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# Literacy as a Human Right: Progress on the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Requires Urgent Policy Change

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## ABSTRACT

*This article asserts that literacy must be defended as a human right at a time when education suffers from enormous inequities and marginalization, preceded and exacerbated by both the COVID pandemic and intransigent literacy policies. Evidence-based literacy programs like DEVI Sansthan's Accelerating Literacy for All (ALfA) and the Right to Read are challenging such intransigent policies. A California lawsuit defending the right to effective literacy instruction illustrates the pressing need for a change of policy at the local, national, and global level.*

Parents in California have recently filed a “class” action suit to hold the state accountable for failing in its duty to “address the literacy development” of its children. These parents articulated in detail the extent to which California had not served its diverse populations: “English learners, students with disabilities, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and African American and Hispanic students.”<sup>1</sup> Theirs was a *class*-action suit supported by research. The outcome: a \$50 million dollar settlement in “Early Literacy Support Block grants (ELSB) for 75 of the state’s lowest-performing schools.”<sup>2</sup>

The lawsuit was not only a victory for educational justice, but a watershed moment in the application of research-driven pedagogy to effective practice. It pressures California to adopt

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<sup>1</sup> D’Souza, K (September 29, 2022). The Right To Read: It took a lawsuit against California. Retrieved from: <https://edsources.org/2022/the-right-to-read-it-took-a-lawsuit-against-california/678069>

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit

programs such as The Right to Read and Structured Literacy.<sup>3,4</sup> Such programs are sustainable, capable of crossing borders, and successful at scale. Globally, DEVI Sansthan (India)<sup>5</sup> has developed Accelerating Learning for All (ALfA), a highly portable, inexpensive, culturally-adaptable, multilingual program in structured literacy for the world's poorest.<sup>6</sup> During a recent press conference at India's Press Club, 5-7 year olds read newspapers in Hindi and English.<sup>7</sup>

## **Incorporating Foundational Literacy into Human Rights Policy**

This lawsuit connects effective foundational literacy to equity, democracy, and human progress. A World Bank press release (June 23, 2022) made this stark claim: "70% of 10-Year-Olds now in Learning Poverty, Unable to Read and Understand a Simple Text."<sup>8</sup> Without doubt, the pandemic was devastating, resulting in school closures, little support for teachers or families, and infrastructure challenges that have undermined, if not gutted, any gains in global development goals. Nevertheless, inequitable policies have been eroding education progress long before COVID shut schools down.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has explored education policies and academic outcomes. Ongoing country-by-country analyses consider: (1) the degree of commitment to research and innovation in education; (2) teacher professional development; (3) education governance, evaluation and quality assurance; (4) access and participation; (5) learning environments; and (6) educational leadership.<sup>9</sup> At every level, research has revealed a striking intersection of outdated literacy policy and disenfranchisement, influenced by, but are not limited to the following:

- A lack of belief that small wins have enormous tipping point impacts;
- A lack of concentrated or sustained attention to effective foundational literacy practices at the village, district, provincial, and national level, along with a persistent disregard for the multiplier effect of enlisting the literate to reach and teach the illiterate;

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<sup>3</sup> Literacy Podcasts Worth Listening To (July 25, 2021): <https://bit.ly/lani-reading> and Plain Talk about Literacy and Learning. *Amplify*. Retrieved from: [https://bit.ly/plain-talk\\_literacy](https://bit.ly/plain-talk_literacy)

<sup>4</sup> The Right to Read (movie). Retrieved from: <https://www.therighttoreadfilm.org/about>

<sup>5</sup> DEVI Sansthan. Dignity Learning. <https://dignityeducation.org/>

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, S., Delaney, T., Hakim, J., and Bhat, M. (2022). Disruptive literacy: A roadmap for urgent global action. Bloomsbury India. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/disruptive-lit>.

<sup>7</sup> Ani Pr. (March 28, 2022). *The Print*. Educationist and innovator Dr Sunita Gandhi develops new pedagogy: 'Global Dream. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/Gandhi-ALFA>.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank (June 23, 2022). 70% of 10-year-olds now in learning poverty, unable to read and understand a simple text." Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/cannotread>.

