

The goals to

A CHARTER prepared by the students of the Makerere University, Uganda, in 1970, said, "We cannot afford to build two nations within the same territorial boundaries — one rich, educated — and the other, which constitutes the majority of the population, poor and illiterate."

A similar statement could be written for the world at large: In a world of over five billion people, one billion are illiterate. The majority of them are poor and live in rural areas of developing countries. But in recent years industrialized countries have become increasingly aware of their own illiterates — the so-called functional illiterates.

Generally speaking, literacy is one's ability to read and write in one's mother tongue or national language. According to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a person is literate when he can read and write and knows enough mathematics "for effective functioning in his group or community" and is capable of using these skills forwards his own or the community's development.

A 1965 UNESCO conference of education ministers developed the concept of "functional literacy". The functionally illiterate are considered able to read and write at an elementary level, but lack the literacy skills needed to cope with the demands of complex living and working environments.

In December 1987 the UN General Assembly declared 1990 as International Literacy Year (ILY). Observance of the Year offers national Governments an opportunity to:

- * Renew and invigorate actions to combat illiteracy;
- * Awaken public awareness about the gravity of the problem;
- * Increase public participation in literacy campaigns;
- * Co-ordinate national and international efforts;
- * Strengthen co-operation within the UN system and among non-governmental organizations;
- * Lay the foundation for launching a plan of action aimed at eradicating illiteracy by the year 2000.

The UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is the lead UN agency for the global campaign against illiteracy and the focal point of ILY, providing national Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with assistance and guidance in devising literacy campaign and other activities for the Year.

UNESCO's literacy programme includes research, training

and promoting information exchange and international co-operation in literacy and education. It helps member countries develop national literacy and education programmes, and provides financial assistance for literacy projects — \$19.3 million in 1988-1989 — to individual Governments and NGOs in over 100 countries.

A 1987 symposium on literacy convened by UNESCO concluded that the struggle against illiteracy called for the mobilization of all elements of society, with Governments in the lead and the involvement of NGOs, youth groups, the media, publishing companies and individuals.

One of ILY's major objectives is to increase Government and public participation in literacy work. An International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL) was formed in 1987 under the auspices of UNESCO as an umbrella group for some 100,000 NGOs from all over the world. Currently it is composed of 27 international and regional organizations and co-operating bodies. At the initiative of ITFL, an international media colloquium was held in Paris in May 1989, bringing together media leaders from all over the world to enlist their support for ILY.

Education (and by extension, literacy) is recognized as a fundamental human rights, and an essential ingredient for the enjoyment of other human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, states:

"Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

The Fourth UNESCO International Conference on Adult Education in March 1985 noted:

* "There can be no human development without the right to learn. There will be no breakthroughs in agriculture and industry, no progress in community health and, indeed, no change in learning conditions without the right to learn. Without this right there will be no improvements in the standard of living for workers in cities and villages."

A far less eloquent but more direct case for literacy is given in a Vietnamese song used to promote literacy campaigns:

"Being married to an educated man can be a great asset. But being married to an uneducated one

"Is like being married to an ass."

Illiteracy aggravates the problems of poverty, malnutrition, inadequate health care and runaway population growth which face many countries. It prevents free choice of work, hampers people's participation in their countries' political life and hinders development.

The geography of illiteracy is the geography of underdevelopment. The link between a country's per capita income and its literacy rate has long been established. As early as 1955, studies found that all countries with per capita incomes above \$500 had a literacy rate of 90 per cent or better, all countries with per capita incomes below \$200 had literacy rates of 30 per cent or below.

The link between the two is not difficult to detect. A literate population:

- * is more productive on the job, and masters new technologies and methods more easily;
- * Has greater job opportunities;
- * In rural villages, can take better advantage of banking and cooperative facilities, and learn from written materials about climate and new methods for farming and livestock management, or for maintaining equipment, wells and irrigation system;
- * In urban areas, is more easily integrated into community efforts to improve the quality of life;
- * Can ensure better health and hygiene for their families and make informed choices about family planning.

A French woman, who could neither read nor write, could only manage to locate her subway station in Paris by remembering the wall posters. The problem was, however, that the posters were constantly changed and the poor woman got lost.

* A Bangladeshi villager, who had believed he had only placed his piece of land under mortgage, to the village landlord, was shocked to learn that the document he had signed by thumb-printing was actually a sales deed. He thus lost his only possession because he could neither read nor write.

In the United States, a man who wanted to join an anti-alcoholism programme first

be reached

had to approach a literacy tutor to read to him the brochures he had been given. His conclusion: "I am accepted more if I am an alcoholic than if I say I can't read."

The proportion of illiterates in the world population has been falling from 33 per cent in 1970 to 27 per cent in 1985 but the absolute number of illiterates continues to grow because of high population growth.

