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Roundtable 2: Education and literacy
Chair: Vice-President of ECOSOC
Leader Organizers: UNESCO and UNICEF

Education for All Dakar Goal 2: *Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.*

Education for All Dakar Goal 4: *Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic education and continuing education for all adults.*

Education for All Dakar Goal 5: *Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.*

Millennium Development Goal 2: *Achieve universal primary education. Target 3: Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling*

Millennium Development Goal 3: *Promote gender equality and empower women*: *Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015. (See annex 1 for all goals)*

A commitment to literacy for all: a development and human rights imperative still to be concretized

The international community has committed and re-committed itself to the promotion of a fully literate world through quality universal primary education and quality adult literacy provision through formal and non formal education for over fifty years. Most recently, the Millennium Development Goals adopted at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000 declared the world's targets for drastically reducing extreme poverty and placed education squarely among the essential means to do so. The goal set for 2015 in Millennium Development Goal 2 and Education for All goals 2 and 4 remain elusive. The international community is now called upon to take concrete action to ensure that those goals are met. Yet, the Millennium Development Task Force on Education and Gender Equality reported on 1 October 2004 that, in spite of a long history of international goal setting through United Nations and other international bodies' conferences and declarations, there is little evidence that increased public spending, donor assistance and enrolment have followed as a direct and sustained consequence [1]. Moreover, the increasingly clear necessity for gender equality and empowerment of women, notably through education for the realization of all the Millennium Development Goals is yet to be transformed into concrete action through existing national and international commitments. Indeed, it can be argued that the realization of the MDGs is not in any case, more than a minimum**.** All the Education for All goals, meaning a comprehensive, system-wide, indeed, sector-wide approach, to education is essential for sustainable improvement in any specific level. Also, a systemic approach to educational planning, governance and sustained resource allocation is as important for adult literacy as it is for primary education. Without attention to early childhood well-being and education, children may be disadvantaged before they even arrive at school. The quality of primary schooling depends on many factors not the least of which is the quality of secondary and higher education that their teachers receive. And the basic literacy, let alone lifelong learning possibilities of adults, women especially, and out-of-school youth are critical to sustainable personal, community and national development.

The international community's first commitment to education as a basic human right is, of course, contained in Article 26 of the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (adopted on 10 December 1948). International conferences and declarations, such as the International Conference on Human Rights, (Teheran on May 13, 1968) in its Proclamation of Teheran stated: 'The existence of over seven hundred million illiterates throughout the world is an enormous obstacle to all efforts at realizing the aims and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations and the provision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. International action aimed at eradicating illiteracy from the face of the earth and the promotion of education at all levels requires *urgent attention*'. [2] This urgency has been addressed regularly directly and indirectly since then, but especially since 1990 in:

- World Summit for Children, New York, 29-30 September 1990;
- United Nations International Literacy Year, 1990 (New York);
- 'World Declaration of Education for All' at the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien, Thailand) 1990;
- 'Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development' at the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995);
- 'Beijing Declaration' at the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace (Beijing, 1995);
- 'Hamburg Declaration' on Adult Education at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (Hamburg, 1997);
- International Conference on Population and Development (IPCD + 5), 1999;
- Review of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (Beijing + 5), 2000;
- Millennium Summit: The role of the United Nations in the 21st Century, New York, 2000;
- 'Dakar Framework for Action' at the World Education Forum (Senegal, 2000);
- Brussels Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2001-2010, adopted in May 2001
- 'Johannesburg Declaration' on Sustainable Development at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002);
- International Conference on Financing for Development, Monterrey, 2002;
- General Assembly Special Session on Children, New York, 2002;
- 'International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade', 2003-2012 (New York, 2002);
- World Summit on the Information Society, Geneva 2003;
- United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development, 2005-2014 (New York, 2005).

