CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

READING THE PAST
WRITING THE FUTURE

Promoting Literacy over Five Decades

-a concise review -

CELEBRATING

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YEARS

INTERNATIONAL
LITERACY DAY

# Reading the past, writing the future

As the international community celebrates fifty years of International Literacy Days, it is timely to pause and reflect on how far the world has come in promoting literacy and how the nature of the challenge has changed. Despite huge progress over this half century, the world keeps on changing, new understandings emerge, the population increases and the goalposts shift. This brief publication traces both the progress and the changes, as well as foreshadowing a more detailed analysis of policies and programmes – illustrated by learners' voices – to be published in this fiftieth anniversary year.

A. Reading the past: Fifty years of progress

Literacy data published by UNESCO display a surprisingly steady trend. Since 1950, the adult literacy rate at the world level has increased by 5 percentage points every decade on average, from 55.7 per cent in 1950 to 86.2 per cent in 2015.[1] However, rapid population growth meant that the number of illiterate adults[2] kept increasing for four decades, rising from 700 million in 1950 to 878 million in 1990. Since then, the number has fallen markedly to 745 million in 2015, although it remains higher than in 1950, despite decades of universal education policies, literacy interventions and the spread of print material and information and communications technology (ICT) (*Figure 1*).

Figure 1. The adult literacy rate has progressed at a constant pace since 1950

Number of illiterate adults (million, left axis) and adult literacy rate (per cent, right axis), world, 1950–2015
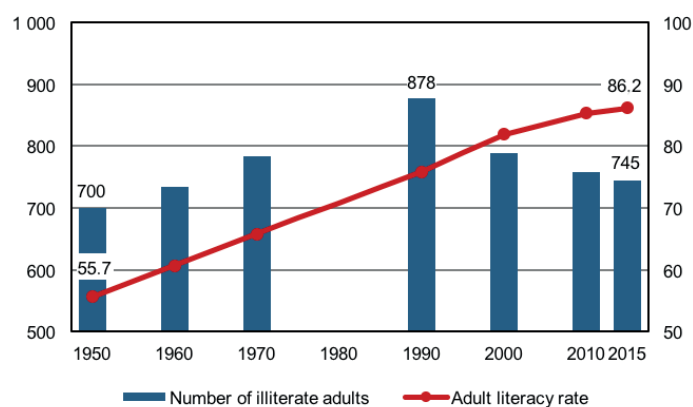

Sources: UNESCO. 1972. *Literacy 1969–1971*. Paris, UNESCO; UIS database.

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1 The latest UIS estimates are for the reference year 2014. They pertain to the 2005–14 census decade and are used for 2010 in this publication. Figures for 2015 are UIS projections.

2 The terms 'illiterate' and 'illiteracy' used in this section reflect usage in the databases of literacy statistics; data based on the continuum of literacy competencies are not yet universally available.

These trends have been far from uniform across regions, so the distribution of illiteracy in the world has been comprehensively reshaped (*Fig 2*). In 1950, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia accounted for one-third of all illiterate adults, and Southern Asia for another third, while the remaining third was spread almost evenly across five other regions, including developed countries (with significant numbers of illiterate adults in Southern Europe). In 2015, Southern Asia accounted for more than half of all illiterate adults, and sub-Saharan Africa for more than one-quarter. The two regions were home to more than 90 per cent of illiterate young people in the world.

Figure 2. Most illiterate persons now live in Southern Asia or in sub-Saharan Africa

