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Literacy

Beyond Reading And Writing

THERE are an estimated 905 million people around the world who cannot read and write. Some 507 million of them are women. Although these new figures indicate a welcome downturn in the rate of illiteracy, and can thus be considered good news, they still represent an enormous number of people yet to be reached. Some 874 million of these people are in the developing countries. Not included in these figures, which are taken from UNESCO's 1993 World Education Report, are those people in developing or developed countries who could be considered functionally illiterate : those, for example, who have received some schooling but who are unable to write a cheque, road the instructions on a bottle of medicine, or take a driving test. If we add these people, the total number of illiterates around the world tops the one billion mark.

Is literacy so important though ?

In the literate societies of the developed countries, people who cannot carry out such simple tasks as those mentioned above, are dreadfully handicapped. They are not only excluded from many activities and limited in their job prospects, but they are also terribly stigmatized. According to German literacy researcher, Heinz Peter Gerhardt, "avoiding shame is the major personal reason why an illiterate enters an adult education class" in an industrialized society, and the first things they want to learn are "the skills that will make them appear literate."

On the other hand, is semi-literate cultures, literacy often ranks very low on the priority list. Ensuring the family's survival — finding a daily meal or looking after the crops — is much more important and, at first glance does not appear to require skills such as reading and writing.

And yet, literacy is much more than reading and writing.

As UNESCO Literacy expert, John Ryan, points out, "nothing is more essential to our progress, as individuals and socieities than the development of human competence and potential through education and training. And literacy ... is the vehicle of education the means through which ideas, information, knowledge and wisdom are expressed and exchanged. Education is the door to the future and literacy is the key."

A glance around the globe shows why this is so.

"A look at some statistics other than those for illiteracy reveals that one billion human beings live below the poverty line, that one and a half billion people lack medical facilities, that one billion people live in insanitary conditions" says former Director of the Paris-based International Institute for Educational Planning, Sylvain Lourie. "The parallel with the billion total and functional illiterates speaks for itself; it is not difficult to recognize that the map of world illiteracy coincides with that of world poverty. This shocking fact applies primarily to developing countries, but the odds are that the functional illiterates in industrialized countries will almost always be round among the unemployed and those who have been left behind by the mainstream of the economy and modern technology."

Similarly, research is beginning to reveal the clear link between illiterate populations and high demographic growth. Those countries with literate female populations are those with the lowest birth rates. According to the recent UNESCO report. Status and Trends, "fertility rates are (now) declining in most countries partly due to the increasing educational level of women." "In many of the world's largest countries" continues the report "the trend to fewer children is unmistakable. In India, for example, where total population will increase by 2,2 per cent annually this decade, the number of children who need a place in school will grow by only 1.6 per cent per year."

And the children born to literate women are more likely to lead healthier and longer lives, and be educated in turn.

"The basic health education we received has completely changed (my family's) life" said an Ethiopian mother after taking part in a national literacy campaign. "I have completely abolished the old ways of keeping our home."

"I am cursing my parents for not educating me. I don't want my children to curse me," said another. "I want (them) to gain ample knowledge and be engaged in higher posts and lead a good live..."

For these women becoming literate has been a process of self-realization, of liberation and empowerment. And this is perhaps the most important benefit of education. It is also the aspect of education that has, in the past, made many governments reticent to act. As was pointed out at a UNESCO symposium at Persepolis in Iran back in 1975, "Literacy work, like education in general, is a political act. It is not neutral, for the act of revealing social reality in order to transform it, or of concealing it in order to preserve it, is political."

In 1976 by former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, underlined that "politicians are sometimes more aware (of the political nature of adult education) than educators, and, therefore they do not always welcome real adult education. Evidence of this attitude was witnessed back in the 1960s, when Brazilian authorities detained educationalist, Paulo Freire for trying to raise literacy consciousness there.

It is difficult to imagine such a reaction today. The majority of the world government's have now thrown the necessary moral support, if not the necessary resources, behind education for all, and many have set precise goals and devised extensive programmes aimed at achieving this ideal.

Although it may now be generally recognized that every effort must be made to provide education for all, achieving this goal is another kettle of fish. By the year 2000 the world education report estimates there will still be 869.4 million illiterate people over the age of 15. According to Status and Trends, the global economic crisis has meant that education spending, as a percentage of total government spending, is less now in all regions, except East Asia and Oceania, than it was in 1980. And yet it, as case studies have shown, the cost of teaching an adult to read and write is more or less the same as the cost of sending a child to school, present levels of education expenditure must be no less than doubled if the goal of providing literacy skills to the world's adult illiterates by the year 2000 is to be reached.

Apart from the numbers and the resources, there is also the monumental problem of language. In total, says Malien linguist and literacy specialist, Adama Ouane "There are thought to be between 3,500 and 9,000 sovereigg states." Literacy teaching in the mother tongue is generally considered the most preferable. But the sheer logistics of using all of a country's languages make this practically and financially impossible in a country like Zaire, for example which has between 200 and 400 languages, depending on how "language" is defined. On the other hand, imposing a single and often foreign language is culturally and politically unaccepteable.

"The challenge of creating a literate world is enormous" says John Ryan, who believes that the vital ingredient is not necessarily money, language or even political will. Rather, he says "people must understand how literacy can help improve their lives." Once literacy becomes something people want, he says, the goal of education for all will move within reach.