

**Speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands**  
**Patron, UNESCO Amsterdam World Book Capital City 2008**  
**at its international launch at UNESCO**  
**Paris, 14 April 2008**

Ladies and gentlemen,

*“It is through books that children create unique images somewhere in the secret chamber of the soul. These images are vital for people. The day when children are no longer able to create such images, is the day on which humanity is impoverished.”*

Indeed, books are important. They are enjoyable, inspire, carry knowledge... And yes, books feed the imagination that we so need, as the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren so eloquently describes. No imagination, no dreams. No dreams, no future. But there is more to this laudable UNESCO initiative than books alone. Looking at this from a societal perspective, it is about the ability to read them. World Book Capital City is a great initiative that also wants to be a means to an end; a platform to achieve something meaningful for society.

It is precisely this perspective that encouraged me to accept patronage of this initiative, which not only wants to promote books, but also foster reading throughout society, involving all relevant players in the book chain – from publishers to libraries, from bookshops to authors and citizens...And this year’s theme - ‘Open book, Open mind’ captures the core characteristics of the initiative: freedom of expression, freedom of publishing and distribution of information. An open mind is an open door for meaningful thoughts. Three icons of this year’s World Book Capital City personify the open mind of Amsterdam: Spinoza, Anne Frank and Dutch author Annie M.G. Schmidt.

“Promoting books and fostering reading throughout society”... it sounds like a fairly straightforward objective, don’t you think? Frankly speaking, it isn’t. Not if you bear in mind that some one billion people across the globe are illiterate. In developed countries, we’ve taken literacy for granted for far too long. It’s been a taboo. In developing nations, access to education is still not a given. Indeed, literacy is at the

heart of everything – of democracy. Democracy places a high value on the quality and equality of individuals. Being able to read and write are building blocks to enable you to absorb, grasp and actively use information independently. It enables you to know the law, to understand your rights and obligations as citizens. In knowledge and information-driven societies such as the ones we live in, literacy is a precondition for truly participating in democracy and making full use of its benefits. We should not, and unfortunately cannot, take democracy for granted. Equally, we cannot take literacy for granted. On an individual level, literacy is about self-esteem and empowerment. It's about making a living and living healthily.

Illiteracy, on the other hand, is about lacking opportunities. About not being able to realise one's aspirations. About feeling ashamed and excluded....Excluded from this fast-moving world that evolves around books, msn, sms, email, the internet. Because of these technological developments, people need to be much more self-reliant to find and apply information. On the one hand, this gives people freedom to shape their own lives. Deficiencies, on the other hand, will put people in a very vulnerable position. The level of self-reliance with regard to processing information is a defining factor for people's position in society.

It is against this background that education is so essential for any society. And it is against this background why this is such an important project. There's quite a programme ahead of us over the coming year: hundreds of book-related projects and initiatives will dominate Amsterdam's activity agenda. And it has released a lot of positive energy across the city already; individuals and organisations want to make this a success.

But Amsterdam wants to go further than that. Being active doesn't mean you've made an impact – an impact to achieve something meaningful for society. Amsterdam World Book Capital City is quite aware that without sufficient literacy, reading of books is fiction. So they go hand in hand: drawing attention to the importance of books and the urgent need to truly commit to literacy. Amsterdam wants to make a more permanent contribution to the fight against illiteracy. How? With the "Amsterdam Initiative against illiteracy".

In a nutshell, this initiative focuses on educational initiatives for adults outside the school structures. In jargon, this is called 'non-formal education'. The Amsterdam initiative wants to pull together all knowledge and innovative experiences in non-formal education that have proven successful in helping adults to read and write. Rationale behind this focus is that given the staggeringly high numbers of illiterates around the globe, formal education alone is not enough to getting these numbers down significantly. Just to be clear: formal education and the drive to make the human right to basic education a reality, remains just as important and relevant. Formal and informal education... it's a matter of and, and – not either, or.

With the Illiteracy Initiative, Amsterdam wants to take the first steps. What does this mean in practice? Basically, it's set up as a relay race. Amsterdam and its partners will first call on all relevant organisations to share their innovative methods; it will then set up a digital portal as a marketplace to exchange innovative opportunities, making it available around the globe. Hopefully, it will be up and running in a year's time and - Amsterdam World Book Capital City will then hand over the digital portal to the next World Book Capital City... Beirut. Hopefully, dialogue starts now! Beirut, companies and other organisations... this initiative can only get off the ground by joining forces. Scope, scale, funding and long-term sustainability of this initiative needs to be determined in partnership.

Let me conclude....I see heads nodding – that's great. But to be frank, too often, I find myself preaching to the converted. We should dare to go beyond that and reach new constituencies. This is about making a real contribution and impact from a societal perspective.

I salute the initiative and will actively engage with all my conviction and energy. I so hope that Amsterdam World Book Capital City, together with UNESCO and other initiatives has the ambition and commitment to make a lasting impact on fighting illiteracy across the globe.

Here's to books, as windows to the imagination *and* as vehicles to achieve something meaningful for society.