

Family Literacy
Fosters Ties Between Nations
and Responds to
The Climate Emergency

Family literacy is a research based, capacity building concept, based on ancient traditions, that has a proven global record of projects and initiatives that can result in rapid transformative change

Surprising to many and unnoticed by most UN Member States there are multilateral initiatives taking place right now that unite people in local communities in many countries of the world

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THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Everybody is Worried

Of course, it's hard not to worry.¹ Everyone is worried. We know there is no point in panic, but many of us are filled with doubts about the ways we live. Nagging at us is the slow realization that our vision of the world is delusional and the persistent doubt that torments us is that we've got everything wrong.

For years now the story 'The Daughters of the Moon'² by Italo Calvino has given me a jolt when it enters my mind, arriving unannounced to warn me about what is happening to us. Written at the beginning of the 1960s, the story takes place in New York City where I live and could have been written today. Calvino describes the skyscrapers gleaming like the nylon bristles of a brand-new toothbrush – that's exactly what they look like on Central Park South where spindle thin new nylon bristle skyscrapers are going up.

In the story Calvino mingles literature with science as he writes about the crowds of people on the city streets with their arms laden with parcels from shopping in the big department stores, and of how the items they have bought will become "the layers of things that had been thrown away" changing the geology of the planet.

Calvino writes of the plight of communities living in "the amalgam of wreckage of piles of battered fridges and burnt-out light bulbs," of the discarded people who have been marginalized by a consumerist society, and of people who have willingly discarded themselves because they are tired of racing all over the city to sell and buy new things that go instantly out of date and have to be thrown away.

At the end of the story young mammoths gallop across the savannas once again, and forests cover the Earth as they did before, burying the decaying cities and roads and obliterating all trace of us.

It is hard not to worry. Calvino has always left me in no doubt that we will all end up on the scrap heap – in jagged, rusty territory -- if we continue to live the way we do now. We have changed the climate and the anatomy of the planet, but there is so much we can do to prevent the complete collapse of the biosphere that we call home.

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1986/11/24/the-way-we-live-now>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23/the-daughters-of-the-moon>

We *can* change the way we live now. It is *not* too late, but first there must be a reckoning, a moment of gut wrenching honesty when we refuse to flinch and do not shy away from appraising the state of the planet *and* the state of humanity. Only when we are prepared to look the future in the eye will we be able to move beyond the violent anguish many people are experiencing as they try to figure out what we can do to push down the existential risks we have caused that threaten our kids.

STATE OF THE PLANET³

“Climate Tipping Points – Too Risky To Bet Against”

Scientists are especially worried. They have been for many years. The stability and resilience of our planet really is in peril and we should all be worried. Terrified, actually. We are in a climate emergency with a growing threat of abrupt and irreversible impacts on multiple interconnected biophysical systems.

In “Climate tipping points – too risky to bet against,”⁴ Timothy M. Lenton, Johan Rockström, Owen Gaffney, Stefan Rahmstorf, Katherine Richardson, Will Steffen & Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, all of whom are eminent scientists whose research we can trust, describe the climate emergency and warn us that we are approaching a global cascade of tipping points that will result in a new, less habitable, ‘hothouse’ climate state.

In their commentary published in *Nature*, November 27 2019, they conclude “If damaging tipping cascades can occur and a global tipping point cannot be ruled out, then this is an existential threat to civilization.”

Within the scientific community this is a widely held view. The state of the planet will directly and cataclysmically impact the state of humanity. Already there are massive migrations within and between countries because of floods and fires. Water sources are already exhausted or contaminated, food production is interrupted by warmer temperature, and insect populations are plummeting. In many places bees no longer pollinate.

³ The author was a participant in the 2009 ICSU/ISSC On-Line Global Visioning Consultation; Participant in the 2010 ICSU/ISSC Open Visioning Consultation Forum, UNESCO, Paris, resulting in the publication of the *Grand Challenges Report*, which is a consensus list of the highest priorities for Earth system science that would remove critical barriers impeding progress toward sustainable development. (More than 1000 individuals from 85 countries contributed in the initial online consultation, and more than 200 individuals and 46 institutions reviewed the draft of the *Grand Challenges*.) *Planet Under Pressure Global Conference on Earth System Science*, London, 2012: 4 peer reviewed presentations accepted focusing on: (1) The State of the Planet; (2) Meeting Global Needs; (3) Transforming our way of living; & (4) Governing Across Scales.

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03595-0> Comment 27 November 2019

More than 11,000 scientists from around the world have clearly and unequivocally stated that Earth is facing a climate emergency that is negatively impacting all human societies and could end human life on the planet.⁵

And yet, in the US scientists are under attack.⁶ Political appointees have dismantled the infrastructure of governmental agencies that are crucial to the advancement of scientific knowledge on the state of the planet. The EPA is now being run by the fossil fuel industry, with former lobbyists for fossil fuels in leadership positions in other government agencies. Scientific studies have been shut down and targeted studies removed from official websites. Words, including “climate change” have been banned.

In the US there is documentary evidence that scientists are now excluded from participation in regulatory decision-making. Some scientists have received gag orders and aggressively pressured not to speak publicly. Even more concerning, scientists have received death threats and intimidation is pervasive, sending the message that economists, scientists, and career staff are not wanted and must be rooted out.

