



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



The Global Literacy Challenge



*A profile of youth and adult literacy at the mid-point
of the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003–2012*

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of the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003–2012*

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Preface from Mr Koïchiro Matsuura Director-General of UNESCO

I am pleased to present this publication, *The Global Literacy Challenge*, as we move into the second half of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012). At this juncture, it is fitting that we should take stock of the dimensions of the challenge in order to move forward with even greater commitment.

Special thanks go to Mrs Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States of America who, in her capacity as the Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations Literacy Decade, gave the Decade a major boost by promoting the development of the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), by hosting the White House Conference on Global Literacy held in New York in September 2006, and by setting in motion the series of six UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy. These strategic initiatives have significantly raised the profile of literacy around the world.

As a global community, we have worked for many decades to enable people everywhere to benefit from literacy, and, without doubt, we are making progress. Literacy rates are rising, and there is a stronger awareness that literacy needs everywhere are changing and must be addressed in innovative ways. However, over 774 million young people and adults in our world today – almost one in five of the adult population – do not have the basic literacy and numeracy skills they require to participate fully in society. In some regions of high population growth, the absolute number of those without literacy is actually growing.

It is common to talk of ‘knowledge societies’, but less common to acknowledge that the generation, transmission and transformation of knowledge almost always depends on writing – whether on paper, computer screen or mobile phone. Without literacy, people are excluded from access to these circuits of knowledge, and even from the most basic information they may need for daily life. Literacy is an integral part of addressing major global challenges – food security and agricultural

production, HIV & AIDS and other epidemics, economic growth, and intercultural relations. Opportunities to learn and acquire new skills necessarily require literacy.

As we move into the second half of the United Nations Literacy Decade with a renewed strategy, the international community must seek innovative ways to assist and work with the diverse, marginalized populations that traditional approaches have not served well. We know that young people and adults learn best when literacy acquisition serves their particular aims, meets their individual needs and fits their specific contexts – it should not be beyond our collective capacity to be more effective in this regard.

It will also take resources. Ever since the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, which adopted literacy as a specific Education for All (EFA) goal and a key outcome of quality learning, I have emphasized the need for greater investment in literacy. To date, the response has not been commensurate to the challenge. As this publication makes clear, there must be stronger commitment on the part of governments and aid donors to make sure that youth and adults are not deprived of the quality basic education they need and deserve.

The challenge we face is not an easy one, but we are better equipped to tackle it than ever before. There are many examples of what works. The second half of the Literacy Decade gives us the opportunity to build the kind of cooperation and partnerships that will accelerate progress in literacy. It is imperative that we harness our efforts and resources in support of this vital goal.



Koïchiro Matsuura

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Executive Summary

The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003–2012) has reached its mid-point, with initiatives and policy shifts which provide a stronger basis for action on literacy now and in the future. The rise in the global adult literacy rate (15+) from 76 to 83.6 per cent over the last two decades shows steady progress, with the rates in developing countries showing an even sharper rise from 68 to 79 per cent. The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) has given new impetus to efforts in countries of high literacy needs. However, progress overall is not enough to meet the 2015 Education for All goal of halving illiteracy rates. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab States region and South and West Asia demonstrate the largest literacy needs. In addressing the challenge that globally almost one adult in five is without literacy skills, new conceptions of literacy and the literate environment set literacy acquisition in the context of lifelong learning, linking it with other basic competencies. Numeracy is often bracketed with literacy, but requires distinct approaches.

As a key outcome of education and an instrument for further learning, literacy is part of the right to education and it facilitates the achievement of other rights. Equitable opportunities to acquire and use literacy are not available to certain groups, such as indigenous populations, nomadic communities, marginalised young people, rural people, prisoners, migrants or people with disabilities. Providing appropriate ways to learn literacy is essential, whether through formal schooling, equivalency programmes, family literacy or distance education. Gender considerations are structured differently across regions: women form a higher proportion of those without literacy skills in Sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, while in the Caribbean and some countries of Europe it is boys and men who have lower literacy rates. Like gender, poverty is a further cross-cutting parameter of disadvantage, and there is a

need for more integration of literacy learning with poverty reduction strategies. In conflict-affected areas where learning opportunities have been disrupted, literacy acquisition can play a significant role in rehabilitation, particularly when linked with peace-building, empowerment and livelihood skills training.

Comprehensive national literacy policies, based on firm commitment to literacy and an understanding of its scope, should be built on sound evidence of what works and on relevant data on literacy levels and needs; policies must lead towards implementation and be backed by adequate resources. Governments must take the lead in formulating policy, with the participation of civil society and in the framework of broad development goals. Putting policy into practice requires coordination among different government departments, since the use of literacy is embedded in other sectors such as health, social welfare, rural development and agriculture. Vertical coordination from central to community levels should distribute responsibilities appropriately.

Effective literacy learning depends in part on the quality of programmes. Research, sharing good practices and capacity development are key aspects of quality which need greater investment. Issues of language, literacy methods, community participation, assessment of learning, and knowledge of learner needs are some of the factors that require attention in rendering a literacy programme effective in a particular context. In terms of capacity development, facilitator training is essential, but institutional development and capacity for research and evaluation are also important areas for investment. Understanding and enriching the literate environment, with adequate production of materials, will facilitate the use of literacy for daily communication needs; authorship and publishing at the local level are useful strategies,

particularly where minority and indigenous languages are used.

Ways of assessing literacy levels focus increasingly on what people can actually do with literacy, using direct testing. These methods, of which the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) is one, move away from the literacy/illiteracy dichotomy towards a continuum of literacy levels, thus enabling better targeting of programmes. A consistent monitoring and evaluation culture at global, national and programme levels has to be built which will document progress, point to effective strategies and key challenges, and demonstrate where literacy fits within broader educational action, particularly in the non-formal arena.

Literacy is not adequately funded; both governments and international aid agencies need to raise their level of investment if the UNLD goals and EFA targets are to be met. Further work on

the costs of literacy and of illiteracy is needed to show what level of financing quality literacy really requires, and what socio-economic resources are currently lost through zero or low literacy levels. Given the multiple connections of literacy and its complex dimensions, partnerships for literacy must bring together governments, civil society, communities, the private sector, universities and international agencies. South-South cooperation holds great potential, as do emerging university networks with a literacy focus.

The Call to Action stresses three areas of focus for the future: 1) mobilizing stronger commitment to literacy; 2) reinforcing more effective literacy programme delivery; and 3) harnessing new resources for literacy. The proposed lines of action point to strategies of support for these priorities, at national and international levels.



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Literacy in the 21st century

Literacy has never been more necessary for development; it is key to communication and learning of all kinds and a fundamental condition of access to today's knowledge societies. With socio-economic disparities increasing and global crises over food, water and energy, literacy is a survival tool in a fiercely competitive world. Literacy leads to empowerment, and the right to education includes the right to literacy – an essential requirement for lifelong learning and a vital means of human development and of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The United Nations Literacy Decade

Literacy is also central to the agenda of Education for All (EFA), with its six goals to improve access to basic education of quality. Literacy lies at the heart of learning for small children, those at school, out-of-school youth, and adults. From this perspective, literacy is an essential component of all aspects of learning programmes but must now move beyond the acquisition of basic literacy skills to become a means for engaging with diverse forms of knowledge, understanding and communication.

At one level or another, social environments are literate environments. Communication through reading and writing is part of every society – global bodies, national governments, and community organizations depend on literacy for making decisions, communicating knowledge, making plans and documenting action. Individuals rely on literacy for daily transactions, learning, leisure and contact across time and distance.

Literacy is taken for granted by the literate but remains a seemingly unattainable goal for many. About one in five adults in today's world – 774 million men and women – has no access to written communication through literacy, 75 million children remain out of school and millions

more young people leave school without a level of literacy adequate for productive participation in their societies.

For them, much of the world they live in is inaccessible, distant and unknowable. They are dependent on others who are literate to make important decisions about their lives. This situation is unacceptable and demands a commitment to make sure that everyone can participate in literate societies. The challenge is urgent and compels all partners to deepen their commitment and strengthen their action.

This profile...

...presents youth and adult literacy at the halfway point of the UN Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003–2012), drawing on the many findings of the UNLD mid-Decade Review presented to the UN General Assembly in 2008. It puts the focus on youth and adults – with zero or low literacy skills. For most countries, adult literacy refers to programmes for the 15+ age group; within that, youth literacy most frequently refers to the 15–24 age group.

This profile is neither a detailed report on progress, nor a manual on how to undertake literacy work. Rather, it presents the many dimensions of literacy which the varied range of stakeholders must consider in planning and implementing literacy programmes. This publication sets literacy in the context of development and shows how it connects with other societal challenges – such as gender inequality, marginalization, poverty, income inequality and lack of respect for human rights – outlining the issues at stake and giving examples from around the world. There are sections on topics such as policies, designing and delivering literacy programmes, assessing literacy levels and monitoring and evaluation, citing instances

***"[The world illiteracy rates]
...would be devastating
numbers at any time, for
individuals and societies
alike; that they occur in
the context of today's
information society should
drive home the urgency of
efforts to promote literacy
throughout the world."***

Ban Ki-moon
United Nations Secretary-General
on the occasion of
International Literacy Day 2008

of recent initiatives. What makes a good literacy programme is discussed, emphasizing the fact that better data are needed to understand what works best. Adequate funding, coordination and international support are also addressed as essential elements for effective action in literacy across the globe. The profile ends with a Call to Action addressed to all literacy stakeholders.

The setting for this profile of the global literacy challenge is the undeniable progress achieved over past decades. Huge strides forward have been made, but there is much left to do to meet the EFA goal of increasing literacy rates everywhere by 50 per cent by 2015 (see box below). One way of achieving this goal is to acknowledge that providing opportunities to acquire literacy is a complex process that demands the same professional approach as any other aspect of education.

While providing a comprehensive overview of the present situation and its different facets, this profile is not exhaustive and thus makes suggestions for further reading.

The issues which this profile addresses, the lines of argument and the recommendations for further action are of particular relevance to those engaged in promoting or supporting literacy: policy- and decision-makers, planners and programme managers, government departments and international organizations, civil society and community associations, practitioners and researchers, as well as the interested public. The combined energies of these stakeholders and many more are essential to address the global literacy challenge.

"It shouldn't need to be stated, but has to be, it seems. Literacy is the basis of all learning."

Nadine Gordimer
South Africa

The Image and the Word,
in *The Alphabet of Hope*. Writers
for Literacy, UNESCO, 2007

Interpreting the EFA goal on literacy

The fourth EFA goal speaks of 'increasing literacy rates by 50 per cent.' Strictly interpreted, this is impossible to realise for countries where the literacy rate is already over 67 per cent. As the 2006 EFA Global Monitoring Report *Literacy for Life* proposed, it is more practical to speak of 'reducing illiteracy rates by 50 per cent', and this formulation is used in the rest of this publication.

The United Nations Literacy Decade

The **United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012)** proposes a new vision of literacy by situating Literacy for All at the heart of Education for All. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Decade in December 2001, reaffirming the central role of literacy in development. The vision of *Literacy as Freedom* and *Literacy for All* remains as relevant now as it was at the start of the Decade.

The Decade listed as priority population groups:

- Illiterate youth and adults, especially women;
- Out-of-school children and youth, especially girls;
- Children in school without access to quality learning, in order that they do not add to the pool of adult illiterates.

The UNLD International Plan of Action, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2002 (A/57/218), signalled six key areas of action: policy, programme delivery, capacity development, research, community participation, and monitoring and evaluation. Resource mobilization and international coordination underpin these priorities. This publication examines the many dimensions of these areas.

In setting up the Decade, the United Nations General Assembly gave the coordinating role of the UNLD to UNESCO, in particular to stimulate and catalyze the activities at the international level within the framework of the Decade.

UNESCO has set the action of the Decade in the context of the EFA movement, seeking to dovetail the promotion of literacy with the specific EFA goals that mention it (Goals 4 and 6), as well as with the EFA agenda as a whole. Literacy cuts across all the EFA goals because it is both a learning tool and a major outcome of education.

