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The UNESCO
International Literacy Prizes
1967-1992

Background and Assessment

This brochure is published by UNESCO on the occasion of International Literacy Day (8 September 1992), which is being celebrated this year in Spain, in the context of the Universal Exposition, Seville 1992.

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UNESCO AND LITERACY EDUCATION

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded just after the Second World War in order to help the rising generations to avoid any repetition of the acts of violence that had led to the outbreak of that war. In the words of its Constitution, adopted in London on 16 November 1945, the purpose of the Organization is "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for... human rights and fundamental freedoms...".

The right to learn

In order to achieve the ends proposed by the signatory governments, the Organization was invited, *inter alia*, "to advance the ideal of equality of educational opportunity [for all] without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social". Education as a fundamental right of every individual was thus recognized at the end of the first half of the twentieth century and was proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 (1). The right to education was reaffirmed on several occasions by the international community at conferences organized by UNESCO as well as by other organizations of the United Nations system. The concept of the right to learn was introduced by the Fourth International Conference on Adult Education in 1985, and reaffirmed,

more recently, in 1990, by the World Conference on "Education for All, Meeting Basic Learning Needs", convened by the Executive heads of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO and the World Bank.

The conference was co-sponsored by 18 governments and organizations and was held at Jomtien, Thailand, at the invitation of the Thai Government. It was attended by 1,500 participants, representing 155 governments, including decision-makers and specialists in education and in other key sectors, representatives of a score of intergovernmental bodies and some 150 non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They discussed the main aspects of 'education for all' in 48 round tables and in a single plenary commission. The Conference adopted the **World Declaration on Education for All**, and agreed upon a **Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs** with a view to attaining the objectives set forth in the Declaration.

Scale of the Problem

Of the world's five billion inhabitants, one billion adults in 1990 were illiterate, and two-thirds of these were women. This problem concerns not only the so-called "developing" countries, but also – though to a lesser extent and in the form of functional illiteracy – the industrialized nations. To this number must be added the more than 100 million children

who are unable to attend school, the tens of millions of drop-outs who do not complete the basic education syllabus and are at risk of reverting to illiteracy and the millions of others who complete the course but fail to attain a satisfactory level of knowledge and skill and end up swelling the ranks of the functionally illiterate.

Combating illiteracy has been one of the major mandatory concerns of UNESCO since the first meeting of its General Conference in 1946.

The founders recognized that there was a risk that intellectual cooperation, the *raison d'être* of UNESCO, would remain a concern of a small number of specialists unless the Organization could reach out to the wider public and elicit their interest in and active support for its activities.

International Literacy Day, celebrated each 8 September since 1967, is aimed at this purpose. On this day, the Director General of UNESCO addresses a message to the world, which is widely distributed in Member States, in which he reviews the results of the year, noting successes as well as setbacks, in the quest to achieve a literate world. His message appeals to individuals, organizations and states to demonstrate their support and solidarity for literacy education. It is also on this occasion that UNESCO's International Literacy Prizes, the winners of which are selected by a distinguished international jury, are awarded to national organizations, private bodies or individuals who have distinguished themselves through their efforts to promote literacy.

UNESCO and the International Literacy Prizes

Background

On 8 September 1967, the Jury appointed by the Director General René Maheu presented the first awards for **meritorious work in literacy**, while the world celebrated International Literacy Day for the second time.

That celebration was in response to a recommendation of the World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy, which met in Teheran in September 1965. The Conference recommended that " 8 September, the historic date of its inauguration by the Shahanshah of Iran, be proclaimed International Literacy Day and be observed by all countries of the world".

In support of the recommendation, the Government of Iran proposed that UNESCO should establish and award an International Literacy Prize for meritorious work in the fight against illiteracy.

1. The **MOHAMMED REZA PAHLAVI** Prize,(1967-1978), named after the then reigning sovereign of Iran.

Between 1967 and 1969, this was the only award presented in the form of a prize and an honourable mention. It was won by laureates from three member States: Tanzania, Brazil

and Cambodia. Eleven years later, on 8 September 1978, the MOHAMMED REZA PAHLAVI Prize was awarded for the last time.

