



A VITAL COMPONENT OF LIFE

The World Literacy Foundation is seeking youth ambassadors for its 2019 programme. Flashes speaks to young people who have previously stepped into the role.

"I believe that education and knowledge are a fundamental right for every child in the world," said Doha Khassawneh, a former Jordanian youth ambassador for the World Literacy Foundation. "[Both are] a means to achieve other rights to protection, survival, development and participation."

Khassawneh was among more than 300 young, like-minded individuals from 35 countries who participated in the World Literacy Foundation's (WLF) Youth Ambassador Programme last year, acting as both a voice for literacy and a fundraiser for education.

Such ambassadors are an important component in the global not-for-profit organisation's work, with each ambassador contributing to lasting change around the world as the WLF seeks to lift young people out of poverty through the power of literacy.

According to the WLF, illiteracy not only costs the global economy an estimated \$1.19 trillion a year, it leads to unemployment, low income, low self-esteem and reduces access to lifelong learning and professional development. It also impacts social cohesion, civic participation, welfare, crime and gender equality.

Close to 20% of the world's population are unable to read or write. Of those, 102 million are aged between 15 and 24. According to the WLF, 250 million children at primary schools in developing countries are also struggling with reading simple words.

THE FACTS



750M ILLITERATE PEOPLE CAN'T READ A SINGLE WORD, MORE THAN **2 BILLION** PEOPLE STRUGGLE TO READ AND WRITE A SENTENCE.



ILLITERACY COSTS THE GLOBAL ECONOMY **\$1.5 TRILLION ANNUALLY**



85% OF ALL TEENAGERS WHO ARE INVOLVED IN **CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES** ARE FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE



21% OF CHILDREN AROUND THE WORLD HAVE LESS THAN **5 BOOKS** AT HOME



ABOUT **263M CHILDREN AND YOUTH** ARE OUT OF SCHOOL



Above: Doha Khasawneh interacting with children in Bunat Alghad School, in Jordan

These problems are particularly acute in Africa, where more than half of children of primary age are out of school. Only 35% of schools in sub-Saharan Africa have access to electricity, while the majority of countries in that region do not have sufficient access to books for the size of the classes they are being taught in. The average number of primary education-level children in sub-Saharan Africa per reading textbook is two or more. In Uganda it is 2.6.

“Education to me is a fundamental human right, and for me to even imagine not having the opportunities I do today is horrifying,” said Avanthika Panchapakesan, a youth ambassador who raised \$2,340 through a performance of classical Indian dance last year. “I wish to transform the lives of thousands of children, to give them equal educational opportunities and the chance to improve their livelihoods for themselves. And for me this starts by fundraising and advocating for a cause I believe in.”

In the Arab world the average rate of illiteracy stands at 17%, with illiteracy particularly acute in those countries where conflict has combined with poverty. In Iraq, illiteracy is on the rise. According to UNESCO, an estimated five million people in

the country are illiterate, including 14% of school age children who have no access to suitable schooling or are obliged to contribute to household income. Almost 30% of the rural population is unable to read or write and 22% of the adult population has never attended school. Women are particularly badly affected, with illiteracy rates reaching higher than 47% among women in some areas.

The World Literacy Foundation's youth ambassadors believe the answer to these problems lie in access to universal education. Anika Christopher, an ambassador from the British Virgin Islands, even quoted Nelson Mandela, who said: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

“Education to me is a fundamental human right, and for me to even imagine not having the opportunities I do today is horrifying”

AVANTHIKA PANCHAPAKESAN

"I firmly believe that the value of literacy goes beyond the pages of a book and the value of education cannot be confined by the walls of any classroom," said Christopher. "Literacy and education are, in fact, an indispensable asset for change. However, millions of people worldwide today are illiterate and are therefore unable to acquire an education."

"I became a youth ambassador because I wanted to play my part in improving this situation, giving persons the chance to turn the page, write their lives and change the world."

"When a person is educated, it allows them to unleash their creativity and [their] innovative potential, as it gives them a space in which they can discover and develop all their talents and abilities," she added. "However, before that is possible one must first be literate. This is because literacy is central for the acquisition of knowledge. It is at the heart of all educational pursuits."

The World Literacy Foundation was founded by Andrew Kay in 2003 with the goal of bringing books, tutoring and literacy resources to children without any educational support. It began with the transportation of children's books to Africa and was followed by the creation of low-cost digital e-books in local languages. It now works in partnership with 3,920 groups from 25 different countries, all of whom have one common goal: to eradicate illiteracy in our lifetime.

The organisation's youth ambassador programme was launched in 2016, with the WLF now seeking youth ambassadors for 2019. All ambassadors should be aged between 14 and 24, must be passionate about literacy and education, and will receive a certificate of completion upon closure of the programme. This year's programme will run from 1 July to 15 December, with registration open until 30 June.

As well as advocating for literacy and education in their schools, universities, communities and social groups, all ambassadors will learn about the development and impact of the WLF's Sun Books project in Gulu, Uganda. The project provides low-cost tablet devices that are powered by solar panels to off-the-grid classrooms. All tablets are pre-loaded with a digital library for young learners in both their local language and in English.

Although illiteracy figures may appear frightening, progress is being made. Fifty years ago almost a quarter of youth globally lacked basic literacy skills compared to less than 10% in 2016. The literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa has also improved in the last 50 years, but is still only at 75%.

"I want to create a vision for universal literacy," said Simran Cheema, a 2018 youth ambassador. "All humans deserve to be able to read and write in order to fulfil their potential. I believe that literacy is a vital component of life." ↑

MEET THE 2018 **GAME CHANGERS**

The youth ambassadors selected last year have helped to bring lasting change around the world



Doha Khassawneh



Isioma Eneli



Jagrit Sardeshpande



Jibrán Gill



Anika Christopher



Aditi Chapanerker



Levie Mdoka



Ryan Brady



Samuel Oppong



Shivam Patel



Simran Cheema

Source: worldliteracyfoundation.org