

The Plurality of Literacy **and** its Implications for Policies and Programmes

Position Paper

UNESCO Education Sector



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and its Implications for
Policies and **P**rogrammes*



UNESCO Education Sector Position Paper

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Introduction

Literacy lies at the heart of UNESCO's concerns and makes up an essential part of its mandate, being entwined with the right to education set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. These concerns have to do with promoting the meaningful acquisition and application of literacy in laying the basis for positive social transformation, justice, and personal and collective freedom.

Despite tremendous progress made over the past 55 years, universal literacy remains a major challenge for both developing and developed countries in terms of commitment and action. There are over 800 million illiterate adults in today's world – a figure projected to remain unchanged in 2015 if current trends continue unabated. The present deliberation on literacy as a plural notion and its implications for policy and programme development represents a contribution towards helping solve this stubborn problem.

The education for all movement put literacy high on the agenda among the six Dakar goals by defining it as an essential component of basic quality education. As occurred after the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand, 1990), however, the problem of literacy is once again threatened with being put aside, as limited resources available for education largely go into the expansion of the formal primary education system. While it is clear that meeting the goal of literacy for all requires greater political commitment and far more action supported by adequate human and financial resources, what is needed most of all are new approaches to literacy work at the local, national and international levels. Towards meeting this challenge, UNESCO's principal role consists in drawing on its longstanding knowledge base and co-operating

with its network of partners. In particular, the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) represents a new opportunity to give special emphasis to the goal of universal literacy under the motto “Literacy as Freedom”.

This motto reflects the fact that over the past few decades, the conception of literacy has moved beyond its simple notion as the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating – the so-called “three Rs” – to a plural notion encompassing the manifold meanings and dimensions of these undeniably vital competencies. Such a view, attending recent economic, political and social transformations, including globalization, and the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs), recognizes that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures. That is the view endorsed by the United Nations Literacy Decade and proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly as part of the global effort towards Education for All. Nonetheless, much remains to be done to incorporate this new thinking in literacy policies and programmes. While reference to the plural notion of literacy abounds in theoretical and academic studies and a number of international declarations support it, actual literacy work has failed to keep pace.

The United Nations Literacy Decade aims to achieve four outcomes by 2012. These include:

- ✦ making significant progress towards Dakar Goal 3: meeting the learning needs of youth and adults, Goal 4: improving literacy levels by 50%, and Goal 5: achieving gender equality;
- ✦ enabling all learners to attain a mastery level in literacy and life-skills;
- ✦ creating sustainable and expandable literate environments; and
- ✦ improving the quality of life.

In order to achieve these goals, the United Nations Literacy Decade encourages all stakeholders in literacy – communities, non governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, national governments and the international community itself – to take adequate account of its many meanings and dimensions by addressing the full range of contexts, languages, purposes, and means of acquisition and application employed by learners.

This position paper issued at the outset of the United Nations Literacy Decade, aims to serve all stakeholders in enhancing their actual literacy work. It intends both to

clarify the plural notion of literacy and to suggest concrete actions through which policy-makers and programme providers might more effectively address the needs of learners. Although the term “literacy” is often used metaphorically to designate basic competencies in domains other than those immediately concerned with written texts, such skills as “computer literacy”, “media literacy”, “health literacy”, “eco-literacy”, “emotional literacy” and the like do not form part of the plural notion of literacy at issue here.

Part I briefly traces the recent evolution of the notion of literacy as well as some of the lessons UNESCO has learnt along the way. Drawing on theoretical and empirical research, Part 2 explores the plurality of literacy in matters of expression and communication, cultural identity, and socio-economic development as well as in its practical ramifications. In turn, Part 3 situates this plurality in the context of global commitments and strategies for achieving literacy for all and education for all, recommending a number of specific points of action for Member States, especially for literacy planners and providers in each area of concern. The Conclusion recapitulates some central concerns with literacy.

A number of literacy experts have contributed to the conception of this position paper, and UNESCO wishes to extend its sincere appreciation to all of them.

1. *The evolving notion of literacy*

Since its foundation in 1946, UNESCO has been at the forefront of literacy efforts and dedicated to keeping these high on national, regional and international education agendas. Beginning with its report on *Fundamental Education* (1947), UNESCO has taken great interest in literacy as part of its efforts to promote basic education.

