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REPORT

drawn up on behalf of the Committee on
Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport

~~on~~ measures to combat illiteracy

Rapporteur : Mrs P.J. VIEHOFF

At its sittings of 21 November 1980, 12 February 1981 and 16 November 1981 respectively, the European Parliament referred to the Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport the motion for a resolution tabled by Mr BOYES concerning combatting illiteracy (doc. 1-615/80); the motion for a resolution tabled by Miss HOOPER and others on illiteracy in the fourth world (doc. 1-898/80); and the motion for a resolution tabled by Mr LEZZI on measures to combat illiteracy (doc.1-702/81).

On 14 April 1981, the Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport appointed Mrs BUCHAN rapporteur. Mrs BUCHAN having resigned as rapporteur, Mrs VIEHOFF was appointed in her place on 21 October 1981.

The Committee considered the draft report at its meetings of 3 February 1982, 25 February 1982 and 29 March 1982, adopting it at the latter meeting by 15 votes to one with no abstentions.

The following participated in the vote: Mr Beumer, chairman; Mr Fajardie, Mr Hahn, Mr Schwencke, vice-chairmen; Mrs Viehoff, rapporteur; Mr Bøgh, Miss Brookes, Mr Chanterie (deputizing for Mr Brok), Mr Ferrero, deputizing Mr Bucchini, Mrs Gaiotti ~~de Base~~; Mr Gerokostopoulos, Mr Papageorgiou, Mr Papapietro (deputizing for Mr Fanti), Mr Pedini, Mrs Pery and Mrs Pruvot.

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The Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport hereby submits to the European Parliament the following motion for a resolution together with explanatory statement :

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION

on measures to combat illiteracy

The European Parliament,

- (a) deploring the rising rate of illiteracy in the European Community;
- (b) aware that illiteracy is generally associated with poverty and with the shortcomings of the education system, and is therefore likely to increase with rising unemployment;
- (c) aware that absolute and relative levels of illiteracy are also likely to increase with enlargement of the European Community;
- (d) convinced that illiteracy acts as an obstacle to full and effective participation in literate, democratic societies;
- (e) recalling the resolution of the Council and Ministers of Education meeting within the Council of 9 February 1976, comprising an action programme in the field of education, and in particular the principle of equal opportunity for free access to all forms of education¹;
- (f) recalling also the conclusions of the Ministers of Education meeting in Council on 22 June 1981, and especially the high priority to be given to extending opportunities for continuing education and training²;
- (g) having regard to the activities of the Commission in the field of literacy³;
- (h) having regard to the work of intergovernmental organizations (e.g. UNESCO, the Council of Europe and OECD) in the field of literacy;

¹ OJ No C38, 19.2.76, p.1

² Bulletin of the European Communities, Commission, No 6-1981, Vol 14, pp.33-35

³ Answer by Mr BURKE on behalf of the Commission to Written Question No 1313/80, OJ No C345, 31.12.80, p.18;
 Answer by Mr RICHARD on behalf of the Commission to Written Question No 2291/80, OJ No C140, 10.6.81, p.21

- especially the Youth Forum of the European Communities;
- j)- having regard to the resolution on a Community education action programme adopted by the European Parliament on 11 March 1982¹;
 - k)- having regard to the motion for a resolution tabled by Mr Boyes concerning combatting illiteracy (Doc. 1-615/80);
 - l)- having regard to the motion for a resolution tabled by Miss Hooper and others on illiteracy in the fourth world (Doc. 1-898/80);
 - m)- having regard to the motion for a resolution tabled by Mr Lezzi on measures to combat illiteracy (Doc. 1-702/81), calling for a public hearing on the subject;
 - n)- having regard to the report of its Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport (Doc. 1-88/82);
1. Calls on Member States to recognize the social and educational problem of illiteracy in the European Community and to declare their formal commitment to its eradication;
 2. In this respect, calls on Ministers of Education to hasten achievement of this goal, to draw up national literacy policies where they have not already done so and, in spite of the difficult financial situation, to make available as a priority the funds necessary for literacy work;
 3. Calls on Governments of Member States to integrate national literacy policies with broader programmes designed to eliminate the many forms of disadvantage with which illiteracy is generally associated;
 4. Calls on the Commission to increase support for research arising from practical literacy programmes, both public and private, in particular through the European Social and Regional Funds;
 5. Calls on the Commission to draw up a comparative report on government measures to combat illiteracy in Member States, as well as to gather, collate and disseminate information on the best practices in Member States;
 6. Requests the Commission to promote the exchange of information between public and private agencies involved in literacy work in Member States, for instance by acting as a clearing-house, by adding literacy to policy themes of the Eurydice system, and/or by encouraging the creation of a European-wide non-governmental literacy organization;
 7. Urges the Commission to encourage Member States where less remedial work has been done through pilot literacy projects involving the full range of technological aids available for teaching purposes, and in consultation with literacy workers including new literates;

