

Office of the
UNDP Resident Representative



**Official launch of the
UN Literacy Decade
2003-2012**

Botswana Conference & Exhibition Centre
Gaborone, 08 April 2003

Bjoern Foerde
Resident Representative

Master of Ceremonies
Honourable Minister for Education, Mr George Kgoroba
Permanent Secretaries here present
Professor Juma Shabani, Director & UNESCO Representative
Members of the Diplomatic Community
International Development Partners here present
Distinguished Government Senior Officials
Non Governmental Organisations Senior Officials
Distinguished Forum Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed a great pleasure and a privilege to be here tonight, to participate in the launching in Botswana of the United Nations Literacy Decade, as adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2001.

I will certainly spend a bit of time explaining why the UN considers this to be a very important decision by the General Assembly. And I will also put it in the context of Botswana.

But first allow me, in a more journalistic language, to illustrate it with an experience I had some years back, in 1996, when I travelled to the small country called Nepal in the Himalaya mountains in my capacity as Secretary General of a non-governmental organisation. And I quote from an article I wrote for Danish magazines after my visit:

“Palpa is a charming mixture of a town and a village: modern and traditional at the same time. Modern shops lie side by side with grocery shops offering vegetables and other foods straight off the sack. Colourful lorries compete with bent-over bearers carrying rice bags weighing 50 kilos from the valley to the market. Oxen can be seen pulling simple wooden ploughs through the stony soil right in the middle of town.

Palpa is a microcosm of the contradictions and conflicts confronting most developing societies in Africa, Latin America and Asia. We are not talking about the passive and humiliating poverty of the refugee camp, nor the extreme and incomprehensible ethnic genocide. But behind the women’s colourful drapery and kind faces there is a reality of widespread poverty which is difficult to change.

One of the organizations we support is the 'Women's Welfare Association', headed by Shanti Nepal, the charismatic chairperson. She takes me on a trip to the mountains. The night is darker than I have experienced it back home, and the rain has made the narrow path up the side of the mountain slippery like brown soap. But Shanti is familiar with the route and leads us safely to our destination: a small hut with walls of branches and a corrugated roof.

Suddenly the path stops, and we are there. Cheerful women's voices ring up in the quiet of the night from the oblong hut, which is lit by small kerosene lamps. Every single centimeter along the wall is occupied. I count at least 25 women and a number of children who are either dozing or sleeping.

The women giggle loudly and a bit bashfully when I ask them, perhaps in a too straightforward Danish manner, if they can explain to me how they get permission and energy to spend several hours a week learning to read and write?

It leads us into a long discussion of traditional gender patterns undergoing changes; of men reluctantly accepting that they are being challenged; of education as a way to personal as well as economic freedom; of the strength women mobilize when they share the company of each other.

What the women tell me also points to the importance of unique women like Shanti Nepal and her many assistants, who possess the vision and resolve to defy traditional conceptions of what women are able to do or ought to do.

Moving down the slippery mountain path, it strikes me once again how dependent the impact and usefulness of our assistance is on local conditions and local personalities.

Without a strong local base, without the local women's resolute and unselfish efforts, without the poor women's determination to sacrifice, then the good intentions of any 'donor' will flutter awkwardly in the wind.

The next day I visit 'Deurali', which literally means a meeting place in the countryside, a place where the paths winding through the mountains cross each other. But it is also the name of a weekly newspaper published by the organisation 'Agricultural Development Palpa'.

There is a world of difference between the kerosene lit, branch-walled hut on the mountain top and Deurali's editorial office with the advanced desk-top computer. But the objective is the same: without education and information, the poor in the rural areas, and the women in particular, will not get the opportunity to play an active role in the development process.

This is why Vinaya Kasajoo, in 1987, began to develop the thought of a non-political and non-commercial weekly newspaper. Towards the end of 1993, the first issue was published. Today the newspaper has over 1000 subscribers in more than 30 districts. Furthermore, 130 readers' clubs receive the newspaper free of cost in return for submitting articles and local news.

