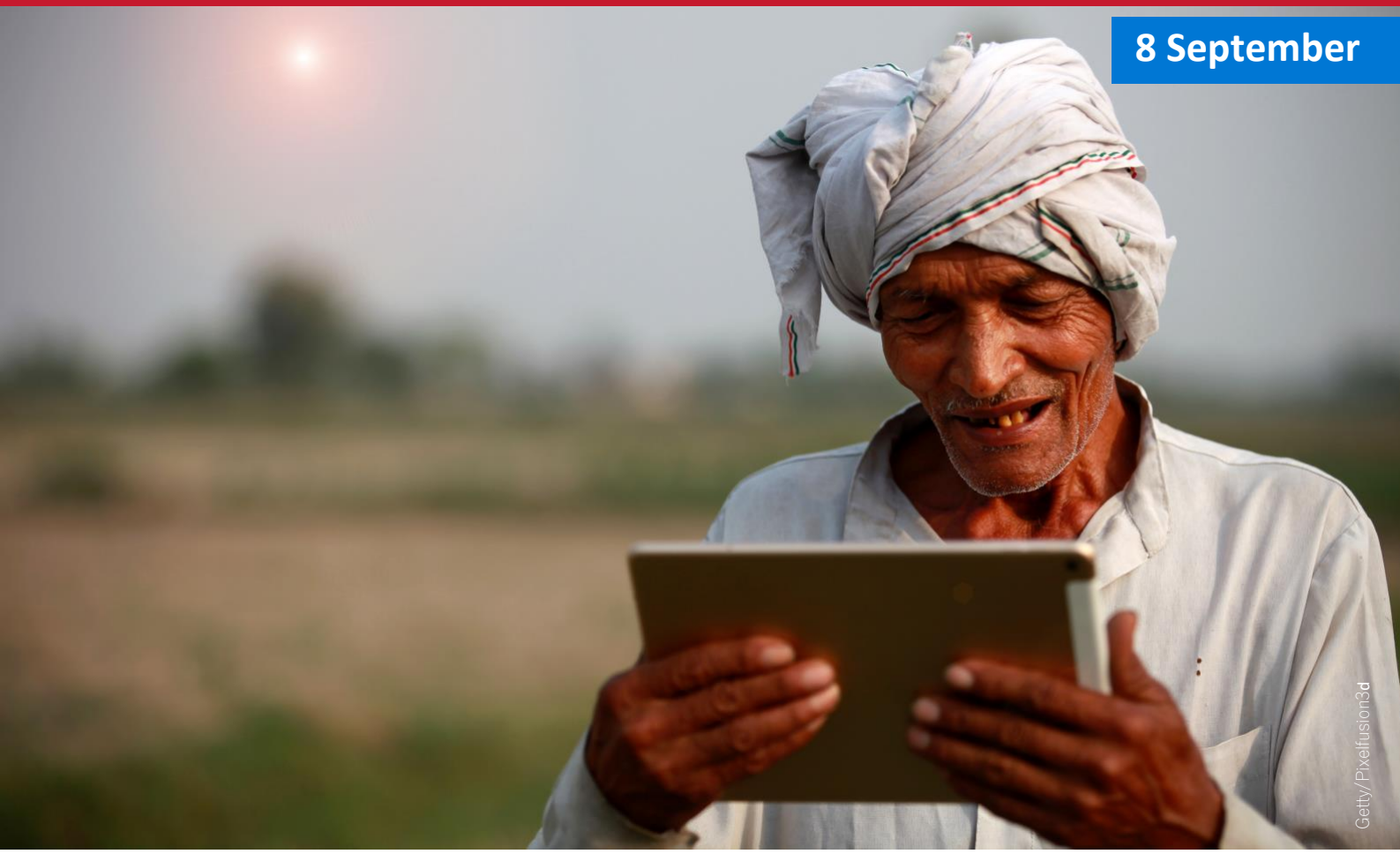
International Literacy Day 2023

Promoting literacy for a world in transition:
Building the foundation for sustainable and peaceful societies



The agenda for the event is available here

Concept note

Background

This year marks the mid-point towards the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to which the international community committed eight years ago. By resolving to achieve this agenda, countries and partners envisioned a future world that is peaceful, just, inclusive, and free from poverty, hunger, and inequalities.