¹ OJ

8. Calls on the Commission to draw up, in due course, a study of the nature, scale and sources of illiteracy in the European Community, not forgetting school organization and teaching methods, based in particular on the findings of practical literacy programmes, and to make recommendations to Member States;

9. Urges the Commission to cooperate with relevant intergovernmental agencies (e.g. UNESCO, Council of Europe, OECD) and non-governmental organizations (especially the Youth Forum of the European Communities) in its literacy work;

10. Calls on Member States, the Commission of the European Communities, and all authorities concerned to mount campaigns in order to raise public awareness of the problems of illiteracy and to remove the stigma involved;

11. Instructs its President to forward this resolution and the report of its Committee to the Council, the Commission and the Economic and Social Committee of the European Communities, and to the Governments of the Member States.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENTI. Definition, scale and significance of illiteracy* in the European CommunityDefinition

1. As yet, there is no single or agreed definition of illiteracy and, in this brief report, no rigorous definition will be attempted. The concept of illiteracy may include, among others, adults who have never attended school, (instrumental illiterates); those who leave school after a short time or without passing primary level certifying examinations (semi-literates); those whose literacy has lapsed (secondary or reversionary illiterates); and migrant workers not literate in the language of the host country (linguistic illiterates). To the lack of basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic may also be added notions of technical, social, cultural and political illiteracy. The notion of illiteracy thus relates to a variety of situations and may best be understood as a spectrum.

2. While illiteracy has often been defined in terms of relatively narrow objective standards (e.g. the average ability to read, write, understand and count of a given age-group), your committee prefers a broader definition based on individual experience of illiteracy as a hindrance to full and effective participation in society. (An approach based on participation in literate society has the advantage that it does not require preparation of special materials to maintain newly-acquired or restored literacy).

Scale of illiteracy in the European Community

3. There is already evidence of widespread illiteracy in the European Community. In 1981 the Commission provisionally accepted estimates putting the number of those in the European Community of the Nine not possessing the capacity for reading, writing and understanding currently expected of school-children aged 13 at between 4-6% of the population, i.e. some 10-15 million people. In so doing, the Commission recognised that these figures were "very conservative".¹

* For the purpose of this report, illiteracy is taken to include innumeracy.

¹ Answer by Mr BURKE to Written Question No 1313/80, OJ No C345, 31.12.80, p.18

4. Estimates prepared for the Government of the Netherlands, suggesting that illiteracy among native Dutch people might reach 4%, bear out these figures. Indications for the United Kingdom, where relatively comprehensive attempts have also been made to study and remedy the problem, put the number of adult functional illiterates at 2 million.

5. In response to a questionnaire sent out by the Commission in late 1979, the Governments of France, Germany and Luxembourg stated that there was no illiteracy in their countries. Since then, however, a report has been published by the Federal Ministry of Education and Science establishing the existence of illiteracy in West Germany.¹ Meanwhile, a study by "Aide à Toutes Détresses - Quart Monde" (ATD-4th World), to be published by the Commission during 1982, reveals the existence of illiteracy in certain urban areas of Belgium and Luxembourg. In the circumstances, it seems reasonable also to assume some measure of illiteracy in France.

6. For Italy, responses to the Commission questionnaire gave rates for 1971 of 5.2% (over 2.5 million people) for adult illiterates; 27.2% (some 13 million) for those not having completed elementary studies; and 26.28% (10.75 million) for those holding only elementary school certificates.² For Mediterranean countries not then members of the European Community, figures made available by the Commission in 1980 on the basis of official statistics indicate 13.97% adult illiteracy for Greece and, for Portugal, 23% adult illiteracy and 8% semi-literacy.³

7. In considering the above figures it should of course be recalled that illiteracy is notoriously hard to quantify, even allowing for differing definitions of the phenomenon. Governments in the European Community, where schooling is universal and compulsory, have hitherto tended to dismiss illiteracy as non-existent in their countries or, at most, as confined exclusively to immigrants. The illiterate themselves, meanwhile, are at pains to conceal their illiteracy for both material and psychological reasons (effect on employment prospects, stigma attaching to illiteracy in literate societies; etc.). Consequently it should be repeated that the above "guesstimates" almost certainly understate the true situation.

