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la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by Nicholas Burnet,
Assistant Director-General for Education,
on the occasion of the “*International Literacy Day*”

New Delhi, India
8 September 2009

**Speech by Nicholas Burnett, International Literacy Day,
New Delhi, India, 8 September 2009**

Dr Manmohan Singh, Honourable Prime Minister of India
Mrs Meira Kumar, Honourable Speaker of the Lok Sabha
Mr Kapil Sibal, Honourable Minister for Human Resource Development
Mrs Purandeswari, Honourable Minister of State for Human Resource Development
Mrs Anshu Vaish, Secretary School Education and Literacy
Mr Jagmohan Singh Raju, Joint Secretary and Director General of the National Literacy Mission

It is a true honour for UNESCO to be here in New Delhi today on International Literacy Day to applaud and support the Government of India's new National Mission for Female Literacy. This Mission is an expression of your country's firm conviction that no social progress can happen without educating women.

It is fitting that one of the laureates of this year's literacy prizes awarded today at UNESCO in Paris is the Indian NGO Nirantar. Its 'news waves' program has trained low caste women in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh to become reporters and produce a fortnightly newspaper that is now distributed to some 25,000 neo-literate readers in more than 400 villages. This program reflects the empowering role of literacy, the theme of this year's Literacy Day.

Literacy transforms lives. When women are literate, they possess the knowledge and skills to improve their livelihoods and the health and well-being of their children. They have the confidence to seek out information, to become more politically engaged and to have a wider impact on their communities. A literate mother is more likely to send her daughters to school and to take an interest in their learning progress.

UNESCO and India share a deep commitment to literacy. Since its founding UNESCO has played a lead role in defining literacy, affirming its vital importance for development and supporting country initiatives to expand adult learning. There has been remarkable progress over the past sixty years. The expansion of formal schooling has driven the spread of literacy but so have mass literacy campaigns and national programs to promote adult learning in all regions of the world.

The scale of literacy efforts in India is impressive by every standard. In the early 1950s, only around 16 percent of the population was literate, a figure that is now close to 64 percent. This has happened through steady political commitment to primary education, legislation, investment and specific attention to adult literacy. The setting up of the National Literacy mission in 1988 marked a turning point, leading to the launch of the Total Literacy campaigns in 1990. These campaigns have spurred massive mobilization, awareness and innovations. They have yielded commendable results. The literacy rate increased by over 12 percentage points in ten years and at a faster pace for women than

men. Evaluations have documented the impact of the campaigns on better health awareness, greater empowerment and more political participation.

Your country has had the courage to take a critical look at what has worked and what could be done better. This has led to a reinforced focus on women and programs with stronger links to development strategies. There is clearly no better foundation for effective policy than sound evidence. There is no better way forward than learning from past experience. India's experience is a source of inspiration and knowledge for the many countries facing similar challenges.

In our global evaluations of Education for All, one major challenge comes forth that is common to nearly all countries. This is the need to more boldly address disparities – whether in terms of poverty, gender, language, ethnic belonging, disability or other. These disparities are visible in terms of access to education and learning outcomes. They are flagrant when it comes to literacy. We know that strong correlations exist between illiteracy and poverty, that literacy rates tend to be lower in rural areas and among minorities and indigenous populations. Above all we know that women continue to constitute a majority of the world's illiterates. It is towards them that literacy efforts must be addressed. Your policy is explicitly aimed at bridging these disparities by targeting women and making education a catalyst of the country's economic and social development.

The task of course is tremendous but as I said earlier, we are in a country accustomed to thinking on a scale that may seem daunting to an outsider, whether we are speaking about geographic territory, linguistic and cultural diversity or population groups. But your reenergized literacy mission has a strategic focus and strong foundations. It is a focus that connects with the three priorities which are spelt out in the Strategic Framework for Action for the second half of the United Nations Literacy Decade and beyond. This important document was developed through a broad consultation process. Let me briefly outline these.

Our first priority is to build stronger commitment to literacy through bolder advocacy about the right to education and the many benefits of literacy. Such commitment also calls for clearly formulated literacy policies, stronger partnerships and improved assessment, monitoring and evaluation.

The second priority is to improve program delivery. Effective projects and policies need to be scaled up and better integrated with the broader national development strategies. We need to ensure that programs are responsive to diverse contexts, needs and language, that literacy educators are adequately trained and that literate environments are promoted through access to relevant reading materials.

The third priority is to mobilize additional resources. Literacy is massively underfunded. Programs cannot rely solely on volunteers. Budgetary allocations to literacy must increase if we are to see progress. We must identify strategies for more effective resource

mobilization, including from civil society and the private sector, because building a more literate society is in everyone's interest.

We have to be more strategic because the challenges remain immense. Today some 776 million adults – most of them women – do not have the basic literacy skills enabling them to break a cycle of deprivation. The lack of such skills is all the more synonymous with marginalization in today's knowledge societies.

In the context of the global economic crisis the foremost responsibility of governments and the international community is to protect the most vulnerable groups and ensure that they are not denied access to education and social services, whatever their age. It is also to invest in quality education as a response to the crisis. Ensuring equal learning opportunities for all children, youth and adults is the path towards more inclusive growth and more just and peaceful societies.

Let me end by expressing UNESCO's full support for this national literacy mission. We stand by you to contribute expertise, to learn from you and to encourage the sharing of your experience across regions. So may this day be dedicated to celebrate the education of all the world's girls and women – one of the most sensible and lasting contributions that is in our power to make happen.