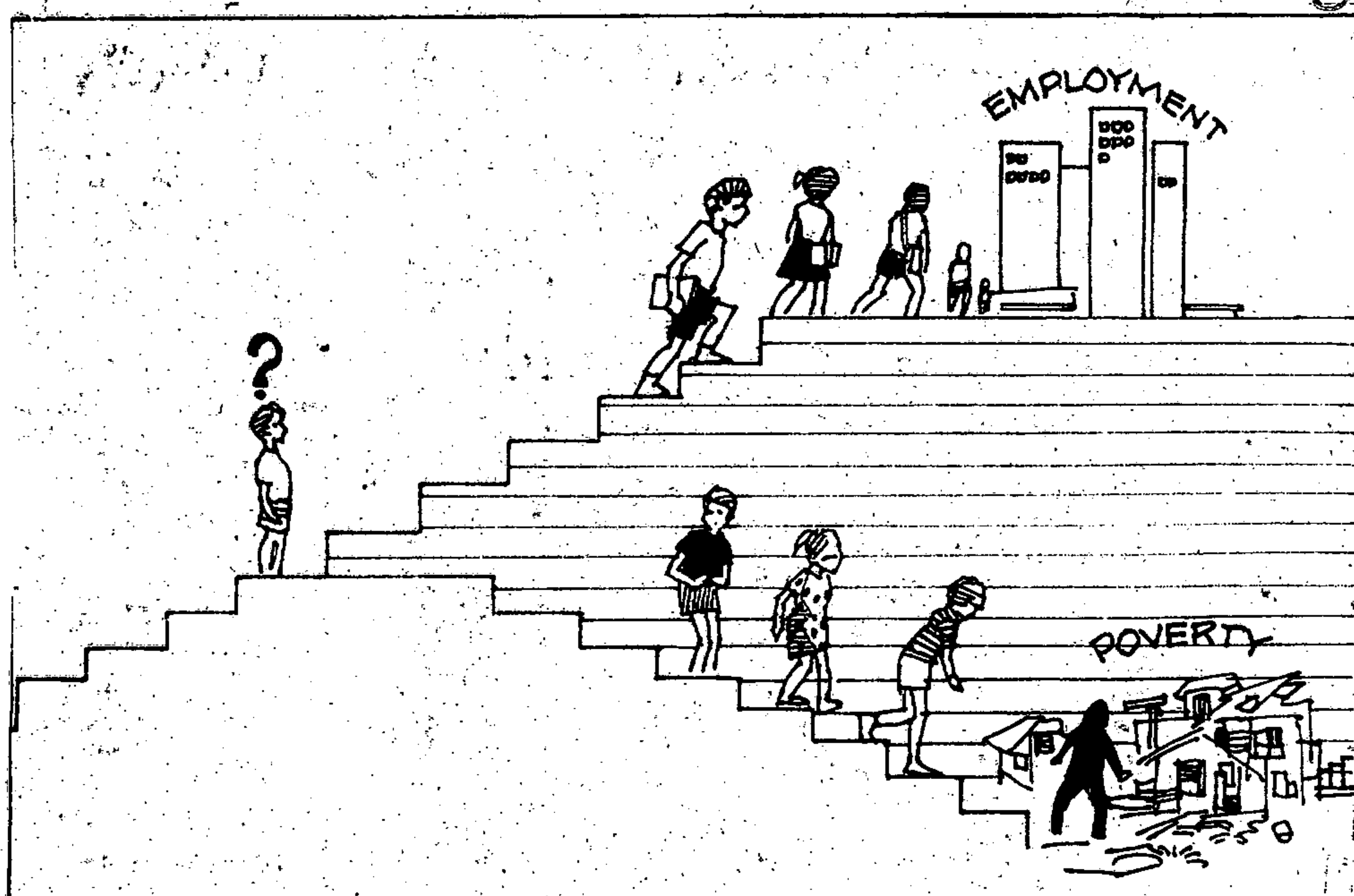


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# The number of illiterates increasing



gional office for education in Asia and the Pacific.

