

The United Nations estimates that almost one billion adults worldwide are illiterate. Illiteracy inhibits progress and productivity, hinders cultural and spiritual advancement, and fuels the chronic dependency of entire societies. The problems flowing from illiteracy are integral reasons for the continuing cycle of poverty and underdevelopment which afflicts many nations of the world.

To break out of this destructive cycle, "literacy" efforts worldwide need to be strengthened and expanded so that people can take control of their lives, and can contribute fully to the development of their communities.

The United Nations' International Literacy Year (Ily 1990) will be a call to action to begin a decade of activity to reduce illiteracy around the world; publicize the benefits and importance of literacy; and help create public awareness about literacy programs. In cooperation with UNESCO an International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL) has been established to encourage and coordinate global literacy efforts and to mobilize voluntary sector action in support of International Literacy Year.

WORLD LITERACY SITUATION

The global illiteracy situation

The creation of a literate world is a challenge which calls for urgent, wide-ranging action in all walks of society, for each and every one of us has a stake in the outcome of this struggle and can and must contribute to it, Dr. Federico Mayor Director General of UNESCO

1990: year of literacy

Illiteracy is clearly serious and urgent. Here are some troubling statistics:

- In 1985, there were an estimated 889 million adult illiterates in the world — or fully 27.7 percent of the world adult population. Those over 15 years of age are considered adults for the purposes of these statistics.
- Nearly 98 percent of the world's illiterates live in developing countries — a testament to the fact that illiteracy is both a cause and a consequence of poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World.
- Asia is the "heart of the problem," with 636 million illiterates. Africa has 162 million illiterates, and the Latin American and Caribbean region

total 44 million. The proportional rate of illiteracy is highest in the African continent, where 54 percent of the population is considered illiterate.

Globally, women are more seriously affected by the problem of illiteracy than men. Almost 35 percent of all female adults are illiterate, compared to 20.5 percent for men. Sixty percent of all adult illiterates are women. A majority of the world's illiterates live in rural areas — often in dire poverty.

Illiteracy rates are also very high in urban slums and in the shanty towns which surround many Third World cities. These uniformly alarming global and continental statistics

mask some important regional differences in the main of illiteracy.

LDCs

In the least developed countries, for example, two-thirds of the adult population is illiterate. Within this context, however, the situation is far from being homogenous. There are developing countries which are confronting and resolving the problem of illiteracy, while in other nations — where nearly 80 per cent of the adult population remains illiterate — the situation seems almost entrenched.

UNESCO findings also indicate that in the industrialized countries, illiteracy has been rediscovered; there are more than 50 million adults who possess limited ability to read, write and handle numbers, but who lack the skills to participate fully and effectively in society. Although functional illiteracy might seem comparative

ly less serious than full illiteracy, the problem is extensive and has become a serious concern to many industrialized countries.

CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Education for children would seem the obvious solution to the endemic problem of illiteracy. However, there are currently more than 100 million children in developing countries between the ages of six and eleven who are not enrolled in school. Furthermore, among those children fortunate enough to attend whatever schooling exists, educational standards are very uneven, and drop-out and repetition rates tend to be very high. Indeed, the quality of education provided in many Third World schools is sometimes so distressingly poor, that even pupils who persist in school for several years may never achieve an enduring level of literacy.

Unless immediate and concrete actions are taken in the field of early education, millions of Third World youngsters will grow up to become the adult illiterates of tomorrow, and the cycle of illiteracy will continue unabated.

CHIEF UN PRIORITY

Illiteracy is clearly a problem of global dimensions which, directly or indirectly, affects and concerns all nations and people of the world.

Illiteracy is an impediment to the fulfillment of human and social rights, and a grave threat to the development and progress of humanity. The legacy of illiteracy is also evidence that for hundreds of millions of people, the right to education — a right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — is not a reality.

The International Literacy Year initiative has been launched with the premise that the eradication of illiteracy calls for worldwide cooperation, and that the process of education can make an indispensable contribution to the achievement of social progress, mutual understanding and cooperation among nations.

For all of these reasons, the eradication of illiteracy is one of the chief priorities of the International Development Strategy for the Third United Nations Decade.