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UNITED NATIONS LITERACY DECADE: PROGRESS REPORT 2003-2004

SUMMARY

Resolution 56/116 of the United Nations General Assembly gave UNESCO a special assignment for the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012). It was asked to “take a coordinating role in stimulating and catalysing the activities undertaken at the international level”. Further, resolution 57/166 requested that the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in cooperation with the Director-General of UNESCO, prepare a report on the implementation of the International Plan of Action to be presented to the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session scheduled for September-October 2004.

The Executive Board by 166 EX/Decision 9.1.1 encouraged the Director-General to devise the methods and strategies needed to ensure that UNESCO effectively plays its lead role in the United Nations system for the Literacy Decade. It also requested the Director-General to report regularly on the implementation of the Plan and authorized him to prepare the report requested by the General Assembly in resolution 57/166.

In accordance with 166 EX/Decision 9.1.1, paragraph 4, the Director-General submits this report to the Executive Board at its 169th session. It describes progress made to date on the implementation of the International Plan of Action that is designed to advance EFA goals. Particular attention is given to the launches of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) organized during the 2003 calendar year internationally and regionally as well as nationally.

Decision proposed: paragraph 31.

Introduction

1. To give effect to 166 EX/Decision 9.1.1, UNESCO has devoted considerable time and effort to ensuring that the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) has been appropriately launched and implemented at the international and regional levels. Also Member States have been encouraged by UNESCO field offices around the world to celebrate the beginning of the Decade. Further, resolution 57/166 requested that a report be made on the implementation of the UNLD International Plan of Action to the United Nations General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session in 2004. UNESCO has begun work on a study on progress, which will provide details on the many activities undertaken to mark the beginning of the Decade and to make its objectives well known. It will present detailed information on current literacy projects, policies and initiatives undertaken during 2003 to mid-2004 that illustrate what can be done to achieve the goals set for the Decade. This document provides a general picture of progress to date drawing on the study and suggests ways UNESCO can strengthen efforts to ensure success.

The rationale for the United Nations Literacy Decade and UNESCO's role

2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says "Everyone has the right to education". Literacy is the essential building block upon which education rests. However, there are an estimated 862 million illiterate adults in the world today, 63.7% of whom are women. There are approximately 140 million illiterate young people (aged 15 to 24) of whom 86 million are female. Over 104 million children are still being denied access to education. These figures indicate the scope of the challenge faced by the global community. The aim of the Decade is to increase access to literacy for those unable to read and to write.

3. The Decade is primarily focused on the realization of the goals contained in the Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments. Nations committed themselves to six EFA goals. Literacy is the thread that links them all. Priority is being given to Goal 4 aimed at a 50% improvement in the levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and at providing equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003-2004 argues, however, that Dakar Goal 4 will not be met in over 70 countries. Current projections are that, worldwide, there will be roughly 800 million illiterate adults in 2015. Again the majority of them, 63%, will be women. Even assuming growth in primary education over the next decade, a projected 112 million youth will be illiterate in 2015, 67 million of them female. These forecasts suggest that the Dakar targets will not be met if the current trend continues.

4. With this situation in mind, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously approved resolution 56/116: United Nations Literacy Decade: Education for All. Since literacy is basic to UNESCO's role in promoting EFA, the resolution gave it the mandate to: "take a coordinating role in stimulating and catalysing the activities undertaken at the international level". The International Plan of Action identifies the Decade's anticipated outcomes, strategies and six "Areas of Action". These include policy change, new flexible literacy programmes, capacity-building, research, community participation and, finally, monitoring and evaluation.

5. UNESCO has endorsed a plural concept of literacy that recognizes there are many literacy practices embedded in social, political and cultural processes, in personal circumstances and in socio-economic structures. This is the view of literacy adopted for the Literacy Decade as part of the global effort towards Education for All.

