

STRATEGY SESSION
**“LITERACY FOR ALL:
A RENEWED VISION FOR A TEN-YEAR GLOBAL ACTION PLAN”**
Thursday, 27 April, 16:30-18:00

Organised on behalf of the EFA Forum by the UNESCO Institute of Education (UIE), UNESCO's Basic Education Division, the International Literacy Institute (ILI), ISESCO, Action Aid and SIDA.

Organiser: Adama Ouana - UIE, Hamburg
Moderator: Linda King - UIE, Hamburg
Presenters: Rosa María Torres - Ecuador/Argentina
Daniel Wagner - ILI, USA
David Archer - Action Aid, UK
Maria Kere - Save the Children - USA, Burkina Faso
Mamadou Lamarana Bah, ISESCO, Rabat
Peter Krug, Ministry of Education, Germany
Final remarks: Michael Omolewa, Delegate to UNESCO, Nigeria
Chander J. Daswani, Consultant, UNESCO, India
Rapporteur: Rosa María Torres
Secretary: Jorge Sequeira, UNESCO

BACKGROUND

This session emerged as a result of a Resolution moved by a number of Member Nations¹, and adopted by the General Assembly in its fifty-fourth session, to consider the declaration of a United Nations Literacy Decade. The Resolution requested that the Secretary General, in co-operation with the Director General of UNESCO, submit a proposal and a plan of action for this decade to the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly.

The discussion at the session was based on a preliminary draft ("Literacy Decade Framework and Elements for a Plan of Action", 15 pages) prepared by a group of specialists convened by UNESCO's Basic Education Division in Sèvres, France, on 27-29 March 2000.² The *Literacy for All* framework adopted in the document proposed:

- a comprehensive and renewed understanding of literacy, including children, youth and adults, in and out of school; (see box)

¹ Bangladesh, Barbados, Belarus, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica, Ecuador, India, Madagascar, Monaco, Mongolia, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, and Trinidad and Tobago.

² The group comprised: C.J. Daswani (India), A. Lind (Sweden), M. Omolewa (Nigeria), A. Ouane (Mali), and R.M.Torres (Ecuador). The following UNESCO staff also attended the meeting: A. Bah-Diallo (Director, Basic Education), S.K. Chu (UNESCO Institute of Statistics), S. Schnuttgen (Collective Consultation of NGOs), and U. Miura (Literacy Section).

- a renewed vision and a renewed commitment from all: national governments, national and local societies, and international agencies; in the family, the community, the workplace, the school system, and the media.
- renewed strategies and mechanisms at all levels, consistent with such renewed vision and with the magnitude and complexity of the challenge.

This session at the World Education Forum was seen as a key opportunity for a first round of feedback on the document and consultation on the conditions for launching a major world-wide initiative that focuses on universal literacy as an integral component of basic education and is framed within the Education for All movement and goals.

THE SESSION

The session attracted about 100 people coming from all regions and from very diverse sectors and institutions: government, NGOs, academic and research institutions, religious, ethnic and grassroots organizations, and international cooperation agencies. There was high representation from developing countries, both among the presenters and the session participants, including some of the countries that promoted the Resolution.

-A. Bah Diallo, Director of UNESCO Division of Basic Education, opened the session. She highlighted UNESCO's longstanding commitment to literacy and invited participants to engage in a fruitful dialogue around the prospects for a Literacy Decade, taking into consideration the draft proposal that had been distributed.

-L. King provided background information on the process leading to the preparation of the preliminary document. She framed the topic and methodology for the session, stressing the need for feedback, interaction and discussion.

-R.M. Torres synthesized the main ideas of the document, particularly regarding the renewed vision of literacy that is proposed for the ten-year plan.

-D. Wagner presented a synthesis of the Thematic Study on Literacy and Adult Education prepared by ILI for the Dakar conference, highlighting some relevant problems and priorities that would need to be addressed in a UN literacy decade.

-D. Archer emphasized the need to view literacy as part of a wider set of self-expression and communication means. He defended participatory approaches to literacy, and clear linkages between literacy and empowerment, and exemplified such approach with Action Aid's REFLECT.

-M. Lamarana Bah stressed the importance of literacy education not only in national languages but in different scripts. A literacy project developed by ISESCO in Guinée, in pulaar national language and using Arabic script, was provided as an example.

-M. Kere advocated in favor of a strong presence and meaningful role of local communities not only as implementors and providers, but in curricular and pedagogical matters as well as in management, monitoring and evaluation of efforts.

-P. Krug stressed the need to view literacy for both children, youth and adults within the framework of lifelong learning, to link adult education to civic education for all, and to link the Adult Learning Week to the literacy decade.

-In their final remarks, M. Omolewa and C.J. Daswani highlighted the vivid interest and concern the literacy issue generates all over the world, as reflected in the number, quality and wide representation of the people present at this session. They stressed the fact that, beyond conceptual, cultural or ideological differences among participants at the session, all agreed in one important matter: the need to strengthen, improve and accelerate efforts towards universal literacy.

MAIN TOPICS DISCUSSED

Neglect of youth and adult education, and of adult literacy in particular, within EFA during the 1990s

There was strong consensus around the fact that youth and adult education, and adult literacy in particular, were neglected in the 1990s. *Education for All* meant in practice primary education for children. The specific EFA goal referred to adult literacy – reducing the adult illiteracy rate to half the rate in 1990 - was not met. Except for a few countries that did make special efforts in this field, there was little progress in reducing the nearly one billion young and adult illiterates worldwide.