Numbers of illiterate adults (aged 15 and above) and illiterate young people (aged 15–24) (million), by region, 1950 and 2015
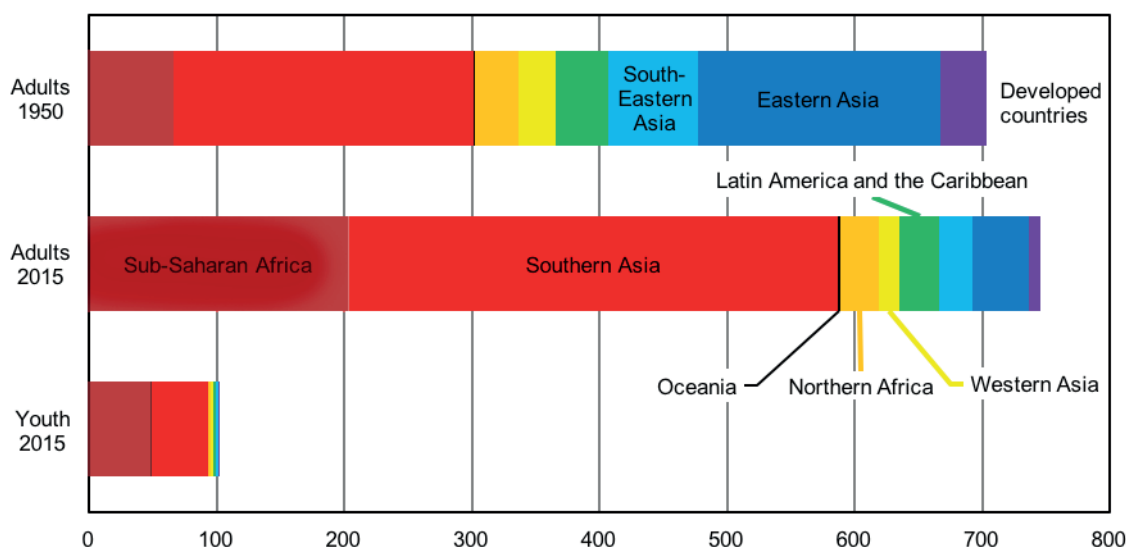
Notes: Regions used in the source for 1950 may not perfectly match the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) regions used for 2015 and for labelling bars. Bars for developed countries include numbers for Caucasus and Central Asia. Regions are sorted in ascending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.
Sources: UNESCO. 1957. *World Illiteracy at Mid–Century*. Paris, UNESCO; UIS database.

Four regional trends stand out (*Figure 3*):

- Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and, to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Caribbean have almost universalized literacy thanks to steady progress since the 1960s. Given their large numbers of illiterate adults around 1950, the spread of literacy in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia appears to be the greatest achievement of education policies and literacy interventions between 1965 and 2015, having fuelled dramatic economic growth in many countries within those regions. In 2015, adult literacy rates were close to 95 per cent in both regions, with youth literacy rates higher than 98 per cent. Latin America and the Caribbean have also reached high adult literacy and almost universal youth literacy in recent decades.

- In Western Asia and Northern Africa, the rapid spread of literacy among young people – especially young women – is a decisive trend of the 1990s and 2000s. While most countries in these regions had low literacy rates and wide gender disparities until the 1980s, regional youth literacy rates reached almost 95 per cent in 2015. The spread of literacy has contributed to the demand for political freedom and socio-economic development expressed by young people in these regions, and will be crucial to their democratization and stabilization.

- Southern Asia has made considerable progress since 1990, owing to the implementation of universal basic education policies (accompanied with the expansion of private schooling). The regional youth

literacy rate rose from 60 per cent in 1990 to almost 90 per cent in 2015. However, progress has been hampered by factors including the persistence of extreme poverty and conflict in several countries of the region, in which schools are often targeted. The number of illiterate adults has merely stabilized and with 43.9 million illiterate young people in 2015, large-scale adult illiteracy will persist in Southern Asia for decades.

- Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania are facing specific difficulties and cannot be expected to reach universal youth literacy rates by 2030 if current trends continue. Owing to its rapid population growth, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in which the number of illiterate young people kept increasing throughout the Education for All (EFA) periods of 1990–2000 and 2000–15, from 37.0 million in 1990 to 49.3 million in 2015, accounting for almost half of the world total. Reaching universal adult literacy in sub-Saharan Africa may be considered the greatest development challenge of the twenty-first century, given its expected impacts on the status of women, fertility, children's development, economic productivity and political processes. Oceania faces a comparable challenge, with literacy rates stagnating since 2000, at a particularly low level among young people.

Figure 3. Literacy has rapidly spread in several regions in the last twenty-five years

