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**Social development: United Nations Literacy Decade:
education for all**

Implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General hereby transmits the report of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization on the final evaluation of the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade, submitted in pursuance of General Assembly resolution [65/183](#).

* [A/68/150](#).



Implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade

Report of the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Summary

The United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) was proclaimed at the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly, in 2001, to support collective efforts to achieve the goals of Education for All by 2015. The Decade ended on 31 December 2012.

In accordance with General Assembly resolution [65/183](#), the present report is submitted to the General Assembly to present key findings of a final evaluation of the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the Decade, conducted in consultation with national Governments and development partners, together with specific recommendations for the post-Decade period.

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I. Introduction

A. Background

1. In recognition of the centrality of literacy to Education for All and of the development and scale of literacy challenges, the United Nations Literacy Decade was proclaimed by the General Assembly by its resolution [56/116](#) in 2001 as a global framework for catalysing intensive, focused and sustained efforts for the promotion of literacy and literate environments. It recognized literacy as a fundamental human right and a “basic learning need”:¹ a key to further learning, a better quality of life and enhanced livelihood opportunities. The Decade’s vision, “literacy for all”, recognized the need to establish stronger linkages between formal and non-formal education and also between child and adult literacy in policy design and practice.²

2. The United Nations Literacy Decade was implemented by countries and development partners guided by their own plans as well as global frameworks, notably the International Plan of Action for the Decade ([A/57/218](#) and Corr.1) and the International Strategic Framework for Action (2009). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was mandated to serve as the global coordinator for related activities. Themes that received focused attention during the Decade were literacy and gender (2003-2004), literacy and sustainable development (2005-2006), literacy and health (2007-2008), literacy and empowerment (2009-2010) and literacy and peace (2011-2012). The Decade came to an end in 2012.

B. Final evaluation of the implementation of the International Plan of Action

3. The present report sets out the results of the final evaluation of the implementation of the 2002 International Plan of Action and the specific recommendations for the post-Decade period. The final evaluation was based on the following: recommendations of the 2011 United Nations Literacy Decade expert group meeting; consultations with countries and development partners (2012-2013); 129 national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012); previous progress reports submitted to the governing bodies of the General Assembly and UNESCO, including the midterm Decade report ([A/63/172](#)); and other relevant publications and documents.

4. The present report reviews progress made in the area of literacy, takes stock of how specific structures and activities for the coordination, implementation, advocacy and monitoring of the United Nations Literacy Decade contributed to that progress, and illustrates major gains made in key areas of action identified in the International Plan of Action. It highlights key issues for the shaping of future agendas and action. Given the diverse levels at which and ways in which countries and partners contributed to the Decade and the multiple factors that facilitated progress, this report does not accord sole attribution to the Decade. At the same time, it highlights the Decade’s catalytic effect.

¹ See World Declaration on Education for All (1990).

² See [A/57/218](#).

II. Literacy in today's world

A. Concepts of literacy

5. Concepts of literacy are diverse and continuously evolving. The United Nations Literacy Decade put forward a renewed vision of literacy relevant to today's society, going beyond the conventional concept of literacy limited to reading, writing and numeracy skills.³ It is increasingly accepted that literacy is a continuum of skill levels, from basic to advanced, acquired throughout a lifespan, as opposed to being defined in terms of a simple dichotomy of literacy vs. illiteracy, and that the demand for higher-order literacy skills is growing.

6. The 2012 national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation of the implementation of the International Plan of Action revealed diverse official concepts of literacy. The conventional concept is still in wide use, as well as the idea of functional literacy, which links literacy with socioeconomic development.⁴ In many countries, the practical use of the concepts of literacy in policies and programmes has become broader in order to meet diverse demands in the contemporary world.⁵ Within equivalency programmes and national qualification frameworks, efforts were made to identify a minimum threshold of basic literacy in the various contexts, going beyond the conventional set of skills. Some recent views about literacy, such as the UNESCO 2003 operational definition⁶ and the plural notion of literacy,⁷ provided a good basis for further reflection on the concept.

B. Overview of progress on and the status of literacy

7. Along with the internationally agreed goals and frameworks, notably the Education for All goals and the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations Literacy Decade ensured longer-term support for literacy. The following provides an account of progress made against the expected outcomes specified in the 2002 International Plan of Action regarding: (a) youth and adult literacy in support of the achievement of Education for All goal 3, on meeting learning needs of young people and adults, and goal 4, on improvement in levels of adult literacy by 50 per cent; (b) achieving gender parity and equality in literacy as a thrust of Education for All goal 5 and Millennium Development Goal 3, on gender parity and equality; (c) child literacy in support of the attainment of Education for All goal 2 and Millennium Development Goal 2, on universal primary education, as well as Education for All goal 6, on the quality of education for achieving recognized and measurable learning outcomes, especially in basic literacy and life skills; (d) enriched literate environments; and (e) improved quality of life. Particular focus is placed on three

³ See UNESCO, Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics (1958).

⁴ See UNESCO, Revised Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics (1978).

⁵ See UNESCO, *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2013).

⁶ See UNESCO, *Aspects of Literacy Assessment: Topics and Issues from the UNESCO Expert Meeting, 10-12 June 2003* (2005).

⁷ See UNESCO, *The Plurality of Literacy and Its Implications for Policies and Programmes* (2004).

major priority groups identified in the Plan: children who are enrolled in school but not acquiring sustainable literacy skills; out-of-school children and young people; and non-literate youth and adults.

