

Laura Bush joins senior UN officials in call for greater efforts to boost global literacy



Former First Lady of the United States Laura Bush pose with children

9 September 2009 – Former United States First Lady Laura Bush has added her voice to a chorus of United Nations officials underscoring the importance of bolstering global efforts to increase the number of people who can read and write around the world.

“Literacy is at the core of sustainable solutions to the world’s greatest challenges,” stressed Ms. Bush, who is an Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012).

“It provides the foundation for freedom and sustainable economic development,” Ms. Bush told a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**) gathering celebrating the International Day for Literacy at the agency’s headquarters in Paris on 8 September.

UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura noted that while the “empowering role of literacy and its significance for development have been recognized worldwide, there are still 776 million illiterate adults in the world and 75 million children out of school whose rights and needs remain unfulfilled.”

In his message marking the Day, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said that in a “world of enormous wealth, in a world in which education and knowledge are the necessary passports to a better life, the scale of illiteracy is truly staggering.”

A UNESCO report released last year noted that some 75 per cent of illiterate adults worldwide live in only 15 countries – including Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India and Nigeria. And in some sub-Saharan African countries, the number of non-literate adults has increased in recent years by approximately 30 million.

Under such circumstances, three quarters of the 127 countries for which projections were calculated will miss the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving adult illiteracy rates by 2015.

In line with the UN Literacy Decade calendar, International Literacy Day put the spotlight this year on the empowering role of literacy and its importance for participation, citizenship and development.

The presentation of the 2009 UNESCO Literacy Prizes followed the opening when representatives of innovative educational projects based in India and Burkina Faso received the awards. Projects in Afghanistan and the Philippines were honoured with the awards of the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy, with a programme in Bhutan receiving an honourable mention.

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