6. Yet it is important to note that the Literacy Decade is not the responsibility of UNESCO alone. Its success or failure will depend on the commitments made and actions taken by all stakeholders: governments, United Nations agencies, bi- and multi-lateral development agencies, non-governmental organizations, civil society and communities. “Literacy for All” is everyone’s responsibility.

7. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) proclaimed by the United Nations in the Millennium Declaration of 8 September 2000 are also very relevant to the Decade. Their principal focuses are the eradication of poverty and the universalization of primary education. There is no question that the achievement of literacy and the eradication of poverty and the universalization of primary education are closely interrelated.

Launching the United Nations Literacy Decade

8. “Literacy as Freedom” was the motto adopted for the Official International Launch of the United Nations Literacy Decade at United Nations Headquarters in New York, 13 February 2003. The inaugural ceremonies were co-hosted by the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the Director-General of UNESCO. In attendance as well were the President of Mongolia, the sponsoring nation of the resolution to establish the Decade, the United States First Lady, and the President of the United Nations Association (UNA).

9. Following the New York event, UNESCO organized a number of regional events in cooperation with the Member States. The Literacy Decade was inaugurated in the Africa region in conjunction with the ADEA biennium meeting at Grand Baie, Mauritius, on 4 December 2003, by the President of Mauritius, the education ministers of Mauritius and Gabon, the Minister of Gender, Labour and Social Development of Uganda, the President of UNESCO’s General Conference, and UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Education. The ceremony was followed by the opening of an exhibition entitled “Literacy in Action around the World”. Prior to the launch, a round table discussion entitled “From Gender Parity to Gender Equality: Challenges for the United Nations Literacy Decade” was organized.

10. The Arab region launched the United Nations Literacy Decade in Tunisia, during the Arab Regional Meeting on Literacy and Adult Education (Hammamet, 15-18 July). Seventeen Arab countries were present in addition to members of the Arab Network for Adult Education and Literacy, and other NGOs and civil society groups. The meeting confirmed that literacy has been a major problem in the region and as a result many countries in the region, including Tunisia and Egypt addressed the issue by setting up a high-level department directly attached to the minister with full political support from the president. The meeting also recognized the exchange of information and materials as an important issue that needed follow-up activities such as developing a Decade website, publishing literacy books and conducting literacy training courses. The launch signalled the start of a newspaper and television media campaign organized by UNESCO Beirut.

11. The Asia-Pacific region launched the Decade on International Literacy Day in Bangkok, Thailand, with technical and financial support from the Governments of Thailand and Japan and in conjunction with the Thai celebrations of Education Week and the opening of the International CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review Meeting. The UNESCO International Literacy Awards were presented and a round table discussion took place on “Literacy and Gender in Asia – the Context of the Plural Notion of Literacy”.

12. The Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Launch was held in Santiago, Chile, at the Second Latin American Regional Meeting of EFA National Coordinators and Representatives of Civil Society Organizations, 24 September 2003.

13. As regards national events, Senegal held its launch on 14 September 2003 at Mbour in a ceremony at which the Senegalese President reiterated the country's commitment to eradicate illiteracy. The President of Mozambique introduced the Decade on 30 April 2003 at a ceremony in Maputo. Guinea began the Decade in Kondeva (15 July) and drew attention to its literacy challenges. Mali chose mid-October to inaugurate the Decade with a four-day workshop to review the state of non-formal learning in the country.

14. Thailand's National Launch of the Decade took place on 2 April 2003 and kicked off with a national literacy essay contest and drawing competition. The results of these competitions were on display at the September Asia-Pacific regional inauguration. In Pakistan, the Ministry of Education issued Guidelines for the Strategic Framework of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade in Pakistan explaining the country's policies in the field of literacy.