But the obscuring of science, endemic in the US, is actually a global phenomenon. In a video interview⁷ at COP 25, Peter Carter, Director of the Climate Emergency Institute⁸ and an IPCC expert reviewer, states that he checked all the COP documents at the Climate Secretariat and found there is no mention either of science, or of the IPCC.

“In this COP science has been completely dropped,” Carter states. “We are accelerating on a trend to total planetary catastrophe, but nothing is going to come out of this COP. It’s under the control of the fossil fuel industry.”

“We’ve got to reduce global emissions by 50% by 2030,” he states. “We can still do that, but if we wait any longer it becomes impossible. So COP 25 is yet another circus, but the acts are terrible in this circus and it’s another delay.”

“It’s always been set up to fail,” Carter says. “We know for sure the United States, Russia, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia are blocking scientists from the negotiations. It’s a terrible crisis. In moral terms it’s an unprecedented crime. Evil.”

In a December 4 2019 email about COP25, Peter Carter shares his deep concern. He states, “The human race may not survive the resulting further acceleration of global warming with

⁵ <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/advance-article/doi/10.1093/biosci/biz088/5610806?searchresult=1>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/climate/trump-administration-war-on-science.html>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oa13KrOvE2s>

⁸ <https://www.climateemergencyinstitute.com/about.html>

a hot house Earth triggering multiple tipping points.” He calls the lack of response by governments and the continuing rise in CO2 emissions “the crime of all time,” and he adds, “Waiting another year to 2020 COP26 is the most terrible crime against all humanity.”

In the *Nature* article, “Climate tipping points – too risky to bet against,” the scientists write, “In our view, the consideration of tipping points helps to define that we are in a climate emergency and strengthens this year’s chorus of calls for urgent climate action — from schoolchildren to scientists, cities and countries.”

Similarly, the 11,000 scientists who signed the letter to galvanize world leaders to take action state, “We believe that the prospects will be greatest if decision-makers and all of humanity promptly respond to this warning and declaration of a climate emergency and act to sustain life on planet Earth, our only home.”

“We urge widespread use of vital signs,” they write, “which will better allow policymakers, the private sector, and the public to understand the magnitude of this crisis, track progress, and realign priorities for alleviating climate change.”

“The good news,” they state, “is that such transformative change, with social and economic justice for all, promises far greater human well being than does business as usual.”

I agree with these scientists and in the last section of this letter I will focus on opportunities that already exist for rapid transformative change. But first, the reckoning.

STATE OF HUMANITY⁹

“We Are Moving Faster Towards Annihilation”

On a daily basis participants on the global listserv of the UN Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS), representing many nationalities and cultures, express their concern about the cascading impacts of human rights violations that result from a lack of political coherence or the will to act on behalf of people who are already suffering because of climate change.

⁹ Note: This section is based on 40 years of theoretical and ethnographic research including a peer review of the 2018 and 2019 UN HLPF based on ethnographic participation. Most recently this research has included longitudinal field research at the UN, which has resulted in a comparative analysis of the UN 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This research includes: 1) ethnographic observation and documentation of the UN 2018 and 2019 High Level Political Forums; 2) participation in events during the 2018 and 2019 UN General Assembly (UNGA); 3) attendance at planning meetings for the HLPF and UNGA; and 4) a sociolinguistic analysis of the extensive documentation pertaining to the SDGs and the HLPF, including email communications, website presentations, official reports and papers, scientific research studies, and media coverage and commentary.

These email threads bring together the leadership of NGOs around the world. With clarity of thought on the future of humanity they express the urgent need for a complete rethinking of the interrelationships between social, environmental and economic policies and global governance.

The MGoS are working together to inform, guide and pressure representatives of UN Member States to push down the risks of climate change and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Since 2015 the MGoS have played a key role in the annual UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF). At first there was an expectation that UN Member States would welcome their participation and there would be opportunities for collaboration. MGoS anticipated systemic change. Instead they have found most of the sessions on human rights and the SDGs they've organized are relegated to the buildings surrounding the UN rather than located in the meeting rooms inside the UN compound. Sessions such as "Towards Collective Advocacy" have been scheduled in nearby churches, NGO offices, consulates and hotels, while events organized by the big money private sector including, for example a session on sustainable beer, have been scheduled inside the UN compound.

In the five years since the establishment of the HLPF there has been a dearth of Member State – Civil Society collaborative projects or initiatives to reduce existential risks and achieve the SDGs. There have been no collaborative responses to the climate emergency or to any other SDG joint initiatives. Concern is frequently expressed in the email threads of MGoS and at the meetings they organize that there is no sharing of knowledge with UN Member States or learning from the real-world practices of participants in the MGoS. There is no interdisciplinarity in solving real-world problems and/or shared initiatives to reduce the extreme risks that confront humanity.

MGoS have found that the power and patriarchy that exists in the delegations from UN Member States is impenetrable. Multilateralism no longer exists. There is a widely held view that UN Member States have retreated into national, unilateral silos, and there is considerable debate about the Member States submitting to the demands of the private sector and ignoring the evidence driven human rights presentations of the MGoS.

There is also common recognition that no UN Member State is on track either in response to the climate emergency or making progress in achieving the SDGs. Many MGoS have lost trust, and a conversation is now taking place on the widely held view that the SDG global indicator framework has failed.