Just as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defined education as a fundamental right, literacy has also been considered something to which every person is entitled – until the mid-1960s, a right primarily understood as a set of technical skills: reading, writing and calculating. Promoting literacy was fundamentally a matter of enabling individuals to acquire these skills, irrespective of the contents and methods of their provision. The nature of literacy work consisted in making it possible for the maximum number of individuals to acquire these skills. This conception led to mass literacy campaigns aimed at the “eradication of illiteracy” within a few years (cf. the Second International Conference on Adult Education, Montreal, 1960). Contrary to their intention, such campaigns – whose influence is still felt – revealed that literacy cannot be sustained by short-term operations or by top-down and unisectoral actions primarily directed towards the acquisition of technical skills that do not give due consideration to the contexts and motivations of learners and follow up closely on accomplishments. Another lesson learnt in the more successful campaigns, often carried out in overtly political frameworks, has to do with the important role played by political will and social mobilization in literacy efforts (Bhola, 1984).

The 1960s and 1970s brought attention to the ways in which literacy is linked with socio-economic development, and the concept of “functional literacy” was born. Programmes for functional literacy – designed to promote reading and writing as well as arithmetical skills necessary for increased productivity – were the subject of many national and international campaigns. During this period, for example, UNESCO was involved in the Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP) conducted in conjunction with the United Nations’ first Development Decade, for which literacy was valued as a technical solution to socio-economic problems. In the mid-1970s, the programme cycle for the Experimental World Literacy Programme expired, yielding two key results:

- ✦ its single-model approach was too limited; and
- ✦ the direct socio-economic returns of literacy could not be proven (UNESCO/UNDP, 1976).

For all that, the concept of “functional literacy” marked a turning point in the modern history of education. It allied education and especially literacy with social and economic development and expanded the understanding of literacy beyond the imparting of basic technical skills (World Congress of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, Teheran, 1965), if only with a view to increased productivity.

Contributing to this expanded understanding, Paulo Freire – honoured by UNESCO for his literacy work in 1975 – spotlighted the political dimension of literacy. He developed a method for teaching literacy in terms of cultural actions immediately relevant to the learner. Best known is his method of “conscientization”, which encourages the learner to question why things are the way they are and to undertake changing them for the better (Freire, 1972). This approach moved literacy beyond the narrow socio-economic confines of the Experimental World Literacy Programme and located it squarely in the political arena, emphasizing connections between literacy and politically active participation in social and economic transformation (International Symposium for Literacy, Persepolis, 1975).

In the 1980s and 1990s, this work served as the basis for the further elaboration of what literacy means and how it is acquired and applied. During International Literacy Year (ILY) in 1990, UNESCO and the international community addressed literacy issues for all age groups in both industrialized and developing countries. The ILY Secretariat in

UNESCO promoted a positive approach to defining literacy needs and de-mystifying definitions, standards, and measurements of literacy. A more analytical perspective came to distinguish literacy as a technical skill from literacy as a set of practices defined by social relations and cultural processes – a view exploring the range of uses of literacy in the entire spectrum of daily life from the exercise of civil and political rights through matters of work, commerce and childcare to self-instruction, spiritual enlightenment and even recreation.

Finally, the World Declaration on Education for All (1990) introduced the concept of “basic learning needs”, featuring literacy in a continuum encompassing formal and non-formal education for children, youth and adults. This concept, together with the “four pillars of education” – learning to know, to do, to live together and to be – proposed by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, in 1996, is solidly linked with that of “lifelong learning” and the foundational contribution of literacy. Subsequent international pronouncements such as the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning (1997), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) and the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the United Nations Literacy Decade (2002) portrayed the evolving notion of literacy as a key element of lifelong learning in its lived context. Linking such a plural notion of literacy with citizenship, cultural identity, socio-economic development, human rights and equity, these proclamations call for the context-sensitive and therewith learner-centred provision of literacy along with the establishment of literate environments. Today, the international community no longer sees literacy as a mere stand-alone skill, but instead as a social practice contributing to broader purposes of lifelong learning.

At the same time, however, in view of actual practices, it cannot be alleged that all approaches to literacy not departing from the premise of multiple literacies have failed. Politically motivated literacy campaigns have produced striking results, including the transformation of fundamental literacy practices in countries such as China, Cuba, Nicaragua, the United Republic of Tanzania, the former USSR and Viet Nam. Inspired by these models, less ideologically oriented campaigns in Ecuador, India and South Africa, for example, have also achieved remarkable results in meeting the learning needs of different groups, paving the way for more advanced literacy practices and continuous learning opportunities. Likewise, small-scale functional literacy projects worldwide

have created conditions helping transform the lives of entire communities served by a nucleus of committed new literates performing distributive functions in their villages, thus fructifying local knowledge and the employment of local languages (Easton, 1998). Mapping such approaches along with the resources and competencies which they liberate represents an essential part of promoting the lifelong learning potentials inherent in illiterate and technologically poor communities.

