

# Conference on Education for All in Europe and North America

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## Functional illiteracy: The invisible problem

Today in the world's developed countries, some men and women lead daily lives resembling an obstacle course because they have either lost or never acquired the reading and writing skills that formed part of their basic education.

Nearly a quarter of the population of these countries is incapable of understanding and using the information contained in brochures, information bulletins, train schedules, road maps and simple instructions for household appliances or pharmaceuticals. This major handicap bears the technical name: functional illiteracy. No country is immune.

The assessment confirms the findings of an international survey on the reading and writing capacities of adults (1994-95) in twelve OECD countries <sup>(1)</sup> which revealed that part of the adult population had reading problems. In Europe and the United States there are adults incapable of making out a cheque or verifying a bill, reading a story to a child... or writing a love letter, and who are petrified by the prospect of future change such as the arrival of the Euro or new technologies.

Those most affected by functional illiteracy are ethnic minorities, marginalized groups and also women - in certain provinces of southern Europe nearly a quarter of women are illiterate. A number of countries have carried out research into the problem, but the statistical data necessary for full comprehension is still insufficient.

One of the priorities of Education for All is to eliminate functional illiteracy. But we must first of all determine why the school has failed in its mission with regard to some students. One of the ambiguities of compulsory education in the West, is that it sometimes appears to lead nowhere. And, as far as technical and vocational training are concerned, they have so far failed to convince either young people or employers. Tackling this mismatch promises to be a major task in the coming years.

<sup>(1)</sup> International Adult Literacy Survey, OECD

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