Since the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000, however, the emphasis within EFA has remained largely on children and on schooling. The relative neglect of adult literacy, documented in the EFA Global Monitoring Reports of 2006, 2007 and 2008, underpins UNESCO's concern that coordination of the UNLD should support and be supported by other educational commitments. It has proved challenging to ensure focused and specific engagement on the part of international partners with the UNLD as such. The risk is that countries do not find an adequate echo of their own concerns to promote literacy among their international partners, particularly in relation to disadvantaged youth and adults whose needs fall outside the regular provisions of the school system.

With these concerns in mind, the official *Report of the UN Secretary-General to the UN General Assembly on the Implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade* called on UNESCO to "strengthen its coordinating and catalyzing role, and that it draw on the results of this mid-Decade review and on the outcomes of the 2007–2008 Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy to develop a strategic framework for renewed cooperation and action in literacy, in cooperation with international partners in literacy, including the agencies of the UN system" (UN General Assembly Document A/63/172).

The risk is that countries do not find an adequate echo among their international partners of their own concerns to promote literacy.

Highlights of the UNLD

The first half of the Decade (2003–2007) saw positive and encouraging progress in the key areas of action and in raising the profile of literacy.

- **The Decade as a rallying cry and banner for renewed international commitment to literacy.** In setting up the UN Literacy Decade, the countries of the world were clearly determined to give literacy a higher profile and stimulate greater efforts. At its halfway point, the Decade continues to be a banner under which to pursue even more vigorously the vision of “literacy for all as the foundation of lifelong learning and a tool for empowering individuals and their communities” (UNLD International Plan of Action, p.4)
- **Raising international awareness and creating new impetus.** The international community’s awareness of literacy and its crucial importance received a major boost from the White House Conference on Global Literacy in New York on 18 September 2006 which was hosted by First Lady Laura Bush, Honorary Ambassador for the UN Literacy Decade. The six follow-up Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy during 2007 and 2008, organized by UNESCO in Qatar, China, Mali, India, Azerbaijan, and Mexico, have created new impetus for youth and adult literacy.
- **New commitment in literacy through the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE).** LIFE is a global strategic framework of the UNLD for collaborative action in 35 countries that have a literacy rate of less than 50 per cent or an adult population of more than 10 million without literacy competencies. It is already an effective catalyst for planning, capacity development, partnership-building and the mobilization of new funds for literacy.
- **Strengthened action on literacy in a number of countries, leading to a noteworthy decrease in the total number of illiterates.** Larger changes in strategy within international development

policies – in particular, attention to equitable growth, governance and social inclusion – have also given greater focus to literacy.

- **Fresh momentum, new policies and stronger institutions.** In a number of countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean, new policies put literacy higher on the agenda, in some cases with the creation of new ministries, budget increases and greater cooperation between ministries.
- **New coalitions of key stakeholders.** Civil society networks and NGOs now play a stronger role in advocacy for literacy, as well as undertaking effective action on the ground; universities have taken new initiatives to build networks for cooperation in literacy.
- **Clearer evidence provides a stronger platform for promoting literacy.** Recent editions of the EFA Global Monitoring Report have provided analyses which show the benefits of literacy. In turn, this has shown the need to develop better policies and find new resources for literacy; it also challenges the international community to respond to the sheer scale of the world’s literacy needs.
- **Greater visibility of good practice in literacy.** Sharing good practice in the series of six Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy during 2007–8 provided insight into factors that make for effective literacy programmes, generating knowledge that will serve to improve efforts everywhere.
- **Improved assessment and monitoring for better planning and action.** Traditional methods of assessing literacy levels among populations do not generate reliable data and tend to under-estimate the scale of literacy needs. The Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) developed by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is being piloted to arrive at a more detailed assessment of current literacy levels, as a basis for better analysis of the challenge and more targeted action.

In the area of literacy provision, UNESCO developed a Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS). This allows countries to map NFE and literacy provision, monitor and evaluate the implementation of their NFE programmes, and measure progress towards their literacy policy goals.

The Decade has untapped potential

There are two major areas where the Decade has yet to reach its full potential:

- Mobilizing all necessary partners around the common agenda of literacy for all;
- Raising significantly the level of resources available for literacy.

In spite of the overwhelming imperative that almost one in five adults is still without literacy skills, and in spite of the neglect of human rights and the unrealized individual potential which such figures represent, the real impact of the Decade on international agendas in education and development has been limited. Literacy is a cross-cutting element of the EFA agenda and yet it is neglected. This reflects experience in EFA in the 1990s, and repeated since 2000, that basic education became increasingly equated with primary schooling, eclipsing the literacy needs of adolescents, young people and adults, and overshadowing the central role of literacy and numeracy competencies for all ages.

The United Nations Literacy Decade has increased the profile of literacy, created a more positive policy environment and seen the formation of new coalitions, but the challenge remains huge. At the halfway point of the Literacy Decade, there is clearly a need for a new dynamic in literacy.



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UN General Assembly. 2008. Implementation of the International Plan of Action for the United Nations Literacy Decade. http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A%2F63%2F172&Submit=Search&Lang=E

Literacy Initiative for Empowerment

The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment – LIFE – is a key strategic framework which UNESCO has put in place for implementing the United Nations Literacy Decade, with a focus on countries where the literacy challenge is most critical.

LIFE Countries

Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone

Arab States: Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan

Asia and the Pacific: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Pakistan

Latin America and the Caribbean: Brazil, Haiti

Eighty-five per cent of the world's illiterate population, or 650 million people, reside in just 35 countries. Each of the 35 countries has a literacy rate of less than 50 per cent or a population of more than 10 million people who cannot read or write. Two-thirds of these people are women and girls. LIFE is a framework for accelerating progress in tackling this huge challenge.

Literacy provision is the responsibility of governments and their partners – LIFE

aims to stimulate action, create space for greater cooperation and mobilize additional support to countries. LIFE is a strategy for making action on literacy more effective and taking it to scale to reach the large illiterate populations of those 35 countries.

Support for LIFE

- A multi-donor fund for capacity development in EFA channelled US\$6.6 million through UNESCO to literacy programmes in six LIFE countries during 2006–2007.
- Afghanistan received a grant of US\$13 million from the Japanese government for a LIFE programme which will benefit almost 300,000 learners, notably women.
- The European Union and Japan have promised to fund major literacy programmes within strategies designed in the framework of LIFE, in Mauritania and Papua New Guinea respectively.
- In Niger, the development of a major multi-year plan has stimulated the interest of UNDP, the African Development Bank and World Bank to fund literacy and NFE activities.



Progress on the ground

- Sixteen countries have carried out in-depth situation analyses to identify strategic areas for making a difference in literacy efforts, and eight countries – Bangladesh, Haiti, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan and Senegal – have developed national action plans, with most of the countries implementing annual work plans.
- Six LIFE countries – Bangladesh, Egypt, Morocco, Niger, Pakistan and Senegal – are working hard to bring their capacity up to strength, to improve policies and programmes and help partners work better together. This work is possible thanks to special grants from the Nordic countries of around US\$1 million for each country and the support of UNESCO field offices.
- Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan and Senegal have trained hundreds of senior and middle-level literacy managers in integrating innovative approaches into their literacy activities.
- Bangladesh, Morocco and Pakistan are running or setting up community learning centres to link literacy with other aspects of local life.
- Pakistan and Senegal have developed better national curriculum frameworks for literacy and NFE so that learners will be able to move more easily between formal and non-formal education.
- Bangladesh, Benin, Egypt, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sudan have held national advocacy events, leading to greater political will to tackle the literacy challenge.
- Morocco is piloting the new UNESCO Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) tools to get a better idea of levels of literacy among the population, adapting LAMP to the Moroccan context.
- In Africa, LIFE contributed to several developments, such as the creation of a Ministry for Literacy and Local Languages in Senegal with a threefold budget increase. Similarly, following the recommendations of the 2007 Bamako Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy, the Benin and Malian Governments decided to create special ministries in charge of literacy, with increased budgets. In Burkina Faso, Mozambique and Niger, the First Ladies of each country have taken the lead to mobilize funds for literacy.
- Bangladesh, Morocco, Niger and Senegal are setting up a Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS).
- Everywhere, those involved are working together more because of LIFE. Across the regions, South-South cooperation is growing. Brazil, for example, is promoting a common network for capacity-building programmes in Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique and other Lusophone countries.



UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning in Hamburg (Germany) coordinates LIFE

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What does literacy mean?

Literacy has been narrowly defined as reading and writing but a broader concept of literacy has evolved in response to changes in patterns of communication and the demands of the workplace. Rather than assuming a divide between literate and illiterate, researchers propose a continuum, with differing levels and uses of literacy according to context. Thus, there is no single notion of literacy as a skill which people possess or not, but multiple literacies. We all engage in both oral and written practices and in learning new literacies at different stages of our lives, for example, the literacy demands of digital technologies. The concept of 'situated literacies' draws attention to how the social, cultural and political context shapes the ways in which people acquire and use literacy.

Further enriching our understanding of literacy is knowing what it is for, who uses it, who is learning or teaching it, why people may not have access to it, and what it enables people to do in their own context. These are important issues because literacy is both a right and means of development.

Can we define 'literacy'?

In the report of an Expert Meeting on literacy assessment, UNESCO published a working definition of literacy which reflects the emphasis on context and use:

'Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society' (UNESCO 2005: 21).

Since literacy is a plural and dynamic concept, neither this nor any other definition is the final word.

Note: This publication uses the terms 'illiterate' and 'illiteracy' to indicate the absence of literacy competence, without implying the pejorative connotations sometimes associated with them.

This plural understanding of literacy underpinned studies such as the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) carried out by the OECD:

"Many previous studies have treated literacy as a condition that adults either have or do not have. [...] proficiency levels along a continuum denote how well adults use information to function in society and the economy. Thus, literacy is defined as a particular capacity and mode of behaviour: the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. Differences in levels of literacy matter both economically and socially: literacy affects, inter alia, labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society." (OECD 2000).

The '**renewed vision for literacy**' of the **UN Literacy Decade** emphasizes the importance

of social context and the complex interaction between literacy and social change. The UNLD International Plan of Action stresses planning and implementing literacy 'in local contexts of language and culture' and the need to relate literacy to 'various dimensions of personal and social life, as well as to development' (UNGA 2002: 4).

The idea of the '**literate environment**' has become central to discussions about how to link literacy acquisition and use. In daily life, people – both literate and illiterate – already engage with diverse forms of text: visual texts like posters, street signs, bills, books, newspapers as well as oral texts, such as telephone messages, radio programmes and political speeches. This is the case in rural areas, often considered to be 'poor' literate environments, as well as in towns. Rather than creating a literate environment it is necessary first to understand the environment that exists and how it can be enriched. Too often, literacy learning programmes have not considered what learners can actually do with literacy in their daily lives. It is important, therefore, to consider who is producing text and why and where literacy fits into the communication patterns of individuals and communities. This can be used as a way of exploring how literacy interacts with each of the Millennium Development Goals – for instance, the literacy practices associated with monitoring child and maternal health (see also section *Literate Environments*).

Literacy is a means for development, enabling people to access new opportunities and to participate in society in new ways. Literacy is also a right in itself – precisely because, without it, people will not have equal life chances. In societies today – both 'developed' and 'developing' – the pace of economic and social change is such that learning continues throughout life. Thus, the use of literacy must also change and adapt – for example, when bookkeepers have to handle complex computer programmes rather than recording figures in a ledger, their literacy needs change. As society increasingly creates wealth by gathering information and processing it into useful knowledge, literacy demands also change.

Learning a new language also requires new kinds of literacy, sometimes in a different script.

Literacy is always part of **further learning opportunities**, whether in formal settings like school or in non-formal learning programmes such as short computer courses, skill development or training for professional certification. However, there are different views about the links between literacy and development: should literacy learning precede learning other skills or go along with it? Indeed, should we leave literacy learning until the need for it arises, not assuming that it is the necessary first step? The answer depends on the learners, their needs and the purposes of using literacy. At one point or another, literacy – ‘communication involving text’ – will form part of the **lifelong learning** that is necessary today (see also section *Literacy: the foundation of lifelong learning*).

Literacy is a right in itself – precisely because, without it, people do not have equal life chances.

Not all languages are written...

