

LITERACY INITIATIVE FOR EMPOWERMENT (LIFE)

INCREASED ACCESS TO LITERACY BASICS FOR AFRICAN POPULATIONS

AWARENESS

Learning to read and write is a fundamental right and yet here in the 21st century, 759 million young people and adults worldwide still do not have access to this right. These figures are even more alarming in Africa where:

- Sixty percent of the population is illiterate, and among these, two-thirds are women and 35 million are children; and
- Only 1% of national education budgets of most African governments is earmarked to address this issue.

If literacy does not become a priority in the coming years, the social, political and economic development goals of the African continent will be difficult to realize.

In an effort to lay the necessary foundation for learning new skills to achieve Education for All (EFA) goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), UNESCO developed, in collaboration with education stakeholders, an initiative: "Literacy Initiative: for Empowerment" – LIFE – which directly contributes to realising the MDGs and three out of six EFA goals:

- Ensuring that the learning needs of young people and adults are met (Goal 3);
- Ensuring that adult literacy levels are improved (Goal 4);
- Ensuring gender equality – in terms of access to education (Goal 5);

THE UNESCO APPROACH

According to UNESCO, literacy is a crucial step in the acquisition of basic skills that will enable children, young people and adults to cope with the many challenges they will face throughout their lives. As non-formal education is one of the main routes to learning for many disadvantaged young people and adults in some of the poorest countries in the world, it is vital that countries with high illiteracy rates develop national policies and strategies that support enhanced access for populations to literacy programmes and non-formal education, with special emphasis on young people and women, who when literate, help to build a better society.

In order to intensify efforts towards achieving literacy-related EFA goals, UNESCO BREDAs provides Member States with technical support within the framework of LIFE, developed in 2005, to:

- Strengthen the capacities of key resource persons (national officials and experts) of institutions and Member States for the development of Non-Formal Education (NFE) strategies and policies.
 - o *Example of a practical application: from the development of*

the EMIS to the adoption of a holistic approach to planning, sectoral policies now take non-formal education increasingly into account.

- Advocate for the enhancement of the role of Non-Formal Education in the education sector through the use of national languages, by allocating it greater budgetary resources.
 - o *Example of a practical application: as a result of advocacy actions undertaken within member countries to allocate 3% of their national education budgets to the literacy and non-formal education sub-sector, 6 LIFE countries have significantly increased their budget allocations to literacy.*
- Create and adopt innovative approaches: By encouraging governments and civil society to work more closely together for the development of the literacy and non-formal education sub-sector, LIFE also helped to disseminate innovative approaches in these areas through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).
 - o *Example of a practical application: The sharing of innovative experiences conducted in a particular country relating to the use of ICTs (mobile, radio, etc...) for literacy were able to be replicated in other countries within the continent.*

TANGIBLE RESULTS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Actions undertaken by UNESCO and its partners are now beginning to deliver the intended results as illustrated in the following accomplishments:

- In capacity-building: LIFE helped, inter alia, to address the lack of information on literacy and non-formal education by producing more recent statistical data and knowledge. In Senegal, funds raised by UNESCO and its partners to obtain higher quality statistical data, one of the weak links in the sub-sector, and to strengthen the capacities and technical skills of national officials and experts for the collection and processing of statistical data are some positive actions that helped to enhance the production of reliable data. This increased understanding of the challenges and perspectives of the sub sector is indeed beneficial as it facilitates planning activities which were previously quite demanding.
- In advocacy: Convinced of the real added value that functional literacy has for populations, more and more countries are increasing the percentage of their national budgets earmarked for literacy and have included non-formal education in their sectoral strategies. Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal have increased the percentage of their education budgets devoted to literacy as a result of advocacy actions conducted with the support of UNESCO. In Mali, the government developed a specific programme to address the illiteracy challenge and Burkina Faso now allocates

9% of its education budget to literacy. This measure has moreover led technical and financial partners to also increase their budget allocations to literacy and non-formal education.

- In the dissemination of innovative approaches: Because new approaches deserve wider recognition, UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Education in Africa (BREDA) is constantly working to ensure that its experiences and those of its partners, with regard to the use of ICTs for literacy, are shared at the continental level. In Cape Verde for instance, a radio broadcast literacy project helped reach marginalized populations in generally difficult to reach areas. This experience is besides being replicated in Guinea Bissau and in Mozambique as part of a South-South cooperation project between Portuguese-speaking countries. In addition to the radio, other technologies are also currently being used to expand access to literacy programmes and non-formal education for populations. The non-governmental organization Tostan used mobile phones as a means to increase the demand for literacy among women traders who were able to find a financial interest in using mobile phones to improve and modernize their trade practices. The effectiveness of this innovative approach quickly convinced other women, prompting an increase in the attendance rate of literacy classes provided for this purpose.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The International Conference on Adult Education held in 2009 in Belém, Brazil, outlined the main actions in the literacy field over the next ten years. In the next five years (2015), LIFE intends to continue its advocacy actions with governments. UNESCO BREDA will, in this regard, further assist countries to develop functional literacy and non-formal education regional programmes.

In order to achieve this objective, impact studies are conducted to substantiate scientific arguments confirming the added value of this sub-sector and underscoring the causal link between literacy and poverty, or again between literacy in local languages and the increased enrolment of children in schools.

New avenues will also be explored seeing that new national dynamics have been created as evidenced by the willingness of some African countries to look at the possibility of beginning the schooling of children in their mother tongue. Indeed, all research and pilot experiments conducted to date show that when children are literate in the language they speak at home, they obtain better academic results and learning is facilitated regardless of the language of study thereafter.

Africa is currently the only continent where more than half of parents unfortunately do not have the capacity to help their children with homework due to illiteracy.

LESSONS LEARNED

Recent studies reveal that one of the best strategies for reducing poverty in rural areas is to conduct functional literacy activities associated with an income-generating activity. With this combination of methods, not only do the individuals learn to read, write and count, but they also enhance their skills and professional capabilities. Besides reading and the acquisition of other basic skills, functional literacy provides learners with a degree of autonomy since, in addition to learning to read, write and count, they will also modernize the practice of their professional activities. However, it is still difficult today to know to what extent this supply matches the demand. There is a real need for a better monitoring of non-formal education supply and demand at the national and international levels to improve the planning and optimization of funding in this sub-sector.

LINKS AND GATEWAYS

LIFE is an initiative in the literacy sub-sector working in close collaboration with the following units and sub-sectors:

- Teacher Training (TTISSA): by advocating for consideration of the issue of NFE staff.
- Education on HIV & AIDS (EDUCAIDS): by incorporating HIV prevention and sexual reproductive health themes into literacy programmes in local languages
- Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET): by translating contents in local languages to increase employment opportunities.
- Statistics, planning and sectoral policies (UIS and Dakar Pole): by further monitoring literacy and non formal education supply and demand through reliable and recent data to better address NFE issues in the analyses and strategies of the education sector.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS

- Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA): UNESCO BREDA is a Steering Committee member of the Working Group on NFE.
- Countries funding the Cap-EFA programme: Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland finance, through the Cap-EFA programme, NFE programmes implemented with the support of UNESCO BREDA.
- African Union (AU): UNESCO-BREDA works closely with the AU, particularly through the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs), to develop policies and implement sub-regional programmes.
- State representatives: UNESCO BREDA provides support to Member States through ministries in charge of literacy and NFE as well as through National Commissions for UNESCO.