1. Youth and adult literacy

8. Overall, the Decade was marked by steady progress, with more young people and adults becoming literate. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2013 information paper entitled “Adult and youth literacy: national, regional and global trends, 1985-2015” reveals that the global youth literacy rate, for the population aged 15-24 years, increased from 83 per cent in 1990 to 87 per cent in 2000 and to 90 per cent in 2011.⁸ The number of illiterate young people declined from 168 million in 1990 to 139 million in 2000 and to 123 million in 2011. Likewise, the global adult literacy rate, for the population aged 15 years and older, increased from 76 per cent in 1990 to 82 per cent in 2000 and to 84 per cent in 2011, while the absolute number of illiterate adults fell from 881 million in 1990 to 782 million in 2000 and to 774 million in 2011. Given the increase in the world adult population by some 40 per cent between 1990 and 2010,⁹ this was considerable yet inadequate progress. The fact that the youth literacy rate was greater than the adult literacy rate in almost 140 countries indicates the positive impact of national efforts to enhance access to education, but also points to the need for a focus of attention on adult literacy.

9. This positive global picture, however, masks disparities across regions and countries and different time periods. All regions reduced the number of illiterate adults except South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where their number actually increased. These regions together host three quarters of the world’s illiterate adults and almost 90 per cent of illiterate youth. Disparities also exist in the developed world. One in five young people in Europe had poor literacy skills in 2009.¹⁰ One in five adults in Europe and some 160 million adults in countries belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)¹¹ are functionally illiterate.¹²

10. The limitations of official statistics should also be noted, as data obtained through surveys and censuses based on declarations by respondents or third parties, or on completed years of schooling, may overestimate actual levels of literacy, and thus the number of literate persons.

11. Initial findings of the 2013 Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics provided a more nuanced picture of the level of literacy skills. Its measurement of reading comprehension (prose literacy) levels, using a three-level scale, revealed that at the time of the survey, the proportion of adults with no skills or having mastered only the lowest levels was 29 per cent in Paraguay, 26 per cent in Mongolia and Palestine, and 20 per cent in Jordan, even though those countries had adult literacy rates of more than 93 per cent.

⁸ Data presented in this section are from the 2013 UNESCO Institute for Statistics information paper based on 2011 data, unless otherwise indicated.

⁹ According to the United Nations Population Division.

¹⁰ See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Statistics Canada, *Literacy for Life: Further Results from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (2011).

¹¹ See UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012: *Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work*.

¹² See final report of the European Union High-level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012).

12. With respect to current trends, 743 million adults, mainly in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and another 98 million young people will lack basic literacy skills in 2015. It is projected that only 30 of the 134 countries and territories considered will reach or exceed Education for All goal 4, a 50 per cent reduction in adult illiteracy rates, with the rest missing the target.

2. Gender parity and equality in literacy

13. The progress being made towards gender parity and equality, in particular gender parity at the primary school level, is encouraging. The proportion of girls in the total number of out-of-school children of primary school age dropped from 58 per cent in 2000 to 54 per cent in 2011. But 68 countries have not achieved gender parity in primary education, with girls being disadvantaged in 60 of them, and 97 countries have not achieved such parity at the secondary level.¹³ Ensuring that boys and girls experience the same advantages in educational access, treatment and outcomes remains an enduring challenge. While the educational marginalization of girls is still a predominant phenomenon in developing countries, a reverse trend has been observed in some developed and middle-income countries.

14. Substantial improvements in literacy among adult women contributed to progress in the Arab States, East Asia and the Pacific, but gender disparity persisted. Some 61 per cent of the world's illiterate youth were female in 2011. Two thirds of the illiterate adult population are women, with this proportion remaining unchanged over the past 30 years. The gender gap was especially large in the Arab States, South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

3. Child literacy

15. Learning in school, for which literacy is key, became more accessible to children during the Decade. This led to an increase in the attention given to the quality of learning. Between 1999 and 2010, the global primary net enrolment ratio increased from 84 per cent to 91 per cent.¹⁴ The Arab States, South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa made the biggest strides. The rate of survival to the last grade at the primary level increased from 87 per cent in 1999 to 91 per cent in 2009, but the achievement of universal primary education by 2015 is a distant prospect for 29 countries. Disparities in access, attendance and progression across populations persist. In 71 of the 98 countries considered, the net intake rates were less than 80 per cent, and in 16 countries they were less than 50 per cent, indicating that many children were not entering the first grade of primary education at the official entrance age, which increases the risk of early dropout.

16. The number of out-of-school children of primary school age declined from 108 million in 1999 to 57 million in 2011, but another 69 million of lower-secondary age children were not in school in 2011,¹⁵ and the progress made in this area has stagnated since 2008. Sub-Saharan Africa was home to 50 per cent of out-of-school children of primary school age. In that region, the continuous expansion of enrolment did not keep pace with the steady increases in the school-age population, resulting in an increase in the number of out-of-school children by

¹³ See UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012: *Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, May 2013.

0.7 million between 2008 and 2011. In contrast, the number of out-of-school children of primary school age in South and West Asia decreased from 13 million in 2008 to 12 million in 2011. On the basis of the current trend, it is estimated that almost one in two out-of-school children of primary age worldwide will probably never enter school.

17. In terms of skill levels, there were some positive signs of progress. Results from large-scale assessments such as the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) and the Programme for International Student Assessment indicated overall steady progress in the reading skills of children and young people worldwide. Of the world's 650 million children of primary school age, 120 million do not reach grade 4, and the 130 million who are in school are failing to learn the basics, graduating with unsustainable literacy skills.¹⁶ Some reading assessments conducted in developing countries point to the fact that many children cannot read even one letter after one year of schooling. These children are at risk of not progressing in school systems or dropping out, eventually adding to the existing population of illiterate adults.

