

4 INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

Efforts to increase literacy rates among girls and women must consequently be pursued and indeed intensified. This is the objective of the activities foreseen under the headings of literacy and post-literacy, where special emphasis will be laid on rural women and on programmes which have a direct bearing on their access to the teaching profession and, more generally, to employment opportunities.¹

THE ELEMENTS SET OUT ABOVE refer to the discrimination and difficulties facing all women and girls in the educational sector. Thus, if large-scale educational activities and strategies in their favour are not promoted, it is highly unlikely that, in this or future decades, a situation of equality will be achieved. This in turn will limit women's participation in and contribution to the political and economic development of society.

In light of this situation, Unesco proposed in 1985 that the United Nations declare a year for literacy. Education is one of the inalienable rights of every person and has been recognized as such in both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Universal Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Since in many developing countries illiteracy still constitutes a serious obstacle to the process of social and economic development, functional literacy and adequate education programmes assume even greater importance as indispensable elements for social development and progress. Recognizing this, the United Nations Assembly declared 1990 as International Literacy Year.²

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR (ILY) 1990

□ Launching a year dedicated to literacy provided a unique opportunity for mobilizing national, regional and international efforts in the struggle to extend literacy to the whole of the world's population. Unesco undertook an awareness campaign in order to focus world public opinion on the need to achieve literacy for all by the year 2000, thereby embarking upon a decade devoted to this end.

Informing the public, mobilizing resources and laying the groundwork for educational activities over the new decade were among the various ILY goals, many of which have borne fruit. For example, at the initiative of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), based in Canada, more than 30 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) met in 1987 to set up the International Task Force on Literacy (ITFL) to mobilize and promote actions during ILY and throughout the 1990s.

To reduce illiteracy during the 1990s is not an easy task. The economic crisis of the past decade has profoundly affected efforts made in favour of formal and non-formal education. UNICEF's *State of the World's Children* (1990) points out that in the 1980s there was a significant decrease in public expenditure for education; in the 37 poorest countries such expenditures have fallen by approximately 25 per cent of gross national product (GNP), resulting in fewer children aged from 6 to 11 years enrolled in school. It also states that, sadly, more than two-thirds of those children who never go to school or who drop out at an early stage are girls. As the 1990s begin, a girl born in South-East Asia or in the Middle East has less than one chance in three of completing primary education.³

Most of these children will be illiterate for the rest of their lives unless they are given a second chance in formal or non-formal education; investment is therefore

needed in both sectors.

The struggle to extend literacy to all is a challenge of such dimensions that it will require multi-sectoral collaboration from international, governmental and non-governmental organizations and national governments. A world movement has therefore been organized to unite all efforts towards the achievement of this goal, with the participation of the United Nations system.

This took the form of international actions carried out in 1990, such as UNESCO's Plan of Action for the Eradication of Illiteracy by the Year 2000, and the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, which took place in Jomtien, Thailand, in March 1990. Both have complementary proposals for countries and international organizations, using a two-track approach based on parallel measures for children and adults, a programme for the universalization of primary education and another for non-formal adult education, including literacy.

UNESCO'S PLAN OF ACTION This identifies four major objectives upon which UNESCO should focus its efforts: (1) alerting world public opinion; (2) rallying the international community; (3) strengthening the regional literacy projects and programmes; and (4) reinforcing technical cooperation with Member States. Two priorities are proposed: (1) to improve the education of women and girls; and (2) to help countries confronting especially severe problems of illiteracy.⁴

These objectives will be implemented through the regional literacy structures established by governments during the past decade, and with the assistance of UNESCO. These include the Major Project in the Field of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (1981); the Regional Programme for the Eradication

of Illiteracy in Africa (1984); the Regional Programme for Universal Provision and Renewal of Primary Education and Eradication of Illiteracy in Asia and the Pacific – APPEAL – (1987); and the Regional Programme for the Universalization and Renewal of Primary Education and the Eradication of Illiteracy in the Arab States by the Year 2000 – ARABUPEAL – (1989).

Although these regional structures have their own programmes, objectives and modes of functioning, the plan of action in all of them is based on the two-track approach involving universal primary education and non-formal adult education, including literacy teaching.

THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON EDUCATION FOR ALL □

From 5 to 9 March 1990 the international community met in Jomtien, Thailand, for the purpose of discussing illiteracy. With the participation of Unesco, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank, 20 inter-governmental agencies, delegates from 155 governments and 150 non-governmental organizations, the conference adopted the World Declaration on Education for All and endorsed the Framework of Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs, which propose specific educational actions for this decade.

The World Declaration on Education for All states that the fundamental role played by basic education in the development of society is an inalienable right for all, in order to meet basic learning needs. These include: literacy, oral expression, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes, not as ends in themselves but as the first steps towards continuing education. The Declaration asserts that in order to meet these basic learning needs, a wider vision should be adopted that involves improving

present resources, institutional structures, curricula and conventional delivery systems.

An appeal is made to all sectors of society to increase and mobilize financial and human resources from public, private and voluntary organizations. The need to strengthen international solidarity in order to implement the Declaration is emphasized, and it suggests that more equitable economic relations and reduced inequalities should be promoted.

The Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs constitutes guidelines for governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations and others engaged in the struggle against illiteracy. The meeting suggested that countries might wish to set their own targets for the 1990s in terms of the following proposed dimensions:

- 1. Expansion of early childhood care and developmental activities, including family and community interventions, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children;**
- 2. Universal access to, and completion of, primary education (or whatever higher level of education is considered as 'basic' by the year 2000);**
- 3. Improvement in learning achievement such that an agreed percentage of an appropriate age cohort (for example, 80 per cent of 14-year-olds) attains or surpasses a defined level of necessary learning achievement;**
- 4. Reduction of the adult illiteracy rate (the appropriate age group to be determined in each country) to, say, one-half of its 1990 level by the year 2000, with sufficient emphasis on female literacy to reduce significantly the current disparity between male and female illiteracy rates;**
- 5. Expansion of provisions of basic education and training in other essential skills required by**

Bolivian refugees in literacy classes; under the Rural Development Programme they play a broader role in their community



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youth and adults, with programme effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural changes and impacts on health, employment and productivity; 6. Increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledge, skills and values required for better living and sound and sustainable development, made available through all education channels including the mass media, other forms of modern and traditional communication, and social action, with effectiveness assessed in terms of behavioural change.⁵

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

□ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are independent groups with their own priorities and programmes. They are not at the service or disposition of government, multilateral or bilateral agencies.⁶ They are thus able to foster a new and innovative vision in education and take responsibility for preparing programmes and projects, including the identification, design, implementation and evaluation of basic education programmes. This independence means that NGOs can support parts or all of programmes initiated by governments, although their role in such collaborative efforts needs to be precisely defined in order to avoid duplication of effort.

NGOs have played an important part in educational actions, both in industrialized and developing countries. Likewise, they can make a valuable contribution to future actions in the struggle against illiteracy. The close ties that NGOs have with communities make them well-placed to identify the population's needs and concerns, and to meet basic learning needs. This in turn puts them in an exceptionally good position to motivate and mobilize the public, as well as to extend their influence to areas of the community that state sectors do not reach.

NGOs can broaden their range of action concerning the education of women

and girls in the following ways:

- **Functioning as catalysts for change.** The regional networks of NGOs concerned with adult and women's education can serve as lobbies for international organizations in order to increase women's participation in development programmes. National NGOs can play a similar role with their governments to promote women's equal access to education.
- **Mobilizing public opinion** on the need to integrate women into education, and to recognize the obstacles they now face.
- **Motivating women** to take part in basic education programmes in order to improve their condition and position in society, to increase awareness of their rights and their self-confidence, to enhance their aspirations, to question gender stereotypes and relations of inequality that limit their individual development, and, lastly, to support everything that can help improve the quality of their lives, including participation in and equal access to development.
- **Conducting follow-up of women's progress in basic education** by assessing the impact of education on women and supporting the introduction of measures and programmes that favour women's integration in literacy programmes and education in general.
- **Mobilizing funds and resources** to support educational programmes for women.
- **Making use of the mass media** to disseminate useful information addressed to women.
- **Helping to develop facilities** to reduce the excessive load of women's work and to enable them to take part in education programmes by providing such facilities as day-care centres, activities, incentives and transportation.