Item **5.11** of the provisional agenda

UNESCO STRATEGY FOR YOUTH AND ADULT LITERACY (2020-2025)

OUTLINE

Background: In compliance with 207 EX/Decision 6.I, the Director-General transmits to the General Conference at its 40th session the draft UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) for approval. Any financial and administrative implications related to the present document will be borne within the framework of the draft 40 C/5, while extrabudgetary funds will be sought for greater impact.

Purpose: This document contains the draft UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025), as well as the comments and observations of the Executive Board, at its 207th session, and the Director-General thereon.

Decision required: paragraph 11.

Job: 201913610

BACKGROUND

1.   The international community has set an ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with education and learning central to its achievement. The vision of the Incheon Declaration, Education 2030, is fully captured by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Education 2030 devotes considerable attention to literacy and adult learning including through Target 4.6 and related indicative strategies.

2.   By 205 EX/Decision 6.III, the Executive Board requested the Director-General to review, update and improve the vision and strategy for literacy to contribute to SDG 4 – Education 2030. In line with the decision, the draft Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025), contained in annex I, was presented to the Executive Board at its 207th session, with a view to transmitting it to the General Conference for approval at its 40th session. The Strategy was developed through an inclusive and participatory process, including research and analysis of key trends, online consultation with Member States and partners, as well as an expert meeting.

3.   The Strategy pays special attention to the member countries of the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning (GAL) – the 20 countries with an adult literacy rate below 50% and the E9 countries where the largest number of non-literate adults live. It is structured around four strategic priority areas, which are broadly related to policy and planning, equity and inclusion, innovation and accountability: (i) supporting Member States in developing national literacy policies and strategies; (ii) addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and girls; (iii) leveraging digital technologies to expand access and improve learning outcomes; and (iv) monitoring progress and assessing literacy skills programmes.

COMMENTS OF THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

4.   At its 207th session, the Executive Board strongly supported the draft UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025), including its vision, four strategic priority areas, management and monitoring approach. The Board stressed the crucial role of literacy as part of the right to education and lifelong learning, and appreciated the Strategy's alignment with SDG 4 in view of mobilizing stronger political and financial commitment.

5.   The Board also highlighted the importance of giving increased attention to digital literacy skills, promoting mother language-based literacy, the capacity development of ministries and educators in the Strategy's implementation and to ensuring links between literacy and other knowledge, skills and competencies, including global citizenship, vocational skills and media and information literacy. The key role of the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning (GAL), as a platform for coordination, advocacy and partnership, in the implementation of the Strategy was emphasized. In addition, the Board stressed the need to foster partnerships with multiple actors, including multilateral organizations, parents, libraries and the wider community, among others.

6.   Through its 207 EX/Decision 6.I (Annex II), the Executive Board expressed its appreciation for the draft UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) and invited the Director-General to submit it to the General Conference at its the 40th session for approval. It also invited the Director-General to present an action plan with a budget for the implementation of the Strategy to the Executive Board at its 209th session. The full text of the draft Strategy is available in Annex I to this document (document 207 EX/6.I).

COMMENTS OF THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL

7.   An estimated 750 million people worldwide cannot read and write at the basic level of proficiency, two-thirds of them being women. The proposed UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) is a strategic framework which aims to step up UNESCO's coordinated and

targeted support, in particular to the 29 GAL countries, among which 17 are from Africa and seven in conflict or post-conflict situations, and to facilitate cooperation among them.

8.   The Strategy builds on previous initiatives, namely the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), for which UNESCO was the lead coordination agency, and UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (2006-2015), as well as substantial regional and country-level interventions, with a particular focus on Africa and Asia and the Pacific. It represents UNESCO's strong commitment to literacy, which is a key area in the Medium-Term Strategy 2014-2021 and draft Programme and Budget for 2020-2021, and was also highlighted as one of the priority areas for accelerating progress on SDG 4 by the 2018 Global Education Meeting.

