

**Message from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of International Literacy Day**

8 September 2006

The annual celebration of International Literacy Day on 8 September is an opportunity to remind the world of the importance of literacy for individuals, families, communities and whole societies. It is also an occasion to remember that literacy remains a right that is denied to about a fifth of the world's adult population. The world's literacy challenge is to translate our recognition of the importance of literacy into practical effect so that hope is given to the millions of women, men and children who cannot read or write even their own names.

Considerable achievements have been made in many poor countries. The Global Monitoring Report on Education for All (2006) shows that enrolments in primary education have risen in both sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, with almost 20 million new students in each region. Around 47 countries have achieved universal primary education and 20 others are expected to achieve this goal by 2015. Girls' primary enrolments have likewise increased rapidly as gender and educational quality measures have been included in national educational plans. The achievement of universal primary education (UPE) is vital in order to staunch the flow of young people entering adulthood without a good command of basic literacy skills.

Progress has also been attained through adult literacy and non-formal education programmes in many countries but tremendous challenges still remain. An estimated 771 million adults live without basic literacy skills and two-thirds of them are women. Over 100 million children are still not enrolled in primary school and more than half of them are girls. Moreover, the sustainability of literacy is not assured as drop-out rates remain high. Globally, adult literacy is allocated only 1% of the national education budget. By their actions, governments and aid agencies show that they do not assign sufficient priority to literacy programmes for adults and youth. If the objectives of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012) and the Education for All literacy goal are to be met, pledges have to be translated to concrete action.

Literacy is important in its own right but it is also widely acknowledged as one of the most powerful tools of development, which makes its relative neglect all the more frustrating. Against the background of the United Nations Literacy Decade and the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014), it is evident that literacy is not only a positive outcome of development processes but also a lever of change and an instrument for achieving further social progress. Hence, the theme of this year's International Literacy Day is "Literacy sustains development".

This theme seeks to highlight the fact that literacy is not merely a cognitive skill of reading, writing and arithmetic, for literacy helps in the acquisition of learning and life skills that, when strengthened by usage and application throughout people's lives, lead to forms of individual, community and societal development that are sustainable. Literacy programmes are increasingly making this connection, as shown by the ways in which literacy is often taught in close association with the acquisition of other skills relating to livelihoods, income generation, small business skills, environmental protection, nutrition and health (including HIV & AIDS prevention).

For these reasons, it is imperative that acquiring literacy skills is done in context-sensitive ways, especially in terms of identity, culture and vocation. Literacy offers chances to develop new capabilities and practise new freedoms, which can have a transformative impact on people's lives. In order to have an enduring impact, literacy needs to be nurtured and supported through the availability of books, newspapers, magazines, computers, and other modalities of written communication. Literacy cannot sustain development if it is itself allowed to wither and die through lack of materials.

The work of literacy cannot be done without helping hands. And so today, I congratulate the outstanding achievements of countless women and men in different regions of the world – teachers, literacy tutors, community workers, family members, friends, volunteers and other individuals – who work tirelessly to help others express themselves through the written word. In small ways, at the local level, they are making a big difference to people's lives and they deserve our support and appreciation. On International Literacy Day, let their efforts and commitment be a shining example to others of the power of literacy.

Koïchiro Matsuura