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### **Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields**

**Social development: literacy for life: shaping future agendas**

## **Literacy for life, work, lifelong learning and education for democracy**

### **Report of the Secretary-General**

#### *Summary*

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution [73/145](#), entitled “Literacy for life: shaping future agendas”. In the resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General, in cooperation with the Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to submit to the Assembly at its seventy-fifth session a report on the implementation of the resolution. As the lead and coordination agency for the Education 2030 Agenda, UNESCO provides an overview of the global literacy landscape, including responses to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

The present report provides a further review of progress achieved in education for democracy, as requested by the General Assembly in its resolution [73/134](#). It contains information on major efforts being made by Member States, the United Nations system and relevant stakeholders in addressing the subject and the intrinsic relationship of the subject to human rights and fundamental freedoms, which is also in line with Assembly resolutions [67/18](#), [69/268](#) and [71/8](#).

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\* [A/75/150](#).



## I. Introduction

1. The present report serves to describe progress made in literacy, with a particular focus on young people and adults. It contains an overview of the global literacy landscape, including responses to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) crisis, followed by highlights of what has been achieved at the country, regional and global levels. It also provides recommendations for the further promotion of literacy as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### A. A 2030 vision of literacy

2. Literacy is an integral part of the right to education and is essential for the enjoyment of other economic, social and cultural rights. Literacy empowers individuals and expands their capabilities for achieving greater freedoms and engaging more effectively in life, work and lifelong learning.

3. Literacy is vital in upholding democratic principles such as mutual respect, human dignity and equality, as well as in enabling people to “read the world” for transformation,<sup>1</sup> and to participate in society as full and active citizens. Literacy is also central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Literacy’s transformative potential is a constitutive element of the 2030 vision of education, which is holistic and humanistic.

4. According to the Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education, adopted at the thirty-eighth session of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2015, the concept of literacy is evolving and multidimensional, but it is generally understood as “the ability to read and write, to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials, as well as the ability to solve problems in an increasingly technological and information-rich environment”. Framed by the concept of lifelong learning in the light of Goal 4 and the 2015 recommendation, the 2030 vision of literacy adopts this understanding of literacy and embraces the following four dimensions, outlined in the UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020–2025):

(a) Literacy is a continuum of learning, composed of evolving proficiency in reading, writing, and numeracy. As such, literacy skills continuously develop, or decline in some cases, throughout one’s life;

(b) Literacy is linked with a larger set of knowledge, skills and competencies required for navigating today’s world, including media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship, as well as job-specific skills. Literacy is a prerequisite for their acquisition, while the demand for skills in other areas can generate a need and motivation for enhanced literacy;

(c) The nature and level of required literacy skills depend on demands in a specific time and context, which has implications for how learning should be organized;

(d) A 2030 vision of literacy recognizes the Sustainable Development Goals as a guide and a framework for defining literacy learning outcomes and development impact.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher (1921–1997) who promoted critical pedagogy. His idea of literacy goes far beyond the ability of being able to read and write since those who “read the word” should be also able to “read the world” in which they exist. Reading the world enables them to rewrite what they read and act for transformation and emancipation.

## **B. Literacy in digitized and globalized economies and societies**

5. Transformations taking place in societies and industries on account of digitization and globalization have generated the need for new literacies. Owing to the growing ubiquity of multimodal communication in digital spaces, digital skills have become an essential part of today's literacies, although the digital divide persists.

6. A higher level of literacy skills is increasingly in demand as societies undergo the fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0) and become more knowledge oriented. Artificial intelligence, for instance, may have an impact on skill demands in employment requiring literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>2</sup> This gives a new perspective to literacy efforts, while the promotion of basic functional literacy skills for all remains a priority.

7. While many countries have adopted the "one language one nation" prescription, multilingualism is a reality for many people and even more so with widespread Internet use, increased human mobility and globalization. Several international and regional languages have expanded as lingua francas, while the survival of numerous minority and indigenous languages is in danger. In that regard, it is important to understand, especially in multilingual contexts, how and for what purpose literacy in a specific language is essential.

## **C. Literacy in the context of the coronavirus disease crisis**

8. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on education and literacy. Schools have been closed in more than 190 countries, affecting the education of 90 per cent of the world's student population of 1.57 billion. National Governments have rapidly deployed measures for distance learning, although uncertainties remain about school reopening and the recovery of "lost learning".

9. Regarding youth and adult literacy, the COVID-19 crisis has illuminated the large gap between policy discourse and reality that already existed. In many countries, adult literacy programmes are absent in primary education response plans. The majority of existing adult literacy programmes have been suspended, with just a few courses continuing virtually, through television and radio, or in the open air. Nevertheless, many non-literate young people and adults will be the hardest hit by the educational, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. They are at the greatest risk of missing life-saving information and learning opportunities offered by digital and other technologies.

10. To mitigate the negative effects of the crisis on learning, UNESCO has launched a Global Education Coalition, which provides coordinated global support to national educational responses, in collaboration with about 130 partners. Gradually, concrete actions have been taken at the country level. In Senegal, the Ministry of Education created an education Subcommittee, which includes a group that addresses basic education for young people and adults, and has mobilized partners, including UNESCO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Chad has developed a COVID-19 response plan involving adult and non-formal education.