It is true that not all languages are written but there are well-known techniques to develop writing systems, so every language can serve as a means of literacy. The more important question is about where written communication (literacy) fits in the broader patterns of oral communication in a particular society. Orality and literacy used to be seen as opposites; now we acknowledge that they are simply different aspects of communication and they can exist in particular contexts to differing degrees. Nevertheless, literacy impacts even a predominantly ‘oral’ society, since people who take decisions affecting their lives do so through written text.

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Numeracy

Numeracy is a key skill: manipulating numbers, amounts, measurements, ratios and quantities is basic to life everywhere. Keeping track of income, expenses or stock, and understanding percentages, trends, discounts or proportions are part of daily activities. Adults whose numeracy skills are low are likely to experience a range of social, personal and economic disadvantages, particularly when combined with poor literacy. Government policies can have enormous impact if they focus on numeracy as well as literacy.

Numeracy is acknowledged to be an under-developed area with a tendency to prioritise literacy. There are many people who may have a competence in literacy but not in numeracy, with a subsequent impact on self-esteem, confidence and functioning. Such an uneven profile of skills is often obscured in the global view represented by literacy data. In most countries, there are limited data on levels of numeracy specifically, and their effects. There is some good news, however; increasing attention to employability and financial education can bring numeracy into focus for policy-makers.

Internationally, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in the 1990s assessed quantitative literacy, and the subsequent International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL, 2003) used a numeracy scale that was designed to be broader than the quantitative literacy scale, going beyond applying arithmetic skills to a wider range of mathematical skills (e.g., use of number sense, estimation, statistics). In the USA, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2005) included quantitative literacy in the survey, focusing on how adults locate numbers within text and use the resulting mathematical information, adopting four

levels of competence parallel to those used for literacy.

Provision for adult numeracy education is less easy to identify than for literacy and 'numeracy programmes' do not exist in the same way as literacy programmes. Where numeracy instruction takes place, it may be of poorer quality than literacy instruction. There is less numeracy teacher training or curriculum materials for adults than for literacy, and literacy teachers are often expected to teach numeracy without additional or specialist training.

There is much debate about which numeracy skills and practices are most appropriate for adults, about how context-specific those skills and practices are or should be; numeracy-related operations are not necessarily equivalent across cultures and languages. Further questions include how to support adults to develop and use mathematics for different purposes, which teaching and learning strategies are effective, and how to measure the impact of learning. This debate needs strengthening if key questions about numeracy provision are to find answers.

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Literacy: the foundation of lifelong learning

“Literacy is about empowerment. It increases awareness and influences the behaviour of individuals, families and communities. It improves communication skills, gives access to knowledge and builds the self-confidence and self-esteem needed to make decisions.”

Koichiro Matsuura
Director-General of UNESCO
on the occasion of
International Literacy Day
2008

© Clinton Robinson



Literacy is a process, not an end-point. It is rather the entry point to basic education and the passport to lifelong learning. We learn new ways to use literacy as we face new demands in work, study or our personal lives. Literacy is a necessary part of using new technologies, learning new languages, taking on new responsibilities and adapting to a changing workplace. The ultimate goal is not ‘eradicating illiteracy’, but engaging people in lifelong learning through universal access to the written culture.

Lifelong learning is increasingly the key organizing principle for education and training systems and for building learning

societies of the 21st century. The overall shift from ‘education’ to ‘learning’ has also shaped literacy into a broader and more holistic concept. Economic and cultural globalization means continuous learning is essential for survival, for improving people’s quality of life, and for development of all kinds – human, social, economic and cultural.

A broader understanding of literacy and numeracy as social practices and a foundation to lifelong learning is linked to key competencies such as critical thinking, the management of information and its transformation into useful knowledge, negotiation and problem-solving, and

Literacy is the entry point to basic education and the passport to lifelong learning.

communication in complex and diverse networks of relationships. Literacy is a fundamental component of 'learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be', as the Delors Report (1996) expressed the pillars of education. The uses of literacy have become wider and increasingly complex, including 'digital literacy', in all societies, rich and poor, North and South, 'developed' and 'developing'. This broader understanding has revealed that the necessary literacy skills even of adults are lacking more often than is suspected (see box). It is no surprise, therefore, that literacy programmes are increasingly part of the learning of other skills and knowledge, as people grasp new opportunities in work and life.

Lifelong learning as a guiding principle for education systems strengthens the role played by literacy and adult learning in social inclusion and human development. As integral parts of more flexible and well-articulated learning systems, literacy and adult learning need new ways of offering learning opportunities. Learners need to be able, for example, to move easily between formal and non-formal systems. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning through certificates further opens up pathways from basic learning to higher levels, creating demand for lifelong learning and building learning societies.

Literacy and other basic skills in a changing European labour market

Europe has 80 million low-skilled workers, around one third of the labour force. Estimates indicate that by 2010 only 15 per cent of newly created jobs will be for those with basic schooling, while 50 per cent of net additional jobs will require tertiary level qualifications. At the same time, international surveys show that a significant share of the European population does not have the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community and early school leavers are particularly at risk. Acquisition of at least basic skills and a good literacy level remains a challenge for many groups.

Key issues in adult literacy in the European Union

Paper presented at the UNESCO Regional Conference in Support of Global Literacy, Baku, Azerbaijan, 14–16 May 2008

Marta Ferreira

European Commission

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Literacy: where do we stand?

The world is making progress in literacy but the challenge remains huge. The number of adults who are not literate has fallen from 871 million between 1985–1994, to 774 million between 2000–2006. Between these periods, the global adult literacy rate rose accordingly from 76 per cent to 83.6 per cent, with the largest increase occurring in developing countries – from 68 per cent to 79 per cent. However, 774 million is believed to be an underestimation as there exist many more adults in so-called ‘developed’ and ‘developing countries’ who do not have an adequate level of literacy to meet the demands of their work and social networks.

“...the world suffers the shame of having about one in five adults still not literate...”

EFA Global Monitoring Report
2008

Behind the headline figures of progress in literacy, not everyone is progressing. The gender gap hardly changed between the two periods: 63 per cent of illiterate adults were women in 1985–1994 as compared to 64 per cent in 2000–2006. People living in rural areas have even less opportunity – fully 70 per cent of illiterate women and men are in this category. Minorities and indigenous peoples, nomads, migrants, refugees, and many other groups outside mainstream society, often have lower literacy rates, although precise figures are difficult to obtain. Literacy is a language-based activity, so those speaking minority and indigenous languages often have less opportunity to acquire and use literacy – this is an area where more specific data are urgently needed.

There are huge variations in literacy rates between different regions of the world and within certain regions. In developing countries overall, increases totalled 11 per cent. Looking at specific regions, the Arab States and South and West Asia made the greatest relative progress, with 13.8 per cent and 16.1 per cent increases respectively. Rates in Sub-Saharan Africa rose by 8.3 per cent. Though Latin America and the Caribbean had only a 4 per cent average increase, the literacy rate was already over 86 per cent in the 1985–1994 period.

The charts (p.25) for the Arab States region and Sub-Saharan Africa show that countries vary greatly in their achievements. Between the periods 1985–1994 and 2000–2006, it is heartening to note that some of the greatest progress has occurred in countries with the lowest literacy rates: Algeria (25 per cent increase), Egypt (27 per cent) and Yemen (20 per cent) among the Arab States, and Burundi (22 per cent), Central African Republic (15 per cent), Malawi (22 per cent) and Senegal (15 per cent) in Sub-Saharan Africa. Other countries such as Burkina Faso, Chad and Ethiopia remain in need of considerable support. Mali and Niger, not shown in the chart, also fall into this category.

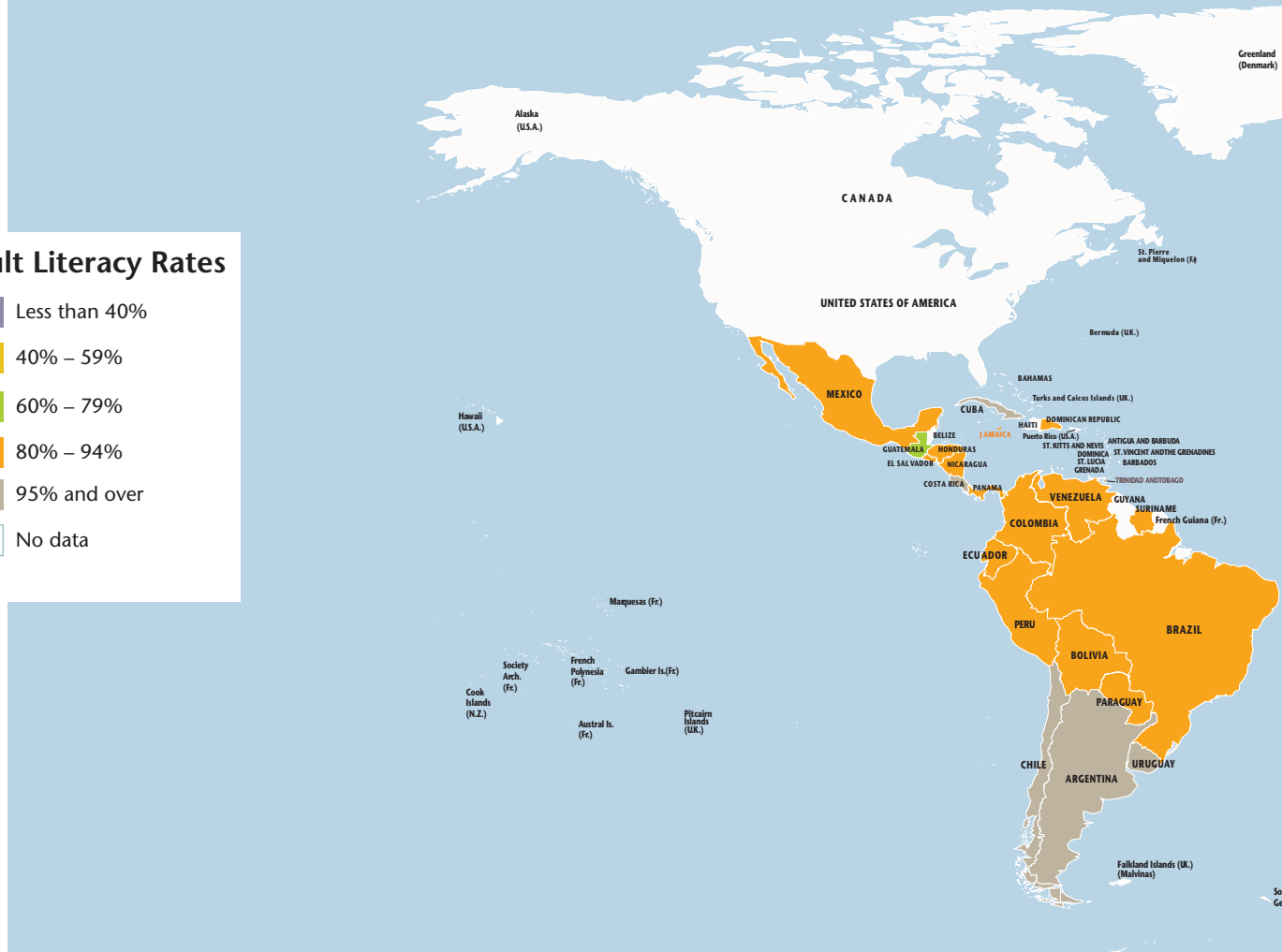
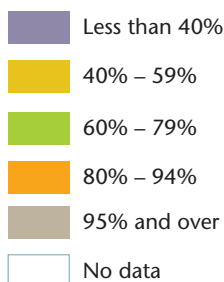
Reducing illiteracy rates by 50 per cent is one of the six Education for All goals, which the Global Monitoring Report assesses each year. The 2008 Report indicates that 26 countries have achieved this goal, and that 30 more are likely to do so by the 2015 target date.

Note on Data

Data refer to the most recent year available during the period specified. The two periods correspond to pre- and post-Dakar (World Education Forum – 2000).

Data are drawn from the August 2008 data release from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Adult Literacy Rates



It further notes that 43 countries are unlikely to meet the goal, and that 25 of them are at serious risk of not doing so. A further 28 countries are showing good progress, but moving too slowly. Fully 76 countries have insufficient or no data and include some in a critical situation such as Afghanistan.