“We are moving faster towards annihilation,” one MGoS participant wrote in a November 2019 email, bolstering this assertion by writing “there is a moral crisis in political ethics and increasing levels of intimidation, disruption and violence, and the lack of fair and efficient justice systems.”

At the UN “Most Countries Are Represented Badly”

Some MGoS are working in the interface between government delegates and bureaucrats from UN Member States, and the career professionals at the United Nations. Their email exchanges provide many insights into the systemic failure of governments and institutions to respond to the climate emergency. There is concern that neither the government ministers of UN Member States nor the bureaucrats who work for them possess the knowledge, leadership skills, or experience to respond to the climate emergency or to achieve the SDGs.

One outcome of the MGoS participation in the UN HLPFs is that it has revealed, as one participant states, “most countries are represented badly”, while at the same time, *there is recognition that the leadership challenges facing the governments of UN Member States are very great and overwhelming.*¹⁰

There are many email threads that focus on the lack of the skills and experience required of bureaucrats representing UN Member States who are employed to design, supervise, and implement government policies. The consistent message is that the bureaucrats have only rudimentary knowledge of the impact of the climate emergency on human societies.

“Most countries are badly represented at the UN,” an MGoS participant states.

“They are not educated on the Earth emergency,” Peter Carter writes, “nor the science on the imperative of replacing fossil fuels with clean renewable energy or science behind the SDGs. They do not understand why the world is in a state of global climate emergency and that our future survival is threatened.” He adds, “Also, they are reluctant to change what they are used to doing.”

Hannah Arendt called this condition “*the thoughtless disengagement from reality.*” Arendt used the phrase “the banality of evil” for the bureaucrats who committed the most terrible crimes against humanity. It is an apt description for the thoughtless disengagement of the governments of UN Member States and the bureaucrats who work for them, and it is this condition that Carter calls “*a terrible crime against all humanity.*”

¹⁰ Simone Filippini, www.leadership4sdgs.org, December 2nd, 2019, email communication.

In a similar way to the MGoS there are many career diplomats and personnel at the UN who are also concerned about the lack of response from UN Member States to the climate emergency. They also comment at meetings that most countries have not made a serious effort to change the status quo to achieve the SDGs.

“There are a large number of governments that don’t care one way or other about human rights,” a senior UN Official states at the July 2019 UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development.

“If the UN pushes back against human rights violations it is accused of undermining governments,” he states. “*Many countries do not want ‘human rights’ mentioned in any discussions or included in any UN documents.* If we mention human rights in our strategic plans we get push back.”

“What’s happened to Human Rights up Front?” a man in the audience asks.

Human Rights up Front (HRuF) is the Secretary-General's initiative to strengthen the prevention of serious problems with human rights consequences that cut across the three pillars of the UN: 1) peace and security; 2) development; and 3) human rights.

“Human Rights up Front is in difficulties,” the UN Official states. “It is systematically being broken apart.” The official looks tired and dispirited as he notes that the issue of human rights receive only three and a half percent of the UN budget, which is troubling given that it is one of the three pillars.

“There are members of the Security Council who question the relationships between human rights and sustainable development,” the UN Official adds. “We’re off track.”

The Official says, “Human rights are not filtering through at the UN.” He laments, “If we push back on human rights we get accused of undermining governments. Some countries will not use the words ‘civil society’.”

The Huge Architecture of the SDGs Has Not Delivered

There is a sense of urgency at the 2019 UN HLPF.

“The huge SDG architecture has not delivered,” a presenter at an MGoS session states. Others attending the meeting talk about the “violation of moral and ethical boundaries” and state, “civil society can no longer function in silence.”

In many of the side events at the HLPF, the acute sense of urgency at the sessions organized by Major Groups and other Stakeholders (MGoS) is palpable. Speakers and participants share an unsettling energy to “*push forward*,” to “call for action,” and a common purpose to insist that UN Member States be “more accountable,” “more inclusive” and to “leave no one behind.” In contrast, at the session with the UN Official on human rights, he reports that the overriding message from UN Member States is to “*push back*”.

He makes the case that many countries have taken a similar stance, lauding the advancement of SDGs in their own country, while ignoring their unacceptable human rights violations and degradation of their own people.

At the HLPF on July 7th 2019 a leader of a non-profit participating with the MGoS described the situation as “moving backward on a treadmill”.

“We have a long way to go,” he said in his presentation. “*Civil society does not have a place with the Member States. The situation is much worse now than it was five years ago.*”

“The UN is a great place to be, but this is not reality,” he said at the end of his presentation and opening the conversation.

“We’ve not been consulted,” an NGO participant said. “We’re not included. We don’t have an impact. Now is the time to come together for systemic change that has ethical and moral boundaries. We can no longer function in silence.”

“*How do we approach things in different ways?*” another participant asked. “*What tools do we have at our disposal?*”

The Private Sector Is Not Accountable

At the MGoS “Civil Society Forum” that took place on September 24, 2019 during the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the panel focused on identifying structural barriers to establishing durable partnerships that recognize the interconnections between human societies that governments cannot break. There was *concern expressed that the private sector is not accountable, and that there is more private money than public money at the UN, which constitutes an emergency for human survival.*

While the speakers at the “Civil Society Forum” focused on identifying structural barriers, at the “International Congress on Discrimination on Work and Descent” the speakers demonstrated how to break them down.