As highlighted in the recent report by the UN Secretary-General, however, '***the SDGs are in deep trouble***'.[1] *Despite the progress in many areas, 'a preliminary assessment of the roughly 140 targets with data show only about 12 per cent are on track; close to half, though showing progress, are moderately or severely off track and some 30 per cent have either seen no movement or regressed below the 2015 baseline*'. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic along with other challenges such as climate change, digitalization, widening inequalities, polarization of societies and conflicts, are increasingly felt in different spheres of human life and the planet.

[1] United Nations (2023). Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Towards a Rescue Plan for People and Planet: Report of the Secretary General (Special Edition), Advance unedited version (A/78/XX-E/2023/XX).

The SDG4 on education and lifelong learning is not an exception. It confronts persistent and interrelated challenges related to equity, inclusion, and equality, as well as the quality and relevance[2]. In 2020, at least one out of seven youth and adults aged 15 years and over worldwide (763 million) lacked basic literacy and numeracy skills[3]. In addition, a significant number of children, including those who are enrolled in school, are not acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills, while 244 million children and young people between the ages of 6 and 18 are not enrolled in school[4]. The COVID-19 crisis, along with other global challenges, has exacerbated the educational and literacy challenges faced by millions of children, young people and adults, predominantly those who were already marginalized before the pandemic. In low- and middle-income countries, the estimated proportion of ten-year old children who cannot read a simple text has risen from about 57 per cent in 2019 to 70 per cent in 2022[5]. Global learning losses from the COVID-19 crisis could cost this generation of students close to US$21 trillion in lifetime earnings[6].

Fulfilling the commitment to the SDG4, including the SDG target 4.6 on youth and adult literacy and numeracy, and shaping a greener, better, and safer future requires not only intensified efforts but also **radical changes in our thinking, approaches, and action.** In its 2021 report entitled 'Reimagining our futures: A new social contract for education', the UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education addressed the necessity to transform education to shape a peaceful, just, and sustainable futures. While the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (Marrakech, 15-17 June 2022) shed light on the importance of a lifelong learning perspective[7], the Transforming Education Summit (TES) convened by the UN Secretary-General (New York, 16-19 September 2022) generated a global movement with more than 130 countries and partners committing to transforming education towards the Summit of the Future (New York, 22-23 September 2024) and beyond[8].

Thematic focus of International Literacy Day 2023

Literacy is central to equipping individuals with the relevant knowledge, skills, and competencies, transforming education, and shaping more sustainable and peaceful societies. At this critical juncture of the SDG journey, therefore, **International Literacy Day 2023** (ILD2023) will focus on '**Promoting literacy for a world in transition: Building the foundation for sustainable and peaceful societies'**. Locating literacy in the entire SDG spectrum centered around the five pillars of sustainable development, namely 'People (social development)', 'Planet (environmental protection)', 'Prosperity (economic prosperity)', as well as 'Peace', and 'Partnership', it will provide an opportunity for reinforcing and adjusting our paths, embracing **the reciprocal relations between development in 'literacy and numeracy' and 'different areas of sustainable development and peace'.**[9]

Literacy, on the one hand, empowers people and improves their self-esteem, creativity, and critical thinking. It enables them to acquire knowledge, skills, attitude, and values required to thrive in our rapidly changing society and economy. As such, **literacy contributes not only to generating personal benefits, such as better well-being and economic conditions, but also social, economic, political,**

