8 September is the International Literacy Day (ILD). ILD was proclaimed by UNESCO, in 1966, to promote literacy as a fundamental human right and a matter of dignity. Literacy is a foundation for individuals' empowerment and for sustainable and inclusive development.

As part of the celebrations of the International Literacy Day, UNESCO spoke to girls, in Sengerema, Tanzania, who have received support to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Neema Hamjj and Resituta Robert, aged 17 and 19, had to leave school at age 7 due to family issues. Since then, they did not have access to learning basic literacy and numeracy skills.

Since August 2019, however, Neema and Resituta have been learning how to read and write at a community-based youth centre, established under the UN joint programme in Tanzania.

At the youth centre, girls and young mothers like Neema and Restituta are writing various words and numbers like “dada” and “mama” (sister and mother in Swahili). Some bring their child to class. Learning how to read and write is an exciting experience for them. ‘It is a big joy being able to read signs and numbers on the street’, says Resituta. ‘I feel satisfied and I am gaining confidence’, added Neema.
Tanzanian girls build confidence by learning how to read and write

"I am happy" was a consistent feedback from girls attending the centre. While writing her name by herself on the interview notebook, Resituta said, ‘I am very happy to be able to write.’ These “happy” girls are excited to learn more, and be empowered to dream of a better future. ‘After completing the basic literacy and numeracy classes, we can finally join pre-vocational skills training. I am very much looking forward to learning how to make soap and batiki, and make an income. I am hoping to have my own business in the future,’ said Neema.

One of the facilitators, Mashaka Ibengwe, found the motivation of girls remarkably high for reading, counting, and writing. He said, ‘They are eagerly awaiting to join pre-vocational training, including batiki and soap making, food processing, and tailoring.’ After completing the basic literacy and numeracy skills training, these girls will have the opportunity to further their skills, through training organized under the project.

Masalu Wadeda, another facilitator, commented ‘I see how girls are empowered – not only they take a lot of joy and pride in learning but they are also developing their creativity and self-expression.’ She stressed that, ‘literacy is a foundational skill for their lives, which will lead them to realise their basic rights and to participate in income-generating activities. I hope this training helps them to have more job opportunities.’

In the 1980s, Tanzania made considerable progress in improving general literacy rates. However, according to the national level survey[1], more than 800,000 girls aged 15-24 are still illiterate. The same study shows that around 54,000 girls dropped out of school at primary school level due to lack of basic needs, repeated absenteeism, early pregnancy and marriage, among other factors. These factors often deprive girls of accessing, completing and benefiting from educational opportunities.

The UN Joint Programme is a joint initiative between UNESCO, UNFPA and UN Women. Launched in 2015, it applies a collaborative, coordinated and multi-sectoral approach to ensuring girls’ and women’s right to quality education in Tanzania. Implemented in close collaboration with the Tanzanian Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) and President Office Regional Administration and Local Government Authority (PORALG), the Joint Programme is funded by Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).

To date, 900 out-of-school girl and young women, especially young mothers, in four districts – Kasulu, Sengerema, Mkoani and Ngorongoro – have benefited from the programme, acquiring literacy and numeracy skills, health education for their well-being, and pre-vocational skills for their empowerment and participation in the economy of their communities.

More information:
- UNESCO-UNFPA-UN Women Joint Programme
- UNESCO’s work on education and gender equality
- International Literacy Day