15. There were activities across Latin America. The Brazilian Ministry of Education instituted the "Program Literate Brazil" aiming at "the full eradication of illiteracy by the year 2006" at a special event attended by the President of Brazil. In Saint Lucia the official launch took place on 4 and 5 February 2003 as part of a symposium on "Literacy and Gender: A National Concern". The Governor General of Saint Lucia declared the Decade open, and the Minister of Education and the Secretary-General of the Saint Lucia National Commission for UNESCO spoke as well. This two-day event featured presentations on the state of literacy in the Caribbean, literacy and the teacher, literacy and productivity, male under-achievement in the school system, gender participation in the National Enrichment and Learning Programme, and presentations by regional participants from Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad. The main subject of consideration of the Central America Encounter on Educational Opportunities for Youth and Adults (San Jose, 22-24 September) was literacy development in the subregion.

16. In Canada the Literacy Decade launch ceremony took place on 4 September 2003 as part of the celebration of National Adult Learners Week. The programme featured Kim Phuc Phan Thi whose childhood image captured the world and defined the Viet Nam War. Ms Phuc, UNESCO's Goodwill Ambassador for Peace, chronicled her own learning journey and the challenges she has faced. An information kit was produced and distributed across Canada. In Washington a special celebration to mark the Decade was held at the Bangladeshi Embassy featuring speeches by the President of the International Reading Association, Leslie Morrow, and the Deputy-Assistant Secretary of Education. A round table was held on literacy and gender and an exhibition on literacy was opened. A media campaign was begun involving the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) series "Children of the CODE".

UNESCO's United Nations Literacy Decade related activities

17. An inter-agency working group, organized in order to share information on the activities being undertaken by each partner agency that contribute to the achievement of the goals of the Decade, met at UNESCO Headquarters (November 2002) to discuss how they could contribute to the launch of the Decade and to the implementation of its strategies. One result of this collaboration was the creation of a special information kit "Literacy as Freedom" that explains the various roles and interests of the participating agencies in the field of literacy with special emphasis on their potential contributions to the Decade.

18. To contribute to advocating literacy, the Jury for the UNESCO International Literacy Awards met in Paris from 19 to 23 May 2003. Thirty projects from around the world were nominated for four awards. The International Reading Association Literacy Award went to the Dhaka Ahsania Mission in Bangladesh, the Noma Literacy Prize to the Panuka Trust in Zambia, and the King Sejong Literacy Prizes to the Tembaletu Community Education Centre in South Africa and to the

International Reflect Circle (CIRAC). There were four Honourable Mentions as well: the Fundación Alfabetizadora Laubach (Colombia) for the International Reading Association Award; the Rabat Al Fath Association for Sustainable Development (Morocco) for the Noma Prize; and the Youth and Adult Literacy and Education Chair, Caribbean and Latin American Pedagogical Institute (Cuba) and to the National Guard, Directorate for Educational and Cultural Affairs (Saudi Arabia) for the King Sejong Literacy Prizes.

19. UNESCO, with financial support from the “UNESCO-Japan Funds-in-Trust for the Capacity-Building of Human Resources”, is working on a special project called Literacy and Non-Formal Education Development in Afghanistan (LAND AFGHAN). Progress was made during 2003 despite difficulties caused by security concerns, a lack of basic information on literacy and NFE, and a weakened Afghan infrastructure. In January, the Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) jointly with UNESCO and the Ministry of Education, Afghanistan, organized a planning meeting on the promotion of literacy and NFE in Afghanistan, which in turn led to the creation of a steering committee. Subsequently, a national survey of learners’ needs was carried out across 400 literacy centres in the 32 provinces of the country. A study of textbooks and a curriculum review were also undertaken to determine future needs. A number of handbooks and materials developed in the Asia-Pacific region under APPEAL (Asia-Pacific Programme of EFA) of UNESCO Bangkok Office have been translated into two Afghani national languages. In September a LAND AFGHAN office was set up in the Ministry of Education. Since there is no organization in the country with the capacity to preserve literacy and NFE documentation, this office has become a Literacy Documentation Centre. Discussions with ANCB (Afghan NGOs Coordination Bureau) are under way to mobilize local human and technical resources to enhance LAND.