<sup>9</sup> Productivity, Human capital, and educational policies (2022). Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/human-capital>

- The sunk-cost fallacy of infusing more money into existing, ineffective literacy programs in the hope that they will improve, combined with a fear of losing face for having refused to change course even when confronted with the evidence to the contrary;
- A lack of leadership consumed by an immobilizing fear of setting expectations too high or risking failure, therefore weakening initiative;
- Policies built around the capricious nature of the election cycle;
- Distributed leadership without accountability to outcomes, research-driven measurement, or development of local management, combined with cumbersome and bloated bureaucracies and attenuated decision-making;
- An uninformed, yet free-floating fear that teacher resistance to change will undermine efforts to make the shift;
- A disregard for, and failure to enlist, the non-formal sector or semi-literate adolescent and adult populations to support foundational literacy, along with a lack of interest in—or coordination with—NGO communities, civil society organizations, and Ministries of public health, agriculture, and public advocacy;
- An inequitable distribution of materials, training, or support;
- Even though effective literacy programs have proven far less expensive to produce and disseminate, resistance to adoption may be driven by a fear that outside funding will decrease;
- An unwillingness to switch to guided, learner-centered education, as opposed to teacher-centered instruction;
- A refusal to acknowledge the contributions and nuances of culture and context in favor of a one-size-fits-all strategy.

In an article on the failure of education in Sub-Saharan Africa, Marka Khwaja bemoans the glacial rate of risk-taking and change, despite the evidence:

*One cannot help but think of policymakers, non-governmental organizations, and politicians circling around a Jack in the Box, winding it up and jumping in surprise when the same clown pops out every time. One might also smirk at the oddity of recycling unsuccessful reforms from one country to another and expecting new outcomes. Perhaps a bit of the humor disappears, however, when one realizes that actual children and families fighting to better their circumstances rely on these schools and ideologies.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Khwaja, M. September 25, 2014. 360° Analysis. *Fair Observer*. Jack in the Box: The failure of education in sub-saharan Africa. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/47KISo2>.

## Embedding Foundational Literacy into all 17 Sustainable Development Goals

*“The future begins with the alphabet.”*

— Former UNESCO Director-General, Irina Bokova (2015).

Despite a large body of evidence linking literacy and the SDGs, foundational literacy is still not embedded as an operational component in each SDG.<sup>11</sup> Without action plans for specific SDG targets and indicators, progress will stall or continue to fall tragically behind.<sup>12</sup>

- **SDG 1 — *No Poverty***: Literacy is directly connected to livelihoods, access to aid and financial services, rights and entitlements, resources to sustain life, economic empowerment, and informed decision-making for nutritious food, health, and food security.<sup>13</sup>
- **SDG 2 — *Zero Hunger***: Literacy equips individuals to learn about farming and crop management, use resources efficiently, and adopt sustainable farming methods. Literate farmers engage with markets and understand financial services. Literacy is directly linked to dietary choices, food supplements, public health services, access to food aid, and improved nutritional outcomes. Literate individuals participate in agricultural cooperatives and policy discussions impacting their lives.<sup>14</sup>
- **SDG 3 — *Good Health and Well-Being***: Literacy has been correlated with disease prevention, treatment adherence, and health advocacy; maternal and child health, participation in public health campaigns, and both increased awareness about mental health as well as reduced stigma.<sup>15</sup>
- **SDG 4 — *Quality Education***: While SDG 4 is an explicit SDG focusing on education, Target 4.6, in particular, aims to ensure literacy and numeracy for all youth and a substantial proportion of adults by 2030. The United Nations is explicitly clear about the direct connection between literacy and all 17 SDGs.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Oghenekohwo, J.E. and Frank-Oputu, E.A. (2017). Vol 5, No 2. Literacy Education and Sustainable Development in Developing Societies. International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies. Retrieved from: <https://journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/IJELS/article/view/3490>.

