



United Nations  
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pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
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para la Educación,  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,  
Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion  
of International Literacy Day 2007**

**8 September 2007**

Today, we celebrate International Literacy Day 2007. Each year for over four decades, on 8 September, UNESCO has reminded the international community where we stand in relation to literacy and adult learning. However, despite many and varied efforts, literacy for all remains an elusive target. As the year 2007 is the half-way point in the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), it is an appropriate moment to review the global literacy challenge.

In today's world, some 774 million adults lack minimum literacy skills; one in five adults is still not literate and two-thirds of them are women; 72.1 million children are out of school and many more attend irregularly or drop out; and literate environments with access to reading material and suitable publications are lacking, with the result that neo-literates cannot sustain their skills.

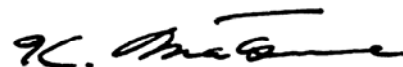
These numbers give a striking idea of the dimensions of the global literacy challenge, but they are only part of the complex picture we face. Our understanding of who is literate and who is illiterate has evolved considerably over the years, giving rise to new implications for both policies and programmes. The practices of literacy are changing rapidly in contemporary societies in response to broad social, economic and technological changes. Indeed, only a plural notion of literacy can capture the variety of literacy practices undertaken by women and men across the world in their everyday lives.

This year, International Literacy Day is placing a special focus on the vital relationship between literacy and health, which is also the thematic emphasis of the 2007-2008 biennium of the United Nations Literacy Decade. This relationship brings

benefits to all age groups: early childhood, school children, adolescents and adults. Most often, these benefits come through the empowerment of women and men: self-confidence and critical thinking have extremely positive effects on the health of individuals, families and communities. Literacy strengthens the capabilities of people to take advantage of healthcare and educational opportunities – for example, by seeking medical help for themselves and a sick child, by adopting preventive health measures such as immunisation, and by acquiring greater knowledge of family planning methods. Moreover, good health and nutrition are prerequisites for effective learning, especially but not only in the early years. Educated parents, especially mothers – whether through formal schooling or adult programmes – are more likely to send their children to school and have a better understanding of their healthcare needs.

On International Literacy Day 2007, I call upon governments, international organizations, civil society and the private sector to give renewed support to literacy as an integral aspect of the universal right to education and as an essential basis for improving health conditions. Literacy does not stand alone, nor does health. Literacy, in fact, is key to good health and well-being.

We must act now, together, to build a literate world, sharing the social and human benefits of literacy. In particular, let us ensure that the links between literacy and health are strong for the benefit of millions of men, women and children around the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Matsuura', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Koïchiro Matsuura