was therefore meant to be extremely simple, so that it is unobtrusive both to the teacher and the students whilst maintaining its novelty in order to attract teachers and students alike. The technology concentrates on teaching reading skills only. The reasoning was that once people are comfortable in reading, they have independent access to information and knowledge, and if they experience the enabling and empowering value of this skill, they would be self motivated to learn other skills. The project uses instruction materials developed by various State Resource Centres (SRCs) under the aegis of the National Literacy Mission (NLM).

Mr Ahmed Shafeeu, Maldives

Maldives has a population of 300,000 persons, a high literacy rate of 98.8 percent and is spread over 700 kilometres. One of the major challenges faced by the country is that of reaching isolated communities spread over the various islands, particularly given the shortage of human resources. The Government of Maldives initiated a programme in 1980 to dramatically improve the literacy profile of the country, as a basis for social and economic development. The programme operated through the distance mode, using radio programmes supported by print material supplemented by tutor training. There were seven separate programmes on health, literacy, general knowledge, etc., of 15 minutes duration each, with a focus on teachers and empowerment. Tutors were volunteers from the community, and all citizens who were literate were encouraged to teach at least one person who was not.

The literacy programme was strongly backed by the government, and the public was encouraged to treat it as a national initiative and to participate in it as a nation-building activity. The literacy and numeracy syllabi that were developed were well designed, so that volunteer tutors could follow the programme easily along with their charges, and at the end of a certain period, certified assessors travelled to different islands to carry out literacy tests.

Ms Thanuja Rajakaruna, Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has a literacy rate of 92.5 percent, with female literacy higher than male literacy in the age group of 15 to 24 years. Significant challenges include the lack of funds and the lack of capacity to implement large scale programmes. A successful initiative has been the Telecentre-based Agri-clinics for Rural Farmer Empowerment. This programme was started in 2006 with an outreach to 1140 Sri Lankan farmers per year through Village Information Centres.

Some of the factors causing low agricultural productivity in Sri Lanka include pests, diseases, inefficient farming technologies and lack of knowledge within farming communities on current situations, technologies, trends and market information. Low levels of knowledge and information flow make the situation worse and these problems are exacerbated by a relatively low level of literacy. To empower the agriculture sector with modern and up-to-date knowledge and technologies, Agri-clinics have been established to provide documentation and e-material related to the agricultural situation in the area. These clinics are thus a unique mechanism to enhance farmer literacy skills, learning situations and information access.

Since this is an ICT-based project, it was essential to improve the computer literacy of beneficiaries through the use of ICT tools like computers and information CDs. The knowledge and information provided to beneficiaries by the Agri-clinics are directly related to their livelihood and since services are freely available in a simple and applicable form that can be directly applied to the field situations, they have been very attractive to rural communities. As a result of the programme, the farmers have been empowered to seek knowledge and information.

Moderator: Mr N.K. Sinha, Joint Secretary (Distance Learning), Ministry of Human Resource Development, India

ICT has a lot of potential in improving learning and can be used for both knowledge creation and dissemination. This new paradigm can be fascinating and stimulating, and can open up new avenues for literacy and vocational training. Learners may be teachers, facilitators, administrators and supervisors. A great feature of ICT is that it facilitates equity and connectivity. At the same time, evaluation of impact is important and it is essential to monitor the results of ICT-based programmes on a sustained basis to ensure that they meet their objectives.

ROUNDTABLE 4: MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF LITERACY

Moderator: Ms Veronica McKay, Director, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Institute, University of South Africa

Panellists: Mr Ko-Chih Tung, UIS
Ms Nayana Tara, Indian Institute of Management, India

Mr Mohammed Bougroum, Cadi Ayyad University Marrakech, Morocco

Mr Joao Pedro de Azevedo, Institute of Applied Economic Research, Brazil

Discussants:

H.E. Mr Ayub Quadri, Honorable Adviser, Member, Caretaker Government, Chairperson of the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO, Bangladesh

H.E. Mr Ali Bagherzadeh Faraji, Vice Minister for General Education, Islamic Republic of Iran

Mr Ko-Chih Tung, UIS

The importance of assessment in literacy cannot be overstated, particularly in South Asia where the sheer numbers can be overwhelming. Although the present estimate of illiterate people in the world is about 774 million, this could easily be over a billion given the difficulties in arriving at accurate figures. The approach adopted by UIS has been to encourage evidence-based policy making. It is in keeping with this approach that the Mid Decade Assessment (MDA) process has been initiated, in which member States are participating in order to arrive at a realistic assessment of where they stand. The process is helping to bring about greater accountability as well as transparency in the implementation of literacy and EFA programmes.

Ms Nayana Tara, India

It is important to clearly articulate literacy policy and to ensure political commitment to such policy at the highest levels. Public-private partnerships can help in the process of evidence-based policy making and in capacity building at all levels of implementation. The fact is that reliance on volunteerism alone is unlikely to suffice in the long run, and it is important to develop a professional approach to literacy. The somewhat loose structures presently in place for implementation of literacy programmes and the high turnover of literacy managers have also become obstacles to the successful implementation of these programmes.

Three possible steps suggest themselves—the first revolves around the implementation of a redesigned Literacy Assessment and Measurement Programme (LAMP). The second would require improvement in the design and implementation of detailed household surveys. Both of these could then be integrated with data from different sources, perhaps in the form of a modified version of DevInfo.