<sup>12</sup> GPE Secretariat (September 08, 2018). Literacy is Key to Achieving the SDGs by 2030. Global Partnership for Education. Global Partnership for Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/>.

<sup>13</sup> Concern USA. (August 27, 2020). Six benefits of literacy in the fight against poverty. Retrieved from: <https://concernusa.org/news/benefits-of-literacy-against-poverty/>.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations. Zero hunger: Why it Matters. Retrieved from: [https://bit.ly/UN\\_zero-hunger](https://bit.ly/UN_zero-hunger)

<sup>15</sup> Menabde, N. World Health Organization Office at the UN. Health Literacy and the SDGs. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3G9QSmW>

<sup>16</sup> UN officials highlight literacy's role in 2030 agenda. (September 14, 2015). International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). Retrieved from: <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/un-officials-highlight-literacys-role-in-2030-agenda/>

- **SDG 5 — Gender Equality:** Literate women counteract material and childhood morbidity and mortality. According to UNICEF, educated girls are healthier and better nourished, face less discrimination, and invest more in their communities.<sup>17</sup> Educated girls are 50% more likely to immunize their children in the future. With an extra year of education, a girl can earn up to 20% more as an adult. A child born to a literate mother is 50% more likely to survive past the age of 5.<sup>18</sup>
- **SDG 6 — Clean Water and Sanitation:** Literacy aids in understanding water conservation techniques and sanitation practices; understanding and applying information regarding safe water usage, hygiene practices, and sanitation, and reducing water-borne diseases. The literate engage in the planning and implementation of local water and sanitation projects. Literacy helps in accessing governmental and non-governmental programs that provide water and sanitation facilities.<sup>19</sup>
- **SDG 7 — Affordable and Clean Energy:** Literacy makes accessible to the poor the importance of clean and sustainably-renewable (and energy saving) sources. Literacy provides skills for employment in renewable energy and can help communities weigh short-term gains versus long-term survival and plan for the latter.<sup>20</sup>
- **SDG 8 — Decent Work and Economic Growth:** Literacy is the precursor to lifelong learning necessary to understand financial concepts, savings, and investments crucial to economic stability and growth. Literacy enables individuals to start and manage businesses, understand market dynamics, and navigate legal requirements.<sup>21</sup>
- **SDG 9 — Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure:** Literacy is essential for understanding and engaging in industrial and technological sectors, fostering innovation. Literate individuals can participate in planning and utilizing infrastructure projects, contributing to sustainable development. Literacy is a prerequisite for engaging in research activities, driving innovation in various sectors.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> UNICEF. Educate girls, change the world: Why UNICEF works to keep girls in school. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/47BDZ0K>

<sup>18</sup> Winfield, S. (September 10, 2018). Opening doors to gender equality through literacy. United Nations Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI). Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3RavRid>

<sup>19</sup> Torres, M., Uribeondo, P.B., Yago, Francisco J.M. (March 5, 2020). Citizen and educational initiatives to support sustainable development Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation for all. Vol. 12, Issue 5. MDPI. Retrieved from: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/5/2073>.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations. Charging up literacy on sustainable development goal 7. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3R9B89Y>.

<sup>21</sup> European Association of Regional & Local Authorities for Lifelong learning. (2023). How is lifelong learning linked with the Sustainable Development Goals? Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3MY7DW1>

<sup>22</sup> Hanemann, U. (2016). Lifelong literacy as a prerequisite for and the key to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. DVV International – International Perspectives in Adult Education / N° 75. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/3SP7mbN>