Why have so many international conferences and their goal-setting led to modest results and what do we know about such processes? Historically, as argued by the Millennium Project Task Force on Education, there has been an imperfect link between the political and technical levels. The feasibility of the goals was not clear before they were pronounced. And in many cases, the goals appear to oversimplify complex social and economic issues in order to advocate for change. Global goals also neglect the diversity of contexts and progress already achieved in some countries. Above all, goals pronounced in an international forum by a leader may not withstand competing priorities on the domestic scene. So, while goal-setting is essential to mobilize international attention, it must be followed by clear realizable targets

identified at national, regional and local levels where specific progress can be measured. The Task Force on Education concludes: 'Achieving the MDG in education will require a major change in the approach to education at both the international and the country levels' [3]

This is not to underestimate the task. All societies reproduce themselves through their education systems and the non formal or informal learning opportunities they provide. The state of a country's education reflects the political, social and economic context. This is not new. The context is simply more complex in 2005 than it was even in the 1990s, with the impact of globalization, insecurity and changing multilateral relations. An increasing number of countries are directly and indirectly affected by conflict. The Task Force on Education and Gender Equality also reported that nearly half of the 104 million out-of-school children, two-thirds of whom are girls, live in countries in conflict or post-conflict settings [4]. Girls and women are the first and most severe victims in conflict and crisis. Women in poverty find their plight exacerbated by the instability and violence that prevail in these situations. They are increasingly the head of lone parent families in poverty. Conflict increases the likelihood of their poverty and vulnerability. Yet, formal education and access to out-of-school youth and adult literacy provision on their own cannot be expected to effect change for the major political and economic problems confronting today's world.

The state of primary education in the world: the data

The latest available data in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 on three indicators gives a fair idea of the state of primary education. The expansion of formal schooling is slowly reducing the number of out-of-school children of primary-school age, from 106.9 million in 1998 to 103 million in 2001. But this pace will not lead to universal primary education by 2015 under current circumstances. Girls represent some 57% of out-of-school children (more than 60% in the Arab States and South and West Asia), as against 59.5% in 1998. The net enrolment ratio (NER) gives part of the picture as well. It reflects the extent to which children who are in the official age group for a specific level of schooling are actually enrolled. They do not, however, take into account overage pupils in a class or grade repetition. Regional differences are significant. In many sub-Saharan African countries, many of which are LDCs, several Arab States and Pakistan, NERs are below 70%. Several education systems in Central and Eastern Europe have NERs between 70% and 90%. Girls' participation is markedly lower than boys in seventy-one out of 175 countries. With only three exceptions, all the countries with a gender parity index below 0.90 are in sub-Saharan Africa (notably West Africa, the Arab States and South and West Asia). Finally, completion of primary schooling remains problematic. Children in low-income countries may not attend school or leave because of cost, need to supplement family income or a classroom environment that is not safe or appropriate to learning. Although survival rates to grade 5 increased in many countries during the 1990s, they fell short of 75% in thirty out of ninety-one countries and were below 66% in half of the sub-Saharan African countries. Substantial declines in many countries reflected deterioration in teaching and learning conditions. [5] The literacy rates of 15-24 year olds is also an indicator of the state and quality of formal schooling (see section on literacy below).

The quality of educational provision in the world

The World Development Report 2004 [6] provided a grim picture of the challenges to quality educational provision system-wide: 'unaffordable access, dysfunctional schools, low technical quality, low client responsiveness, and stagnant productivity'. In spite of more than fifty years' recognition that universal literacy and primary education are essential to national development and numerous international declarations, even full school enrolment has not

been achieved. In a large number of countries, significant progress cannot be made in the current political and economic climate. The poorest countries and the poorest families within those countries are the most severely disadvantaged. They may even be unable to meet their basic food needs, which also prevent them from sending their children to school and instead keeping them at home to help with family chores or support the generation of income. But in the growing number of countries affected by international or internal conflict and crisis or natural disaster, poverty is aggravated by destruction, displacement and failed state institutions to ensure public services. Schools themselves may be 'dysfunctional' for many reasons including teacher absenteeism due to lack of motivation or infrequent pay. The devastating impact of HIV/AIDS on teachers and learners alike is increasingly taking a direct toll on the availability of schooling at all. Furthermore, schools may provide little in the way of real learning opportunities and outcomes or they may appear to be the result of a distant government that is not responsive or accountable to local communities. Also, while educational spending may actually increase, it may not reach learners in the form of well-constructed school buildings, textbooks and trained teachers. The language of instruction may be an obstacle to learning or teachers may not be trained to convey a curriculum in a second language. Also, the national language policy and especially the language in education policy, have a critical impact on any learning. The choice of language of instruction or some form of bilingual transition or language maintenance instruction may be the single most important choice to be made by education decision-makers for the success of literacy and other knowledge acquisition. Increasingly, mismanagement of public funds or privatization without public quality control is being recognized as problematic around the world.