8. The most telling points to emerge from the above figures are, first, that illiteracy exists on a significant scale in the Northern and not just in the Mediterranean countries of the European Communities; and, second, that the indigenous and not merely the immigrant population is affected.

¹ Bundesministerium für Bildung und Wissenschaft, Werkstattberichte, 32, : Analphabetismus in der Bundesrepublik

² A. LORENZETTO, Report on the Problems of the Acquisition of Literacy in an Enlarged Community, Commission of the European Communities, Doc.XII/444/80

³ Answer by Mr BURKE to Written Question No 1313/80, OJ No C345, 31.12.80, p.18

9. Moreover, it may be assumed that continuing recession and rising unemployment will worsen matters considerably. Indeed, while some reading and writing difficulties may be physiological in nature, your Rapporteur believes the problem to be primarily social in origin. Findings to date indicate that the incidence of illiteracy is particularly high in what has come to be known as the "Fourth World", comprising the most disadvantaged groups in society (i.e. the poorly paid and the unemployed; the inhabitants of peripheral and depressed regions, including inner cities; migrant workers and their children; gypsies and other "travellers"; ethnic and/or religious minorities; the handicapped; and women, as the most severely affected within these and other underprivileged groups). Educational provision for such groups, which tends to be less adequate than for more favoured sectors of the population, may be held to account for much of the problem.

10. For related reasons, enlargement of the Community to Portugal and Spain can be expected to increase both the absolute and the relative levels of illiteracy in the European Community.

11. Your committee believes that the provision of large-scale remedial programmes, which would encourage the illiterate to come forward, is one of the surest means of ascertaining the scale of the problem. It is to be expected, given the experience of existing remedial projects, that the demand for such programmes will far exceed the supply and will reveal the above estimates to be merely the tip of the iceberg.

Implications of illiteracy

(a) for the individual

12. The implications of illiteracy for those affected are serious. For the individual concerned, illiteracy operates as an obstacle to full self-development and self-respect, and as a general restriction of opportunity.

13. At the level of relations within the family, illiteracy not only prevents parents from helping their children in their studies, but is liable to warp the overall relationship between the two generations. Similarly, it stunts unduly the development of relations within the immediate community.

14. Meanwhile, in economies with ever-diminishing labour markets and dependent on increasingly sophisticated skills, the opportunities open to the illiterate for employment or even for vocational training are poor. At best, the majority of illiterates can aspire only to marginal and insecure positions in the economy. Although the principle of equal rights would require that the illiterate and the literate be represented in equal proportions among the unemployed, in practice the illiterate are heavily overrepresented. While it is clear that even high levels of literacy are no guarantee of a livelihood in face of present economic trends in Western Europe, literacy must be regarded as a necessary minimum condition for stable and well-paid employment.

15. It follows from their vulnerability that the illiterate are particularly in need of social protection. Yet their very illiteracy tends to leave them largely unaware of their social rights and/or unable to enforce them adequately.

(b) for society

16. Illiteracy is a problem not just for the individual but for **society**.

17. Perhaps most important of all in liberal democracies, illiteracy acts as a bar to informed participation in decision-making at all levels: when one can read neither a political programme nor a newspaper, the exercise of political choice becomes virtually meaningless. Opportunities for seeking, by political means, to change the circumstances which generate illiteracy are thus largely denied to those most directly affected.

18. Illiteracy also generates the habit of concealment which in turn distorts the whole moral development of the individual citizen, with obvious consequences for society. Moreover, of course, illiteracy limits the potential for technical progress and hence the international competitiveness of any community.

19. Consequently, illiteracy must be understood as detrimental to the healthy development of society in general and of the European Community in particular.

II. Action by the European Community

Council of Ministers of Education

20. As yet, no formal pronouncement by the Council and Ministers of Education meeting in Council on the subject of illiteracy is available. Ministers of Education have, on more than one occasion, stressed the basic right to education and training, as well as their commitment to the principle of equal opportunities for every individual.

21. Commitment to full adult literacy might be taken to be implicit in such declarations; nevertheless, explicit recognition, at the level of Council, of the fact of illiteracy in the European Community, and a declared commitment to its eradication, would provide the essential political impetus for concerted action at Community level.