In places, the picture of literacy progress is gradually being re-drawn, with new surveys which test for levels of actual literacy competence. A survey undertaken in France in 2004–5 showed that around 9 per cent of the adult population did not have functional literacy skills, even though many of them were in work. In 2006, Kenya conducted a survey of actual literacy use, rather than recording whether people declared themselves to be literate or not. The results showed that the headline literacy rate of 74 per cent was in fact lower – 61.5 per cent – once direct testing of competence was used. The picture becomes more complicated when the goalposts of what constitute ‘adequate’ literacy levels are constantly moving – what was sufficient 20 years ago is no longer enough in the digital age.

Obtaining the right data

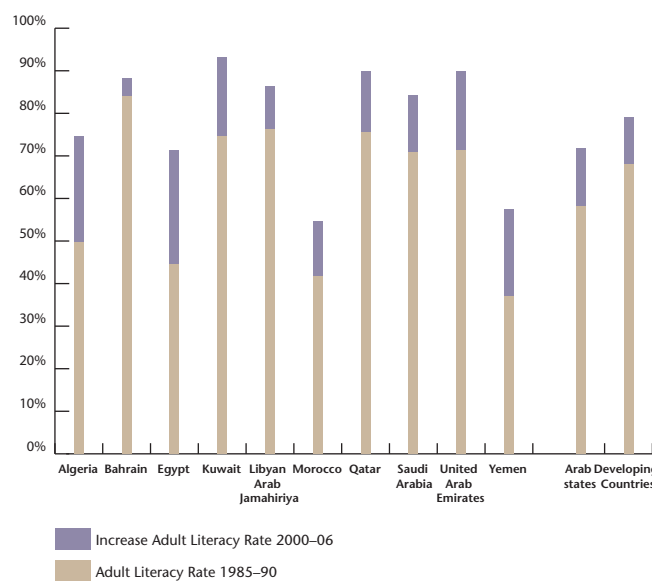
What is the best way to count literate and illiterate people? National literacy rates may reflect census data where people respond whether they are literate or not, perhaps making a response for the members of their household too. Other ways of counting include listing as literate those who have completed a certain number of years of schooling. These methods do not produce reliable data, nor do they reveal how well people can use literacy in their lives – for personal, social or work purposes.

More targeted methods are therefore increasingly in use that, first, assess directly how well a sample of the population can actually perform literacy and numeracy tasks, and, second, indicate what level a person performs at. This moves away from classifying people as either ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’ towards differentiating levels along a continuum of literacy competencies (see also section *Assessing levels of literacy*).

These methods will give a much more accurate picture of the state of literacy and numeracy in a country. Once better data are available, literacy policies and programmes may become more relevant and focused, with objectives and methods that are appropriate to the actual learning needs of particular population groups.

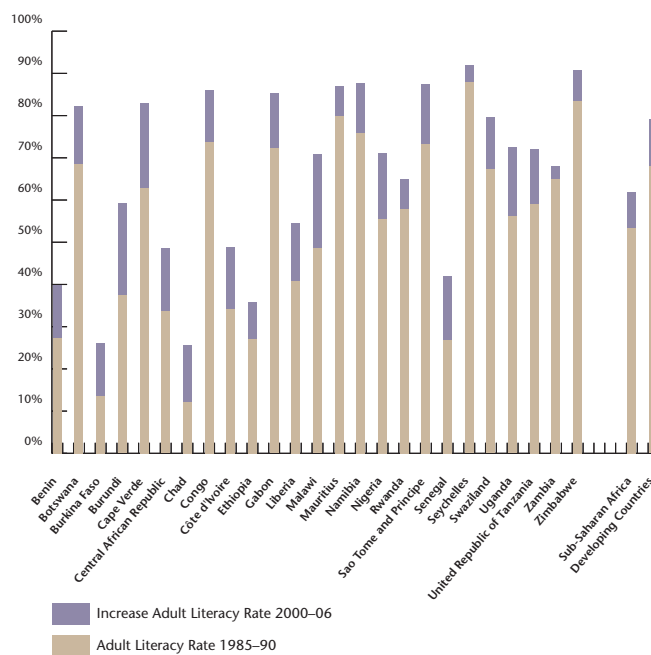


Adult Literacy Increase over time in Arab States



Source: UIS database

Adult Literacy Increase over time in Sub-Saharan Africa



Population growth is another important factor which has an impact on literacy rates. Even if the percentage of literate adults is increasing, in some regions the rate of population growth is such that the absolute numbers of illiterate adults continue to climb. School systems cannot absorb the increased population or cannot deliver education of sufficient quality to guarantee usable literacy skills to the large numbers who pass through them. Similarly, adult learning opportunities are not available to increased numbers of unschooled, under-schooled or dropout youth.

In some regions population growth is outstripping literacy efforts...

	Adult literacy rate (%)		Number of illiterate adults (million)	
	2000	2006	2000	2006
Sub-Saharan Africa	59.5	62.1	151	163
South and West Asia	58.9	64.3	390.5	393.2

Source: UIS Data release April 2008

Where will we stand in 2015, the target date for reaching the EFA goals? The only projections possible are those based on current trends, therefore assuming current rates of progress, current conditions and availability of data. The

box below shows the projections for youth and adult literacy that the EFA Global Monitoring Report has made. They indicate such modest progress that they can serve only as a spur to much stronger efforts and greater investment. As a whole, in 2015 the world will still be far from achieving the EFA goal in youth and adult literacy, mostly because of large and abiding challenges in certain regions.

Projections...

- Global literacy rate in 2015: 86.9 per cent - up 3.3 per cent from the period 2000–2006.
- Fewer young female illiterates in 2015: 50 million in the 15–24 age bracket, down from 76 million.
- Proportion of women in illiterate population: almost unchanged at about 64 per cent.
- Achieving the goal of halving adult illiteracy rates by 2015: three-quarters of the 127 countries for which projections were calculated are likely to miss this goal, including most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia and the Arab States.

Sources: EFA Global Monitoring Reports 2008 and UIS April 2008 Data Release

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Equity

"Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights."

UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
1999

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Literacy and human rights

Where literacy and human rights converge:

- Literacy is a human right and is implicit in the right to education recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. No education is possible without literary skills. It is not only a question of gaining access to literacy, be it through formal schooling or non-formal programmes, but also of the quality of the literacy programmes.
- Achieving basic literacy skills should not be seen as an end in itself but as a tool for active citizenship and a means to pursue other civil, political, economic or social rights. Those who can use literacy skills to defend and realize their legal rights have significant advantage over those who cannot. Through literacy, individuals obtain the means to participate politically in society.
- Relating literacy to human rights refers also to the content taught in the programmes. Literacy classes are places where learners, especially women, can be informed about their rights and can develop abilities to claim, defend and promote them. Many literacy providers already link basic literacy skills training to lessons on human and civil rights.

These connections are fundamentally empowering – enabling people not only to benefit from greater personal freedoms and choices, but to take a more active role in claiming their place in society. Empowerment is about new autonomy of action – the capacity to initiate and manage change, rather than merely endure it. Active use of literacy is an essential condition of socio-economic empowerment and democratic participation.

Adopting a rights-based approach to literacy provision can help meet the global education goals. It demands the creation of strategies to reach all citizens of all ages including the most marginalized groups - girls and women, indigenous populations and remote rural groups, street children, migrants and nomadic populations, people with disabilities, and linguistic and cultural minorities.

Literacy within the right to education: international statements and agreements

Education has been formally recognized as a human right since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) echoed the UDHR in affirming the right to education and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) stressed the responsibility to provide basic education for individuals who could not complete primary education. In 1975, the Persepolis Declaration spoke of literacy as a right in itself, and in 1981, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women affirmed access to literacy as part of achieving gender equality. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) once again affirmed the entitlement to free, compulsory primary education for all children, while the Hamburg Declaration of 1997 set literacy in the context of the right to adult education, with a view to lifelong learning.

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Inclusion and equity: is literacy really for all?

At a global level, the challenge of literacy inequalities remains undiminished. Ensuring adequate and appropriate provision to diverse population groups will require that improvements in mass literacy go hand-in-hand with sensitivity to linguistic and cultural diversity among minority and indigenous populations. In addition, provision for women, young people, rural populations and the poor is often inadequate.

Literacy plays a central role in preventing social exclusion and promoting equity and social justice. Poor literacy skills result in a lack of participation in education, employment, community life or citizenship. Literacy is key to inclusion, empowerment and improving the quality of life. Where illiterate people do not have access to literacy provision, this adds to their exclusion and serves to reproduce social inequalities.

When countries and donors prioritize their investment in education, financially and politically, illiterate youth and adults are largely excluded. Within this huge group of illiterate people, many more women than men lack literacy skills. As literacy provision is often seen as the basic education for adults, major groups who should be targeted by literacy programmes do not receive sufficient attention. These include out-of-school children, youth and adolescents who, if not taken in charge early enough, will soon add to the number of illiterate adults. As many programmes target adults from age 15+, adolescents and youth (15–24) might find themselves in class with older learners whose needs are different. Given the age profile of populations in many developing countries, it is imperative to provide relevant alternative learning opportunities to young people.

Among excluded populations, certain groups in particular have been marginalized: minorities, indigenous populations, migrants, refugees, nomads, prisoners, and others. Such social exclusion may be due to disability, to ascribed characteristics such as ethnicity, caste or religion (in addition to gender and age), or to 'acquired' characteristics such as poverty, income level, migration, displacement or incarceration. Socio-economic status and 'class' are often determinants of access to quality learning opportunities.

It is difficult to consider one dimension of inequality in isolation as there are significant interactions between, for instance, gender and poverty in relation to literacy attainment. Promoting inclusive literacy, therefore, is not just about how to target literacy or schooling interventions effectively for specific groups but also about the impact that literacy can have on transforming traditional gender, socio-economic, cultural and political inequalities within and

between communities. Moreover, it is pertinent to link literacy programmes with development strategies that address poverty in integrated ways.

Literacy rates amongst **indigenous populations** remain relatively low in many countries, as compared to the rest of the population. In Bolivia and Guatemala, for instance, over half the population is composed of indigenous groups and they also account for the largest number of illiterates. The main reasons are that (a) there are very few adequate educational programmes in the languages of these indigenous populations and (b) the content of education pays insufficient attention to their cultural backgrounds. They often have to perform in the mainstream culture and in a language they may not have mastered.

Nomadic communities face similar problems regarding exclusion from mainstream education. Sedentary values are linked to notions of progress and shape ideas about how education should be provided. Becoming literate is often associated with adopting the dominant sedentary lifestyle and, to some extent, values that promote literate above oral practices. For this reason, mobile adult literacy provision – intended to respond to the nomadic lifestyle – is seen as excluding nomads from what they see as higher status education in formal settings. With growing numbers of children becoming literate through mainstream schools and in response to increasing interaction with 'dominant' cultural values and communicative practices, indigenous and nomadic cultures are changing. Approaches to literacy and broader learning which respect the nomadic lifestyle need much greater attention.

The literacy and basic learning needs of **young people** are critical for the future. Some particular groups of children and youth have been excluded from regular schooling due to the pressures of poverty or living in war-torn areas. The large numbers of children of school age who are not in school – currently 75 million – need alternative and often less formal learning opportunities.

In many countries, there are large numbers of illiterate or semi-literate adolescents and youth who are at the critical stage of entering productive life. However, they do not have the

necessary skills to do so successfully, and most of the countries concerned do not have any well-articulated policy to deal with this segment of the population. School drop-outs, child soldiers, working children, street children and others who continue to be excluded from mainstream education, require literacy programmes tailored to their needs and circumstances. Literacy programmes for youth, most often defined as the 15–24 age group, should build on the specific needs, energy and enthusiasm of that age group. A focus on shaping their own lives and that of their communities offers a channel for their aspirations and ideals. Understanding youth sub-cultures is a starting point for addressing feelings of alienation from the values of mainstream society and thus a springboard for designing relevant learning. The process of learning literacy and the content of materials, when both are designed specifically for that age group, can stimulate young people to adopt learning habits which they can sustain throughout life. Within this group, the characteristics of adolescents, both girls and boys, need targeted approaches where literacy and numeracy skills are combined with confidence-building and skills for appropriate work.



