



Above:
Senior officials
at the opening
ceremony of
the Literacy
Challenge Forum
in Dubai.

Literacy Challenge Forum Leaders Seek to Eradicate Illiteracy in the Arab World

Organised by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (MBRF), the inaugural edition of the 'Literacy Challenge Forum' officially opened at the Hilton Dubai Al Habtoor City, under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE, Ruler of Dubai, and with directives from MBRF Chairman H.H. Sheikh Ahmed Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

The Forum held on February 24-25, 2020, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). It aims to provide a holistic platform bringing together experts in

literacy from all around the world to exchange experiences and expertise, strengthen collaboration, and come up with effective solutions to combat illiteracy in the Arab world.

The opening session featured four prominent speakers, namely, MBRF's CEO His Excellency Jamal Bin

Huwaireb, H.E. Dena Assaf, the United Nations' Resident Coordinator for the UAE; H.E. Dr Hegazi Idris, Regional Programme Specialist in Basic and Adult Education at UNESCO; and H.E. Khaled Abdel Shafi, Director of the Regional Hub for Arab States at the UNDP.

"Illiteracy is ignorance; it is poverty, fundamentalism, and terrorism," asserted H.E. Bin Huwaireb in his keynote address. "Illiteracy is a major issue in the Arab region; it is a key obstacle standing in the way of Arab countries' quest for sustainable development and ensuring the wellbeing of their people. It is a problem that has been considerably exacerbated by the tensions plaguing this region. Statistics point to the deep-seated nature of this issue in certain Arab countries, where it has grown into a major challenge that requires drastic measures and collaboration among all countries."

"With all of these realities in mind, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation is organising the first Literacy Challenge Forum under the theme 'Challenges and Solutions', in line with the vision of the UAE's and Dubai's wise leadership, as well as the directives of our Chairman H.H. Sheikh Ahmed Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum. Our leaders have long been committed to investing in individuals, training them, and sharpening their future-ready skills," H.E. added.

"The Forum presents a platform bringing together thought leaders and experts to exchange views, inspiring individuals and organisations to rally efforts and take on the illiteracy issue across all cities and countries of the Arab world," H.E. Bin Huwaireb noted.

For her part, the UN's Dena Assaf applauded MBRF's literacy efforts, saying: "It is encouraging to see that the MBRF has maintained the momentum of its initiatives despite the turbulence spread across the region. Despite the humanitarian crises in many parts of the Arab world, there have been some reassuring statistics. School enrolment and literacy rates have actually increased; the adult literacy rate rose to 75.3% up from 65% in 2000, while youth literacy rates grew to 86.8% from 81.8%. Nevertheless, the region continues to lag behind global averages."

"The situation is more complicated in countries that

Dena Assaf: "There are 28.5 million out-of-school children in the world and half of them live in conflict-plagued countries."

Jamal Bin Huwaireb: Illiteracy is a major issue in the Arab region; it is a key obstacle standing in the way of Arab countries' quest for sustainable development.

have endured conflict," Assaf continued. "There are 28.5 million out-of-school children in the world and half of them live in conflict-plagued countries. Of these, four million live in the Arab region, and girls make up 55% of the total. In fact, women make up 63% of the global illiterate population. Educated women have a better chance of escaping poverty and ensuring a better standard of life for their children."

In his portion of the ceremony, Dr Idris said: "Literacy is a human right; it empowers individuals to claim all of their other social rights, and to improve themselves and their communities. There are more than 750 million adults who can neither read nor write; this is unacceptable, unjustifiable, and unethical. In the Arab region, estimates from five years ago put the number of illiterates at a staggering 50 million."

Dr Idris went on to outline seven challenges and solutions for illiteracy in the Arab world. Firstly, the region faces a serious issue in identifying the concept of literacy. It is not limited to reading and writing, but goes beyond that to include the ability to communicate with people and learn modern concepts. Second, primary education needs to be enhanced. It is not enough to get students in classrooms, the material they learn must also be upgraded.

For his part, Khaled Abdel Shafi noted: "The Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation's initiatives have always sought to place Dubai and the UAE in the knowledge map. Together, we launched the Global Knowledge Index, which has grown to cover 136 countries. The Index offers countries a roadmap to set proactive data-backed policies to promote and enhance knowledge, which is a building block of the knowledge economy and sustainable development. The Foundation has always supported bold, innovative ideas, and today we join hands again to launch the Literacy Challenge Forum, bringing together on literacy experts from around the world to tackle the issue of illiteracy in the Arab world. We are proud of being part of this initiative."