4. Literate environments

18. Literate environments were gradually enriched during the Decade, providing literacy materials as well as means and opportunities to apply, sustain and advance literacy skills for the benefit of society. Also enhanced were physical, sociocultural and political environments, through supportive legislation and policies for the promotion of languages, book publishing and media. Between 2006 and 2010, newspaper circulation rates increased in such regions as Asia and Latin America, while they declined in developed countries, where more people had access to the Internet.¹⁷ In Asia and the Pacific, 170,000 community learning centres or non-formal education centres were established. However, there is still much to be done. The results of the SACMEQ III project show that only 3 per cent of pupils in the sixth grade had their own reading and mathematics textbooks in the United Republic of Tanzania in 2007, while the rest either had no textbook or shared one with others. In Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe, one in five pupils had his or her own textbook.

19. The Decade witnessed considerable improvements in terms of virtual literate environments, with information and communications technology becoming more accessible and affordable, although the digital divide still exists. For example, the number of people with mobile-phone subscriptions almost tripled to 6,411 million in 2012, with faster progress made in developing countries.¹⁸ This advancement opened up opportunities for the use of information and communications technology to enrich learning environments and called for an expansion in the scope of literacy learning to include digital and information competencies.

5. Improved quality of life

20. Through their political, social, economic, human and cultural benefits for individuals, families and societies, enhanced literacy skills help improve quality of

¹⁶ See UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012: *Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work*.

¹⁷ See World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, *World Press Trends 2011*.

¹⁸ According to data provided by the International Telecommunication Union.

life. Evidence shows that a child born to a literate mother is 50 per cent more likely to survive past age 5, and that an extra year of schooling increases an individual's earnings by up to 10 per cent. Many literacy programmes have had the following impacts: increased willingness on the part of parents to educate their own children; more effective use of communication and decontextualized language; improved family health; more productive livelihoods; empowerment; increased self-confidence and autonomy; enhanced democratic participation and citizenship; and the fostering of cultural identity.¹⁹ Although measuring improvements in quality of life and impacts on social development, peace and poverty reduction is a complex task, a more literate world is closely associated with better quality of life.

III. Coordination, implementation, advocacy and monitoring of the United Nations Literacy Decade

21. Overall, the Decade inspired a number of specific activities aimed at its coordination, implementation, advocacy and monitoring, which generated a significant amount of momentum. At the same time, the Decade could have had a much greater impact if literacy had been better integrated into the global developmental framework, notably the Millennium Development Goals. In addition, different levels of ownership on the part of countries and partners affected their levels of commitment.

A. Coordination and implementation

22. UNESCO was mandated to take a coordinating role in stimulating and catalysing activities at the international level.²⁰ It set up an international team as a technical sounding board on the Decade in 2003-2004. This was later replaced with an expert group that provided specific inputs into the mid-Decade review and the final evaluation. A number of supporting structures at the regional and country levels were also established.

23. UNESCO utilized Education for All coordination mechanisms as key platforms to enable it to fulfil its role as the global coordinator for Education for All. The focus placed on literacy by several meetings of the High-level Group on Education for All, the Thematic Working Group on Education for All, the Global Education for All Meeting and the Education for All Global Monitoring Reports raised the profile of literacy. Also used were the Collective Consultation of Non-Governmental Organizations on Education for All; the E9 Initiative, which placed a special focus on literacy in 2010-2011; and the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education, held in Belém, Brazil, in 2009, and its follow-up activities boosted commitment and action with respect to adult literacy.

24. As a strategic framework for the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade, UNESCO launched the Literacy

¹⁹ See H. Abadzi, *Adult Literacy: A Review of Implementation Experience* (2003); A. Robinson-Pant, *The Benefits of Literacy* (2005); and UNESCO, Global LIFE Midterm Evaluation Report 2006-2011: *Looking Forward with LIFE* (2012).

²⁰ See General Assembly resolution 56/116.

Initiative for Empowerment 2005-2015. Focusing on 36 countries²¹ that had adult literacy rates of less than 50 per cent or adult illiterate populations of more than 10 million, the Initiative served as a catalyst to enhance commitment, strengthen capacities, forge strong partnerships and allow for mutual learning. The momentum was sustained by a series of events organized to mobilize greater support for the Decade. The White House Conference on Global Literacy, convened in 2006 by Laura Bush, the Honorary Ambassador of the Decade, was attended by 30 first ladies, 39 ministers of education and other high-level representatives. The subsequent six UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy, held in 2007 and 2008 in Azerbaijan, China, India, Mali, Mexico and Qatar, and the 2008 White House Symposium on Advancing Global Literacy, with the attendance of Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, first ladies from China, Mali and Mexico and ministers, contributed to the mobilization of renewed commitments on the part of countries and partners. The results of the UNESCO global literacy challenge event in 2008 highlighted the need for urgent action to address youth and adult illiteracy.

25. Moreover, collective global efforts resulted in the establishment of synergies between the United Nations Literacy Decade and other United Nations decades, notably the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, and in the further integration of the literacy agenda into global debates and ongoing consultations on the post-2015 education and development agendas. The Global Education First Initiative, launched by the Secretary-General in 2012, is catalysing additional support. In the setting of the post-2015 development agenda, the emphasis given by the current global frameworks, notably the Millennium Development Goals, to primary education, youth literacy and gender parity, leading to a relative neglect of adult literacy and the quality of literacy learning, should be reviewed in order to promote a holistic vision of literacy across the lifespan of the individual.

26. The relatively small UNESCO budget for the United Nations Literacy Decade was complemented by the contributions of partners, including from Japan, the United States of America and other donors supporting the UNESCO Capacity Development for Education for All programme.