11. To be effective, COVID-19 response and recovery plans for youth and adult literacy need to ensure that learning continues, provision is improved, and national lifelong learning systems and capacities are enhanced. Special attention is required

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<sup>2</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2017* (Paris).

for those with no or low literacy skills, especially women. A range of policy measures could be considered by Governments, including: integration of adult and youth literacy programmes into national education response plans; development of literacy programmes using remote learning and adaptation of appropriate technological solutions, depending on connectivity; support for parents and adults to ensure the continuity of learning and promotion of family and intergenerational learning; building of platforms to share educational resources; financing schemes such as emergency funds for providers and social transfers, and education vouchers for learners; and psychosocial support for the well-being of educators and learners.

## II. Global literacy landscape

12. Despite steady progress, the global literacy landscape, based on conventional proxy indicators, shows mixed results. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the global adult literacy rate for the population aged 15 years and older was 86 per cent in 2018, which has remained almost unchanged since 2016. The actual number of non-literate young people and adults, however, has increased by 23 million to 773 million in 2018, owing to rapid population growth and a recent update of the data collected. This is a stark reminder of the tasks ahead for the international community if it is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular target 4.6 of the Goals.

13. Mirroring patterns of socioeconomic inequalities and development, progress in literacy has also been uneven across different regions, countries and populations. Nearly one-half of the world's non-literate adults (47 per cent) reside in South and West Asia, while 26 per cent are in sub-Saharan Africa. Gender gaps persist, with women accounting for 63 per cent of non-literate adults. This proportion has remained unchanged for more than two decades.

14. In-country disparities also exist in high and middle-income countries. Recent data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) indicate that an average of 18.9 per cent of adults in OECD countries surveyed had low literacy skills (Level 1 or below on the six-level scale), around 1 in 4 adults (23.5 per cent) had low numeracy skills (Level 1 or below), and 1 in 10 adults (11.7 per cent) reported having no prior computer experience.<sup>3</sup> The gradual decline of literacy and numeracy levels in several OECD countries deserves attention, especially in the youngest age groups and those with tertiary education, as well as adults who might be reading less at work.

15. A global estimate of literacy among the young aged from 15 to 24 years is slightly more encouraging owing to increased access to basic education as a result of the Education for All movement. Globally, 92 per cent of young people were literate in 2018, compared with 86 per cent of adults. Unlike adults, in recent years, progress in youth literacy has been rapid enough to lead to an absolute decline in the number of non-literate young people, from 102 million in 2016 to 100 million in 2018, largely driven by the improvements in Asia. However, disparities persist, with youth literacy rates remaining low, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (77 per cent), where problems of inadequate access to schooling, high dropout rates and a poor quality of education remain.

16. If the current trend continues, the global youth literacy rate is expected to reach 94 per cent by 2030, and the equivalent for adult literacy will be 90 per cent. In low-

<sup>3</sup> See OECD, *Skills Matter: Additional Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Skills Studies (Paris).

income countries, however, less than 70 per cent of adults and slightly more than 80 per cent of youth are projected to be literate by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

17. An estimated 258 million children, adolescents and young people (about 6–17 years old) were out of school in 2018, representing one sixth of the global population of that age group.<sup>5</sup> Without intensified efforts, many of them will join the adults with no or low literacy skills.

18. Furthermore, being in school is not always the same as learning. Globally, more than 617 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. If the current trend persists, more than one half (56 per cent) of all children will leave primary school without achieving minimum proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy, and the figure for adolescents of lower secondary-school age could reach 61 per cent. More than four out of five children and adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa (88 per cent) and in Central and Southern Asia (81 per cent) will face the same difficulty.

### III. Progress at country and regional levels

#### A. Youth and adult literacy

19. In order to go beyond reflecting progress in terms of statistics, section III of the present report serves to illustrate promising initiatives in the four priority areas adopted by the UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy and the strategy of the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning.

#### **Policies, strategies, and measures for literacy as an integral part of lifelong learning**

20. The 2030 vision of literacy conceives of the acquisition of literacy skills as a lifelong learning process that takes place through formal and non-formal education, as well as through informal learning. The concept of lifelong learning, based on the integration of learning and living, has been gradually translated into national education policies, systems, governance and programmes, guided by Goal 4; the Belém Framework for Action: Harnessing the Power and Potential of Adult Learning and Education for a Viable Future, adopted at the sixth International Conference on Adult Education, held in Belém, Portugal, in 2009; and the Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education, which defines adult literacy as one of the three learning domains. According to the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Leave No One Behind – Participation, Equity and Inclusion*, 157 countries responded to the survey, with two thirds of them (66 per cent) reporting significant progress in adult learning and education policies, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab States. Some 81 countries reported that the implementation of the recommendation was well under way. About 68 per cent of the countries had made progress in implementing relevant legislation, 73 per cent in implementing lifelong learning policies, 82 per cent in developing plans, 86 per cent in involving stakeholders, and 66 per cent in the validation of non-formal education and informal learning.

21. Within a national education system, however, there tends to be a lot of fragmentation. As a result, youth and adult literacy and education efforts tend to be detached from the mainstream activities, as is evident in national education sector plans or education management information systems that primarily focus on children's

<sup>4</sup> See UNESCO and UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Meeting commitments: are countries on track to achieve SDG 4?" (2019).

<sup>5</sup> See UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Fact sheet No. 56" (September 2019).

formal education. In response, UNESCO has offered an online course on the theme “Mainstreaming adult/non-formal education into education sector plans: a lifelong learning perspective” in 2018. The course benefited 52 policymakers and planners from Afghanistan, Kenya, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia. UNESCO also organized two capacity-building workshops on developing education systems from a lifelong learning perspective, which included youth and adult literacy sessions in partnership with Shanghai Open University, China, in 2018 and 2019, for 68 policymakers from Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Kenya, Namibia, the Philippines, Rwanda and Viet Nam.

