



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
des Nations Unies
pour l'éducation,
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

**Address by Irina Bokova,
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of the E-9 Ministerial
Review Meeting on EFA**

Abuja, Nigeria, 21 June 2010

His Excellency Mr Namadi Sambo Vice-President of the Federal Republic of
Nigeria,

Her Royal Highness Princess Laurentien,

Honourable Minister of Education of Nigeria Ms Ahamd Rufa'I,

Honourable Vice-Minister of Education of Indonesia, Mr Fasil Jalal,

Other Honourable Ministers of Education,

Mr Afolabi, Permanent Secretary of the Federal Ministry of Education,

Mr Davidson Hepburn, President of the General Conference,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be in Abuja for this Eighth E-9 Ministerial
Review Meeting on Education for All.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to all of you, and thank the Federal
Government of Nigeria for organizing and hosting this timely meeting.

As many of you heard me say last February in Addis Ababa at the High-Level
Group meeting on Education for All, I am determined to reaffirm UNESCO's
international leadership in education and to use all our influence to ensure that
education is at the top of policy-making agendas. It is a central pillar of
development and a condition for reaching all of the Millennium Development Goals.

As such, I very much welcome the theme of this meeting, "Literacy for
Development." I would like also to express my sincere thanks to Her Royal
Highness Princess Laurentien, UNESCO's Special Envoy for Literacy for
Development, for being here today. She is a highly experienced and committed

advocate whose passionate commitment several of you had the opportunity to witness at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education held in another E-9 country - Brazil - last December. Thank you for being with us your Royal Highness.

Finally, allow me to welcome each of the Honourable Ministers of Education who are here to bring their contribution to our meeting, as well as those who are here to represent the Ministers who could not be present.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The E-9 meeting also occurs at an important crossroads: ten years after the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and only a few months ahead of the High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals at the United Nations in New York. This review meeting will be crucial to laying down the guidelines for the achievement of the goals – based on accrued experience, best practices and recognized challenges. It will also be a moment to reaffirm the importance of education and of devoting to it the required investment. Indeed, UNESCO has been intensely engaged in providing input to help shape the content of the Summit's outcome document so that it adequately emphasizes the crucial role and benefits of education for achieving the MDGs.

This is my first E-9 meeting and I am proud to be here. Let me say from the outset how much I welcome this Initiative and the dynamic force of your countries on the regional and global scene. Yours are immense territories that harbour a tremendous reservoir of youthful talent and a rich cultural and linguistic diversity. You face the fundamental challenge of providing quality education to very large numbers of children, youth and adults. This E-9 Initiative provides a unique forum for information-sharing, for advocacy, for leveraging new resources and improving literacy policy. It also stands as a singular example of South-South cooperation.

We all know that nearly 70 per cent of the world's illiterate population lives in these nine countries - an estimated 510 million adults, of whom two-thirds are women. In short, the Education for All goals will not be achieved globally if they are not reached in the E-9 countries. Of course, the scale of the challenge differs from one E-9 country to the other – in three, literacy rates are below 60 percent, in four they are above 90 percent. But in all cases, investing in literacy will not only be crucial

for reaching Education for All, but also for reducing poverty, improving child and maternal health, promoting social cohesion and making societies more equitable.

Literacy is a foundation for learning at all ages. It provides life-long personal and development dividends, whether in terms of self-confidence, health, income or citizenship. Literacy unlocks opportunities, enables people to access wider sources of information, to better manage their lives and make informed decisions for themselves, their families and communities.

In today's knowledge-based societies, characterized by rapid change, integration and reliance on technology, lack of literacy skills is a major factor of exclusion. This is why literacy is so closely linked to development. In fact literacy has a multiplier impact on development.

For all these reasons UNESCO has made literacy a priority area in its education programmes. We are expanding our efforts to have a visible impact in tackling the global literacy challenge – and especially in reaching girls and women.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

National reports prepared for this meeting reflect the dynamic commitment of all E-9 countries to literacy.

I am impressed by the rich scope of programmes and policies that resolutely focus on the most marginalized groups: rural populations, migrants, disadvantaged youth, out-of-school children, indigenous groups and other vulnerable sections of the population. I am encouraged by the top-level recognition given to advancing literacy in all nine countries: to give just a few examples, in Brazil it is a presidential goal; in Egypt a constitutional priority; in India a key to inclusive growth and here in Nigeria it is viewed as instrumental to economic empowerment and development, as well as an important means for achieving the integration that the African continent seeks, both at the sub-regional and regional levels.