20. A potential EFA flagship programme complementing the Decade is the Education for Rural People initiative led jointly by FAO and UNESCO. This initiative has a strong gender dimension which fits well with the priority being given to the literacy needs of women and girls in the first two years of the Decade. It has made strides including a global study done by FAO and IIEP on “Education for Rural Development: Towards New Policy Responses”. The study aims to build awareness about the importance of education for rural people for achieving MDGs. The study identified increasing rural peoples’ access to quality basic education and increasing national capacity to implement basic education plans to address their learning needs as of prime importance. A series of international seminars on Education for Rural People included “Education for Rural People in Asia: Experiences and Policy Lessons”, which brought together ministries of education and agriculture from ten Asian countries to discuss possible common actions to support education for rural people, an aid agencies workshop on “Education for Rural People: Targeting the Poor” and an international symposium on rural education.

21. UNESCO has also been involved in developing “information literate societies”, an endeavour related to the Decade goal of creating literate societies. An initial meeting on the project was held in Prague in September 2003 that was organized jointly by the United States National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) and the National Forum on Information Literacy. UNESCO provided financial support from the special United States Contribution to UNESCO for 2003, and participated actively in the meeting. The objective was to develop a clearer and more comprehensive vision of the role of information literacy, to develop a working definition of the field, and to make preliminary recommendations for a global congress on information literacy. Forty experts from 23 countries attended the meeting. They agreed that information literacy “encompasses knowledge of one’s information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize, and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues or problems at hand”. They saw it as a prerequisite for participating effectively in the information society, and is part of the basic human right of lifelong learning. Since this notion could also be applied to the post-literacy phase of learners in developing countries, participants proposed

that some thought should be given to integrating information literacy into the implementation of the Decade UNLD in close collaboration with UNESCO's Communication and Information Sector.

22. The UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), in collaboration with the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok and with support from the Department of Non-formal Education of the Ministry of Education of Thailand, organized the CONFINTEA V Mid-Term Review Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, from 8 to 11 September 2003. Attended by over 300 representatives of 90 Member States, including ministers and senior-level officials and agencies of the United Nations system as well as non-governmental and civil-society organizations, the Mid-Term Review highlighted the urgency of addressing adult literacy throughout the world. As one of the ten themes of CONFINTEA V, literacy is a key area in adult education so in the Mid-Term Review Synthesis Report: Recommitting to Adult Education and Learning, it calls upon Member States to articulate CONFINTEA V Recommendations for adult literacy and adult basic education with the Decade's International Plan of Action and the Dakar Framework for Action and implement them in the perspective of lifelong learning. It also called upon UNESCO to support the national capacity of Member States as well as non-governmental organizations and partner agencies in: (1) training adult educators; (2) establishing indicators for continuous monitoring of the Decade by 2004; and (3) systematically assessing literacy levels in different countries and contexts. As part of its advocacy strategy to address literacy issues in Europe, UIE has also organized together with the German National Commission a seminar for journalists in June 2003, to sensitize German media to literacy issues. To articulate the first theme on the Decade, gender and literacy, UIE, in collaboration with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) Working Group on Non-formal Education, organized a round table on gender and literacy in December 2003 in Mauritius on the occasion of the ADEA Sixth Biennial attended by ministers and high-level government officials as well as representatives from SIDA, SDC, UNICEF, GTZ and the Austrian Ministry of Development Cooperation.

23. UNESCO, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and UIE joined forces to organize an expert meeting on literacy in Paris, from 10 to 12 June 2003. The focus of the meeting was a definition and expanded notion of literacy and a discussion of the proposed Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (see para. 26). As a result of the meeting, UNESCO's Education Sector position paper on the plural notion of literacy was finalized and prepared for publication.

The monitoring and evaluating of the Decade

24. Both the sixth Strategy and the sixth Area of Action stress monitoring and evaluation. Some countries have begun to invest heavily in various adult literacy and life skills assessments including the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) and OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). These initiatives support the concept that the measurement of literacy should go beyond the traditional dichotomy of illiterate/literate to take into account various functional uses of literacy in social, cultural, economic and citizenship terms. They also suggest, given the distribution of literacy in the world, that there is a need to develop survey tools and analytical instruments that will permit data collection in developing countries. This necessitates approaches that are both affordable and transferable.