Every speaker came from an oppressed group and identified themselves with the 260 million people worldwide who are discriminated against. There were participants at the Congress from Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America, and every speaker highlighted the need for inclusion, equity and non-discrimination in human rights if the SDGs are to be achieved by 2030.

Speakers focused on the protection of existence and the right of people in marginalized groups to define themselves. They decried how marginalization becomes internationalized and institutionalized, and that discrimination takes place in hearts as well as in minds.

But the overarching message, so powerful and so significant, was that *those who perpetuate discrimination against marginalized groups should take into consideration that those who have been left behind are now able to come together to unite and to fight for their rights.*

“We have come here to declare our freedom,” a speaker shouts. “The freedom of the people. Not the freedom of the nation. The freedom of the people!”

“It’s not just about achieving policies that are needed. It’s a complete rethinking of the interrelationships between policies and governance.”

“It starts at the local level. Strengthening local communities and the capacity of local communities”

UNRECOGNIZED MULTILATERALISM

“The System Is Crumbling From Within”

At the 2018 and 2019 HLPF the thoughtless disengagement of the governments of UN Member States was clearly evident, and the growing hostility between the governments and the MGoS was almost palpable.

“The system is crumbling from within,” one MGoS participant commented. “We know people are right to be anxious.”

In a new report scientists state, “Particularly notable is the 13°C Arctic warming projected for boreal late autumn months by the end of the 21st century under a business-as-usual scenario (RCP8.5)”¹¹

¹¹ <https://advances.sciencemag.org/content/5/12/eaaw9883>

Families in every country in the world are grappling with the cascading effects of climate change. *We know* what will happen when the planet heats up 3.5°C – 5°C and the Arctic warms up 13°C. Our species will struggle to survive and it will be cataclysmic for all other life forms on the planet. It's the reason there are massive protests around the world – children, families, scientists – condemning the governments of UN Member States for their failure to protect children and future generations from the manmade climate emergency and ecological disaster.

For many of us with knowledge but no privilege it's like sitting in a lifeboat holding a lifejacket, but being stopped by authorities from throwing it to a person in the water who is drowning. Or, having a ladder, but being stopped by officials from putting it against the side of a burning building so a person can escape the flames. Our research does not count even though we know of actions that can be taken to push down the risks and quite possibly save the future for our children.

The Family Is The Only Organizing Principle All People Share

There is an urgent life sustaining need for multilateral cooperation and intergovernmental participation to bring about global reconciliation. *Surprising to many and unnoticed by most UN Member States there are multilateral initiatives taking place right now that unite people in local communities in many countries of the world.* Ironically, while the United States, Russia and China clash with each other at the UN and all three countries are notorious for bullying less powerful Member States, there are family literacy projects and initiatives taking place in the three countries that have similar frameworks and purposes and can be traced through evidence based references in peer-reviewed articles to the original conceptualization of family literacy that was established in my doctoral research 40 years ago.¹²

Similarly, while the massive architecture of the UN SDGs is aspirational and *not* actionable, *communities in many regions of the world embrace the systemic complexity of the SDGs, define problems for themselves and address them using frameworks established for local family literacy projects and initiatives that successfully foster resilience and reduce risks.*

The concept of family literacy is grounded in the recognition that *the family is the originating and only organizing principle that all people share, and that all other divisions and affiliations are secondary.* This fact is memorialized in the preamble of the 1948 Universal Declaration of

¹² The concept of “family literacy” originates in my doctoral dissertation, which was a longitudinal transdisciplinary study (1977-1980), entitled: “Family Literacy: The Social Context of Learning to Read and Write.” The study was published by Heinemann in 1983.

Human Rights, which states: “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

The family is the primary organizational principle of all + 7,750,000,000 people on the planet. The struggle for freedom, justice and peace originates in the familial sphere, and these conditions are negotiated and sustained through the use of language. Language as Hannah Arendt writes, “bridges the abyss.” It bridges the gap between us and facilitates the identification of problems and ways of addressing them.

It is for this reason that the concept of family literacy is so important, and it is considered a dynamic organizing principle that holds promise for global peacebuilding and for peace sustaining initiatives that incorporate the UN SDGs. *Family literacy could quite possibly foster ties between nations and provide an easy to implement macrostrategy for ensuring life for future generations on Earth.*

Most family literacy initiatives in UN Member States are conceptually plural, and are focused on ending poverty and hunger, and on promoting good health and wellbeing. The majority of initiatives have as their mission inclusive quality education, gender equality, climate action, peace and justice, and revitalizing partnerships for the goals. Most include programs especially for girls and women.

Family Literacy has a 40-Year Evidence-Based Record of Capacity Building

The global trajectory of capacity building family literacy initiatives and projects is remarkable. There are family literacy initiatives undertaken by governments, NGOs, UN Member States, academia, the private sector, and the UN system, including UNESCO and UNICEF. In the past 40 years it is estimated that the concept of family literacy has become a familiar concept to more than one billion people. The number might be much higher but is certainly isn't less.

