

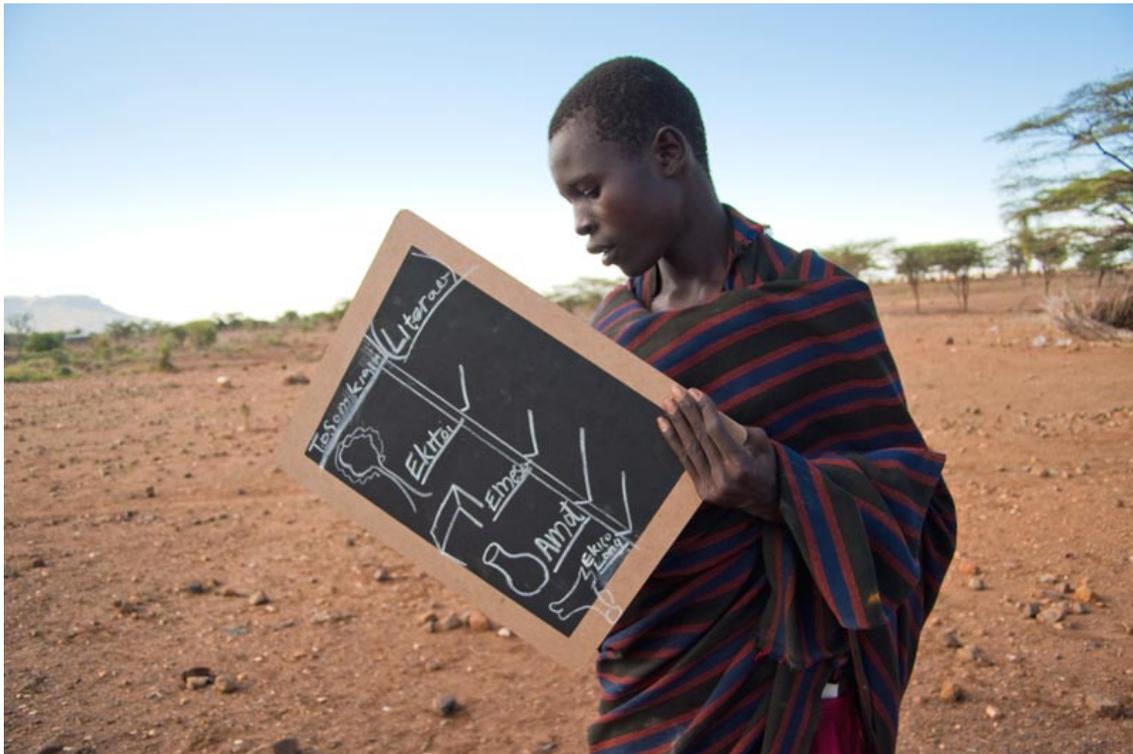


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Literacy vital for overcoming poverty and disease and reinforcing stability – UN



8 September 2011 –

With nearly 800 million people unable to read or write, the United Nations today marked International Literacy Day with a warning that illiteracy undermines efforts to eliminate a host of social ills such as poverty and sickness and threatens the very stability of nations.

“The costs are enormous,” [Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon](#) said in a [message](#). “Illiteracy exacerbates cycles of poverty, ill-health and deprivation. It weakens communities and undermines democratic processes through marginalization and exclusion. These and other impacts can combine to destabilize societies.”

This year’s Day is being commemorated under the theme “Literacy and Peace.”

Mr. Ban noted that despite progress, illiteracy continues to afflict millions of people, especially women and girls. In 2009, roughly two thirds of the world's estimated 793 million illiterate adults were female. That same year, some 67 million primary school-aged children and 72 million adolescents were denied their right to an education, he added.

“Literacy unlocks the capacity of individuals to imagine and create a more fulfilling future. It opens the way to greater justice, equality and progress. Literacy can help societies heal, advance political processes and contribute to the common good,” he declared.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) [noted](#) that more than half the adults in 11 countries are illiterate. These are Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Haiti, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

“The world urgently needs increased political commitment to literacy backed by adequate resources to scale up effective programmes,” UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said in a message.

“Today I urge governments, international organizations, civil society and the private sector to make literacy a policy priority, so that every individual can develop their potential, and actively participate in shaping more sustainable, just and peaceful societies.”

In a ceremony in New Delhi, UNESCO awarded the international Confucius and King Sejong literacy prizes, financed respectively by China and the Republic of Korea, to projects in Burundi, Mexico, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the United States. King Sejong promulgated the native alphabet of the Korean language in the mid-15th century.

The National Literacy Service of Burundi won one of the two UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prizes for its innovative approach to linking functional literacy to daily life issues and to topics related to peace and tolerance, as well as for its overall impact. From 2010 to 2011 alone, the service presented more than 50,000 certificates to new readers.

The other UNESCO King Sejong Prize went to the National Institute for the Education of Adults of Mexico, for its bilingual literacy programme, which has helped reduce illiteracy among indigenous peoples, especially women, and improved their ability to exercise their rights.

The US-based Room to Read won one of the UNESCO Confucius Prizes for Literacy for its programme, Promoting Gender Equality and Literacy through Local Language Publishing. Operating in nine countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Viet Nam and Zambia – it has assisted communities in the development of culturally relevant reading materials in local and minority languages.

The second UNESCO Confucius Prize laureate was the Collectif Alpha Ujuzi in the DRC for its programme, Peaceful Coexistence of Communities and Good Governance in North Kivu, using an innovative model for preventing and resolving tensions and conflicts among individuals and communities.

Each of the four prizes carries a \$20,000 award.

In connection with the Day, UNESCO and Procter & Gamble's Always feminine care brand launched a partnership to promote literacy for young girls and young women. "A major world corporation like Procter & Gamble can give added impetus to our drive for global literacy," Ms. Bokova said.

The first project under the partnership concerns girls' literacy in Senegal where, in 2006, fewer than 45 per cent of women could read or write. Educational kits and digital resources will be made available to train and support more than 1,200 teachers who will devote 600 hours of literacy and life skills teaching to girls.

Two facts illustrate the importance of improving literacy among girls: HIV/AIDS spreads twice as fast among illiterate girls and women; and a baby born to a literate mother has a 50 per cent better chance of living to the age of five than one born to an illiterate woman.

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