

# International Literacy Year: 1990

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.

## What is "literacy"?

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 towards 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:

- Review 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.

## An International Task Force

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.

## Literacy And Human Rights

Education and by extension, literacy, is recognised 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 co-operative facilities, and learn from written materials about climate and new methods for farming and livestock management, or for maintaining equipment, wells and irrigation systems; 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 Bangladesh 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 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."

(To be Continued)