

What can we expect of an international year? During this one, International Literacy Year (ILY), Unesco prodded, pushed and above all, mirrored the world's conscience and commitment to literacy in particular and education in general, as basic human rights. Literacy matters was the message and everyone is concerned by its promotion.

ILY took place during a period of global economic crisis, at a time when major political and economic shifts were challenging the role of education in Europe and elsewhere. It also coincided with growing recognition of illiteracy in the industrialized countries where, until recently, the issue was viewed as non-existent or, at worst, confined to migrant or disadvantaged populations, and this new outlook made it possible to reinforce the North-South and East-West dialogue. All of these factors gave the Year particular pertinence and intensified the debate.

ILY had five main goals: to encourage action at top government levels; raise public awareness, especially of the high rate of illiteracy among women and the low rate of school participation among girls; mobilize all potential partners NGOs, the media, industry, etc.; reinforce international cooperation and finally, muster forces for a 10-year Action Plan.

To help do the job, national ILY committees were formed in 110 countries, and 94 Honorary Ambassadors nominated. Two major world conferences were held, along with all kinds of events, exhibitions and count-less meetings, organized at all levels worldwide, to launch programmes including for research, prepare publications and exchange infor-

mation. In many cases, the media led the way.

Taking the world pulse in 1990 the ILY Secretariat and national committees recognized that a new, more open approach was necessary, that no single solution could be applied within or across countries. Programmes and strategies had to emanate from the perceived needs of individuals and their communities. Simple recipes and slogans like "eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000" were to be discarded in favour of a more complex message. Competitive strategies, like ranking countries according to simplistic literacy and illiteracy rates also came under attack.

In short, ILY provided the opportunity for taking stock of the situation in a given country or group, then moving forward from that perhaps unique context. A number of industrialized countries in the Mediterranean Basin, for instance, are highly conscious of the inadequacies of their education structures to meet the needs of children and adults alike. To achieve full literacy, therefore, these countries need not necessarily pass through the same awareness-raising process as other industrialized countries which refuse to acknowledge the problem.

High-level national awareness also comes about in different ways. In the United Kingdom it grew from the grassroots through voluntary bodies and the

media in the 1970s, while in France, a presidential mandate in the early 1980s focused attention on literacy needs as closely linked with poverty and youth unemployment.

As for raising the level of public awareness and involvement, the second goal of ILY, one of the most difficult jobs for international organizations was to find a clear language in which to communicate the issues to different countries and sectors of society, and the media didn't always help. Newspapers and television, in fact, too often presented stereotypes, dwelling on the shame and conveying an image which likened the illiterate adult to someone with an affliction like alcoholism. In reality, such an individual is usually a fully functioning family member who perceives these needs largely in terms of employment possibilities.

During ILY we tried to go beyond this negative approach, to encourage the involvement of adult learners in formulating goals. We also tried to convey the idea that for many groups the right to the written word has not been fully recognized. At various debates during the Year it became clear that for some peoples it was a matter of seeing how best oral cultures could be comple-

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mented by literacy. For others, the written word turned out to be a form of bilingualism. This may be true for immigrant or minority groups, or in multi-lingual societies where populations may learn to read and write in their mother tongues, but must become literate in a second language, possibly the official national language, to participate in the life of society. As another example, the deaf communicate within an authentic culture through sign language, but need the written word to participate in the world of the hearing.

One of the most successful efforts to include adult learners in the formulation of their aspirations was the Book Voyage organized by the International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL), a coordinating body of NGOs. Thousands of learners around the world thus communicated their thoughts in an immense undertaking culminating in an international book presented to the Secretary General of the United Nations on December 10, 1990.

During ILY our Secretariat expanded the narrow black-white notion of literacy vs illiteracy to look at literacy acquisition as a complex, life-long process. Everyone, at different stages in life will have new literacy needs. The pressure to over-simplify,

however, continues to be enormous. While literacy practitioners and school teachers are concerned with identifying and responding to needs the call for accountability and statistics is overwhelming. Funding agencies want to know where and how effectively their money is being spent. The media want to strike the imagination with figures that shock. Yet for Unesco, it became clearer than even during ILY that there simply are no truly reliable statistics for cross-country comparison. Keeping tabs on literacy acquisition is far more complex than counting available doses of vaccine.

Unfortunately, the language of international organizations, such as Unesco, has in some ways contributed to the confusion. The work of Unesco, as well as many funding sources, is frequently broken up into "projects" of "programmes" which starting with "literacy" then moving to "post-literacy" may have a lifespan of only a few months to a few years. Indeed, as the planet became a forum for literacy issues notions like "relapse into illiteracy" or of exactly what constitutes "post-literacy" provision came under scrutiny.

As the Year progressed, the spiralling interest in literacy issues was evident, particularly at the ILY Secretariat, which during 1990, responded to some 200,000 requests for information. The momentum for a Decade of action was clearly gaining pace.

A REVIEW The benefits of Literacy Year

Given the present trends there is, of course, no realistic way to eliminate illiteracy by the year 2000. And, in any case, if we broaden our definition, we shall always have literacy needs. It is a matter of promoting literacy, not eradicating a "scourge" of enhancing people's communication possibilities without denying their cultural and linguistic identities.

During ILY tight links and networks have been formed between and among a vast number of partners, including Unesco other UN agencies, NGO's the OECD, the EEC, the Council of Europe and other inter-governmental organizations universities, national and regional bodies and the private sector. We must now work to consolidate these partnerships to keep literacy and basic education on national agendas over the long term. Concrete steps forward will be radically different from group to group, country to country and from one form of international co-operation to another. But there is a new climate of openness marked by the conviction that we can all learn from each other.

Success may be gauged by the fact that many countries are now developing 10-year educational strategies and questioning their education systems, both formal and non-formal, more intensely. In the final analysis, the ILY balance sheet will be positive only if the Year leads to this kind of long-term commitment, ensuring that literacy for all is not subsumed under vague assurances or short-term, market-expedient, educational goals.

Literacy is everyone's business and we must keep it that way!