



UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy

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

Baku, Azerbaijan, 14-16 May 2008

General Information

1. Background

The UNESCO Sub-Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy entitled “Addressing Literacy Challenges in Europe with a sub-regional focus: Building Partnerships and Promoting Innovative Approaches” forms part of a series of six regional or sub-regional conferences supporting global literacy that are being organized by UNESCO within the framework of the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) and UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE).

The conferences are part of a major drive to promote literacy at national, regional and international levels as one of the major Education for All goals and as a foundation of lifelong learning. The regional conferences build upon and extend the work started at the White House Conference on Global Literacy held in New York in September 2006, hosted by Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States of America and Honorary Ambassador for the UNLD. The objective is to trigger sustained global and country-level leadership for the promotion of literacy by renewing support to and encouraging investment in literacy for all and by integrating literacy programmes into a sector-wide education strategy. The initiative also seeks to assist countries in addressing their literacy challenges and to make a real and measurable impact in the lives of their citizens, with the aim of contributing towards sustainable human development and poverty reduction.

From the outset, it was envisaged that the six regional conferences – covering the Arab States, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean - would address the literacy challenges specific to each region. They would serve to build momentum for advocacy based on evidence which would underpin renewed commitment and action in the field of literacy for out-of-school children, young people and adults. Each conference would result in concrete action points and country support.

In sum, the objectives of the regional conferences are:

- to advocate for literacy;
- to identify and discuss main challenges and achievements in literacy;
- to present and disseminate effective literacy practices;
- to build cooperation among stakeholders;
- to mobilize partners and resources for concrete interventions at the country level;
- to develop recommendations on how to move forward.

The first regional conference, for the Arab States Region, took place in Doha, Qatar, on 12 - 14 March 2007 under the auspices of Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Bint Nasser Al-Missned. The second conference, for East Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific sub-region, was hosted by the People's Republic of China and took place on 31 July and 1 August 2007 in Beijing. The African Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy, which was the third conference in the series, took place in Bamako, Mali, on 10 - 12 September 2007, and was hosted by the Government of Mali. Finally, the Government of India hosted the sub-regional Conference for South, South West and Central Asia on 29 and 30 November 2007 in New Delhi.

2. Purpose and content of the Baku Literacy Conference

UNESCO is now organizing the fifth conference in the series which will cover Europe with a sub-regional focus (Central, Eastern and South-East Europe and the Baltic States) and will target the following 30 countries: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

The Conference will take place on 14 - 16 May 2008 in Baku, Azerbaijan, under the auspices of Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva, First Lady of Azerbaijan and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador, as well as of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation. It will be opened at 4 pm on 14 May 2008 at the Gülüstan Palace in Baku.

The Baku Literacy Conference will address the literacy and adult education challenges specific to Europe.

Despite the high literacy rates in Europe, illiteracy continues to affect a significant proportion of Europe's population. Contrary to the commonly held assumption that it is only affecting minority groups, there are growing numbers within mainstream European populations who either have weak foundations in literacy from school or who are not able to use their literacy skills and therefore do not retain them. Recent surveys have revealed the numbers and nuances of the problem of literacy and competencies the region was facing. The demands of rapid social and technological changes, economic and cultural globalization, growing diversity, competition and liberalization, inequality of opportunities, conflict and poverty in all its forms require that individuals have basic competencies that go far beyond mere technical communication skills, such as reading and writing skills, scientific literacy, mathematics and the acquisition of language, but help assessing, managing, integrating, interacting with and evaluating knowledge.

Successful and sustainable national literacy policies and very rich and stimulating programmes and initiatives do exist in the region and pave the way for replication in other places and contexts. However, in many European countries, more efforts are required to build a national strategy to address the matter.

The forthcoming UNESCO Regional Literacy Conference in Baku is therefore of utmost importance for UNESCO and its Member States and partners in their efforts to place literacy high on the agendas of all stakeholders at the national and regional level and to develop concerted action in order to achieve the goals of the Lisbon Strategy (2000) and make Europe a competitive and dynamic knowledge society.

The Conference will organize roundtables to stimulate discussions on main challenges, trends, gaps, achievements and innovations in the region, as well as to develop recommendations on how to promote literacy. The following themes will be addressed: (1) Concept and evolution of literacy and adult learning in today's world: Literacy as the foundation for lifelong learning and key competencies for employability, active citizenship and social inclusion in knowledge societies; (2) Assessment, measurement and evaluation of literacy levels and basic competencies; (3) Pedagogical approaches for promoting quality basic learning; and (4) Responding to new demands, integrated systems of learning opportunities, legislative and institutional arrangements; and.

In addition, the conference will look at innovative programmes to improve literacy levels which can serve as models for adaptation and replication in other contexts. The panel presentations build on and add depth to the following thematic fields addressed in the first conference on Global Literacy:

- Family Literacy and Intergenerational Learning
- Literacy for Health
- Workplace Literacy
- E-learning, Open-Distance Education and ICTs
- Quality basic learning for groups with special needs, such as minority groups, migrants and prisoners
- Education for Sustainable Development: Citizenship, consumer and environmental education

Through the Conference discussions and exchange, partnerships will be fostered among key stakeholders: decision-makers, civil society organisations, community-based organisations, bilateral and multilateral organisations, and private providers in the field of literacy. The conference will ultimately lead to renewed commitment, with concrete proposals in support of activities at the country level.

3. Objectives

The conference aims at:

- undertaking strong advocacy for youth and adult literacy in the sub-region as part of the global literacy drive and the UNLD within the overall framework of EFA;
- identifying and discussing the main challenges and achievements in youth and adult literacy and developing recommendations on the way forward;
- building renewed commitment towards literacy at the highest political level, including increased investment and resources;
- building a coalition and cooperation among all stakeholders, involving governments, NGOs, private providers, development agencies, universities, etc., in support of effective national literacy programmes and policies in the framework of UNLD and other global initiatives such as Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD);
- facilitating exchange and sharing of successful experiences and effective practices in the area of literacy, and access to the stock of knowledge and know-how;
- creating a new momentum for UNLD in Europe and contributing to the preparation of the UNLD mid-decade review in 2008.

4. Participants

The Conference will be attended by First Ladies, UNESCO Goodwill Ambassadors, ministers in charge of education and literacy, representatives of the Ministry of Labour where appropriate, UN Agencies and other international organizations, civil society, universities and research institutes, programme managers and practitioners, multilateral and bilateral organizations and private foundations, publishers, writers, and the media.

5. Venue and dates

The Conference will take place at the Hyatt Park Hotel, Baku, Azerbaijan, from 14 to 16 May 2008. The Opening Ceremony will take place at the Gülüstan Palace at 4 pm on 14 May 2008.