B. Advocacy

27. At the global level, various platforms and opportunities were used to advocate literacy, including International Literacy Day (8 September), World Teachers' Day (5 October), World Book and Copyright Day (23 April) and International Women's Day (8 March). The UNESCO International Literacy Prizes (the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize and the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy) helped to increase the visibility of excellent efforts around the world. In 2009, adult literacy received a boost when Global Action Week and the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education were organized as part of the Global Campaign for Education. A report compiled by ActionAid International in 2005 and based on a Global Campaign for Education research project entitled "Writing the wrongs" was a positive step forward, setting 12 adult literacy benchmarks aimed at improving the

²¹ The Initiative initially focused on 35 countries, to which South Sudan was added upon its establishment in 2011.

quality of literacy learning and monitoring. In many instances, civil society organizations and coalitions of non-governmental organizations such as the Collective Consultation of Non-Governmental Organizations on Education for All and the Global Campaign for Education continued to be powerful advocates of literacy.

28. Laura Bush, the former First Lady of the United States, supported the United Nations Literacy Decade as its Honorary Ambassador, raising awareness across the world. The UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors Grand Duchess Maria Teresa of Luxembourg and Princess Caroline of Hanover of Monaco also championed the cause of literacy. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Goodwill Ambassador Shakira Mebarak lent support by advocating children's education. Recently, the Global Education First Initiative, which seeks high-level advocates for education, has helped to galvanize support for every child's right to a quality education.

29. At the country level, a wide array of advocacy activities were carried out. More than 70 countries organized advocacy events during the Decade.²² The majority of the countries surveyed undertook media campaigns and produced publications, leaflets and posters, with positive impacts. In Senegal, for example, advocacy led to an increase in the percentage of the budget allocated to literacy in the 10-year education plan from 0.1 per cent in 2005 to 1.9 per cent in 2007. Nearly half of the countries surveyed expressed the view that the Decade had accelerated country-level advocacy efforts.

C. Monitoring

30. In collaboration with countries and partners, UNESCO played a key role in monitoring the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the Decade, notably through progress reports submitted to the General Assembly and to its own governing bodies. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics continued to be the major source of official literacy data. The annual Global Monitoring Reports were vital in monitoring progress made on the six Education for All goals and on specific themes, including literacy, educational marginalization and skills. Other reports, such as the Human Development Reports of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the *State of the World's Children* reports of UNICEF and the World Development Reports of the World Bank, monitored related issues. Also contributing to the monitoring process were a midterm review of the UNESCO Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (2012) and the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2009 and 2013), focusing on adult literacy; the Education for All midterm reviews conducted at the regional level; and the country reports prepared for the eighth and ninth ministerial review meetings of the E9 Initiative, held in 2010 and 2012.

²² According to national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012).

IV. Evaluating progress in the key areas of action

31. This section outlines progress made in the six key areas of action identified in the 2012 International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade: policy, programme modality, capacity-building, research, community participation, and monitoring and evaluation. Resource mobilization and international support are also highlighted. In addition, it takes into consideration the three strategic objectives set out in the International Strategic Framework for Action (2009) and the six areas highlighted in the Belém Framework for Action, adopted at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (2009).

A. Policy

1. Political will and commitment

32. Globally, stronger political will and renewed commitment with regard to literacy were demonstrated during the Decade through a number of high-profile declarations and pronouncements, including the outcome documents of the aforementioned meetings related to Education for All, the UNESCO regional conferences and the High-level International Round Table on Literacy held in 2012.

33. Legal frameworks also reflected countries' commitments to literacy. Almost 87 per cent of the 111 countries reporting data had laws supporting adult literacy,²³ while many countries continued to implement relevant normative instruments, such as the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Several countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, Senegal and South Sudan, made literacy a State responsibility codified within their Constitutions.²⁴ New legislative measures were introduced in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Djibouti, Latvia and Liberia. Moreover, several regional normative instruments incorporated literacy, including the African Youth Charter (2006). The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008 helped to address the learning needs of the United Nations Literacy Decade priority groups, as also reflected in the current Constitutions of Colombia and the Dominican Republic.

2. Policy and planning

34. Reflecting political will, many countries made efforts to put in place appropriate literacy policies and to link those policies with broader national education and development policies. An analysis of 44 national education plans conducted in 2009 showed that approximately 70 per cent of them included the adult literacy component, with most focusing on marginalized populations.²⁵ Between 2009 and 2012, 61 per cent of the 116 countries reporting data had either developed or reviewed national adult literacy action plans.²⁶ Moreover, countries such as Chad, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea and Pakistan integrated literacy into their poverty

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See UNESCO, "Literacy from a right to education perspective" (2013).

²⁵ See UNESCO, "Educational marginalization in national education plans" (2009).

²⁶ According to national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012).

reduction strategy papers.²⁷ Other countries, such as Morocco, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea and Yemen, integrated literacy into their national development policies.

35. A global trend worth highlighting is a move towards a more holistic approach to literacy, with an increased recognition of non-formal education as an alternative mode of delivery that addresses the needs of a diverse range of learners in the context of lifelong learning. Bridging formal, non-formal and informal modes, countries have developed frameworks with which to recognize, validate and accredit (RVA) the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. In 2012, 69 per cent of the 127 countries reporting data had developed RVA policy frameworks.²⁸ New initiatives in this direction were the online RVA Observatory and RVA guidelines developed by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning as well as the 2009 European guidelines and the 2012 European Council recommendations regarding the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

36. During the Decade, deep concern about the literacy skills of the marginalized, such as women, indigenous populations and people living in extreme poverty, was translated into inclusive policies and interventions. For example, language policies and practice promoting learning in multilingual situations improved. Strong mother-tongue-based literacy programmes in Bangladesh, China, India and Nepal, education strategies for Maori and Pacific Islanders in New Zealand, the use of 25 local languages as languages of instruction in Ethiopia, and the bilingual curriculum framework employed in Niue are cases in point. But the adequacy and the quality of teachers and materials in local languages continued to pose challenges.

