



One in five European fifteen year olds has poor reading skills and 75 million Europeans have low qualifications, often lacking basic reading and writing skills. These striking facts prompted the European Commission to establish the High Level Group of Experts on Literacy. The group launched its report in the run up to 8 September, UNESCO's International Literacy Day.

UNESCO's Special Envoy on Literacy for Development, H.R.H. Princess Laurentien of the Netherlands, chaired the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy.

The Princess is a longstanding advocate for improved literacy, for both children and adults. In the Netherlands, she established the Reading & Writing Foundation (Stichting Lezen & Schrijven), which she also chairs.

UNRIC's Alexandra Froger and Anne Helsen talked to Princess Laurentien on the eve of the publication of the High Level Expert Group's Report.

Could you give us a summary of the situation in Europe regarding literacy and highlight some developments that are particular for Europe (as compared to the rest of the world)?

We are living a paradox: our lives tend to be dominated by the written word, yet our literacy levels are falling. This has a huge impact on the lives and livelihoods of millions of Europeans. The next generation is on course to do no better. When we look at the shocking numbers, we

have to admit to ourselves that Europe has made very little progress over the past decade. I hope that our recommendations will convince policy makers to put the issue on the political agenda, both within EU Member States and at EU level. But that's not enough of course. We need to put our knowledge into practice!

▣ **Are low literacy levels expected to disappear in Europe in the near future?**

The current statistics do not bode well for the future. People with low literacy are less likely to finish school, more likely to be unemployed, especially in times of crisis, and more likely to suffer from poor health. Poor literacy thwarts aspiration and ambition. All these factors tend to be passed down through generations. But the good news is that through a combination of approaches, literacy is a solvable problem, and we can achieve our vision of a one hundred percent literate Europe. We need to put our minds to it and take action. But it only works if we're courageous enough to start addressing the root causes of issues, rather than the symptoms. For instance, tackling reading problems among children, rather than labeling them with dyslexia. Or waiting to take language development seriously when children go to school rather than investing in it during the early childhood years.

What are the main recommendations of the report?

There are of course a range of improvements to make in the educational sector - from teacher quality to creating the right learning environments for them, and from early intervention to developing the right reading materials on paper and online to motivate children and adults. But that's not all. Far from it. Tackling literacy is as much about understanding literacy as it is about understanding and appreciating other socio-economic challenges. We need to make literacy relevant to other policy areas. Think about getting people out of poverty, increasing digital participation or maximizing investments in healthcare. Imagine how much money gets wasted when millions of people don't take the medication they get prescribed in the right way! In short, the report calls for concerted and coherent action by many players. Governments, local and regional authorities, schools, employers and NGOs need to work together to address the problem effectively. So I hope this report finds its way onto the desks of many UN agencies.

Let's talk about your UNESCO Special Envoyship on Literacy for Development. What does this mean for you?

It has been a great journey of inspiring encounters. My main focus has been advocacy, particularly aimed at decision-makers in governments and companies who are not yet involved. We need to reach the non-converted... My key point is that literacy is not 'just another issue', but that it forms the heart of the development of our people and our society. Investing in literacy is a prerequisite for tackling most of the pressing policy and societal challenges.

Why is the literacy question so close to your heart?

What touches me most is that literacy goes to the very core of someone's self-confidence and independence. In the odd twenty years or so since I first became aware of the issue, it has been this human side of it that moves me most. Everyone deserves to have a sense of self-worth. It's humbling to realize that not everyone is brought up with something which so many of us take for granted. And then the shocking numbers... 778 million adults across the world don't have sufficient reading and writing skills and over 75 million children don't go to school. When will we truly wake up? With the active engagement of all stakeholders in the public and private sectors, we can tackle it. We simply must.

What are the biggest challenges in combating illiteracy?

Any approach requires a sustained, long term commitment. That is no easy task, because we tend to ask for quick, tangible and measurable results. There are no quick fixes and unilateral answers. We need to mobilise all of society, think and work across generations and make it relevant to a broad range of players, including those who do not even realise that it concerns them, let alone that they too can help tackle it. Companies for instance – we have some jewels who are fully engaged, but we need many more. Another challenge is getting the balance right between maintaining long term commitment and instilling a sense of urgency. Investing in literacy is not a luxury. Tackling the literacy crisis in Europe is a prerequisite for innovation, smart growth and the well-being of our citizens.

In the Netherlands you chair the Reading and Writing Foundation (Stichting Lezen & Schrijven), which was set up on your initiative in 2004. Could you give us a summary of the situation in the Netherlands and what is your approach to tackling the issue?

I think our main strength is that we serve one cause and one cause only: the prevention and

reduction of illiteracy. In the Netherlands, some 1,5 million adults have insufficient reading and writing skills. The Reading & Writing Foundation was launched on 27 May 2004. Together with our many partners, we've managed to break the taboo, raise awareness and work across fields with a range of experts. We help create demand for the tremendous knowledge - educational and other – that exists.

And action starts with awareness, a matter on which we are very active. We profess innovative and unusual approaches, involving many players.

This week is Literacy Week, which we organize every year around 8 September, the UN Literacy Day. Several hundreds of organizations across the country undertake activities. That's exactly the societal engagement we need. But a lot remains to be done!

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