22. It is therefore strongly to be hoped that Council will register its formal commitment to the fight against illiteracy. It would add considerable force to such a statement if Ministers of Education were also to set a deadline for eradication of illiteracy in the European Community, as well as - where they have not already done so - to draw up comprehensive national literacy programmes and to accord priority to literacy work in the allocation of public funds.

23. At the same time, it seems clear that cuts in national education budgets must doom any attempts to eradicate and prevent illiteracy to failure, since such cuts aggravate the very conditions which give rise to illiteracy (reduction in the amount of schools, classes, staff, teaching materials, individualized supervision, etc.).

24. It is therefore essential that the heavy cuts inflicted on the public education sector in several Member States in recent years be reversed if literacy programmes are to achieve any success in lowering illiteracy rates.

25. Moreover, since illiteracy is one of a set of related conditions, its solution cannot usefully be approached in a vacuum. Literacy campaigns must therefore be conceived as part of integrated programmes designed to eliminate the varied forms of disadvantage with which illiteracy is generally associated.

The Commission of the European Communities

26. During the last few years, the Commission has recognised the need to devote priority attention to the problem of adult illiteracy, in the context of continuing education and training, and has itself begun both to study the problem and to support some practical measures to combat illiteracy.

27. Commissioner Ivor RICHARD suggested in 1981 that available Community funds should be concentrated on practical action to combat illiteracy, and your Rapporteur shares this view.¹ While the Commission has provided some support to practical programmes in the framework of the European Social Fund, it is essential that Community funding for literacy work be increased significantly to help finance research following upon practical programmes.

28. Community funding should be available to both public and private literacy campaigns. Although it is to be hoped that Member States which have not done so will soon establish national literacy programmes, practical work has to date been and may for a while continue to be chiefly the province of private or voluntary organisations.

¹ Answer by Mr RICHARD to Written Question No 2291/80, OJ No C140, 10.6.81, p.21

29. Apart from its support to practical measures, the Commission has also begun to research the problem of illiteracy. To date, it has financed a qualitative study of the experience of illiteracy, and a quantitative assessment of the phenomenon in urban areas of Belgium and Luxembourg, both of which should be available in 1982. It has also undertaken a report on the problem of illiteracy in an enlarged Community and two smaller-scale enquiries in the context of the fight against poverty.¹

30. It would be useful if the Commission were to build on these beginnings by drawing up a comparative report of the official measures adopted by Member States to combat illiteracy.

31. To avoid duplication of experiment and to ensure the widest application of tested methods, it would also be helpful if the Commission were to collect, synthesise and disseminate information on the best practices in Member States, as well as to publicise the existence of such information.

32. Equally, the Commission should promote the exchange of information between both public and private agencies involved in literacy work in Member States. It might, for instance, act as a clearing house on literacy and could harness Eurydice to the task by adding a new "literacy" policy theme to the system. Since there is no European-wide (let alone more broadly international) body to coordinate the work of presently scattered non-governmental literacy agencies, the Commission might also usefully encourage the creation of such an umbrella literacy organisation.

33. To set the example, the Commission could also run a number of pilot literacy projects, concentrating on those Member States where less remedial work has so far been undertaken. In designing such projects, the Commission should take advice from literacy experts, and not least from former illiterates, on the most appropriate procedures for reaching students, selecting teachers and teaching methods, and publicising courses.

34. Your committee, although not usually in favour of voluntary work, feels that voluntary teachers may be particularly suitable for work with adult illiterates, since their own non-professional status makes them more sympathetic towards the handicaps of others. She also wishes to draw attention to the possible value of bringing the latest audio-visual and information technologies to bear in Community pilot projects, both as a complement to more traditional methods in literacy work and during the crucial pre-literacy stage.

¹ Ibid.

35. In pursuing its activities in the field of literacy, the Commission should take account of work carried out in this area by intergovernmental organisations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe and the OECD. While the particular interests of these bodies may differ in some respects from those of the European Community, the general concern with illiteracy is shared. UNESCO, in particular, has over 25 years experience of literacy work in an extensive range of contexts;¹ the contrast between the problem as it affects the "Third World" and the "Fourth World" should not be overdrawn, since in both cases the concern is to impart the ability to cope with daily life.

36. Similarly, your committee urges the Commission to work with non-governmental agencies involved in the field. The activities of the Youth Forum of the European Communities, through its Permanent Commission on literacy, and the involvement of "Aide à Toutes Détresses - Quart Monde" (ATD-4th World) are especially worthy of mention.

37. When more and further-reaching literacy campaigns, including any Community pilot projects, have run their course, the Commission should draw up a comprehensive report on the nature, scale and sources of illiteracy in the European Community, to be based primarily on the findings of these practical programmes.