9.   To achieve the literacy vision in today's world, in which demands of knowledge, skills and competencies are fast-evolving, going beyond the basic reading and writing skills, UNESCO will implement the Strategy, considering four dimensions. These include learning that is (i) lifelong, for all age groups and throughout one's life; (ii) life-wide, through different learning settings throughout life and work; (iii) intersectoral, through embedding literacy in efforts for sustainable development in other sectors; and (iv) universal, an issue for least developed, developing and developed countries. Through the Strategy, the Secretariat will also continue to advocate for literacy and literate environments to support Member States in enhancing capacities for policy formulation, programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

10.   Following the approval of the draft Strategy, the Secretariat will develop an action plan for its implementation during the period of 2020-2025, which will be presented to the Executive Board at its 209th session (spring 2020). The development of an accountability and result matrix is also underway, including specific indicators, for effective progress tracking and monitoring, the results of which will be presented as part of a mid-term review in 2022. The Director-General also wishes to point out that, while some basic functions related to the implementation of the Strategy can be fulfilled within the existing regular budget, further extrabudgetary support will be needed to fully implement the Strategy for greater impact in Member States.

Proposed draft resolution

11.   In light of the above, the General Conference may wish to adopt a resolution along the following lines:

> *The General Conference,*
>
> *Recalling* 205 EX/Decision 6.III and 207 EX/6.I*,*
>
> *Also recalling* United Nations General Assembly resolution 73/145, which requests UNESCO to continue to play its 'coordinating and catalysing role through the implementation of the recommendations of the Global Alliance for Literacy and by continuing to provide support to Member States, in collaboration with partners', in the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 targets connected with literacy,
>
> *Having examined* document 40 C/25, which presents the UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025),
>
> 1.   *Takes note of* the broad support expressed by Member States for the draft UNESCO strategy for youth and adult literacy (2020-2025) and its alignment with SDG 4 – Education 2030;
>
> 2.   *Approves* the UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) and *invites* Member States and development partners to reinforce UNESCO's capacities and resources on literacy through extrabudgetary funding;

3. *Encourages* Member States and UNESCO to foster partnerships and promote South-South, North-South and triangular cooperation, with a particular focus on the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning (GAL);

4. *Requests* the Director-General to present an action plan with a budget for the implementation of the UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) to the Executive Board at its 209th session.

ANNEX I

(document 207 EX/6.I)

UNESCO STRATEGY FOR YOUTH AND ADULT LITERACY (2020-2025)

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The international community has set an ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[1], with education and learning central to its achievement. The vision of the Incheon Declaration[2], Education 2030, is fully captured by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Education 2030 devotes considerable attention to literacy and adult learning including through Target 4.6 and related indicative strategies.

2. By 205 EX/Decision 6.III, the Executive Board requested the Director-General to review, update and improve the vision and strategy for literacy to contribute to SDG 4 – Education 2030, and to present it at its 207th session, with a view to transmitting it to the General Conference at its 40th session. The present document therefore contains the draft UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025). The Strategy was developed through an inclusive and participatory process, including research and analysis of key trends, online consultation of Member States and expert meetings.

II. CONTEXT AND JUSTIFICATION

Key challenges

3. Globally, literacy provision has progressed during the last five decades as a result of significant improvements in school enrolment levels; a reflection of the political and financial commitment demonstrated by national governments and the international community. In many countries, this commitment was also reflected in the expansion of access to literacy programmes. However, there are now more adults without literacy compared with 50 years ago, meaning that our efforts have not kept pace with population growth. An estimated 750 million people worldwide cannot read and write at the basic level of proficiency. Counting also the number of people who lack the literacy and numeracy skills needed to function as active members of society would probably increase this estimated figure substantially.

4. Literacy is an essential component of the right to education and a prerequisite for accessing other human rights. Hence, ensuring access to youth and adult literacy provision constitutes a major undertaking for changing the lives of millions of people who have received little to no formal education. For them, the inability to read and write at basic levels of proficiency and to actively participate in an increasingly literate and digitized world is potentially a source of exclusion and a major barrier to their engaging more actively in political, social, cultural and economic activities.