There is a wealth of materials published in many countries, in multiple languages, some multilingual and plurilingual, from books^{13,14} to periodicals, guides, manuals, handbooks, conference materials, bibliographies, dictionaries, and encyclopedia descriptions¹⁵. Most of these family literacy materials focus on topics that are of specific concern to local communities, such as AIDS education. Other materials are geographically specific, for

¹³ Taylor, D. (1983). *Family literacy*. Exeter: Heinemann. [Google Scholar](#)

¹⁴ Taylor, D., & Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988). *Growing up literate*. Portsmouth: Heinemann. [Google Scholar](#)

¹⁵ <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346441.n84>

example, there are materials specifically developed for use in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America, as well as in North America, the U.K., the E.U., Russia, and China.

In addition to the U.S.¹⁶, Russia^{17,18} and China^{19,20}, family literacy projects and initiatives are integral to the political macrostructures of economically advanced countries on five continents, as well as in many countries in response to the rise in extreme inequality caused by the increasing imbalance in economic, financial and trade frameworks of the dominant UN Member States.

This finding led to a three-year transdisciplinary evidence-based document analysis that focused on the theoretical conceptualization and practical functions and uses of family literacy as an organizing principle to address the local issues of families in countries around the world. What is remarkable about the findings of this document analysis is that it is possible to trace family literacy initiatives in UN Member States with seemingly irreconcilable differences and forcibly disagree.

“There is an absolute political fight going on,” one MGoS said, at the 2018 HLP. “All the rest of the agenda is being hidden.”²¹

And yet nearly all these UN Member States that are hunkered down in their silos have family literacy initiatives in their countries that can be traced back to the original family literacy research, and the projects taking place are “multilateral” because they share the theoretical, conceptual and practical frameworks of the original ethnographic study.

Family Literacy Is Based On Ancient Educational Traditions

A 2011 report produced and published by UNESCO²² provides support for this finding, noting that “family literacy” as originally conceptualized in my doctoral research “is based on the most ancient of educational traditions”.

In the report UNESCO asserts, “Inter-generational learning practices are rooted in all cultures” and observes that “educational programmes with literacy components involving

¹⁶ <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v6n2/green.html>

¹⁷ [MarinaVasilyeva^aEricDearing^aAlinaIvanova^bChenShen^aElenaKardanova^b](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.08.003)

¹⁸ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.08.003>

¹⁹ https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-007-4822-4_12

²⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303654099_Family_Literacy_in_China:_Perspectives_on_Teaching_and_Learning_Chinese_Literacy_in_China pp 199-210. Cite as Family Literacy in China.

²¹ See related discussion in <https://www.dennytaylor.com/news/2018/how-family-literacy-in-un-member-states-has-become-a-conduit-for-sustaining-peace>

²² <http://uil.unesco.org/fileadmin/keydocuments/Literacy/en/Review UIL Family Literacy Mauritania 2011 final.pdf>

families are found in all world regions, although not always under the term “family literacy” but responding through literacy to the local needs of families. UNESCO states:

Many local projects and programmes, in the attempt to adapt to specific contexts, incorporate a focus on creativity, including art, music and theatre activities as well as digital skills. As family literacy programmes expanded and diversified in the late 1990s, many more programmes arose in response to local needs and were developed to enhance the linguistic competences of multi-lingual families. While the UK is the pioneer of family literacy in Europe, there are a few other European countries with long-standing experience such as Ireland, Malta and, above all, Turkey. More recent family literacy programmes were developed and/or piloted in Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Romania. What they have in common is that they combine elements of adult education and pre-school or primary education – to enhance the literacy of both adults and children and support teachers and parents in preventing school failure and future dropouts.

A footnote to the 2011 UNESCO report names many countries, including Bahrain, Canada, Cuba, Guatemala, Mali, Namibia, New Zealand, Palestine Autonomous Territories, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Vanuatu, that have family literacy programs that meet the needs of local communities.

The report names Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean as regions in which intergenerational learning is a family practice and is less institutionalized and more community-oriented.

This meta-analysis of the family literacy initiatives in UN Member States and 40 years of family literacy research^{23,24} in high poverty urban and rural locations, and in regions of armed conflict and catastrophic events provides solid interlinked scientific evidence of the connections in family literacy initiatives between peacebuilding and sustainable development.

There is four decades of peer-reviewed evidence to support the finding that family literacy is now ubiquitous, and there is unspoken agreement that local knowledge is of vital importance in solving some of the most intractable problems humanity has ever faced.

Family literacy initiatives that enhance peace, reduce poverty, build resilience and bridge economic and social gaps have been found in more than 140 UN Member States that are locally led and regionally and internationally supported, including these countries:

²³ <https://www.dennytaylor.com/research-retrospective>

²⁴ Taylor, D. (1997). *Many Families Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Principles*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahamas, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Barbados, Belgium, Belize, Benin, Bhutan, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei Darussalam, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Congo, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Eritrea, Estonia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, France, Gabon, Gambia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Latvia, Lesotho, Liberia, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Malta, Mauritania, Mauritius, Mexico, Micronesia (Federated States), Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Palau, Paraguay, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Korea, Romania, Russian Federation, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Uganda, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam, Yemen.

