

# A Review of Global Policies Regarding Literacy and Development: Strength and Weaknesses in Relation to Learning Achievements since the 1990 Jomtien Conference

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**Abstract:** Bringing the world close to universal literacy has been a major legacy of the twentieth century. To realize this agenda UNESCO has been at the forefront since 1946. Its focus has been to advance the vision of a literate world for all. Nations worldwide inclusive of multilateral organizations considers Literacy as a driver for sustainable development in that it enables greater participation in the labour market; improved child and family health and nutrition; reduces poverty and expands life opportunities. Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. In light of this, a number of Global policies on Literacy have been formulated. Agreement on the best means of achieving this goal, however, has been very difficult to come by, and a number of literacy program have been shaped by internal and external politics as well as by local exigencies. This article outlines how literacy policies have evolved since the 1990 Jomtien Conference discussing their idealistic aims and intentions. The write up provides an analysis of their impact in relation to enhancing literacy levels and outlining the strength and weaknesses of the policies by focusing on their strength and weaknesses.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is a concern for every country that education for all is achieved. However, to ensure increased access to education by making sure that there is some improvements in the condition of schooling and student achievement levels has been a challenge. In order to achieve increased access, a number of declarations and policies on Education have been enacted. These policies have been enacted to ensure that the education status of member countries is improved. There have been a number of policies that have been formulated before and after the 1990 Jomtien Conference on Education for All. After the declaration of the Education for All policy on Education in 1990, other conferences also followed and made declarations with regards to Education. These included the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning which was the fifth international conference on adult learning in 1997, the Dakar Framework for Action 2000 organized by UNESCO, the Incheon Declaration 2015, and UNESCO sixth conference on

adult Education. All of these conferences enacted policies to ensure that the literacy levels of citizens are improved.

## II. LITERACY

Definitions and understandings of literacy have broadened considerably over the past fifty years, influenced by academic research, international policy agendas and national priorities. In all understandings, literacy embodies reading and writing skills. Numeracy is generally understood as a supplement to or component of literacy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of 'functional literacy' gained ground and emphasized links among literacy, productivity and overall socio-economic development. Recent perspectives look at the ways in which literacy is used and practiced in different social and cultural contexts. Many educators have come to view literacy as an active process of learning involving social awareness and critical reflection, which can empower individuals and groups to promote social change UNESCO in particular – have played an influential role in developing policies on literacy, drawing on emerging conceptual understandings. During the 1960s and 1970s, the international policy community stressed the role of literacy in economic growth and national development, especially in newly independent countries. Reflecting this emerging understanding, UNESCO's General Conference in 1978 adopted a definition of functional literacy still in use today: 'A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community's development.' Over the 1980s and 1990s, definitions of literacy broadened to accommodate the challenges of globalization, including the impact of new technology and information media and the emergence of knowledge economies. Greater attention has also been paid to the language or languages in which literacy is learned and practiced.

## III. LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT.

Literacy is critical to economic development so as to every individual and the community's well-being. Helping someone

to read and write effectively or acquire the essential literacy skills has been seen significant factor in economic development. Effective literacy skills open the doors to more educational and employment opportunities in order that people are ready to pull themselves out of poverty and chronic underemployment. In our increasingly complex and rapidly changing technological world, it's essential that individuals continuously expand their knowledge and learn new skills so as to stay up with the pace of change.

Developed and developing countries recognize the fact that formal education is a pre-requisite for growth and development and so this has resulted in a number of Declarations and policies formulated on the rights to education and universal declaration on education for all. For meaningful developmental achievements, governments have been compelled to provide quality formal education for their citizens by increasing resource allocation towards educational service provision. "Studies of the more advanced countries notably the US, Denmark and Japan during suggest that there had been a really significant relationship between their economic process and therefore the quality of formal education provided to their citizens" (Thompson, 1981). The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 stipulates that each child has the right to education a minimum of within the elementary and fundamental stages. "Independent African nations are becoming conscious of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and therefore the incontrovertible fact that large investment would pay off in economic terms started increasing the intake of faculty pupils at the first level of education" (Antwi, 1992).

However, despite a number of declarations being made, there is a growing mismatch between the skills that employers need and the skills that workers have. This discrepancy leads to high unemployment coupled with a high job vacancy rate.

