BEIRUT: If by naming Beirut as the 2009 World Book Capital the United Nations wishes to encourage the Lebanese to study more, its latest report should be a must-read. Lebanon's fourth National Human Development Report (NHDR), "Towards a Citizen's State," highlights a worrying discrepancy in adult reading rates between urban and rural regions.

Adult literacy (measured among those above 15 years of age) is highest in Beirut, where only 6.1 percent of the population cannot read by adulthood. In Nabetieh, by contrast, the illiteracy rate reaches 16.7 percent. The rate rises even higher in the Bekaa, reaching 16.8 percent.

The NHDR, using data compiled from a variety of investigations, emphasizes the need to close this educational gap and demonstrates the strong links between poor education and poverty.

The report, by the United Nations Development Programme in Lebanon, says that "the country's main areas of deprivation are to be found among that proportion of the population that lacks functional literacy skills."

Maha Nahya, Project Director of the NHDR, who wrote the section related to literacy levels in the report, offered her opinion on the discrepancy.

"The problem is not the quality of the services but access to them. The majority of good services are, of course, located in the capital, with some exceptions.

"There is a direct correlation between poverty and illiteracy. The poorer you are the more likely you are to drag your children out of school," she told The Daily Star.

She said that many children could not recognize the importance of going to school. "Some don't see the value added in education. Many drop out and decide to work so they can at least earn some money."

Paul Salem, of the Carnegie Middle East Institute, was on the report's advisory board. He said that there were general literacy issues that needed to - and could conceivably - be addressed by the new government.

Lebanon's recent history has hampered educational development among adults, with relief and regeneration efforts taking precedence over teaching, according to Salem.

"Certainly there are two variables with this issue. One is the security situation which is disruptive to family life and the ability to have a relationship with a school and go there," he said.

"In addition, it's known that in the outlying regions government services including education are still catching up. [The situation] is better now but there were certainly a number of districts were government officials haven't caught up with the need."

The report also reveals the existing gulf between gender literacy rates, with Lebanese females still lagging behind males in their ability to read.

Anita Nassar, Assistant Director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at Lebanese American University, said that work was still required to ensure true gender equality in education.

She said that it was initially hard for the IWSAW to persuade many families that women needed to be literate as part of Lebanon's development.
"We are still in a patriarchal society where people think it's more important for boys to be educated than
girls, but this is changing," she said.

"We have worked with parents and families, teaching about the importance of sending their women to
school. Bit by bit we are finally making some progress," she added.

One sign of advancing gender equality is the fact that more women than men are currently signing up for
education, with the female enrolment rate outstripping male for the first time in Lebanon.

According to the report, "female adult literacy levels have also increased considerably in the past years
especially in younger age brackets and have led to gender parity in enrolment.

"Education is the base for the betterment of a woman and her family," said Nassar.

Salem said that while education in schools is improving in Lebanon, more needed to be done to address the
illiteracy of previous generations whose studies were interrupted by years of conflict.

"Lebanon prides itself on its high cultural output and that remains very true. Unfortunately that doesn't
match up with the kind of welfare state approach to stamp out illiteracy.

"The Lebanese state has never tackled adult illiteracy as a major objective. This remains very much linked
to poverty and should be a major national goal," he added.

The NHDR highlights "the need to improve the functional literacy levels of Lebanese youth and building up
their ability to compete in today's economy."

The report also outlines a number of recommendations to continue literacy growth across all demographics.

"Concerted national efforts are required to improve the level of human development in the North Lebanon,
Bekaa and South Lebanon governorates particularly in terms of income generating activities from the North
and improvements in literacy levels in the Bekaa and Nabatieh regions," it says.

"Even with low-income growth levels, attention to education can reap tremendous benefits for the overall
human development of the country."