Its Implications for Policies and Programmes

2. *The many meanings and dimensions of literacy*

the way literacy is defined influences the goals and strategies adopted and the programmes designed by policy-makers as well as the teaching and learning methodologies, curricula and materials employed by practitioners. Its definition also determines how progress or achievements in overcoming illiteracy are monitored and assessed.

UNESCO in its normative function has provided a generic definition of literacy mainly for use in international evaluations and to assist countries in coming up with their own specific definitions. The first internationally agreed-upon definition, one which is still often quoted, stems from the UNESCO Recommendation of 1958 concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics. It states that a literate person is one who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life. Another much-criticized but often-used definition is that from 1970, according to which a functionally literate person is one who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for the effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development. The definition of literacy employed in the Education for All 2000 Assessment is the following: "Literacy is the ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement related to one's daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and often includes also basic

arithmetic skills (numeracy).” Many countries have adapted this definition in their own ways in order to determine the literacy rates of their populations.

Even this definition, however, is not broad enough to capture the full complexity and diversity of literacy across the spectrum of its acquisition and application.

A proposed operational definition in particular for measurement purposes was formulated during an international expert meeting in June 2003 at UNESCO. It states: “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.” This proposed definition attempts to encompass several different dimensions of literacy. Yet because even this plural notion of literacy remains centred on the life of the individual person, more reflection should be given to incorporating into it the various circumstances in which individual learners live their lives. An attendant challenge has to do with accurately monitoring and assessing the multiple forms of literacy.

The plurality of literacy refers to the many ways in which literacy is employed and the many things with which it is associated in a community or society and throughout the life of an individual. People acquire and apply literacy for different purposes in different situations, all of which are shaped by culture, history, language, religion and socio-economic conditions. The plural notion of literacy latches upon these different purposes and situations. Rather than seeing literacy as only a generic set of technical skills, it looks at the social dimensions of acquiring and applying literacy. It emphasizes that literacy is not uniform, but is instead culturally and linguistically and even temporally diverse. It is shaped by social as well as educational institutions: the family, community, workplace, religious establishments and the state. Constraints on its acquisition and application lie not simply in the individual, but also in relations and patterns of communication structured by society. Numerous examples from the critical literature on the diverse social practices of literacy (Street, 1995, 2003; Doronila, 1996; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996; Fagerberg-Diallo, 2001) substantiate this view of literacy as essentially situational, yet dynamic.

The plurality of literacy also implies that it takes both dominant and subordinate forms in every society. The dominant form is transmitted through official institutions

such as schools, often to the neglect of other forms based on historical experiences and lived realities. Such institutional domination tends to legitimize existing social structures and therewith unequal power relations. In response, individuals and groups in subordinate positions may construct their own forms of literacy in their own language(s), articulating their own – officially unacknowledged – meanings, knowledge and identity.

UNESCO has drawn a number of inferences from the plural notion of literacy that will be useful for orienting global literacy efforts. These concern: literacy and cultural identity, literacy and socio-economic development, and approaches to literacy.

Literacy and cultural identity

In acknowledging the fact that literacy involves oral, written, visual and digital forms of expression and communication, literacy efforts conceived in terms of the plural notion of literacy intend to take account of the ways in which these different processes interrelate in a given social context. Because all such processes involve expressing and communicating cultural identity, the promotion of literacy must foster the capacity to express or communicate this identity in one's own terms and especially language(s). In a multilingual society, the plural notion of literacy entails designing multilingual policies and programmes for both the mother tongue and other languages as well as recognizing the complementary relationship between literacy and orality. Rather than imposing a foreign literacy on an indigenous culture and so undermining existing modes of thought and social organization, literacy policies and programmes should respect these and build upon local knowledge and experience (Olson and Torrance, 2001, p.14).

