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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
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Message by

Irina Bokova,

Director-General of UNESCO,

on the occasion of International Literacy Day

8 September 2014

International Literacy Day, devoted this year to the connection between literacy and sustainable development, provides us with an opportunity to remember a simple truth: literacy not only changes lives, it saves them.

Literacy helps reduce poverty and enables people to find jobs and obtain higher salaries. It is one of the most efficient ways of improving the health of mothers and children, understanding doctors' prescriptions and gaining access to healthcare. The lives of more than two million children under the age of five were saved between 1990 and 2009 thanks to improvements in the education of women of reproductive age. Literacy facilitates access to knowledge and triggers a process of empowerment and self-esteem that benefits everyone. This energy, multiplied by millions of people, is essential to the future of societies.

Today, 781 million adults worldwide cannot read, write or count. Two thirds of them are women. More than 250 million children are unable to read a single sentence, even though half of them have spent four years in school. What kind of societies do we expect to build with an illiterate youth? This is not the kind of world we wish to live in. We want a world where everyone can participate in the destiny of their societies, gain access to knowledge and enrich it in turn. To succeed, we must also change the traditional approach of literacy programmes to encompass, beyond reading and writing in the narrower sense, broader skills with regard to consumption and sustainable lifestyles, the conservation of biodiversity, poverty reduction, disaster risk reduction as well as civic participation. In these ways, literacy programmes can unlock their full transformative potential.

Commitment to these goals will be central to the forthcoming Aichi-Nagoya conference on education for sustainable development to be held in Japan this November. It will also be at the heart of the World Education Forum to be held next year in Incheon, Republic of Korea, to lead the global debate towards the adoption of new sustainable development goals at the United Nations General Assembly in 2015. UNESCO is working across the world – in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal and elsewhere – to ensure that literacy is integrated into national development strategies. The Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education and the Malala Fund for Girls' Right to Education, launched by UNESCO, also focus on literacy. The programmes acknowledged by the UNESCO-Confucius Prize for Literacy and the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize enable us each year to celebrate innovative practices that show that achievement is within our reach. New technologies, including mobile telephones, also offer fresh opportunities for literacy for all. We must invest more, and I appeal to every Member State and all our partners to redouble efforts – political and financial – to ensure that literacy is fully recognized as one of the most powerful accelerators of sustainable development. The future we want starts with the alphabet.

Irina Bokova