Mr Mohammed Bougroum, Morocco

In Morocco, the National Literacy Strategy approved by the government in 2004, places special emphasis on the question of monitoring and evaluation. However, although the achievement of achieving national and international goals requires strong public action, decision makers and parties involved often lack statistical visibility. The current information system does not enable stakeholders to have adequate knowledge of the reality in which they operate, nor to evaluate the impact their actions have on this reality.

In the context of policy, basic questions that need to be asked should include assessment of size and target groups, readiness for implementation on the ground and the expected outputs and/or outcomes of literacy programmes. Unfortunately, there are few evidence-based answers to these questions just yet. This leads to a waste (or even misuse) of resources and a loss of credibility, which can become negative advocacy for literacy. Sound monitoring and evaluation systems thus become essential for the successful implementation of literacy programmes.

Mr Joao Pedro de Azevedo, Brazil

Investment in monitoring and evaluation is necessary because more of the same does not always work. It is important to understand why certain things have not worked before taking up further investments of the same nature. Monitoring and evaluation thus need to be a central part of any strategy and must provide hard data and facts that can be taken into account.

A reliable data base is required to enable effective policy making and to allow for mid-course corrections as and when required. It is also important to publicise the data that has been gathered rather than keeping it safe; such information should be widely disseminated, through the Press and other media, so that people are aware of the situation. The determinants of impact should also be widely known to enable further improvement of the programme. There is often a perception that setting up a monitoring and evaluation system is expensive; however the cost of not doing so may often be more expensive in the long run.

Ms Veronica McKay, Director, Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) Institute, University of South Africa

Massive information systems are required for good management, particularly of programmes in the development sector. MIS are useful for quantitative management, and the data can be used by policy makers, media, learners, etc. Web-based and statistical systems could prove to be useful in improving MIS use and availability, but care must be taken to compare apples with apples and not with oranges; in other words, the basis for comparison must be similar.

H.E. Mr Ayub Quadri, Honorable Adviser, Member, Caretaker Government, Chairperson of the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO, Bangladesh

While primary education and adult literacy are often treated differently, the fact is that there is no real divide and they are inseparable. In the case of adult literacy, the Government of Bangladesh has been taking several steps to improve, and the government is confident of achieving the EFA target for literacy by 2015. However, it is important to focus on a total literacy movement to prevent any relapse into illiteracy. Post literacy and continuing education programmes thus become very important.

H.E. Mr Ali Bagherzadeh Feroji, Vice Minister for General Education, Islamic Republic of Iran

The Islamic Republic of Iran believes that literacy is crucial for sustainable development. The Iranian Revolution had prioritised literacy a full decade before Jomtien and Dakar,

holding it to be essential for the progress of the country. Great emphasis is placed on literacy for women, marginalised groups and rural areas, in order to make sure that no part of the population is inadvertently left out of the benefits of learning. It is in recognition of these facts that five international prizes have so far been awarded to the Iranian Literacy Movement.

In the next five years, the government envisages the complete eradication of illiteracy in Iran, especially among youth. Budgetary allocations are being raised and the involvement of the public and private sectors increased to build partnerships that strengthen progress in this vital area. To ensure that quality is sustained, the government is also ensuring that post and continuing literacy programmes are designed and implemented across the country.

ROUNDTABLE 5: COALITION AND PARTNERSHIP BUILDING FOR LITERACY AND NFE

Moderator: Mr. Edilberto de Jesus, Secretariat Director, SEAMEO

Panellists: Mr. Joseph Carney, USAID
Ms. Phyllis Magrab, Georgetown University
Ms. Amit Mitra, ASPBAE India
Ms. Shaizada Tasbulatova, Kazakhstan
Mr. Denzil Saldanha, India

Discussants: H.E. Mr Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, Minister of Education, Bhutan
H.E. Ms Irina Karimova, Vice-Minister of Education, Tajikistan
Mr R P Perera, Secretary General, Sri Lanka National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO

The panel accepted as a starting premise that governments have primary responsibility for literacy, yet they cannot meet this obligation by themselves and need the assistance of other stakeholders. It is therefore in the interest of governments to develop frameworks that facilitate the role of private partners in literacy and other activities.

Mr Joseph Carney, USAID

ODA institutions must be viewed as partners in literacy initiatives. The Global Monitoring Report of 2008 focuses on “neglected areas”, i.e., ECCE, youth and literacy, and stresses the need for diverse stakeholders to involve themselves in these areas. It is unfortunately true that literacy has been neglected despite being very much a part of basic education and EFA, especially by the donor community. With increasing realisation of the importance of literacy, donors would be interested in supporting such programmes if national governments could prepare holistic national plans needed to prioritise adult literacy. USAID has a programme that functions as an honest broker between national governments and possible private players who might contribute to development, and

would be happy to play this role whenever called upon. To avoid any conflict/confusion, as has been the case in the past, a clear MOU between government and private sector should always be entered into.

Ms Phyllis Magrab, Georgetown University

Several corporate sector entities dedicate time and resources to literacy, seeing this as their contribution to society. Private partners need to be nurtured and educated, and governments need to reach out to them by underlining common interests. There is a need for a plan into which the private sector can fit; however such a plan cannot be prescriptive, and would have to be flexible enough to see different possible roles.

Ms Amit Mitra, ASPBAE India

Governments, NGOs and private players need to enter into true and meaningful partnerships, not looking at each other with suspicion. In particular, governments have to stop viewing outsiders as mere contractors or implementers. A clear understanding of literacy is required at all levels; unfortunately NFE is often passed off as a substitute for basic schooling. This requires the development of overall strategy, monitoring mechanisms, mobilisations, etc.

