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International Literacy Year

OVER one quarter of the world's adult population cannot read or write. Illiteracy adversely affects their lives, their work and their place in society. International Literacy Year (ILY) — 1990 — addresses these problems and those of the more than 100 million out-of-school children between the ages of 6 and 11, who might otherwise be destined to join the ranks of the adult illiterate.

"The aims of ILY are to boost literacy efforts around the world and to put literacy high up on the development agenda," says Colin N. Power, Assistant Director-General for Education at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the lead U.N. agency for planning the year.

ILY was proclaimed in 1987 by the United Nations General Assembly in response to an appeal from UNESCO. The main objective of the Year is to set in motion a worldwide movement for literacy as part of the ten-year Plan of Action extending to the year 2000.

Collective Enterprise

"If universal literacy is going to be achieved, it requires an enormous collective enterprise involving governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, as

well as millions of communities and individuals around the world," says Power.

A network of partners must be created in order to carry out the two-pronged strategy which will make it possible to eliminate illiteracy: first, the provision of universal primary education to ensure that all children attend school; and second, the organization of programmes for adults.

Such a partnership is being forged within the United Nations system, private initiative and the media. Two major events have already been fixed for 1990. In March, four international agencies — UNESCO, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and the World Bank — will convene in Thailand a meeting of more than one thousand decision-makers and experts in the World Conference on Education for All, which will focus on basic education. The conference aims to spur governmental commitment and to appeal to the generosity of potential financial donors. The second event is scheduled for September 1990, when the International Conference on Education in Geneva will focus on the review of national literacy and education plans.

Some thirty international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have set up the International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL) to stimulate active participation during 1990 and beyond. A similar impetus has been provided by the media. They play an essential role in the ILY endeavour, both by informing the public and also by taking active part in programmes. Media organizations from all over the world came to UNESCO in May 1989 to discuss their participation in the Year. In many countries, the media are actively involved in literacy work. The largest Japanese newspaper, Yomiuri, for example, has launched a campaign to collect "a yen per illiterate" in Asia and the Pacific, a total of 666 million yen (five million dollars). The funds will be directed to literacy projects in the region.

UNESCO's action takes place at three levels: globally through action to mobilize public opinion and rally the international community; regionally through its four regional programmes and projects for literacy; and nationally through technical co-operation with its Member States. "UNESCO's role is essentially that of catalyst, mediator and experts," says Power.

UNESCO's Co-Action Program-

me has received funds from all over the world — often in the form of small amounts from private individuals — to help construct schools and libraries, and to buy pencils, paper, books, and material in Braille for the 18 literacy projects it is implementing in developing countries.

Literacy has been identified by Member States as an absolute priority for UNESCO in the years to come. Momentum is building rapidly. Some countries with major problems of illiteracy, such as China and India, have launched literacy campaigns that will touch tens of millions of people. More than 80 countries have created national committees to prepare their participation in the year.

The Plan Of Action

The foundation for UNESCO's ten-year Plan of Action 1990-1999 is based on the regional programmes launched with UNESCO support in Latin America and the Caribbean, in Africa, in Asia and the Pacific, and in the Arab countries, regions which account for 98 per cent of the world's illiterates. The Plan of Action has two priorities: the least-developed countries, where illiteracy is widespread and in some of which school enrolment is falling. — UNESCO