Literacy and socio-economic development

Literacy is not the solution to all problems such as crime, unemployment, poverty and poor health. Blaming these problems on illiteracy deflects attention from underlying causes, including political and economic disenfranchisement or injustice. Social cohesion, equity, the equal distribution of wealth and adequate access

to good health care have not been shown to depend directly on levels of literacy. Literacy does not automatically generate socio-economic development. Nonetheless, a closer look at the links between literacy and such development makes clear that they are complex and manifold. It is, moreover, certain that literacy can play an enormous transformative role in the lives of individuals and communities. The extent to which these links may be enhanced depends on how literacy is addressed in local social and economic circumstances and not restricted to established educational institutions and interventions. For this very reason, it is a societal responsibility to eliminate institutional obstacles depriving the illiterate of their full potential for expression, communication and participation by creating learning opportunities for all. Doing so requires commitment from and action on the part of all stakeholders, including the international community, governments, NGOs, civil society, the private sector and local communities.

Approaches to literacy

The fact that there are various ways of acquiring and applying literacy in daily life – whether at home, in the classroom, in the workplace or elsewhere in the community – means that there is no single method or approach that is uniquely valid and that fits all circumstances. The many and diverse contexts of its acquisition and application demand programmes and materials that are separately and locally designed, not standardized and centrally planned. Diversified strategies and methods employing content determined by learners' circumstances must be sought, building on local knowledge and experiences as well as on the specific environment and cultural conditions. In promoting the search for the most relevant, effective and affordable schemes of literacy provision – innovative methods of participatory and interactive literacy learning and new learner-centred strategies – UNESCO recommends flexible approaches responsive to the individual circumstances and needs of the learner and the learning environment.

3. *Literacy for All for Education for All*

at Dakar in April 2000, governments, civil society organizations and international agencies re-affirmed the global commitment to education for all and pledged to achieve six goals by 2015 (World Education Forum, Dakar, 2000). Education for all was further endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly as part of the Millennium Development Goals (A/RES/56/326).

Understood not only as a component of basic quality education and a foundation of lifelong learning but also as itself a lifelong process, literacy constitutes the common thread running through the six Dakar goals. Embracing such a view of literacy, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Literacy Decade a focal point in education for all. This Decade is directed above all towards improving levels of adult literacy, creating dynamic literate environments, the attainment of a mastery level of literacy by all learners, and enhanced quality of life. Literacy is regarded as a cross-cutting theme of EFA.

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution on the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty invited UNESCO, UNICEF and the United Nations System “to promote the inclusion of education in all anti-poverty strategies” (A/RES/55/210, § 17). It emphasized the crucial role of both formal and non-formal education in enabling those living in poverty to take control of their own lives.

As the co-ordinating agency for education for all and the United Nations Literacy Decade, UNESCO has placed literacy at the heart of its education for all efforts and anti-poverty strategies. UNESCO takes the view that – as in the case of Education for All – the key to the success of global literacy efforts lies at the country level. Furthermore, UNESCO considers the successful implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade to require that literacy occupy the centre of attention of all plans, actions and programmes of education for all. Each must address literacy in its relation to issues of gender equality and the needs of those without access to quality learning opportunities – out-of-school children and adolescents, and illiterate youths and adults.

UNESCO recommends several strategies for literacy work at the country level with a view towards achieving education for all – recommendations also articulated in the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade (A/RES/57/218). These are:

- ❖ placing literacy at the centre of national education systems and development efforts;
- ❖ giving equal importance to formal and non-formal education modalities;
- ❖ promoting an environment supportive of literacy and a culture of reading in schools and communities;
- ❖ ensuring community involvement in literacy programmes as well as their local ownership;
- ❖ building partnerships particularly at the national level, but also at sub-regional, regional and international levels, between government, civil society, the private sector and local communities; and
- ❖ developing at all levels systematic monitoring and assessment supported by research and data collection.

The following discussion elaborates connections between the plural notion of literacy and the key areas of concern in these strategies: creating a literate environment, formal primary and non-formal education, community learning, gender equality, governance, civil society and, finally, monitoring and assessment. It also recommends several specific points of action for Member States.

Creating literate environments

Given the many facets of literacy in daily life, efforts towards achieving universal literacy clearly require more than merely increased enrolment in school or adult-education programmes. Developing rich and dynamic literate environments – where written communication is used in sustainable ways by all for purposes and in forms appropriate to particular contexts – represents a key to advancing literacy. A person uses literacy in diverse ways as he or she interacts with various forms of written communication – whether street signs, transportation schedules, administrative forms, bank accounts, calendars, shopping lists, posters, cards, letters, books, diaries, magazines, newspapers, television, e-mail or web pages. Stimulating literate environments at home, in the classroom, in the workplace and elsewhere in the community are essential for facilitating the diverse uses of literacy. In turn, such environments presuppose wide access to information and enhanced means of expression and communication incorporating local content, knowledge and languages. “While ensuring the free flow of ideas by word and image care should be exercised so that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known” (Article 6 of the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity). It is not simply a matter of giving space to local content, knowledge and languages, but of generating and sustaining local ownership of expression, communication and transactions with the wider world.

