



United Nations  
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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

## Message from

**Ms Irina Bokova,  
Director-General of UNESCO,**

### **on the occasion of International Literacy Day**

*Literacies for the 21st century*

**8 September 2013**

Literacy is a basic right and an essential motor for human development. It paves the way to autonomy, the acquisition of skills, cultural expression and full participation in society.

Illiteracy in the world has fallen over the two decades, thanks to international efforts and work towards the Millennium Development Goals. Today, 84% of the world's population can read and write, compared to 76% in 1990. In 20 years, the illiterate population has been reduced by more than 100 million people.

This is still not enough. Behind these figures there are still serious inequalities. Two thirds of the 774 million illiterate adults in the world are women. Most of the children and young people who do not go to school are girls. Fifty-seven million primary school-age children and 69 million secondary school-age children do not have the opportunity to attend. Children lucky enough to go to school do not always leave being able to read and write. Even in economically developed countries, the proportion of the population lacking basic reading and writing skills is too high. This is a serious obstacle to individual fulfillment, to the development of societies and to mutual understanding between peoples.

This situation is exacerbated by the rise of new technologies and modern knowledge societies that make the ability to read and write all the more essential. Literacy is the first condition for dialogue, communication and integration into new connected societies. Young people need new skills to enter and succeed in the job market: knowledge of several languages, understanding of cultural diversity, lifelong learning. Literacy is the key for acquiring knowledge, interpersonal skills, expertise and the ability to live together in community – all skills that are the foundations of

modern society. In the twenty-first century, more than ever before, literacy is the cornerstone of peace and development.

Literacy is much more than an educational priority – it is the ultimate investment in the future and the first step towards all the new forms of literacy required in the twenty-first century. We wish to see a century where every child is able to read and to use this skill to gain autonomy. On this International Literacy Day, we call on governments to work together to achieve this dream. This requires new funding, policies drawn up with the populations concerned, new and more innovative forms of action, taking full advantage of new technologies. The progress made in recent years shows that this is possible, and UNESCO is committed to doing all that it can to make it happen.

Irina Bokova