#### IV. STRENGTH AND WEAKNESSES OF LITERACY AND DEVELOPMENT POLICIES IN RELATION TO LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE 1990 JOMITIEN CONFERENCE

It is important to note that these policies have been influenced by the fact that literacy is a right and it is implicit in the right to Education. However, it is important to state that Education has been recognized as a right, for both children and adults in a number of international conventions that have been past ever since. There are numerous reasons as to why literacy has been and should be recognized as a right. This could be the set of benefits it confers on individuals, families, communities and nations. In modern society, literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social communities. In addition, it has proven benefits on individuals. Some of these benefits are intrinsically valuable and may also be instrumental in realizing other benefits such as improved health, increased political participation, increased life expectancy and reduced child mortality

Since its foundation (UNESCO) in 1946, it has been at the forefront of literacy efforts and dedication to keeping Literacy programs high on national, regional and international education agendas. The UNESCO report on Fundamental Education (1947), indicated that "UNESCO has great interest in literacy which is part of its efforts to promote basic education. UNESCO has placed so much emphasis on literacy development and its concern makes up an essential part of its mandate, which is supported by the right to education which was set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948". Promoting the meaningful acquisition and application of literacy which has benefits in social transformation, justice, and personal and collective freedom. Commitment and action towards the eradication of illiteracy has been noticed as a challenge for both developing and the developed countries. In today's world there over a million illiterate adults a figure projected to remain unchanged if current trends continued unabated.

There are many definitions of literacy. According to Kamens et al (2010) "most contemporary definitions portray literacy in relative rather than absolute terms. They assume that there is no single level of skill or knowledge that qualifies a person as 'literate', but rather that there are multiple levels and kinds of literacy (e.g. numeracy, technological literacy)". Definitions of literacy must address the skills needed in out of school context as well as to the school based competency requirement so that they have a bearing on real life situations.

Due to its keen interest and concern about literacy problems, UNESCO provided guidance on the definition of literacy which has been in use for international evaluations and to assist countries in coming up with their own specific definitions. "A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life. A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community" (UNESCO, 1978). "Using printed and written information to function in society to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (OECD/Statistics Canada, 1995). However, UNESCO further proposed another operational definition for measurement purposes that "literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" (UNESCO, 1978). Therefore, literacy involves a number of issues thus it focuses on acquisition of skills thereby enabling individuals to achieve their goals, develop their knowledge and potential and be participants of their social, economic and political issues in their community and wider society. "Most definitions of literacy have traditionally included calculating skills as part of the broad definition of literacy, but often these have been limited primarily to the four arithmetic operations. It is now widely thought that numeracy assessment should encompass a broad range of skills, thought processes, and background knowledge (formal and/or informal). Numeracy enables interpreting, acting upon and communicating mathematical information in

a wide range of everyday or work related and other life contexts, and is also needed for effective functioning in a world of amounts, prices, weights and distances. “Literacy and numeracy are thus now considered to be at the Centre of the educational goals not only of children in school, but youth and adults in need of further education” ( Bhola 1989).

Whether at home, in the classroom, in the workplace or else in the community there various and different ways of acquiring and applying literacy. This is an indication that there is no gussed single method or approach that is uniquely valid and fits all circumstances through which literacy is acquired among individuals. According to Kamens et al (2010) “the many and diverse contexts of its acquisition and application demand programs and materials that are separately and locally designed, not standardized and centrally planned”. Despite this notion it is very clear to ensure that different strategies and methods must be sought which should be built on local knowledge and experiences as well as the specific environment and the prevailing cultural conditions.

However, due to its impact on human life, awareness campaigns have taken the Centre stage, nationally and internationally to give hope to many that the struggle against illiteracy can be won. This has been seen or demonstrated by the vigorous mobilization of resources and will to eradicate it which has resulted in a number of declarations been adopted since 1990. However, Since the 1990 Jomtien World Conference, EFA issues have been subjected to unprecedented rhetoric in international summits. “The 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) in Jomtien, Thailand, included adult literacy as one of its six major worldwide goals. Although the complete elimination of illiteracy by the year 2000 was adopted as a goal of UNESCO and a significant number of its Member States in the Udaipur Declaration of two decades ago, the Jomtien Conference scaled back such promises, and chose a more modest, and theoretically achievable, goal of cutting illiteracy rates in half by the year 2000. The reasons for this reduction in targeted goal were numerous” (UNESCO 2004).

In addition UNESCO (2010) further argues that “During the 1990s, views on literacy and illiteracy have changed dramatically. Many literacy specialists and policy-makers have moved away from the monolithic view of illiteracy as a disease in which the germs might be ‘eradicated’ with an appropriate drug or vaccination”. Rather, literacy is now more broadly viewed as a product of educational, social and economic factors that cannot be radically changed in short periods of time”. However, despite a number of efforts have been initiated in both research and practice it is not surprising to indicate that change has been moderate in terms of the problems and global statistics on literacy in both developing and the developed countries. As a result governments and international/bilateral agencies have been concerned about illiteracy and low literacy levels ever since due to increasing competition and knowledge based economies across nations. Despite these efforts the allocation of resources have

remained disproportionately small towards the increase in the literacy levels of what formal schooling receives. However, the upholding of fundamental principles of equality of educational opportunities and universal access to education is of greater need today. The adopted world declaration on education for all in Jomtien, Dakar framework for action, the Hamburg declaration on adult learning and the Incheon declaration set out an overall vision.

