



news

unesco

**united nations
educational, scientific
and cultural organization**

**Message from the Director-General of UNESCO on the occasion of
International Literacy Day
(8 September 2002)**

International Literacy Day is an occasion to celebrate the importance of literacy to individuals, communities and societies everywhere and to affirm the centrality of literacy within all struggles for sustainable human development. It is also an opportunity to send a message of hope and encouragement to the estimated 862 million adults, of whom about two-thirds are women, whose illiteracy currently excludes them from full participation in society.

This year, we draw particular attention to the forthcoming United Nations Literacy Decade, which will be launched at the beginning of 2003. The nations of the world have given their collective support for this important new initiative, which will provide an international framework for mobilizing efforts to spread the benefits of literacy as widely as possible in the years ahead. The Decade will be crucial for galvanizing action to achieve the agreed international goal of a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women. This goal must be pursued in conjunction with the wider Education for All agenda, notably the guarantee of a quality basic education for all children, boys and girls, so that a lasting foundation of literacy skills is laid.

It is intolerable that around 1 in 5 people in the world still do not have access to literacy skills. How can we build equitable information societies or thriving democracies if so many remain without the basic tools of literacy? How can intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding prosper when the literacy divide is so great? And how can poverty be eradicated when the roots of ignorance are left undisturbed? In a world constructed around the assumption that everyone has the basic skills of literacy and where literacy and freedom are indissolubly linked, to be illiterate is to be unfree.

As we make the final preparations for the United Nations Literacy Decade, we must draw upon the lessons of experience. We know, for example, that one size does not fit all: instead of standardized programmes, more customized approaches are needed. We know that women and men have different needs and that these differences must be reflected in learning content and processes. We know that learning is most fruitful when it is an enjoyable experience undertaken with others. We also know that literacy is best acquired in connection with practical purposes and uses, such as building livelihoods, solving problems, and accessing new information - in short, ways in which people empower and transform themselves and their society.

Today, it is increasingly recognized that there are multiple 'literacies' which are diverse, have many dimensions and are learned in different ways. In all cases, however, each kind of literacy must lead to sustainable and meaningful use - this must be our goal for the forthcoming Literacy Decade.

On International Literacy Day, we also celebrate the dedicated efforts of countless facilitators, animators and teachers who work so hard to bring learning opportunities to others. As the unsung heroes of literacy; they are a reminder to UNESCO and its partners at international and national levels that our role must be to strengthen local capacity and to support community initiatives. Indeed, it is vital that learners themselves, in their own contexts and guided by their own aspirations and hopes, shape the literacy agenda. Only this will result in societies that sustain their own use of written communication and their own learning.

Koïchiro Matsuura