



May 2008

UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy

“Addressing Literacy Challenges in Europe with a sub-regional focus: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches”

Baku, Azerbaijan, 14-16 May 2008

Summary Outcomes

I. The regional scene

1. National adult literacy rates in the regions and sub-regions represented at this conference are in general high. These headline rates often lead to a perception that youth and adult literacy is an issue only for particular population groups or those with special needs; however, they mask a different reality. Increasing information flows and the need to deal with growing complexity in today's world require higher levels of proficiency. In this region, effective use of literacy is part of a range of key competencies that youth and adults need to meet the new demands of globalization and fast-paced socio-economic change. As a result, the capacity to use literacy within the knowledge societies of the 21st century may often be inadequate for a significant proportion of these same populations. Therefore, notwithstanding the clear importance of building strong literacy capacities through quality education for all school-age children, this Conference focused on literacy for youth and adults. Participants in this Conference signal to all literacy stakeholders – governments, civil society, the private sector, the media, regional bodies and the international community – the necessity of recognizing this situation and the need to act.

II. Literacy remains a critical competency

2. Conceptions of literacy are changing. Mobility, information technologies, rapid communication and other socio-economic developments require new competencies in literacy. The uses of literacy are varied and are specific to particular contexts. In the area of youth and adult literacy, strong government policies are required to respond to new literacy demands and to recognize the multiple dimensions of literacy that people need for different purposes.

The conference therefore RECOMMENDS that:

- a. Policy-makers at national and local levels recognize and promote the importance of literacy competencies at all levels of education, as the key tool for lifelong learning and as a foundation for acquiring other skills;

- b. Governments and other stakeholders establish, by means of surveys or in other ways, the nature and volume of new literacy demands among different social groups;
- c. Governments strengthen policies for the promotion of literacy, as part of broader policies of lifelong learning;
- d. Governments increase budget allocations to literacy as an essential element of national investment in education;
- e. Stakeholders in literacy raise awareness among the population of the critical role of literacy in achieving key competencies;
- f. Governmental, non-governmental and private sector literacy providers give particular attention to ensuring basic competencies in using digital technologies.

III. Better evidence for better policies

3. Good policy-making depends on good and reliable evidence. The Education for All Global Monitoring Report reveals a lack of literacy data for some countries in the region – where headline literacy rates are high, governments may have little concern to document or address literacy as a social issue. At the same time, international literacy surveys, such as IALS and ALL, and national surveys have revealed more precisely the nature of the literacy challenge in those same societies, where significant proportions of the population have low literacy competency. Assessment of literacy situations is gradually moving away from the literate/illiterate dichotomy towards a more nuanced picture of literacy competencies, with an emphasis on how far people are able to make use of literacy for the purposes of their daily lives. Evaluation of literacy programmes focuses increasingly on the problem-solving that literacy enables people to carry out, rather than simply on the bare technical skills of reading and writing. Further progress in gathering, compiling and analyzing systematic evidence is necessary to provide the basis for more precisely targeted policies and investment in literacy.

The conference therefore RECOMMENDS that:

- a. Governments and other literacy providers undertake surveys, or where appropriate participate in international surveys, to assess directly the different levels of literacy performance of their populations, both adults and children;
- b. Governments and other literacy providers draw on the increasing range of tools and methods of assessment, adapting them to local cultural and linguistic realities;
- c. Literacy providers of all kinds undertake regular literacy programme evaluations with a view to identifying their specific results, learning the lessons of experience and understanding better what works;
- d. Literacy providers further develop cooperation at regional and international levels in the assessment, monitoring and evaluation of literacy.

IV. Literacy for living... and for all

4. Literacy is an essential element of the fundamental right to education and constitutes a set of key competencies of crucial importance. It is a means of learning and communication, and a critical skill for participating fully in society. It also facilitates engagement with democratic processes, enables individuals and communities to grasp new economic opportunities and fosters the learning and interaction which underpin sustainable development. Literacy is an important tool for everyone in society; for disadvantaged social groups in particular, such as minorities, refugees, migrants, or people with disabilities, literacy has special significance as a means to claim rights and benefit from advances in the wider society. Literacy needs grow and change during the course of a lifetime and so literacy is part of lifelong learning, embedded in learning other competencies.