These problems are not without solutions, however. One initiative growing out of increasing international concern about the coordination, effectiveness and responsiveness of education interventions in situations of emergency and crisis, has been the development of minimum standards to apply throughout the international and non-governmental agency community. These standards are both a grass-roots practitioner and international intergovernmental initiative through the Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies. (See Annex 2).

Equitable and effective school systems are not necessarily centralized or decentralized. According to a considerable body of national and international experience, success is best achieved through accountability, clear objectives, adequate resources and capable and motivated providers. It has also been argued by the World Development Report 2004 that successful education systems need to include: (a) the effective voice of the poor in both the school system's objectives and the public resources that go to education; (b) a compact between policymakers and providers of schooling to balance the autonomy of schools and teachers with performance assessment; (c) schools (and school systems) must be enabled to manage for performance—and, particularly, to find effective ways to train and motivate teachers; and (d) direct parent and community participation in schools' well-being and integration into the communities they serve. [7] The provision of a school meal or a take-home ration may encourage children's, and particularly that of girls, in enrolment and retention in school.

The state of literacy in the world

According to the estimates published by the EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2005, there are nearly 800 million adult illiterates in the world (adult defined as 15 or over), representing 18% of the adult population [8]. Literacy in this context is defined with the standard UNESCO statistical definition that 'literacy is the ability to read and write, with understanding, a simple statement related to one's daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and

often includes also basic arithmetic skills (numeracy)'. More than half (64%) of adults lacking any basic literacy skills are women. Regional differences and differences even within countries are great. Of the world's adult illiterates, over 70%, or 562 million persons, live in only nine countries, with some 34% in India alone. The other countries are either countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States or South and West Asia with low literacy rates (below 70%) and sizeable populations (Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia), or populous countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and East Asia and the Pacific with high literacy rates but large absolute numbers of illiterates (mostly China, with a literacy rate of 91%, but also Indonesia and Brazil, both with a literacy rate of 88%). The gender parity index gives a clearer picture of gender disparity with respect to women's basic skills acquisition (ratio of the literacy rate for females to that of males). It varies from 0.63 to 0.77 in south and West Asia, the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa, and is over 0.90 in the rest of the world. And low overall literacy rates inevitably mean even lower female literacy. (9)

Adult literacy is also more than a developing country issue. Both developing and industrialized countries have long recognized that their entire populations do not necessarily have the basic literacy skills they need, regardless of whether they have attended formal schools. And indeed, there may be evidence that, as the public investment in schooling and adult education declines, the quality of educational provision is affected. This may be increasingly the case in countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as the developing world. It is undoubtedly the case in countries suffering from natural or man-made crisis. Again, women in poverty in all regions of the world are more likely to have limited access to basic skills training and to be heads of lone parent families where the demands on them are great.

Youth literacy for the population between 15 and 24 is an important indicator for Millennium Development Goal 2 and EFA. The state of youth literacy is a reflection of a country's ability to deliver basic skills through formal schooling. UIS data published in the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005 indicates that there are nearly 137million illiterate youths in the world. 85 million are female. Youth literacy rates are above 70% in all regions, although many countries do not reach the average. The youth illiteracy rates range from 2% in East Asia and the Pacific to 28% in South and West Asia. Gaps between men and women are especially great in South and West Asia, the Arab States and sub-Saharan Africa. [10]

One of the critical issues on literacy is that currently existing data are not perfect. Reliable data on literacy is required in order to monitor and assess the current literacy situation in given countries and develop appropriate interventions in both policy-making and programme design. Given context-specificity and local variation, the challenge lies in forging a methodology for producing reliable and comparable data on literacy proficiency at national and international levels. In a recent effort to assist (especially developing) countries in bettering the contents and methodologies of literacy assessment informing national and international policy decisions, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) together with other stakeholders such as the World Bank has launched the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP). This programme aims at developing a methodology which can be adapted for use in different contexts and yet provides data for international comparison.