There are many examples of private sector involvement with NGOs; yet these are not true partnerships. In a democracy, the terms of reference of private sector involvement need to be defined by the people. The right TO literacy is not in dispute; it is the rights IN literacy that entail decentralisation so that people design almost everything themselves. Historically this has been an area of conflict in India. Rights THROUGH literacy, i.e., what one does after attaining literacy skills are also important, since literacy often empowers people to challenge existing power equations and can lead to conflict.

There is great distrust between NGOs and government, as has been confirmed in a study carried out recently. While NGOs are perceived as incompetent and corrupt, government organisations are seen as bureaucratic and unable to deliver. While these perceptions are not new, they underscore the need for both parties—and the private sector—to work together to remove these apprehensions and deliver on the ground.

Ms Shaizada Tasbulatova, Kazakhstan

Various kinds of partnership are possible; they depend on the context of the country concerned, as well as social and cultural concerns. Skills beyond mere reading and writing are needed for the modern market economy. Referred to an example of a project taken up in Kazakhstan recently to help people below the poverty line; as a result of the government encouraging civil society to get involved in its implementation, nearly 5000 NGOs are now working in the country. Major challenges lie in the areas of continuing education and lifelong learning.

Mr Denzil Saldanha, India

Partnerships need to reach decentralised levels, which is the level that counts the most. Convergence between various partners in India at village level has been brought about through Village Education Communities (VECs). The creation of various people's

organisations (community libraries, etc.) is important for sustaining learning and linking it to livelihood. For instance, in the Indian state of Kerala, literacy programmes were implemented with the help of NGOs in a government and civil society partnership, and were immensely successful because both sides respected the role of each other.

It helps if there are clear policy frameworks that are facilitative in nature. The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments in India and the Lifelong Education and Awareness Programme (LEAP), etc., are examples of an integrated approach to education. Collaborations are also possible with Universities and media, both folk and electronic. For instance, substantial work needs to be done in producing low cost material for libraries, and this is something that can be done with the assistance of civil society organisations.

H.E. Mr Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho, Minister of Education, Bhutan

There is great diversity among the fourteen countries of this region, and the solutions in each country vary according to its own specific situation. However, the private sector has an important role to play in education.

Unfortunately there is often too much compartmentalisation, with focus only on literacy, or schooling or adolescence. Literacy programmes must cover current school children as well so as to ensure that they do not drop out of the school system and eventually require adult education programmes later. Parents and families of children must be considered holistically; one reason why we have high rates of illiteracy is because of the social and economic conditions of parents. If these problems can be addressed, participation in schooling will improve. Within the same system, there is a great deal of potential for using same/similar assets and resources for both primary and adult education.

The fourteen countries of this region have met for the first time to share ideas and experiences in literacy. Each of these countries is rich in experience and it would be useful if UNESCO could facilitate greater exchange of ideas among them.

H.E. Ms Irina Karimova, Vice-Minister of Education, Tajikistan

One of the main policy issues in Tajikistan is reform of the education system. In the last 3 years, financing of education has increased three times. The process was started by strengthening the legislative base of education. Ten years compulsory and free education has been made mandatory in the country. However, while the literacy rate in the country is 99.8 percent, there are problems of a different nature, relating to quality, relevance, etc.

Mr R P Perera, Secretary General, Sri Lanka National Commission for Cooperation with UNESCO

It is important to strengthen monitoring and evaluation of delivery mechanisms. While there is a need for the private sector, this requirement can be at different levels. For instance, the absence of the State sector in ECCD can be an opportunity for the private sector to enter.

Partnerships should be inter-Ministerial to address issues comprehensively. Given the high labour exports of Sri Lanka to the Middle East, vocational education could be another possible area of partnership between government and the private sector. Some numbers of street children could also be addressed by such partnerships. Wherever possible, partnerships of the UN system, private sector, NGOs, and government could be brought about to address specific problems and issues.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES: GENERIC BENCHMARKS AND INDICATORS FOR LITERACY

Presenter: Mr Denzil Saldanha, India

It is important to have as broad parameters some benchmarks and indicators for literacy and adult education. These could serve as general guidelines for adult education interventions, in given contexts, and also suggest possible learning and other development outcomes that are built into the process of literacy learning and that hence emerge from it. In addition, benchmarks provide some directions for accountability of agencies involved in facilitating adult education.

The international Benchmarks on Adult Literacy were presented and accepted by participants from 24 countries gathered in Abuja, Nigeria at the Workshop on Adult Literacy from February 12-16, 2007. Apart from representatives of government, participants included United Nations officials, donors and civil society organisations. The Benchmarks were preceded in 2004-05 by the largest survey conducted by the Global Campaign for Education and ActionAid of adult education programmes. The survey involved consultations, a survey of 67 programmes in 35 countries and verifying the Benchmarks by 142 respondents in 47 countries. They have been distributed over 100 countries and translated into several languages.

While these Benchmarks are a good starting point for a national dialogue on literacy, they need to be contextualised to meet specific needs of different countries. In addition to the areas presently stressed by these benchmarks, there is a need to look at outcomes also, helping to create conditions that facilitate these outcomes. The benchmarks should also include some reference to cultural mobilisation involved in building people's organisations, since these types of processes are important in providing sustainability and meaning to literacy.

