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PREPARATION OF THE REPORT TO THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS LITERACY DECADE (2003-2012)

SUMMARY

The Director-General informs the Executive Board of the preparation process of the report on the implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) to be submitted to the United Nations General Assembly in 2013. In accordance with 186 EX/Decision 5 (I), the Director-General will present a comprehensive final report on the implementation of the Decade with specific recommendations for the post-Decade period to the 192nd session of the Executive Board (autumn 2013).

Introduction

1. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly at its fifty-sixth session in 2002. The resolution (56/116) states that “literacy is crucial to the acquisition by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills” and reaffirms the centrality of literacy for Education for All (EFA) and development as well as for creating peaceful, just and democratic societies.

2. The UNLD has been implemented by countries and development partners guided by their own plans as well as global frameworks, notably the “UNLD International Plan of Action (2002)” and the “UNLD International Strategic Framework for Action (2009)”. Themes identified for special focus during the Decade were: literacy and gender (2003-2004); literacy and sustainable development (2005-2006); literacy and health (2007-2008); literacy and empowerment (2009-2010); and literacy and peace (2011-2012). The UNLD came to an end on 31 December 2012.

UNLD Final evaluation

3. The United Nations resolution adopted at the sixty-fifth session (A/RES/65/183) in 2010 requested the United Nations Secretary-General, in collaboration with UNESCO, to “undertake a final evaluation of the implementation of the Decade by Member States and other stakeholders and submit to the General Assembly in 2013 a final report on the implementation of the International Plan of Action with specific recommendations for the post-Decade period”.

4. UNESCO initiated the process of final evaluation by convening an Expert Group Meeting on 9-10 May 2011, which was followed by a series of consultations with countries and development partners. In addition to the available information, consultations held with countries and developing partners have provided useful insights. Major consultations included: some 130 country reports received by the Secretariat in response to a joint questionnaire for the follow-up to the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) and UNLD sent to Member States in autumn 2011; consultations with multilateral organizations and the Global Partnership for Education; and meetings with the six regional groups of UNESCO.

5. UNESCO is intending to produce the following as the evaluation outputs: contribution to the United Nations Secretary-General’s reporting on UNLD final evaluation at the sixty-eighth session of the United Nations General Assembly, incorporating the inputs received from Member States, United Nations agencies, and NGOs, and experts; comprehensive final report to be presented to the 192nd session of the UNESCO Executive Board; and a special webpage on UNLD final evaluation.

UNESCO and UNLD

6. UNESCO has played the dual roles of the global coordinator for UNLD and an implementer of the UNLD International Plan of Action.

7. As the global coordinator, UNESCO was instrumental in preparing the International Plan of Action (2002) and has monitored progress through periodical reports submitted to the United Nations General Assembly and its own governing boards, as well as through others such as the UNESCO Institute of Statistics’ periodical monitoring and EFA Global Monitoring Reports (GMR), including the 2006 GMR on literacy. Marking the mid-way, it also mobilized renewed commitments to literacy through the six “UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy” in 2007 and 2008¹, building on the White House Conference on Global Literacy (September, 2006) convened by Ms Laura Bush, the Honorary Ambassador of the UNLD. The

¹ Six UNESCO regional conferences in support of global literacy were held in Azerbaijan, China, Qatar, India, Mali and Mexico in 2007 and 2008.

CONFINTEA VI held in 2009 was also a major milestone for adult literacy. In September 2012, the High-Level International Round Table on Literacy gave a further “push”. For enhanced coordination and advocacy, it capitalized on other platforms and opportunities, including EFA coordination mechanisms, the E-9 Initiative, the Collective Consultation of NGOs on EFA (CCNGO/EFA), and annual celebration of International Literacy Day (8 September), UNESCO International Literacy Prizes, and Global Action Week on EFA.

8. As an implementer, UNESCO has supported national efforts mainly through the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE, 2006-2015), a global strategic framework for the UNLD implementation, targeting the 36 countries that have a literacy rate of less than 50% or a non-literate population of more than 10 million. UNESCO’s Capacity Development for Education for All Programme (CapEFA Programme) has supported over 20 countries to enhance capacities for a more effective literacy programme delivery. UNESCO also enhanced an information and knowledge base, notably through the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), along with other work related to the assessment of learning outcomes for children and youth² and developed new tools to better understand the literacy needs. UNESCO continued to enrich the knowledge base by research, productions and documenting effective literacy practices.

Overview of progress

9. Since 2000, significant gains have been made towards the EFA goals, within which literacy is both crosscutting and an area of specific focus. Globally, the adult literacy rate continued to rise from 76% in 1990 to 84% in 2010.³ Yet the progress was not fast enough and uneven across countries and populations. In 2010, 775 million adults lacked basic literacy skills, with the number of illiterate population even increasing in several countries. Two-thirds of them are women and 86% of them reside in Sub-Saharan Africa and, South, East and West Asia. Moreover, 61 million children of primary school age and another 71 million children of lower secondary school age, many of whom are insufficiently literate, were not in school in 2011. They will most likely join the adult illiterate population, in the future.

10. Globally, the UNLD has provided a framework for securing longer-term support for literacy with new impetus and creating more synergies between activities of different stakeholders. It has also given “reasons for cautious optimism regarding progress in youth and adult literacy rates, and [has put] literacy higher on the international agenda⁴”. In a number of countries, “national policies have led to more dynamic structures and increased funding for literacy”.⁵

11. However, despite the diverse levels and ways in which countries and partners committed to the Decade, literacy challenges remain a genuine concern given multiple variables underpinning the progress. The youth and adult literacy agenda has received insufficient attention. While aid to basic education has doubled from 2002/2003 to 2010 to \$5.8 billion, only \$1.9 billion was allocated to basic education in low income countries,⁶ of which the aid flow into youth and adult literacy was limited, reflecting development partners’ priorities.