Education and gender: key to all the goals

An historical perspective on the spread of literacy and education over centuries will not demonstrate that there is always a causal link between the growth of literacy and economic or social development. Historical evidence is much more complex. At times the growth of

literacy preceded economic development and at other times, it followed. [11] Globalization and delocalization in today's world are even more complex settings in which the education factor is only part of the equation. However, there is considerable evidence that basic literacy and numeracy skills are fundamental to political, social and economic participation in society. Higher levels of general education are also clearly linked to preparing individuals for today's changing formal and informal employment markets.

We do know today that literacy and formal basic education, especially for girls and women, contributes greatly to enhanced well-being for families and communities. Education of mothers leads to better education for the next generation. Women's education has critical impact on health, infant mortality, and reduction of risk to HIV/AIDS and improvement of livelihoods. The findings and evidence of the vital importance of girls' and women's equal access and participation in all forms and levels of education is such that the Millennium Project Task Force on Gender and Equality has issued a single report: <u>Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women.</u> (See note 1 and 4). While literacy is not a panacea for social or economic problems, it remains the foundation for all learning. No other Education for All or Millennium Development goal can be achieved if a learners' basic need for sustainable literacy skills are unmet. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) launched in 2003 is an opportunity to place literacy for all age groups back on international development agendas as well as central in all national planning. (See annex 3)

The international community also needs to recognize that education is part of systemic development. The education sector in national ministries needs to be an integral part of overall development planning and within the education sector, both formal (pre-school, primary, secondary, all forms of higher and continuing education) *and* non formal educational provision need to be planned, governed and resourced (in both human and financial terms) as an essential public good.

Key themes for discussion:

Achieving universal primary education and universal literacy for youth and adults alike will require a major change in the approach to education at both the international and country levels. What are the major systemic changes required in national planning, and how can other elements of a comprehensive national education program be incorporated in planning, for example, school feeding and food for education? What have we learned from past experience? How can we do better?

How can gender equality and women's empowerment be concretely advanced through education and basic literacy and numeracy in the light of extreme budgetary constraints?

How can we effectively address the educational needs of women in a world context of increasing insecurity, conflict and crisis where they take increasing responsibilities for themselves, their children and their community's well-being?

Given the impact of literacy on female well-being, autonomy and empowerment for themselves and their families, what actions can be taken to improve their equitable access to quality youth and adult literacy programmes that meet their immediate needs and longer-term aspirations?

What are the key ingredients of reform and accountability at international organization, donor community and national levels to ensure that goals set for the past fifty years relating to the Millennium Development Goal 2 and the Dakar goals are met?

How can commitments become actions to reduce the growing disparities between rich and poorer countries' abilities to address their own needs in educational policy, institutional capacity-building, reliable data and sustained finance for primary education and youth and adult literacy provision?

Notes:

(1) Birdsall, Nancy and Levine, Ruth (2004) Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality. <u>Final Report on Achieving the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education</u>, Draft, page 13).

(2) Cited in Limage, Leslie. (1987) 'The Right to Literacy', in <u>Human Rights and Education</u> edited by Norma Tarrow, Pergamon, Press, London, page 82. (from United Nations, 1981, page 19).

(3) Op.cit., page 17.

(4) Grown, Caren, Gupta, Geeta and Kes, Aslihan (2005). <u>Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women</u>. UN Millennium Project, Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, Earthscan, London, page 45).

(5) UNESCO (2004), Ibid, pages 130-131.

(6) World Bank. (2004) <u>World Development Report</u>, World Bank, Washington, D.C. page, 111.

(7) Ibid, page 111. Also, UNESCO. (2004), <u>The Quality Imperative, Education for All</u>. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, UNESCO, Paris.

