



Literacy and Life Skills Education for Vulnerable Youth

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1. Making the case: Literacy and life skills

Especially for young people the 21st century is characterized by extreme disparities in economic, technological, social and cultural resources between regions, countries, localities and population groups. There are more than one billion young men and women aged between 15 and 24 in the world today, representing the largest cohort that has ever had to progress from childhood to adulthood. Almost 85 per cent of them live in developing countries, many of them in the rural areas (despite the rapid process of urbanization). In Africa and South Asia, children and youth represent over 60% of the total population.

In Africa young people face particularly daunting challenges, many of them linked to poverty, the HIV pandemic, and armed conflict. The global community, through the UN, recognises literacy and basic education as a human right, being factors that enable people to advance in other areas of life. However, out of 44 sub-Saharan African countries, only seven have an estimated adult literacy rate above 80 per cent, while 18 of these countries have a literacy rate under 50 per cent.

The education and training of marginalized young men and women present a particular policy and programming challenge for government and non-government actors in developing countries. Youth literacy and basic life skills cover a broad field, and encompass issues both within and beyond the education sector. UNESCO's Member States are committed to achieving the Education for All (EFA) goals, including "that the learning needs of all young people are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes" (EFA, Goal 3). EFA Goal 4 addresses literacy for adults and youth aged 15 and older. Meanwhile, children's ability to read and write is situated in the context of quality education at the primary and lower secondary levels (EFA Goal 2). UNESCO's recently published EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012¹, subtitled *Putting Education to Work*, reveals the urgent need to invest in skills for youth. Across the world, around 200 million young people need a second-chance education to acquire the basic literacy and numeracy skills. In sub-Saharan Africa, over 56 million people aged 15 to 24 have not even completed primary school and need alternative pathways to acquire basic skills for employment and prosperity. This is equivalent to one in three of the region's youth population.

Youth do not form a homogeneous group, and the situations in which young people live, their specific challenges and opportunities, differ across and within countries. Among the factors that influence young people's situation are: gender, their family's socio-economic status, their geographic location, the educational level, literacy skills, their ethnic or religious identity, physical and medical conditions, internal conflict, war, natural and man-made disasters. As these factors interact with each other, they can either accumulate privilege or intensify marginalization.

For marginalized and out-of-school youth, lack of literacy and basic life skills limits their life chances, including access to employment and/or technical and vocational training. Their chances of earning a decent living, whether in formal or non-formal sectors, are low. The connection between youth unemployment and political turmoil reinforces the importance of targeted efforts to increase young people's access to relevant education and skills training, as well as to opportunities for participation in society. Consequently, it is of utmost importance to scale-up efforts to secure young people's education, their access to quality health services, and their participation in society. The current challenges need to be addressed by actively involving governments and strengthening all stakeholders' capacities.

¹ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/reports/2012-skills/>

Background information

a) UNESCO's strategy on African Youth

With its Strategy on African Youth, UNESCO, together with global and regional partners, seeks to enable young women and men to effect change in their countries and communities. The Strategy promotes youth civic engagement and innovation as a way to empower young people to contribute to peace and development in Africa, to help them make successful transitions from school to the workplace, and to prevent violence.

The three main objectives of the Strategy are:

1. To strengthen knowledge of, and promote research on, youth issues in Africa;
2. To foster the development of policies and frameworks in line with the African Youth Charter of the African Union (AU);
3. To promote youth participation in decision-making, youth civic engagement and social inclusion.

UNESCO developed this strategy in 2010. It was finalized through a series of consultations with partners and key stakeholders, which included Member States, the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank, regional economic communities and regional intergovernmental organizations, youth organizations, academia, the private sector, and UN partners. The Strategy shares many common elements with the draft 10-year AU Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment and Development in Africa (2009–2018). UNESCO will collaborate closely with the African Union Commission in implementing the Strategy.

The Strategy provides a guiding framework for UNESCO's action on youth in Africa and serves as a catalyst for collaboration between key stakeholders in the field of youth.

b) UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)² is a non-profit, policy-driven, international research, training, information, documentation and publishing centre. One of UNESCO's seven educational institutes, UIL promotes lifelong learning policy and practice with a focus on adult learning and education, especially literacy, non-formal education and alternative learning opportunities for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. UIL's activities are geared towards achieving the Education for All (EFA)³ objectives and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)⁴, as well as the objectives of the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA)⁵, the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD)⁶, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD)⁷, and the UNESCO Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE)⁸. UIL answers to the concerns of UNESCO's Member States, giving priority to Africa.