Multiple benefits of addressing literacy challenges

5. Literacy has multiple benefits for individuals as well as society. As part of policies and programmes that promote equality in all aspects of life, literacy interventions can contribute to empowering women and other disadvantaged people and groups to participate in social, economic, political and cultural activities. In particular, the cognitive, psychological, socio-cultural and economic benefits of literacy programmes are well recognized, such as the high tendency of literate mothers enrolling and keeping their children in school. With regard to people on the move, especially migrants

---

and refugees, the 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report[3] provided evidence of the benefits and multiple challenges associated with literacy. Literacy and host language proficiency can increase migrants' and refugees' sense of belonging, their ability to communicate, secure jobs and improve health, while maintaining as well as improving literacy in their mother languages.

Building on the current and previous work

6.   This Strategy builds upon lessons learned from previous initiatives and strategies. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) made literacy a global concern by providing a framework for catalysing intensive, focused and sustained efforts for the promotion of literacy and literate environments through mobilizing political will as well as human and financial resources. UNESCO's Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE, 2006 – 2015) provided a key strategic and operational framework for realizing the vision and goals of UNLD.

7.   In the final evaluation of UNLD, three areas were identified for future action[4]: (i) *mobilizing stronger political and financial commitment and ensuring coordinated action through coordination, advocacy and partnerships as well as integrating literacy in the future global developmental architecture as an education and development imperative; (ii) intensifying collective efforts for enhanced education systems and interventions, underpinned by a three-pronged approach to literacy – improving the quality of basic education for children and adolescents; providing alternative learning opportunities for out-of-school children, adolescents and adults; and enriching literate environments – with a particular focus on the marginalized and the quality of literacy teaching and learning; and (iii) building a robust knowledge and technical base, including revisiting the concepts of "literacies" and improving literacy monitoring and assessment.*

8.   This Strategy carefully builds on lessons learned from the UNLD. It aligns with SDG 4 and Education 2030 to mobilize stronger political and financial commitment. It uses the Global Alliance for Literacy (GAL) within the Framework of Lifelong Learning as a platform for coordination, advocacy and partnership. It also offers a conceptualization of literacy and a better monitoring and evaluation framework. In addition, the Strategy leverages the potential of digital technology in improving access and quality.

III.   VISION FOR LITERACY IN THE STRATEGY

9.   The vision underpinning this Strategy is articulated around four key principles: (i) recognizing the SDGs as a guide and a framework for defining literacy learning outcomes and development impact; (ii) defining literacy as a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing, and using numbers, from a lifelong learning perspective; (iii) linking literacy with a larger set of skills, including digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills, in a mutually reinforcing combination; and (iv) recognizing the importance of contexts in identifying literacy skills needs and ensuring the relevance of contents and delivery modes.

10.   Literacy conceptualized as a continuum of learning and proficiency in lifelong learning perspective is defined as the ability to read and write, to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials including on-line, as well as the ability to solve problems in an increasingly technological and information rich environment[5]. UNESCO recognizes the importance of a three-pronged approach to literacy: (i) increasing access to and

---

3   See: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000366946/PDF/366946eng.pdf.multi

4   37th General Conference (2013). Implementation of the international plan of action for the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012) and specific recommendations for the post-decade period (item 37/58) and the UNESCO Director-General's report to the United Nations General Assembly on the implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade (A/68/201).
        https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/755313/files/A_68_201-EN.pdf

5   UNESCO (2015) Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education
        [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245179]

improving quality of school education; (ii) providing alternative learning opportunities for out-of-school children, young people and adults; and (iii) enriching literate environments. This Strategy focuses on the promotion of youth and adult literacy, and on the provision of literate environments, while other UNESCO initiatives focus on further improving schooling as the best prevention against low levels literacy and numeracy.

IV. GOAL, SCOPE AND STRATEGIC AREAS OF ACTION

11.   Within this context and in full alignment with SDG 4, 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 Target 4.6. In doing so, it will also contribute indirectly to achieving other targets of SDG 4 and other SDGs.

12.   This Strategy will pay special attention to member countries of the GAL, which includes 20 countries with an adult literacy rate below 50% and the E9 countries, where the largest number of non-literate adults live. It will foster targeted support to and cooperation among the member countries, among which 17 are from Africa and seven in conflict or post-conflict situations.