3. Governance and management

37. A number of countries restructured their education governance and programme management systems. Burkina Faso, Guatemala and Pakistan, for example, have decentralized literacy programmes, creating greater transparency and better connections to local actors and circumstances. Supported by the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment, countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Mali and Senegal created special entities and task forces and increased their budgetary allocations to literacy.²⁹

38. Moving towards a holistic approach to literacy, many countries, such as China, Côte d'Ivoire, Ireland and Uganda, promoted intersectoral cooperation. Yet, with responsibility for youth and adult education often diffused across several ministries and national entities, coordination and harmonization remain an enduring challenge.

39. Countries strengthened their institutional frameworks for literacy, and key roles were played by national specialized entities in countries such as France, Mongolia, the Netherlands and New Zealand in involving and coordinating stakeholders.

40. Despite these positive changes, gaps remain between legislation, policy and practice. The 2009 *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* highlighted the trend of the incoherence and fragmentation of adult literacy policies and action,

²⁷ See UNESCO, Global LIFE Midterm Evaluation Report 2006-2011: *Looking Forward with LIFE* (2012).

²⁸ According to national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012).

²⁹ See UNESCO, *Advancing Literacy: A Review of LIFE 2006-2009* (2009).

along with inadequate coordination within government and between Governments and partners. While child literacy enjoyed a growing and renewed focus, youth and adult literacy struggled to gain a desirable space in national policies and budgets.

B. Programme modality

41. Literacy programmes of good quality must be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to all. During the Decade, a variety of literacy programmes based on different concepts of literacy and pedagogical approaches were implemented, in response to specific needs of different population groups in different contexts.

1. Preschool and in-school programmes for children

42. Many countries strengthened early childhood care and education interventions, to lay solid foundations for the acquisition of literacy skills and for later learning and to help break the vicious circle of intergenerational marginalization from the earliest stage of life. By enhancing the quality of the mother-child relationship and the amount of time that parents spend reading to children, a number of family literacy programmes influenced children's language development. Numerous interventions addressed diverse needs arising from the expansion of primary education, the increased need for post-secondary learning opportunities, and the inadequate quality of learning. Supported by the World Food Programme (WFP) and other partners, for example, school feeding programmes had a positive influence on the cognitive and physical development of 368 million children each year.³⁰

2. Programmes for out-of-school children and young people

43. Many interventions for out-of-school children were undertaken within and beyond the education sector to overcome economic barriers, improve accessibility and enrich the quality of learning. The School Fee Abolition Initiative, launched by UNICEF and the World Bank in 2005, supported Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania in this regard. Stipends and cash transfers gave a major boost to girls' education under World Bank-financed projects in Bangladesh, Malawi and Pakistan. The global initiative of UNICEF and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics to address the needs of out-of-school children and the Educate a Child initiative, launched by Sheikha Moza Bint Nasser al-Missned of Qatar, are other examples.

44. A positive trend observed was the growth of flexible alternative learning opportunities, including equivalency programmes for general or vocational education, outside the framework of formal education.

45. In order to reach the unreached, innovative ideas including the effective use of information and communications technology were being implemented in countries such as Pakistan and Senegal, where literacy programmes and teacher training were facilitated by mobile phones.

³⁰ According to data provided by WFP (2013).

3. Programmes targeting illiterate youth and adults

46. Accumulated experiences and new research deepened understanding of diverse context-specific needs of adult learners, resulting in improvements in the design, content, pedagogical approaches and mode of delivery of learning programmes.

47. The Decade witnessed increased awareness of the importance of learner-centred approaches and of situating learning in the real-life contexts of learners. Literacy programmes were linked with water and sanitation training in Ghana, income-generating activities in Kenya and workplace skills in Slovakia. Functional literacy programmes were an integral part of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Training for Rural Economic Empowerment programme adapted in Asian and African countries, as well as of its support for the upgrading of informal apprenticeships for young people in Africa. The embedding of literacy in vocational training proved to be effective in terms of increased livelihood opportunities.

48. Various approaches were undertaken in this area. Programmes aimed at providing a second chance for primary education were started in many countries, including Romania and Saint Lucia. Intergenerational approaches to learning had impacts on the literacy skills and the quality of life of both parents and children in countries such as Iran (Islamic Republic of), Namibia, Nepal, Norway, Turkey, Uganda and the United States. Several countries, including Chad, Egypt, Nigeria, India, Iraq and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), opted for national literacy campaigns to reduce adult illiteracy.

49. Certain programmes started before the beginning of the Decade continued to be implemented, including Cuba's "*Yo sí puedo*" (yes, I can) programme, combining radio and television distance learning with face-to-face learning in 15 Latin American and African countries; ActionAid's Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Techniques approach, adapted in more than 70 countries; the "faire-faire" approach in sub-Saharan Africa, which outsources literacy activities to community-based organizations; and Frank Laubach's "each one teach one" method, which supports learner-centred instruction in countries such as Bangladesh.

C. Capacity-building

50. Lack of individual and institutional capacities, one of the obstacles to universal literacy, was addressed through specific programmes or as a component of broader interventions. UNESCO support for national efforts through the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment and the Capacity Development for Education for All programme led to the development of a comprehensive policy on non-formal education in Bangladesh and an action plan for literacy in Cambodia, as well as to the integration of literacy into national education sector plans in Burkina Faso and Chad.