² www.uil.unesco.org

³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/>

⁴ <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

⁵ <http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/adult-learning-and-education/confintea-portal/>

⁶ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/un-literacy-decade/>

⁷ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/>

⁸ <http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/literacy-and-basic-skills/life-literacy-initiative-for-empowerment/>

Although UIL's main focus is on developing countries, the Institute was among the first organisations to examine functional adult literacy in Europe. UIL's goal for its literacy-related activities is to promote literacy as a foundation for lifelong learning. It provides technical support to Member States, including consulting services and programme monitoring and evaluation.

c) UIL and youth: CONFINTEA VI

UNESCO organises the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) series, which have taken place every 12–13 years since the late 1940s. Since the fifth conference in 1997 a holistic understanding of adult learning and non-formal education has informed the work of UIL. The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI)⁹, which took place in Brazil in December 2009, underscored the central role of adult education in helping young people and adults gain the necessary knowledge and skills to adjust to, shape and develop their environments in an accelerated and interconnected world.

Among the many issues discussed at the conference, emphasis was given to the large numbers of young people not engaged in learning opportunities or employment. The outcome document of the Conference, the *Belém Framework for Action: Harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future*, spelled out the need to address the learning needs of youth as well as adults in a holistic and comprehensive system of lifelong learning.

In each region preparatory regional meetings were held in advance of the global conference in Brazil. The African region was the only region which explicitly included young people in the pre-conference discussions. The African regional meeting was held in Nairobi from 5 to 7 November 2008 under the theme "The Power of Youth and Adult Learning for Africa's Development". Africa's UNESCO Member States, as well as regional civil society organizations working on literacy and adult education, attended this meeting. The main outcomes included the *African Statement on the Power of Youth and Adult Learning and Education for Africa's Development*. This statement comprises the main recommendations made by the Ministers of Education and the civil society organizations for the promotion and revitalization of youth and adult education within the perspective of lifelong learning in Africa.

Following CONFINTEA VI, UIL identified youth with little or no experience of formal schooling as a target group for research and policy dialogue, the aim of which is to increase their participation in non-formal education. Low levels of literacy and life skills limit the opportunities available to young people, including access to employment and technical and vocational training. Data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) indicate that over 122 million young people worldwide lack basic reading and writing skills. In sub-Saharan Africa, 3 out of 10 young people are illiterate (26.3 million young women and 18.9 million young men).¹⁰

Based on what UNESCO Member States and practitioners have stated in the *Belém Framework for Action* and the *African Statement on the Power of Youth and Adult Learning and Education for Africa's Development*, there is an urgent need to improve young people's access to education and community services, and to increase their participation in society. The current challenges need to be addressed by actively involving governments and strengthening all stakeholders' capacities. To this end, UIL has launched a research and policy-dialogue process, entitled Literacy and Life Skills Education for Vulnerable Youth, to

⁹ <http://uil.unesco.org/home/programme-areas/adult-learning-and-education/confintea-portal/>

¹⁰ UIS 2012 <http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=201>

enhance the capacities of UNESCO Members States to reduce basic education barriers that youth are facing in many different contexts.

The specific objectives of this process are:

- To identify appropriate means for reaching vulnerable youth through literacy and life skills education;
- To disseminate relevant evidence; and
- To develop concrete activities that will build partnerships.

3. Types of interventions

To initiate the Literacy and Life Skills Education for Vulnerable Youth programme within UIL, a core team was selected from among the 30 international staff members. It comprises four colleagues from different research and field backgrounds, who expressed a specific interest and prior experience in youth issues.

a) Research study

In 2010 a multi-country research study was commissioned by UIL in cooperation with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Policies and practices of 15 countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America were mapped to gain a better understanding of how access to relevant learning opportunities for vulnerable youth could be improved.

The following countries were covered by the research study:

- Africa: Ethiopia, Mali, Morocco, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania
- Asia: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia and Vietnam
- Latin America and the Caribbean: Bolivia, Brazil, Haiti and Mexico

The study's report is divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides the rationale for the research, explains its objectives and methodology. It also clarifies the factors giving rise to vulnerability among youth and the role of literacy and life skills in addressing this. The second chapter reviews policies and examines policy-making processes and implementation. Chapter three presents innovative practices and gives an overview of the main lessons that can be drawn from the programmes identified. Chapter four suggests concrete ways to address the needs of vulnerable youth through literacy and life skills education, and concludes with specific recommendations.

In general, common characteristics of innovative practices for vulnerable youth could be identified. These can be summarized as follows:

1. It is important that a specific group of young people is targeted and that their structural and personal reasons for vulnerability are identified;
2. Effective programmes tend not to be 'stand-alone', but rather integrate basic education and literacy with vocational and skills training;
3. Effective programmes build on active partnerships with a variety of stakeholders;
4. Involving the youth at different stages, from policy design to programme formulation, is a key factor in the success of any practice.

b) Africa Policy Forum on Literacy and Basic Life Skills for Vulnerable Youth

With support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), UIL and UNESCO's Bamako office organized the Africa Policy Forum on Literacy and Basic Life Skills for Vulnerable Youth. Held in Bamako, Mali, from 26 to 29 September 2011, it brought together 70 participants from seven West-African countries (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone), as well as representatives from bilateral and multilateral agencies. It built on a research project initiated by CIDA and UIL in September 2010, which was undertaken to contribute to a better understanding of how access to relevant learning opportunities for vulnerable youth can be improved.

