

Fight Against Illiteracy

Erlinda Bolido

IN an age when computers are common household items, when information can be transmitted in seconds across continents, and when a single event can be watched by the whole world as it unfolds, the existence of millions of illiterates is a supreme irony.

Despite the world's enormous capacity to educate its populations, enhanced by scientific advancements, there today around 900 million adult illiterates worldwide.

Even more ironic is the fact that about 666 million or 75 per cent of these illiterate people, aged 15 year and older, are in the Asia-Pacific region. More than 100 million primary school age children in the region have never enrolled in any school.

Many countries in the Asia-Pacific are engaged in the difficult task of development. The existence of large pockets of illiteracy in their populations is not likely to ease the job.

"Illiteracy, a is well-known in the developing countries, is a supreme destroyer of human creativity and initiative," according to Makaminan Makaginsar, director of the Principal Office for Asia and the Pacific (PROAP) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Mr. Makaginsar, who is also assistant director-general for coordination of UNESCO activities in Asia and the Pacific, says: "(Illiteracy) cripples the thinking power of the individual, thereby immobilising the community and reducing a nation's capacity for self-reliant development." Mass literacy, he adds, will enable a nation to generate creative solutions to development problems at the grass roots.

Education in Asia and the Pacific, published by the UNESCO PROAP, points out that, "Almost all studies made of development indicators show that illiteracy is invariably associated with mass deprivation and socioeconomic underdevelopment."

Countries with high illiteracy rates rank low in terms of socio-economic indicators. These countries, the re-

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port says, have infant mortality rates of over 100 per 11,000 live births; one-half to two-thirds of the children are undernourished; and life expectancy at birth is under 50 years.

The need to provide education for all in Asia and the Pacific has long been recognised. In 1960 the Karachi Plan, a regional programme, was launched to make primary education free and compulsory. But despite tremendous progress achieved by the region in the last few decades, it was obvious something more needed to be done.

In 1987 in New Delhi, India, then UNESCO Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow launched the Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for all (APPEAL). APPEAL has three components: eradication of illiteracy; universalisation of primary education; and provision of opportunity for continuing education. The programme aims to achieve the first two goals by the year 2000. APPEAL's package of three components acknowledges available information which clearly shows that the of illiteracy, low enrolment, and high dropout rates in primary education are interrelated.

Illiteracy is widespread in countries where primary enrolment is low. Children who drop out of school before completing primary education inevitably lapse into illiteracy. It was clear that an integrated approach, as represented by APPEAL, was needed in the region.

Activities under APPEAL are essentially left to each participating UNESCO member state to decide. Countries are encouraged to establish a national coordinating mechanism. The coordinating centre will also serve as a contact point between regional groups and national initiatives.

On a regional level, APPEAL is a

vehicle for regional cooperation. It provides opportunities for exchange of information, experience and expertise; joint consultation, research, evaluation and other actions, and training of personnel at various levels.

Since its launching, APPEAL has either inspired or directly contributed to strengthening efforts all around the Asia-Pacific to eradicate illiteracy and universalise Primary education.

China, for instance, which has at present about 230 million illiterates, is eager to take advantage of opportunities for regional cooperation and collaboration through APPEAL.

The country has succeeded in the past 36 years to educate 150 million illiterates. But it realises that it still faces an arduous task if it is to succeed fully. China wants to draw from successful experiences of other countries.

Even South Korea, where elementary school enrolment is almost 100 percent, finds APPEAL a worthy cause to rally to. The country is faced with the challenge of educating people in the 544 Korean islands which are inhabited.

Half of these islands are more than 20 kilometres away from the mainland. About 42 per cent have no passenger-ship available, elementary education in remote islands has remained backward to a large extent.

Sri Lanka is drawing inspiration from APPEAL for its education programmes. The country has always been aware of the critical role education plays in national development.

It has always striven, and has been quite successful, to educate as many of its population as possible. A problem is the high dropout rate in the elementary level. Almost 30 per cent of students leave school before the end of the primary cycle.

Sri Lanka will use APPEAL to energise its educational activities and find solutions to the remaining problems.

Indonesia also subscribes to APPEAL as it works to eliminate illiteracy in the country by 1994. A set of 100 booklets entitled "Package A" is being used by Indonesia to cure three "blindnesses" in its population: blindness in terms of Latin Characters and numerals, blindness in terms of Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, and blindness in terms of basic education.

On the regional level, APPEAL has already spawned and bolstered several projects.

A network of institutions for the training of personnel in the three APPEAL action areas is being planned. The network would allow the exchange of ideas and experiences of training of personnel, planning and implementation, joint research for improving training, sharing material and facilities. Training expertise available to member states will be utilised in the spirit of mutual help.

The promotion of girl's education and the making of education more relevant to the needs of girls and women is a major focus of APPEAL. A programme has already been drawn up in 1986 for a joint innovative project focused on the promotion of girl's education for universal primary education.

Given the objectives of APPEAL, it is expected that countries with low participation and retention of girls in primary education will collaborate in the project.

Also expected to be strengthened by APPEAL is a joint innovative project for raising achievement levels in primary education.

Countries Participating in the project have undertaken various programmes the results of which will be very useful to other nations. Participating countries are China, India, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. — Depthnews