Adult literacy rates (per cent) by region, 1990–2015
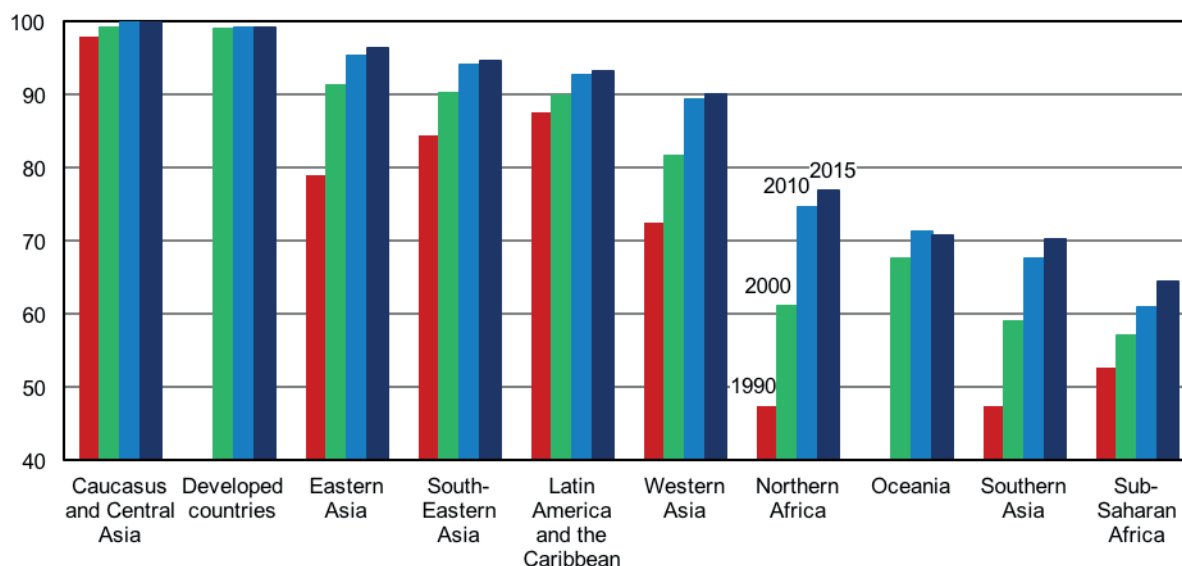
Notes: No data for developed countries and Oceania in 1990. Regions are sorted in descending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.
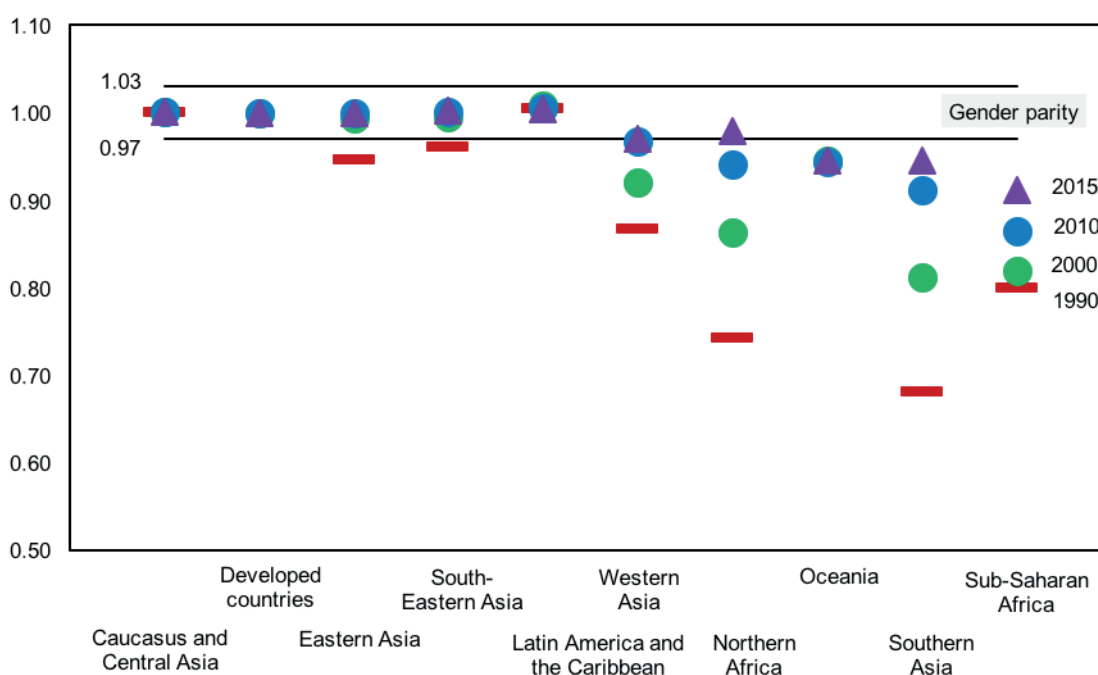*Source*: UIS database.