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INAUGURAL SESSION SPEECHES

**Address by Mr M A A Fatmi, Minister of State for Human Resource Development,
Government of India**

Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance - Madam Sonia Gandhiji, Her Excellency First Lady of Sri Lanka, Hon'ble Ministers of Literacy and Education of participating countries, Hon'ble Minister for Human Resource Development, Government of India - Shri Arjun Singhji - Director General of UNESCO - Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Minister of State for Human Resource Development – Purandeswariji, Dr. Shantha Sinhaji, Secretary, Department of Higher Education, Government of India – Shri R P Agrawal, Secretary, Department of School Education and Literacy, Government of India - Shri Arun Kumar Rath, Delegates who have come from different countries and India, Representatives of UN Agencies and other multilateral and bilateral organizations, NGOs, universities and research institutions, friends from the media and ladies and gentlemen.

On behalf of the government and people of India I extend you all a very warm welcome to India, and this UNESCO Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy.

Initiated as a sequel to the White House Conference on Global Literacy held in New York in September 2006, this Conference is the fourth in the series of Regional or Sub-Regional Conferences being organized for the promotion of literacy at national, regional and global levels.

A great deal of differences and disparities mark the literacy situation in the 14 countries of this Sub-Region of South, Southwest and Central Asia. While some of the South and Central Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, etc., have nearly cent percent adult literacy, other countries are far behind. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – the three among the most populous countries also account for well over 40 percent of the world's 770 million adult illiterates.

Literacy is at the core of Education For All, and is the foundation for lifelong learning and effective participation in the socio-economic life.

The tightly drawn up agenda that has been set up for this Conference, the range of aspects slated for deliberations during the next two days through many round tables and panel discussions reflects the importance attached to literacy and its different dimensions.

I welcome you all once again and wish that your deliberations and recommendations would lead to greater cooperation and advocacy for literacy in the countries of this Region, build mechanisms and networks for this purpose as well as facilitate sharing and dissemination of best practices and policies for the promotion of literacy.

Address of Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General, UNESCO

Madam Sonia Gandhi, Madam Shiranthi Rajapakse, Distinguished Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the UNESCO Conference on Literacy Challenges in South and West Asia and Central Asia.

This meeting is part of the major campaign in support of global literacy that UNESCO is undertaking within the framework of the United Nations Literacy Decade and UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE). Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the Government of India for hosting this important event, and in particular to our Chief Guest, Sonia Gandhi, whom we are honoured to have with us today. Her tireless support to literacy in India is a driving force to make Education for All (EFA) a national reality.

Let me also warmly thank the Minister of Human Resource Development of India, Mr Arjun Singh, for his commitment to making this meeting a success.

I wish to pay special tribute to the First Lady of Sri Lanka who joins us here this morning. As role models and advocates, First Ladies have a unique opportunity to champion the cause of literacy, especially among girls and women.

I would also like to thank the First Lady of the United State and Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade, Mrs Laura Bush, for sending a video message to our opening ceremony. This meeting is a direct follow up to the landmark White House Conference on Global Literacy that Mrs Bush organised last September in New York.

Let me finally welcome the other strategic partners, whose commitment, guidance and wisdom will be contributing to our deliberations: Ministers, sister UN agencies, the World Bank, representatives from international and regional NGOs and other implementing agencies, universities, foundations, donors and literacy experts and practitioners from around the sub-region.

I would also like to thank Verizon for its generous contribution to this Conference.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Achieving universal literacy is a moral and development imperative.

Yet, the international community has given little attention to literacy, tending to focus instead on universal primary education and gender equality—the two EFA goals that also figure as Millennium Development Goals.

Let us therefore recall that literacy is not only a human right, which opens access to other basic human rights. It is also fundamental for achieving Education for All and the Millennium Development Agenda aimed at reducing human poverty. In today's knowledge societies, literacy skills are more vital than ever to individual freedom and empowerment.

The struggle for literacy is, simultaneously, a struggle for sustainable development, justice and equality, and the recognition of the dignity of each and every human being.

And the struggle is far from being won. The literacy challenge remains formidable, both globally, but in particular here in South and West Asia.

The *2008 Education For All Global Monitoring Report* which UNESCO will be launching today in New York, provides critical evidence in this regard.

Halfway to 2015, this Report provides an authoritative assessment of the progress countries have made toward achieving the EFA goals. The title is straight to the point: "Education for All by 2015: will we make it?". The cover of this new edition features two girls at school in India. They do not have desks or chairs, but the vivid concentration on their faces expresses a determination to learn.

India is among the countries that have made remarkable strides since 2000 towards EFA, with a range of targeted initiatives that reach disadvantaged children, youth and adults across the country.

The Report draws attention to this and many other examples of success in other countries.

Yet, it also draws attention to several key areas where greater action is needed. Literacy is singled out as the most neglected EFA goal, and one that is likely to be missed by the majority of countries.

Projections suggest that of the 127 countries for which sufficient data is available, 101 are still far from achieving universal literacy, and 72 will not succeed in halving adult illiteracy levels by 2015.

Globally, more than 774 million adults—two-thirds of whom are women—lack basic literacy skills. This estimate is based on conventional methods of assessing literacy; it is likely that the actual number of illiterates is higher still.

The situation in South and West Asia is particularly critical.

Even though the literacy rate in the sub-region has increased by 25 percent over the past two decades—the most rapid rise in the world—population growth has meant that the absolute number of adults lacking basic literacy skills has declined only slightly.