22. In each of the five regions, a range of activities have been carried out for policy dialogue, information exchange and capacity development. In Africa, for instance, national policies and plans have been enhanced to include adult and non-formal education, including Mali’s education policies, and the revised education and training road map 2030 of Ethiopia. The Inter-Country Quality Node on Literacy and National Languages of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa has carried out activities, including language policy development and literacy training in transborder maternal languages, in alignment with the Association’s Strategic Plan (2018–2022). Moreover, Mali and Togo have developed a harmonized reference framework for the training of trainers in bilingual schools with the support of the International Organization of la Francophonie and UNESCO. Countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have institutionalized the training of teacher trainers in alignment with teacher certification frameworks of ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States. In Senegal, for example, the prior learning of 67 facilitators has been recognized and validated in the pilot phase. Supported by the African Development Bank, UNICEF and the Global Partnership for Education, Eritrea has implemented basic education and skills training for adults through mother language literacy initiatives. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has launched a literacy awareness programme with the non-governmental organization (NGO) Alpha Ujuvo. Kenya has established adult and continuing education centres for community education, including in financial literacy and digital literacy.

23. In the Arab region, countries have made further efforts to promote literacy framed by lifelong learning and Goal 4, with UNESCO facilitating regional policy dialogues. Representatives of Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia shared their policies at the survey launch event for the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*. Countries such as Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia, have strengthened their systems and capacities, including the development of national literacy strategies. Egypt is developing literacy monitoring tools. At the Regional Conference on Literacy and Adult Education in the Arab Region: Challenges and Opportunities (Dubai, February 2020), organized by UNESCO in collaboration with the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), participants explored countermeasures for challenges, including the salient increase in the rates of non-literate youth and adults and of school dropouts, and adopted the Dubai Declaration to advance the literacy agenda.

24. In Asia and the Pacific region, several countries have strengthened policies and frameworks, including a community education policy and a 2035 education modernization strategy aligned with Goal 4, adopted by China; a comprehensive education policy review for lifelong learning in Mongolia; a new lifelong learning policy in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic; and a new lifelong learning policy and a detailed syllabus of community literacy programmes in Cambodia. Countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which face the greatest literacy challenges, have also made notable progress. In Afghanistan, the UNESCO multi-year

programme Enhancement of Literacy had benefited 212,403 learners and had served to train 9,218 facilitators by 2019. Nepal had launched its Literate Nepal campaign on basic literacy skills for citizens by 2020. Furthermore, the Fifth Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030, held in Bangkok in 2019 and organized by UNESCO and UNICEF, was a major stock-taking occasion in the light of target 4.1 of the Goals, on primary and secondary education, and target 4.6, on youth and adult literacy. In addition, UNESCO facilitated policy dialogue on literacy and lifelong learning through the Asia-Africa interregional seminar on Goal 4, held in Kuala Lumpur in 2019, to promote the concept of lifelong learning and its implications for policies and practice.

25. In the Latin America and the Caribbean region, youth and adult literacy has traditionally received special attention in nearly all countries that have strong equity concerns. However, progress has been slow as documented in the 2019 UNESCO regional report entitled “Entre el reloj y la brújula: desafíos en la garantía del derecho a la educación y el aprendizaje de personas jóvenes y adultas en América Latina y el Caribe” (between the clock and the compass: challenges in the exercise of the right to education and learning for young people and adults in Latin America and the Caribbean). Within the Global Alliance for Literacy framework, the International Forum on Literacy Policies and Sustainable Development Goal 4, held in Mexico in 2018, was organized by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and the Centre of Regional Cooperation in Adult Education for Latin America and the Caribbean in collaboration with Mexico to define new directions for countries facing greater literacy challenges. There was a major media campaign on the theme of “Leaving no one out, leaving no one behind: the right to education for young people and adults”, and region-wide dissemination of the Institute’s guidebook, entitled “Communities in action: lifelong learning for sustainable development”. In coordinating efforts within the context of the Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4, UNESCO produced a regional report on lifelong learning with recommendations for literacy and adult education policies that informed a discussion held during the Second Regional Meeting of Ministers of Education, held in Cochabamba, Plurinational State of Bolivia, in 2018. In 2019, UNESCO and UNICEF organized a regional implementation partners group meeting on Sustainable Development Goal 4—Education 2030 for Latin America and the Caribbean, which offered an opportunity for a stock-taking of progress and for dialogue towards more coordinated action.

26. In Europe and North America, where the proportion of adults in the total population is higher than in other regions, literacy challenges, especially among low-income adults, have been addressed through various initiatives and measures. The third meeting of the Lifelong Learning Interest Group of the European Parliament, held in Brussels in 2018, and organized by the Lifelong Learning Platform and the European Association for the Education of Adults as part of the 2018 Lifelong Learning Week, brought increased attention to adult learning through a key message: that collaboration made possible by Erasmus+ and other funding programmes should be further supported in the next European Union budget. In 2019, the European Parliament increased the funding of Erasmus+, the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport that supports adult learning initiatives in Europe, and raised the budget share for adult education to at least 6 per cent.

### **Addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups**

27. To address the literacy learning needs of disadvantaged groups and individuals, many countries have strengthened inclusive and equitable policies and systems and have adopted programmes that target specific groups.