Creating a dynamic literate environment also involves sectors beyond education. According to the United Nations General Assembly: “... creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy” (A/RES/56/116, § 7). If not directly related in a simple causal manner, socio-economic development and the growth of literate environments are mutually beneficial. Their creation relies upon co-ordinated actions at all levels undertaken by many partners, for example, ministries, civil society, the mass media and the private sector, especially the publishing industry.

UNESCO recommends the following actions for creating literate environments:

- ✦ promoting and ensuring freedom of expression and communication;

- ❖ widening access to tools for expression and communication, such as newspapers, radio, television and information and communication technologies;
- ❖ supporting individuals and communities in building capacities for the production and management of local content, and for textual expression and communication in conjunction with the visual arts, dance, music, story-telling and theatre as well as electronic information;
- ❖ establishing and supporting community libraries;
- ❖ pursuing multilingual and multi-cultural policies, especially in education;
- ❖ forging multi-ministerial collaboration as integral parts of policies and programmes relating to social, economic and cultural development;
- ❖ co-operating with and supporting the growth of industries that contribute to literate environments such as those in the private sector involved in publishing, the mass media and the information and communication technology industry;
- and
- ❖ engaging community-based groups, families and individuals, civil-society organizations, universities and research institutes, the mass media and the private sector in providing input into actions undertaken for creating a literate environment.

Literacy and formal primary and non-formal education

The attainment of the mastery level of reading, writing and calculating at the stage of formal primary education is critical for achieving literacy for all. No one doubts the major role of primary education in achieving universal literacy. Yet the formal education system in all too many countries has failed to meet this need fully and produced huge numbers of school dropouts. More efforts should be made on such areas as relevant curriculum, appropriate pedagogy, well-trained teachers, and teaching-learning materials in order to increase the quality of learning and improve

retention and survival rates in primary school. While countries should see to it that children attain this mastery level before they conclude formal primary education, non-formal education programmes must address the needs of those unreached through formal basic education. These programmes are carried out not only in the education sector but also in such diverse fields as public health, agriculture, entrepreneurship, community and rural development, and natural-resource management. They aim to fulfil diverse learning demands by enabling individuals and communities to develop the capacities, skills and knowledge required for lifelong learning and sustainable economic and social development. In line with this task, the Dakar Framework for Action asserts that “adult and continuing education must be greatly expanded and diversified, and integrated into the mainstream of national education and poverty reduction strategies. The vital roles literacy plays in lifelong learning, sustainable livelihoods, good health, active citizenship and the improved quality of life for individuals, communities and societies must be more widely recognized” (§ 38).

The new focus on the links between literacy, livelihood and poverty highlights the important role of literacy in acquiring the capacities, skills and knowledge needed to secure a living. It offers education activists, practitioners and policy-makers additional scope for elaborating effective non-formal literacy programmes within the wider context of human life. How to build an integrated approach linking literacy and sustainable livelihoods has become a central issue in strategies for socio-economic development and poverty eradication.

Given the inherent difficulties in establishing formal education services responsive to the excluded or marginalized, UNESCO believes that non-formal education composes an effective and equitable alternative of providing access to learning, information, and skills-development. A more inclusive approach answering to the learning needs of the disadvantaged and integrating non-formal education and formal education is required in order to achieve education for all and sustainable development.

UNESCO recommends the following actions for more productively aligning formal and non-formal education:

- ✦ conducting research to identify the actual and potential uses of literacy in conjunction with the real needs of learners before determining the modes and content of non-formal education provision;

- ✦ continuing to emphasize reading, writing and numeracy in formal primary education curricula;
- ✦ adapting all curricula to reflect the specific needs of children and feature local resources;
- ✦ encouraging all teachers to improve their instructional techniques in reading, writing and numeracy through pre-service and in-service training;
- ✦ training and upgrading the qualifications of non-formal education facilitators;
- ✦ placing the contribution of non-formal education to literacy at the forefront of policy discussions and programme planning and implementation in matters of poverty reduction, and socio-economic and educational development;
- ✦ incorporating literacy in multi-sectoral programmes responding to a wide variety of issues such as employment, entrepreneurial skills, healthcare, HIV/AIDS prevention and care, environmental problems, provision of water and food, political advocacy, fundraising, cultural identity, personal and intellectual development and religious participation;
- ✦ using information and communication technologies for fostering diverse modes of literacy and delivering non-formal education;
- ✦ connecting non-formal as well as informal and formal education within a lifelong learning perspective by establishing equivalency programmes; and
- ✦ providing guidance and counselling services in pro-active support of lifelong learning.