(8) UNESCO. (2004) <u>The Quality Imperative</u>. <u>Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005</u>, UNESCO, Paris, page 129. Note that the number of illiterates has been re-estimated by UIS in 2004 based on the latest data revisions. The present estimate of nearly 800 million adult illiterates in the reference period 200-2004 is considerably lower than the estimate of 862 million for 2000 given by the preceding EFA Global Monitoring Report. This is a consequence of more recent data from some countries, notably China. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics receives data from countries based on their own reporting but then analyzes the data supplied and harmonizes it for the usage by the EFA Monitoring Report. UIS points out that the currently available literacy statistics are not internationally comparable.

(9) UNESCO (2004). <u>Summary. Education for All. The Quality Imperative</u>. Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO. Paris. page 15-16.

(10) Ibid, page 131.

(11) There is a vast literature on this complex relationship. See for example on the distinct histories of literacies and the histories of development/formal schooling: Graff, Harvey (1987) <u>Legacies of Literacy. Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society</u>. Indiana University Press, Bloomington. Jones, Phillip. (1989). <u>International Policies for Third World Education, UNESCO, Literacy and Development</u>. Routledge, New York.

Annex 1: Education for All Dakar Goals and Millennium Development Goals

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Education for All Dakar Goals

Education for All Dakar goal 1: *Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children.*

Education for All Dakar goal 2: *Ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities have access to complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality.*

Education for All Dakar goal 3: *Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills.*

Education for All Dakar goal 4: *Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic education and continuing education for all adults.*

Education for All Dakar goal 5: *Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality.*

Education for All Dakar goal 6: *Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.*

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Millennium Development Goals and targets relating to education

Millennium Development Goal 1: *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*

Millennium Development Goal 2: *Achieve universal primary education. Target 3: Ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling*

Millennium Development Goal 3: *Promote gender equality and empower women*: *Target 4: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015.*

Millennium Development Goal 4: *Reduce child mortality*.

Millennium Development Goal 5: *Improve maternal health*

Millennium Development Goal 6: *Combat HIV/AIDs, malaria, and other diseases*

Millennium Development Goal 7: *Ensure environmental sustainability*

Millennium Development Goal 8: *Develop a global partnership for development*

Annex 2: Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction*

There has been a growing recognition in recent years that individuals do not forfeit their right to education during emergencies and that education cannot remain 'outside' the mainstream humanitarian debate, but must be seen as a priority humanitarian response. At the same time, there is a broad-based desire and commitment to ensure a minimum level of quality, access and accountability for education in situations of crisis. As a result, INEE members around the world engaged in a consultative process to draft the first set of standards for all actors in this field. These standards were launched at the end of 2004. They will be piloted and tested widely. They include indicators that must be contextualized but reflect a broad consensus that children and youth in both stable and unstable country situations should have the protection and opportunity to learn that all young people should enjoy. These standards include:

Analysis:
Standard 1 Initial Assessment: A timely education assessment of the emergency situation is conducted in a holistic and participatory manner.
Standard 2: Response Strategy: A framework for an education response is developed, including a clear description of the problem and a documented strategy for action.
Standard 3: Monitoring: All relevant stakeholders regularly monitor the activities of the education.
Standard 4: Evaluation: There is a systematic and impartial evaluation of the education response in order to improve practice and enhance accountability.

Access and Learning Environment:
Standard 1: Equal access: All individuals have access to quality and relevant education opportunities.
Standard 2: Protection and well-being: Learning environments are secure, and promote the protection and mental and emotional well-being of learners.
Standard 3: Educational facilities are conducive to the physical well-being of learners.

Teaching and Learning:
Standard 1: Curricula: Culturally, socially and linguistically relevant curricula are used to provide formal and non-formal education, appropriate to the particular emergency situation.
Standard 2: Training: Teachers and other education personnel receive periodic, relevant and structured training according to need and circumstances.
Standard 3: Instruction: Instruction is learner-centred, participatory and inclusive.
Standard 4: Appropriate methods are used to evaluate and validate learning achievements.