51. The centrality of teachers to meaningful learning, in particular for children, was placed high on the global agenda, as reflected in the establishment of the International Task Force on Teachers for Education for All in 2009. But teachers and facilitators for adult literacy and non-formal programmes tended to be undervalued in many national education systems, while non-governmental organizations played a key role in the training of non-formal teachers. UNESCO also supported the capacity development of non-formal teaching personnel.

52. A shortage of qualified teachers and education professionals remained a major challenge.³¹ Approximately 112 countries needed to expand their teaching workforces by a total of 5.4 million primary school teachers by 2015.³² The teaching force for non-formal learning and adult literacy also needed to expand, with more attention given to their status, working conditions and professional development.

D. Research

53. The knowledge base regarding literacy and lifelong learning continued to expand through advancements in research, including qualitative, applied and interdisciplinary research. Journals; publications, notably the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006: *Literacy for life*; databases on effective literacy practice, such as Project Litbase of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, and researcher networks, including the Adult Learning Documentation and Information Network, contributed to the sharing of knowledge. The creation of the Education Research in Africa Award in 2012 by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa and the African Development Institute is an example of the efforts made to recognize excellence in research.

54. In order to enhance evidence-based policymaking and practice, however, further efforts are required to build research capacities and networks that connect different actors, and mobilize more resources, and to explore topics that need further investigation, such as the benefits, use and impact of literacy; literacy skills relevant to evolving societies and their assessment; and the cost and benefits of quality literacy programmes.

E. Community participation

55. Local community involvement was promoted by Governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and other civil society organizations as a vital means for making literacy relevant to people's lives. A total of 55 per cent of the 119 countries reporting data involved learners in discussions about national literacy policies and plans, while 80 per cent of the 116 countries reporting data involved local communities in the planning of adult literacy activities.³³ Community learning centres became hubs of literacy action in many communities. Community involvement was an enabling factor of Save the Children's Literacy Boost programme for children and of Room to Read's support for 7.9 million children through the creation of libraries and the provision of local-language books. The relevance of literacy programmes was considerably enhanced where local communities were involved, but funding remains a challenge.

³¹ According to national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012).

³² See UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012: *Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work*.

³³ Ibid.

F. Monitoring and evaluation

1. National information systems managing education and literacy

56. Education management information systems (EMIS) were strengthened in almost all developing countries. A non-formal education management information system programme developed by UNESCO in 2001 was adapted in several countries. In a number of countries, such as Cambodia and the United Republic of Tanzania, it was being integrated into EMIS, covering both formal and non-formal education.

2. Monitoring and evaluation of literacy programmes

57. Many countries reported improved monitoring and evaluation systems in the management of literacy programmes. Of the 129 countries reporting data, 73 per cent collected information on enrolment in literacy programmes, 69 per cent on the completion of such programmes and 60.5 per cent on attendance.³⁴ For the enhanced effectiveness of programmes, however, learning outcomes also need to be assessed. Some 57 per cent of the countries reported that learning outcomes were measured by teachers and facilitators, only 23 per cent measured outcomes by standard tests, and 42 per cent measured outcomes by standard tests for certification purposes. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning action research on measuring learning outcomes in some sub-Saharan African countries is an example of support for improving the measurement of learning outcomes in adult literacy programmes.

3. Assessment of child literacy

58. The Decade witnessed growing interest in gaining an understanding of competences and skill levels. More countries — most of them developed and middle-income countries — participated in international large-scale assessments such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment. Regional large-scale assessments were also enriched, such as SACMEQ, the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education and the Programme for the Analysis of Education Systems of the Conference of Education Ministers of Countries Using French as a Common Language. SACMEQ and the Programme started to coordinate their activities, resulting in the inclusion of common test items. While these large-scale assessments had an impact in terms of curriculum content, performance standards, classroom instruction and teacher development, many countries face the challenge of designing sustainable and useful assessment systems.

59. In parallel, the number of small-scale assessments grew. In India, for example, Pratham's sample-based household survey reached nearly half a million children in 2012. The Early Grade Reading Assessment, developed by RTI International with support from the United States Agency for International Development and the World Bank, is used in almost 50 countries. In Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania, Uwezo tested the literacy skills of some 350,000 children. UNESCO

³⁴ According to national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012).

began to support the development of a writing assessment through the Latin American Laboratory for Assessment of the Quality of Education and through collaboration with the University of La Laguna in Spain.

60. Several related global initiatives also emerged. In 2012, the Learning Metrics Task Force started its work to recommend main domains of learning, including literacy and communication, and types of measures to be undertaken. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics created the Observatory of Learning Outcomes to monitor global trends in students' learning achievements. Other, related global initiatives created included the "Learning Counts" seminar and General Education System Quality Analysis/Diagnosis Framework of UNESCO; the World Bank's Systems Approach for Better Education Results initiative; and the Assessment and Teaching of 21st-Century Skills project, launched by Cisco, Intel and Microsoft in 2009.

4. Assessment of adult literacy

61. In recognition of the limitations of traditional adult literacy statistics, attempts were made to measure literacy skills. Building on the International Adult Literacy Survey and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics developed the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme in order to apply direct testing of literacy levels. Furthermore, building on the methodology used in those surveys, OECD developed a more comprehensive international survey of adult skills, the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, to assess the key cognitive skills and social, physical and learning skills required in contemporary societies. The first round, involving 24 developed countries, will be completed in 2013, while the second round, involving 10 countries, started in 2012.

