International Literacy Day 2017
Literacy in a digital world
Concept Note

International Literacy Day (ILD, 8 September)

September 8th was proclaimed as International Literacy Day (ILD) by UNESCO at the 14th session of UNESCO's General Conference on 26 October 1966 to remind the international community of the importance of literacy for individuals, communities and societies, and the need for intensified efforts towards more literate societies. Since the first ILD in 1967, ILD celebrations have taken place annually around the world, coordinated by UNESCO, countries and partners, to advance the literacy agenda at global, regional and national levels.

Theme and main objectives of ILD 2017

The overarching theme of ILD 2017 is: '**Literacy in a digital world**'.

Main objectives are:
- To reflect on what it means to be literate in increasingly digitally-mediated societies;
- To explore effective policies and programmes for literacy skills development in a digital world; and
- To explore how digital technologies can support progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal 4, especially Target 4.6 on youth and adult literacy.

Background

1. Global landscape: digital economy and society

Digital technologies, including the Internet, mobile phones, and all the other tools to manage information digitally, are fundamentally changing the way people live and work, learn and socialise. This transformation is taking place at record speed with the rapid advancement and expansion of technologies. For instance, mobile subscriptions, which had been a few tens of thousands in 1980, were about 7 billion in 2015[1]. In Africa, mobile subscriptions increased from almost zero in 2000 to around 900 million today[2].

The transformation has both positive and negative sides. For many, digital technologies provide better access to information and knowledge that used to be out of reach or costly, while facilitating the use of obtained information and knowledge. Digital technologies also enable a host of services – including administrative, educational, health and agricultural ones – to be delivered in a more accessible and efficient way. In industry, Industry 4.0, including the Internet of Things and Cloud Computing, has realized a direct and real-time interface between the virtual and physical world to create so-called 'smart factory', bringing about the fourth industrial revolution. For societies that are less equipped with conventional infrastructure,

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[1] Source: Sachs, J. D, Modi, V. et al. (2016)
[2] ibid.

digital technologies are offering opportunities for people to benefit from information and services that are not available in their immediate environments and for policy-makers to bring 'ICT-enabled transformation' into the public services.

At the same time, there is a global 'digital divide' in terms of access to digital technologies, their use and impacts. The broader development benefits associated with the rapid technological advancement are unevenly distributed across and within countries. Around 4 billion people, more than half of the world population, do not have any internet access, nearly 2 billion do not use a mobile phone, and almost half a billion live outside areas with a mobile signal[3]. In 48 Least Developed Countries (LDCs), only around one in seven people is online.[4] Beyond simple technology access, there exist capacity gaps. The knowledge, skills and competencies required to access and analyse the accessed information, and to best utilize it in a given context affect to what extent the "digital dividends" can be reaped or, worse, to what extent the digital divide can be magnified. Usually, the harvest is greatest amongst groups that are already privileged. Those who are marginalized due to their gender, ethnicity, geographical location or economic status, tend to be left behind in participating in our digital societies and digital-enabled transformation.

2. Potential implications for literacy

The rapid expansion of these digital technologies also poses a range of questions in promoting literacy where challenges are still prevalent. Despite the significant literacy progress made in the past decades[5], the world was still home to 758 million illiterate adults and 263 million out-of-school children of primary and secondary school age in 2014.[6] Some 250 million children worldwide, including those who are in school, are failing to acquire basic skills. Considering the nature of the data, however, these figures, based on indirect measurement, could be an underestimation of the degree of literacy challenges and their complexity. The OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), which adopted direct measurement, shows that even in the OECD countries surveyed, 8.9% of adults have poor reading skills and 22.7 % of adults have poor numeracy skills.[7]

Literacy challenges also lie in lifelong learning systems, governance, policies, practice, financing as well as monitoring and evaluation. Collective efforts to counter these challenges will require the consideration of not only literacy's undividable relations with social, economic, political, cultural and linguistic contexts, but also 'digital opportunity and divide', including the following:

- What kinds and levels of literacy skills are required in an increasingly digital world? How could such skills be related to a broader set of knowledge, skills and competencies required in the digital world?
- What are different the dimensions of literacy in digital societies, for which increased attention is required?
- What are the implications for policies, governance and financing for literacy?
- How do literacy programmes need to adapt in a digital world, in terms of delivery modes, curriculum, teaching-learning methodologies, materials, teachers and facilitators, language used, as well as monitoring and evaluation? What are the opportunities and challenges to make literacy programmes available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to all?
- What are the implications of digital technologies for enriching literate environments?
- How can data analytics advance the monitoring of literacy skills acquisition? How can digital technologies change the ways literacy skills are assessed, and made visible through recognition, validation and digital technologies improve monitoring and evaluation?

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[3] World Bank (2016) The world Development Report 2016
[4] Broadband Commission (2016)
[5] UNESCO (forthcoming). Reading the past, writing the future.
[6] UNESCO (2016a) Global Education Monitoring Report 2016
[7] OECD (2016a) Skills matter: Further results from the Survey of Adult Skills

- Which measures can be considered to address inequalities in literacy and to turn the 'digital divide' to the 'digital opportunity' towards more literate societies?
- What are the different dimensions of literacy in the digital societies, for which increased attention is required?