But does the concept work? It certainly does! On a trekking tour through the mountains, I stopped by a small shop selling cokes and biscuits. The owner was completely absorbed in an issue of Deurali when I interrupted her to quench my thirst.

She was reading an issue with articles on birth control, women's rights, environmental conservation through tree planting, common diseases, local technologies and stories told by old people living in the area, written in an easy-to-read language and illustrated with photographs and sketches.

"It is interesting because the articles are about people like myself," the woman explained. "Then I also feel that I have the right to hold an opinion, and that others will care to listen to me."

In this way, Deurali contributes towards a feeling of dignity and the strengthening of people's possibilities for participating in local democracy, distributing and sharing knowledge of methods and techniques which may improve the daily life."

This was the Nepali experience. We can find similar experiences all over the world. And they illustrate vividly that literacy can make a dramatic difference in the lives of ordinary men and women. Or as it is expressed:

Literacy for all: voice for all, learning for all.

As already indicated there is really no reason to justify the decision to focus on literacy, but if asked to do so nevertheless, there are three reasons in particular which justify the Decade:

- **First:** *One in five people over the age of 15 cannot communicate through literacy or take any part in the surrounding literate environment. The EFA Global Monitoring Report 2002 spelled out the scope of the challenge – over 861 million people without access to literacy. Two thirds of these people are women, with illiteracy thus adding to the deprivation and subordination to which women are already subject. In an interconnected world where literacy is a key to communication such exclusion is unacceptable.*
- **Second:** *Literacy is a human right. Basic education, within which literacy is the key learning tool, was recognised as a human right over 50 years ago, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is scandalous that this right continues to be violated for such a large proportion of humanity.*
- **Third:** *Literacy efforts up to now have proved inadequate, at national and international levels. The Decade is an opportunity to make a sustained collective effort which will go beyond one-shot programmes or campaigns.*

The Literacy Decade is part of broader international work in education and development. The ***Education for All*** goal of increasing literacy rates by 50% by 2015 provides the overall target for the Decade, and the ***Millennium Development Goals*** set the Decade in the context of poverty reduction.

Literacy promotion is at the heart of both EFA and MDG goals.

How will it make a difference?

The International Plan of Action for the Literacy Decade proposes six lines of action to implement literacy for all:

- ***Policy change:*** Policies must provide a framework for local participation in literacy, including multilingual approaches and freedom of expression. National policy environments must link literacy promotion with strategies of poverty reduction and with programmes in agriculture, health, HIV/AIDS prevention, conflict resolution and other social concerns.
- ***Flexible programmes:*** Diverse and meaningful literacies require flexible modes of acquisition and delivery, using appropriate materials and languages, focusing on relevant purposes, and generating interesting, culturally relevant and gender-sensitive materials at the local level.

- ***Capacity-building:*** as well as increasing and improving the training of literacy facilitators, capacity-building will focus on areas which need strengthening in particular countries. These may include the planning and management of programmes, research and documentation, material production and curriculum design.
- ***Research:*** new policies for literacy will be most effective when they are based on the results of empirical research. What is the long-term impact of literacy? How can local communities better participate? What is the extent of civil society engagement in literacy?
- ***Community participation:*** strong community ownership of the purposes and processes of literacy will result in its effective use. This requires good communication between government and communities, inter-community networks, community learning centres and other ways of ensuring that literacies are relevant and useful to people in their daily lives and serve their aspirations.
- ***Monitoring and evaluation:*** better literacy indicators are necessary to show what progress is made during the Decade, both in terms of literacy rates and numbers, and in terms of the impact of literacy.