Estimates indicate that about 70 per cent of poor populations live in **rural areas** which have fewer schools and less well-developed opportunities for non-formal learning. Other factors such as poverty, remoteness and cultural differences may compound relative disadvantage. As a means of accessing new and wider sources of information, literacy enables rural people to manage their own development and take more autonomous

decisions. The inclusion of skills enabling rural people to diversify their livelihoods – such as basic literacy and numeracy, agricultural skills, skills for off-farm activities as well as for micro-business management – contributes to reducing vulnerability and poverty. In many rural communities, other subjects such as human rights, non-violent resolution of conflicts, HIV and AIDS prevention and treatment and other health topics are valued. Whatever the configuration of content may be, basic education should equip rural learners to continue learning, apply critical thinking and cope with the changes they will encounter in life. In rural areas, local artisans, story-tellers, and others are human resources who can contribute to meeting learning needs based on the local culture and economy.

Adolescent girls – a neglected group

Adolescent girls are the most vulnerable group of the poorest parts of the population: with little or no education and limited skills, facing aggression, exploitation, deprivation, discrimination, and becoming victims of trafficking and the prostitution-poverty trap. Both girls and boys in their adolescent years are at a point where they need to develop life skills of all kinds – intellectual, social, vocational, etc – and where the potential for developing a solid base of capabilities is particularly strong.

*Out-of-school Adolescents in South Asia:
A cross-national study
UNESCO 2004*

Globally, **people with disabilities** make up the world's largest and most disadvantaged minority and often live on the margins of society. An estimated 20 per cent of the world's poorest people are those with disabilities: over 90 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school, and the literacy rate for adults with disabilities is as low as 3 per cent, in some countries dropping to 1 per cent for women with disabilities. In many parts of the world, people with disabilities suffer from negative attitudes from their families and communities, and the education system may completely overlook them. Beyond the crucial questions of access, literacy programmes need to structure learning in ways that enable people with disabilities to make relevant use of literacy, with a firm commitment to avoid stigma and discrimination in learning materials.

Migrants often find themselves facing the challenges of a new language and possibly a new script which they must learn in order to live and work in their new environment. Skilled and experienced workers are unable to function at their previous socio-economic level without the opportunity to acquire new literacy competencies. Migrants also encounter new literacy practices, for example in moving from a rural to urban environment.

Learning for Prisoners

Over 60,000 people were in prison in Argentina in 2006, and this group had a rate of illiteracy which was ten times that of the general population. In addition, the educational opportunities were few, and the educational content was largely out of date. Located in two hundred prisons, about 20 per cent of the inmates took part in formal learning and a further 8 per cent in non-formal learning, according to official statistics. In this situation, new efforts aim to increase all kinds of learning, to provide education which is work-related, and to link prison-based learning with what is available in regular learning centres. Central to these endeavours is raising the quality of the programmes and making inmates aware of the opportunities available.

The emphasis so far has been placed on enhancing access and it will be a major challenge for many countries in future years to use literacy as a means of tackling the sources of social inequalities. Only a few programmes have explored new learning, teaching and curriculum approaches that respond to and build on the practices, languages and cultures of marginalized groups. Some examples may be found in Latin America, particularly in relation to indigenous communities. These examples

suggest the potential to promote literacy as a process of engaging critically with existing inequalities, whether around disability, poverty, gender, ethnic group or language, following in the Freirean tradition of literacy for social transformation.

Sensitivity to cultural diversity means that a critical examination of the relevance and appropriateness of the curriculum is equally as important as addressing more structural obstacles to access such as, for instance, the emphasis on literacy by radio for remote groups.

Literacy for the Blind and Partially Sighted in Morocco

The project 'Literacy for the Blind' in Morocco is a partnership between a local NGO, the University of Marrakech and the Ministry in charge of literacy. It is structured around 4 main activities:

- i. Braille literacy: classes are organized in small groups of 3 to 4 learners formed on the basis of age and educational level.
- ii. Digital literacy: groups of 2 people per facilitator use a computer centre supplied with appropriate equipment managed by the Association.
- iii. Training in personal independence: teaching the blind person how to identify objects and move in space, how to achieve greater independence in daily living (running errands, preparing meals, doing administrative tasks...). These meetings are also an opportunity for beneficiaries to organize trips and recreational activities as a group.
- iv. Publishing of suitable books: either in paper (Braille) or audio format.

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Getting the chance to learn literacy



"I will return to my community a changed person, and forgive everyone who has hurt me."

Khalil, age 15

Khalil is a Jordanian teenager who joined Questscope, a

Non-Formal Education (NFE) programme which uses dialogue to expand children's opportunities and reintegrate them into mainstream society. Improvements in literacy are coupled with improvements in self-awareness, citizenship and preparation for competence to reach goals within the mainstream society.

For those who were not able to complete basic education successfully or to retain skills obtained in school, **non-formal** learning opportunities offer literacy programmes adapted to their specific needs. Non-formal programmes take a variety of shapes, of which some examples follow.

There are many ways to learn literacy – as part of schooling, in non-formal programmes for youth and adults, or informally without any structured instruction. Literacy learning may stand on its own, be part of a package of basic competencies or have a place in programmes which teach other knowledge or skills.

Where the **formal** education system provides good quality basic education, it ensures effective literacy learning in schools. It reduces drop-out rates and helps in retaining literacy and other skills. Literacy gets increasing attention as a particularly important area of the school curriculum because it lays the foundation of success in other subjects too. Children's home and community situations influence the education they receive at school. School-age children perform better if their parents have an education and if books and other reading materials are available at home or in the community.



Equivalency or 'second chance' programmes provide young adults and out-of-school children access to an alternative route for gaining the same qualifications provided in the formal sector. Many Asian countries such as India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, for example, have considerable experience in designing and implementing equivalency programmes, and these are widespread in many regions. They are often more flexible and can better respond to the specific needs of the learners in terms of timing, and the pedagogical approaches used but also as far as content and learning material are concerned. To allow learners in non-formal programmes to join formal schooling again, efforts are made to link both systems and allow easy transition. In Madagascar, a Joint Malagasy Government-United Nations System Programme for the Promotion of Basic Education for All Malagasy Children offers as one of its components the 'school of the second chance' where the primary school cycle is covered in 10 months instead of 5 years. In Morocco, equivalency or second chance schooling, which caters for the

out-of-school population and school drop-outs aged 9 to 16, is one of the two main education programmes of the Department of Literacy and Non-Formal Education of the Ministry of Education.

Second Chance School in Bulgaria

With the support of DVV-International, a pilot school based on the model of 'Second Chance Schools' serves the second largest Roma urban community in Bulgaria, in Stolipinovo, Plovdiv. Illiterate adults of this population or people who did not complete school were included in a group-based type of non-formal education. The programme aimed to provide tailor-made kinds of training and non-formal education, aiming at employment and social inclusion. The objectives are to build the reading and communication skills of illiterate adults in this population group, to support the completion of an educational level, to motivate illiterate adults to make the link between literacy and employability, and to support social inclusion and active citizenship.

Sometimes known as **family literacy**, an intergenerational approach to literacy learning has shown positive results as adults and children learn together, as programmes in Guatemala, Pakistan, Turkey, Uganda, and the USA have shown.

The Mother Child Home Education Programme (MOCEP)

MOCEP is a high quality, research-based intervention programme that effectively empowers mothers with child-rearing skills and teaches them how to give a complete early years home education pre-primary course to their children in their homes. The programme started in Turkey in 1993 and was adapted and replicated as from 2000 in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

This approach takes account of the different learning styles and needs of both adult and child. At the same time, activities designed for parents and children together stimulate learning and the child receives valuable support. Family literacy also enable parents to engage much more with their children's experience at school and makes the links between school and community stronger.

Seizing the opportunity

Under the slogan 'Making books part of a healthy childhood', the NGO Reach Out and Read found a special niche through which to encourage literacy learning in young children in the USA. Building on the regular visits of parents with young children to pediatric clinics, the organization promotes literacy by training medical staff to advise parents about the importance of reading. Each child receives a book at the regular pediatric check-ups between six months and five years of age, with encouragement to parents to read aloud to their young children. In 2006–7, over 2.8 million children participated in the programme, involving over 3200 medical establishments across the country.

In remote areas, neither formal nor non-formal literacy programmes might be available. In this context, **distance education** through television, video, radio and the Internet plays an important role. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in general can be an interesting alternative to traditional modes of learning as they often provide for more individualized learning opportunities. ICTs are rarely the sole means of literacy learning, but they give support to learners and facilitators in a number of ways: stimulating awareness and raising motivation, facilitating learner-generated materials, providing input for facilitators, and gathering feedback on learner experiences. The

explosive growth of access to mobile phones has enabled illiterate adults to use text messages to enhance their livelihoods: for example, fishermen in Bangladesh have compared prices through texting to possible market purchasers. A successful distance learning programme in Mongolia addressed the needs of nomadic herder families for stronger basic competencies and new skills to adjust to new economic realities. Using radio, print materials, district learning centres, 'core' learning families and itinerant facilitators, the programme made a difference to families nationwide.

In addition to formal learning in school or non-formal learning outside the formal education system, many young people and adults may learn literacy by **informal** means. This may involve learning to read certain texts that are necessary for work, learning through texting by mobile phone or using a computer for particular purposes. Informal learning by using literacy in practice is the way everyone improves their skills.

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Literacy and gender

Two-thirds of the youth and adults without literacy skills are female. In some countries, this proportion reaches 80 per cent. However, the relationship between literacy and gender is more complex than these figures suggest. In Europe, North America, the Caribbean and some middle-income countries, educators are concerned about boys' relative lack of achievement in literacy. There is thus a striking difference between the discourse about literacy and gender in different regions of the world, which illustrates the importance of context in relation to the gendering of literacy practices and education generally.

In most countries of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, policy focuses on women's and girls' marginalization from education due to the huge gender gap in adult literacy rates. This is also true in the countries of Latin America with indigenous majorities. Both structural barriers (inappropriate timing, lack of childcare, lack of mobility, male teachers, etc.) and social factors (male opposition to women's education, women's low status in society, etc.) affect the participation of women in literacy programmes. Structural barriers are easier to tackle in the planning of programmes than social and cultural barriers which need a change in attitudes.

In order to reach equity, programmes should raise awareness about gendered assumptions, practices and texts.



"I was enrolled in the Mother-to-Mother programme with all its components for six years. The programme has turned my life around, after I lost hope. I am now a confident woman who knows her abilities, I am involved in my children's education and my husband sees me as a partner in decision-making and solving problems."

Hanan E. (paraprofessional mother)

The Mother-to-Mother Programme operates in the Palestinian Territories and enables mothers to become familiar with the essentials of early childhood development processes. After the training, the mothers pass on their newly acquired knowledge to other mothers in their neighbourhood. The programme also strengthens the women's roles in their social environment and encourages them to participate in community work.

In Europe and North America where the trend disadvantages boys, gender inequalities are analysed in relation to the literacy curriculum which seems to be more 'girl friendly'. Assessments of literacy skills emphasize writing and reading which

are girls' preferred activities in the classroom. In the Caribbean, the disadvantage that boys suffer reflects the socio-economic status and circumstances of their families.

Research reveals a correlation between women's literacy and the positive development of the family and the community in terms of their economic situation, education and health. There is evidence that literate women, even those with relatively low levels of literacy, are more likely to send their daughters to school than those without any literacy at all.

Previously, literacy programmes tended to target women as a homogeneous group. Now there is more understanding of the differing needs of women according to age, marital status, location and economic situation. Many literacy programmes specifically target women in their roles as wives and mothers and adopt a functional literacy approach with lessons on health, child care, savings and loan clubs and income generation. In particular, poor women and women and girls in conflict situations need special attention.

Importantly, what attracts many women to attend a literacy class is the symbolic value of literacy and the self-confidence that learning generates. They wish to learn to read and write as a value in itself and learning about improved health and nutrition practices – aspects put forward by many providers – is secondary. The potential that literacy offers for increased status in their living and work situations holds greater value for many women.

An evaluation of approaches to literacy and gender reveals a deeper challenge. Most emphasis has so far been placed on how to change structures, curriculum and teaching approaches to ensure greater participation of the marginalized group, whether girls or boys, women or men. Many women welcome women-only classes as a safe space to discuss their lives and to learn new skills in a supportive environment. It is also more

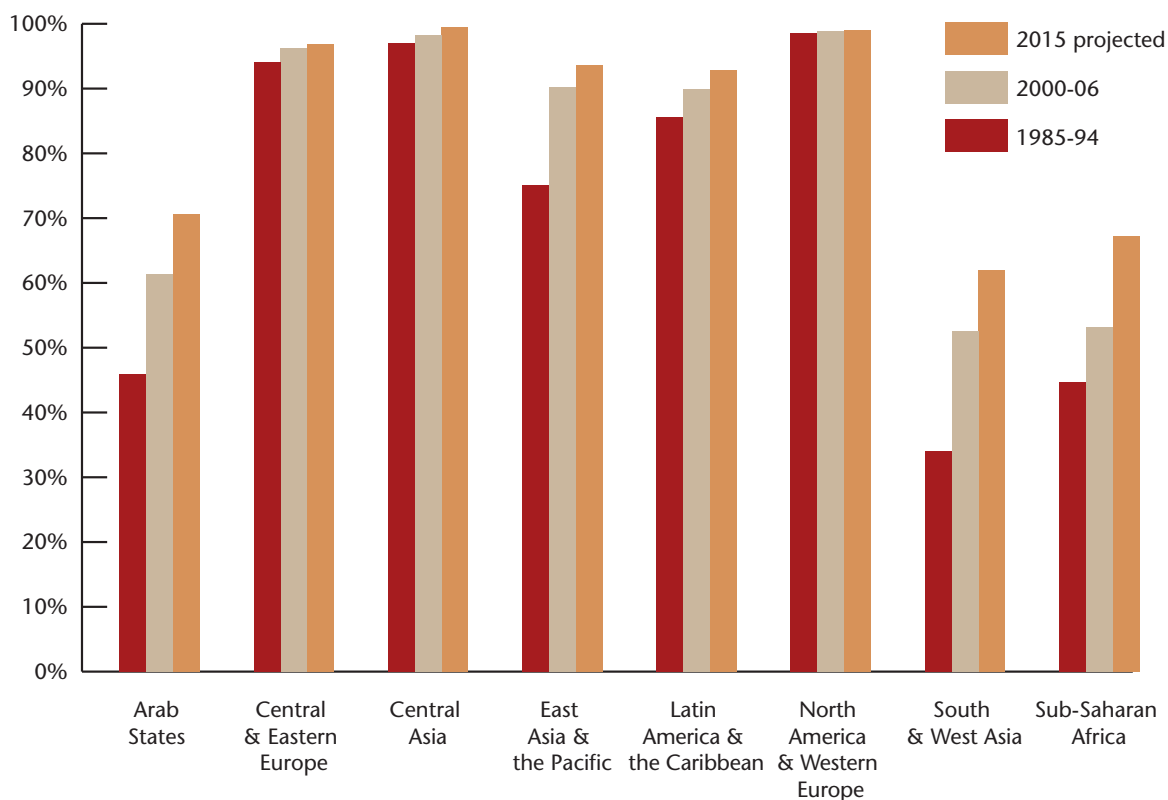
acceptable in many communities for women to learn literacy in places where men are not present. However, in order to challenge traditional gendered assumptions and change attitudes towards women, men also need to be included in the educational process. Promising examples come from REFLECT programmes which use a participatory approach to help men and women to discuss and address gender inequalities such as the gender division of labour and unequal workloads in their homes and communities.

When gender equality is addressed holistically and specific programmes target both women and men, literacy programmes have an impact on transforming traditional gender inequalities.

Gender disparities

Worldwide, the overall percentage of women who are illiterate has remained virtually unchanged in the last 20 years: 63 per cent of the illiterate population were women in 1985–1994 as compared to 64 per cent in 2000–2006. The gender gap has improved most in the Arab States, and in South, West and East Asia. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the female literacy rate has risen from 45 per cent to 53 per cent, but the proportion of illiterate women within the total illiterate population has increased slightly, from 61 per cent to 62 per cent. Within specific countries, there are also considerable differences in women's and men's literacy rates according to geographical location. In Pakistan, the gender disparity in literacy rates is much greater in rural areas than in urban areas. In South Asia as a whole, the gender gap in school enrolments is particularly evident in remote areas. Latin America and the Caribbean show contrasting trends to the other regions discussed, with only a small number of countries still showing disadvantages for women in accessing education, six countries showing parity and 18 countries where there are reversals of gender disparities with more girls enrolling in school than boys. Significantly, the Latin American countries with large indigenous communities (Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia) have lower literacy rates for women as compared to the population as a whole.

Trends in female literacy rates by region (%)



Source: UIS database

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Literacy and poverty reduction



"...the enhancement of human capabilities also tends to go with an expansion of productivities and earning power."

Amartya Sen
Development as Freedom
1999

Poverty is a complex cycle of deprivation, with a high level of vulnerability to changes in social, economic, ecological and demographic circumstances. It is not a homogeneous phenomenon, with a single solution. Whatever measure of poverty is used – for example US\$1 or 2 a day to live on – the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. Moreover, a map of areas of high illiteracy in the world corresponds quite closely with a map of high levels of poverty, and literacy competence is an essential learning outcome contributing to economic development. In this perspective, it is not literacy on its own that makes a difference, but rather what it enables people to do in order to benefit from new freedoms and address poverty – accessing information, using services they have a right to and reducing vulnerability to disease or ecological change. Literacy is one of the features – but a universal one – that is linked with poverty reduction, economic growth and wealth creation.

In **Malawi**, the Ministry of Women and Child Development implemented the Sustainable Social and Economic Empowerment Programme for Poverty Reduction (SSEEP) to tackle the problems of illiteracy, environmental degradation and poverty reduction. The integrated approach combined the participatory REFLECT methodology with functional literacy and the development of livelihood activities. Promoting linkages across different sectors, the programme developed post-literacy primers on themes such as HIV and AIDS, population growth and gender-based violence. It also provided training on new energy technologies and income-generating activities.

This programme, like other functional literacy programmes linked to skills development, aimed to yield direct benefits to participants in terms of increased income. The concept of lifelong learning has particular relevance for the poor who may need to continually update their skills to survive in the informal economy.

Literacy, the Millennium Development Goals and Poverty Reduction Strategies

An analysis of the development frameworks informing both education and wider development policy can give an insight into how literacy is defined within international and national poverty reduction strategies. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper's (PRSP) conceptual framework for education is informed by two theories: human capital and an integrated approach to development. These two theories carry different assumptions about education: the former assumes that more education will improve capacity to raise income (i.e. more education = less poverty), whereas the latter approach, less prominent in PRSPs, promotes education both in its own right and for achieving economic, social and infrastructural targets in other sectors. In promoting literacy, an integrated approach responds best to rights-based and functional rationales.

Illiteracy is regarded as a barrier preventing the poor from improving their lives.

– Cambodia

Illiteracy is regarded as one of the causes and determinants of poverty: improving literacy is one of the priorities of the second strategic pillar of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

– Benin

Illiteracy is considered an obstacle to implementing a participation plan for PRSP: high levels of illiteracy are regarded as 'poverty's social face'.

– Guyana

These statements drawn from the PRSPs of three countries show the strong links that are deemed to exist between illiteracy and poverty. Development policy frameworks have shaped and influenced

approaches to literacy – particularly outside the formal school sector. In particular, the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals at the UN General Assembly in 2000 reinforced the prioritisation of funding for primary education (Goal 2). The lack of reference to adult literacy or non-formal education in the goals meant that the connections between literacy and poverty reduction were not directly addressed. However, literacy clearly has an important role to play in achieving all eight MDGs – for instance, the inter-generational effect of literate adults being more likely to send children to school (Goal 2), or learning about prevention of HIV and AIDS through literacy (Goal 6).

Education is a major element of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers; however, a review of 18 PRSPs revealed that though most countries referred to the MDGs related to education, there was limited reference to the EFA goals that were not focused on formal education. Though many countries presented correlations between low levels of poverty and illiteracy rates and discussed illiteracy 'as a cause of poverty', some PRSPs did not contain any suggested actions to tackle literacy problems. This was partly due to the lack of any developed theoretical framework around learning and teaching to take the PRSP process beyond the recommendation that the poor should learn relevant skills.

Mauritania: putting literacy and development together

Mauritania has made particular efforts to integrate education and literacy into the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Framework. The National Programme for the Development of the Education System for 2001-2010 has specific linkages to wider development and provides a coordinated framework for the reform of formal and non-formal education. Within this, the Mauritanian National Strategy for the Eradication of Illiteracy (2006-2015) reinforces the importance of literacy as a full-fledged component of the revised Poverty Reduction Strategy Framework and as an essential ingredient of sustainable development.

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Literacy in conflict-affected areas

A major obstacle to achieving literacy for all is the high proportion of countries that are experiencing or have recently emerged from conflict. Most conflicts today occur in poorer countries which often have the lowest literacy rates. Protracted violence and instability may mean that entire groups miss out on the chance to develop literacy skills.

Conflicts and their aftermath directly affect the provision of education. School buildings are destroyed, teachers are killed or flee and under-qualified teachers are brought in but are often unpaid and untrained. Not surprisingly, families are unwilling to send their children to school when security is poor. Opportunities for non-formal education and youth and adult learning may similarly be curtailed.

The importance of access to literacy instruction for conflict-affected populations, particularly women and marginalised youth, cannot be over-emphasised. Building literacy is critical to protection, health and well-being during and after conflict, as well as to social and economic reintegration and development. Literacy programmes, especially when linked to life and livelihood skills, empowerment and peace-building initiatives, have the potential to improve human security, promote reconciliation and prevent future conflict.

Programmes in Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo show that integrated literacy, conflict resolution and peace-building programmes can play an important role in contributing to the reconstruction of post-conflict societies.

Even more than under normal circumstances, it is crucial to use participatory approaches and elaborate literacy programmes in full dialogue with the affected communities.

Literacy and peace-building

In the conflict in Sierra Leone during the 1990s, approximately two-thirds of the population were displaced, creating the largest refugee population in Africa. The population experienced atrocities first hand. Social structures as well as physical infrastructures broke down. The task of dealing with trauma and rebuilding communities physically and psychologically was enormous. In response to this, Education for Development, a UK-based NGO, developed programmes in partnership with local NGOs which combined literacy provision with conflict resolution and peace-building. Newly acquired writing and reading skills were used by the course participants to describe their own experiences and read those of the others. This appeared to be a promising approach, helping them come to terms with multiple traumas and shift towards constructive action.

A number of challenges to achieving literacy for all among conflict-affected populations remain. Conflict imposes risks, responsibilities and burdens on adults and youth that may prevent them from accessing learning opportunities. Further, conflict can intensify processes of marginalisation, increasing the vulnerability of certain groups or individuals whether because of economic status, age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability, geographic location or some combination thereof.

Missed years of schooling during conflict make it difficult for many young people to complete even a basic education, especially for those beyond the age limit for school entry, or build a solid base for further learning. It is critically important to offer learning opportunities tailored to the urgent needs of such groups. Despite growing emphasis on working with adolescents and youth, their educational needs typically exceed the number and scope of programmes available to address them.

Situations of displacement may present additional challenges as learners are often forced to adapt to a new language of instruction, whether in refugee or IDP camps or upon returning home. Where youth and adult learning opportunities exist in camps, literacy gains are not always sustained by appropriate follow-up strategies.

These possibilities and challenges highlight the need for additional investment in research, capacity development and programming, if literacy for all is to be achieved among conflict-affected populations. Situations of reconstruction may open 'windows of opportunity'. As stated in the Global Monitoring Report 2006, "The necessary reconstruction of education after conflicts and other emergencies represents considerable potential for renewal and improvement. Policy change, for example, can be relatively easy, as old structures may have been swept away."

Where new opportunities open up during reconstruction a sustained commitment is necessary to make them meaningful and bring promising programmes to scale.