The objectives of the policy forum were:

- To identify appropriate modalities to reach vulnerable young men and women, in Africa in general and West Africa in particular, through the review of existing policies and programmes which target youth literacy and basic life skills;
- To contribute to the dissemination of relevant evidence that could improve policies and programmes promoting youth literacy and basic life skills in the region, including second-chance learning or access to employment or self-employment for vulnerable young men and women; and
- To develop specific activities that would forge partnerships, mobilise resources for programmes and facilitate knowledge-sharing for the youth in the region.

In terms of methodology, the forum was an exceptional event as the young people themselves were given a voice. The active participation in policy and programme discussions of the 17 young people, who came from various countries and backgrounds, contributed greatly to the forum's success. The seven inter-sectoral country teams worked together enthusiastically and tried to give each team member space for his or her individual involvement in the forum.

c) Literacy and Life Skills for Vulnerable Youth: Policy Forum in the Arab States

In December 2011 UIL and UNESCO's Cairo office partnered with the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute to co-organise a policy forum on literacy and basic life skills for vulnerable youth in the Arab States. Participants from eight countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan and Yemen) met in Cairo from 17 to 20 December 2011 with the support of the German government.

Based on a presentation of the 15-country research study (see above), participants in the forum were asked to relate to following questions through group work and field visits to innovative education/training programmes for young boys and girls with handicaps in Cairo:

- How best to identify vulnerable young men and women engaged in garbage collection work and reach them effectively?
- What policies are needed to support literacy and basic life skills education for vulnerable young men and women?
- What approaches and practices exist to provide access to literacy and basic life skills education for vulnerable young men and women?
- What are the best models of second-chance learning or access to employment or self-employment for vulnerable young men and women?

- What are the appropriate methodologies to monitor and evaluate work in this area?

The 2011 Education for All Regional Overview for Arab States indicated that about 4.6 million adolescents exist outside the school system in the region. During the forum sub-regional and national action plans to improve policies and programmes promoting literacy and life skills for young men and women were drafted. These action plans form a basis to forge partnerships, mobilise resources for programmes, and to share knowledge between countries. Furthermore, the policy forum provided a space for policy-makers and practitioners to identify vulnerable groups of young men and women in their respective countries and to analyse existing policies and programmes which provide literacy and life skills education for these groups.

d) Planned Policy Forum in Asia

UIL is planning to convene a forum on literacy and life skills for vulnerable youth policy in Asia in early 2013. Initial negotiations have begun with the Government of Indonesia as a host country. Participating countries have not yet been identified, but these will be chosen based on their experiences in the field.

4. Main achievements, main challenges and monitoring process

UIL and its partners have achieved various objectives and have faced different challenges, as the youth programme involves a multi-layered process and a variety of stakeholders. It is therefore not feasible to generalize these issues and only possible to highlight a few good practices and lessons learned regarding UIL.

Participants of both policy forums (in West-Africa and the Arab Region) expressed their satisfaction after the meetings. In particular, the methodology used was appreciated, as it included working in country teams consisting of government representatives, civil society representatives and, in some cases, young people themselves.

In their end-of-forum evaluation sheets many participants stated that a better understanding for the appropriate strategies to address the needs of vulnerable youth had been created. Especially through exchanging knowledge and experiences among the different country-teams the level of understanding was increased. Participants also became more aware of the need for enhanced synergies between the different actors (youth, state, civil society and private companies) as well as of the need for long-term financial support. With regard to the design and implementation of programmes, many contributors claimed that programmes which integrate literacy and life skills to target the specific needs of vulnerable youth are more effective than stand-alone programmes.

Challenges in the research and dialogue process were mainly connected to the nature of vulnerability, as its identification is one of the crucial steps towards addressing it. The most vulnerable youth tend also to be the most difficult to identify and to reach. In each context vulnerability and youth are defined differently, so each intervention has to be developed specifically.

5. Scaling up

Drawing on the lessons learnt in the African and the Arab policy forums, and following the recommendations formulated in the commissioned study, UIL is currently drafting a guide on

issues to be kept in mind when vulnerable youth are addressed. Furthermore, UIL and the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Africa (BREDA), in cooperation with the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and CIDA, are mobilizing youth and adult education specialists from national governments, international and regional development organizations, and civil society organizations to meet at an African Regional Expert Meeting in Cape Verde in late 2012. This meeting aims to further identify successful youth and adult learning and education policy and practices in Africa and to formulate concrete action points and mechanisms for a collaborative regional action plan. One proposal under discussion is an online network among practitioners and youth organisations to exchange policies and programme documents on literacy and life skills for vulnerable youth in Africa.

A major achievement and follow-up activity is the currently planned South-South experience-sharing network, to be coordinated by ADEA. To support countries in introducing or enhancing policies and programmes on literacy and life skills education for vulnerable youth, UIL and CIDA are setting up a platform or network on this topic in collaboration with ADEA. Given the relevance of the issue, the network will be open to governments and civil society across Africa.