

Remarks by Former President Kgalema Motlanthe at the Project Literacy Breakfast, Johannesburg

05th July 2018

Programme Director;
Meg Pahad, Chairperson of Project Literacy;
Brenda Kali, CEO of Conscious Companies;
Nicolas Wolpe, CEO of the Liliesleaf Trust;
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to say a few words at this morning's 'Breakfast of Insights' in support of Project Literacy and its 'Run Home to Read' programme.

As we collectively rally to sustain and aid the initiative's longevity and endeavours, we are reminded of the central importance of education and literacy – which comprises a nation's lifeblood, being critical to its success.

Gathering to honour and recognise this reality, we are charged with ensuring that one of our nation's critical projects – which have to date benefited thousands of people – does not perish under the weight of economic insufficiency.

As UNESCO notes, 'literacy is a human right'¹! Literacy is integral at every stage of human life, with the building blocks formed during early childhood development. In the absence of the fundamental pillars of literacy, people are prevented from many aspects of communication and participation in systems of state and civilian life.

Comprehending this, Apartheid's Bantu Education system sought to abbreviate the potential of the country's Black, Coloured and Indian inhabitants by subjecting them to

¹ <https://www.gov.za/speeches/international-literacy-day-2017-17-nov-2016-1446>

segmented and hierarchically organised system of education, on the basis of race.

This reality was keenly evident for those of us imprisoned under apartheid. In response, we took it upon ourselves to teach each other to read and write primarily to enable ourselves to read the letters sent by loved ones. Illiterate prisoners were first trained to hold a pen, draw vertical and horizontal lines, as well as circles and semi-circles, as we guided each other on the key pillars to support literacy.

We believed that the ability to draw the afore-stated lines, circles and semi-circles was the key to literacy because all alphabets and numbers are a combination of lines, circles and semi-circles.

Of course, adults gain the labels of things through their lived experience – they have a vocabulary which enables them to engage in debates involving abstract and complex concepts. With illustrative language based in their experience it is possible to explain complex concepts.

For instance there is an isiXhosa idiom which says: “*ni ba lumkele a bazingeli a ba phatha ityiwa*”. Let me try to translate that into English for you. Imagine a hamlet or village in times of famine when meaty relishment to a meal is difficult to come by except through hunting. The idiom states that one beware of hunters who take salt with them as they embark on the hunting expedition. This act of carrying salt, in this case, creates the risk of the hunters failing to bring any animal back because they may eat all of it in the forest.

The idiom has universal applicability and is used whenever the trustworthiness or integrity of someone or candidate who seeks to be elected to a position of trust and responsibility is called into question.

There is also a Setswana idiom which says; “*Ke modidi o o makoko*” – meaning I am an indigent but proud person. Such a person can never be bribed or corrupted.

In doing so, we gained intimate knowledge on how critical literacy skills are during early childhood development – which forms the foundations that will enable young people to achieve their goals, access employment and basic needs and fully participate in every aspect of citizenship.

At present, there are several weaknesses within the system – some of which occur at structural levels.

When an infant is born, they become the responsibility of the Department of Health, moving on to become the responsibility of the Department of Social Development and then subsequently the Department of Basic Education. There is a pressing need for streamlining and integration within this process – which sees departments contribute separately and at different times over the course of a child’s life.

We know that in terms of cognitive skills, early childhood development represents the most important phase for a child – and therefore it demands our most urgent attention and care.

Our country’s present literacy and education crises demand our urgent attention, as the statistics on ECD and literacy-at-large speak volumes.

According to the Statistics South Africa’s General Household Survey of 2012, 92.9% of South Africans can read and write². While this appears positive, recent studies have revealed that this statistic denotes functional literacy, failing to account for full comprehension.

² <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/31407/literatez/>

A recent 'Progress in International Reading Literacy Study' (PIRLS), which aims to assess reading comprehension found that

'78% of grade 4 pupils in South Africa fell below the lowest level on the PIRLS scale: meaning, in effect, that they cannot understand what they're reading'.³

50 countries participated in the study, and out of these, South Africa placed last. The study additionally found that '62% of South African primary schools do not have school libraries', as many of our schools are under-resourced and neglected.

This is further compounded by the fact that at present, 32.9% of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 are unemployed and not receiving education or skills training.

From these statistics, it is clear that the legacies of our past remain with us, exacerbated by the failures of the post-apartheid era in fully addressing our education crisis, and neglecting to pay particular attention to ECD. The arrival at a future rid of the scourges of the past is dependent on the development of our country's children and youth – while finding ways to address the unemployment crisis.

Consequently, supporting initiatives like Project Literacy is central to these efforts.

Programme Director;

In addressing our present education and literacy crises, we require innovative models that enhance and supplement the official schooling system.

Project Literacy represents one of these. Your community-based early childhood development programme 'Run Home to Read', presents us with a unique model in addressing our

³ <https://theconversation.com/south-africa-has-a-reading-crisis-why-and-what-can-be-done-about-it-88711>

nation's literacy challenges, while paying attention to innovative ways to create employment.

It reminds us that while attention is often placed on matric results and the higher education sector, we must not lose sight of the importance of basic education and ECD.

Project Literacy, founded as an NGO in 1973 that focused on adult literacy and numeracy and now targets adults, youth and children, has shown remarkable resilience.

Over forty-five years, the project has provided vital assistance to communities that are ignored, under-recognised and isolated. These efforts have had a profound impact, while facing intermittent and pressing funding challenges – which stands as a testament to the tenacity of its employees.

Through the remarkable 'Run Home to Read' programme, the project simultaneously addresses literacy, leadership, access, social cohesion and unemployment through the identification and training of Reading Champions who assist young children and families in literacy development, ensuring school readiness, providing critical support, and enhancing family life.

A project like this deserves our support as developing literacy propels the advancement of communication tools in children, assists in their brain development and grows imagination and creativity⁴.

With these words, we are reminded that access to literacy is at once about education, early childhood development, and the freedom to dream and access different realities and experiences.

⁴ <http://www.inspirationboost.com/8-reasons-why-reading-is-so-important>

In closing, our collective presence at today's breakfast affirms our belief in and support for the work that Project Literacy does – which serves to address historical inequality and achieve social justice.

Through the insights that are shared in our time together, I hope that we can chart a way forward, ensuring the longevity of Project Literacy and mapping a new course for its future.

Let us use our positions of privilege to mobilise donations of financial resources in support of Project Literacy.

Thank you for your kind attention.