International Literacy Day 2018
Literacy and Skills Development

Concept Note

International Literacy Day

September 8th was proclaimed as International Literacy Day (ILD) at the 14th session of UNESCO's General Conference on 26 October 1966. Since 1967, ILD celebrations have taken place annually around the world to remind the public of the importance of literacy as a matter of dignity and human rights, and to advance the literacy agenda towards a more literate and sustainable society. ILD 2018 will be celebrated through: 1) a global event, including an award ceremony of the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes; 2) regional and country events; and 3) celebrations in a virtual space.

Theme of ILD 2018: 'Literacy and skills development'

This year's theme is 'Literacy and skills development'. Focusing on youth and adults within the lifelong learning framework, the effective linkages between literacy and skills will be explored. For ILD 2018, 'skills' means knowledge, skills and competencies required for employment, careers, and livelihoods, particularly technical and vocational skills, along with transferable skills and digital skills.[1]

Connecting literacy and skills: paths travelled

Integrated approaches that connect literacy learning and skills development have a long history. For these approaches, functional literacy has been an influential concept since the late 1950s[2], viewed as a set of context-dependent skills that can engage a person with those activities in which literacy is required for an effective functioning of his or her group and community. Beyond project managed by the education sector, numerous integrated programmes have been managed by other sectors in field such as agriculture, labour and health. These programmes have played an important role in combining literacy, technical and vocational skills, and employability and entrepreneurial skills, as exemplified by extension services and 'farmers school' models. Parts of integrated programmes have targeted specific populations, such as out-of-school youth, women, rural people, low-skilled workers, and indigenous peoples.

There are multiple factors that contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of these programmes. A review of African experiences, for instance, highlighted two enabling factors. 1) competent, reliable and well-supported teachers or instructors; and 2) the consideration of participants' interest and conditions in programme design (Oxenham et al., 2002)[3]. Its findings also indicated, among others, the need to offer concrete and immediate benefits (e.g. income generation) to motivate learners.

Current global context for integrated approaches: new perspectives and demands

The renewed focus on integrated approaches is grounded, on the one hand, in persistent literacy and skills challenges, and, on the other, in the new skills demands and impetus generated by the

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[1] UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012. Paris: UNESCO.
[2] Gray. W. (1956) The Teaching of Reading and Writing: An International Survey. Paris and Illinois: UNESCO, SCOTT, FORESMAN and Company. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000029/002929eo.pdf
[3] Oxenham, J. et al., (2002) Skills and Literacy Training for Better Livelihoods: A Review of Approaches and Experiences. The World Bank.

current context of globalization, digitization and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The state of youth and adult literacy and skills, which were relatively neglected among the six Education for All (EFA) goals pursued between 2000 and 2015, is calling for stronger policy attention. Globally, steady progress has been made in literacy with the increase in the adult literacy rate (15+ years) from 81% in 2000 to 86% in 2016. Yet, the world is still home to at least 750 million adults, including 102 million young people (15-24 years old)[4], who lack basic literacy skills. Moreover, six out of ten children and adolescents (617 million) are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics[5]. If no action is taken, many of the estimated 267 million out-of-school children and young people will be part of the future illiterate adult populations. This lack of literacy skills is also affecting TVET learners. UNESCO notes that many young people entering apprenticeships lack the literacy skills needed to succeed[6]. Recent studies by the OECD highlight the lack of literacy skills as an impediment for fully benefiting from TVET and work-based learning programmes.[7]

Regarding technical and vocational skills, skills gaps and mismatch remain an issue, which, combined with other factors such as insufficient economic growth and rapid technological development, is resulting in massive unemployment and livelihood challenges that particularly affect young people, women and other disadvantaged groups. According to the ILO (2018)[8], the global unemployment rate reached 5.6 % in 2017 while the rate for youth is 13 %. Further, women are less likely to participate in the labour market with less chances of finding jobs. In many countries, the lack of information regarding the labour market demand for skills and on actual skill levels of the population is exacerbating the situation and adds another layer of challenges in managing policies and programmes.

These challenges in skill gaps and mismatch are faced by developing and developed countries alike. For example, the 2018 Global Education Monitoring Report notes that only 2% to 4% of adults surveyed in Egypt, Iran, Jamaica and Pakistan could use basic arithmetic formulas in a spreadsheet[9]. International surveys, such as the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), as well as the World Bank's Skills Towards Employability and Productivity (STEP) program, indicate alarming literacy and digital skill gaps among large adult populations even in developed countries. For instance, one out of ten adults in the OECD and partner countries had no prior computer experience, and a further 4.7% of adults lacked basic ICT skills, such as the ability to use a mouse or scroll through a web page[10].

