

**Message from Ms Audrey Azoulay,
Director-General of UNESCO,
on the occasion of International Literacy Day**

8 September 2022

International Literacy Day is an opportunity to assess progress and spur momentum towards celebrating literacy as an essential human right that plays a fundamental role within our societies.

Indeed, to quote the Brazilian intellectual and educator Paulo Freire, who dedicated much of his life to adult education, literacy should be “the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world”.

Together we have achieved much in this field. In 1979, only 68% of the world’s population knew how to read and write. In 2020, this figure had risen to 86.7%. Despite this progress, 771 million youth and adults around the world still do not possess basic literacy skills – 60% of whom are girls and women.

COVID-19 is exacerbating this issue. School closures and disruptions caused by the pandemic have likely driven learning losses and drop-outs. This is especially true for vulnerable populations. In response to this urgent situation, UNESCO and its Member States are redoubling their efforts to ensure that progress made in recent decades is not reversed, but reinforced.

For example, on the crucial topic of adult education, UNESCO Member States have renewed their commitment to literacy this year through the adoption of the Marrakech Framework for Action, which recognizes adult learning and education as a core driver for all the SDG goals.

Moreover, in June, UNESCO hosted a Pre-Summit to pave the way for the Transforming Education Summit convened by the United Nations Secretary-General this September in New York. The Pre-Summit brought together more than 150 Education Ministers to reaffirm that tomorrow’s education must be inclusive and focused on the most vulnerable – giving them not only basic skills but also keys to navigate the contemporary world. The Summit reaffirmed the importance of a new form of literacy, digital literacy, as an essential tool for lifelong learning.

To achieve these objectives, UNESCO Member States emphasized the need for more investment in education and increased international aid, along with more open, free and high-quality educational resources.

Through the celebration of International Literacy Day, UNESCO calls on all actors in the field of education and beyond to re-think the role of literacy.