

Message from Ms Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO on the occasion of the International Literacy Day, 50th Anniversary

8 September 2016



For fifty years, International Literacy Day has celebrated literacy as an empowering force for women and men and for society as a whole.

We have seen great progress since the proclamation of International Literacy Day by UNESCO in 1966. The world's population has increased substantially, but the number of young adults without literacy skills decreased by 25 percent between 1990 and 2015. There has been movement in enhancing women's opportunities to

acquire literacy – 43 countries have shown major improvements in gender parity. The global Education for All movement spearheaded much positive change.

But not enough. There remain today 758 million adults who cannot read or write a simple sentence. Two thirds of them are women. On the side-lines of the global village, they receive none of the benefits of globalization and suffer all its costs. These women and men are more vulnerable to ill health, exploitation and human rights abuse. They are more likely to be unemployed and paid less. Unable to read or write, they are held back from their full potential, and whole communities are locked into vicious cycles of poverty that lay the conditions for violence and strife.

Illiteracy remains synonymous with exclusion and poverty -- we must turn this around.

This is the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, setting forth a new global vision of prosperity, sustainability and peace in 17 Sustainable

Development Goals – including a specific goal to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Literacy is essential to success across the board. A foundation for human rights and dignity, literacy is vital for poverty eradication, for gender equality, for more inclusive and sustainable societies. This is why we launch today the Global Alliance for Literacy, to mobilize investment and promote innovative initiatives, with a focus on gender and new information and communication technologies. We must seize every opportunity -- we must work across all sectoral boundaries.

The world has changed since 1966 – but our determination to provide every woman and man with the skills, capacities and opportunities to become everything

they wish, in dignity and respect, remains as firm as ever. Literacy is a foundation to build a more sustainable future for all – this is UNESCO’s message.

Irina Bokova