*Girls and women*

28. While gender inequality can affect both men and women, women face greater literacy challenges globally. Policy-level interventions include the development in Jordan of a strategy for mainstreaming gender equality in education and the formulation, implementation and monitoring of gender-responsive education sector plans in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, the Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Many countries have continued to provide opportunities for promoting women's literacy, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mali, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Senegal and the Sudan. In Pakistan, the Advancing Quality Alternative Learning Project has provided learning opportunities for socially vulnerable and disadvantaged people, especially women, by integrating literacy, life skills and vocational education. In Cambodia, the Educational and Social Development of Garment Factory Workers programme has improved the literacy skills of 1,300 garment factory workers (95 per cent of them female) through literacy classes and libraries created in factories. In Nigeria, an offline application on mobile devices or tablets developed by UNESCO through its School Meets the Learner Approach Initiative has increased access to education for more than 250,000 women and girls and has improved retention.

*Crisis-affected persons including refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons*

29. The past two years have witnessed major displacement events and a further increase in international migration.<sup>6</sup> In 2018, 27 fragile and conflict-affected countries that were able to provide data<sup>7</sup> accounted for about 30 per cent (32 million) of all non-literate young people worldwide. As a global response, the States Members of the United Nations finalized the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the global compact on refugees. Accordingly, the UNESCO qualifications passport for refugees and vulnerable migrants was developed to facilitate the mobility of refugees by giving them the opportunity to improve their language proficiency, continue their studies, increase their employment chances or allow them to apply for formal recognition or authorization. Another example of facilitating mutual recognition of skills and qualifications is a programme to certify the credentials for refugee camp education in Uganda, using block-chain-based applications to facilitate the certification.

30. For many migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, mastery of the host country's language and culture is a priority for their survival and social integration. Using theatre as a tool to exchange knowledge and bridge the cultural gap, the programme "Tell Me" launched by an Italian non-profit organization, the New Nobel Committee for Persons with Disabilities,<sup>8</sup> facilitates language learning and social inclusion for young and adult migrants. Moreover, numerous literacy and skills development integrated approaches have proven to be effective, including the whole-of-government effort in New Zealand to improve refugee resettlement outcomes in terms of English language skills and education, self-sufficiency, health, housing and social participation, and language support courses in Austria extended to part-time vocational schools and vocational education and training colleges. The need for mother language-based, multilingual approaches is increasingly recognized, as exemplified by a Finnish-based start-up that provides mobile learning to refugees in countries in Europe and the Global South in their own languages, thus aiding their

<sup>6</sup> In 2018, there were 25.9 million refugees, 41.3 million internally displaced persons and almost 272 million international migrants, according to the World Migration Report 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Calculated based on data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

<sup>8</sup> See <https://en.unesco.org/news/italian-programme-wins-unesco-prize-teaching-literacy-migrants-through-theatre>.

social integration and employment. UNESCO, through a project supported by the Swedish International Development Agency, is conducting a landscape review of literacy learning supported by information and communications technology (ICT) for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons in order to provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and practitioners.

#### *Indigenous peoples*

31. The world is home to around 370 million indigenous people and around 7,000 living languages. Linguistic diversity, however, is at risk on account of, among other factors, digitization. In 2015, a mere 5 per cent of the world's languages were present on the Internet. Promoting literacy for indigenous peoples, particularly in indigenous languages, has intrinsic value, and it can also empower indigenous peoples by fostering linguistic and cultural diversity, and protecting indigenous identities, cultures, worldviews and knowledge systems.

32. Efforts have been made to support literacy among indigenous peoples by developing writing systems and building a solid literacy base in a mother language and then adding a national language and/or lingua franca. In West Africa, Governments and NGOs have promoted a number of mother language-based, multilingual literacy initiatives that have led to positive literacy outcomes. In Latin America, UNESCO-supported intercultural bilingual education programmes have also contributed to the revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures. In Asia and the Pacific, States endorsed the first regional statement on multilingual education at the sixth Multilingual Education Conference, held in Bangkok in 2019. Other examples include a Thai multilingual education programme using both Patani Malay and Thai for children and families of the Patani Malay minority community, and the mobile application Thazin, which supports the preservation and learning of Arakanese, one of the minority languages of Myanmar.

#### *Out-of-school youth*

33. Worldwide, one in three young people of upper secondary school age (36 per cent) are out of school, with significant disparities between low-income countries (60 per cent) and high-income countries (6 per cent). In order for those young people to acquire literacy skills, countries and partners have enhanced policies, measures and programmes, including expanding alternative education and training pathways, linking literacy learning with skills development to facilitate learning-work transitions, and recognizing students' skills and qualifications. In Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, for instance, national policy frameworks on alternative education pathways have been developed, with the support of UNESCO, for the integration of out-of-school young people and children.

34. These out-of-school young people are part of the broader youth group aged between 15 and 29 years, which constitutes almost 20 per cent of the global population (1.8 billion). They are exposed to a world of work often characterized by informality and vulnerable employment. Many literacy programmes for young people have integrated a skills development component to respond to high youth unemployment rates and high rates of young people not in employment, education or training and to facilitate school-to-work transitions. In Madagascar, the national employment and vocational training policy has strengthened 17 vocational training centres, which provide nearly 3,000 out-of-school young persons in rural areas with vocational training combined with literacy programmes, supported by UNESCO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and UNDP.