13.   Following on the above, the Strategy includes four strategic priority areas:

- Strategic priority area 1: Supporting Member States in developing national literacy policies and strategies.

- Strategic priority area 2: Addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and girls.

- Strategic priority area 3: Leveraging digital technologies to expand access and improve learning outcomes.

- Strategic priority area 4: Monitoring progress and assessing literacy skills and programmes.

Strategic priority area 1: Supporting Member States in developing national literacy policies and strategies

14.   The review of 50 years of strategies and programmes identified several areas that require action. The absence of whole-of-government approaches, lack of opportunities for national stakeholders to strengthen their capacity and limited partnership opportunities constitute some of the major problems associated with improving literacy policies and provision in many countries. An insufficient capacity to design literacy strategies from a lifelong learning perspective and to expand opportunities for improving literacy in mother-tongue languages, including indigenous languages, often constitute additional challenges.

15.   UNESCO will work with Member States to integrate the vision of literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in public policies and programming. This requires an inter-sectoral approach to formulating policies and programmes, which calls for the integration of literacy provision both in public policies and in education sector plans. This also requires tools and mechanisms such as recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) mechanisms, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and quality assurance processes.

Strategic priority area 2: Addressing the learning needs of disadvantaged groups, particularly women and girls

16.   Although steady progress has been made, many people are still unable to read and write sufficiently for the needs of their everyday life and work. While responding to the request of Member

States to strengthen inclusive and equitable policies and systems to address the learning needs of marginalized and vulnerable people, UNESCO will provide its support to expand flexible and open youth and adult literacy programmes, tailored to the learning needs of specific populations that tend to face multiple disadvantages. This includes in particular women and girls as well as ethnic minorities, indigenous peoples, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons, rural populations, those in conflict affected countries and persons with disabilities.

17.   This Strategy will focus particularly on gender equality and the learning needs of out-of-school youth, refugees and migrants as well as indigenous people. To promote gender equality in and through literacy, UNESCO will seek to fill knowledge gaps in understanding the issue in various socio-economic and cultural contexts, promoting policy learning and providing policy support and capacity-development services. In addition to promoting targeted measures, UNESCO will support Member States in mainstreaming gender equality when reviewing and developing literacy policies, strategies and activities, so that gender equality considerations positively influence policy priorities and budgeting patterns.

Strategic priority area 3: Leveraging digital technologies to expand access and improve learning outcomes

18.   UNESCO will support Member States in leveraging digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) and open education resources (OER) to expand access to literacy learning opportunities, improve their quality, and build a digital learning environment that will contribute to sustaining and further developing the acquired literacy skills. Attention will also be paid to the use of digital technologies to train literacy educators and provide in-service support. Partnerships with leading research institutions and with relevant private sector bodies will be strengthened to provide resources to analyse, anticipate and assess the potential of blended and technology-based literacy programmes for young people and adults, and the extent to which AI and other new developments in technology can contribute to developing flexible learning pathways and systems within a lifelong learning perspective. Lessons learned in developing the appropriate blend of information and communication technology (ICT) and face-to-face learning strategies will be documented and mediated to help ensure the most effective and efficient use of digital technologies in literacy programmes for young people and adults.

Strategic priority area 4: Monitoring progress and assessment of literacy skills and programmes

19.   For UNESCO, two key priorities are to improve literacy data to support evidence-based policy and programme interventions at the national level, and to monitor the progress towards SDG 4 Target 4.6. Special attention will be given to strengthening national capacities in establishing learning assessment systems, and the use of data for planning, delivery and accountability. For the latter purpose, through the work done by the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), UNESCO will monitor global literacy progress towards the SDG 4.6.1 indicator, and develop measuring and monitoring tools and methodology at the global level. In addition, material to provide a broader perspective will be gathered and analysed using the Global Education Monitoring (GEM) reports, the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) and the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA) process. Furthermore, UNESCO will encourage researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to continue producing and using a diverse range of data and evidence on literacy. This will facilitate the identification of challenges and the impact of policies and practices at the individual and community levels, especially when literacy notions, uses, practices and benefits are considered highly contextual and complex.

