International Literacy Day
8 September 2012

Literacy and Peace

The right to literacy

The Persepolis Declaration (1975) described literacy as "not an end in itself, but as a fundamental human right". Indeed, literacy is an indispensable means in acquiring any form of education and requisite for basic education which was recognised as a human right in the Universal declaration of Human Rights over 50 years ago. Any deprivation of this right impacts the fulfilment of other human rights, minimizes individuals' choices and limits opportunities for social participation. The minimum obligation of a society or its government is to ensure that no deliberate obstruction is imposed on any individual in acquiring literacy skills.

Over the past few decades significant progress has been recorded, especially in regions like Asia and Africa where the literacy challenge has been most persisting. From 1984 to 1994, adult literacy rates in Asia and Africa where at 69.7% and 52.1%, while from 2005 to 2009 literacy rates in both regions rose to 81.9% and 63.3% respectively. Similarly, youth literacy rates in Asia and Africa where recorded at 65.7% and 74.5% between 1984 and 1994. Those levels increased to 81.9% and 90.2% by 2009. However, the challenge remains considerable; there are still 775 million adults and 122 million youth who are illiterate (UIS). Women and girls make up more than half of the illiterate population, making the scale of the problem even greater, given the disadvantaged and often marginalised position of girls and women. The lowest literacy rates for youth and adults are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, while the majority of adult illiterates live in ten countries: D.R. Congo, Indonesia, Brazil, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China and India (GMR, 2011).

Literacy and democracy

Literacy is not merely the skill to read and write. It is a transformational process that empowers individuals, broadens their critical thinking and provides them with the ability to act. A person without basic literacy lacks real opportunities to effectively engage with democratic institutions, to make choices, exercise his/her citizenship rights and act for a perceived common good. The consolidation of democracy requires people's participation; only then can a nation be brought closer to peace. However if literacy is to become an enabler of democracy it cannot be confined to basic skills, and thus to functional literacy. A study on attitudes towards democracy in Africa examines how low cognitive awareness may

impact on the level of demand of democracy within societies[1].Political learning therefore requires a broad set of skills or else civic literacy, which naturally presupposes functional literacy. The role of literacy in political participation and in the formulation of political opinion has long been recognised by national governments. The example of Nicaragua is an imminent one: as soon as the Sandinista left-wing party took power over from the Somoza dictatorship in 1979, it organised a mass literacy campaign, known as the National Literacy Crusade. The Sandinistas acknowledged that the estimated 50% of illiteracy in the country at that time was a hindrance to the political education process which was closely associated to their own role in the liberation movement. The Crusade became a national project of imagining a new nation and developing a new cultural consciousness. Even today the Crusade is more remembered for defining a national political identity rather than raising literacy levels.

Literacy and education for conflict resolution and peacebuilding

Literacy may also facilitate conflict resolution and peacebuilding. For example literacy programmes conducted in Guinea, Sierra Leone and South Sudan[2] have drawn upon various techniques and teaching and learning models in order to impart adult literacy in combination with conflict resolution procedures. In such contexts literacy becomes an entry point for dialogue and debate and has a critical role to play in helping individuals overcome trauma, grief and loss but also in transforming them to agents of positive change. Many of the techniques used in these programmes find their theoretical underpinnings in Paulo Freire's concept of adult literacy that relates the literacy process to the lived reality of individuals and to their own transformation. For Freire 'the word is not something static or disconnected from men's existential experience, but is a dimension of their thought–language about the world[3]. When literacy is in association with learning about the world, it is likely to promote intercultural understanding, tolerance and respect. Lack of such an approach to literacy and therefore to education, may however have a reverse effect. Education, whether in the school environment or in a non-formal context has political impact as it can perpetuate inequalities and exclusion, or promote social cohesion. In her article, Mc Lean Hilker[4], takes the example of the education system in pre-genocide Rwanda to demonstrate how education may reinforce social rupture. In her article she notes that prior to the genocide, one of the criteria that was used to determine the transition of students from primary to secondary education was based on ethnic and gender quota. Parallel to that, was a biased curriculum which allegedly reinforced propaganda. Even though there is no study that has established a direct link between the role of education in the genocide, it is reported that these practices affected popular sentiment with prejudice and discrimination.

Establishing peace through education

Literacy and education have been barometers for measuring human development since the establishment of the first Human Development Report in 1990. While human development is not directly measured through examining progress of dimensions of peace by the use of the Human Development Index, it cannot be disassociated from its concept. Life expectancy, education and economic indicators (e.g. GDP and GNP), which are some of the variables

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[1] Mattes R. and Bratton M., *Learning about Democracy in Africa: Awareness, Performance and experience in Africa,* in American Journal of Political Science, Vol.51, No.1, January 2007

[2] See: McCaffery J., *Using transformative models of adult literacy in conflict resolution and peace building processes at community level: examples from Guinea, Sierra Leone and Sudan*, in Compare, Vol.35, No.4, December 2005

[3] Freire P., *The Adult Literacy Process as Cultural Action for Freedom* in the Harvard Educational Review, volume 40, No.2, 1970, pp. 212

[4] McLean Hilker L., *The role of education in driving conflict and building peace: The case of Rwanda*, in Prospects, Vol.XLI, No.2, June 2011

used to calculate progress in human development, may be affected by unstable political conditions. Other more explicit efforts have been made for measuring and defining the extent to which societies are peaceful and even efforts towards ensuring peacebuilding within societies. Education, which necessitates basic literacy skills, has been identified as one of the indicators or conditions for determining peace within societies. For example, in the programme of action to build a 'Culture of Peace', which was launched by UN General Assembly in 1999, education- and particularly education for the peaceful resolution of conflict- is considered to be one of the eight pillars for enabling a culture of peace. Gender equality, which necessitates educational attainment, is also identified as one of the eight pillars for achieving a culture of peace. More recent efforts have been made to exemplify this association, notably through the 2012 Global Peace Index (http://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/2012-Global-Peace-Index-Report.pdf). The Global Peace Index (GPI) ranks nations according to their levels of peacefulness, but does not include education in its composite indicators. However, the report highlights the correlations of the various multidimensional factors of peace over the Global Peace Index. These factors include: mean years of schooling, gross enrolment rates in higher education institutions and adult literacy rates. In the report there is a first attempt to quantify measures of peace through the Positive Peace Index (PPI). The PPI measures the capacity of 108 nations to create and maintain a peaceful society. One of the 'pillars of peace' is high levels of education.