

Internet consultatie vernieuwd Beleid Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking BuZA

Why literacy matters; a new perspective on inclusive growth: why literacy matters

Introduction

Globalism takes in the world all at once. Its rise has coincided with amazing progress; from 44% of the world's population living in extreme poverty to 10% now. The gains, however, have not been uniform. In many countries inequality is growing as the benefits of economic growth go to the richest members of society. Today the wealthiest 1% hold 19% of the total wealth against just 3% held by the bottom 40%. In many countries the gap between rich and poor has widened. Not only has the gap in incomes widened, but in just about every area, whether it be education, life expectancy or employment prospects. Many people feel left behind, see a stagnation in their living standards and an erosion in prospect for social mobility. So it's time for change. Not only is it time to rethink our traditional model of economic growth and aim for a more inclusive way of organizing our economy but also to rethink the way we, as organisations, wish to see our policy recommendations implemented by national governments. Too often our recommendations fall on deaf ears, too often our proposals are not implemented, too often our advice gets lost in governmental silos. So how can we strive for a better implementation of our policy recommendations? And how can we help the people whose real struggles and real problems are often unheard on policy level?

Putting people first

For many years both OECD, UNESCO and the European Commission have been pushing for more investments in the skills of people, like literacy, numeracy and digitization. They have advised to put people's real needs and struggles central in every policy recommendation and implementation. Governments unfortunately take the basic skills of their people for granted. But so far the numbers have been discouraging; the EU has made almost no progress over the past decade in reducing the percentages. Individuals often feel ashamed and low literacy has become a hidden issue and even a taboo in Europe. Children hide it from their teachers, patients hide it from their doctors, and workers hide it from their employers. How can we ensure inclusive growth with people's well-being centre stage if our own people can't read and write well enough to function in everyday society? There is a lack of awareness among politicians, policy makers and employers that

literacy is an issue in Europe whilst literacy is more essential than ever before in societies dominated by the written word. If we really want to ensure globalisation works for the many, investment in literacy skills is a prerequisite for achieving success. Because each year, hundreds of thousands of children start their secondary school two years behind in reading. And about 70 million Europeans lack sufficient reading, writing and numeracy skills. They lack the ability at a level that enables development and functioning in society. 45% of the EU population lack a sufficient level of digital skills. Many young people cannot find jobs; 30% of third-level graduates are working in jobs that don't require their level of qualification; yet 40% of employers say they can't find people with the right skills. Reading and writing have for too long been viewed as solely a matter for the education system. Wrongly so, as the need for a substantial improvement in literacy levels is driven to a large extent by a number of important socio-economic trends, now and in the future. Unfortunately there is currently no comprehensive and structural literacy strategy in Europe nor on other continents in place, no shared mission to solve this literacy crisis in the world and no alignment between the real learning needs of workers and employers. All the policy recommendations are in place but there is not enough action on national level. This frustrates all players who work towards a solution for the dangerous gaps in our societies.

Now what?

If we wish a more inclusive economy where globalisation works for the many, if we want to strengthen Europe's and the world's competitiveness, to stimulate investment and create more jobs we should act upon it. We should put literacy and basic skills higher up on the political agenda. Countries should implement the recommendations made by OECD, the European Commission and UNESCO's Special Envoys. As OECD's Secretary General Angel Gurría said during his Ministerial Forum speech in 2017; 'we need to empower people and build social elevators, enhancers for shared prosperity.'

If we want to provide people with the means to succeed – in line with OECD's Inclusive Growth initiative- we need to ensure that every child and adult in the world can read and write sufficiently enough to function in modern day society.

Objectives *SDG agenda Minister Sigrid Kaag – Foreign Affairs the Netherlands-*

- Create sense of urgency and co-responsibility with governments and employers around the world to put SDG 4.6 higher up on the political agenda
- Get insights from OECD, UNESCO and ministers to solve the world's literacy issue
- Create a shared mission to ensure all children and adults can read and write sufficiently to function in modern day society

Sources: OECD Report 'Bridging the GAP', World Economic Forum Davos 2018 report, policy brief 'Time to Act; Making Inclusive Growth Happen', EU High Level report on Literacy 2012, Skills Agenda European Commission 2016