25. One major issue is the lack of reliable data on the state of literacy especially in the developing countries. Another is the lack of consistent and dependable information on non-formal education. There is no question that good data are needed in order to understand the current literacy and adult learning situations in the developing world, and to design appropriate interventions in training and policy-making. Methods for assessing literacy and numeracy skills, and measuring participation in formal and non-formal adult education and training in developing countries are also needed.

26. To meet this need, in 2003 UIS launched the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) in cooperation with a number of stakeholders including UNESCO Headquarters, UIE, the World Bank, various international agencies, and technical experts in literacy assessment. Collaboration with local and regional organizations is also expected. LAMP is testing a methodology to measure literacy skills directly to provide data of high quality. It also aims at building capacity in literacy data handling in the participating countries. The hope is that the common measure will become the world standard.

27. Similarly, efforts are being directed at the need for more complete information on non-formal education (NFE), especially monitoring progress towards EFA targets. To meet this challenge UNESCO has initiated its Monitoring and Evaluation of Non-Formal Education Programme to promote widespread monitoring and evaluation of non-formal education in order to guide sound policies and planning, and to improve the management, coordination and delivery of non-formal education at the national and sub-national levels. Plans call for the creation of an international methodology for monitoring non-formal education, including a conceptual framework, indicators, guidelines, the development of appropriate software and capacity-building efforts at the national level. A prototype monitoring methodology is being field tested in Cambodia, India and the United Republic of Tanzania where operational Non-formal Education Management Information Systems (NFE-MIS) is being set up.

The challenges ahead

28. It was the consensus at the International CONFINTEA Review meeting that effective reporting on the Decade will only be possible if initial benchmarking is done to assess where we are with respect to the expected outcomes and areas of activity in the Decade's Plan of Action. This requires more than literacy statistics, important though they are; other indicators related to the six areas of action are vital.

29. The Decade was successfully launched in 2003. However, there has been neither sufficient time nor financial resources to track how various players have responded to the call to action. Establishing a mechanism to do this is part of the plan for 2004. As well, while a good start has been made on the promotion of the concept and the objectives of the Decade, more needs to be done in this field. The policy framework for the Literacy Decade also needs to be re-examined. As the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2003-2004 observes, literacy is not explicitly mentioned in the MDGs and the education targets "... are cautiously phrased".

30. The lack of specific attention to literacy is a weakness in the Millennium Development agenda that must be addressed if the potential of the Decade is to be maximized. The same can be said of the World Bank's Fast-Track Initiative designed to meet the MDG of the achievement of universal completion of primary education by 2015. Its focus is on the education of children and youth. While there is no doubt the education of children is critical, attention to the literacy and learning needs of adults is also important. Literate parents raise literate children. Research findings consistently show that parents with higher levels of education and literacy are in a better position to build a strong foundation for literacy in their children. Therefore the policy framework for the Decade must be holistic and integrated. This means a better alignment of the place of literacy in the Millennium Development Goals and the Fast-Track Initiative, and greater attention to the literacy needs of adults as well as children.

Proposed draft decision

31. In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to adopt a decision along the following lines:

The Executive Board,

1. Recalling 166 EX/Decision 9.1.1, whereby the Director-General was requested to report regularly on the implementation of the International Plan of Action and authorized to prepare the report for the United Nations General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session,
2. Having examined document 169 EX/9 on the progress of the United Nations Literacy Decade;
3. Requests the Director-General to strengthen UNESCO's capacity to fulfil its international role in coordinating the Decade's effort by mobilizing the human and financial resources required to maintain the momentum generated during the Decade launching year;
4. Invites the Director-General to continuously monitor the progress of the Decade and to submit a report to the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session as well as to the Executive Board every two years, beginning in 2005.