The spread of literacy among women has been a key feature of the fifty years since the first International Literacy Day was held in 1966. However, the gap between men and women only started narrowing from 1990 onwards, after male adult literacy rates had reached a threshold of 80 per cent. In 1960, 55.1 per cent of women in the world were literate, compared with 66.5 per cent of men, yielding a gender parity index (GPI, the ratio of the female rate to the male rate) in the adult literacy rate of 0.83. Across Africa and Asia, female adult literacy rates were 15–20 percentage points lower than male rates. In 1990, 69.5 per cent of women were literate, compared with 82.3 per cent of men, meaning that the GPI stood at 0.84, not significantly higher than it had been thirty years earlier. Gender disparities remained extreme in Southern Asia, Western Asia, Northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

Therefore, rapid progress towards gender parity over the EFA periods of 1990–2000 and 2000–15 appears to be a radical change, which should keep unfolding over the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) period of 2015–30

and beyond. In 2015, 82.6 per cent of women were literate, compared with 89.8 per cent of men, with the GPI reaching 0.92. Four out of ten regions were at gender parity (defined as a GPI value between 0.97 and 1.03) and two more were very close to it. Progress has been particularly dramatic in Northern Africa and Southern Asia, which had the widest gender disparities in 1990. These trends are even clearer among young people. The world has reached gender parity in youth literacy (GPI value of 0.97), including seven out of ten regions (*Figure 4*). Only sub-Saharan Africa had a GPI below 0.95 in 2015. In four regions that comprise mostly middle-income countries (Caucasus and Central Asia, Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean), there are now slightly higher numbers of illiterate young men than young women.

Figure 4. Progress towards gender parity in literacy started after 1990

Gender parity indices in youth literacy rates by region, 1990–2015

Notes: No data for developed countries and Oceania in 1990. Regions are sorted in descending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.
Source: UIS database.

Finally, the steady global progress towards universal literacy – particularly among youth – is largely due to the significant increases in enrolment and completion of primary education over the last five decades. While expecting that this trend will continue, the 745 million youth and adults[3] who did not benefit from schooling cannot be neglected, meaning that strong policies and effective programmes for youth and adult literacy are essential strategies in the pursuit of learning societies.

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3   UIS projection. The latest UIS estimate is 758 million for the 2005–14 census decade.

B. Observing the trends: Fifty years of changing concepts

Over the last five decades, the conception of adult literacy has significantly changed, with this evolution influencing the way in which governments and other actors plan and implement literacy programmes. This section highlights four influential conceptions of literacy and how they are manifested in programmes on the ground over this period:

- Literacy as a standard skill: organized in campaigns and focused on the decoding and encoding processes in reading and writing, acquired as a stand-alone skill;

- Functional literacy: as an instrument to enhance the use of skills and the quality of life and livelihood;

- Literacy as empowerment: as a means to understand and question the world and problematize social structures and the exercise of power, reflecting literacy as a liberating process;

- Diverse and plural literacies: approaches focusing on the context and life of the learner.

1. Literacy as a standard skill

For centuries, literacy was the preserve of the elite, who used it to record the rulers' decisions and accounts or as guardians and interpreters of holy writings. Early attempts to give the common people access to literacy were often resisted: in the fifteenth century in Korea, King Sejong's development of an alphabet that would replace the need to use Chinese and enable people to read and write directly in Korean, took hundreds of years to become the norm. In the sixteenth century, Luther's efforts to enable universal access to holy scriptures by using everyday German – rather than Latin – were welcomed by some but resisted by powerful elites. From the nineteenth century and with growing industrialization, governments in some parts of the world began to promote universal literacy through schooling, perceiving literacy as an individual skill that everyone should acquire as a basis for education and a means of contributing to rapidly-growing national economies.

Literacy as a skill – the three Rs: reading, writing, arithmetic[4] – was eventually seen as holding universal value for everyone, whatever their context. In countries where there had been no widespread written tradition, illiteracy became an 'evil' to be 'eradicated' (UNESCO 1965), and literacy campaigns emerged as a standardized approach to impart literacy to a large population. Over the last fifty years, the way in which governments have expressed the objectives of mass literacy campaigns has remained remarkably similar. At some point, almost all have referred to the 'eradication of illiteracy' or the 'fight against illiteracy', as expressed in the 1965 Tehran Declaration, using this deficit language rather than the more positive expressions of the same purpose, such as 'promoting literacy for all' or 'universalizing literacy'. While all these expressions – both deficit-based and positive – have been subject to criticism in more recent decades, they served to mobilize national populations and rally national efforts around a common literacy-related objective.