V.   RESOURCES, PARTNERSHIPS AND ADVOCACY

20.   The successful implementation of this Strategy will largely depend on financial, human and technical resources, and on strong political commitment by UNESCO and its Member States. In this

regard, UNESCO will build effective partnerships and cooperation based on its *Policy Framework for Strategic Partnerships: A Comprehensive Partnership Strategy*.

21.   UNESCO will internally mobilize and coordinate its technical resources to manage and support the implementation of this Strategy. It will also rely on key partnerships with a wide array of technical and funding agencies within the United Nations family and beyond, regionally and globally. UNESCO has already enlisted a number of United Nations agencies and multilateral agencies in the process of the development of this Strategy as current and potential partners in this regard.

22.   Ensuring adequate financing of the Strategy will also entail UNESCO's enhanced advocacy efforts with national governments, bilateral donors, financial institutions and global financing mechanisms such as the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). In addition, the Strategy will use International Literacy Days and Literacy Prizes to promote literacy and to mobilize its Member States and international community to support literacy policies, strategies and programmes.

VI.   MONITORING AND EVALUATING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

23.   With a view to rendering this Strategy more effective and facilitating its implementation, monitoring and evaluation, UNESCO will apply a results-based programming, management and monitoring approach, consistent with the Organization's rules and procedures. UNESCO will develop an accountability and results matrix, including specific indicators to allow tracking of progress and drawing out useful lessons in the implementation of the Strategy on a continuing basis.

24.   A mid-term review will take place in 2022, which is the first year of UNESCO next Medium Term Strategy (41 C/4), to assess progress and to adapt the Strategy as required and in accordance with the situation and operating context. UNESCO will undertake a final and independent evaluation of the Strategy in 2025. This evaluation will determine the need for rolling this Strategy over to the 2026-2030 period to coincide with the end of the 2030 Education agenda and the completion of the SDGs.

ANNEX II

(document 207 EX/Decision 6.I)

UNESCO STRATEGY FOR YOUTH AND ADULT LITERACY (2020-2025)

The Executive Board,

1.   Recalling 205 EX/Decision 6.III,

2.   Having examined document 207 EX/6.I,

3.   Recognizing literacy as a continuum of learning and proficiency in lifelong learning perspective as the ability to read and write, to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials including online, as well as the ability to solve problems in an increasingly technological and information-rich environment;

4.   Also recognizing that literacy is a foundation for lifelong learning, a building block for achieving human rights and fundamental freedoms and a driver of sustainable development;

5.   Expresses its appreciation to the Director-General for aligning the draft Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) with SDG 4 – Education 2030, as contained in document 207 EX/6.I, and invites the Director-General to transmit it to the 40th session of the General Conference for its approval;

6.   Encourages Member States, UNESCO and other United Nations organizations, multilateral and bilateral donors, regional organizations, civil society, academia, cultural institutions such as libraries, and the private sector to scale up intersectoral literacy efforts, including digital literacy, through *inter alia* technology and community engagement, with particular attention to disadvantaged groups, as well as girls and women;

7.   Underlines the importance of promoting, where appropriate, learning in mother tongue as well as granting national minorities the opportunity to receive an education in their mother tongue as one of the key components of the strategy;

8.   Also encourages Member States and UNESCO to promote South-South, North-South and triangular cooperation, with particular focus on countries of the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning (GAL);

9.   Encourages the Director-General to promote the use of literacy methods developed by Member States which have been awarded by UNESCO in the implementation of the UNESCO strategy for youth and adult literacy;

10. Taking into account the importance of quality education, and UNESCO's mandate to lead the global coordination on SDG 4, requests the Director-General, in collaboration with partners, to continue her efforts to advocate for literacy and literate environments and support Member States in enhancing capacities for policy formulation, programme implementation, monitoring and evaluation;

11. Invites Member States and development partners to reinforce UNESCO's capacities and resources on literacy through extrabudgetary funding;

12. Invites the Director-General to present an action plan with a budget for the implementation of the strategy for youth and adult literacy to the Executive Board at its 209th session.