G. Financing for literacy

1. National resources

62. Overall, more domestic and external resources were mobilized for education, of which literacy education is a part. Globally, spending on education increased by an average of 2.7 per cent per year from 1999 to 2010.³⁵ The rate of increase was higher, at 7.2 per cent, in low-income countries, where aid amounted to as much as one fifth of the education budget. For example, the United Republic of Tanzania, where the primary net enrolment ratio doubled, increased spending on education as a percentage of gross national product from 2 per cent in 1999 to 6.2 per cent in 2010.

63. In places, more domestic funds were mobilized for the achievement of adult literacy. In 28 Literacy Initiative for Empowerment countries, budgets for literacy and non-formal education increased between 2005 and 2011.³⁶ Between 2009 and 2010, national budgetary expenditure for adult literacy increased in half of the 32 countries reporting data, stagnated in 6 and decreased in 10.³⁷ As the United

³⁵ See UNESCO, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012: *Youth and Skills: Putting Education to Work*.

³⁶ See UNESCO, Global LIFE Midterm Evaluation Report 2006-2011: *Looking Forward with LIFE* (2012).

³⁷ According to national progress reports for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* and the final evaluation (2012).

Nations Literacy Decade midterm review shows, many countries allocate only 1 per cent of national education budget to adult literacy. Among several costing exercises with respect to adult literacy programmes, the Global Campaign for Education-ActionAid International study conducted in 2005 indicated an annual cost required per learner of \$50 to \$100. Although there are various context-specific variables, these figures indicate the magnitude of the funding required.

2. External resources

64. The overall rise in education expenditure can also be attributed to external resources. Between 2002 and 2010, aid to education increased by 77 per cent to \$13.5 billion, of which \$5.8 billion was directed at basic education. However, aid to basic education stagnated at this level between 2008 and 2011, with only \$1.9 billion being allocated to support low-income countries in 2010. This was far from the estimated \$26 billion required per year for the poorest countries to achieve universal basic education of good quality by 2015.

65. Determining the amount of external resources mobilized for adult literacy is not easy, but diverse partners provided funding for literacy, including non-governmental organizations and civil society. The flow of aid to adult literacy was limited, reflecting the low priority accorded to it by development partners. In order to achieve only Education for All goal 4, on youth and adult literacy in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, requires an estimated \$1 billion in aid per year.³⁸ To fill this huge gap, non-traditional donors such as private sector entities can play a much greater role. Integrating a youth and adult literacy programme into a country's basic education plan has helped to secure external funding support for adult literacy, as in Burkina Faso.

3. Effective use of existing resources

66. Countries and partners took a number of measures to enhance effectiveness in the use of existing funds. For example, following the successful model of Uganda, a public expenditure tracking survey was carried out in Burkina Faso. Countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Colombia developed regulations aimed at ensuring clear and transparent mechanisms for the flow of funds across various levels of national education systems.

67. Lack of adequate funding remains a critical impediment. The Belém Framework for Action (2009) states that for every single year that the average level of education of adults is raised, there is a corresponding increase of 3.7 per cent in long-term economic growth and a 6 per cent increase in per capita income. A study carried out in Latin America revealed that the average annual earnings of persons with no schooling and of persons with six years of schooling were \$440 and \$1,100, respectively.³⁹ It is also important to take account of opportunity costs and the negative consequences of illiteracy for health, social participation and citizenship, with concomitant cost implications. Experiences and knowledge gained during the Decade highlighted the critical importance of placing financing for literacy in broader education and development contexts.

³⁸ See Jan van Ravens and Carlos Aggio, "The Costs of Dakar goal 4 for developing and 'LIFE' countries" (2005).

³⁹ See Economic Commission for Latin America and UNESCO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, *The Social and Economic Impact of Illiteracy* (2010).

H. International support and partnerships for the promotion of literacy

68. The promotion of literacy and literate environments is a collective act. While national Governments, which recognize, respect and protect the right to literacy, were the prime movers in this regard, development partners played significant roles at the country, regional and global levels.

69. Positioning literacy as a human right and a means to achieve sustainable development and poverty reduction, United Nations entities provided various forms of normative and operational support. As the global coordinator of the Decade and as an implementing agency, UNESCO mobilized its networks, led relevant global and regional initiatives and encouraged intersectoral approaches with respect to tackling such issues as literacy for indigenous people and the use of information and communications technology for the acquisition of literacy skills.

70. UNICEF supported countries in improving basic education and literacy through its cross-sectoral approaches, sharpening its focus on girls and out-of-school children, especially in post-conflict countries, through such initiatives as “child-friendly schools” and the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative.

71. In the early days of the Decade, the World Bank continued to implement 7 large-scale adult literacy projects and 14 other multi-component projects, covering 11 million illiterate persons. During the Decade, the Bank implemented 256 primary education projects, 49 pre-primary education projects and 29 youth and adult literacy projects. Other, related efforts included poverty reduction strategy papers, the Global Partnership for Education, the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) initiative, and ensuring a robust global knowledge base.

72. UNDP supported literacy by providing broader development perspectives and frameworks, including through its support for United Nations country teams. In Pakistan, “adult education and non-formal basic education” was one of the four areas of the joint United Nations programme for education (2008-2010), with a \$260.8 million budget. Recently, it has supported some 46 countries through the Millennium Development Goals Acceleration Framework.