### **Leveraging digital technologies to expand access and improve the relevance of learning outcomes**

35. While acknowledging the merits of older media such as radio and television, UNESCO is encouraging countries to exploit digital technologies to expand access and improve learning. It has built a knowledge base on the use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence for youth and adult literacy in line with the 2019 Beijing Consensus on artificial intelligence and education. It has also supported countries in developing national policies for open educational resources, guided by the 2019 UNESCO Recommendation on Open Educational Resources and the sharing of openly licensed learning and teaching materials for the benefit of literacy learners and instructors and facilitators alike.

36. Global platforms, such as the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes and the Mobile Learning Weeks, have facilitated the sharing of effective practices, as exemplified by the BASAbali Wiki programme. BASAbali, a non-profit organization, has developed a multimedia Balinese-Indonesian-English wiki dictionary and encyclopedia for promoting literacy in those languages and revitalizing endangered local languages.

37. UNESCO has been supporting the systematic integration of digital technology into literacy programmes; examples include: the School Meets the Learner programme in Nigeria; ICT-supported community learning centres piloted in the Sudan to provide literacy courses for women and to reinforce the economic capacity of communities; the Advancing Mobile Literacy Learning project implemented in Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia and Mexico; and the development of a material- and information-sharing application created in Myanmar. UNESCO has also been conducting diagnostic studies on ICT-supported non-formal education and technical and vocational education and training in Benin, Mali, the Niger, Senegal and Togo, as well as developing pedagogic approaches for mobile-supported literacy learning for disadvantaged teachers and for refugees. Online courses and materials have also contributed to promoting literacy as part of lifelong learning, including the above-mentioned UNESCO online course and the lifelong learning online modules developed by UNESCO in 2019, which have already reached more than one million views.

### **Monitoring progress and assessing literacy skills and programmes for decision-making and accountability**

38. Insufficiency of information and data on literacy has been an issue. Recently, efforts have been made to improve literacy data by basing it on direct measures to capture the more nuanced concept that underpins the 2030 vision of literacy. Goal 4, especially with the establishment of new global benchmarks for functional literacy and numeracy levels for indicator 4.6.1, has provided a further impetus to this effort.

39. The implementation of Goal 4 requires strengthening of the weak components of educational management information systems, such as adult literacy and non-formal education, and by doing so, re-orienting the entire educational management information system to cover all the levels and areas of education and learning, as exemplified by Afghanistan. According to data analysis by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the gap in relation to target 4.6.1 on youth and adult literacy is significant, with only 13 per cent of the required data available, compared with the level attained for target 4.1.1 on literacy at the primary and secondary school levels, which was 33 per cent in 2018.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Miguel Subosa and Mark West, *Re-orienting Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning*, Working Papers on Education Policy, No. 5 (UNESCO, 2018).

40. There is a trend towards setting quality standards and expected outcomes, and linking them with forms of recognition, accreditation, validation, and certification. Twelve African countries<sup>10</sup> involved in the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning action research programme for measuring literacy programme participants' learning outcomes have developed a harmonized competency framework and an assessment framework, as well as test items and background questionnaires. In Algeria, the national multilingual national strategy for literacy programme offers an end-of-course exam to provide post-literacy opportunities to learners, including further learning through distance education, vocational training at a specialized institution, and income-generating activities. In Mozambique, after testing in five districts involving 1,297 learners (65 per cent female), the UNESCO-supported adult literacy programme has developed learning assessment tools and a national curriculum for primary education for young people and adults.

## **B. Children's literacy from a lifelong learning perspective**

41. The multiple benefits of investing in children's literacy have been widely recognized. Such an investment also contributes to achieving target 4.6 of the Goals and, thus, to creating a truly literate society in the long term. From a lifelong perspective, children's literacy learning depends on a mix of different elements. Beyond language classes offered by basic education institutions, the roles played by parents, families, community members and friends are important, as well as the existence of a literate environment in both physical and digital spaces. The 2030 vision of literacy, therefore, invites us to take a holistic approach to literacy, considering those multiple actors and sites of learning in addition to formal schooling within the Framework of Lifelong Learning.

42. Linking the learning of children, young people and adults has proved to deliver positive outcomes. UNESCO has supported national capacity development to manage intergenerational literacy and learning programmes: 458 adults and children (52 per cent female) benefited from the Institute's Family and Intergenerational Literacy and Learning project in Ethiopia and the Gambia; and 248 national stakeholders were trained in Africa<sup>11</sup> and in Pakistan in 2019. In Chad, training modules for literacy facilitators are being revised to improve literacy provision and learning.

43. To enrich literate environments, libraries and community learning centres have been expanded in some places, offering resources and space for literacy learning for all. In 2019, there were around 405,561 public libraries worldwide, of which more than a half were in developing countries, including in prisons,<sup>12</sup> while more than a million school, community, research, university, national and special libraries were also available. China and Nepal have enhanced community learning centres as effective instruments for community-based learning of literacy and other skills and for social transformation. Similar efforts are being initiated in Ethiopia, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. Another example is the Global Digital Library of the Global Book Alliance. Its Asian version, launched in 2019, contains reading materials in 41 Asian languages.

<sup>10</sup> Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Morocco, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo.

<sup>11</sup> Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger and Senegal.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://librarymap.ifla.org/>.

## IV. Advancing the global literacy agenda

### A. Global coordination

44. At the global level, UNESCO has continued to play its mandated coordination role to achieve Goal 4 through partnerships, policy guidance, capacity development, monitoring and advocacy. Literacy, as related particularly to targets 4.1 and 4.6, has been an integral part of discussions at the Sustainable Development Goal 4–Education 2030 coordination mechanisms, including the Sustainable Development Goal–Education 2030 Steering Committee, the Multilateral Education Platform, the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030, and the Nine High-Population Countries Initiative. The regional coordination mechanisms for Goal 4 have also served as effective platforms for coordination.