To reverse the trend and hopefully boost efforts of governments to provide education for all by the year 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted last December a resolution proclaiming 1990 as International Literacy Year.

One objective is 'to create favourable conditions for launching a decade-long Plan of Action by mobilising international public opinion in support of literacy efforts by governments and organisations.'

The Plan of Action, as ra-

tionalised by UNESCO, 'will be built upon regional inter-governmental programmes for promoting literacy.' APPEAL is a case in point.

The idea is to proud countries with illiteracy or functional illiteracy problems to eliminate these handicaps by providing education for all.

Part of the thrust in the coming decade is to increase opportunities for women's education. As Dr. Namik Aksornkool, UNESCO programme specialist in literacy training in Asia, put it 'Educate a girl and you educate a nation.'

— DEPTNEWS/

The rate at which adult population is gaining literacy is outstripped by the rate of population growth. Primary school dropouts add to the number of illiterates, Nestor Cervantes writes.

As in much of the Third World, increasing numbers of adults in industrialised countries also labour under severe handicaps in reading and writing.

Surveys by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicate that in some of these economically advanced countries the number of people hardly able to read and write has reached 5 per cent or more of the population. A far larger proportion of the population suffer from less serious literacy-related difficulties.

Because of these handicaps, the functionally illiterate find it increasingly difficult to land jobs in a modern economy. Those holding low-paying, menial jobs see little or no prospect at all for promotion in pay and work status and thus remain underemployed. Too often, they retire early in their own limited world, unable to participate effectively in increasingly complex societies, notes UNESCO.

A phenomenon in industrialised societies, functional illiteracy has been traced to alarmingly high dropout rates. With only a few years of formal schooling, many have been lured out of school by the prospect of making easy money in sweatshops and factories. Poverty is also a major reason, and peer group is a contributing factor.

The dropout problem becomes twice compounded in developing countries, observes UNESCO. In Sri Lanka, for example, almost 30 per cent leave school before complet-

ing their primary cycle.

With a relatively high literacy rate, the Philippines also has a largely unremedied dropout problem. A study by the Fund for Assistance to Private Education places school dropouts at 9.6 million or nearly 20 per cent of the national population. Only 62 out of every 100 first grades finish the elementary course or reach the fifth grade, according to the study.

The situation is no better in other developing Asia-Pacific countries. And concerned officials have come up with non-formal education programmes to rescue school dropouts who have lapsed back into illiteracy.

In Sri Lanka, the Education Ministry conducts literacy classes in state schools and in other suitable locations. A parallel programme is the setting up of Learning Activity Centres in remote and sparsely populated areas to provide alternative basic education to children.

In the Philippines, the livelihood-oriented University of Life is being eyed as the nucleus of activities for developing non-formal education programmes nationwide.

China has spare-time primary schools for peasants who have attained literacy, dropouts from primary schools, youth, and middle-aged individuals.

Indonesia boasts a comprehensive programme of literacy for primary school dropouts and those who have never had any formal schooling.

Vietnam has full-time and part-time complementary education for various levels of

learners and evening classes for the illiterates.

UNESCO itself has launched innovative programmes to stem the tide of illiteracy in Asia and the Pacific. Only a year old, its Asia-Pacific Programme of Education for All or APPEAL is now generating tremendous enthusiasm among member states. Also in place is its Asian Programme of Educational Innovation for Development, or APEID.

But for all these programmes for continuing education, the illiteracy problem remains daunting.

The dropout problem is just one gray area in the global literacy picture. Worldwide,

the number of illiterates has increased despite an improvement in the aggregate literacy rate of developing countries over the last 15 years.

By UNESCO's estimates, the number of illiterates worldwide had increased by 97 million from 760 million in 1970 to 857 million in 1985. Asia and the Pacific accounted for 618 million or an increase by 81 million from 537 million in 1970.

'Clearly, the rate at which adult population is gaining literacy is outstripped by the rate of population growth, while primary school dropouts add to the number of illiterates,' notes the UNESCO re-