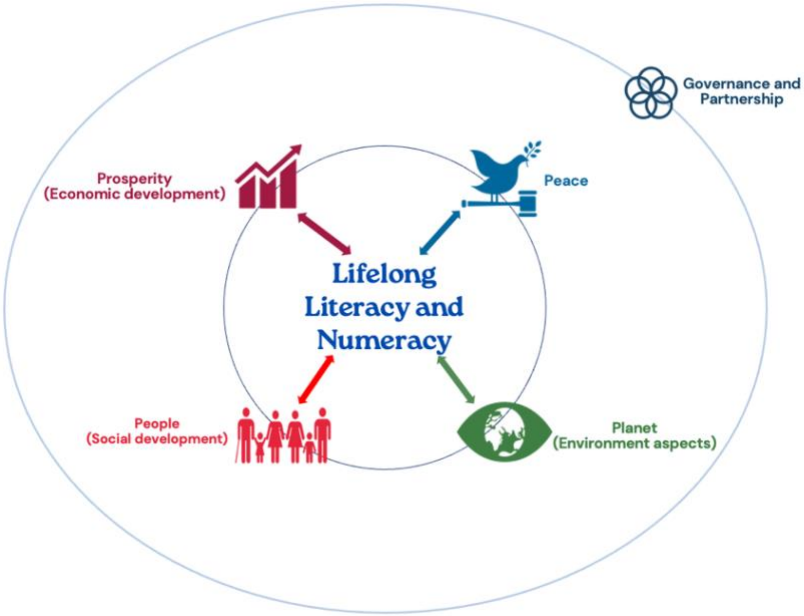
[2] UNESCO and Sustainable Development Goal 4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee (SDG4-HLSC) (2023). The SDG4-Education 2030 High-Level Steering Committee's contribution to the 2023 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.
[3] UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023
[4] Global Monitoring Report Team and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022). *New estimation confirms out-of-school population is growing in sub-Saharan Africa*. Paris: UNESCO.
[5] World Bank, UNESCO UIS, UNICEF, FCDO, USAID, BMGF, and UNESCO (2022). The state of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update.
[6] The World Bank and UNESCO (2022). *The Education Finance Watch 2022*. Washington, D.C., Paris: The World Bank and UNESCO.
[7] UNESCO (2022). CONFINTEA VII Marrakech Framework for Action: harnessing the transformational power of adult learning and education. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
[8] United Nations (UN) (2023). *Report on the Transforming Education Summit*. New York. UN.
[9] For instance, see UNESCO (2016). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2016 on Education for people and planet: Creating sustainable futures for all*. Paris: UNESCO, and Wagner, A. D. (2016). *Learning, literacy and sustainable development: Inclusion, vulnerability, and the SDGs*. Paper to appear in edited volume: Children and Sustainable Development: A Challenge for Education. Rome: Pontifical Academy of Sciences (Vatican)/Springer.

cultural, and environmental ones[10]. Evidence shows, for instance, that literacy programmes help enhance democratic values, peaceful coexistence, and community solidarity[11]. By empowering people, especially through a critical and emancipatory approach, literacy can help them 'to engage and assume active role both locally and globally to face and resolve global challenges'[12] and to become an agent for transformation for more sustainable and peaceful societies.

On the other hand, **progress in other areas of development**, such as health, agriculture, water, energy, transport, and peace, can improve the conditions and environments in which people live, work, and learn. More reading materials, libraries, and learning opportunities in multiple forms that become available due to socio-economic development can help literacy learning. At the same time, new environments generated by such development, including increased employment opportunities, could generate people's demands for acquiring, applying, and advancing literacy and numeracy skills'.[13]

In looking at these reciprocal relations, ILD2023 will also note that not all new developments create necessarily the favorable conditions for **fulfilling everyone's right to education**, of which literacy is a part. For instance, the advancement of **digital technology** can be a double-edged sword. While its potential for expanding teaching and learning has been demonstrated most recently during the COVID-19 crisis, multiple issues have been pointed out, including the digital divide that has disproportionately affected marginalized people in terms of access to the quality learning and their misrepresentation within AI-driven learning[14]. New services devised for convenience, such as voice recognition, automatic dictation and interpretation services may disincentivize people to make efforts to be literate.

Figure 1: Reciprocal relations between 'Literacy and numeracy' and 'Sustainable Development and peace'



Source: Authors.

[10] Please see, among others, UNESCO (2006). EFA Global Monitoring Report on Literacy for Life. Paris: UNESCO and UIL (2022) Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. Hamburg: UIL.
[11] UIL (2016) Third Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: The impact of Adult Learning and Education on Health and Well-Being: Empowerment and the Labour Market; and Social, Civic and Community Life. Hamburg: UIL.
[12] UNESCO (2014). Global Citizenship Education: Preparing leaners for the challenges of the 21st century, Paris: UNESCO.
[13] Easton, P. (2013). *Sustaining learning in Africa: Developing a literate environment*. Paris: UNESCO.
[14] Facer, K. and Selwyn, N. (2021). *Digital technology and the futures of education – towards 'non-stupid' optimism*. Background paper for the Futures of Education Initiative. Paris: UNESCO.