Today, South and West Asia is home to 388 million adult illiterates—half the world total.

Three highly populated countries—Bangladesh, Pakistan and India—continue to face major challenges, both in terms of the high numbers of illiterates, and the deep disparities that exist between urban and rural areas. This poses a serious obstacle to national efforts to achieve EFA and eradicate poverty.

A serious gender gap also persists. On average, 67 women are literate for every 100 men in South and West Asia. This is lower than in all other regions, with grave consequences for human development. As studies show, female literacy can have an immensely positive impact on all aspects of family well-being.

The situation in Central Asia is different. However, while literacy rates are high, there are still concerns, including an important gender gap. Of the total illiterate population, 72.5 per cent are women. There is also the need to ensure the provision of continued learning opportunities that are adapted to changing social and economic needs.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The expansion of good quality primary education will be vital to raising literacy levels.

Yet, globally, an estimated 72 million children are out of school, and therefore at risk of never acquiring basic literacy skills.

In South and West Asia, it is very encouraging to see that countries have seen a 22 per cent increase in the number of children enrolled in primary school. All countries with data in the region have improved girls' access to primary school, with noteworthy progress in India and Nepal. As a result, there has been a rapid drop in the number of out-of-school children, from 31 million in 1999 to 17 million in 2005. This is a commendable achievement.

However, despite such progress, gender disparity remains a problem. Girls account for 66 per cent of out-of-school children in the sub-region, the highest share worldwide. This threatens to perpetuate inequalities in access to learning opportunities throughout life.

Quality is also a concern. Rates of grade repetition and drop-out are high across South and West Asia, and learning assessments systematically show that too many children leave school without acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Promoting literacy is first and foremost the responsibility of national governments. If the EFA goals are to be met, literacy must be put higher on the policy agenda and receive top-level political commitment.

UNESCO has argued for a three-pronged approach to providing literacy for all.

First, governments must step up their efforts to provide universal access to quality schooling. This includes targeted measures to combat exclusion. Many good policies exist, but they need to be scaled up and adequately resourced.

Second, youth and adult literacy programmes must be massively expanded. These programmes need to be well staffed and funded, and harness all the different forms of media. Again, good practices already exist, which can be replicated elsewhere. But there needs to be better coordination and monitoring. Governments must also adopt a more systematic and sustained approach, and integrate literacy programmes within national education sector plans.

Finally, greater investment needs to be made in developing literate environments, where literacy is used, valued and nourished. The exhibition accompanying this Conference highlights ways of promoting environments conducive to literacy, giving a particular focus to ICTs.

As I have said, the primary responsibility in all these areas lies with national governments. However, increased international support is also vital.

UNESCO's commitment is firm. Through our flagship literacy programme, LIFE, we are focusing on countries that face the greatest literacy challenges. In South and West Asia, we are giving special attention to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and India.

But the international community as a whole must step up its support.

Bilateral and multilateral agencies need to significantly increase aid to basic education. Even if recent pledges are met, external funding will still only reach \$US 6 billion by 2010. This is far short of the \$US 11 billion that the *GMR* estimates is required annually to achieve EFA.

The share of aid allocated to literacy must also be greatly increased. Of the \$US 11 billion, the *GMR* recommends that \$US 1 billion be channelled to literacy. Yet at present, aid for literacy is miniscule.

I therefore call urgently on donors, especially those active and present in the sub-region, to give much higher priority to literacy. The struggle to eradicate illiteracy will only be won through global solidarity.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since literacy is not included in the MDGs, it has tended to be neglected by the development community. This is why today's Conference is so important. Its aim is to give literacy the profile it deserves on the agendas of national governments and international partners. It is also to facilitate the exchange of good practices, and mobilise partnerships and resources for concrete interventions at the country level. Above all, it is

to make a tangible difference to the lives of the millions of children, young people and adults who are still waiting to enjoy the benefits of literacy.

This Conference is not an end in itself, but rather a starting point for concrete action.

I hope that this meeting in New Delhi will create a strong platform for addressing the literacy challenges in the sub-region. The outcomes of your deliberations will feed into the other literacy Conferences being held for other regions. They will also feed into the strategy UNESCO is preparing for the second half of the UN Literacy Decade, as well as into the sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), which UNESCO is organising in 2009. Expectations for this meeting are high; so too are the stakes.

The *EFA Global Monitoring Report* speaks of illiteracy as a “global disgrace”. In this 21st century, we cannot in all conscience keep one in five adults—one in four women—on the margins of society. Concerted action is needed, and now.

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**Address of Mr Arjun Singh, Minister for Human Resource Development,
Government of India**

Your Excellency Smt. Sonia Gandhiji, First Ladies, Education and Finance Ministers of the participating countries, Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, Smt. Mahashweta Devi, Shri M.A.A. Fatmi, Secretary (SE&L) and other eminent persons who are present today.