The re affirmation of the global commitment to education for all and pledges to the achievement of the six goals by 2015 was witnessed during the Dakar conference in 2001 where governments and international agencies were present. “The endorsement of Education for all was further done by the United Nations General Assembly which was part of the Millennium Development Goals” (A/RES/56/326). The endorsement of Education for all in the MDGs included both the component of basic quality education and a solid foundation of lifelong learning. It is a point of fact that literacy has a very significant impact of our daily lives hence the reason as to why it constituted a common thread running through the six Dakar goals as enshrined in the Millennium development goals on Education. Due to its relevance in all circles of human life, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Literacy Decade as a focal point in education for all. Embracing such a view it is evident that nations are committed in ensuring that literacy related problems are addressed. This is seen by the number of declarations that have been passed during conferences by countries and international agencies. To ensure improvements in levels of adult literacy through the creation of dynamic literate environments, the attainment of a mastery level of literacy by all learners, and enhanced quality of life has been the concern of the various countries worldwide. Literacy development has been on the Centre of the formulated policies by UNESCO as it is the coordinating agency for education for all and the United Nations Literacy Decade, has placed literacy at the heart of its education for all efforts and anti-poverty strategies. It is a point of fact that countries are key to the successful global literacy efforts. In addition literacy should be given significant attention of all planned activities, actions and programs of education for all in order to see the successful implementation of the United Nations Literacy Decade by ensuring literacy is addressed in its relation to issues of gender equality and the needs of those without access to quality learning opportunities “out-of-school children” and adolescents, and illiterate youths and adults. To achieve the UNESCO mandate of universal access, there is need for more enrolment in school or adult-education programs. As of this other policies on literacy where formulated.

“The Declaration on Education for All, which was adopted in Jomtien, Thailand (1990) and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) stressed the need with emphasis to universalizing access to education for all children, youth and adults, and promoting equity. Evaluating the progress made towards the EFA goals since and the education related

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as well as the lessons learned, a new education agenda and the Framework for Action lead to the proposed Incheon Declaration, 2030” (UNESCO 2010). The attention this time focused on examining the challenges identified on future priorities and strategies for its achievement hoping to “leave no one behind”. The vision which was embodied in the proposed Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. Wiseman (2010) further states that, “the global norm for educational governance has been established by adopting evidence-based policymaking in education” which was set by the United Nation”. “The establishment of mechanisms to improve educational outcomes has been on the emphasis rather than only on education inputs. Consequently, there has been a global growth in the use of learning assessments” (Kamens & McNeely, 2010). “Which has become a major tool of governments to collect high quality data on education in order to enact effective policies and practices” (Masters, 2017).

The strength of these global policies could be seen in the shift from an emphasis on education inputs to assessment of quality which was influenced by the Jomtien Declaration (World Declaration on Education for All 1990). Article 4 of the Jomtien Declaration stated that the focus of basic education should be “on actual learning acquisition and outcome, rather than exclusively upon enrolment, continued participation in organized programs and completion of certification requirements” (World Declaration on Education for All 1990, p. 5). It is also noted that the Dakar Framework for action was noted as a reason for this shift in focus. UNESCO (2000), “highlighted the importance of learning outcomes”. One of its goals was, by 2015, to improve “all aspects of the quality of education especially in literacy, numeracy, and essential life skills” (UNESCO 2000, p. 97). As a result of this, the participants of this declaration adopted the Incheon Declaration “Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all”. The Incheon Declaration was signed at the end of the World Education Forum (WEF) held in Incheon, Republic of Korea, during the third week of May 2015. The Declaration marked an important step in the development of international education policy, continuing the Education for All (EFA) movement, which started in Jomtien Thailand in 1990 and formalized by the Dakar Framework for Action (2000). As of this, a number of measures have been adopted which included the monitoring of student achievement through national assessments at different Grade levels. Kellaghan et al (2015) argues that “a national assessment is designed to describe the achievement of students in a curriculum area aggregated to provide an estimate of the achievement level in the education system as a whole at a particular age or grade level”.

Additionally, “the purpose of an assessment is not only to provide information on the state of education, but also that information should lead to improvement in student

achievement by systematically feeding into decision making” (Sui-chu Ho, E 2015).

However, National Assessment save a lot of purposes in ensuring the education for all campaign is achieved. It however used as a tool to evaluate the overall learning achievement levels of students at certain grade levels and to monitor the overall quality of basic education and providing feedback to the curriculum and teaching and learning practices in order to achieve better outcomes for students.