The conference therefore RECOMMENDS that:

- a. Literacy providers regularly update learning programmes in order to ensure that the literacy components are relevant to learners' needs and appropriate to specific purposes;
- b. Literacy providers, in partnership with other relevant actors, integrate new literacy demands – such as those relating to citizenship and social participation, healthcare systems, computing, financial operations, environmental protection and consumer education – into courses they offer;
- c. Employers recognize the needs of their employees to improve their literacy skills, with clear acknowledgement of the role played by trade unions in facilitating workplace learning;
- d. All those working with employees integrate the learning of necessary literacy competencies into the learning of skills in the workplace.

The conference further RECOMMENDS that:

- e. Literacy providers, particularly governments, improve strategies to increase participation in socio-economic life, particularly for disadvantaged groups, while respecting their distinctive cultural identity;
- f. Literacy providers tailor their approaches to the particular circumstances of disadvantaged groups in such a way as to enhance their life chances;
- g. Governments facilitate access to learning literacy and other key competencies for the groups most excluded from learning opportunities, by removing barriers, financial and otherwise;
- h. Providers of education make a clear distinction between literacy learning and learning a new language, and between literacy and numeracy learning, given that the methods of acquiring these various competencies are quite different.

V. Literacy: improving quality learning

5. Most people learn literacy in the formal school system; however, not everyone acquires useable literacy competency through schooling. Drop-out, low-quality instruction and opportunity costs all play a role. In some cases, initial literacy may be acquired completely outside of the formal school system. Informal learning as part of everyday life and non-formal opportunities for lifelong learning are essential strategies to meet the demand for acquiring or improving literacy competency and for learning other skills. Ensuring quality for diverse groups of learners and a varied range of learning needs is complex – relevant learning outcomes must characterize non-formal as much as formal learning opportunities. Promoting high-quality literacy and key competencies is a responsibility that all stakeholders should carry out – governments, civil society and its networks, private sector enterprises, regional bodies (such as the EU, the Council of Europe and CIS), and international organizations, especially UNESCO. Partnerships and effective coordination are key to success in literacy work.

The conference therefore RECOMMENDS that:

- a. Literacy providers, particularly governments, establish ongoing quality monitoring processes for non-formal learning;
- b. Literacy providers adopt teaching and learning approaches that are tailored to adults and to the specific learning outcomes desired by learners;
- c. Literacy providers use delivery methods (pedagogical approaches, timing, duration, place, materials, etc) which are suitable for the circumstances of learners, and undertake effective professional development of literacy facilitators and others working in the area of literacy;

- d. Literacy providers consider the use of peer learning, particularly among youth, as a means of literacy acquisition;
 - e. Governments and other stakeholders give ongoing support to research into factors which make for effective teaching and learning practices, and into other aspects of literacy provision;
 - f. Governments develop mechanisms for mutually beneficial links between formal and non-formal learning spaces, facilitate literacy provision for the wide diversity of groups and needs by mobilizing a variety of providers, and set up frameworks for maximizing the impact of small-scale NGO literacy initiatives and family-based learning;
 - g. Literacy providers give systematic and ongoing attention to achieving learning outcomes that enhance learners' capacity to improve their lives;
 - h. All literacy stakeholders take specific measures to enrich literate environments, drawing on their multiple capabilities and creativity;
 - i. Governments and other literacy stakeholders strengthen cooperation and partnerships to multiply impact and build on comparative advantage, reinforcing existing networks for information flow and exchange, for mutual learning and for the dissemination of good practice;
 - j. Coordination should increase at national, regional and international levels for more effective literacy provision, such as through national frameworks and regional networks;
 - k. In the context of the UN Literacy Decade, UNESCO strengthens international networking and exchange in literacy, providing virtual and face-to-face forums to build productive synergies and partnerships.
6. Literacy is a right, and literacy provision is an investment – in the lives and capacities of individuals and communities. As such, it requires adequate financial resources. The participants appeal to governments of the region and beyond, as well as to the EU, to increase budget allocations, grants and loans so that every person acquires the tools and competencies they need to play their full role as an active and productive member of society.