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MESSAGE ON INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY

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Literacy sustains development. That is the theme of this year's International Literacy Day. It recognizes that higher literacy rates are essential to economic growth, poverty eradication, social participation and environmental protection. It reminds us that literacy is the platform for developing a society's human resources.

Literacy begins with primary education, and achieving universal primary schooling by 2015 is one of the Millennium Development Goals. Yet primary education does not reach every child; there are more than 100 million girls and boys who never enrol in school. Even for those who are enrolled, the quality of primary schooling may be so poor that it leads to only a fragile command of basic literacy skills. And while official statistics put the number of illiterate adults at more than 770 million, that figure does not include the millions more who are ill-equipped to deal with everyday needs of learning, understanding and communicating.

Clearly, in many parts of the world, development has not yet delivered one of its most important outcomes -- more literate and better educated populations. At the same time, those societies are being robbed of the crucial tool for development which literacy represents -- a tool that enables people to take advantage of new learning opportunities, respond to changing occupational demands, undertake greater responsibilities, build their way out of poverty and protect themselves against disease -- especially HIV/AIDS. Women and girls who are deprived of literacy lack a vital weapon in freeing themselves from inequality and discrimination. As we are reminded by the overall theme of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), literacy is freedom.

The precious gift of literacy can sustain development only if it is itself sustained -- by post-literacy programmes, further opportunities for education and training, and the creation of "literate environments" in which literacy can thrive. On this International Literacy Day, let us pledge to step up national and international efforts for improved literacy levels worldwide. Let us give literacy a real chance to transform individuals and societies around the world.

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