There is a move everywhere to make literacy relevant to the local context and to combine literacy learning with the acquisition of relevant personal and professional skills. In most of your countries, literacy is integrated into wider development

frameworks and national strategies. This is a promising reflection of your recognition that literacy plays a crucial role in reducing poverty.

And every one of your countries has set ambitious targets for the years to come. This is extremely encouraging. Although literacy rates have increased in all E-9 countries over the past two decades – Brazil, China, Indonesia and Mexico have all crossed the 90 percent threshold – the scale of the challenge remains considerable. But through research, through experience, through the E-9 network, we have clear evidence of best practice in learning programs, training, financing policies and governance.

I am also encouraged by the extent of collaboration not only within but also beyond the E-9 with other developing countries. I spoke earlier about how Nigeria uses education as one path to sub-regional integration. For example, rectors from universities and directors of centres of excellence based in French-speaking ECOWAS countries came to Abuja recently, to receive training in and learn from Nigeria's experience related to, improving the quality of higher education degree certificates at the undergraduate graduate and doctorate levels. I can but encourage further initiatives of this type.

Your Honour, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am strongly committed to promoting South-South cooperation. Indeed, recently I signed agreements in China and Brazil to this end. I see great potential for other similar agreements with other members of this E-9 group. Because I believe strongly that it is only by sharing expertise, by initiating joint programs and supporting least-developed countries in their efforts that we will accelerate progress towards Education for All.

Let me expand on UNESCO's action to support Member States in meeting the global literacy challenge.

Our collective efforts are framed by the United Nations Literacy Decade, launched by the United Nations in support of the Education for All agenda in 2003. This Decade aims to place literacy at the centre of national education systems and development efforts.

To guide future action, collaboration and partnerships, an International Strategic Framework for Action for the second half of the Decade and beyond was developed in a highly collaborative process by a wide range of partners. Representatives from all E-9 countries played an active part in shaping this Framework.

The three strategic objectives of the Framework are still valid, and are a succinct guide to all our work in literacy:

First, to generate stronger commitment through bolder advocacy, evidence-based policies, strong partnerships and better assessment. Second, to deliver programs more effectively, which also entails dramatic improvements in the quality and scale of literacy programs. And third, to mobilize new resources for literacy.

These objectives are in full line with the national priorities of E-9 countries as set out in reports prepared for this meeting. You have not only set quantitative targets, but also emphasized the importance of improving the quality of literacy provision in all settings, formal and non-formal. To be effective, programmes must make a difference. They must speak to people's lives, empower girls and women, carry hope and unlock opportunities.

Naturally, this specific attention to youth and adult literacy programs must be integrated with national education policies that span the whole learning continuum, from early childhood, through primary and secondary education, technical and vocational training, and beyond. As I said at the outset, literacy is a foundation for learning.

Achieving Education for All is not only about guaranteeing every child a place in school, but also about ensuring that each one of them learns. However, national and international assessments show that large numbers of children – often those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds – are leaving school with poor literacy skills. This has very serious implications not just for their personal future, but for the whole endeavor to achieve universal literacy.

The cornerstone of achieving Education for All is national leadership, commitment, and ownership. This is no less true for literacy. It is the responsibility of countries to determine their own path to achieving Education for All but it is our collective responsibility to ensure that the right to education is enjoyed by all.

Be assured that in all my discussions with heads of State and government in all regions, here in Africa with the African Union Commission, in G8 and G20 countries, with the United Nations' Head of Agencies and the Secretary-General, with the media and others, UNESCO will continue to call for a holistic, inclusive approach to education and development and for increased funding to education, including funding for literacy. Indeed, during a recent visit to the Republic of Korea, I urged the government and chairperson of the G20 organizing committee to make education a full-fledged part of the next meeting's agenda. I am convinced that it is vital that we bring our advocacy to this level and that we build the necessary coalitions so as to further enhance our chances for education.

Our success lies in the change literacy brings to people's lives. Every 8 September, on International Literacy Day, UNESCO awards prizes to programs that show the way, in some of the poorest and most remote communities. They stand as a reminder that at all ages, access to learning can break the isolation of poverty and bring about deeply positive change.

Everyone gains from investment in literacy – individuals, families, communities and nations. As the stewardship for hosting the E-9 initiative passes from Indonesia to Nigeria, let me reiterate UNESCO's commitment to fully support your efforts. Your collective clout – that can be counted in billions of people – has the potential to make literacy a real driver for development.

As a Chinese proverb says, if you are planning for a year sow rice. If you are planning for a decade, plant trees. If you are planning for a lifetime, educate people.

I look forward to hearing about the outcomes to this Meeting and wish you fruitful and stimulating exchanges.

Thank you very much.