² The work include: Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and its collaboration with *Programme d’analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN (PASEC)*; Observatory of Learning Outcomes, Latin-American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education (LLECE); General Education Quality Analysis/Diagnosis Framework (GEQAF); Holistic Early Childhood Development Index (HECDI); and writing assessment in early grades.

³ UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) data for 2010 published in 2012.

⁴ Note by the United Nations Secretary-General on implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade (2008, A/63/172).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Education for All Global Monitoring Report (EFA-GMR), 2012.

Unfinished and emerging issues in literacy

12. While efforts of countries and development partners for the promotion of literacy and literate environments continue, a number of reports⁷ published during the past years and consultations held to date have provided good information and insights about unfinished agenda and emerging issues, as presented below.

13. **Heightening political commitment and leveraging increased resources through better coordination, partnerships and advocacy:** There is an urgent need to strengthen a long-term commitment of countries and development partners for sustained literacy efforts, addressing literacy needs of all – children, young people and adults alike. Political will, further mobilization of financial resources and ensuring more effective use of existing ones are greatly needed.

14. **Strengthening national systems, policies and capacities and scaling-up effective literacy programmes of good quality:** It is imperative to strengthen national education systems and capacities of both institutions and professionals to articulate policies for sustainable literacy further, underpinned by a holistic literacy vision relevant to the needs of the twenty-first century. Such efforts could include bridging formal, non-formal and informal learning, adding new competencies needed for today's social, economic and personal development, and connecting learning to the world of work. This should be accompanied by translation of policies into quality literacy provision and scaling-up of effective programmes in order to respond equitably and sufficiently to the learning needs of the unreached and the marginalized, with a particular focus on girls and women. The quality of literacy teaching and learning requires further improvement based on a systematic, innovative approach to curriculum, learning materials, professional development of teachers and facilitators, and assessment. New and innovative ways to deliver literacy programmes, particularly through using modern information and communication technologies such as e-learning, mobile learning should be widely introduced to revitalize literacy programmes in Member States. Also needed is the development of literate environments which encourage learners to acquire, sustain, improve and apply literacy skills throughout life.

15. **Enhancing the knowledge, information, and technical base:** In the context of lifelong learning in globalized knowledge-oriented societies of the twenty-first century, further articulation of concepts of literacy is critical, taking into consideration key theoretical underpinnings: literacy as a continuum of learning; literacy as a foundation for lifelong learning and what could be “a minimum threshold of functional literacy”, going beyond the traditional set of reading, writing and arithmetic skills to include other skills such as basic digital competency and life skills, and literacy for global citizenship. Moreover, a knowledge and technical base requires further improvement. Also needed is enhancement of education management information systems with more accurate data and information related to literacy, including information on learners and assessed literacy levels, which is a basis for an evidence-based policy environment.

The way forward

16. The UNLD final evaluation presents a unique historical opportunity for the international community to galvanize all stakeholders for accelerating progress towards EFA, leading up to 2015, and envisioning the literacy agenda and action beyond that.

⁷ Including: EFA-GMR Literacy for Life (2006); Mid-Decade Review of the UNLD submitted to the 63rd session of the United Nations General Assembly (2008); The Global Literacy Challenge – A profile of youth and adult literacy at the mid-point of the UNLD 2003-2012 (2008); Global Report on Adult Learning and Education prepared for CONFINTEA VI and based on 154 National Reports submitted by UNESCO Member States on the state of adult learning and education, five Regional Synthesis Reports and secondary literature (2009); UNESCO Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE)'s Global LIFE Mid-term Evaluation Report 2006-2011 – Looking Forward with LIFE (2012); and United Nations System Task Team on the post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda: Education and skills for inclusive and sustainable development beyond 2015 – thematic think piece, UNESCO (2012).

17. The consultations held to date and a number of recent events and reports, including the CCNGO/EFA meeting, the Ninth E-9 Ministerial Review Meeting and the Global EFA Meeting, have already articulated a strong need to both build up and sustain the momentum to advance literacy as a development imperative beyond the UNLD.⁸ This, together with the transcendent values of the United Nations system, emerging trends in development and insights obtained through other global debates, including the Third International Congress on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (May 2012) and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development “Rio+20” (June 2012), would inform the collective reflection on a future literacy vision and action.

18. An innovative global initiative that addresses key literacy challenges and can make a tangible impact on the lives of illiterate populations would need to be put in place. UNESCO is examining examples of actions initiated after the conclusion of previous United Nations Decades and the possible ways in which the new literacy initiative can be most purposefully shaped. UNESCO Member States may wish to present their views and recommendations on the way forward for the consideration of the sixty-eighth session of the United Nations General Assembly.

⁸ The Sixth Meeting of UNESCO’s Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education for All (24-26 October 2012) underscored the need for “significant new investments as well as a broader conception that recognizes literacy as a continuum”; the Ninth E-9 Ministerial Review Meeting (8-10 November 2012) acknowledged “that actions must be scaled up to eradicate illiteracy in the E-9 countries, thereby making a huge impact on illiteracy globally”; and the Global EFA Meeting (21-23 November 2012) called upon education partners to “redouble efforts and increase the sharing of best practices to ensure progress, especially for women” and committed “to national efforts to translate the Paris Communiqué on Scaling up Literacy”.