Literacy and community learning

Community learning represents the most comprehensive aspect of non-formal education in its response to individual and collective learning needs

and the promotion of lifelong learning and sustainable development. It takes the many forms of community learning centres, community education, popular education, open learning communities, learning circles, organic learning communities, networks and even learning cities or societies. Ideally, community learning emphasizes learning across disciplines and age groups, as knowledge and abilities are acquired through investigative learning directly related to real-life situations and to local culture and language(s). At the same time, in today's globalized world, just as "community" no longer refers to a geographically bound collective entity, so, too, learning may now take place at a distance, yet together with other learners elsewhere. Information and communication technologies are, then, increasingly important in connecting local communities with wider contexts and providing access to literacy. The challenge lies in bringing about beneficial social transformation through strengthening and enriching genuine community learning.

UNESCO recommends the following actions for making good use of community learning:

- ✦ providing technical and financial support for community learning programmes by promoting their organization, assisting interaction between communities and governments as well as among communities themselves, and integrating community learning into local educational governance;
- ✦ facilitating public debate about literacy at local and national levels as a form of expression and communication as well as a means for social change;
- ✦ designing comprehensive and integrated local literacy programmes, especially with a view to making it possible for communities to carry out action research on the actual and potential uses of literacy with regard to their own culture, knowledge and language(s), including the interrelation of oral and written expression and communication;
- ✦ supporting the participation of the illiterate in all levels of literacy programmes; and
- ✦ supporting the production of local ICT-based forms of literacy and their broader dissemination.

Literacy and gender equality

Gender-based discrimination remains one of the most intractable constraints to realizing the right to education (Dakar Framework for Action, § 40). Analysis of figures from the past 30 years reveals the persistent disparity between literacy rates for women and for men. Eliminating this disparity, which itself perpetuates sexual discrimination, is imperative for realizing education for all. Positive effects of increased literacy among women have been documented at the macro-level. Increases in national levels of female literacy tend to accompany lower rates of infant mortality and maternal mortality in childbirth, better children's health, higher school-enrolment rates among girls and even lower fertility rates. Beyond these general positive effects and the particular instrumental advantages of literacy, its intangible benefits – self-awareness, self-esteem and self-determination – may accomplish even more for gender equality. These intangible benefits allow women to assess their own situations critically in the light of broader horizons and new possibilities. As a social event, participating in literacy provides women with a forum to share their experience of male and female gender roles, to develop new insights and knowledge, and to support each other in bringing about beneficial change. A closer look at the interplay between the instrumental and the intangible benefits of women's literacy along with the ways in which women best acquire and apply literacy should lead to improved literacy initiatives and better understanding of its relevance and significance for women. The topic of literacy and gender equality, however, goes beyond issues of women's access to literacy, encompassing fundamental issues such as empowering women and putting in place long-term strategies addressing their unequal status in the social context of gender relations. All of these should be integral elements of developing literacy policies and programmes.

UNESCO recommends the following actions for literacy from the perspective of gender equality:

- ✚ maintaining this perspective in all planning, programming, implementation and evaluation by sensitizing stakeholders to gender issues related to literacy and basic education; eliminating gender stereotypes from programme contents and methods as well as in management practice; and promoting positive role models for both sexes enhancing the status of

women and helping make traditionally male skills accessible to women and female skills accessible to men;

- ✦ strengthening literacy programmes – whose contents may range from vocational skills, the use of micro-credit and marketing, through confidence-building and decision-making activities or group and community organization, to HIV/AIDS prevention, and care or health and nutrition matters – for empowering out-of-school girls and female adolescents as well as young and adult women;
- ✦ encouraging the participation of women at all education levels by attending to their own priorities and perspectives in defining the means and ends of their learning;
- ✦ ensuring that the focus on gender equality does not lead to exclusively prioritizing girls (instead of children), women (instead of adults) or mothers (instead of women), even while advancing a more diversified conception of female identity.

