The United Nations Literacy Decade

In 2002, the United Nations declared the decade between 2003 and 2012 the “United Nations Literacy Decade”. The aim of the Decade is to bring literacy to all. The overall target for the Literacy Decade is the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) goal of increasing literacy rates by 50% by 2015.

Because of the social and political benefits that literacy brings, the achievement of the Literacy Decade goals is central to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Many people are insufficiently literate: they lack the expression and comprehension skills that enable them to learn and thereby to improve their daily lives. Some people lack literacy skills because they have not had the opportunity or the means to attend school; others because their schooling was cut short or of poor quality. As noted earlier, these people are almost all poor, two-thirds are women, most are older, almost all live in low-income households in developing countries, and most belong to linguistic or cultural minority groups. The Decade, under the banner of “Literacy for All: Voice for All, Learning for All,” will focus on reaching the most marginalized groups of people.

Literacy efforts during the Decade will focus on developing locally sustainable literacy environments which will give people opportunities to:

- Express their ideas and views
- Engage in effective learning
- Participate in communication
- Exchange information and share knowledge with others.
Global Commitment to Literacy

Perhaps the strongest assertion of renewed commitment to literacy has been Resolution 56/116 adopted by the United Nations General Assembly which proclaimed the United Nations Literacy Decade for the period 2003-2012.

Resolution 56/116 recognises that

“Literacy is crucial to the acquisition …of essential life skills that enable (people) to address the challenges they can face in life, and (literacy) represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.”

The United Nations General Assembly asked UNESCO to take on the coordinating role during the Literacy Decade, bringing partners together for joint action and policy debate. In response to Paragraph 11 of Resolution 56/116, which requested an action-oriented plan of action to be submitted to the General Assembly at its 57th session, UNESCO developed the “International Plan of Action”.

The resolution also supports the concept of Literacy for All in its reaffirmation that

“Literacy for all is at the heart of basic education for all and … creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy…”
The UN Literacy Decade International Plan of Action has six key lines of action. These are as follows:

- Policy
- Programme
- Modality
- Capacity Building
- Research
- Community Participation
- Monitoring and Evaluation

The complete text of the International Plan of Action can be obtained by visiting the Literacy section of the UNESCO portal: http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12013&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
Literacy Initiative for Empowerment

The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) is a global strategic framework and key operational mechanism for achieving the goals and purposes of the UN Literacy Decade.

The LIFE strategy focuses on empowering learners through country-led practice, informed by evidence-based research.

Working globally, UNESCO will raise awareness on the importance of literacy, rally political will and resources, oversee policy development and capacity-building through technical assistance, and develop rigorous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure LIFE’s effectiveness.

As a global strategy supported and led by UNESCO, LIFE operations will be country-led, respond to country-specific needs and priorities, and correspond to national capacities.

LIFE will be implemented in 35 countries with a literacy rate of less than fifty percent or population of more than 10 million without literacy competencies.

For further information visit the LIFE section of the UNESCO website: