



So closely are illiteracy and poverty linked in the mind of westerners that recently the British School Minister, Mr. Nick Gibb, proclaimed that when it came to reading, despite two centuries of technological and social revolution in the United Kingdom, there were "still shadows of Charles Dickens' world in our own" and "literacy problems were still "heavily orientated towards the poorest."

When it comes to literacy, there is certainly a tale of two worlds to be told globally, to paraphrase the title of Charles Dickens' masterpiece on 18 and 19th century London and Paris.

Of the 800 million people who are unable to read or write almost all are poor, two thirds are female and most live in some of the world's poorest countries, predominantly in Africa and southern Asia.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) notes that more than half of adults in eleven countries are illiterate. These are Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Haiti, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone.

Of these eleven countries Senegal ranks highest at number 155 on the 183 country UN Human Development Index and there is undeniably a strong correlation between national wealth and literacy rates. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called literacy "a bridge from misery to hope."

To underline the importance of education, Achieving Universal Primary Education is the second of the eight Millennium Development Goals.

Enrolment in primary education in developing regions reached 89 per cent in 2008, up from 83 per cent in 2000, but the current pace of progress is insufficient to meet the target by 2015.

About 69 million school-age children are not in school. Almost half of them (31 million) are in sub-Saharan Africa, and more than a quarter (18 million) are in Southern Asia.

“Education brings sustainability to all the development goals, and literacy is the foundation of all learning. It provides individuals with the skills to understand the world and shape it, to participate in democratic processes and have a voice, and also to strengthen their cultural identity,” UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said last year.



UNESCO, the leading UN agency on education, fights for literacy worldwide which it considers a human right, a tool of personal empowerment, a means for social and human development and condition for all educational opportunities.

Recently UNESCO published testimonies of the participants in literacy programmes in Iraq. Blindness as a metaphor for illiteracy is a recurring theme in these testimonies. Taimaa speaks of her humiliation at the hospital when she was “...like a blind person who could barely go anywhere” because she couldn’t read sign posts: “Once, when I went to the ophthalmologist and told him that my eyes hurt at night, he shouted at me and said “This is not an ophthalmologist, this is a dentist.”

Another newly literate Iraqi, Ms. Rand pictured her time as illiterate as “a dark time” she left behind her – as she puts it, now she is “like a blind person who has regained sight.”

Iraq may not yet have a history of “two centuries of technological and social revolution” like the UK, but these newly literate Iraqis have taken a step out of the darkness of a “Dickensian” world.