2. The NADEZHDA K. KRUPSKAYA Prize (1970 – 1991)

On 13 August 1969 in Paris, during the 83rd session of the Organization's Executive Board, the representative of the USSR announced his Government's decision to establish an international literacy prize with a value of 5,000 convertible roubles, about US \$5,500 at the time.

Between 1970 and 1978, the M. REZA PAHLAVI Prize and the NADEZHDA K. KRUPSKAYA Prize, named after the companion of Lenin who personified the fight against illiteracy during the great mass literacy campaign that followed the October Revolution, were awarded to many prize-winners. The Nadezhda K. Krupskaya's prize was awarded for the last time on 8 September 1991, to an organization in Pakistan.

3. The INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION Prize (since 1979)

1979 was a turning point in the history of the literacy prizes, marking the beginning of a third period, when a number of new prizes were instituted. An International Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) headquartered in the United States which had maintained an information and consultation relationship with UNESCO since 1975, the International Reading Association (IRA), offered to establish a prize in the

amount of US \$5,000 which is to be awarded annually for an indefinite period.

4. The **NOMA Prize** (since 1980)

The following year, in 1980, a third literacy prize was awarded to coincide with the celebration of the thirteenth International Literacy Day.

The prize had been offered by Mr Shoichi NOMA, a Japanese publisher, now deceased, who was at that time President of the Tokyo publishing house Kodansha Ltd. The prize bears the name of its donor.

5. The **IRAQ Literacy Prize** (1980–1991)

In 1980, the Government of Iraq offered a \$10,000 literacy prize to be financed from the proceeds of the annual interest on a sum of \$150,000 which it set aside for that purpose. This prize was one of the donations made to UNESCO under "One million dollar Iraqi grant to the Funds–in–Trust of UNESCO".

After being awarded for 10 years, the Iraq Literacy Prize was terminated following the Gulf War.

6. The **KING SEJONG LITERACY Prize** (since 1989)

In 1989, the Republic of Korea offered an annual US\$30,000 literacy prize to be known as the King Sejong

Literacy Prize, in commemoration of the remarkable contribution made by that sovereign to literacy and the spread of knowledge 550 years ago, when in 1443 he invented the 22-letter "Hangul" alphabet, which became a valuable model and reference tool because it was so easy to learn and straightforward to use.

At present, therefore, only three international literacy prizes are being awarded each year. These are:

1. The **INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION** Prize (\$10,000)
2. The **NOMA** Prize (\$10,000)
3. The **KING SEJONG** Literacy Prize (\$30,000)

Three categories of recompense are awarded by the literacy jury to distinguished candidates on 8 September each year on International Literacy Day. These are:

1. **Prizes.** Prize winners receive a diploma, a silver medal and a cheque for the amount of each prize.
2. **Honourable mentions.** Winners receive a diploma and a bronze medal.
3. **Recognition by the Jury.** Winners have their names placed on the International Literacy Prize List.

Assessment

In the twenty years since 1967, when the literacy prizes were first instituted, 709 candidature files have been considered by the International Literacy Prize Jury.

The number of candidatures presented by NGOs, which has become a matter of course, has varied greatly from year to year, but has never equalled the participation of Member States.

The jagged profile of the attached graph gives a fairly accurate, if predictable, picture of the development of literacy worldwide and invites a number of comments. Two major periods, each lasting decade, are discernible with the years 1977–1978 forming the dividing line between them.

Discounting the first two or three years that followed the institution of these prizes, the decade between 1967 and 1977 was a time of relative stability in the number of candidatures, in contrast with the sharp variations that characterized the 1980s, the exception being the fall in numbers recorded in 1977–1978. This first decade was dominated, as far as literacy work was concerned, by the Experimental World in Literacy programmes (EWLP), which was implemented from 1967 to 1973. Thus the curve reached its trough in 1977–1978, when the number of candidatures fell to its lowest point, while questions were being raised about the future direction of literacy education.

The decade of the 1980s saw another turning point in the

number of candidatures submitted to UNESCO, 1981 bringing in a record number of 41 candidates – a figure that has not been equalled since.

The geographical distribution of candidatures submitted by Member States holds few surprises tracing as it does the broad contours of the map of illiteracy worldwide. It does reveal, however, the degree of interest shown, which varies from state to state.

