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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS LITERACY DECADE (2003-2012) AND SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE POST-DECADE PERIOD

SUMMARY

Pursuant to 186 EX/Dec.5 (I) and further to 191 EX/4 INF.2, the Director-General submits to the Executive Board a report of the implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) and proposes recommendations for the post-Decade period.

This document has financial and administrative implications for document 37 C/5.

Action expected by the Executive Board: proposed decision in paragraph 21.

Introduction

1. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) towards education for all (EFA) was proclaimed by resolution 56/116 of the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 as a global framework to ensure intensive, focused and sustained collective efforts for the promotion of literacy and literate environments. UNLD's vision "Literacy for All" recognized the need to establish stronger linkages between formal and non-formal education and also between child and adult literacy in policy design and practice. It was implemented by countries and development partners, guided by their own plans as well as global frameworks, notably the UNLD International Plan of Action (United Nations resolution 57/166, 2002) and the UNLD International Strategic Framework for Action (2009). It ended on 31 December 2012.

2. Further to the initial findings of the UNLD evaluation contained in 191 EX/4 INF.2, the present report provides a summary of the UNLD final evaluation report prepared in compliance with the United Nations General Assembly resolution (A/RES/65/183), by which the United Nations Secretary General was requested, in collaboration with UNESCO, to undertake a final evaluation of the implementation of the UNLD International Plan of Action with specific recommendations for the post-Decade period. The final evaluation was conducted based on: results of the 2011 UNLD Expert Group meeting and consultations with Member States and development partners; national progress reports for the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) II and the UNLD final evaluation (2012) provided by 129 countries; the previous reports on UNLD submitted to the United Nations General Assembly and UNESCO's governing bodies, including the mid-term Decade report (A/63/172); and other relevant documents.

Literacy in a changing world

3. Literacy is essentially related to written language as a means of communication and is seen as a continuum of skills, from the basic to the most advanced, acquired throughout a lifetime. Situating literacy at the heart of the global efforts to achieve EFA, the UNLD put forward a "renewed vision of literacy", addressing the "new literacies" required in today's society going beyond the conventional concept of literacy as a set of reading, writing and numeracy skills (3Rs).¹ During the Decade, countries' concepts of literacy evolved and many of those in actual policies and programmes departed from 3Rs and "functional literacy"² to meet diverse demands in the evolving contemporary world.³

Progress on the literacy and EFA goals

4. Along with the internationally-agreed goals and frameworks, notably the EFA goals and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UNLD ensured longer-term support for literacy in key areas related to EFA goals 3, 4, 5 and 6. It also aimed at enriching literate environments and improving the quality of life. Overall, the Decade was marked by steady progress towards EFA goal 3 on meeting learning needs of young people and adults and EFA goal 4 of a 50% reduction in the adult illiteracy rates, despite population growth. Not only did the global adult literacy rate rise from 82% in 2000 to 84% in 2011, but also the number of adult illiterates fell.⁴ The youth literacy rate has also risen gradually from 87% in 2000 to 90% in 2011, and the number of illiterate youths dropped.

5. Yet, there are enduring challenges. Some 744 million adults and 123 million young people lacked basic literacy skills in 2011. Even in developed countries, 160 million adults are functionally

¹ UNESCO (1958) *Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics* in Records of the General Conference. Tenth session.

² UNESCO (1978) Revised Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics

³ UNESCO (2013) Global Report on Adult Literacy and Education II (GRALEII)

⁴ This section relies on the UIS (2013) Information Paper June 2013 based on 2011 data, unless other sources are provided. The UIS calculates regional averages per census decade. The years 1990 and 2000 are used as shorthand references to the census decades 1985-1994 and 1995-2004. The most recent data from the current census decade, 2005-2014, are presented as data for 2011.

illiterate.⁵ There are disparities across regions, countries and populations. On the current trend, 743 million adults mainly in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and 98 million young people will be illiterate in 2015. It is projected that only 30 of 134 countries with data will reach or exceed the EFA goal 4 and the rest will miss the target. It is alarming that two thirds of the illiterate adult population continue to be women in 2011; the proportion remaining unchanged over 30 years.