Exploring human-centered solutions at system, programme, content and practice levels.

Promoting the mutually-benefitting 'two-way process' of development in 'literacy and numeracy' and 'different areas of development and peace', calls for **lifelong learning and intersectoral approaches**, underpinned by the notion of literacy as a continuum of proficiency that alters throughout life[15]. Also required is attention to evolving contexts. In addition to basic literacy and numeracy skills, higher-level skills as well as skills for communication, using digital text, are increasing.

ILD2023 will explore how the 'lifelong literacy and numeracy'[16] approaches can be translated into concrete solutions and actions at the system, programme, and practice levels. In doing so, it will pay attention to the learning content that connects literacy with acquisition of other **knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and competencies.** It will also reflect on the appropriate governance and partnerships based on whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches through democratic conversations and interactions, across and within education authorities at different levels, different ministries, development partners, disciplines, and people from diverse background and age groups[17]. More broadly, there is a need for fostering a culture of lifelong learning[18], which facilitates intensified interactions between individuals, communities and social institutions[19].

In doing so, **ILD2023 will remind the centrality of people** - their needs, aspirations, and capabilities, as well as the conditions and environments in which they live - to making all action meaningful. It is demand-driven, human-centered policies, programmes, and practices that can harness the transformative power of literacy.

Celebrations of International Literacy Day 2023: Objectives and formats

International Literacy Day 2023 will be celebrated on September 8 worldwide to acknowledge advancements in literacy and foster a more literate society. The day will bring together policymakers, practitioners, development partners, youth, and individuals.

At the global level, a **Conference on 'Promoting literacy for a world in transition: Building the foundation for sustainable and peaceful societies'** will be held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France on 8 September, immediately after the Digital Learning Week (Paris, 4-7 September 2023) and prior to International Day to Protect Education from Attack (9 September 2023). The Global Conference will also feature the Award Ceremony of the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes. Additionally, the ILD2023 webpage will showcase **a number of events planned at the country level**, while **virtual celebrations** will take place in other formats, including social media.

[15] According to the UNESCO Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (2015), literacy '*involves a continuum of learning and proficiency levels which allows citizens to engage in lifelong learning and participate fully in community, workplace and wider society. It includes 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. Literacy is an essential means of building people's knowledge, skills and competencies to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society*'.

[16] Hanemann, U. and Robinson, C. (2022). Rethinking literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the International Conference on Adult Education. International Review of Education, 68: 233-258.

[17] Elfert, M. (2019). Lifelong learning in Sustainable Development Goal 4: What does it mean for UNESCO's rights-based approach to adult learning and education? International Review of Education, 65:4: 537-556.

[18] UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) (2020). *Embracing a culture of lifelong learning: contribution to the Futures of Education Initiative*. Hamburg: UIL.

[19] Benavot, A. (2015). Literacy in the 21st century: towards a dynamic nexus of social relations. International Review of Education. 61:273-294.

Main expected outcomes of ILD2023

- Raise awareness of the literacy promotion as the 'two-way process', through which the 'literacy and numeracy learning' and 'advancement in different areas of development and peace' are mutually reinforced as integral part of lifelong learning.
- Relevant knowledge, experiences, and solutions identified and shared for unleashing the transformative power of literacy at the system, programme, content and practice levels, towards more sustainable and peaceful societies.
- Cooperation and partnerships fostered for promoting literacy.

Format

The global conference will take place in a hybrid format. The in-person participation is by invitation only. The global conference, however, can be attended via a virtual platform (Link to be provided later).

Working languages

The working languages of the global conference are English, French, and Spanish.

