



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture

Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura,  
Director-General of UNESCO  
on the occasion  
of International Literacy Day**

**8 September 2008**

More than halfway through the UN Literacy Decade launched in 2003, one in five young people and adults aged 15 years and over does not possess the most elementary skills required to read a street sign, a child's book, a map, a newspaper, names on a voting ballot or instructions on a medicine bottle. In a world increasingly driven by knowledge and technology, a staggering 774 million adults are illiterate. We are far from the goal of halving the number of illiterate persons around the world by 2015. Even though literacy rates have risen, the absolute number of illiterates has increased in some regions due to population growth. This represents a genuine threat for human development.

This year's International Literacy Day puts the spotlight on the connections between literacy and health. Today's gravest health concerns cannot be adequately addressed unless literacy finds a central place in public health policies and strategies. An illiterate person is simply more vulnerable to ill-health, and less likely to seek medical help for themselves, their family or their community. Nearly ten million children die before reaching age 5, most often of preventable infectious diseases, and it is children of the poor who are less likely to be treated for serious illness. The risk of contracting malaria – which claims over one million lives each year – is increased significantly amongst illiterate populations, with literacy levels having a direct impact on health-seeking behaviours. Women with post-primary education are five times more likely than illiterate women to know facts about HIV and AIDS. This is why the Millennium Development Goals directly or indirectly related to health – eradicating extreme poverty, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combating HIV and malaria – cannot be reached without a literacy dimension.

Literacy is about empowerment. It increases awareness and influences the behaviour of individuals, families and communities. It improves communication skills, gives access to knowledge and builds the self-confidence and self-esteem needed to make decisions. A woman who participates in a literacy programme will have better knowledge of health and family planning. She will more likely adopt preventive health measures for herself and for her children; she will more easily seek medical help and make use of the available medical services; finally she will be able to follow medical instructions more easily to ensure adequate treatment for herself or close-of-kin. In short, literacy is a powerful yet too often overlooked remedy to health threats, with the potential to promote better nutrition, disease prevention and treatment.

The winners of the 2008 UNESCO International Literacy Prizes offer inspiring examples of how literacy impacts powerfully on the promotion of healthy societies. Operation Upgrade's "Kwanibela Project" in South Africa offers an innovative approach to integrating knowledge about HIV and AIDS into literacy programmes. The "Reflect and HIV" programme in Zambia organized by the People's Action Forum is remarkable for its cultural programmes in mother tongue languages. The Brazilian programme "Alfabetizando com saude" shows the benefits of successful collaboration between municipal health and education bodies in the city of Curitiba. The programme reaches people with various long-term illnesses, enabling them to take better care of themselves and break their sense of isolation. In Ethiopia, the "Literacy Plus" programme targeting rural women has led to the increased use of malaria nets.

These innovative and successful literacy practices show that when health is at stake, literacy has a major role to play.

UNESCO is actively engaged in encouraging countries to adopt policies that explicitly tackle literacy and build on the valuable work often led by civil society. Several initiatives, including UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), a series of six high-level regional conferences on literacy in 2007-2008, and the forthcoming Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) to be held in Belém, Brazil, in May 2009, point to renewed momentum.

But this is just the cusp of change. It is essential for countries to show greater leadership and to increase spending on literacy, and for donors to give it a higher

profile in their aid portfolio. There is an urgent need to scale up youth and adult learning programmes, to improve their quality, and to develop a rich literate environment where individuals of all ages are encouraged to sustain and use their newly acquired skills.

The challenge ahead is our collective responsibility.

Koïchiro Matsuura