It is clearly to state that the main focus of the member countries of the United Nations declaration on Education policies is to promote “Equity” and “excellence” and reducing disparities in the education system. In this regard a comprehensive medium term Education Sector Development Framework and Program was developed. This “framework incorporates a blend of bottom - up and top down supportive planning process for the development of the primary and secondary education system. One of the concerns identified in the framework is to “Improving the quality of basic and secondary education and increasing equitable access to basic and secondary education. The emphasis was further made clear on equitable access meant thus “each child can access an education appropriate to his /her individual learning potential and needs”.

With respect to improving learning achievement, “Article 1 of the WCEFA Declaration stated that ‘basic learning needs’ or competencies (BLCs), ‘comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem-solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings” (UNESCO, 1990, p. 43). The second goal which is of relevance to literacy and adult education appears to have received somewhat less attention in the literacy and adult education arena, for the obvious reason that broadening the range of content in literacy programs, especially in less-developed countries (LDCs), has been a major challenge in itself (for a review, see ILI/UNESCO, 1999). It is clear to state that this has been one of the greatest weaknesses of the global policy on Education.

There has been a number of challenges witnessed to ensure the effective and efficient application of the global policies. That’s there has been increasing pressures on the concern about global competitiveness and workforce skills which has stimulated a renewed involvement in literacy and basic education in virtually all countries of the world. Despite this, the targeted literacy levels have not been generally met. Although a number of these global policies have been made “there has been uneven progress towards achieving the EFA Goals mainly in relation to universal primary education (UPE) and the reduction of gender disparities” (UNESCO, 2008a). Improvements in early childhood care and education have been limited to date, and wide disparities in pre-primary enrolment ratios between countries. During the 1999-2006 period average net primary enrolment ratios rose in sub-

Saharan Africa and South and West Asia. “Yet more children of primary school age were not enrolled in school in by 2006. Unsatisfactory progress is especially apparent for the EFA Goals directly related to adult education namely, ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are equitably met and reducing adult illiteracy rates by 50% by 2015. Limited access to educational opportunities in the past has left a lot of adults lacking basic literacy skills, of whom about two in every three are women” (UNESCO 2008). According to UNESCO (2008) “In some countries, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, adult literacy rates are below the developing country average of 79%.

Gender disparities in primary and secondary education participation rates had been eliminated in 59 of 176 UN countries by 2006, although most countries in sub Saharan Africa, South and West Asia and the Arab States have yet to achieve this EFA target”. In the end, because the learning needs of children and adults have received inadequate attention in implementing EFA, the goal of improving educational quality and excellence (Goal 6) is also off target. Of course, overall progress in early childhood care and education and in basic education has a positive impact on adult learning and education in the medium-term, since children and young people who have had greater access to formal education are more likely to continue their participation in various learning settings as adults. Nevertheless, this progress has to be put in context: poverty, living in rural areas or urban slums and belonging to an indigenous or migrant minority still significantly constrain educational opportunity. Around the world, girls are still educationally disadvantaged and disadvantages are cumulative. However, the slow and uneven progress sends a message that certain goals are more important than others and therefore should be prioritized when, in fact, all the goals are inter-connected and need to be addressed concurrently. The continued dominance of universal primary education, whether measured by enrolment ratios in the EFA agenda or completion rates in the MDGs, underscores the marginalization of the youth, adult literacy and lifelong learning objectives which are vital to overall success. The consensus on the Millennium Development Goals was part of an international compact meant to address key global problems at the start of the 21st century.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the MDGs not only summarized the development aspirations of the world as a whole, but also brought attention to universally-accepted values and basic rights. Building on the recommendations of UN Conferences in the 1990s, they set out development benchmarks to be reached by 2015, with clear indicators to track progress. However, out of close to 100 strategies enumerated on how to move the MDGs forward, not a single one refers to adult

learning and education as a means (United Nations, 2001). It is clear to state that one of the weaknesses of polices on eradication of illiteracy was the absence of the adult education as an MDG strategy. Despite its transformative power, adult education as evidenced as outstanding, the 2008 Report on the progress on the MDG indicated some improvement in relation to goals number 2 and 3 of the MDG, which is approximated to universal primary education and gender equality, and modest progress in relation to the other MDGs. For example, 51.4% of employed people in sub-Saharan Africa lived on less than US \$1 per day in 2007 compared with 55.5% in 1997 (UN, 2008). In addition, it is clear to state that despite the stated weaknesses, the other strength of these declarations was that they indicated the current position of the education levels and systems and gave a formidable direction, they also admitted the current literacy situation, formulated a journey to undertake in order to reduce the illiteracy levels and achieve EFA and they all determined the input, output processes and what outcomes of education should be expected.

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