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Making policy for literacy

A comprehensive literacy policy is the starting point for effective national action. Strong, clear policies and strategies – backed by legislation and properly costed and resourced – need to underpin the delivery of the many literacy opportunities which countries offer in order to meet the diverse needs of many different groups. However, a policy statement in the national education plan alone does not guarantee implementation on the ground.

Designing literacy policies and strategies has to start with a process of reflection on the meaning and scope of literacy – a consistent definition is necessary as a yardstick for monitoring. Sound policies and planning need sound data – reliable and timely data on literacy levels of population groups, on patterns of literacy and illiteracy, and on the types, quality and outcomes of literacy programmes. Where this information is not available at national level, efficient planning and implementation are rendered difficult. Benchmarks (see below) provide a reference point for setting standards in implementing literacy policies.

In making policy for literacy, national development strategies, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Poverty Reduction Strategies and other frameworks form the larger context, while education sector plans, gender policies and policies on linguistic minorities will shape literacy programming.

“Literacy must be placed at the centre of all levels of education systems and development efforts.”

from the UNLD Action Plan

Policies in themselves are not enough – they must lead to feasible strategies for implementation and include sound projections of what the strategies entail in terms of human and financial resources. Making these resources available is a critical step towards action.

Feasible strategies will take account of which institutions deliver literacy – both governmental and non-governmental – and how formal and non-formal education are linked. Partnerships at national and community level will be a feature of effectively reaching diverse population groups; as well as government departments and units, these partnerships will include both international agencies and community associations.

Strategies that are realistic will address the essential aspects of literacy in order to deliver literacy successfully on the ground. These include curriculum design, facilitator training, fostering an environment which encourages the use of literacy, both reading and writing, as well as assessing how local communities can manage and sustain relevant literacy efforts. No strategy is complete without appropriate and adequate provision for monitoring and evaluation, in order to measure progress made.

Many national governments have integrated youth and adult literacy into their education plans and poverty reduction strategies. These policies express a growing commitment to literacy and its links with other aspects of development. During the first half of the UN Literacy Decade, countries in all regions strengthened literacy policies, for example:

Brazil: Coinciding with the start of the Literacy Decade, the government gave fresh impetus to youth and adult literacy by establishing a new national secretariat. The Secretariat of Continuing Education, Literacy and Diversity focuses on population groups which had historically been denied access. There was a budget increase in 2005 of 25 per cent – part of a new concern for the quality of literacy programmes which also led to longer programmes and new monitoring and evaluation tools. States and municipalities in particular have raised levels of investment. Currently, there are steps to offer continuing basic education at primary and secondary levels to those who participated in the government’s 2003–2008 basic literacy programme *Brasil Alfabetizado*.

Burkina Faso: With the goal of increasing the literacy rate from 28 to 40 per cent by 2010, literacy policy focuses on offering opportunities to young people and adults who did not benefit from primary schooling or who dropped out. Permanent literacy training centres and centres for non-formal basic education are the practical

expression of this policy. Graduates from these centres grew by 24 per cent between 2003 and 2007. As part of the agreement with the EFA Fast Track Initiative, the government included funding for adult literacy as part of its strategy to promote EFA holistically at local level.

China: Having achieved major increases in the adult literacy rate over the last 15 years with over 90 million new literates, literacy policy in China now focuses on groups that experience particular disadvantage: poor areas, rural populations, women and ethnic minorities, especially those with a population of less than 100,000.

India: The National Literacy Mission focuses on functional literacy and stresses female literacy. It has a target of achieving an 85 per cent literacy rate (90 per cent for males and 80 per cent for females) by 2011. Having stressed literacy needs among youth and younger adults, particularly girls and women, a major policy shift is to add the 35+ age group population to the target group for adult literacy programmes, and to focus on low literacy areas, particularly in the northern part of the country (i.e. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), tribal areas and some states in north-eastern India.

Morocco: The *National Initiative for Human Development*, launched in May 2005, provides the policy framework for the *National Literacy and Non-Formal Education Strategy*, and this means that literacy action is increasingly integrated into local development projects aiming at the promotion of income-generating activities and health awareness, specifically for women.

Niger: The 10-year Education Development Plan (2003–2013) aims to double the overall literacy rate from 19 per cent (2000) to 38 per cent, with a focus on partnership with civil society, community participation, and improving the quality of literacy provision.

Who makes literacy policy?

Governments set education policy – it is part of their responsibility to fulfil the right to education for the citizens of the country. A coherent policy and plan for the whole education sector is the best way to organize learning opportunities for all ages, within a lifelong learning perspective. Literacy for young people and adults who had no chance to learn it as children must be part of that. In recent years, and particularly since the Dakar World Education Forum in 2000, other stakeholders have come to the policy-making table, either for the first time or in a more deliberate way – civil society, the private sector and bilateral/multilateral partners.

The participation of civil society in policy-making for literacy is particularly crucial since CSOs run so many programmes on the ground.

In literacy, the **participation of civil society** is particularly crucial since CSOs run so many programmes on the ground. They bring experience and knowledge to the table and can lobby for policies that respond to grassroots realities. The private sector, with its concern for a well-educated workforce, brings a clear focus and some resources to the policy debate, for example on workplace literacy. External partners, in particular bilateral and multilateral agencies, have played a critical role in shaping efforts to achieve the EFA goals, but have shied away from engaging with youth and adult literacy. Whereas planning for EFA is the obvious forum to plan for meeting literacy needs, in practice this has rarely happened, or has not given enough focus to this aspect of education. It is time for collaborative policy and planning arenas to address literacy seriously, particularly at national level.

Bangladesh: formulating literacy policy

At the beginning of the Literacy Decade in 2003, Bangladesh developed its Second EFA National Plan (2003–2015), with the goal of establishing a knowledge-based and technology-oriented society. With around 52 million illiterate adults, it was imperative to include policies to promote sustainable and empowering literacy. The aim is both to ensure that children have access to primary education, and that youth and adults benefit from formal and non-formal learning opportunities, with specific targets for each category of learner. The Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a national network of NGOs active in literacy and education, regularly reviews the status of adult and primary education through its Education Watch, providing data for policy-makers. This government-civil society collaboration focuses on identifying the marginalized population groups which still do not benefit from education.

Benchmarks for literacy

A benchmark is a norm or standard which represents practices in literacy which will lead to effective learning and use. There are two reasons why benchmarks are useful in literacy. First, adult literacy provision is a neglected area in education and quality control is frequently absent or haphazard – thus benchmarks provide a valuable reference point. Second, literacy learning takes different forms in different contexts, with content and approach being dependent on particular circumstances and population groups – thus it is difficult to establish which programmes are effective and therefore worth investing in. Benchmarks provide an external marker for assessing how close a programme is to known quality standards.

When it addressed the theme of literacy in its 2006 edition, the EFA Global Monitoring Report commissioned work from ActionAid to propose a set of benchmarks (see box). These benchmarks, however, are not universal and do not command unquestioning support from literacy professionals, and application of the benchmarks will vary according to context. Refinement and wider use of the benchmarks will require further testing and research.

Twelve suggested areas for benchmarking in literacy:

1. Defining literacy
2. Continuity of learning
3. Governing literacy
4. Evaluating literacy programmes
5. Facilitator pay
6. Facilitator recruitment and development
7. Ratios and timing
8. Multilingual contexts
9. Participatory methods
10. The literate environment
11. Costs per learner
12. Financing literacy

Writing the Wrongs

ActionAid
2005

Changing literacy policy in St Vincent and the Grenadines

In 2002, the government Adult Education Unit conducted a national literacy survey which revealed that approximately 20 per cent of the adult population of St Vincent and the Grenadines were seriously lacking in terms of their literacy and numeracy skills. As a response to this challenge, the government launched a National Literacy Crusade in January 2005. This includes a new Literacy Policy and Plan of St Vincent and the Grenadines which highlights a number of critical imperatives, such as:

- Mobilizing and sensitizing the nation in a 'National Crusade'
- Massively upgrading teachers with specific skills to include diagnosis, evaluation and innovative methodology
- Promoting literacy in the early years
- Including and educating parents
- Providing a greater number of specialist reading teachers
- Expanding the range of resources to include culturally relevant materials

Literacy is viewed as a human right and all citizens should be enabled to achieve a basic minimum standard.

Without increased commitment to adult literacy at the national level through sound policies, supported by feasible plans and strategies, carried out and monitored by efficient institutions and with adequate funding, a reduction of existing illiteracy rates will be unreachable in many countries, aggravated further by demographic pressure and poor quality schooling.

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Putting policy into practice

Literacy calls for collaboration across institutional boundaries. Literacy is not only the concern of the Ministry of Education. Others such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, etc., often offer literacy programmes too or link other subjects within their concern to literacy because of its role as a tool for learning of all kinds. Civil society, the private sector and bilateral/multilateral partners also play a prominent role in implementing literacy and influencing policy.

Integrating literacy across ministries

In addressing poverty, literacy must connect with the key areas where people are seeking improvement in the quality of their lives. In Nepal, the government has given priority to literacy programmes for economically disadvantaged social groups – landless, jobless, Dalits, minority ethnic groups and those living in remote and inaccessible areas. Over the past ten years, Nepal has also begun to integrate literacy across government departments. Formerly, it was largely the Ministry of Education that delivered adult literacy, but now other ministries integrate literacy as a component of programmes in health and agriculture, with experienced literacy personnel seconded to support these interventions.

Young people and adults have a variety of reasons for learning literacy and they use it for different purposes. Therefore, it is only natural that a range of ministries and agencies provide literacy for different groups. Special initiatives have integrated literacy into learning for farmers and fishermen in Morocco, border guards in Thailand, army recruits in Saudi Arabia and Mongolia, jobseekers in the United Kingdom, village craftsmen and women in Bhutan, and rural development groups in Ethiopia. In some countries, particularly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, civil society organizations and NGOs are the main providers of literacy on the ground.

Coordination among these organizations and with government departments varies greatly from one context to another, but is crucial in reaching all groups with learning needs and in achieving sustainable results. Strengthening coordination is therefore a vital concern – the best scenario is where there is mutual support (see box on the *faire faire* approach). In this respect, three important issues require attention if the quality and scope of literacy are to improve:

- **Coordination:** the government is best placed to coordinate action, not by insisting on the same approach by everyone, but by enabling literacy providers to learn from each other and to complement each other's efforts. This needs to take place across the government ministries concerned, as well as with civil society, the private sector and other providers.
- **Quality assurance:** governments have the responsibility for setting standards and monitoring their application, receiving feedback from the multiple actors involved.
- **Funding:** there may be no central budget for literacy, so it is important for the government to allocate sufficient funds for literacy through all the ministries concerned. Similarly, external funding partners must be ready to see funds for literacy channelled through a range of organizations and interventions.



Often the best way to achieve coordination and to target funding is to concentrate attention at the local level, decentralizing certain aspects of literacy work.

Decentralizing literacy: *faire faire*

Experts acknowledge that young people and adults learn literacy best when it is relevant to their context and their needs. Decentralizing literacy provision is a way of bringing it closer to communities, their contexts and languages. The *faire faire* approach, from the French expression 'to get someone to do something', outsources literacy to local organizations. The Senegalese government, faced with the country's diverse languages and communities, set the policy framework, approved implementing organizations, set up consultation processes, and then provided funding for civil society groups and NGOs. Benefiting from their flexibility, responsiveness and prompt action, these organizations assessed local needs, then implemented programmes and reported on results.

Challenges, such as the variable quality of programmes and some funding inefficiencies, required responses such as capacity development and adequate monitoring and evaluation. The initiative not only enables Senegal to increase investment in youth and adult literacy, while benefiting from international funding partners, but also enables the possibility of integrating literacy with local development planning and programmes.

Burkina Faso, Mali, Morocco and Niger have also adopted the *faire faire* approach.

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Promoting quality literacy

Literacy learning opportunities for youth and adults need the same attention to quality as other aspects of education: basic education of high quality is the right of all those who need it – adult, young person and child. The low quality of some literacy provision leads some decision-makers to question the value of such investments; however, it should rather spur literacy stakeholders to be more vigorous in promoting quality at every level.