Literacy and governance

Traditional patterns of centralized governance and management, although they have in some cases achieved considerable progress, do not provide a genuinely supportive policy framework for effectively dealing with the many meanings and dimensions of literacy. For this reason, the Dakar Framework for Action calls for “more decentralized and participatory decision-making, implementation and monitoring at lower levels of accountability” (§ 55) along with improved “capacities for managing diversity, disparity and change” (§ 56); it recognizes that “all adults have a right to basic education, beginning with literacy” (§ 37), even as “adult and continuing education must be greatly expanded and diversified” (§ 38). In order to secure the right to literacy on the part of the disadvantaged, decisions about how and when literacy is acquired and used, and about its contents and purposes must be in local hands. This entails support by national governments and international agencies to local planning and decision-making, “strengthening the ability of local communities and groups with common concerns to

develop their own organizations and resources” (World Summit for Social Development, Copenhagen, 1995, Commitment 4[j]). Devolving decision-making to local administrative levels is essential for enabling truly diverse literacy work in local contexts and making possible a range of partnerships with communities and civil society.

UNESCO recommends the following actions for relating literacy and governance:

- ✦ putting priority on literacy in the development agendas of Education for All, the Millennium Development Goals and the Fast-Track Initiative in association with economic, political and social participation;
- ✦ defining clearly the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders at different national levels and building their capacities in line with their responsibilities;
- and
- ✦ decentralizing literacy policies and practices, and allocating sufficient financial resources to allow local communities, authorities and civil society groups to plan, carry out and monitor their own programmes in a way suitable to the circumstances of learners.

Literacy and civil society

Volunteers, popular educators, grassroots organizations and religious groups have traditionally dedicated themselves to helping the illiterate become literate. An increasing number of non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations are now responsible for carrying out literacy programmes, while others are involved in lobbying governments and campaigning for the right to literacy. Still others are concerned with conducting policy dialogue with governments and international partners, drawing attention to literacy matters at regional, national and international levels, or advancing alternative thinking about literacy by linking it to broader questions of learning, cultural identity and globalization. It is, then, not surprising that the United Nations Literacy Decade, in the light of the Dakar Framework for Action, gives particular attention to developing broad-based ownership of literacy planning, implementation and monitoring, meaning thereby not only governments, non-governmental

organizations and international agencies, but also other groups falling under the term “civil society” such as community organizations and families or even research institutions and the media.

The members of civil society, as service providers, advocates, policy partners and critical thinkers, render an essential contribution to literacy work. While the participation of civil society in international literacy forums and mechanisms is well established, policy dialogue at the country level often takes place without it. Despite various international agreements and regional commitments, some governments continue to define civil-society participation in literacy efforts exclusively in terms of service provision without regard for the formulation of education strategies. On the one hand civil society programmes should include a greater investment in capacity-building, while on the other, governments should not further withdraw from literacy work, leaving too great a responsibility with civil society organizations.

UNESCO recommends the following actions for supporting civil-society participation in literacy work:

- ✦ facilitating public debate on the views and practices of civil society related to literacy as well as integrating such debates in civil society movements and initiatives;
- ✦ documenting the experiences of civil society with literacy work, ranging from involvement in policy dialogue to conducting programmes with local communities and for people without access to literacy;
- ✦ promoting access to and sharing of information among members of civil society at all levels having to do with literacy, especially by harnessing ICTs; and
- ✦ supporting sub-national or national networks of non-governmental and civil society organizations working in the field of literacy.

Monitoring and assessment of literacy

Finally, strengthening national and international efforts towards achieving universal literacy is closely linked with improving literacy monitoring and

assessment. Reliable data on literacy – hitherto largely unavailable – is required in order to monitor and assess the current literacy situation in given countries and develop appropriate interventions in both policy-making and programme design. The problem is particularly acute in developing countries.

Literacy assessment is crucial at the beginning of the United Nations Literacy Decade. The Decade opens a process of reflection on literacy and its definition – one taking into consideration the plural notion of literacy by constructing new benchmarks based on demonstrated competencies and actual uses of literacy instead of self-reporting and mere attendance at school or adult-literacy programmes. Given such context-specificity and local variation, the challenge lies in forging a methodology for producing reliable and comparable data on literacy proficiency at national and international levels useful as well for policy-making and programme planning.

