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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

on the occasion of International Literacy Day 2005

UNESCO, 8 September 2005

Minister,
Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,
Distinguished Guests,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this celebration of International Literacy Day 2005. In this year of the sixtieth anniversaries of the founding of the United Nations and UNESCO, nations around the world are today celebrating International Literacy Day for the fortieth time. It is a sign of our enduring commitment and determination to rid the world of the scourge of ignorance.

Today's occasion is particularly auspicious because we will be inaugurating the Hans Christian Andersen international exhibition. Let me extend a warm welcome to Mrs Henriette Rasmussen, Minister of Culture, Education, Research and Church of the Greenland Home Rule Government, who honours us today with her presence and who will inaugurate the exhibition to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen, which will take place immediately after this ceremony.

Let me also cordially welcome M Philippe Delerm, our distinguished guest speaker. A well-known French writer and scholar, Mr Delerm has a particular interest in literacy and is a member of the Association "Lire et faire lire" which seeks to stimulate children's love of reading. Thank you for being with us today.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today, compared with 40 years ago when International Literacy Day was first celebrated, millions more people enjoy access to communication through the written word. Millions have used this knowledge to further their learning, improve their lives and exercise more control over their present and future.

These gains have been made through tremendous efforts by individuals, communities, NGOs, educational institutions, governments and international organizations. Literacy programmes are engines of hope, creating new opportunities for individuals and their families. At this very moment, millions of women and men and out-of-school girls and boys are attending classes in houses, churches, mosques or temples. Others are learning under trees, in the fields, and at the roadside.

Mothers' literacy is, by far, the most important factor in determining their children's, particularly their daughters', education. Educated women are able to make more informed choices about important matters in their lives, and this affects everyone around them.

The United Nations Literacy Decade launched in 2003 aims at literacy for all, both in developing and developed countries. UNESCO is taking a leading role in coordinating the Decade and its Honorary Ambassador, the First Lady of the United States, Mrs Laura Bush, has repeatedly stressed the importance of mothers and children reading and learning together for "Literacy for All" and "Education for All" (EFA). The focus on literacy for women's empowerment is, therefore, very important and necessary for the overall development of countries.

The United Nations Literacy Decade, for which UNESCO is the lead agency and international coordinator, is dedicated to the EFA goals of halving adult literacy and ensuring the learning needs of all young people and adults through access to quality education by the year 2015. This is a massive challenge when one realizes that today there are around 800 million people who cannot be considered literate; the majority are women and rural people.

Much literacy work is going on around the world and everyone involved deserves our congratulation and support. But more needs to be done. This is why, drawing on good practices and proven approaches, UNESCO will launch a new literacy initiative for empowerment called LIFE this autumn, addressing the literacy needs of 34 countries in the world where the literacy rate is below 50% or the illiterate population is above 10 million.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The theme of this year's International Literacy Day is literacy for sustainable development, which corresponds to the Literacy Decade's emphasis for 2005-2006. In today's world, literacy is a vital key for unlocking human potential. It is essential for accessing information and knowledge, for participating in processes of economic development, and for interacting with the social and natural worlds. As modern life becomes more complex, so must our understanding. In changing conditions, for example, new forms of livelihood may bring a different relationship between people and their environment. Literacy programmes can be an avenue for addressing issues dealing with environmental protection, poverty alleviation and viable methods of income

generation. Literacy is a flexible skill through which poor and marginalized people can realize their full human potential.

Above all, literacy is a means for achieving a better quality of life. Thus far, I have emphasized the importance of literacy for improving our “outer life”, so to speak, but literacy is a powerful force for enriching our “inner life” too. This is why I am especially happy to be celebrating on this International Literacy Day the 200th anniversary of the birth of Hans Christian Andersen. Thanks to his creative and artistic genius, people in all parts of the globe have gained entry through reading to his world of imagination, fantasies and dreams. Over many generations, his works have provided parents and children with access to a shared experience of wonder, astonishment, humour and surprise. Through writers like Andersen, literacy is revealed as a gateway to the fullness of our own humanity.

I believe that this was recognized many centuries ago by King Sejong, one of the most outstanding Korean kings of the Choson Kingdom. In 1443, King Sejong invented the han’gul alphabet which became the basis for the subsequent development of Korean literacy, education and scholarship. As a great promoter of education and learning, King Sejong has been associated with UNESCO’s work in literacy since 1989 through the award of prizes bearing his name.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a few moments I will be awarding the prizes to the winners of the 2005 International Literacy Prizes but, in concluding my remarks, let me extend my thanks and congratulations to all the candidates and, indeed, all those women and men of good will everywhere who are working to create a fully literate world.

Thank you.