

Speech by H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands
UNESCO Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy
Literacy, the road to human progress
Baku, 14 May 2008

Royal Highness, First Ladies, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

It's a great pleasure being here. It allows me to translate the stories of millions of people affected by literacy across our continent, across the globe. Individuals, such as my fellow countrymen and women who learnt to read and write when they were adults. Veronica, Fernando, Fre, Samira, Aljien, Dini, Anke and Ahmed. It's the story of our children who will so need literacy skills to get on in life. And this is the story about an issue that goes to the heart of our societies.

Like you, I am inspired to be part of this global UNESCO initiative, hopefully making a contribution to our shared efforts. Baku is a perfect setting – for its vibrancy and inspiration, and of course for the commitment to literacy by the First Lady of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Mrs Aliyeva. Thank you very much for your hospitality. We've heard the numbers globally: some 800 million adults don't have sufficient reading and writing skills to function independently. Over 100 million children don't go to school. And across Europe, about 5 to 20 percent of our populations lack the literacy and numeracy skills to come along.

Do we find this acceptable? Do we see these shocking figures as mere statistical data? Or do we realise that behind each number, there is a person like you and me. Someone often ashamed of his handicap, deprived of chances everyone deserves. Do we see literacy merely as a technique of memorising letters, words and sentences? Or do we see literacy, as Kofi Annan said, "as a road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential". But is it getting the attention it deserves? The answer lies with you, with us. You know what triggers the right mindset to make this a priority in your respective countries. You know what works and what doesn't.

So this conference is an opportunity to get inspired. An opportunity to work with an open mind and at times even to be brave enough to challenge commonly held notions. We need to be practical. And most of all – this is an opportunity to make a difference and affect change. We need to be able to look each other in the eye when we meet at future occasions, be it in Hungary or Brazil, and say to each other: “yes, we are making real progress”.

I'd like to look at literacy and illiteracy first from a human perspective, then from a societal perspective. They are the pillars of my firm belief that we urgently need to mobilise our entire societies to tackle illiteracy structurally. I will share some concrete examples of how this could be done.

1. The human perspective

Again, let's keep reminding ourselves that literacy is about people. And illiteracy is often linked to immense personal problems - low self-esteem, social isolation and an inability to function independently. As UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning says: “Literacy arouses hopes in the individual who is striving for fulfilment, happiness and personal benefit by learning how to read and write.”

From a policy perspective, literacy is often boxed in as an adult education issue. This simply doesn't make sense when the individual is the starting point, the centre, of our thinking. Because an adult, once was a child; and a child will grow to become an adult. If we accept this natural course as the basic premise, it's only logical to work with the concept of the literacy chain.

What it means: you take a person's life and determine when, how and where that person does or should get in touch with reading and writing. All those circumstances provide opportunities to invest in literacy – we have to make the links and connect the dots.

You get the point: the literacy chain is about preventing and reducing illiteracy. The Dutch philosopher Erasmus said that literacy is a mindset. Likewise, education and reading and writing go way beyond schooling. Education starts at birth. I recently attended a speech by a formerly illiterate adult at a secondary school. He wanted to encourage children to take reading and writing seriously. He clearly linked the limitations of his life due to his illiteracy to the need to invest in basic skills early on in

life. He told the room full of children: “Don’t take the path I took of not learning to read and write. It’s a dead end. I had no self-esteem and always felt ashamed. Make the right choices while you can.” Imagine this: two hundred 16 year-olds, stunned in silence...

2. The societal perspective

Society is made up of a multitude of areas that people come into contact with throughout their lives, from the healthcare and educational systems to government services, shops and the labour market – you name it...So people always wear several hats: they are citizens, students, consumers, employees, patients or unemployed. In all these capacities, reading and writing play an important role in one way or another. In our societies, the pace is set by rapid technological change, which requires us to constantly update our skills. When we talk about long-term economic growth and development, we tend to focus on knowledge, innovation and research. In the so called Lisbon strategy, the European Union outlines its ambition “to be the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion (...) by 2010”.

But consider this: knowledge is about information. Information is, more often than not, in written form. Our ability to grasp, process and use written information determines to a large extent our ability to participate in society in all our different roles, wearing several hats at the same time. For instance, many services and transactions increasingly require some form of e-skills – from banking to buying train tickets to filling out our tax returns, and from voting to applying for a job.

