

**Keynote speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy for Development**

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Mr President, Mrs Bokova, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for inviting me as Unesco's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development to your distinguished gathering. I appreciate your tremendous expertise and experience when it comes to addressing literacy in your respective countries. And progress has been made in bringing down the number of illiterate people, both among young people and adults. So I have come here to learn and listen from you as well as share some thoughts that look at literacy from an international perspective.

Literacy is of course about numbers and investments. But at its core, literacy is about empowerment and gains for individuals, communities and societies. Literacy is a precondition to achieving our ambitions on competitiveness, healthy living, sustainability, social inclusion and active citizenship. You and I know this and probably even find this common sense. You and I live by this conviction every day and are determined to do something about it. And indeed, your determination has greatly contributed to the progress made on achieving the EFA goals. But we also know that much remains to be done if we are to achieve the target of 50% reduction of adult illiteracy in 5 years time. So we need to step up efforts through expansion and implementation of existing and new initiatives.

But if with all the efforts made to date, we still have not achieved the results we wanted, surely we should not go on as "business as usual". We should be wary of "literacy fatigue", resulting from being on the agenda for so long. It's not just about creating best practices, it's also about strategic analysis and creating demand and implementing the knowledge that we learn from these best practices.

Well into the UN Literacy Decade, we need a renewed energy and dynamics in our shared mission on literacy. As E9-countries, collectively and individually, you have a central role to play, also in a global context. To create these new dynamics we should of course step up efforts already under way. But that's not enough, given the sheer magnitude of the number of people we need to reach. And let's also keep looking beyond the target dates we set ourselves.

It starts by admitting that we cannot reach our objectives from within the education sector alone. We need to expand our action radius. How? By generating a snowball effect that makes others co-owners of the fight against illiteracy. So we need to reach out and involve the "non-converted". We can do so by demonstrating in no uncertain terms the value and importance of literacy to political leaders, decision-makers and influencers who may not yet know that they are in fact co-owner for tackling illiteracy. We have the supply of expertise, data and best practices, now we need to create a demand for literacy solutions.

When looking at different aspects of this, the underlying notion is of course the importance of literacy to people themselves; literacy brings a greater sense of dignity and self-esteem, enhanced respect of others, an ability to take control of one's life and a greater desire to participate in society.

Thus, our main challenge is to create a sustainable demand for literacy.

Literacy transforms individuals, communities, entire social structures and societies. We all know the stories of farmers who discover that they can get better prices for their crops once they learn how to read and write. We know of newly literate adults who open bank accounts and are able to manage their money more knowledgeably. Literate mothers are better able to look after their own health and that of their children... And literate boys and girls who chose for jobs with a future instead of short-term gains.

These stories pertain to the everyday lives of citizens around the world. They no doubt sound familiar to you.

But if we want to step up efforts, others beyond the education field need to know these stories too. Are colleagues in other non-educational civil society organizations and companies truly aware of the enormous benefits literacy skills bring to their areas of responsibility? Do they fully appreciate that by investing in literacy, there's a greater chance of success for their work?

It is by demonstrating the benefits that we create a demand for literacy. Companies need more skilled workers, Ministers of Finance need literate citizens to pay taxes, Ministers of health and health professionals need literate people get a return on their investment in healthcare and the same goes for social workers. Environmentalists need literate citizens to get their support for environmental regulations....these are just a few examples - I could go on and on.

So by showing how relevant literacy is, others have no choice but to take co-ownership. This will increase the likelihood of greater and more sustainable investments in literacy efforts. And it may help avoid short-term reflexes to cut down investments in education at a time of crisis. We should learn from countries such as India, that recently made the political choice of actually increasing the percentage of investment of its GDP in education.

What we're talking about, is creating a socio-economic environment conducive to literacy and seeking engagement of many players in society.

This is by no means an easy task. But we simply have no choice. To achieve this, we need to enhance cooperation - nationally, regionally and across the globe. And in doing so, we need to let go of divides between what we traditionally call developing and developed countries. We share many more issues than we sometimes believe. Climate change, poverty and migration are obvious ones. Another is the role of knowledge, digital information and communication. They rule our systems, interaction and decisions as farmers, consumers, voters, employees, and patients. Almost everywhere, a country's success is therefore largely defined by people's ability to read, write and be numerate.

Across the globe, illiteracy affects us all. It strikes me time and time again how similar some of the debates are: decreasing numbers and the quality of teachers, the lack of reading and writing abilities of large percentages and numbers of children, employees lacking the necessary literacy skills to handle production processes when they become more computerized and citizens making the wrong health decisions due to their limited literacy skills. And pretty much everywhere, literacy is perceived as an educational, not a societal issue.

If we want to develop a sense of shared mission across the globe, we must tackle the widespread misperception that illiteracy is only an issue of countries in development. In Europe and other parts of the West, the problem may not be access to education. But the numbers may shock you. In the European Union, an average of 12 percent of adults are functionally illiterate. In the Netherlands, 1.5 million adults are functionally illiterate – 1 million of whom are born and bred in the Netherlands. And 25 percent of our children leave primary school being two years behind in reading and writing.

I know from experience in the Netherlands that it is hard for a developed society to admit that staggering numbers of people cannot read and write, and even more so that the majority of them are born and bred in the Netherlands. We cannot label this as a problem stemming from migration only. Countries are ashamed to admit to failures not only of educational systems, but also of informal societal structures such as the family and communities. These structures are apparently not able to detect illiteracy or stimulate children to learn how to read and write.

You have an important role to play at different levels. First, within your own countries to engage other ministries, companies, communities and civil society organisations beyond the education sector. By way of example in France and the Netherlands strategic cooperation is created involving eight ministries. And internationally, it is tremendously helpful if you could raise the importance of literacy in your dealings with national development partners and international entities such as the European Commission and the Worldbank. And again, not just with those responsible for education and literacy!

To conclude

Literacy empowers people –children, teenagers, women, men... Literacy gives confidence to people who have had few opportunities, and it is this confidence which enables them to better take part in society. Focusing on literacy as a means of developing the full human potential of each individual will give results in social, economic and cultural terms. And in a time of crisis, we should avoid short term reflexes to avoid long-term disasters.

The contexts in which each of us works differs, and we face different as well as comparable challenges. Our individual and collective success will be defined by admitting to shortcomings, implement what we know, celebrate successes, build on them and replicate them elsewhere. The ultimate aim is to scale up the impact of our actions. We are individually and collectively responsible.

This conference is a great opportunity to further develop joint initiatives, enhance cooperation and expand mutual exchange – and find ways to exchange expertise continuously. And I very much hope that you will also develop strategies and actions on how to create a sustainable demand for literacy, nationally and globally. I am deeply committed to helping to make this happen. We will of course have traditional ways of measuring success. For me personally, a symbol of success will be that literacy is on the agenda of the next meeting of your Finance Ministers! Or, even better, if they have asked to join us in two years time!

Thank you again for having me here. I look forward to constructive bilateral and multilateral discussions with you and an actionable outcome of this conference.