Two Noteworthy Findings Stand Out From The Three-Year Analysis Of Family Literacy In UN Member States

The first finding is that family literacy has become integral to/and in keeping with the UN Resolution, Adopted by the General Assembly 27 April 2016, which is outlined in the 70/262 Review of the United Nations Peacebuilding Architecture.^{25,26}

Connections between the 70/262 Review of the United Nations peacebuilding architecture and family literacy initiatives are evident when the architecture is used to evaluate family

²⁵ The following documents provide essential information on the UN architecture for sustain peace and specific information with regard to SDG 16:
UN Security Council [Resolution S/RES/2282](#) (2016): Reviews the UN peacebuilding architecture and introduces the notion of sustaining peace.
UN General Assembly [Resolution A/RES/70/262](#) (2016): Reviews the UN peacebuilding architecture and introduces the notion of sustaining peace.
Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)16 Data Initiative [2017 Global Report](#) (2017): The SDG16 Data Initiative (SDG16DI) supports the open tracking of progress towards the twelve SDG16 targets. This report assesses global progress towards realizing the 2030 Agenda's commitment to peaceful, just and inclusive societies.

²⁶ A subsequent UN document on guidance for sustaining peace reaffirms the importance of family literacy to sustaining peace. https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Guidance-on-Sustaining-Peace.170117.final_.pdf

literacy initiatives. There are family literacy initiatives in many UN Member States that fulfill the following aspects of the UN peacebuilding architecture:

- “Encouraging coherence, synergies, and complementarities”
- “Recognizing that development, peace and security, and human rights, are interlinked and mutually reinforcing”
- Responding to “the high human cost and suffering caused by armed conflicts”
- Recognizing the importance “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”
- “Recognizing and participate in the struggle to establish a just and lasting peace all over the world”
- “Ensuring that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account”
- “Encompassing activities aimed at preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict, addressing root causes, ... moving towards recovery, reconstruction and development”
- “Stressing that civil society can play an important role in efforts to sustain peace”
- “Promoting sustained and sustainable economic growth, poverty eradication, social development, sustainable development”
- Supporting “gender equity and respect for, and protection of, human rights and fundamental freedoms”
- “Recognizing also that the scale and nature of the challenge of sustaining peace calls for close strategic and operational partnerships ... (including) civil society organizations, women’s groups, youth organizations”
- “Reaffirming the important role of women in peacebuilding and noting the substantial link between women’s full and meaningful involvement in efforts to prevent, resolve and rebuild from conflict and those efforts’ effectiveness and long-term sustainability, and stressing, in this regard, the importance of women’s equal participation in all efforts for maintenance and promotion of peace and security and the need to increase women’s role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution and peacebuilding”
- “Reaffirming also the important role youth can play in the prevention and resolution of conflicts and as a key aspect of the sustainability, inclusiveness and success of peacekeeping and peacebuilding efforts”

The critical point here is that the meta-analysis of family literacy initiatives and projects in UN Member States underscores the importance that recognition be given to the peace sustaining opportunities that family literacy creates to connect peacebuilding challenges with solutions at the local, regional and global scales.

Family literacy is used to frame peace-enhancing initiatives in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Sub Saharan Africa, offering village based family literacy programs, which seek to develop literacy in the context of community needs such as health, employment and family planning.

Family literacy has also become a conduit for the peaceful relocation of refugees and economic migrants in Canada, the U.S., and many countries in Europe, especially Germany and Sweden. Family literacy programs are available in many economically advantaged countries especially for immigrant mothers and children learning new languages and life skills so they can survive and thrive in the new places that have become their home.

In some countries family literacy initiatives are designed to reduce gender inequality and family violence, while in other countries family literacy programs focus on the amelioration of psychological and emotional traumas resulting from armed conflict and the support of family members physically disabled by war. For example, family literacy peace enhancing programs have been established to:

- Respond to the needs and concerns about health, employment and family planning (Afghanistan; Albania; Sub Saharan Africa)
- Respond to the psychosocial needs of women (Afghanistan; Egypt)
- Respond to war trauma and PTSD (Afghanistan; Iraq)
- Respond to issues of child labor, family violence, and other life adversities (Afghanistan)
- Establish literacy programs for socially excluded families (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- Establish literacy and peace education classes for families (Iraq)
- Establish literacy programs, especially for women and girls who want to attend schools and literacy classes in order to lead a peaceful and better life (Iraq; Bangladesh)
- Establish programs empowering rural women to develop literacy skills through the writing and documenting of their own poetry as a cultural resource that is valued both locally and nationally (Yemen)
- Establish programs in low-literacy regions, e.g. with families in the deeply-rural, under- resourced mountain valleys of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa)
- Create home-based programs to engage with families in literacy activities (South Africa)
- Create literacy centers of care for vulnerable children and mothers (South Africa)
- Combat HIV and AIDS through informational literacy activities (South Africa)
- Establish family and community literacy programs for children isolated and needlessly separated from their families (Armenia)
- Encourage family literacy for boys and girls living in poverty by developing basic literacy and using “communication technology” (Azerbaijan)

The most important point here is that family literacy initiatives frame life-sustaining initiatives established in the aftermath of armed conflict to assist mothers and children who have experienced mass violence, and to support family members in the military returning home with PTSD and life-impacting physical injuries.

There is compelling evidence that family literacy initiatives in Iraq provide post conflict projects to support families and communities negatively impacted by war. There are family literacy initiatives in Iraq that address both the mental health distress (PTSD) of internally displaced Iraqi youth (13-17 year olds), and the mental health distress of both parents and their young children. Similar family literacy initiatives that address the high incidence of major depression, anxiety and suicidality in youth and young children can also be found in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Rwanda, Israel, and the West Bank and Gaza.

Thus, we can state with great confidence that family literacy projects and initiatives are in keeping with the UN peace building architecture, amplifying social resilience, fostering engagement and collaboration between multiple stakeholders from the public and private sectors.

Based on the evidence a strong argument can be made for reconsidering the significant role that family literacy programs can have as conduits for local peacebuilding initiatives that enhance the lives of vulnerable people in every UN Member State, including economically advantaged countries. By reframing family literacy programs in UN Member States, these well-established collaborative initiatives offer real possibilities for peace building, and the support of family literacy projects could have a vital role in achieving consensus on political solutions for sustainable peace.

In a time of protracted conflicts, sectarian violence, population displacement and refugee challenges, being able to read and write can become the determining factor of whether entire families live or die. It is for this reason that family literacy is important to the future of humanity.

In communities around the world, challenges have been met and vulnerable people are building webs of caring and compassion that intersect and cross over, creating intricate patterns of hope and possibility for future generations in human societies. This is our common project on which we can all agree – the urgent need to live more peacefully. Every effort should be given to sharing this family literacy peace work, with the goal of creating new frameworks for sustaining peace in human societies, whilst becoming more proactive in our responses to the destructive impacts on human societies caused by the ravages of war.

The second finding of the three-year study is that family literacy has become integral to/and in keeping with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Family literacy projects often reflect the systemic complexity of the UN SDGs, forming signature constellations that are unique to the local, country and region in which the initiatives were established. For example, many locally defined family literacy projects focus on SDGs: 4 (Education), 10 (Reducing Inequality), 13 (Climate Action) and 16 (Peace and Justice).

Evidence has been found of family literacy initiatives increasing cohesion and reducing fragmentation by responding to local, regional, and global situations that are deleterious to the health and wellbeing, and even the survival of vulnerable families. This combination of factors creates many opportunities for locally defined innovative change that could be globally transformative in the spirit of the 2030 SDG Agenda, building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

It is inspiring testimony to the universal applicability of family literacy that stakeholders, including UN Member States, UN Officials, NGOs, the private sector and academia, often form partnerships. The beneficiaries are families, especially women and children, displaced families, asylum seekers, refugees, survivors of armed conflict, and families in recovery from weather related catastrophes and other manmade disasters. Often family literacy initiatives are locally defined. In Moldova programs focus on supporting the Roma, in South Africa on knowledge-sharing on HIV and support for family members impacted by AIDS, and in Iraq and Afghanistan on children and adult family members experiencing PTSD.

Shifting our lens to a specific initiative, the Roma family literacy project in Montenegro provides insights at the local level that confirm the importance of family literacy as a transformative opportunity for Roma families who are discriminated against on the basis of work and descent.²⁷ The family literacy initiative for the Roma was supported by a coalition of Montenegro government agencies, German relief funds, NGOs focused on the human rights of the Roma, and local Roma mediators. The intent of the Roma project is to “reduce the transfer of inequalities” and to provide support for the development of literacy skills that will improve access to employment, healthcare and social services. The framework for the project is specific to the Roma, but it is globally relevant to all families discriminated against because of work or descent:

²⁷ Parenthetically, Gabriela Hrabonova, represented the Roma at the International Congress on Discrimination on Work & Descent, Casteism, Antigypsyism & Contemporary forms of Slavery (ICDWD), September 21-23, 2019.

Initiatives aimed at disadvantaged families must take account of potential internal and external barriers parents may face, including alienation from government services; literacy difficulties; cultural barriers; work-related barriers; lack of childcare; hectic or chaotic lives; and other caring commitments. Parents want the best educational outcomes for their children, but disadvantaged parents often do not know how to achieve or realize those outcomes.

Again, the important point here is that the Roma family literacy initiative focuses on a locally defined constellation of the SDGs, while at the same time the project encourages border crossings between local realities to SDG initiatives on a global scale.

The Montenegro proposal refers to the 2012 EU final report of “The European High Level Group of Experts on Literacy,”²⁸ which concludes with the observation that “family literacy programmes are under-used by policy-makers.” The EU report recommends that governments “develop more extensive, larger and better coordinated family literacy initiatives” in order to reduce inequalities around literacy and develop “a more literate environment”.

South Africa takes a similar stance. Family literacy programs have been established in deep rural areas of South Africa to meet the interests of family literacy group members, including adult literacy, early learning and literacy, child illness and protection, and adult health - responding specifically to the high incidence of HIV/Aids. The director of one South African family literacy program states:

FLP aims to be participatory and build the capacity of local people to work in their own communities to bring about social change ... our approach takes into account the context we work in and aims to equip families to take action to make improvements in their communities and families.

In South Africa family literacy is also a conduit for local, national and regional interventions aimed at preventing disease and improving health and wellness. Indeed, family literacy is at the heart of many initiatives designed to reduce health disparities arising from social status inequities.

These desired outcomes of family literacy projects are addressed by increasing access to information and services to safeguard the health and wellness of the most vulnerable families in human societies. For example, in Afghanistan there are family literacy programs focused on reducing family violence, as well as empowering women to improve food

²⁸ http://icm.fch.lisboa.ucp.pt/resources/Documentos/CEPCEP/LITERACY_FINAL_REPORT.pdf

security. These family literacy projects promote empowering literacy practices to improve the life circumstances, especially for women and girls.

