

Opening Ceremony, CONFINTEA VI
Keynote speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
1 December 2009, Belém, Brazil

Dear Madame Governor, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here in such distinguished company for the first time since my appointment as Unesco's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development. I would like to thank the Member States and UNESCO's Secretariat for organising this conference, the Government of Brazil for taking the initiative to bring us here and for the tremendous hospitality of the State of Pará and the city of Belém. Right here, next to the world's greatest natural resource, I cannot imagine a more inspiring setting to discuss a matter that concerns human resources. Our presence here symbolises how both natural and human resources are inextricably linked!

Over the next few days, we will exchange insights and define action. May the commitments we express here lead to an ambitious and clear Belém Framework of Action by the time we leave. This conference is only one step of the way. Our tangible success will be defined by putting into practice what we already know and agree in order to scale up impact. A lot has been done, but I remain concerned about the huge gap to be bridged to reach our shared Education for All goal of reducing the number of illiterate people by 50% by 2015. It is more urgent than ever before that literacy for children, young people and adults are moved up the list of national priorities. When it comes to adult literacy, we have sharpened the agenda through the International Strategic Framework for Action. This should guide us through the second half of the UN Literacy Decade.

How do we achieve real progress?

1. By positioning learning and literacy as relevant to pretty much all challenges we face globally, regionally, nationally and locally: protecting the environment and health, alleviating poverty, ensuring financial stability, managing migration flows and living in peace.
2. By approaching learning and literacy within the wider context of the literacy chain. All areas of learning are linked: from early childhood development to reading and writing for young people to adult learning.

So, by making learning and literacy everyone's business, we will increase our chance of multiplying our impact.

About relevance

For the great Paulo Freire, literacy was about participating more critically in society. Society is framed by the way it deals with its challenges and informed citizens are crucial for addressing them. How can we achieve our ambitions on competitiveness, healthy living, sustainability, social inclusion and active citizenship when large proportions of the population lack the necessary skills? This makes education of both children and adults imperative. But there's no meaningful learning without literacy. It is a means to an end. Investing in literacy is investing in someone's feeling of self-confidence and sense of self-worth. This may be a given for you and me. But adults who were formerly illiterate have taught me that literacy is about every aspect of someone's life: about gaining self-esteem, finding and maintaining a job, being productive, raising children, living healthily and yes, often about being happy. It is about giving children a chance to have a future without boundaries. It is about freedom and equality.

What does this mean for your work in adult learning? Decision-makers and influencers in all these areas – from health and development to financial management need to understand the relevance of learning and literacy to their work. The same goes for civil society organizations and companies. They need to fully appreciate that by investing in literacy, there's a greater chance of success in their respective areas of responsibility. We need to convince them on the basis of clear evidence. Does this hold true for all regions of the world you may wonder? Interestingly, the issue of relevance is mentioned by representatives from Africa, Asia and Latin-America alike. And this has also been our experience in Europe. As the 16th century Dutch philosopher Erasmus puts it: literacy is a mindset.

About the literacy chain

Although our focus during these days is on enhancing adult learning and reducing levels of illiteracy, I very much hope that we keep in mind that adult learning is inextricably linked with preventing children from becoming illiterate. A child raised by literate parents has a higher chance of personal development and success and of becoming an active citizen. Put differently: if you want to educate a village, educate the mothers. The notion of the literacy chain also goes beyond the formal educational field. Because a learner is also an employee, a voter and a consumer. So the everyday environment provides unlimited learning opportunities. So we need it all: and early childhood development and universal primary education and secondary and vocational education and adult learning and creating literate environments.

To make this a reality, we need to work together and not be tempted to compete for attention and funding among different parts of the literacy chain. What we do in one area is likely to strengthen the success in another. Taking the literacy chain as our starting point, we should also accept that our work is never-ending.

So how do we put the notions of relevance and literacy chain into practice? We need to scale up our impact by creating a snowball effect. A lot has been achieved through individual and collective efforts. We have most of the insights about what works and what doesn't in adult learning and literacy programmes. You and many other dedicated experts across the world work tirelessly on these themes every day and I commend your tremendous efforts.

But we can only scale up our impact by reaching out to players outside the traditional educational field and involve them in the learning challenges. We need to find new partners and create a sense of co-ownership. In this context, I'd like to share the concept of the marketplace with you. Networks generally are about sharing knowledge and best practices among a group of likeminded players. In a marketplace, likeminded players also preach to the non-converted to create a demand that wasn't there before. That's where the impact is scaled up – by bringing together supply and demand. The likeminded players provide the supply side, namely the vast array of knowledge, educational methods, materials, campaigns, research and experts that exist. And by showing the relevance of learning and literacy, we create demand among non-traditional players in the private and public sectors. For instance, if a company is unaware that a percentage of its employees has literacy problems, it is unlikely to invest in training them.

In conclusion, every one of you, working in different countries and regions, no doubt faces specific challenges. But learning affects us all across the world. I very much hope that our shared efforts over the coming days will strengthen our commitment, scale up impact and harness new resources for learning and literacy. We need to celebrate successes, build on them and replicate them elsewhere.

I realise that the vision I have layed out may be common sense for some and daring for others. But we must be ambitious. What's more, we are all in a prime position to connect the dots, seize opportunities and maximise the potential of our efforts. I look forward to working with you to help make learning and literacy everyone's business.

Thank you.