Those who lack the necessary reading and writing skills are left behind. In societies that strive for social cohesion and maximum participation of its citizens, this is highly undesirable. Indeed, in the Netherlands, we estimate that tackling low literacy in relation to health, criminality and social security would save us approximately 537 million euro per year. A society that accepts literacy is unfit for the future.

Also, we should not forget that low literacy levels affect all groups – not just immigrants, the elderly or socially less wealthy groups, as is commonly thought. In my own country for example: of the 1.5 million adults with low literacy levels, 1 million people are born and bred in the country. Yes, they followed our own school system...

And yes, it also affects the young: also in the Netherlands, 25 percent of our 11-year olds are two years behind in reading!

Mobilising society

What does this all mean? Based on the notions of the literacy chain and societal benefits and needs of investing in literacy, I believe that there are three preconditions for a visionary, structural and durable approach to literacy. I hope that these provide directions of your thinking during this conference. The preconditions are:

Literacy needs to be on the societal and political agendas (and high up there!);

All areas of action need to be linked – from early childhood development to adult education, from health literacy to literacy in the workplace;

Society needs to be mobilised to feel a shared responsibility for promoting literacy and tackling illiteracy. There are two main strands to this: communications and approaching the field of literacy as a market place.

Communications

Communicate again and again to break a vicious circle. What is this vicious circle: illiterate people feel that they are the only ones with the problem. Their sense of shame stands in the way of seeking help. Getting the issue out in the open will help overcome the taboo. This in turn will encourage them to go back to school and stop us from taking literacy for granted. Breaking the vicious circle is also needed to stop Awareness-raising is also needed for politicians to realise the relevance of literacy to society and make the necessary commitments.

I've experienced first-hand how hard it is for a society to admit that staggering numbers of people cannot read and write. 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.

The sky is the limit when it comes to communications about literacy. Seek the active engagement of business and political leaders; highlight new angles of the issue through research and partnerships to keep the issue afresh and on the agenda.

Invest in a well-targeted media campaign. And finally, use "Literacy Ambassadors" - their intensely personal stories are more powerful than anything else to encourage

others to go back to school. You no doubt have many other creative and effective ideas and good practices.

Market place

Clearly, illiteracy is too complex an issue for one organisation too “own” it. So we need to develop a sense of shared responsibility among all stakeholders involved. While traditional networks are important, the notion of shared responsibility goes further than a simple exchange of information; it calls for a market place where supply and demand come together. The supply side consists of the vast array of knowledge, educational methods, materials, campaigns, toolkits and research as well as experts and teachers. In a way, this is the “easy” part, given the amount of expertise that exists around the globe – see what’s represented in this room alone! What’s needed on a large scale is to create demand among leading individuals and private and public sector organisations for these offerings that exist on the supply side, particularly in the area of informal education. Despite all efforts made, there ignorance about the issue persists. This makes taking responsibility impossible. How to create such demand: by reaching out to inform opinion leaders and organisations to highlight and demonstrate the relevance of literacy to each and every one of them. Once they are convinced, we need to encourage and support them in tackling illiteracy within their own structures - by using the offerings on the supply side. The beauty of it is that the actual work is done by the organisations themselves. What’s needed are catalysts to make this happen. And, for efficiency’s sake, it is best to work through multipliers – for instance to work through entire sectors in addition to working through individual organisations, or, in turn, to work with one company with the aim of addressing entire sectors.

I’ll give you a concrete example of the market place in practice: we identified a company with the potential to multiply impact: Schiphol airport, where two-dozen large companies and hundreds of smaller companies operate, employing many low-trained workers. Until recently, Schiphol was unaware of the issue of illiteracy. The company wasn’t unwilling; they simply didn’t know. We created awareness among the management of Schiphol and provided them with the necessary tools and arguments to encourage other the companies to address illiteracy within their structures. The ultimate aim of the approach: for employees to come forward about their literacy deficiencies and go back to school. The CEO of Schiphol is now an

outspoken advocate on literacy issues – which of course is useful for communications purposes.

Connecting the dots...

To end:

There is no silver bullet in eradicating illiteracy. We must work together to raise awareness, implement practical initiatives and measure actual results. Mr Matsuura, in doing so you have called on the collective will of the international community to ensure that the necessary support is forthcoming.”

Indeed, we have to dare to have a vision and must be ambitious. Those of us here are in a prime position to connect the dots, to seize opportunities and to maximise the potential of the market place approach. We don't need to reinvent the wheel and there's no sense in preaching to the converted. We need to reach out to new and seemingly unexpected constituencies to tackle illiteracy within their structures. We have no time to waste.

Thank you.