It is indeed a great honor for my country to co-host this conference of the countries with whom our historical and cultural linkages go back to the dawn of civilization and even before. It is also a privilege to host this conference in collaboration with UNESCO on a theme of such pressing concern. In this age of globalization and information and with winds of change sweeping through continents at a rapid pace, it is important that some countries and segments of population are not left behind. It was said in respect of my country which may be true of many other counties of the world that we missed the industrial revolution on account of which we could not keep pace with the developed world. Now this century offers a golden opportunity to reverse the tide. It is in this context that this Conference acquires significance of no mean order. The challenge of literacy is not just of the means or the wherewithal. It is one of commitment and perseverance. To ensure this literacy has to be brought to the centre stage not just in our respective countries but also amongst the comity of nations. The challenge posed by literacy is varied and complex. Our experience has shown that it cannot be left to one Department or agency to do the needful. The entire community and society has to be mobilized. Our efforts have to transcend national boundaries and encompass the international community as a whole. Just as Water and Climate Change have become global issues, literacy must also receive the same importance and treated on par with them. Literacy has a critical role to play in bringing the marginalized, the unreached and the downtrodden to the mainstream and giving them a fair chance in sharing the fruits of development. It certainly merits the complete attention of each and every one of us, if the world is to progress in harmony and peace. If globalisation is to be just and meaningful and if the fruits of economic development are to percolate to the masses, then the yawning gap between the haves and have notes has to be bridged. And this certainly cannot happen if 774 million persons, world wide, in the 15+ age group do not have access to the world of letters. In other words one in five adults cannot read or write and two thirds of these are women. Needless to add the bulk of these unlettered people are in our region alone. The importance of literacy for the smooth transition to the digital world and in the making of an equitable world order cannot be minimized. This fact has to be driven into the consciousness of every citizen of this planet in the same manner as environment, energy or for that matter nuclear proliferation.

It is in this context of creating a worldwide awareness, I laud the initiative of UNESCO in organizing Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy as a part of a major drive to promote literacy at international and regional levels. The UNESCO has been working tirelessly and to this end the decade 2003-2012 has been declared the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) for making a sustained collective effort to establish literacy on a firm footing. The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) set up by

UNESCO to achieve the EFA goals targeting 35 countries that have a literacy rate less than 50 percent or having more than 10 million illiterates is a commendable effort. The Regional Conferences, which are being organized against the framework UNLD, and LIFE are no doubt well conceived to draw global attention. The momentum generated by the White House Conference on Global Literacy held in September 2006, which was graced by Mrs. Laura Bush, the First Lady of the United States, has been followed by Regional Conferences in Qatar, Beijing and Mali. The Conference being held in New Delhi, which is the fourth in the series will be followed by one more in Costa Rica before the final meeting in Azerbaijan scheduled for next year. All these efforts no doubt will go a long way in garnering support for literacy amongst the international organisations, think tanks and donor agencies. The presence of the First Ladies of the participating countries in these Conferences not only adds luster to the conference but also helps in focusing attention on a much neglected cause. We are indeed charmed and honored by your presence and I am sure the deliberations would be greatly enriched under your gentle and watchful guidance.

We are also honored by the presence of Smt. Sonia Gandhi, who has kindly consented to be our Chief Guest. Madam, if you may recall, it was under the leadership of your husband, Shri Rajiv Gandhi that the National Literacy Mission in our country took shape. For that matter, he was the moving spirit behind the telecommunication and digital revolution in our country. The National Policy on Education, 1986 was adopted when he was the Prime Minister. One of the most important postulates made in this document is about equalization of educational opportunities particularly for the deprived sections of the society. This has been the guiding principle in our educational efforts since then. As a matter of fact, I may mention that our goals for the new Five Year Plan which commences this year is to ensure that every child at the primary level is enrolled and retained in school. With the combined efforts of the National Literacy Mission, we hope to achieve 85 percent literacy by the end of this Plan period. We expect that there would be a significant jump in the quantum of resources to be provided for education, particularly elementary education and literacy.

The National Literacy Mission in our country will be completing two decades next year. Over the years, adult education in India has steadily has changed contours. Under the NLM, it began with concentrating just on imparting fragile basic literacy and it is now ambitiously exploring new grounds to bring in its fold skill development and life long education opportunities. At present, there are an estimated 124 million neo-literates whose learning requirements are posing a challenge of immense proportions. This heterogeneous group has variegated learning needs, which have to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. The challenge is more on opening multifaceted avenues of learning customized and moulded to the unique requirement of each individual. The primary concern of these neo-literates who are mostly from the disadvantaged sections of the society is that literacy should help them in coping with their livelihood issues and other issues of daily concern. Equivalence programmes which have inbuilt components of vocational training or skill development is one way of meeting their concerns. Quality of life improvement programmes and use of ICT in the literacy programmes would constitute an important value addition. Individual Interest Promotion Programmes, which

can include music, painting and other arts, can add a totally new dimension to the literacy programmes by satiating the creative urges of the talented. Convergence with development programmes through the conduit of literacy centres is likely to be viewed as an interesting opportunity by the learners to have best of both the worlds. These are some of the new initiatives, which we are contemplating. I am sure many more ideas will be thrown up during the next two days. I understand that one of the important objectives of the Conference is to show case the best practices of each country, which could be very useful. I am sure that the Roundtable and Panel discussions with eminent educationists and other experts will be very stimulating and invigorating.

I would once again like to thank the First Ladies, the Ministers and other important dignitaries for making it convenient to come to our country. My special regards and thanks to Mrs. Sonia Gandhi whose presence here is a source of great inspiration for all of us.

Jai Hind

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**Address by Ms Shantha Sinha, Chairperson, National Commission for the
Protection of Child Rights, Government of India**

Ms. Sonia Gandhi, Shri Arjun Singh ji, First Lady Ms Shiranthi Rajapakse, Mr Koichiro Matsuura, Mr Rath and distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honor to take part in the UNESCO Regional Conference “Addressing the Literacy Challenge in South, South-West and Central Asia: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches”.

