



**UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa
Concept Note on the Celebrations of International Literacy Day 2021**

ILD 2021 Theme: ‘Literacy for a human-centred recovery: Narrowing the digital divide’

Where: Virtual
When: Friday, 10 September 2021: 10:00 – 12:00 hrs
Mode: Virtual: Register in advance for this meeting:

<https://unesco-org.zoom.us/meeting/register/tJwqcOuurDlpE9F9o8M7cbG6irHJumeNHJb3>

Context

Global

UNESCO is celebrating the International Literacy Day with a webinar on the 8th and 9th of September 2021. The event will include high level panel discussions on concrete experiences on narrowing the digital divide. Another key feature of the event will be the presentation of the International Literacy prizes to 2021 winners.

This year’s celebrations are taking place amidst the new Youth and Adult Literacy strategy for the period 2020-2025. The main goal of the Strategy is to guide UNESCO’s work towards supporting Member States in ‘*ensuring that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030*’, as captured in SDG Target 4.6. The strategy also intends to contribute indirectly to achieving other SDGs with **four strategic priority areas**, which are:

- 1) Supporting Member States in developing national literacy policies and strategies;
- 2) Addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and girls;
- 3) Leveraging digital technologies to expand access and improve learning outcomes; and
- 4) Monitoring progress and assessing literacy skills and programmes.

From studies carried out in different parts of the world, we now know that in many countries, the COVID-19 crisis has illuminated the unpreparedness of education systems, including policy-makers and educators on the continuity of teaching and learning for all in the pandemic. The pandemic has considerably affected youth and adult literacy education. In many countries, adult literacy and education has been absent in initial education response plans, and numerous adult literacy programmes that did exist in the pre-COVID-19 crisis era were suspended. This means that many youth and adults with no or low literacy skills who tend to face multiple disadvantages had limited access to life-saving information and remote learning. In terms of the digital divide, globally, nearly half of the world population (51.2%), including many non-literate adults, did not have access to Internet in 2018¹. Mobile phone subscription per 100

¹ <https://news.itu.int/itu-statistics-leaving-no-one-offline/>: the figure is slightly high at 54.7 per cent for developing countries.

people was 67.5 in low income countries, while the corresponding figure exceeds 90 per cent in high (113.6%) and middle (91.9%) income countries.²

The COVID-19 crisis has been a stark reminder of the large gap between adult literacy policy discourse and reality that already existed in the pre-COVID-19 era. Moving towards the recovery and resilience-building phase, it is pivotal that literacy, including youth and adult literacy, will be integrated into global and national COVID-19 response and recovery plans to ensure the continuity of learning, and enhanced national lifelong learning systems and capacities. For continued learning in the midst of the pandemic, use of alternative learning modes becomes imperative. The emerging digital tools and approaches are making it possible for continued learning. Thus, clear action is needed in terms of policy and practice to promote continued learning.

Regional

UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa has produced country reports on the existing Youth and Literacy policies and practice. The country studies were carried out in each of the nine (9) countries that are supported by the UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa, namely: Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The studies looked into the effects of the fast changing digital world as well as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study reports have potential to shape the intervention strategies for UNESCO to implement the Literacy enhancement in the ROSA supported countries.

While each of the country studies show peculiar country situations on the literacy landscape, a regional synthesis show findings useful to understand in order to move forward to narrow the digital divide. These findings showed: (i) different definitions of literacy, (ii) inadequate state funding for literacy programmes, (iii) different training of literacy facilitators/tutors, and (iv) limited or no use of ICTs and new technologies in literacy programmes and blended learning approaches across the countries.

Across the region, **ICT** is sparingly or not at all used in the delivery of literacy programmes. While the use of new technologies is widely spread in the region (use of cell phones and internet), penetration and use in the education sector is at a snail pace. The excessive cost of the data and network availability especially in most remote areas has not been a help too. The COVID-19 pandemic clearly exposed that education systems in the region were not embracing ICTs to continue teaching and learning in the ‘new normal’. Moving forward, the new normal demands **blending online learning with the face-to-face teaching and learning**, including youth and adult literacy at both national and regional levels.

It is in this context that the Regional Office for Southern Africa is organizing a regional webinar on Sept 10, Friday (10:00 – 12:00 hrs)

Objectives

The objectives of the regional webinar are to:

- share knowledge and experiences regarding equitable, inclusive and effective distance and digital literacy learning for youth and adults with no or low literacy skills

² http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/COVID-19_and_human_development.pdf

- explore the interplay between literacy and digital skills and the ways in which digital skills can be effectively integrated into literacy teaching and learning, and
- identify main issues to be addressed for reimagined distance and digital literacy learning that can contribute to fulfilling the right to literacy of all young people and adults in times of COVID-19 and beyond, and
- celebrate the winning of the 2021 UNESCO - King Sejong Literacy prize for mother language based literacy development in the Southern Africa region by Puku for Children's Literature Foundation, South Africa.

Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes of the webinar include

- Increased awareness on what makes distance learning inclusive and effective for youths and adults building on new knowledge and evidence of effective technologies
- Improved understanding of the interplay between literacy and digital literacy skills for adult education, and
- Concrete ideas for collaboration and potential partners to support development and operationalization of initiatives related to the theme of ILD 2021 in responding to COVID-19 pandemic, and
- Draw a linkage on the blended learning approaches as solution, not just for formal learning but adult learning and education in times of crisis.

Expected participants

The participants are policy makers in Ministries of Education in charge of literacy programmes; other relevant ministries central to literacy programmes; education practitioners, researchers and experts working on literacy programmes; representatives of organisations working on promoting literacy; and civil society organizations.