In economically advanced countries including the US, Canada, Australia, Canada, Korea, and the UK, as well as EU countries, there are well established government sponsored family literacy programs as well as programs and initiatives sponsored by NGOs, academia and the private sector. An overview of these initiatives in EU countries is presented in the report: *Family Literacy in Europe: Using Parental Support Initiatives to Enhance Early Literacy Development*, published in 2011 by NRDC, Institute of Education.

In recent years the massive migrations of people have added to the prevalence of family literacy programs to support refugees and migrants. In many countries these programs provide opportunities for family members to share their immigrant experiences and the language and literacy practices of their heritage countries, while also learning more about the societal mores and language and literacy practices of their new country. These family literacy programs also provide access to information, resources, and services that refugees and migrant families need to establish homes, gain employment, enroll children in public schools, and access the health care system – all necessary skills that promise a bright future.

With regard to the first finding of the three year study of family literacy in UN Member States: it makes eminent sense to locate sustaining peace efforts in family settings, working alongside children's caregivers to ameliorate the often-violent circumstances in which they live their everyday lives. Added to the merits of this proposition is the possibility that family literacy is one way that the UN can stay ahead of potential conflicts, and participate with people in local communities in sustaining peace initiatives. And, given that war is a major polluter, a global family literacy peace initiative would increase the possibility of reaching a zero carbon existence by 2050.

With regard to the second finding of the study: family literacy has become integral to/and in keeping with the seventeen UN SDGs, the evidence is indisputable and needs no further elaboration. *Communities in many regions of the world embrace the systemic complexity of the SDGs, defining problems for themselves and addressing them using frameworks established in local family literacy projects and initiatives that successfully foster resilience and reduce risks.* There are family literacy projects throughout the world that provide viable frameworks and real opportunities for countries to respond to the climate emergency and push down the risks confronting humanity.

The problem of course is the UN Member States. The final section of this letter is an attempt to persuade them.

FAMILY LITERACY AND RAPID GLOBAL TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

We can now state with confidence that family literacy is a research based, capacity building concept, based on ancient traditions, that has a proven global record of projects and initiatives that can result in rapid transformative change.

One of the reasons that family literacy has become ubiquitous is because it is an unencumbered originating concept that all people share. The concept builds on ancient ways of being and learning that intersect with all cultures. Ownership cannot be claimed by any specific group – national, religious, ethnic, racial or economic. Family literacy is not tribal. There are no silos. The concept belongs to everyone irrespective of his or her identifying signifiers, and because of this we can use it to change the future now.

To advocate for a global family literacy initiative to save the planet for our children is a clear-eyed, evidence-based, data-driven ethical stance that deserves the consideration of the leaders of every UN Member State. However, after seven decades of emphasis on global interests, nationalism and isolationism have taken primacy over collective concerns. We have the capacity to protect humanity and the planet from existential risks that originate here on Earth as a result of human activity, but UN Member States refuse to act.

In *The Peculiar Case of Asteroids and Elephants*²⁹ I argued that if we can spend billions on a Global Defense Strategy to protect the planet from an asteroid that is not expected to approach Earth for more than 100 years, we can spend the billions now on a Global Defense Strategy to protect children and their families from the impact of the climate emergency that is occurring now and will increase exponentially in just a few years.

I am making a similar argument here: Your money or your children? The choice is that stark, that definitive. While people around the globe are worried, scared and paralyzed, the leaders of the global superpowers and all those who enable them are irresponsibly anxious and appear threatened by the possibilities of diminished wealth and power. Aggressive moves by powerful interest groups to maintain favored status for subsidies to key industries, or credit to privileged companies, or the advantageous manipulation of the value currencies, will be of no use when the Earth is crumbling beneath their children's feet.

The bottom line is that both the UN and the governments of UN Member States all need an overhaul. Responding to catastrophic climate change and environmental collapse requires emergency management in every UN Member State that is dynamic, multifaceted, and addresses all the existential risks that confront us. Countries have an opportunity to reboot

²⁹ <https://www.dennytaylor.com/news/2019/the-peculiar-case-of-asteroids-and-elephants>

the future if they act quickly – building trust, sharing knowledge, breaking out of silos, establishing agreements on ethical guidelines, and putting in place people who can work together on the time-sensitive life-threatening problems that confront us.

The imminent threat of the climate emergency and other existential risks present compelling reasons for UN Member States to put in place new strategic leadership to revitalize global partnerships (SDG 17) to address the looming threats to all human societies. Integral to achieving this goal is the recognition that there are family literacy frameworks that could be used by UN Member States to engage with families in local communities who are already participating in multilateral family literacy projects that cross borders in their ideals, principles and practical purposes.

This moral imperative can be achieved by UN Member States elevating their most accomplished and knowledgeable citizens to leadership positions, and also by replacing bureaucrats with scientists and participants in MGoS and civil society, who have the life jackets and ladders to respond to the risks of the climate emergency and other existential risks threatening humanity.

Governments can take a huge leap forward by recognizing the important role of families and communities worldwide in reducing extreme risks. It is worth repeating that the family is the primary organizing structure of all human societies. This is what Eleanor Roosevelt and the founders of the United Nations would say if they were here to guide us. Once again, in the preamble to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights Eleanor and her contemporaries state: “Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” We ignore this fact at our peril.