In 1985:

- * There were some 889 million illiterates aged 15 and above.
- * Over 100 million children of primary-school age (6-11 years) in the developing countries were not enrolled in schools.
- * Asia, where 56.8 per cent of the population was illiterate, was home to three quarters of the world's illiterates; 14 per cent of Africa's population and 34.6 per cent of Latin Americans were illiterate.
- * Of the 32 countries where less than half the population could read and write, 22 were in Africa and 7 in Asia.
- * Literacy training for adults was on the rise — from 1.7 billion in 1975 to 2.3 billion in 1985.

* More women were illiterate than men. More than one out of every three women was illiterate while only one man out of five could not read and write. Ten African and four Asian countries had an illiteracy rate for women in excess of 80 per cent.

Industrialized countries account for 20 million or just 2 per cent of the global total of illiterates. However, the number of functional illiterates may be considerably larger — over 50 million according to one source. With rapid changes in technology and jobs becoming increasingly demanding, their number is growing.

* A recent study prepared by the European Community estimated that one in 20 West Europeans is illiterate. In some Europe, illiteracy rates reach 23 per cent.

* A study conducted by the Southern newspaper group in Canada concluded that one in every four Canadians is functionally illiterate. Ten per cent of Canadian adults can't understand the dosage directions on a medicine bottle, 20 per cent can't select a fact from a simple newspaper article, 40 per cent can't figure out the tip on a lunch bill and 50 per cent have serious problems using a

bus schedule.

In 1988, 35 industrialized countries, in co-operation with UNESCO, issued a recommendation calling for concerted efforts to prevent functional illiteracy and laid the basis for future co-operation among the countries concerned and UNESCO.

Several countries have already launched successful literacy campaigns combining UNESCO support with the efforts of Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other international organizations. Some example:

* Ethiopia in 1974 had an illiteracy rate of over 93 per cent. Five years later, in 1979, a major literacy campaign was launched. Volunteers from all sections of educated society were mobilized. A million and a half people were expected to participate in the first phase of the programme, but more than 6 million became involved. By 1983, Ethiopia's illiteracy rate had dropped to 44.8 per cent.

* In the Federal Republic of Germany, where as many as 3 million people may be functionally illiterate, more than 300 "Volkshochschulen" or adult education centres have been opened to cater specifically to the needs of at least 10,000 functional illiterates each year. The programme is supported by the efforts of the Government, NGOs and the media.

* In Ghana, a theatre group, Kusum Agromba, is luring children back to school by showing why education is necessary.

* In India radio and television play an important role in the national literacy campaign.

Nicaragua launched an intensive literacy programme in 1980. More than 100,000 people volunteered to teach 700,000 of the country's illiterates. Using a method developed by the famous Brazilian literacy teacher Paulo Freire, more than 400,000 people learned to read and write in just six months. The country's literacy rate rose from 50 per cent to 87 per cent.

* In Somalia, a literacy campaign combined with a health and sanitation programme is helping to bring down a high illiteracy rate among women.

* In Bangkok's slums of Rajapathan and Sam Sen, UNESCO and Thailand's education authority launched an innovative literacy programme. Focused on women, it combined litera-

cy learning with lessons in employable skills, primary health care and housekeeping. In just three months — from January to March 1988 — the lives of 400 poor families were radically changed. Their incomes rose, their homes were cleaner and their children were healthier. The success of the project has led to a similar programme for 600 road sweepers of the city's Phayathai district.

* In the United States, nearly 3,400 older volunteers in the National Retired Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP) contributed over 208,000 hours to literacy efforts in their communities between 1985 and 1988. The project reached both urban and rural areas. Over 2,800 of the volunteers became tutors. The programme received grants from ACTION, the national volunteer agency, and the Dayton Hudson Foundation, and was managed by an NGO, Laubach Literacy Action.

The UN system of programmes and agencies, with UNESCO in the lead, is rallying the support of Governments and the public for a global assault on illiteracy. UN bodies are pooling their resources in support of the literacy programme. The UNESCO campaign against illiteracy has already been launched in co-operation with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank. The programme aims to secure a common basic level of primary education in every country for at least 80 per cent of all 14-year-olds by the year 2000.

UNESCO along with UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank will convene a world conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs in Bangkok, Thailand, in March 1990, to bring together educators and education administrators.

Discussions are currently under way within the UN on a strategy for a fourth UN Development Decade in the 1990s. The Committee on Development Planning, an international group of experts, has singled out "human development" as a key element of the strategy. In particular, the experts cite education, along with health, nutrition and housing, as investments with the potential to yield "at least as high a return" as investments in physical assets. They point to the links between literacy, health and education; and literacy and labour productivity. They have also identified the attainment of universal primary education — especially for girls — as a "particularly desirable goal" for the decade.