How You Can Use This Booklet

This booklet will enable readers to:

- Learn about the literacy challenge and the United Nations Literacy Decade Plan of Action.
- Recognize the potential of ICT as a tool in addressing literacy challenges.
- Learn from successful literacy projects being implemented in countries in the Asia-Pacific region and other regions of the world.
- Develop effective strategies for using ICT as a tool in action plans to achieve the Literacy Decade Plan of Action goals.

What is Literacy?

While all approaches to literacy are related to the ability to understand and communicate via written text, there is no standard international definition of literacy that captures all its facets. Over the past 60 years our understanding of literacy has expanded and the definition has subsequently evolved. This evolving definition has in turn led to changes in approaches to literacy education.

Definitions of Literacy

In 1958, in an attempt to provide a simple definition that would enable the comparison of international data on literacy levels, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined a literate person is one who can “read and write, with understanding, a short simple statement about his or her everyday life”.

According to this view of literacy, people were divided into two distinct categories: literate and illiterate. Later, recognition of the diversity of needs of learners led to the identification of a range of literacy levels. Following this shift, assessment of literacy focused on determining whether people have a level of literacy adequate for their needs.

It became clear that literacy campaigns must be more than merely about the acquisition of technical skills and need to also take into account the context and motivations of learners.

This new understanding of literacy led to the idea of “functional literacy”. A definition for this was suggested in 1978 as follows: “A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculations for his own and the community’s development.”