- **SDG 10 — *Reduced Inequalities*:** Marginalized groups can access information and resources and reduce inequalities by reading how to advocate for their rights and participate in decision-making processes. Promoting literacy among all groups, including those with disabilities, supports inclusive education and reduces disparities.<sup>23</sup>
- **SDG 11 — *Sustainable Cities and Communities*:** Literacy allows individuals to participate in urban planning discussions and local governance initiatives that impact them the most. Literate communities (especially those disproportionately impacted by climate change) understand and apply information on preparedness and planning to mitigate the impact of natural and national disasters.<sup>24</sup>
- **SDG 12 — *Responsible Consumption and Production*:** Literacy fosters an understanding of sustainable consumption and the importance of resource conservation. Being literate helps individuals understand their rights as consumers and make informed choices. Literacy enables people to understand and participate in recycling and waste management practices.<sup>25</sup>
- **SDG 13 — *Climate Action*:** Consistent with SDG 11, literate communities mobilize and participate in community efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change, empowering individuals to engage with climate policies and advocate for effective climate action.<sup>26</sup>
- **SDG 14 — *Life Below Water*:** Literacy enables individuals to understand the importance of conserving marine ecosystems and biodiversity and are more likely to engage in sustainable fishing practices and reduce ocean pollution. SDG 14 is inextricably connected to livelihoods, safety, and public health. Literacy allows individuals to participate in, and benefit from, awareness campaigns about marine conservation.<sup>27</sup>
- **SDG 15 — *Life on Land*:** Literate individuals understand the importance of terrestrial biodiversity and ecosystem services. Children must be aware of wild animals in their habitat. Literacy supports local farming and contributes to conservation efforts, sustainable land use practices, and stewardship of natural resources. Literate communities are engaged in activities to protect natural habitats.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> UNICEF. Reducing inequalities to leave no child behind. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/media/64366/file>

<sup>24</sup> Street, B. (2011). Literacy inequalities in theory and practice: The power to name and define, *International Journal of Educational Development*, Volume 31, Issue 6. Pgs. 580-586. Pages 580-586,

<sup>25</sup> GEM Report. (updated February 3, 2022). What kind and level of literacy will create sustainable societies? Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/46CITcO>

<sup>26</sup> UNESCO. SDG Resources for Educators - Climate Action. Retrieved from: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education/sdgs/material/13>

<sup>27</sup> Haas, B. Achieving SDG 14 in an equitable and just way. *International Environmental Agreements* 23, 199–205 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-023-09603-z>

<sup>28</sup> UNESCO. SDG Resources for educators: Life on land. UNESCO. Retrieved from: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education/sdgs/material/15>

- **SDG 16 — *Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions*:** Understanding legal rights and the justice system is crucial for promoting peace and justice. Literate citizens are more likely to participate in democratic processes and hold institutions accountable. Literacy enhances communication and negotiation skills instrumental to resolving conflicts.<sup>29</sup>
- **SDG 17 — *Partnerships for the Goals*:** While partnerships are largely viewed with meta contexts: international NGOs, governments, and corporations, foundational literacy enables individuals to understand global challenges and the importance of international cooperation. Literate individuals can engage in and contribute to partnerships at local, national, and international levels. Literacy facilitates the sharing of knowledge, best practices, and innovative solutions across borders.<sup>30</sup>

We acknowledge that the odds that developing countries will emerge from the pernicious, generational impact of colonialism and a suffocating mountain of debt are not in our favor. We also acknowledge that foundational literacy *alone* is not the answer to everything. The world needs roads, vaccinations, fresh water, sustainable livelihoods, equity, safety, the consistent application of the law, clean energy, climate change mitigation, protection against discrimination, and social justice.

But without literacy integrated into each SDG, the road falls into disrepair, the poor get poorer and sicker, the land cannot produce enough food, good jobs drift even further out of reach, inequality widens, victimization deepens, and racism festers.

The net effect of resistance to, fear of, or misguided views toward literacy is the decimation of human rights. Take it from a group of California parents who insist that anyone, anywhere, can read: letter by letter, phoneme by phone, word by word, sentence by sentence, idea by idea.

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<sup>29</sup> Hanemann, U. (September 7, 2023). Promoting literacy for more peaceful, just, and sustainable societies. United Nations Chronicle. Retrieved from: <https://bit.ly/411iBjh>

<sup>30</sup> Marope, P.T.M. (2017). Literacy: A foundation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. *Prospects* 47, 163–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-018-9436-y>