It also draws attention to the fact that the industrialized world – more particularly Western Europe and North America – is engaged in a task which likewise concerns it, especially since the thorny problem of functional illiteracy has arisen.

In the space of 24 years, eight States (India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Thailand, Congo, Egypt, United Republic of Tanzania and Brazil) submitted between 15 and 20 candidatures each, thereby becoming the most regular participants. In fact, two of those eight States have shown an exceptional interest in the Prizes programme: India, with 22 candidatures and 20 awards since 1967, and Indonesia, with 18 candidatures and nine awards.

Moreover, since the early 1980s the Asia–Pacific group has been represented by six countries, including Bangladesh, China and Vietnam, which have been most regular in submitting candidates for a prize.

A number of States from Latin America and sub–Saharan Africa have also led the field. Three of these have often been

singled out as exemplary models for mass literacy campaigns: the United Republic of Tanzania (six awards), Brazil (seven awards) and Nicaragua.

As has often been pointed out, a sufficient qualification to compete for these prizes should be the political will to do so. This, moreover, is in line with the purpose of UNESCO's action in the field of education and literacy, which is to encourage public policies and individual initiatives where they exist rather than to seek to replace them. It was on this basis that a prize was awarded to Nicaragua in 1980 in recognition of its national literacy campaign.

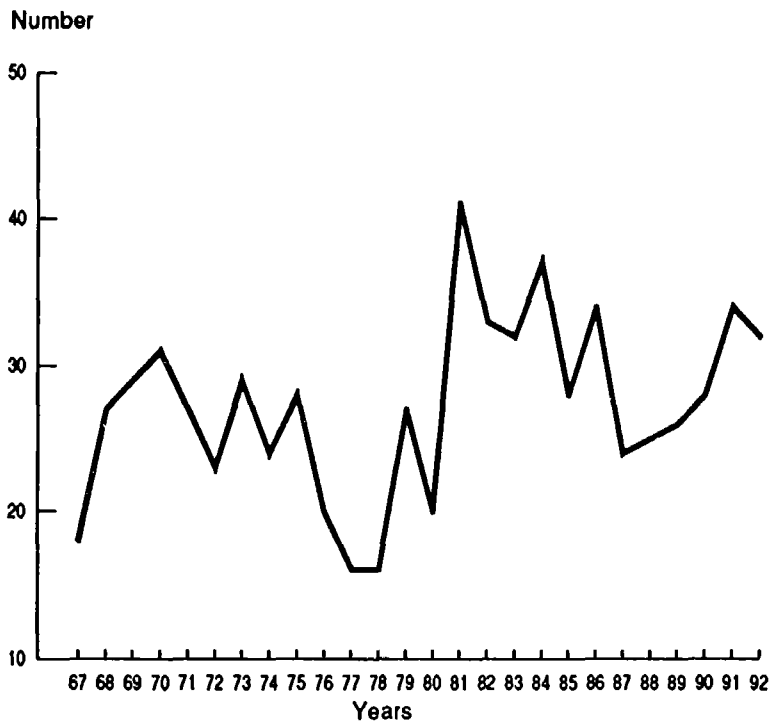
By the end of 1991, 70 literacy prizes and 216 honourable mentions and Jury citations had been awarded to deserving candidates from 84 countries and international NGOs, which together make up the UNESCO Literacy Prize List.

Literacy education took a fresh turn in 1990 with the proclamation of International Literacy Year by the United Nations; the literacy prizes, too, should enter this new stage with a new look.

One of UNESCO's hopes and objectives is to see the entire population of the world mobilized in the fight against illiteracy and for the promotion of literacy activities everywhere, until no -- man, woman or child -- is without access to the written word, which is one of the keys to personal growth and to fuller participation by the individual in community life and development.

UNESCO has established a Special Account for Voluntary Contributions to World Literacy. This Account is intended to provide support to literacy projects in especially needy countries. For this purpose, States, NGOs, associations and individuals are invited to make voluntary contributions to this Account. Payments should be made to UNESCO with specific reference to the Special Account for Voluntary Contributions to World Literacy (406-INT-10) and should be addressed to UNESCO – ED/BAS/LIT, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France.

Candidatures for the Literacy Prizes from 1967 to 1992



International Literacy Prizes Awarded from 1967 to 1991: 286