Child and adult education were viewed as options rather than as complementary and mutually reinforcing. The child was viewed in isolation, in the frame of the school rather than in the frame of the family and the home. Education for All was understood as education

for children. Jomtien's "expanded vision" of *basic education* was reduced to formal schooling and, more specifically, to primary education.

Various participants provided examples and related all this to their own countries, thus confirming what has been officially acknowledged by the global EFA 2000 Assessment, regional and most national EFA reports, as well as the E-9 EFA report.

Importance of renewed efforts towards *literacy for all* and support for a UN Literacy Decade

Participants supported the idea of a UN Literacy Decade. Reasons given included:

- Literacy is an ethical, formative, cultural, civic and economic necessity.
- Literacy has become a major national and global priority for both developing and industrialized countries.
- Child and school-based literacy -- as revealed by a number of national, regional and international assessments conducted in the 90s -- is an area of poor performance in school systems worldwide, and a major source of school repetition and early drop out.
- Literacy is evolving in its concept and applications.
- Literacy was not sufficiently addressed during the Jomtien decade. The gap between literates and illiterates in terms of social, civic and economic opportunities will likely increase unless major new efforts are undertaken.
- A decade is a reasonable timeframe to be able to show major gains worldwide.

Some specific proposals regarding the UN Literacy Decade were as follows:

- It must be framed within the EFA global initiative, not developed as a separate, parallel program. Youth/adult literacy should be included in education sector planning at the subnational, national and international level.
- It must be based on the principles of inclusiveness, social and community participation, and empowerment. It should build on cultural heritage, positive values and strengths of national and local communities. Literacy is and must be understood as a liberating force, not as a means to impose dominant languages, cultures and ways of thinking.

- Quantity cannot be separated from quality. Focusing on quality implies considering diversity in its various manifestations (age, gender, race, culture and tradition, language, context, etc.), improving teacher training and capacity building at all levels, increasing and improving program evaluation and assessment, and making the best use of information and communication technologies.
- The language (and related script) issue must be central to the definition, implementation and measurement of literacy.
- There is a need to reflect more and refine better the conceptual and operational definitions and levels of literacy, taking into account assessment requirements.
- The proposal for a Literacy Decade came from countries. Thus, the ownership of the initiative should remain country-driven – bottom up rather than top down. Each country and community should be free to define which sectors of the population to include and prioritize under the ten-year literacy plan. However, reaching the most disadvantaged must remain a priority.
- The magnitude of the challenge requires massive, intense and sustained efforts, and thus major involvement of the State. However, NGOs, universities and other actors of civil society play a critical role in making this ten-year plan succeed. Broad and sustainable partnerships are required at all levels, from the local to the global, and new partners need to be brought into scene.
- Strategising for the Literacy Decade should include both short, medium and long-term goals, as well as the need for high impact work.
- Inasmuch as illiteracy is a structural problem, intimately related to poverty and social inequity, it cannot be dealt effectively without a serious effort to address poverty and its causes at both local, national and global level.

ISSUES OF CONCERN, IN NEED OF WIDER CONSULTATION AND DEBATE

While acknowledging the importance of a holistic, life-long and life-wide approach to literacy - children and adults, in and out of school - several participants warned against the tendency to marginalise youth/adult literacy when placed under the rhetoric of comprehensive policies and strategies. The long-acknowledged need for a two-pronged approach to literacy requires breaking with traditional mindsets and inertias, enhancing systemic awareness of education and educational change, and building a culture of cooperative thinking and doing at all levels and in relation to all actors involved.

Box

LITERACY FOR ALL: THE NEED FOR A RENEWED VISION	
OLD VISION	RENEWED VISION
Illiteracy as a social pathology and an individual responsibility.	Illiteracy as a structural phenomenon and a social responsibility.
"Eradicate illiteracy" as the goal.	Create literate environments and literate societies as a goal.
Literacy education associated only with youth and adults.	Literacy education associated with children, youth and adults.
Literacy education associated with out-of-school groups and non-formal programmes.	Literacy education takes place both in and out of the school system.
Child literacy and adult literacy viewed and developed separately.	Child and adult literacy linked within a holistic policy framework and strategy.
Literacy understood as initial, basic literacy (an elementary level).	Literacy as functional literacy (literacy, to be such, must be functional and sustainable).
Literacy viewed separately from basic education (literacy <i>and</i> basic education).	Literacy viewed as an integral part of basic education.
Literacy acquisition and development associated with a particular period in the life of a person.	Literacy understood as a lifelong learning process.
Literacy acquisition in school as a goal of the first or the first two grades.	Literacy acquisition in school as a goal for the whole primary education cycle.
Literacy as a specific area in the school curriculum (Language).	Literacy across the school curriculum.
Literacy associated only with conventional tools (i.e. pencil and paper).	Literacy related to both conventional and modern tools (pencil and paper but also keyboard and digital technologies).
Literacy centred around literacy provision (<i>teaching</i>).	Literacy centred around literacy <i>learning</i> .
Literacy goals centred around literacy acquisition.	Literacy goals include literacy acquisition, development and effective use.
Literacy as a responsibility of the State only.	Literacy as a responsibility of both the State and civil society.