45. Participants of the Global Education Meeting, convened by UNESCO in Brussels in 2018, recognized persistent literacy challenges. In the resulting Brussels Declaration, ministers called for action around nine key messages, including the commitment to eradicate illiteracy through formal and non-formal education and training. Through the Steering Committee, that message on literacy was brought forward as part of strategic policy recommendations to the 2019 high-level political forum on sustainable development, which focused on the theme “Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality”. The Steering Committee called on Governments to allocate sufficient resources to youth and adult literacy programmes and to monitor their impact on the most vulnerable and marginalized groups.

46. In 2019, UNESCO adopted its new Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020–2025) to guide its work. It focuses on: (a) developing national literacy policies and strategies; (b) addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and girls; (c) leveraging digital technologies to expand access and improve learning outcomes; and (d) monitoring progress and assessing literacy skills and programmes.

47. As the major implementation platform of the Strategy, the Global Alliance for Literacy developed a new strategy in close alignment with the former. The Alliance’s strategy has five goals, encompassing the areas of policy, equity, innovation, data and partnership to support its 29 member countries, 20 of them with adult literacy rates below 50 per cent, and the countries of the Nine High-Population Countries Initiative, in which over half of the world’s non-literate adults reside.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, the Alliance conducted a study to estimate the cost of achieving target 4.6. The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning will launch a report in September 2020 on the status of youth and adult literacy policies and programmes in the 29 countries, on the basis of extensive surveys, which will guide future activities of the Alliance and better targeting of domestic and external funding.

48. Another platform facilitating local coordination efforts is the Institute’s Global Network of Learning Cities. The Network supports knowledge-sharing, policy dialogue, peer learning, innovation and partnerships, as well as capacity development and development of assessment and monitoring instruments in 173 cities across 55 countries. During the Fourth International Conference on Learning Cities, held in Medellin, Colombia, in 2019 and which focused on inclusion, participants adopted the Strategy of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (2019–2021) to guide the strategies of the member cities in seven thematic clusters, including one on literacy.

<sup>13</sup> The nine countries are Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan.

49. Literacy challenges are closely tied to various forms of inequalities, with gender inequalities remaining a major concern, and girls' and women's literacy being a priority within all global efforts. Organized by the French presidency of the Group of Seven, in cooperation with UNESCO, the Group of Seven France–UNESCO International Conference, held in Paris in 2019, on innovating for girls' and women's empowerment through education, provided a unique platform for new forms of collaboration and initiatives. Through its Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education, and the initiative "Her education, our future", UNESCO continues to accelerate action for girls' and women's education and literacy. It elaborated Her Atlas, a monitoring and advocacy tool to enhance public knowledge of the status of national constitutions, legislation and regulations related to girls' and women's education rights in 193 countries.

50. UNESCO has also promoted literacy for indigenous people as the coordinator of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and will lead, in collaboration with the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat and other agencies, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), proclaimed by the General Assembly in its resolution 74/135. At a high-level event held in Mexico in 2020, participants gathered to mark the end of the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages and to launch the decade of action for indigenous languages, integrating literacy into the draft plan of action for the decade.

## **B. Advocacy**

51. In a context where the gaps in basic education still require increased investment in children's education, major advocacy efforts for youth and adult literacy are needed for increased attention and more funding. The major platforms used for advocacy include the Global Alliance for Literacy, the Goal 4 mechanisms, global meetings such as the 2018 Global Education Meeting, the 2019 high-level political forum, and the Group of Seven France-UNESCO International Conference. Other platforms include the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes and international days, notably the International Literacy Day, the International Mother Language Day, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples and the International Day of Education. The 2018 International Literacy Day and the International Literary Prizes served to remind the world of the multiple benefits of integrated approaches to literacy policies, provision, instruction and learning. UNESCO efforts in 2019 for the International Literacy Day and the International Literacy Prizes, and the contribution of UNESCO to the International Year of Indigenous Languages, focused on multilingualism and helped to generate renewed attention to the importance of mother language-based, multilingual approaches to literacy development. The UNESCO Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, Princess Petra Laurentien of the Netherlands, has been an active advocate for literacy.

## **C. Financing**

52. According to the UNESCO publication entitled *Global Education Monitoring Report 2019: Migration, Displacement and Education – Building Bridges not Walls*, the estimated annual education expenditure worldwide was \$4.7 trillion: \$3 trillion (65 per cent) in high-income countries and \$22 billion (0.5 per cent) in low-income countries. The role of Governments is critical, as they account for 79 per cent of total spending, while households account for 20 per cent. In that context, financing for adult literacy and education is still inadequate. Without strong action soon, financial prospects for adult literacy and education will likely deteriorate even further owing to the COVID-19 crisis.

53. According to the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*, there has been no progress in spending on adult learning and education since 2015 in 41 per cent of the 109 countries responding to the survey. Nearly one out of five countries (19 per cent) reported spending less than 0.5 per cent of their education budget on adult learning and education and a further 14 per cent reported spending less than 1 per cent, while 19 per cent of the countries spent more than 4 per cent of the education budget on adult learning and education. Countries reported that the highest priority in such funding was for adults disadvantaged by their lack of education and skills (45 per cent of responding countries), followed closely by unemployed adults (44 per cent), residents of remote or rural areas (44 per cent) and women (38 per cent).