Teachers and Other Education Personnel:

Standard 1: Recruitment and selection; A sufficient number of appropriately qualified teachers and other education personnel is recruited through a participatory and transparent process based on selection criteria that reflect diversity and equity.
Standard 2: Conditions of work: Teachers and other education personnel have clearly defined conditions of work, follow a code of conduct and are appropriately compensated.
Standard 3: Support and supervision: Supervision and support mechanisms are established for teachers and other education personnel, and are used on a regular basis.

Education Policy and Coordination:

Standard 1: Policy formulation and enactment: Education authorities prioritize free access to schooling for all, and enact flexible policies to promote inclusion and education quality, given the emergency context.
Standard 2: Planning and implementation: Emergency education activities take into account national and international educational policies and standards, and the learning needs of affected populations.
Standard 3: Coordination: There is a transparent coordination mechanism for emergency education activities, including effective information sharing between stakeholders.

*The Inter-Agency Network on Education in Emergencies (INEE) is a global network of over 100 organisations and 800 individual members who are working together to ensure the right to education in emergencies and post-crisis reconstruction. The network gathers and disseminates information, among its members. INEE is led by a Steering Group currently composed of representatives from CARE USA, the International Rescue Committee, the International Save the Children Alliance, the Norwegian Refugee Council, UNESCO, UNHCR and the World Bank. The standards are published in: INEE (2004). <u>Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction.</u> (Available at: <u>www.ineesite.org</u>)

Annex 3: UNITED NATIONS LITERACY DECADE (2003-2012) AND LIFE

The United Nations General Assembly declared the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) with UNESCO as lead agency. UNLD follows United Nations International Literacy Year 1990, where UNESCO promoted literacy skills acquisition for all age groups in both developing and industrialized countries. In 1990, ILY promoted positive ways of addressing literacy issues and long-term sustained commitment. The stigmatizing and simplistic labels attached to 'illiteracy' as ignorance or the battle language of inflated rhetoric were avoided. Also, ILY stressed a continuity of concern for basic skills acquisition for very young children (pre-school age), language and literacy in schools, as well as adult and out-of-school youth programmes with equivalency and public guarantees of quality and relevance. Although the international community turned its attention more to primary education after 1990, many countries maintained their own attention to adult and out-of-school youth literacy. In 2003, the United Nations is again drawing the world's attention to a comprehensive view of literacy needs in all countries and for all age groups as an essential part of individual and societal development and well-being.

UNESCO contributes to the promotion of literacy as a basic tool for every form of learning, in school and out of school, and a prerequisite for people to participate in social, cultural, political and economic activities. Within the framework of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD), UNESCO has been closely working with UN agencies, bi-/multi-lateral development agencies, national governments, NGOs, civil society, and private sectors in the areas of global advocacy, inter-country and inter-regional coordination and implementation of various literary activities.

The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) promotes literacy in the North and the South, in urban and rural areas, for those in and out-of-school, for adults and children, boys and girls, men and women under the banner 'Literacy as Freedom.' Within the framework of the ongoing global UNLD, UNESCO will launch in 2005 a Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (**LIFE**) with special emphasis on women and out-of-school children and youth. This initiative will target 33 candidate countries, which have an illiteracy rate of above 50% or an illiterate population larger than 10 million, with the objective to assist these countries in carrying out concrete actions to improve their literacy rates.

Conceived to be an integrated part of the global EFA initiatives, **LIFE** will contribute towards all Dakar Goals, particularly Goals 4, to achieve 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, and 3, to contribute to ensuring learning needs of young people and adults are met through appropriate learning and life skills programmes. With specific emphasis on women and young girls out-of school, the initiative will also contribute to Dakar Goal 5 by promoting gender equality in basic and continuing education of good quality. This will enable UNESCO to exploit its comparative advantage and the vast experience it has gained in the field of literacy over the past decades. **LIFE** will complement World Bank's Fast Track Initiative (addressing Dakar Goal 2), UNICEF's work on education of girls through UNGEI (addressing Dakar Goal 5), as well as contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG goal 1 on poverty alleviation and MDG goal 3 on gender equity).

This programme will be implemented over a ten-year period, aiming to provide tangible outcomes that reduce the number of illiterates in excluded groups particularly women and out-of-school children and youth, in the target countries with the ultimate aim of poverty alleviation. (see http://www.unesco.org for further information)