However, there was no consideration of existing patterns of written and oral communication, or the diverse purposes for which learners may wish to use literacy. Furthermore, literacy campaigns were often associated with the propagation of a dominant ideology, either implicitly or explicitly. For example, in the last century, some socialist countries, Ethiopia, United Republic of Tanzania among others, saw literacy promotion as a means also to promote a particular conception of society and forms of governance, backed by political commitment and social mobilization (Hanemann, 2015a). Both the discourse and the practice of literacy promotion through campaigns continue to exert influence, with mixed results.

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4 In recent work, numeracy is sometimes held to be part of literacy or separate from it.

Strong political will and dedicated governance structures gave the campaign approach the best chance of success. The first president of Tanzania – himself an educator – gave high priority to adult education as a lever of national development, launching a mass literacy campaign that led to an increase in the literacy rate from 33 per cent in 1967 to 90 per cent in 1986 (United Republic of Tanzania 2012). However, once the president retired, other areas of national development were prioritized and neither the campaign nor the literacy levels could be sustained. Under the impulse of the Jomtien process in 1990, Egypt set up the General Authority on Literacy and Adult Education (now the General Authority for Adult Education, GAAE), opening literacy centres across the country. Implementation began in 1993, developing and deploying the official literacy curriculum "Learn and be Enlightened": between 1996 and 2010, Egypt boosted its adult literacy rate from 56 per cent to 72 per cent, while the youth literacy rate rose from 73 per cent to 88 per cent. High-level support of a more ideological nature during the socialist regime in Ethiopia (1974–1991) gave rise to a series of six-month campaigns, which reached 9.57 million adults through fifteen languages from 1979 to 1983.

More recently, campaigns have morphed into more diversified approaches. India recognized that its large-scale campaigns had inadequately mobilized local communities and now calls Saakshar Bharat a 'people's programme', with the government acting as facilitator and resource provider, while working closely with local communities to tailor the programme to their needs. Between 1962 and 1985, Nepal persistently launched and relaunched literacy campaigns, but moved away from a standardized approach, giving pride of place to Community Learning Centres (CLC) as local 'centres of educational activities' under community responsibility, charged with offering learning opportunities through multiple approaches and local relevance.

What remained invisible in planning for the campaign approach were the purposes for which people might want or require the use of literacy and the societal patterns of oral and written communication as part of which new literacy competencies might be deployed. Both the positive results and the drawbacks of the campaign approach lie within this tension: on the one hand, large numbers of people had at a least a fleeting opportunity to acquire literacy competencies, but on the other hand, given that the competencies were not embedded in daily purposes of communication, they had little chance of being sustained.

2. Functional literacy

The 1970s saw a move towards linking literacy with development and vocational skills, marking the recognition that literacy serves as a key competence in the pursuit of socio-economic development. Labelled 'functional literacy', it largely focused on small-scale initiatives that individuals and groups could undertake at the community level, through gaining access to new knowledge (on agriculture, processing and marketing produce, crafts and trades), acquiring better management skills (keeping accounts, documenting meetings and decisions, recording harvests, managing irrigation) or participating in economic networks (cooperatives, government registration, funding proposals and reports).

Governments linked literacy with poverty reduction and economic strategies; for example, in Algeria, Bangladesh, Sierra Leone and Zambia. In the programmes of Algeria, Eritrea, Gambia, Sierra Leone and Turkey, the creation of new opportunities and autonomy for women was a focus, demonstrating that functional literacy goes beyond the mere assimilation of new skills and facilitates their use in empowering women to gain a new place and status in society.

A functional orientation in literacy learning may take shape in different ways: the literacy acquisition process may lead to other kinds of training later, or participation in other development activities once a certain level of literacy has been achieved, an approach sometimes known as 'literacy first' (Rogers, 2000). Alternatively, literacy learning may take place together with learning other skills; indeed, NGOs have taken the lead in promoting an embedded approach, placing literacy learning in the context of rights awareness, health and food security (Zambia), reproductive

health, community mobilization and communication (Gambia), vocational and life skills with support for income-generating activities (Sierra Leone), and linking literacy not only with training in trades and income generation, but also with developing the intangible skills for women's empowerment, such as solidarity, human rights, respect, gender equality and economic autonomy (Algeria).