54. National Governments and partners have made efforts to adopt innovative funding mechanisms for adult literacy, learning and education. According to the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*, 135 countries introduced new adult learning and education financing mechanisms, ranging from interministerial collaboration, public-private partnerships and campaign initiatives, to special funds, unemployment insurance, scholarships, and international and regional funding.

55. Aid for education, which accounts for 12 per cent of total education expenditure in low-income countries and 2 per cent in lower-middle-income countries, tends to be directed at children's education, as reflected in the policy orientations of major platforms such as the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity, and the Global Partnership for Education. Nevertheless, youth and adult literacy and education benefitted from funding from the Global Partnership for Education through its grant for education sector plan preparation. In the national education sector plan of Timor-Leste, to which the Partnership provided an implementation grant for the period 2012–2015, adult literacy and education were identified as one of the priorities. But that is rather exceptional. Youth and adult literacy integrated into education sector plans requires much more funding support. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of empowering adults with low literacy skills so that they, in turn, can support children's learning outside of school.

56. Ensuring adequate and sustainable funds for adult learning and education, both domestic and external, requires further collective efforts. In 2019, UNESCO, as part of the Global Alliance for Literacy activities, estimated the cost of achieving target 4.6. The analysis indicates that more than \$14 billion will be needed if the 20 countries with the lowest adult literacy rates and the countries of the Nine High-Population Countries Initiative are to achieve functional literacy and numeracy skills by 2030. The funding gap amounts to more than \$10 billion in the 20 countries and \$4 billion among the countries of the Nine High-Population Countries Initiative. This indicates that even if 3 per cent of the national education budget is allocated to adult literacy and education, target 4.6 cannot be achieved in those 29 countries without external funding support.

#### **D. Monitoring**

57. UNESCO has monitored global literacy progress through the work of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, including the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning and the Global Education Monitoring reports. The Global Alliance to Monitor Learning continues to support national learning assessment strategies and to develop internationally comparable indicators and methodological tools to measure progress towards Goal 4 targets. The task force on indicator 4.6.1, co-chaired by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and OECD, has produced a draft technical note describing the minimum proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy to be used as new global benchmarks. It has also created an online database of direct

assessments of adult competencies and an expert group to develop a short self-assessment questionnaire for national household surveys.

58. Through 157 national survey reports, the Institute for Lifelong Learning has also successfully monitored the implementation of the Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education. The results were presented at the fortieth session of the UNESCO General Conference, held in 2019, and included in the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*. The Report also monitored the progress of the 2009 Belém Framework for Action. It also revealed the need to strengthen data management. For instance, 38 countries out of 149 countries surveyed did not provide data on public spending for adult learning and education.

59. In response to the data gap and building on the UNESCO Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics released a tool to measure functional youth and adult literacy skills specifically in developing countries (Mini-LAMP). The tool is one of the recommended instruments for countries to use in literacy assessment and monitoring, while the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies and the World Bank Skills towards Employability and Productivity programmes remain useful in middle- and high-income country contexts, providing data on key cognitive skills used in workplaces and at home.

## V. Education for democracy

60. |Section IV of the present report serves to address the implementation of General Assembly resolution 73/134 on education for democracy. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law are essential pillars of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which, for the first time, contains a goal on peace, justice and strong institutions (Goal 16). The review of progress of implementation of the resolution since 2018 shows that quality education (Goal 4), and particularly target 4.7, is increasingly recognized as a key enabler to promote just and peaceful societies, highlighting the interconnected nature of the 2030 Agenda.

61. While the General Assembly, in its resolution 73/134, does not provide a definition of education for democracy, it reaffirms that democracy is a universal value based on the freely expressed will of people to determine their own political, economic, social and cultural systems and their full participation in all aspects of their lives. The United Nations does not advocate a specific model of government but promotes a set of principles to uphold a human-rights based approach for greater participation, equality, security and human development.

62. With the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns are being raised about how emergency measures to prevent its spread can erode fundamental freedoms and human rights post-crisis. According to a policy brief issued in April 2020, entitled “COVID-19 and human rights: we are all in this together”, the pandemic is becoming a human rights crisis. Thus, education has a key role to play in preparing people to build resilient post-crisis societies where human rights and the rule of law are upheld.

63. Education for democracy has been implemented in national education systems worldwide under different topics, including education on citizenship, human rights, peace and intercultural dialogue, media and information literacy and global citizenship education, as highlighted in previous reports. The review of progress highlights that entities of the United Nations system are investing efforts into:

(a) Supporting teachers and educators to foster an environment that is conducive to promoting active citizenship in an increasingly interdependent world. According to its Youth Global Programme for Sustainable Development and Peace,

UNDP has worked with the Government of Morocco to train teachers and educators to establish a network of socio-educational coordinators in schools to encourage youth civic engagement. As part of its global educational effort to empower learners to become active promoters of peaceful, inclusive and sustainable societies, UNESCO has developed with the Government of Cuba a teacher's manual that integrates, holistically, education for sustainable development and global citizenship. Furthermore, UNESCO has joined forces with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in developing handbooks for teachers that provide activities, lessons and out-of-school initiatives for empowering students for just societies;

