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Organización
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**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of International Literacy Day**

UNESCO, 8 September 2009

Mrs Bush, Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade,
Mr President of the General Conference,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,
Professor Bown,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you here today on International Literacy Day. Promoting global literacy is a top priority for UNESCO and the celebration of this International Day is always a special occasion for the Organization.

I am particularly honoured to welcome Mrs Laura Bush, Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade. Mrs Bush's dedication to the promotion of reading and her commitment to universal literacy have been a constant throughout her life. In her role as Honorary Ambassador, she has given a major boost to the Decade and thereby to literacy worldwide. I would like to thank her for being here today, and for her continuous support to UNESCO.

Let me also express my thanks to President Anastassopoulos, representing the General Conference, and Chairman Yai, representing the Executive Board, for being with us this morning.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

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 UN Literacy Decade.

Literacy is an integral part of the right to education. It is also the prerequisite for personal freedom and independence, providing individuals with the confidence, knowledge and skills to make informed choices and better their lives.

These individual benefits of literacy bring positive consequences for society as a whole. Literacy can open the door to better job opportunities, greater access to health and educational services, and fuller social and political participation. This is particularly the case for women, for whom literacy can be a vital tool for overcoming obstacles to equality and empowerment.

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.

However, despite the proven power of literacy, millions are still deprived of its benefits.

We have often repeated the statistics, but allow me to state them again.

Over 776 million adults in the world – around one in six – cannot read or write. Of these, two-thirds are women. UNESCO estimates that, at the current rate of progress, there will still be over 700 million illiterate adults in 2015.

In addition, at least 75 million children do not attend primary school and have little chance to acquire basic literacy skills.

It is clear that without concerted new efforts, the international community will not meet its promise of increasing adult literacy levels by 50 percent by 2015. Literacy remains by far the most neglected goal on the Education for All (EFA) agenda.

Given the importance of adult literacy to education, health, nutrition, income and employment, this lack of progress puts the whole development agenda at risk.

This is why International Literacy Day is so important. It is an opportunity to focus attention on the world's literacy needs. It is an occasion to mobilize governments and international partners to do more to address this challenge. It is also a time to celebrate those initiatives and policies that are already making a difference, especially to the lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

We can affirm that, while illiteracy levels remain unacceptably high, there are positive signs.

The UN Literacy Decade has certainly boosted the profile of literacy on the global development agenda. I wish to pay special tribute to the tremendous contribution Mrs Bush has made in her role as Honorary Ambassador for the Decade.

The symposium she organized in 2006 marked a major breakthrough in the international community's engagement with literacy issues.

Over the following eighteen months, UNESCO convened a series of six regional conferences to further mobilize awareness and support for literacy – and I would once again like to express my sincere thanks to each of the host countries: Qatar, Mali, China, India, Azerbaijan and Mexico.

At the wrap-up meeting organized by Mrs Bush last September, we heard many examples of how these conferences have given increased impetus and visibility to literacy efforts across the world.

UNESCO will continue to drive this momentum forward. In particular, we must make the case for literacy outside education circles, showing the positive impact it has on all aspects of human development.

The establishment of the UN Literacy Decade Fund, backed by a 2.55 million dollar contribution by the United States, will provide valuable support to this effort, including by facilitating the collection, analysis and dissemination of effective literacy practices.

The annual award of the UNESCO Literacy Prizes also plays an important role, by showcasing literacy programmes that are making a real difference to people's lives.

Here, I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate the winners of this year's prizes. Coming from Burkina Faso, India, Afghanistan, the Philippines and Bhutan, these prize-winning projects stand out for their innovation, excellence and relevance to learner needs.

[You ask the representatives of the prize winning projects to stand-up and the audience to applaud].

I would also like to express my gratitude to the two sponsors of the UNESCO Literacy Prizes: the Government of the Republic of Korea for the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize – which this year celebrates its 20th anniversary – and the Government of the People's Republic of China for the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy. Your support is instrumental in enabling UNESCO to promote successful practices that can be disseminated and replicated worldwide.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Progress has been made, but it is too slow and major challenges remain. If we are to meet our commitments on literacy, we must step up our action, building on the experience we have gained over the past years.

UNESCO and its partners have developed an international strategic framework to guide efforts during the second half of the UN Literacy Decade.

To support the implementation of this strategic framework, I am proposing to reinforce UNESCO's programmatic and budgetary commitment to literacy in the next biennium, making literacy a central pillar of our action to achieve EFA.

The strategic framework highlights three main priorities for the years ahead.

The first is building stronger commitment to literacy through bolder advocacy, clearly formulated policies, stronger partnerships and improved assessment, monitoring and evaluation.

I wish to underscore the particular importance of better assessment and monitoring, which is vital to focusing attention, policies and resources on where they are most needed.

UNESCO has developed the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) to help countries build a clearer picture of needs. With support from the UN Literacy Decade Fund, this initiative will shortly be expanded to cover more Member States.

The second priority is improved programme delivery. Many effective projects and policies exist, but they need to be scaled up and integrated within broader development strategies.

Through our flagship Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), UNESCO is working with 35 countries most in need to put in place comprehensive national literacy strategies that are sustainable and adequately resourced. This initiative has already resulted in the creation of dedicated ministerial structures and increased budgetary support in several countries.

Let me also signal the forthcoming International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA), to be held in Belem, Brazil, in early December. The conference will be an excellent opportunity to exchange good policies in adult learning and literacy, and to advocate for national strategies that expand educational opportunities throughout life and connect them more closely with the world of work.

The third priority is mobilizing additional resources. Funding for literacy remains deeply inadequate, both in terms of government budgets and international aid. It has to increase if we are to see progress. We must identify strategies for more effective resource mobilization. This includes targeting non-traditional sources of funding within civil society and the private sector.

The current economic crisis cannot be allowed to deflect these efforts. Rather, now is the time to call for greater investment in basic education and literacy as drivers of growth, development and empowerment.

International Literacy Day is a platform for calling for action on all these fronts. And act we must. It is simply unconscionable that one-sixth of the world's adult

population cannot read or write. In today's knowledge-based societies, this represents a gross denial of freedom and opportunity.

Let this Day therefore be an occasion to reaffirm our commitment to overcoming this injustice and making literacy a reality for all.

Thank you very much.

It is now my great pleasure to give the floor to Mrs Bush.