In this context, some of the main assessment exercises undertaken in the recent past should be mentioned, such as: for adults, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL); and for students, the Programme for International Student Assessment, (PISA) and the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) studies.

Results of the IALS, carried out since 1994 in OECD countries and more recently in non-OECD countries, reveal:

- ✦ the many levels of literacy which could be identified beyond the simple distinction of literate and illiterate;
- ✦ a meaningful comparison between countries of literacy levels and distribution of skills, as a high percentage of items used were the same across countries.

The importance of such studies and their data for convincing policy-makers of the need to address the issue of literacy is also noteworthy.

In a recent effort to assist countries (especially developing countries) in improving the contents and methodologies of literacy assessment informing national and international policy decisions, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics together with other stakeholders such as the World Bank has launched the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP). This pathbreaking programme aims at developing a methodology which can be adapted for use in different contexts and yet provides data for inter-

national comparison. The goals of the overall programme are to improve the quality of data, especially at the national level but also for international policy development and monitoring (including for EFA and MDGs), and for the design of literacy programmes. The programme gathers information on both the literacy competency of adults over 15 years in age and the way in which this competency is employed in real life.

The monitoring and assessment of literacy and non-formal education has likewise to be put in the larger framework of the impact these have on the quality of learners' lives, even as actually determining this effect represents a second major challenge. UNESCO has recently developed a prototype package for monitoring non-formal education which consists of a conceptual framework, a handbook for developing a Non-formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS), data collection tools and corresponding software. Its purpose is to provide assistance in improving policy-making, planning and provision in non-formal education as well as the co-ordination between providers.

As spelt out in the International Plan of Action of the United Nations Literacy Decade, UNESCO regards the most urgent actions in monitoring and assessment as the following:

- ❖ refining literacy indicators and emphasizing those measuring the qualitative impact of literacy;
- ❖ promoting widespread and better use of census and population data;
- ❖ developing improved methods for assessing the literacy levels of individuals as well as for evaluating learning outcomes at the programme level;
- ❖ working out and utilizing a common yet locally acceptable framework for assessing progress towards achieving 50% improvement of levels of literacy by 2015;
- ❖ building management information systems in support of literacy policies and programmes; and
- ❖ studying the specific impact of literacy on the quality of life.

Conclusion

this position paper has sought to clarify the plurality of literacy and suggest concrete actions by which policy-makers and programme providers might expand and improve their work and thereby address the learning needs of those deprived of learning opportunities. Its aim is not to endorse and disseminate in an uncritical fashion the plurality of literacy as a panacea. Instead, it seeks to prompt all stakeholders to reflect on their guiding assumptions and specific practices with a view to a more effective orientation and improving the quality of their services.

In this regard it is noteworthy to reflect on the plurality of literacy, not only from the perspective of *supply* but that of *demand* as well. With reference to literacy planners and providers, the supply aspect, as set forth in this paper, represents literacy as being pluralized by the fact that different individuals require different literacies. This is equally true for those of the demand aspect since their needs and application of literacy change from time to time and place to place. Hence, decision-makers must cope with the challenge to promote literacy, in a more localized and specific approach, among the people. Decentralization of the decision-making power and technical and substantial resources, to create a literate society in respective localities will promote this to happen.

It is also noted that the plurality of literacy ought not be fixated as distinct entities. Their dynamic nature is indeed based on manifold communicative and social practices, but it is not itself identical with or reducible to these multiple patterns.

In conformity with its mission, UNESCO does not advocate single models of literacy, no matter how technically sound and culturally responsive these might be. It seeks instead to open up and even increase possibilities for informed choices,

promote different approaches to solving common problems and create opportunities for synergistic dialogue, exchange and action. In the end, however, it is not merely individuals who must be targeted; for what is required is fundamentally changing the attitudes of entire societies towards reading, writing and calculation. In moving away from the consideration of what literacy does to people towards the consideration of what people do or can do with literacy, we must face the challenge of creating literate societies, not just making individuals literate. The ultimate goal is to foster social and economic conditions and transactions generating a massive demand for literacy and thus to bring about environments indispensable for using literacy-based skills and competencies.

The notion of literacy is complex and has evolved in accordance with recent political and socio-economic transformations, globalization and the advancement of ICTs. Yet no matter how complex this notion may be, we should address the huge and diverse literacy needs through simpler yet relevant policies and cost-effective provision. UNESCO hopes that this paper encourages further discussion about the plurality of literacy. Creating a literate environment for everyone is literacy for all.

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