The official records of Literacy rate in Botswana stands at about 70%. Since the International Literacy Year of 1990, Botswana has carried out various important activities relating to literacy:

- *National Literacy survey*
- *Workplace literacy projects*
- *UN Literacy day celebrations and commemorations*
- *Post Literacy workshops*
- *Literacy Learners week*
- *Literacy & HIV/AIDS work place projects*

Botswana has also carried out a critical assessment of the implementation of activities, and a number of shortcomings were revealed. Some of these indicated that the concept of literacy was narrowly understood, and as such the scope of Literacy activities was narrow. The resultant reaction was a declining number of participants by eligible population. This observation was also revealed by the 1994 Revised National Policy on Education, which recommended that the Botswana National Literacy Programme

under the Ministry of Educations' Department of Non Formal Education be revised.

I am informed that the Department of Non Formal Education together with all stakeholders will during the implementation of National Development Plan 9, embark on revised literacy programmes that will target eligible populations.

It is important to note that this decade for Literacy is an integral part of *Education For All* and is a platform and impetus for achieving all the six Education For All Goals of the *Dakar Frame Work for Action*.

The EFA consultative forum on the Botswana EFA Action Plan that started this morning and continues during the next two days should take into account the **Literacy For All Vision** that clearly stipulates that in the rapidly changing world of today's knowledge society, with the progressive use of newer and innovative technological means of communications, literacy requirements continue to expand regularly.

Literacy For All is central to all levels of education, especially basic education, through all delivery modes – formal, non-formal and informal. Literacy For All encompasses the educational needs of all human beings in all settings and contexts, in urban and rural, those in school and those out of school, adults and children, boys and girls, men and women.

I must add that Literacy For All will be effectively achieved only when it is planned and implemented in local contexts of language and culture, ensuring gender equity and equality, fulfilling learning aspirations of local communities and groups of people. Literacy efforts must be related to a comprehensive package of economic, social and cultural policies cutting across multiple sectors.

As you embark on the Literacy Decade, you will need to prioritise your work plans ensuring that by the end of the Literacy Decade, the Literacy For All thrust of Education For All will yield significant progress towards the 2015 Dakar goals, 3, 4 & 5 which were presented to you this morning by the Chairperson of the EFA Working Group and are reflected in the EFA National Action Plan.

What is critical during the implementation period, is that at the end of the decade recognizable increase in absolute numbers of those who are literate should be a feature of assessment reports. I have to

caution that it is however not just the numbers but rather the quality and the diversity of literacies that shall have been achieved and most importantly the extent to which the eligible populations have been reached.

Resource mobilisation is an integral part of the implementation strategy and therefore, it requires all of us to ensure that resources are in place for the effective implementation of Literacy For All. Intervention must not suffer or languish on account of insufficient funding. I call upon all International Development Partners that are present at this function to assist with the resources that are required to effectively implement the Literacy For All.

At the international level, the UN General Assembly asked UNESCO to take on the coordinating role, bringing partners together for joint action and policy debate. But the whole of the UN system is implicated, each part promoting literacy components within its own area of specialisation. International civil society networks also have a responsibility both to sensitise their own members and to raise the awareness of governments and the general public about literacy.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Literacy is a fundamental human right; perhaps the most human of all human rights because reading and writing are fundamental characteristics of being human. Illiteracy deepens poverty, widens inequality, and slows economic growth. Literacy for all is crucial to our efforts to create a world free of poverty and discrimination.

No country can expect to seize the opportunities associated with globalisation and technological progress without equipping their people with basic capabilities.

The notion of participation is central to the human rights-based approach to development. We consider poor people as principal actors and engaged subjects of development, rather than passive recipients; strategic partners rather than as a 'target group'. Literacy is fundamental for meaningful participation and for improving governance.

Honourable Minister!

Allow me at this stage to announce the launch of the UN Literacy Decade in Botswana by calling the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education and his team to develop a ***Literacy For All Botswana Implementation Plan***.

I am confident that your ministry's commitment to education and training and indeed that of the government of Botswana will ensure that Botswana achieves the Education For All by 2015, together with Literacy For All by 2013.

In the UN, we are convinced that illiteracy can be eradicated by 2015!

It is technically feasible and financially affordable!

Hopefully the 2003-2012 Literacy Decade will help us get there.

We all have something to contribute and a role to play.

Let us do it, and let us do it together.

Thank you very much.