Since the 1990s, Senegal has adopted a policy of working with its diversity of communities and seeking ways to conjoin the efforts of the state with those of civil society and communities themselves. Partnerships within an outsourcing framework – known as *faire-faire* – brought literacy learning closer to the purposes and aspirations of the learners and proved effective in more strongly embedding literacy in the local social and economic fabric. As a result, the model has been taken up across West Africa and beyond; for example, in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Togo. Across the region, the approach has enabled increased efforts for literacy through a substantial joint commitment of the state with technical and financial partners in meeting challenges. It has proven effective, although questions of coordination and quality control remain.

The evolving understanding of literacy leads towards a more embedded approach, taking full account of the purposes, conditions and contexts of its use, with the recognition that literacy is only as valuable as people's intended uses for it, reflecting a process of social and economic empowerment.

3. Literacy as empowerment

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and winner of a UNESCO International Literacy Prize in 1975, pioneered an approach to literacy learning that moved away from the mere delivery of literacy towards questions of what literacy might mean for marginalized and poor populations. Being critical of 'banking' and 'domesticating' types of education and challenging conventional top-down, pre-packaged teaching, he developed the literacy learning process as a locus of 'conscientization' in the course of which communities became aware of the social structures that kept them poor and marginalized and the possibility for them to take charge of change. He reconceptualised literacy as a radical political act, 'breaking the silence' of oppression and questioning the structures that maintained it.

Countries that took up Freire's approach focused on human and social development as much as functional impacts. In Cabo Verde, the literacy programme aimed to boost people's confidence and self-esteem, drawing lessons from the lives of the learners. In Bolivia, on the basis of a law of 2010, literacy was conceived as being universal (fulfilling the right to education), liberating (breaking out of dependency), democratic and participatory (active learners), respecting diverse cultural identity, which includes being intercultural and bilingual. Drawing on Freirean methods, the Latin American regional programme Bi-Alfa simultaneously gave literacy instruction in both the indigenous language and Spanish, sending an important message about the equality of status of the indigenous language and thus raising cultural self-esteem and confidence. The programme also addressed gender inequality, promoted through gender-differentiated learning environments to ensure that traditional patterns of male domination did not disturb the women's learning. New awareness – with some trepidation – on the part of the women was met with perplexity or disapproval from men. These complex reactions illustrate both the transformative effect of promoting gender equality through learning and the fact that literacy learning provides a social space for dialogue around cultural identity and change.

In this literacy approach, the learner-facilitator relationship becomes the central dynamic, where dialogue 'problematizes' the process and context of social change. The flexibility, openness and pedagogical awareness of the facilitator are essential conditions of Freirean methods, whereby literacy may empower people to act in new ways through the dialogue process with and among learners.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Burundi, facilitator roles have been essential in promoting rights-based and peacebuilding programmes in post-conflict situations. Listening to learners in DRC led to literacy

sessions becoming places of mediation and reconciliation, with one programme leading to almost 3,000 cases of resolved conflicts. In Burundi, literacy groups became places to overcome distrust and examine local problems, while in Rwanda church-based literacy learning focused on holistic human development, combined with vocational training to foster the construction of new individual and collective futures.

4. Diverse literacies

During the 1990s, research in literacy focused on social practices, with an emphasis on understanding the social context in which literacy is used and the connections with institutions, systems, structures and the exercise of power. The practice of literacy is culturally and politically embedded and differs according to context in its purposes, uses, languages and its place in networks of communication (Street, 1995, 2005). With this new understanding, studies emerged exploring how literacy is practised in many different contexts across the world, revealing the great diversity of purposes, cultural messages, use of languages, individual and collective significance, dominant, subordinate and 'contesting' practices of literacy. The understanding of literacy as a social practice echoed the work of Freire in that literacy use is situated squarely in the realm of social and political action.

A fundamental insight from these studies was the notion that literacy is plural, namely involving not one standard literacy but rather diverse literacies. Already taking shape in the 1990s (Street, 1995), UNESCO reflected the plural understanding in its position paper on literacy in 2004, stating that 'literacy is not uniform, but is instead culturally and linguistically and even temporally diverse. […] Constraints on its acquisition and application lie not simply in the individual, but also in relations and patterns of communication structured by society' (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13).