All of us gathered today know that what we are, what we think and do, how we dream, and grapple with our lives on a day to day basis, and philosophize and draw meaning to our existence is inextricably shaped by literacy and education. Our modern world about which there is a lot to be awfully proud of, mainly in the realm of ideas and celebration of the invincibility of human rights is so much to do with literacy. The crystallization of the finest of human values and sentiments and shared wisdom and multiplicity of perspectives about our very beings has so much to do with communicating through literacy. Simply because we are literate, we are together today in this conference, transcending boundaries of language, culture, nation to meet, empathize with and act in solidarity for all those who have been left behind.

We know that the lives of these illiterate persons who have been left behind are that of fear and anxiety, a loss of self-esteem, and vulnerability. Since two thirds of all illiterate persons are women this gets compounded further resulting in their incapacity to access all their entitlements as a matter of right. The biggest divide between those who have and the have-nots is that of literacy in the world today. Notably, once a person becomes literate the likelihood of a literate progeny is significant and degree of exposure and confidence associated with the empowerment process is greater. In this sense, appropriate structural intervention and State and societal support which focuses on addressing the first time learner creates multi-generational impact. It is so practical and doable if the process of inclusion is based on the wholehearted support of all concerned especially those in the echelons of power and establishment. And its impact is profound – the notions of solidarity, inclusion, empowerment all extend not only from the attainment of education but also the process which enables its attainment.

India has been witness to some of the large-scale movements for literacy involving millions of volunteers – the kala jatha cultural campaigns being important testaments to their role in fostering social mobilization of peace, solidarity and active citizenship. Volunteers are at the core of such endeavors to reach out to the illiterate, which recognise the potential of literacy for individuals as well as for societal transformation. Within their enthusiastic struggle to empower their learners are also the heart rendering stories about the emergence of the poorest, and women as campaigners in the movement for literacy.

For all these ‘campaigners’ it is a process of becoming active citizens who exercise choices, seize opportunities, discover their potential, take part in public action and

demand equity and social justice. The poetry, literature, music and songs which emerge in abundance when the new learner is welcomed to the portals of the literate world – not only open a world of ideas and give voice to their living history and emerging citizenship but also lead them beyond local and national boundaries. The small black and white story books of the NGO Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samithi for example, which have translated some of the greatest literature from around the world are more than just literacy aids - they are the portal to pluralistic ideas and values and world citizenship. The act of giving the gift of literacy by the ordinary local volunteer in such a charged atmosphere and the relationship with the neo-literate whose thirst for knowing is boundless, is one of aesthetics and beauty. It is also the moment of unfolding of a new layer in society for enabling and ensuring freedom and dignity.

In places where there has been a near collapse of the fabric of society where citizens live in fear and mutual suspicion, new spaces have been created through the movements for education. Respect for one another, dialogue and discussion among ones own has started. The process of peace and reconciliation has generated new possibilities among citizens for constructive action. Undoubtedly this march towards imagining humanity and a world citizenry founded on plural values would be further enriched with inclusion of each of us in a literate society.

The challenge in taking such movements forward has always been in institutionalizing the ground swell of local action. The message sent by the State and the earnestness with which it gives a call to action for such fundamental and transformative empowerment is of the utmost importance. When utmost faith in its people and their capacities is evidenced by the State's commitment, local actions emerge, which go beyond the expectations of the government. In fact it has been seen time and again how a community can take ownership of the idea, spread its wings and offer all that it has to make education happen including breaking down many exclusionary barriers, as if it was waiting for this call from its government leaders.

The mantra is to trust the local. It is so easy. This process of building thought and action of the local has profound impact on the lives of all of us. The issues of social justice and equity, access to services and State obligation, citizenship and participation, democracy no longer remain abstract notions, but become to the focal points of concern within the context of the concrete realities and predicament of the poor. The seeds of deepening democracy are sown in this process of articulation, debate and discussion and resolution of differences in perspectives, enabled by simple literature and study material. There is something very organic about capturing the imagination of everyone in the process of making a literate society. A non-violent, silent social transformation for citizenship and rights is launched in this process.

Since several of these ideas challenge normative ways of thinking and doing things, they do question the existing social and cultural hierarchies and power structures. And it seems that at this point taking sides becomes inevitable. However, the strengthening of the community forums which emerge, serve to strengthen collective democratic processes

through local consensus building in favor of the democratization of existing structures and practices. Universalisation means empowerment at the local level.

In this way the struggle for the right to education can be seen as part of the struggle for citizenship. Full citizenship depends on recognising not only the rights embedded within it but the catalysing role of education in accessing a number of other fundamental rights through it. Our 86th constitutional amendment five years forcefully legitimised the central role of this right as our nation's most urgent imperative today. I am greatly heartened by the shared vision for transformation and the highest level of importance and urgency accorded to literacy and education by the world leaders and policy makers gathered here today -I urge you all to continue to support your passionate and visionary educationists in their endeavours. I am sure that I stand together with all who are gathered here today in also asking for the continued support by governments and multilateral agencies such as UNESCO of this fundamental platform for active citizenship and access to rights. It is a platform, which Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi saw as the key to reduced violence in society as well as one, which would cultivate secularism, socialism, democracy, and moral values. Through the National Literacy Mission, Prime Minister Gandhi brought education to the centre stage of India's democracy – we must ensure that, this is where it remains.