(b) Equipping young people with the values, knowledge, skills and attitudes to become engaged advocates for just, inclusive and sustainable societies. As part of the Education for Justice Initiative, UNODC has developed a series of educational resources, such as books and animations that teach children and young people about integrity, fairness and respect for diversity, as well as university modules to teach about the rule of law. Promoting appreciation for diversity among young people can also be achieved through art and culture; UNESCO is supporting the implementation of an education policy in Zimbabwe that includes the establishment of a cultural centre for schools and the community to encourage young people to understand their cultural heritage. For youth to positively engage with their local communities as change-makers, it is equally important to equip them with life skills. Through a programme (UPSHIFT) to empower youth to identify challenges in their communities and create entrepreneurial solutions to address them, for example, UNICEF provides young social entrepreneurs in Ukraine with the mentorship and resources to devise innovative solutions for children to communicate with non-hearing people;

(c) Promoting freedom of expression and fostering a pluralistic media environment. This is particularly critical since the digital revolution is accelerating the spread of information, including fake news. In addition, the proliferation of digital surveillance threatens fundamental freedoms like privacy. UNESCO has developed resources for developing media and information literacy skills, and a handbook for journalism education and training that promotes quality and ethical journalism to mitigate disinformation. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights is coordinating the fourth phase of the World Programme for Human Rights Education, focusing on promoting human rights training for media professionals and journalists. Aiming to promote democracy and human rights education around the world, the United Nations Democracy Fund trains journalists and helps media managers in the Syrian Arab Republic to organize public dialogues on human rights, democracy and governance issues;

(d) Empowering youth to participate in public decisions and hold decision-makers to account, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, social origin, language, religion, nationality, economic condition or ability. The United Nations Population Fund has a global adolescent and youth strategy – My Body, My Life, My World – which emphasizes the importance of civic education for empowering youth, especially girls, to know about and demand their sexual and reproductive rights. This is only possible when women have access to education, hence the importance of initiatives such as the global model for a comprehensive Second Chance Education and Vocational Learning Programme launched by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women). To support youth from ethnic and excluded minorities, UNDP has worked in Bangladesh to involve them as youth leaders in awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives for human rights, resulting in the inclusion of excluded minority representatives in local government standing committees.

64. Challenges regarding the implementation of General Assembly resolution [73/134](#) remain. They include the growing disillusionment with the institutions that are to be upheld by education for democracy and the lack of political will to

strengthen underrepresented voices that could challenge the status quo, especially where exclusionary nationalist discourse is on the rise. Other challenges pertain to the lack of teachers' preparedness to build the socio-emotional and behavioural skills of students to help them become champions for democratic societies. The impact of such initiatives has been limited by discrimination connected to age, lack of possibilities for youth participation in decision-making and limited inclusion of youth-specific needs.

65. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the importance of individuals being aware of their rights and fundamental freedoms and how to demand them when they have been curtailed beyond the strictly necessary. Looking forward, awareness of these rights and fundamental freedoms provides an opportunity to reflect, improve – and maybe redefine – education for democracy in the emerging digital environment, in the light of new models of learning and the rise of disinformation and hate speech. Educational responses should build resilient post-crisis societies that promote human solidarity, global citizenship and the engagement of youth in favour of democratic, peaceful and inclusive societies.

## VI. Recommendations

66. **On the basis of the present report, the General Assembly may wish to consider the following recommendations:**

- (a) **Literacy for life, work and lifelong learning**
- (i) **Recommendations to Member States and development partners**
  - **Promote literacy further, as an integral part of the right to education, to empower people, expand their capabilities and foster inclusive, sustainable development, on the basis of the 2030 vision of literacy framed by the concept of lifelong learning**
  - **Ensure, within and beyond the context of the COVID-19 crisis, sufficient and sustainable domestic and external resources for youth and adult literacy, as well as their efficient use**
  - **Leverage the digital technology to expand access to and improve the quality of literacy learning, including by mobilizing education technology industry, non-profit organizations and civil society actors**
  - **Strengthen literacy measurement instruments and statistics, and invest in national education management information systems and data management capacities**
  - **Enrich multilingual literate environments, in which people acquire, use, and develop literacy skills in both physical and digital spaces**
- (ii) **Recommendations to Member States**
  - **Enhance legal frameworks, policies, systems, governance and financing to promote literacy for children, young people and adults as an integral part of lifelong learning, and adopt mother language-based, multilingual approaches, where appropriate**
  - **Continue to ensure universal access to quality basic education and to build a solid literacy base for children and young people**
  - **Accelerate and enhance literacy efforts, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable and marginalized, including girls and**

women, out-of-school children and youth, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, and indigenous persons

- Intensify efforts to provide flexible learning opportunities for young people and adults with no or low literacy skills

(iii) Recommendations to development partners

- Request UNESCO to continue to play its mandated role as the lead coordinating United Nations agency for implementation of the Education 2030 Agenda and to catalyse collective efforts towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4, especially target 4.1 and target 4.6
- Ensure coordinated and sustained collective support, advocacy and knowledge management through different platforms, including Sustainable Development Goal 4–Education 2030 coordination mechanisms, the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Lifelong Learning Framework, the Global Network of Learning Cities and the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning
- Integrate youth and adult literacy into education aid policies and strategies for technical and financial support, and persuade international financing mechanisms for education, including the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait and the International Financing Facility for Education, to support countries in deeper need, especially the 20 countries with the lowest adult literacy rates

(b) Education for democracy

(i) Recommendations to Member States and development partners

- Recognize the importance of educating young people about their rights and empowering them, in particular to shape, in the aftermath of COVID-19, societies that are anchored in respect for human rights and the rule of law

(ii) Recommendations to Member States

- Develop educational policies and initiatives that contribute to preventing disinformation and hate speech, in particular through media and information literacy.

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