Literacy programmes that take account of the wide diversity of contexts and purposes in which literacy learning takes place can be found throughout the past fifty years, without necessarily being recognized as promoting diverse literacies. Two manifestations of this diversity are the varied purposes and languages used in literacy. Some countries have shifted from a more standardized approach towards the appreciation of diverse literacies in recent years. Emerging from a strongly marked campaign approach and concerned about the ongoing literacy challenge, South Africa launched *Kha Ri Gude* in 2008 with the participation of a wider range of governmental and non-governmental bodies. In this instance, the approach recognized the diverse learning needs of different groups using an integrated and multilingual approach. The latter is in line with the language policy of South Africa, which gives official recognition to 11 languages, with others also in use. Holding similar concerns that its National Literacy programme had not reached certain population groups, Botswana launched *Thuto Ga E Golelwe* (It's never too late to learn) to target ethnic minorities and people with special learning needs as well as disadvantaged and often marginalized rural communities. In Cameroon, civil society is the principal actor in adult literacy, focusing on local-level initiatives. Based on principles of local organization and with few outside resources, one such NGO promotes adult literacy on the basis of local language, culture and learning needs, providing facilitator training and support for local material production. Participation in the programme depends on local communities taking the initiative to set up a committee and determine what its literacy needs are, as well as how to meet them.

In retrospect, the influence of changing conceptions of literacy is visible in the developments of literacy programmes on the ground, not in a linear fashion but rather as a slow but steady discernible trend. New influences and trends have emerged, some of which are already reshaping understandings of literacy.

C. Writing the future

The attention given to promoting literacy over the last fifty years, along with huge increases in school enrolment, has not been enough to achieve levels of literacy that give every youth and adult the chance to participate in written communication in a meaningful way. Every region of the world faces the challenge of raising skill levels across the population. In this respect, two regions stand out, namely Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa:

- Strong progress in adult and youth literacy rates in Southern Asia has not kept pace with population growth, and numbers of non-literate adults remain high. Poverty and conflicts in parts of the region have left many millions of young people with inadequate schooling. It is likely that Southern Asia will see large-scale adult literacy needs persist for decades, thus presenting a formidable challenge in achieving universal adult literacy.

- In sub-Saharan Africa, rapid population growth means that absolute numbers of non-literate adults continue to increase. The spread of adult literacy in this region is one of the key global challenges of the twenty-first century, owing to the expected effects on other aspects of development, including women's role and status, fertility, children's development, economic productivity and political processes.

Over the last five decades, the understanding of what literacy is and where it fits in the lives of individuals and communities has changed in major ways, as illustrated in this review. As a means of communication conditioned by its socio-political context, our understanding will continue to evolve, whereby three trends will be important in the medium term: the sustainable development agenda, lifelong learning and the digital society.

1.   Sustainable development agenda

The seventeen SDGs largely focus on improvements in the quality of life, also devoting attention to societal relations (gender, equity, peace, justice, institutions), but not on the processes of achieving them. However, it is here that literacy – and education more broadly – sharply come into focus. Communication involving text is necessarily a part of the processes of achieving each goal, meaning that literacy promotion (initial acquisition, reinforcement of literacy skills, use in new domains) is one of the means that efforts across the SDG agenda will deploy. Demand for literacy will be an integral part of pursuing the SDGs, requiring purposeful and ongoing intersectoral collaboration. Literacy may empower learners individually and collectively, through both the process of its acquisition and its use, to understand and take risks, as well as feeling more capable in terms of acting on their environment. This intangible effect is crucial for the confidence needed not only to face change, but also to influence its direction.

Socio-economic development implies the expansion of information access, increased knowledge, institutional development, transforming and transformed relationships, as well as many other far-reaching consequences, whereby all of these processes presuppose communication, exchange, reflection and learning. The use of literacy in all its modes will be an essential part of these processes, given that being excluded from the circuits of written communication leaves people with a reduced opportunity to shape the implementation of the SDGs.

2.   Lifelong learning

SDG 4 aims to 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning.' The notion of learning throughout life implies the continuous development of learning needs and processes – individually and societally – as sociocultural change takes place. Lifelong learning has the purpose of creating learning opportunities throughout an

individual's life as his/her circumstances, needs, aspirations and challenges evolve in every area. Literacy learning and levels of achievement are integral to defining national qualification frameworks and the validation of prior learning, enabling relevant guidance and greater links between literacy programmes and TVET for low-literate and low-skilled learners. In its diverse manifestations, literacy is integral to the individual pursuit and collective promotion of lifelong learning in the following ways (cf. Hanemann, 2015b):

- As a continuous learning process across all ages and generations, situated in social contexts and going beyond learning in the classroom;

- As a continuum of proficiency levels, combining with the development of other skills.

This will mean a constant re-assessment of what kind of literacy promotion and what learning processes – including the use of ICT – may best enable relevant and effective lifelong learning.