38. In view of the stigma associated with illiteracy and the reluctance to recognise the nature and scale of the problem, a prime condition for the success of any remedial work is that the Commission and all authorities concerned attempt to sensitise public opinion to the problems of illiteracy.

¹ For a brief survey, see UNESCO, "Analphabétisme et Alphabétisation", Etudes et documents, No 42

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION (Document 1-615/80) tabled by Mr Roland Boyes pursuant to Rule 25 of the Rules of Procedure concerning combatting illiteracy

The European Parliament,

- aware that the number of adults in the Community who are illiterate is estimated to be at least 10 million,
 - believing that it is essential for people to be able to read and write to play a full life in society,
 - recognizing the many reasons that create difficulties in teaching adults and particularly the more elderly to obtain these skills,
 - believes it is the right of all people to have an opportunity to acquire these basic skills,
 - noting the work done in this area by the Youth Forum,
 - aware of the great advances in the case of modern, sophisticated but often high cost, technology for teaching purposes, particularly the use of computer based learning,
1. Calls on the Commission to carry out a series of pilot projects involving the full range of technological aids available for teaching purposes and consequently to make recommendations to Member States;
 2. Calls on its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION (Document 1-898/80) tabled by Miss Hooper, Mr Christopher Jackson, Sir Frederick Warner, Mr Battersby and Mr Prag pursuant to Rule 25 of the Rules of Procedure on illiteracy in the fourth world

The European Parliament,

- aware that four million men, women and children throughout the European Community, representing 5% of the total population, remain in a state of extreme poverty,
 - noting that this section of the population (known as "the Fourth World"), is now seeking to participate normally in society and that the International Movement ATD Fourth World estimates (as a result of meeting thousands of young people who leave school without having mastered the basic elements of reading, writing and arithmetic) that the rate of illiteracy is inordinantly high in spite of compulsory education,
 - believing that this catastrophic situation remains too much an unacknowledged fact, represents a very serious omission in the basic right to education and training, and eventually employment, and constitutes an important loss for European culture and economy,
- is anxious to respect human rights everywhere in the world, and particularly within the European Community:-
1. Asserts its deep concern at the extent and persistence of illiteracy in the Community;
 2. Asks the Commission to prepare a report on illiteracy in the European Community with a view to proposing to the Council the necessary initiatives; in order that:
 - young people will no longer leave school without having mastered the basic elements of reading, writing and arithmetic,
 - illiterate adults are given opportunities to learn to read and write without loss of self respect and in such a way that their identity and background is acknowledged.
 3. Asks the Commission to carry out periodic evaluations of the efforts undertaken to overcome illiteracy in each Member State, stressing, in particular, progress made with regard to the most disadvantaged citizens.

4. Calls upon the Council of Education Ministers to consider the problem of illiteracy within the European Community as a priority.
5. Calls upon the President of the European Parliament to forward this motion to the Commission and to the Council.

MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION (Document 1-702/81) tabled by Mr Lezzi pursuant to Rule 47 of the Rules of Procedure on measures to combat illiteracy

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the alarming increase in illiteracy in the Community Member States,
 - whereas this problem is liable to get worse because of the link with rising unemployment in the Community Member States,
 - whereas illiteracy constitutes an obstacle to persons seeking to enter the labour market and is thus a form of discrimination,
 - whereas the elimination of illiteracy is essential if a more just and progressive social order is to be established and the living and working conditions of Community citizens improved,
 - conscious of the efforts made by the Commission in this field and of the existence of various forms of illiteracy, but interested primarily in the 'functional' illiteracy of the adult sufferer, which reduces his chances of finding employment and prevents effective participation in training and retraining programmes,
 - accepting, for practical reasons, UNESCO's 1958 definition of illiteracy as 'an inability to read and understand a short account of everyday events',
 - realizing that this problem will assume still greater dimensions on the labour market when the European Community is further enlarged,
1. Calls on the Commission to publish the information it possesses about the programmes and measures implemented by the Member States with the aim of combating illiteracy;
 2. Requests the Commission to carry out a comparative study of the measures adopted by Member States' Governments;

3. Calls on the Commission to draw up a report illustrating the connection between illiteracy and economic, social and regional problems and to submit proposals for Community action;
4. Hopes that it will be possible for aid to be granted from the Social Fund to help teach illiterate persons to read and write;
5. Calls on the parliamentary committee responsible to organize a public hearing on this problem;
6. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.