Provisional agenda

Friday, 8 September 2023	
8:30 - 9:30	Registration (125 Avenue de Suffren, Paris 75007 – UNESCO's back entrance)
9:30 - 9:31	Video Projection
9:31 - 10:30	**Opening Session** **Moderator**: Mr Borhene Chakroun, Director, Division of Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems, Education Sector (ED/PLS), UNESCO • **Ms Stefania Giannini**, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO • **Ms. Farida Shaheed**, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education • **H.E. Ms Dipu Moni**, Minister of Education, Bangladesh • **H.E. Mr Kouaro Yves Chabi**, Minister of Secondary, Technical and Vocational Education, Benin and the Chair of the Steering Group of the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning • **H.E. Mr Cheikh Oumar Anne**, Minister of National Education, Senegal • **Mr Laeek Siddiqui**, SDG4Youth Network representative • *Testimony of a learner*

10:30 – 11:00	**Keynote speech: Lifelong literacy and numeracy - The imperative for building sustainable and peaceful societies.** **Moderator:** Mr Borhene Chakroun, Director of ED/PLS, UNESCO **Keynote speaker:** Mr Timothy Denis Ireland, Professor, Federal University of Paraiba, Brazil and Chairholder of UNESCO Chair in Youth and Adult Education **Question and Answer**
11:00 – 11:15	**Coffee break**
11:15 – 12:45	**Panel 1: Enhancing governance and Financing of literacy for Peace and Sustainable Development** This session will reflect on the major trends and issues in governance and financing of literacy, focusing on youth and adult literacy, and will explore ways to enhance them through a lifelong literacy lens. It will also reflect on the key role of each actor in promoting literacy through a democratic, whole-of-society approach towards more sustainable and peaceful societies. **Moderator: TBC** • **Fostering lifelong literacy through a National Literacy Strategy:** Prof Charles Mifsud, Director, Centre for Literacy, University of Malta • **Literacy for the futures we want: Youth voices and actions**: Ms Diana Cristancho Diaz, SDG4Youth Network representative • **Harnessing the potential of learning cities for sustainable development and peace**: Dr Abdulrahman M. Alasmi, Director-General, Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States • **Multilateral efforts for promoting literacy for peace and sustainable development:** *A representative of a United Nations organization* • **Partnership for system enhancement and resource mobilization for literacy**: Ms Raphaelle Martinez, Education Policy and Learning Team Lead, Global Partnership for Education • **Building a holistic and inclusive systems to promote literacy for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons:** Ms Yayoi Segi-Vltchek, Chief of Section of Migration, Displacement, Emergencies and Education, Division for Education 2030, UNESCO
12:45 – 13:45	Lunch

13:45 – 15:15	**Panel 2: Effective programmes, contents and practices for unleashing the transformative power of literacy for sustainable and peaceful societies** This session will look into effective lifelong literacy solutions in programmes, contents and practices, while exploring ways to enrich a culture of lifelong learning. **Moderator:** Mr Anantha Duraiappah, Director, Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development, UNESCO • **Effective lifelong literacy solutions to leave no one behind:** Mr Dan Wagner, UNESCO Chair in Learning and Literacy and Professor of Education, University of Pennsylvania, United States of America • **Empowerment through literacy and vocational training:** Mr Lazare Golo, Ministry of National Education and Civic Promotion, Chad • **Holistic, multisectoral approach to literacy interventions and practice:** Ms Maida Pasic, Regional Education Advisor for UNICEF Europe and Central Asia • **Leveraging technology in literacy programmes for refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons:** Ms Rakhat Zholdoshalieva, Team Leader Learning ecosystems, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning • **Implications of technological development for the promotion of lifelong literacy: Artificial Intelligence Competency Framework for Teachers,** Mr Mutlu Cukurova, Professor of Learning and Artificial Intelligence, University College London, United Kingdom
15:15 – 15:30	Coffee break

15:30 – 16:30	**Award ceremony of the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes 2023** **Master of Ceremony:** TBC • Ms Stefania Giannini, Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO • Ms Rana Dajani, Chair of UNESCO International Literacy Prizes Jury • A representative of the Republic of Korea to UNESCO • **Laureates of the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize** • H.E. Mr Jin YANG, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of the People's Republic of China to UNESCO • **Laureates of the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy**
16:30 – 17:45	**Panel 3: Laureates of the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes** Building on the previous session, this session will reflect on how the prizewinning programmes manage their programmes, teaching and learning approaches, educators and other staff, and the contents and materials, underpinned by a lifelong literacy perspective. **Moderator:** TBC • Laureates of the UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize • Laureates of the UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy
17:45 – 18:00	**Closing session** **Mr Borhene Chakroun**, Director, Division of Policies and Lifelong Learning Systems, Education Sector (ED/PLS), UNESCO
18:10 – 20:00	Reception (UNESCO premises)