

Speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
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Make Literacy Your Business!

Ladies and gentlemen,

Europe's largest book fair.... how truly wonderful it is to be here to talk about an issue that affects so many people. To meet with you on a theme so close to our hearts and at the centre of our activities: the issue of literacy.

You'd probably agree with me that to an outsider, it may seem somewhat unexpected to hold a conference about literacy at an event that people come to exactly because they love books, reading and literature – be it for fun or for business...Unexpected maybe, but rightly so. Because literacy goes to the core of our existence. Literacy is about self-esteem and empowerment. About independence, participating and contributing. About making a living and living healthily. Illiteracy is about lacking opportunities. About not being able to realise one's aspirations. About feeling ashamed and excluded.... So all praise to the organisers to put the spotlight on this debilitating phenomenon that affects around one billion people across the globe, including five million people in the Netherlands and Germany alone. One billion people...

My plea to you is a clear and simple one: "make literacy your business". And if it already is, then make sure you attract others to make it their business too. We need a snowball effect. In our respective countries, across Europe, across the world.

There is no time to waste. We are three years into the United Nations Literacy Decade. Six years since the World Education Forum in Dakar. If we put together our combined knowledge, experiences, resources, networks and creativity, surely we will succeed in going a long way to attain the ambitious objectives? Let us combine our passion and compassion, our sense of reality and practical initiatives. Let us work together to obtain tangible results. Much remains to be done.

Again, it's great to be here today. I'll briefly outline some thoughts on the various aspects of literacy. I will then share some of the lessons learnt from the activities we undertake in my country, the Netherlands, to combat illiteracy, or rather, to promote the importance of literacy.

First, the two worlds of illiteracy

What's the harsh reality behind the 1 billion people in all corners of the world who cannot read, let alone write? Illiteracy affects men and women, boys and girls. Even in so called developed societies, where education is mandatory, problems of illiteracy persist. In these countries, illiteracy rates range between 5 and 20 percent.

Do we find this acceptable?

Do we see these figures as mere statistical data or do we realise that behind each number, there's a person like you and me. A person often ashamed of this handicap, deprived of chances everyone deserves? A person who cannot participate in democracy because casting a vote is a daunting task, who cannot read to his children and help them with their homework?

I'd like to get back to my plea: make literacy your business.. . What does this mean in practice? Let's look at the situations in both the developing and developed nations.

Developing Countries

I will start with the first group: about the urgent and continuing need to invest in basic education the developing countries. Access to education – acces to quality education - is essential for poverty reduction and sustainable social, political and economic development. In this audience, this is perhaps stating the obvious – in the Netherlands we call this kicking in an “open door” – but it cannot be said often enough. I am glad to see friends from the Worldbank and Unesco. Your role and expertise is of course crucial in the worldwide fight against illiteracy. And individual countries of course have a huge contribution to make.

On paper, the 164 nations who came together in Dakar in 2000 share a commitment to “education for all”. Sound educational plans as part of poverty reduction strategies drawn up in the developing countries themselves do – and should - form the basis for addressing illiteracy in these countries. My plea in the west: make literacy your business by investing in basic education as an essential part of your development aid budget. In the Netherlands, the target is to spend 15% of the Official Development Aid budget on basic education. Some countries follow suit; others could certainly strengthen the focus on basic education in their development approach. But this is not just about governments. Companies, non-governmental organisations, teachers and parents should also get involved.

All players need to work together efficiently with the countries in question. Pulling together resources. Coordinating initiatives.

By investing in children attending - and finishing! - school, we invest in their future. This in turn means a structural investment in the future of the countries at stake. Without a largely literate population, a country is built on quicksand. And that goes for developing and developed nations.

Just to illustrate how important such an investment into education is: studies now show that the longer a woman stays in education, the more likely she is able to understand the risks of sexually transmitted disease. In Uganda alone, data suggests that a universal primary education alone would save the lives of 700,000 young people, the majority women, from HIV infection.....

What are we waiting for?

The Western World – social outcasts and economically neglected

This brings me to the situation closer to home, where it's about people who tend to hide their disability in the shadows of our societies. People who can be found by just stepping outside this conference centre.

How can this be? Do we find it acceptable that in the 21st century there are millions of functionally illiterate people in our western societies? In countries where we have mandatory schooling? In my mind, it isn't acceptable. It is high time we make this an absolute priority – politically, economically, socially.

At the heart of the problem lies the vicious circle we've gotten ourselves into. What do I mean by this: we take literacy for granted – in other words, we presume that mandatory schooling will 'do the trick'. We find it simply unimaginable that there are illiterate people. That's precisely the reaction I often get from people in the west: "*in this country? Illiterate people? That cannot be!*" We don't talk about it. When people stop talking about something, it becomes a taboo. In the West, 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.

Since we don't talk about it, adults who are illiterate think they are the only ones with this problem. They are actually one of the few groups in society – if we can talk about 'groups' when we're talking about so many different people and situations – who do not stand up and shout: "*please, please, do something about our handicap!*".

The main challenge is to identify the adults who are illiterate and encourage them to go back to school. The challenge is also to make sure our children know how to read and write by the time they leave school. And that they see the relevance of reading and writing, no matter what their choice of profession is. Three weeks ago I visited a secondary school for vocational education. One student asked me: why do I need to learn reading and writing if I want to become a car mechanic or a construction worker? Parents and teachers have a big responsibility to inspire students, to show them language can be fun and is relevant to their lives.