In addition to these literacy and skills challenges, globalisation and fast-advancing digital technology are transforming ways in which people work, live and learn, and are generating new skill demands and lifelong learning needs. They are also influencing ways in which education and learning are organized and managed, involving multiple actors, including governments, NGOs, communities and the private sector. Many countries are adopting lifelong learning approaches with a focus on learning pathways that are facilitated by multiple actors, paying attention to learners' agency, motivations and career paths. Those lifelong learning approaches require action in multiple areas, notably: 1) policy and strategies (e.g. policy focus, target groups, sectoral priorities); 2) policy measures related to quality assurance and promotion of learning pathways in a coordinated manner

[4] UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). (2017) 'Literacy Rates Continue to Raise from One Generation to the Next', UIS Fact Sheet No.45. Montreal: UIS.

[5] ibid.

[6] Marope, M> Chakroun and Holmes. (2015) Unleashing the Potential: Transforming Technical and Vocational Education and Training. Paris: UNESCO.

[7] OECD (2017) Learning for Jobs: Synthesis Report of the OECD Review of Vocational Education and Training. Paris: OECD Publishing, and OECD (2015) The G20 Skills Strategy for Developing and Using Skills for the 21st Century. Prepared for the third G20 Employment Working Group Meeting (23-24 July 2015, Turkey).

[8] ILO (2018) World Employment Social Outlook: Trends 2018. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_615672.pdf

[9] UNESCO (2018) Global Education Monitoring Report 2017/2018. Paris: UNESCO.

[10] OECD (2016) Skills Matter: Further Results from the Survey of Adult Skills. OECD Skills Studies. Paris: OECD Publishing.

(e.g. developing national qualification frameworks, recognition, validation and accreditation schemes, quality assurance mechanisms); 3) organization and delivery (e.g. needs assessment, type of programmes, organization, learning settings, use of digital technology); 4) governance (e.g. institutions, legal frameworks, decentralization, intersectoral cooperation, public-private partnerships, community involvement); 5) teaching and learning (e.g. content, pedagogy, materials, language); and 6) monitoring and evaluation (e.g. information systems, measurement of skill levels, assessment of labour market, social outcomes).

Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have generated new impetus for collective efforts to address skills challenges and skills mismatch as universal issues. The indivisible nature of the goals and targets urges integrated approaches and intersectoral collaboration, which helps improve not only integrated programmes but also improve conditions and environments required for leaners to acquire, use and advance literacy and other skills to lead to better cognitive, social and development outcomes. Moreover, the SDGs' strong equity and inclusion focus calls for increased investment in the learning for low-skilled people. In this respect, two SDGs are particularly pertinent, namely SDG4 to '*Ensure equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'* and SDG8 to '*Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'*. The Targets and Indicative Strategies for SDG4 included in Education 2030, particularly Targets 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, and 4.6, resonate with the policy areas introduced above. Meanwhile, SDG8 emphasises the importance of labour market outcomes of literacy and skills development programmes, particularly for disadvantaged target groups, including youth Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET).

Ultimately, for policy makers and the international community to invest in integrated approaches, it is important to provide evidence that these approaches have the capacity to respond to multiple demands and lead to better labour market and social outcomes for individuals and, more broadly, sustainable development outcomes for their communities.

ILD 2018: key questions

ILD 2018 aims at providing renewed impetus for collective efforts for making meaningful connections between literacy and technical and vocational education and training through programmes, policies, systems and governance. It will do so by recalling lessons from the past decades and reflecting on the main features of effective integrated approaches emerging in the current context. Key questions are as follows.

- What knowledge and experiences can countries and partners share regarding successes and failures in promoting integrated approaches? What specific policies and strategies are the most effective? What are the success factors?
- What are the evidences of impact of integrated approaches on individuals and their communities? What is their potential to motivate learners to participate in learning?
- How can the international community better support integrated approaches with a view to achieve the SDGs?

Expected outputs

- A review of international trends in combining lliteracy learning and skills development produced and disseminated as an outcome of the celebrations of ILD 2018.
- Knowledge and experiences of integrated approaches consolidated for further reflection and action in the future.
- A community of practice on literacy and skills development enhanced.