73. Other agencies also contributed to the goals of the United Nations Literacy Decade: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, by promoting education for rural population; ILO, by integrating literacy into its programmes on vocational training, enhancing informal apprenticeships and entrepreneurship, supporting teachers and promoting the use of indigenous language; the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, by supporting the development of educational responses as an HIV prevention strategy and carrying out its work to improve the dignity, quality of life and life expectancy of people living with HIV; the United Nations Population Fund, notably by carrying out its work on sexual and reproductive health, reducing maternal mortality and promoting the understanding of population dynamics; WFP, through its school feeding programme; and the World Health Organization, through the promotion of health literacy. The creation of the United Nations Entity on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in July 2010 was a positive step forward in the promotion of literacy for girls and women.

74. Global initiatives provided new impetus. The Global Partnership for Education, as a funding mechanism, helped low-income countries to strengthen

children's literacy as an integral part of national plans and, more recently, as an area of focus in its strategic plan for 2012-2015. Between 2003 and 2013, the Partnership allocated more than \$3.1 billion to education. Many bilateral donors continued to support basic education, focusing on child and youth literacy.

75. With their wealth of expertise and insight, non-governmental organizations played a major role in fostering innovative service delivery, resource mobilization, active policy dialogues and advocacy, as well as in the capacity-building of local organizations. Private sector partners have increasingly supported literacy initiatives in both technical and financial terms. Other civil society partners, such as universities, research institutes, parliamentarians, journalists and communities, helped to advance the literacy agenda. Intersectoral cooperation and South-South and triangular cooperation made greater impacts.

76. A lesson learned during the Decade pointed to the critical need to enhance the coordinated efforts of partners on the basis of their comparative advantages in the drive towards universal literacy. As we approach the 2015 deadlines for the achievement of the Education for All goals and the Millennium Development Goals, collective reflection is required for the positioning of literacy in future education and development agendas.

V. Shaping future agendas

77. The final evaluation of the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade has highlighted the following needs for future action:

(a) **Mobilizing stronger political and financial commitment and ensuring coordinated action:**

(i) **Heightening political will and strengthening financial commitment to literacy.** The evaluation strongly recommends that Governments enhance political and financial commitment, in particular for youth and adult literacy and non-formal education. Development partners are called upon to support such efforts technically and financially through the fostering of diverse partnerships, involving traditional donors; non-State providers such as non-governmental organizations, communities and the private sector; and the exploration of new funding modalities;

(ii) **Stepping up coordinated global action, advocacy and partnership.** There is an urgent need to put in place a global framework linked with regional and country-level activities to coordinate and sustain collective efforts, with increased clarity about the role and responsibility of each partner;

(iii) **Integrating literacy into future global developmental architecture as an education and development imperative.** It is critical to integrate literacy into future agendas for education and development. Goal-setting at all levels needs to move progressively towards the inclusion of a holistic vision of literacy and a clear focus on the quality of literacy learning;

(b) **Intensifying collective efforts through enhanced education systems and interventions:**

- (i) **Strengthening national lifelong learning systems, underpinned by a three-pronged approach to literacy.** Further advancement towards universal literacy and mastery of higher-order literacy skills requires enhanced lifelong learning systems that allow for synergies between formal and non-formal education, underpinned by a three-pronged approach to literacy, simultaneously: improving the quality of basic education for children and adolescents; providing alternative learning opportunities for out-of-school children, adolescents and adults; and enriching literate environments;
 - (ii) **Enhancing non-formal education and alternative learning to reach the unreached.** With a view to meeting diverse learning needs through flexible, effective and context-specific approaches, the evaluation recommends the enhancement of non-formal education and alternative learning and the exploration of innovative modes of delivery and pedagogy, including the effective use of information and communications technology;
 - (iii) **Improving the quality of literacy teaching and learning for all.** It is imperative to provide meaningful literacy learning opportunities through a systemic approach to quality improvement, encompassing such elements as curriculum, teachers/facilitators, materials, language of instruction, learning environments and assessment;
 - (iv) **Intensifying efforts to address non-literate and functional illiterate adults.** In promoting an inclusive literate world, adult literacy, which has hitherto been relatively neglected, needs to be given a greater thrust;
 - (v) **Focusing more sharply on the learning needs of girls and women.** It is critical to redress female illiteracy through gender- and context-specific policies and programmes aimed at literacy. Positive discrimination measures for boys and men are also required, where appropriate;
- (c) **Building a robust knowledge and technical base:**
- (i) **Revisiting the concepts of literacy to enhance the relevance of learning in evolving contemporary societies.** The evaluation calls for further exploration of the concept of literacy and the identification of a minimum threshold of basic literacy as a building block for sustainable development;
 - (ii) **Improving literacy monitoring and assessment.** Evidence-based policymaking and quality learning require the enhancement of the knowledge and information base through improved literacy monitoring, assessment and research. There is an urgent need to enhance national assessment systems and improve the direct measurement of literacy skills, as well as to develop a global network or a platform for knowledge-sharing among policymakers, practitioners and researchers.

VI. Recommendations

78. **The final evaluation of the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade calls for sustained collective efforts to address evolving literacy agendas at the country, regional and global levels. The gains made during the Decade need to be consolidated and expanded**

through additional technical and financial support and the full integration of literacy into development architectures at all levels.

79. It is strongly recommended that countries and development partners continue to promote literacy and literate environments through multi-pronged approaches, with a focus on marginalized groups, in particular girls and women.

80. In order to coordinate the global efforts and act in synergy, UNESCO could create a global multi-stakeholder partnership in support of national efforts to accelerate progress towards the attainment of the unfinished agenda with a view to 2015 and beyond. As a forum for collective action, such a partnership would facilitate the mobilization of political commitment as well as of technical and financial resources. It would foster innovation in literacy. It would also catalyse national actions to strengthen the institutional base and to enrich literacy policies and programmes for the realization of the vision of a literate, inclusive, sustainable world.
