



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,  
Director-General of UNESCO  
on the occasion  
of International Literacy Day**

**8 September 2009**

This year, International Literacy Day puts the spotlight on the empowering role of literacy and its importance for participation, citizenship and development. 'Literacy and Empowerment' is also the theme for the 2009-2010 biennium of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012).

While the empowering role of literacy and its significance for development have been recognized worldwide, there are still 776 million illiterate adults in the world and 75 million children out of school whose rights and needs remain unfulfilled. Literacy, in fact, is by far the most neglected goal on the Education for All (EFA) agenda.

Who are the 776 million illiterate adults? In most countries, these are the most disadvantaged and marginalized populations, with a high percentage of women and girls, indigenous people, linguistic and cultural minorities, nomads, rural dwellers, and the disabled. There is a high correlation between poverty and illiteracy. In this perspective, empowerment is the key. For all those women and men who live without access to basic reading and writing skills, literacy opens up new horizons of opportunity, improves standards of life and contributes to processes of social change and poverty eradication.

However, despite clear evidence of the power of literacy to transform individual lives and patterns of social development, in many parts of the world there is neither the political will nor the resources to make youth and adult literacy an area of priority action. In consequence, those whose lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills is not being addressed - almost one in six adults - are being told that their

rights, their needs and their hopes do not count. This is an unconscionable situation whose blatant injustice must not be allowed to continue.

Fortunately, there are many governments, civil society organizations, enterprises, community groups and individuals who understand the benefits of literacy and are conscientious in their support of literacy programmes. Many persons work anonymously, quietly and steadily to help others to acquire literacy and numeracy skills and the chance to embark on the adventure of learning. International Literacy Day is an occasion to salute and applaud their efforts and to encourage them to sustain their commitment. By tutoring and mentoring others, literacy workers – whether professional or voluntary – are important catalysts of change who are making a real difference to the lives of others.

Literacy produces these human benefits with and through the learners themselves. As many studies have found, literacy is an empowering force that serves to increase self-esteem, confidence and assertiveness and helps to build a sense of personal competence and independence together with better awareness of one's rights. Literacy gives enhanced autonomy to individuals in both the family and community context.

These human benefits of literacy give rise to consequences of significance for society as a whole. Thus, the self-esteem generated by literacy skills facilitates social and political participation and is, in fact, associated with greater interest in national and community activities, influencing attitudes and practices in the political sphere. In many and varied contexts, literacy has demonstrated its extraordinary power to equip individuals to participate more actively and more effectively.

In this era of widening disparities, literacy brings not only greater self-esteem but also opportunities to those who have been disenfranchised, marginalized and neglected: neo-literates acquire greater capacity and skills to raise their income levels, build sustainable livelihoods, gain access to health and educational services, and engage in the public arena. Indeed, literacy is vital for securing access to political, economic and cultural opportunities, and this is particularly the case for women thanks to the enabling and transformative impact of literacy on their lives.

Each year, International Literacy Day is an occasion for worldwide mobilization for literacy. Today, I call upon governments, intergovernmental organizations, development partners, employers, trade unions and civil society organizations everywhere to stop the neglect of youth and adult literacy and to strengthen their commitment to literacy. Literacy is not just about reading and writing, it is about self-respect and human dignity and about opportunities that give hope to individuals, families, communities and entire societies. Literacy, an integral part of the right to education, has shown itself time and time again to be a vital tool of empowerment. It is time for the right to education of all persons, of whatever age, to be realized in practice.

Koïchiro Matsuura