

22 July 2021

To: Subject Advisors, Teachers, Departmental Heads

Lessons drawn from Cuba to promote reading in South Africa.

#### Message Objective

To:

- outline the purpose of the Cuban literacy campaign with relation to the world literacy levels
- details the lessons South African community stakeholders could draw on to improve reading in South African communities

In 1960, Fidel Castro introduced his literacy campaign that would target one million illiterate adult Cubans. He claimed that within a year, all these adults would be taught how to read and write. In my mind this campaign, while viewed by the rest of world as having ties to communism, was the most successful literacy campaign ever run. Several countries all around the world, communist or not, have adapted this method of eradicating illiteracy. A nation's literacy should take precedent to improve its economy and compete in the global market. Every country in the world struggles with an illiterate population. Some may be worse than others, but the truth is that literacy is an extremely important component of society and individual life. UNESCO reports that today the world's literacy rate stands at 26%, or 1 billion people. This is still an issue, and we should look at Cuba's practices as the solution.

Literacy determines how educated a population is on making informed decisions, which should be especially appealing to democratic nations. Communist and capitalist countries alike were very concerned with eradicating illiteracy; however, education was increasingly politicised during the Cold War. Based on South African context, community stakeholders can draw a lot of lessons from the Cuban literacy campaign. Firstly, churches can create programs to educate their communities against destruction of business infrastructure when their needs are not met by either government and community leaders. For instance, South Africa was marred by riots and unrest which saw most businesses looted in some of her provinces. Hardly two weeks, people were queuing to buy food at exorbitant prices. With improved literacy levels, people would have avoided looting knowing that there will be serious implications in securing employment and food.

The Cuban Literacy Campaign called upon volunteer teachers across Cuba to teach reading and writing to its illiterate population. Cubans answered the call with 250,000 volunteers. These teachers, most of whom were young women, would live and work with the families that they would be teaching. Teacher unions in the country can use the Cuban campaign model to run youth dialogues to discuss challenges affecting communities and how best they could be avoided.

Furthermore, the National Education Collaboration trust have established a structure called District Steering committee in several districts around the country. This structure consists of various stakeholders operating in districts e.g., traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers' unions and youth leaders. This structure is necessary to promote literacy campaigns through radio stations and in imbizos held in communities. The DSC together with the business community can source out books and establish community reading forums to get parents and their children reading books and engage in reading dialogues'

[bailey@nect.org.za](mailto:bailey@nect.org.za).