6. Access to schooling increased and the number of out-of-school children fell from 108 million in 1999 to 57 million in 2011. Progress towards the EFA goal 5 was encouraging, in particular gender parity in primary school. However, universal primary education by 2015 is still a distant reality for 29 countries,⁶ and disparities in access, attendance and progression across populations persist. Gender parity and equality is still to be achieved. In 2011, 57 million children of primary school age and another 69 million children of lower secondary school age were not in school⁷. Moreover, despite good progress, 120 million children of primary age do not reach grade 4 and the additional 130 million who are in school are failing to learn the basics and are graduating with unsustainable literacy skills.⁸

7. More domestic and external resources were mobilized for education. Public spending on education increased on an average by 2.7% a year from 1999 to 2010.⁹ Between 2009 and 2010, national budget expenditure for adult literacy increased in half of the 32 countries with data, stagnated in six countries and decreased in ten countries. Between 2002/2003 and 2010, aid to education also increased by 77% to US \$13.5 billion, of which \$5.8 billion was directed at basic education. However, clearly, there are huge funding gaps that are impeding progress. Further mobilization of resources and their optimum utilization is highly critical to fully realize the vision of a literate world.

8. While multilateral and bilateral partners supported literacy based on their comparative advantages, the private sector and civil society played important roles in innovative service delivery, policy-dialogues, advocacy and resource mobilization. Universities, research institutes and parliamentarians also proved to be key partners.

9. Globally, stronger political will and renewed commitment to literacy was demonstrated through a number of high-level declarations, reinforcing regional frameworks, integrating literacy into education and development policies and restructuring governance systems. Countries moved towards a more holistic approach to literacy with an increased recognition of non-formal education as a flexible alternative mode of delivery and efforts to bridging formal and non-formal modes through equivalency and qualification frameworks. Institutional capacities were developed but shortage of qualified teachers for formal and non-formal education still remains as a challenge.

10. Literate environments also improved, enabling people not only to access relevant materials but also to have the means and opportunities to apply, sustain and advance literacy skills for their and societal benefit. A significant change was the advancement of virtual literate environments with information and communication technologies (ICTs) becoming more accessible and affordable. ICTs have become effective tools for literacy learning enhancement, and there is an increasing recognition that the scope of literacy skills should include digital and information competencies.

11. The Decade witnessed strengthening of education management information systems (EMIS) and a growing interest in understanding competences and skill levels. More countries participated in international large-scale educational assessments including components of literacy¹⁰ and results

⁵ EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UIS (2013) Note on Out-of-school children data trends and analysis

⁸ EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012.

⁹ 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report

¹⁰ They include: The Progress in Reading Literacy Study, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment as well as the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of Quality in Education, the Southern and Eastern African Consortium for the Monitoring of Education Quality, and the Programme for the Analysis of Educational System of the CONFEMEN countries.

of these assessments showed overall improvements of literacy skills of children and young people. In parallel, initiatives such as the Learning Metrics Task Force and the Learning Counts as well as small-scale assessments such as Early Grade Reading Assessment helped sharpen the focus on the quality of literacy learning. UNESCO's Literacy Assessment and Measurement Programme (LAMP) and OECD's International Assessment of Adult Competencies were designed and conducted in view of overcoming the limitations of the traditional adult literacy statistics.

UNESCO as the global coordinator and implementer

12. UNESCO played the dual roles of the global coordinator for UNLD and an implementer of the UNLD International Plan of Action. As the coordinator, UNESCO set up supporting structures, including a UNLD Expert Group, disseminated relevant knowledge and information, strived for more coordinated action, advocated for literacy and monitored literacy progress. It used the EFA coordination mechanisms¹¹ as key platforms for coordination and mobilization, along with others such as the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA and the E-9 Initiative which focused on literacy in 2010 and 2011. The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education ([CONFINTEA VI], Brazil, December 2009) and its follow-up activities were a major boost for stronger commitment and action for adult literacy. UNESCO-led global initiatives such as the Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education also supported the literacy drive. Most recently, the Global Education First Initiative (GEFI) launched by the United Nations Secretary-General in 2012 is contributing to catalyze additional support for literacy and learning. UNESCO was also instrumental in integrating the literacy agenda into global debates and ongoing post-2015 education and development debates.

13. At the mid-point of the decade, UNESCO's activities gave impetus to collective efforts. The 2006 [White House Conference on Global Literacy](#) convened by Ms Laura Bush, the Honorary Ambassador of the UNLD and attended by 30 first ladies and 39 Ministers of Education put literacy high on the global agenda. This was followed by six "UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy" (Qatar, China, Mali, India, Azerbaijan and Mexico; 2007 and 2008) and the White House Symposium on Advancing Global Literacy in 2008.