Imagine practical daily life when nothing is done: you can't read sign-posts, operate ticket machines, read food labels. Travelling becomes too daunting to even think of. The supermarket becomes a nightmare. You can't read letters or cards people send you. You can't read the medicine bottle.

The need is increasingly urgent. There's more and more focus on knowledge, innovation and research. Knowledge is about information. Information is, more often than not, in written form. The pace is set by rapid technological change, which requires us to constantly update our skills. But while many are focusing on the high end of the knowledge-based economy, we choose to turn a blind eye to what lies at the base. As societies leap ahead, many people are left behind because they lack the necessary reading and writing skills. Reading and writing lies at the core.

The so called "democratization of knowledge" is being taken to new levels. We have initiatives like Google's Book Search, which brings knowledge which were previously the accessible only by the book-shop elite, or library pass-holders, into the global public domain. The opportunities of this so-called democracy are enormous. But even this democracy has an entry price, and that is the ability to read and write.

The costs of illiteracy to society are enormous. In the Netherlands, the foundation that I chair, Stichting Lezen & Schrijven (the reading and writing foundation), commissioned research into the economic costs of illiteracy or low literacy. The researchers looked at issues such as health, employment rates and crime. Some staggering statistics came out: illiteracy costs Dutch society an estimated 537 million Euro each year.

So finally, let me turn to the essential question I put at the beginning – “how to make literacy your business”.

Like you, I've come across many innovative and successful projects that aim to combat literacy. At the White House conference on global literacy organised by Mrs Bush 2 weeks ago in New York, I again learnt about some extraordinary programmes – from Afghanistan to Egypt, from Senegal to the US, from India to Brazil.

This sharing of information across the globe remains essential - so that we don't waste time, energy and resources by reinventing the wheel. I wonder: are we doing enough to share all this expertise and good practices? Is there a platform or a tool that would allow us to share such information in a structured and user-friendly manner? Could Unesco or the Worldbank, play a role in this?

The organisers asked me to give some insight into the approach we take in the Netherlands. Two years ago, I set up the Reading and Writing Foundation in the Netherlands. It's funded by public and private sector money. The foundation works on the basis of a snowball effect: by involving as many individuals and entities as possible, we aim to create the necessary momentum to drive the issue to the core of how we think and act - and keep it there. For now, the focus is on the Netherlands, but we certainly have our eyes open towards Europe. Our goal? That in five years time, the fight against illiteracy and the promotion of literacy so deeply embedded among all key players of society that the foundation as it currently stands will be superfluous and can be dissolved. Ambitious, perhaps. It certainly keeps us from becoming complacent....

The foundation works in three areas:

First, we communicate, communicate, communicate. Over and over again. This is about breaking the taboo and ignorance about the issue. For as long as illiterate people feel that they are the only ones with the problem, they will continue to feel ashamed and conceal their handicap. If we don't talk about it, too many young people will think "why bother with reading and writing?". And without awareness-raising, companies as well as other players will fail to recognise the importance of literacy. The importance for employees, for patients, for individuals. And for society as a whole.

Concretely, what do we do in this area? For instance, we seek the active and public support of opinion leaders in business or in politics. We constantly provide new angles to the issue through research, through new partnerships. And now we've started a nationwide advertising campaign.

The "Literacy Ambassadors" are essential to any communication efforts. Their personal stories also form the core of the campaign. We could not do without them. They are formerly illiterate people who apart from taking the huge step in learning to read and write at a later age, have been trained to publicly speak about their lives and how becoming literate has changed their lives. They inspire me. They inspire everyone. They are courageous. Funny. Witty. Endearing. And their efforts are incredibly effective. Just how effective are they? Before the campaign, the national free helpline to direct illiterates to language courses received 50 calls per month. Since the campaign started, three weeks ago there have been 624 calls.

Our second area of work: the foundation is a "marketplace" that brings together public and private sectors in this area. Educational experts, but also companies - from PCM Publishers to Unilever, from BP to KLM and IBM to TNT. We help share good practices at national, regional and local levels, pass on relevant information, and connect the players – both the expected ones and the unexpected ones. Basis of our thinking is that illiteracy is too complex an issue for one organisation to "own" it.

Thirdly, together with others, we develop model projects that can be rolled out widely. Of course, money is needed, but thinking outside the box, using common sense and connecting the dots also go a long way. Concretely for instance, we created toolkits for organisations as different as companies, medical centres and municipalities to help them get under way to address literacy in their structures. For next year we are thinking to start another 'potential snowball' project with publishers: books and educational materials for adults with low literacy skills. Anyone interested in this room: let us know!

At the basis of any approach lies the need to look at the entire "literacy chain". Literacy affects children, adolescents, employees and adults alike. This is not an issue to be boxed in from a policy perspective in, let's say the adult education box. So my plea to policy-makers: speak to colleagues in other departments. Make sure that the various policy areas are connected; that decisions are always made with one objective in mind: the pressing need for a literate population.

To end:

There is no silver bullet in eradicating illiteracy. We must work together to raise awareness. To develop and implement practical initiatives. Parents, politicians, publishers, businesses, charities – we all have a role to play.

We have got to be ambitious. Action is needed. Those of us here are in a prime position to act. Let's join efforts where we haven't already and where it makes sense. Let's remain open to learning from each other. Let's put the funds where it's most needed. Let's be critical where we need to be – no matter how painful it may be to admit we could have done something better. We have no time to waste.

Literacy is the business of the Frankfurter Buchmesse. It should be everyone's business. That's my personal plea. You have much to add, no doubt.

Thank you.