3. The digital society

As the purposes for which digital processes are developed become increasingly diversified, there will be a greater need for those with ICT skills who are able to use them to the fullest extent. This presupposes not only literacy for basic communication purposes, but also higher-order skills in manipulating, interpreting, displaying and communicating data. An adolescent today who has not achieved basic literacy and numeracy competencies through schooling and who catches up through non-formal learning must move quickly to master the skills necessary for processing digital data and information.

With their mix of text, graphics, icons, pictures and symbols, digital documents continue to replace print-based materials. As digital devices become increasingly ubiquitous as learning tools, basic literacy will include how to manipulate them, now reflecting an almost universal set of skills. Literacy acquisition programmes must increasingly plan to include an introduction to ICT devices as part of the instruction process and as soon as possible.

The question is how will literacy best be acquired in the light of much greater demands on its use? Clearly all well-known strategies such as identifying the purposes of literacy, its place in communication patterns, mother-tongue-based multilingual approaches and embedding literacy learning in the learning of other skills will continue to be foundational. Through digital communication, the scope for self-expression and cultural creativity will be expanded, although the dominance of certain languages and bodies of knowledge on the internet also brings the danger of cultural loss and reduced diversity. It is perhaps the embedding of literacy with other learning that will count for the most, since it proposes a learning mode that immediately connects with prospective uses of literacy.

A rights-based approach must continue to underpin the provision of literacy to marginalized groups, and the 'functional' approach should be broadened to mean not so much a livelihood focus, but rather a focus on the purposes that people define for themselves. This echoes Amartya Sen's (1999) central focus in development, which should give the opportunity to improve 'our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value'. Literacy is one of these capabilities.

D. Conclusion: reshaping literacy

These more recent trends will best shape literacy promotion by building on the past lessons of policies, programmes and practices. Moving forward to address ongoing challenges, important lessons from earlier experience and thinking include the following:

- Literacy promotion is complex and connects with the whole of life at the individual and societal levels: it is embedded in context, which shapes, facilitates and constrains the practices of literacy and the ways in which people may acquire it. Engaging multiple actors, researching patterns of communication, understanding the use of languages and discovering actual and potential purposes of literacy will be essential in addressing this complexity. Intersectoral collaboration is essential to maximize the benefits of literacy learning, as part of broader educational efforts (UNESCO 2016; UIL 2016).

- No single approach to literacy learning is adequate; rather, it will vary from one group to another, from women to men and old to young, from one sociocultural context to another, and from one-time period to another. Flexibility, sensitivity to the wider environment and a constant questioning of where written communication fits into people's lives, livelihoods, relations and networks must underpin literacy promotion efforts.

- The use of literacy will only grow if the purposes and needs of individuals and communities can be identified and built upon. This is a factor that differentiates the four main conceptions discussed: campaigns, functional literacy, literacy for empowerment and diverse literacies. In general terms, campaigns never asked learners about the purposes, functional approaches assumed certain (economic) connections, empowering approaches provided a space for learners to discuss what their purposes might be, and the approach addressing diverse literacies assumed that differences are critical factors of programme design. As an overall lesson, respect, dialogue, negotiation and local ownership are key.

- The relations between actors are a critical factor. The nature of governance structures will define the role of government in providing coordination, funding, regulation and quality control, as well as determining how to manage connections with multiple and diverse partners. The strength of dialogue between implementation agencies or NGOs and the communities they serve will affect relevance and ownership at the local level. Having an awareness of these dimensions and devoting constant attention to the relational context are crucial to enabling sustainable and effective learning processes.

- Assuring the quality of teaching and learning requires monitoring both inputs and learning outcomes. The capacity of teachers is a key element, requiring professional development and adequate conditions to match the characteristics of a high-status profession, given that quality never comes cheap. Officially certifying learning achievements also opens up recognized pathways of lifelong learning.

- Across all of the approaches reviewed, funding for adult education and literacy has rarely been adequate. Adult literacy promotion is low on the budgetary priorities of governments and their partners. Few countries devote 3 per cent[5] or more of their educational budget to adult education, and the proportion of the aid devoted to 'basic skills for youth and adults' by Development Assistance Committee countries is the lowest proportion of their total aid allocated to education, at 1.4 per cent in 2014. Progress towards lifelong learning and a learning society will not become a reality without greater financial input.

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5   The 3% level was proposed by civil society organizations as a benchmark for a minimal allocation to adult education and literacy (Archer 2005).

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