14. As the implementer, UNESCO assisted national efforts through the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE, 2006-2015) launched in 2006 to support 36 countries¹² furthest away from reaching the literacy goals and through the Capacity Development for EFA programme (CapEFA) to support 21 Member States in the field of literacy since 2003.

15. UNESCO used various platforms and opportunities for advocacy, including International Literacy Day (8 September) and UNESCO International Literacy Prizes (King Sejong Prize and Confucius Prize) and collaborated with UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy and Development, Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, and other UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors. In 2009, the Global Campaign for Education (GCE)'s Global Action Week on EFA and the CONFINTEA VI reinforced the momentum generated by the global and regional conferences, raising the profile of adult literacy. Civil society organizations continued to be powerful advocates for literacy.

16. In collaboration with countries and partners, UNESCO played a key role in monitoring progress in literacy through its Institute for Statistics (UIS) and its annual *EFA Global Monitoring Reports (GMRs)*. UNESCO contributed to improving the measurement of literacy skills, notably through LAMP and Action Research on Measuring Learning Outcomes (RAMAA).

17. UNLD inspired many of these activities, which generated a good momentum. However, greater impact could have been generated if literacy had been better integrated into the global developmental architecture, notably the MDGs. Different levels of ownership of countries and partners also affected their degree of commitment.

¹¹ Notably the High-Level Group on EFA (HLG), the Working Group on EFA (WG) and the Global EFA Meeting (GEM).

¹² It started with 35 countries but it became 36 countries, due to the founding of South Sudan in 2011.

Towards shaping the future agendas

18. The UNLD generated reasons for cautious optimism regarding literacy progress, new impetus, and a heightened literacy profile on national, regional and international agendas. However, there is quite a large unfinished agenda that needs urgent attention and tangible action. Nearly a billion citizens of the world are not able to fully participate in the text-mediated contemporary world because they lack literacy skills.

19. The final evaluation highlighted the following as areas for future action:

- (1) mobilizing stronger political and financial commitment and ensuring coordinated action through coordination, advocacy and partnerships as well as integrating literacy in the future global developmental architecture as an education and development imperative;
- (2) intensifying collective efforts for enhanced education systems and interventions, underpinned by a three-pronged approach to literacy – improving the quality of basic education for children and adolescents; providing alternative learning opportunities for out-of-school children, adolescents and adults; and enriching literate environments – with a particular focus on the marginalized and the quality of literacy teaching and learning; and
- (3) building a robust knowledge and technical base, including revisiting the concepts of “literacies” and improving literacy monitoring and assessment.

20. The gains made during the UNLD need to be consolidated and expanded beyond the Decade. The objectives of the Decade remain as an unfinished agenda; Member States and development partners are highly encouraged to continue their action to create a literate world. Based on the key findings of UNLD’s final evaluation, it is recommended that UNESCO create a global multi-stakeholder partnership in support of national efforts to accelerate progress towards attainment of the post-UNLD unfinished agenda and realizing the vision of a literate, inclusive, sustainable world. National governments, partners, the civil society, the private sector and the academia could work together to forge new strategic partnerships for concrete action to transform the lives of nearly a billion citizens who cannot read and write. UNESCO will lead and support a coalition of partners who believe that literacy can transform our world into a more inclusive, just, peaceful and sustainable planet.

Proposed decision

21. The Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision as follows:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 192 EX/7,
2. Recalling 186 EX/Dec.5 (I) and resolution (A/RES/65/183) of the United Nations General Assembly, requesting the Secretary-General, in cooperation with the Director-General of UNESCO to undertake a final evaluation of the UNLD and submit to the General Assembly a final report on the implementation of the International Plan of Action with specific recommendations for the post-Decade Period,
3. Taking note of 191 EX/4.INF.2, presenting the process and initial findings of the UNLD final evaluation,
4. Acknowledging with satisfaction the final evaluation of UNLD contained in 192 EX/7 and taking note of the progress and achievements made by countries and development partners, areas identified for future action, and recommendations,

5. Clearly recognizing the need to intensify efforts to address the literacy and learning needs of youth and adults, especially women and to enhance the quality and relevance of learning;
6. Expresses their conviction that the post-2015 development agenda should include the importance of literacy across the life span integrated with a holistic view of education,
7. Recognizing with appreciation UNESCO's role and its contribution to the UNLD and the importance for UNESCO to continue to play a key coordinating, catalytic role in the promotion of literacy and literate environments,
8. Encourages the Director-General to continue the process of elaborating a post-UNLD literacy vision and agenda, in consultation with Member States and development partners in view of setting up a global multi-stakeholder partnership.