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**Address by Mrs Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance,
India**

Mr Koichiro Matsuura,
Mrs Rajapakse,
Mr Arjun Singh,
Mrs Purandeshwari,
Mr Fatmi,
Mrs Shanta Sinha,
Excellencies,
Distinguished guests,
Friends.

I

It is indeed an honour for India to host this “UNESCO Regional Conference in support of Global Literacy”. I too extend a very warm welcome to you all.

Our meeting today comes at an opportune time. The global community is engaged in making a mid-term assessment of the charter adopted at the World Conference in 1990 to ensure Education For All by 2015. To support this endeavour, a decade later, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously agreed to establish the UN Literacy Decade, 2003 – 2012, to focus on the poorest and most vulnerable sections of societies, including women.

These are ambitious goals - we still have a long way to go before we fulfill them. But they are goals that must remain inviolate, goals that must be achieved, within the time frame set for ourselves. We recognize that it is unacceptable to have illiteracy on the scale we still have today.

II

Literacy is a basic human right, a fundamental entitlement.

Literacy is a pre-requisite for social transformation. It enables people to be aware of and assert their rights.

It is a force against superstition and bigotry. It is a great liberator.

Literacy is basic to gender equality. It bridges the gender divide.

Literacy is a necessary tool for economic empowerment. It is a critical contributor to rapid economic growth, to equitable, inclusive economic and social development. It is the very cornerstone of national progress, and must always remain so.

This gathering represents a rich confluence of cultures, ethnicities and religious beliefs. It also represents a rich canvas of experience. Amongst us are the representatives of many countries - which may be small in size, but that have literacy rates of 90 percent or more. Together with India, we also have representatives of countries which contribute heavily to the world pool of illiterates. In our midst there are a few countries where heroic efforts are being made, to spread education and literacy, in the most difficult of circumstances. We have much to learn from each other. We must also be open to best practices from other parts of the developing world.

III

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Adult literacy programmes have always been part of our planning in India. But it was in 1986 that Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi gave a whole new impetus to it when he launched the National Literacy Mission. He believed that India should take advantage of all that modern science and technology has to offer, so as to accelerate the achievement of universal literacy.

The Mission galvanized the country. For the first time, literacy became a mass movement and a very large number of civil society organizations became partners of government. As many as 12 million volunteers reached 150 million new learners, a stupendous feat by any reckoning.

The results were impressive. Between 1981 and 1991, India's literacy rate had climbed from around 44 percent to about 52 percent. And as the National Literacy Mission gathered momentum between 1991 and 2001 when we had the last Census, the literacy rate increased from 52 percent to 65 percent.

Of course, we still have regional variations.

In a few states, literacy levels are on par with those prevailing in developed countries. But in a number of others, female literacy particularly, is still very low.

The National Literacy Mission is now being given a new direction. The objectives are to bring a sharper emphasis on female literacy in poorer areas and amongst disadvantaged communities, to effect convergence of existing schemes and programmes, to link literacy to improved livelihood and career opportunities, particularly in the knowledge economy. The Mission will be implemented by institutions of local self governments, to ensure greater accountability and responsiveness.

IV

Your discussions are going to be largely on adult literacy.

Its obvious cause is lack of education in the early years.

There is no greater gift bestowed on us than our children, and no greater responsibility placed on us than to ensure their education right from the very beginning.

That is why India has embarked on a very ambitious programme to universalize elementary education by 2010.

Our challenge is not just to ensure full enrollment.

It is also to ensure that drop-out rates, which are very high, are reduced significantly.

It is also to ensure that quality education is imparted.

A cooked 'mid-day meal' programme is an integral part of this strategy. Today, some 120 million children are being fed daily in schools. This has helped in retaining them in the primary education system. The numbers, as you can see, are truly staggering.

We have increased public investment in elementary education manifold. But money alone cannot guarantee the outcomes we seek. As in the case of adult literacy, people's participation, involvement of local self-government institutions, of self-help groups and of social action networks are critical to success.

V

The road ahead is not without difficulties.

The three countries of South Asia, particularly, - India, Pakistan and Bangladesh- have to redouble their efforts to eradicate illiteracy. With technology improving and diffusing at an increasingly faster pace and becoming so pervasive in our lives, the inability to read and write causes greater exclusion, from the benefits of economic growth and the information revolution. The Digital Divide cannot be allowed to stratify our societies any further than they already are, by sharp differences in literacy levels. Indeed, the new information technologies, creatively used and purposefully deployed, can themselves help vastly to extend the reach of literacy campaigns as well as to improve the quality of instruction in schools.

The heavy incidence of unemployment, has given new urgency, to forging a closer link between education and job opportunities. As we look to the future, vocational education must get increased importance. Jobs matter, and matter crucially. Education must therefore equip people with the ability to acquire new skills from time to time.

We have pledged ourselves to the Millennium Development Goals.

Those goals have to be achieved. There is simply no alternative for our nations if we are to compete and prosper in an age of globalization. Universal literacy is the bedrock of a knowledge society.

We are at a moment of convergence between technological development and educational need, as well as between educational need and political will. Let us grasp this moment.

Through the instrument of literacy and education for all, let us work together to ensure that our societies remain enriched by the best traditions of their own heritage and yet open to the light of science and progressive thought; that our societies are freed from poverty, from prejudice; from oppression, discrimination, inequality and violence.

I wish your deliberations all success and a pleasant stay here.

Thank you.

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