Literacy needs are highly diverse and no single approach or literacy method will meet them. At the macro level, three major components fundamental for improving the quality of literacy efforts emerged from the UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy and from the studies undertaken for the mid-Decade review of UNLD: strong policies, evidence of what works emerging from sound research, and developing capacity. At the programme level, planning must take into account the many dimensions specific to working with youth and adults.

Setting the macro-level framework

Clear **policies** (see box) will provide a framework within which all actors can make literacy learning effective and relevant to learners in diverse contexts. Such a framework will avoid a standardised, centralized or top-down approach, but rather be responsive to local circumstances. The earlier section on *Making policy for literacy* spelled this out in more detail. Without clear policies which facilitate cooperation, there is little chance of sustained success on the ground.

At the national level, clear literacy policy frameworks will:

- be based on reliable data on literacy levels and needs of populations
- be based on solid evidence of what works
- set up strong institutional frameworks
- promote broad partnerships and coordination
- set standards for quality
- respect diverse contexts
- make links with other aspects of development
- set literacy in the context of lifelong learning
- promote a rich and dynamic literate environment
- plan for monitoring and evaluation

Sound policies are based on solid **evidence** of what works best and of what does not work well. There are lessons to learn both from success and failure – the key is to make sure that learning from experience does actually take place. Currently, there is not enough research to supply sound evidence for policy formulation. While governments, civil society organizations and others document particular programmes, systematic research is harder to come by. Research requirements in adult literacy will necessarily vary between countries. There are many areas of youth and adult literacy which could benefit from more vigorous and extensive research, including:

- Factors at the national level: to optimize policy, implementation strategies, budgeting and coordination; to respond to linguistic diversity and changing literacy environments, including digital literacies and ICTs;
- Factors at the programme level: to understand what contributes to quality – including content, pedagogical approaches, group dynamics, facilitators, materials, language of instruction and other aspects;
- Learning purposes: to maximize the relevance, usefulness and impact of literacy programmes;
- Analysis of costs and benefits: to inform investment and resource needs, to improve programme quality and to demonstrate impact;
- Analysis of the costs of illiteracy to the society and the economy;
- Synergy between children's education and adult literacy: to understand inter-generational benefits and reading acquisition, and the impacts of expanded primary education on adult literacy programmes and on the literate environment.

A selection of recent research on literacy methods and impact

Cabello Martínez, María Josefa (Coord.). 2006. *Educación de personas jóvenes y adultas en Iberoamérica*. Madrid, RIEJA, Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia y Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Cameron, J. and Cameron, S. 2005. 'Economic Benefits of Adult Literacy Interventions'. *Journal of Educational Planning and Administration*. Vol. XIX, No. 4, October 2005.

Iversen, V., and Palmer-Jones, R. 2008. Literacy sharing, assortative mating, or what? Labour market advantages and proximate literacy revisited' *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (July 2008).

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Planas, J. y J. Rifa. 2003. *Consolidación y desarrollo de la formación continua en España*. Fundación Tripartita, Madrid.

Robinson-Pant, A. 2008. 'Why Literacy Matters: exploring a policy perspective on literacies, identity and social change' *Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (July 2008).

Valerio, A. 2003. 'Estimating the Economic Benefits of Adult Literacy Programmes. The Case of Ghana'. *PhD Thesis*. Columbia University.

Further evidence comes from documenting and sharing good practices. However, a literacy programme which works in one context will not necessarily work in another. Rather, the exchange of experience sheds new light and stimulates new approaches. On the one hand, practices from very different situations can challenge existing patterns and stimulate change. On the other hand, experience from similar contexts can bring highly relevant perspectives, and this is why regional sharing can work well. The 2007–2008 UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy provided a useful opportunity for this, and numerous examples of good practice

from all regions of the world are available online at: <http://portal.unesco.org/education>.

The UNESCO International Literacy Prizes reward outstanding and innovative efforts in the field of literacy and non-formal education throughout the world. The three prizes are: the International Reading Association Prize, the King Sejong Prize (Korea), and the Confucius Prize (China). Since the beginning of the UNLD, these prestigious prizes have rewarded literacy projects and programmes – undertaken by governments and NGOs – in Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Cuba, India, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Spain, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Turkey, and the USA.

Capacity development is a sine qua non of quality literacy. Many literacy programmes work because of the motivation and enthusiasm of the people involved – often from the local community with a commitment to its education and development. The skills that literacy personnel bring to their work are frequently derived from their experience in the formal school system, whether as teachers, trainers or managers. However, youth and adult literacy requires specific approaches, and the management of these programmes is different from running schools. In today's world, the scale of the literacy need and the complexity of programmes necessitate the development of greater capacity at country level – it is essential to move away from amateur and volunteer methods to a fully professional approach to literacy. Developing capacity must take place at both the institutional and programme levels (see section *Developing capacity for literacy*).

Designing good literacy programmes

A good literacy programme is one that is accessible, relevant, useful and leads to learning outcomes that participants can put to use in their daily lives and for further learning. Experience has shown that literacy for youth and adults must recognize their existing knowledge and experience and build on it. Good programmes

will avoid treating youth and adults like children – they bring considerable life experience into the learning environment and frequently demand that learning should be relevant, with the possibility of applying new knowledge and skills directly in their lives. These characteristics mean that the local context of literacy is critical – language (see next section), culture, social relationships, economic activity, religion, history, and future hopes and aspirations. They also mean that local ownership and management of literacy programmes are the best way forward.

Another important factor is the duration of programmes, in terms of the number of contact hours. There are models which claim that literacy can be attained with a rather limited number of contact hours, which reduces costs. However, an ActionAid study concluded that most good quality adult literacy programmes involve about two contact hours twice or three times a week, for about two years or more – an estimate of the whole process amounting to about 600 contact hours over nearly three years.

Which literacy method?

The first half of the Literacy Decade has witnessed a good deal of innovation in pedagogic approaches to adult literacy, and some consolidation of approaches that were developed in the 1990s. There are now multiple pedagogical approaches used in adult literacy programmes and campaigns. All have their merits as well as their challenges. No single method can be considered the most appropriate to be adopted by everyone. Below are examples of existing methods:

- Initial literacy: including conventional primer-based approaches, family literacy such as 'Reading with Children' of Save the Children US, for example in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.
- Community Literacy and Social Literacy approaches: working with specific groups and their development needs, for example in India and Nepal.

- REFLECT: focusing on local learning circles, community mobilization and generation of local materials, in at least 55 countries.
- Methods based on the Laubach 'each one teach one' method, for example in Bangladesh.
- The Cuban Yo sí puedo method combining radio/TV and systematized instruction in some Latin American countries and other regions.
- Critical Literacy and Legal Literacy: combining literacy with other skills for social participation, in Scotland, India, Nepal, Nigeria and Sierra Leone.
- Intercultural and multilingual literacy: combining literacy and language learning with cultural exploration, for example in Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Senegal and South Africa.

Quality: it's not just about the method!

No single literacy method is suitable in all contexts, and other factors also have an impact on the success of literacy programmes. These include:

- characteristics of learners*
- levels of learner participation*
- training of facilitators*
- levels of funding*
- language(s) of literacy*
- duration of instruction*
- literate environment*
- women's empowerment activities*
- links with wider activities, such as vocational or livelihoods training*
- community mobilization*

As a result, good methods alone cannot guarantee quality learning outcomes.

Some approaches adopt a campaign mode, while others involve national programmes, or community-based initiatives. There are approaches that include the use of new

information technologies, and specialist methods developed for working with people with disabilities, learning difficulties and dyslexia. Family literacy and intergenerational learning programmes have met with success, for example, in Pakistan, Turkey and the USA.

Knowing the learners' needs

The South African NGO Operation Upgrade, the winner of a UNESCO Confucius International Literacy Prize in 2008, describes its approach to make sure that its literacy programmes meet learners' needs:

Educators work through community structures and local development bodies to recruit learners. They also go recruiting house-to-house. The enrolment process involves a first meeting with the learners, to explain what learning literacy will be like. Their existing learning is established in a written assessment which identifies the level of mother tongue literacy – or lack of it – and English skills. We find what motivates them to stay in the programme is:

- Lesson themes of interest and concern to them
- Well-organized lessons
- Lessons with plenty of participation
- Income generation projects – essential
- Educators who are from the local community, who can follow-up on absentees and encourage them to return to class

Most learners develop mother tongue literacy skills first, to the point where they can write a fluent letter and read mother-tongue text at a level equivalent to a newspaper. They go on to learn conversational English skills, and basic numeracy which we teach in their own language.

Assessing effective learning

'Formative assessment' has emerged as a useful way of both assessing learning and improving the process. This approach extends also to assessing how much and how well adults learn. Adults bring their life experience into the learning environment, and effective teaching/learning approaches build on this knowledge. An interactive and facilitative approach has demonstrated its value in many contexts. While it is important in particular contexts to assess, and possibly certify, outcomes at the end of

learning cycle, it is equally important to make sure that adults take responsibility for their own progress and that they have real input into what kind of learning processes best fit their needs.

"Formative assessment refers to the frequent assessment of learner understanding and progress to identify needs and shape teaching."

Janet Looney. 2008. Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Adults: Improving Foundation Skills. Paris, OECD.

Community participation

Communities participate in literacy not merely as learners, but also in management roles. They may select facilitators, write materials, determine content or organize the programme. In Asia, Community Learning Centres (CLCs) have provided a focus for community participation in 22 countries. As a local educational institution outside the formal education system, they offer an opportunity for people to learn literacy together with other skills and may become a focus for development activities. Usually, local people set up and manage these centres, ensuring strong ownership of what happens in them. In terms of literacy programmes, CLCs give a better chance of aligning literacy more strongly with local development priorities, thus increasing its relevance and value.

In 17 countries of Asia and the Pacific, Literacy Resource Centres (LRCs) for Girls and Women develop innovative literacy and NFE teaching-learning materials and strategies and provide information and training opportunities on literacy and NFE to NGOs, government organizations and field workers. The Centres are integrated into local organizations, with support from Japan's Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU).



Community ownership in Afghanistan

The Pashai literacy programme is firmly grounded in the local community leadership and managed through a network of local structures. The literacy project aims to strengthen these community structures in order to effectively coordinate literacy programmes in conjunction with both the community and the government. In this spirit, the Pashai Language Committee initiated planning for the Pashai literacy and language development programme and takes responsibility to collect and update Pashai language materials. It also works to improve the Pashai writing system and reviews text books for printing. Committee members discuss how many literacy classes to run at the various proposed locations, and the number of classes to be held for men and women. This committee also encourages community members to enrol in the Pashai programme. The language committee, together with local elders and teachers, initiated Pashai language classes in 2006, and as of June 2007, there were 21 classes – 14 for boys, 2 for girls and 5 for women.

Quality literacy requires a fully professional approach with attention to the many dimensions addressed above, and to the connections between them. There is no short cut to literacy that addresses learners' needs and contexts and offers them relevant, useable and sustainable skills. The message is clear: literacy learning of the highest quality demands that policy-makers, planners and practitioners give consistent and comprehensive attention to the upstream (macro-level) factors and to the modes and methods of programmes.

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The language question

Literacy is a language-based activity, and wherever a number of languages are used, the question arises: which language for literacy? There is general agreement that it is best to learn literacy in the learner's first language or the one they know best. There is also agreement that this gives the best chance to learn literacy in other languages subsequently. UNESCO's position paper *Education in a multilingual world* supports these approaches.

In multilingual environments, policies frequently propose literacy in the mother tongue, but practical considerations get in the way: no script, high cost, small populations, no written materials, no trained facilitators. However, some countries, often working together with NGOs at community level, have found ways to overcome such obstacles. Papua New Guinea was a pioneer in adopting the principle early on that the vernacular language (there are over 850) should be the beginning language of instruction for all children and adults learning basic literacy and numeracy. All citizens are encouraged to become literate in their own language and one of the two national languages, Tokpisin or Hiri Motu. In Thailand, a bilingual curriculum is being piloted which teaches P'wo Karen first, then Thai in response to the community's demands. The Muthande Literacy Programme in South Africa developed a dual language literacy approach in Zulu and English, responding to participants' everyday practices where they switched between two languages even in one sentence.

Multilingualism is the norm in most parts of the world, requiring well-designed multilingual approaches to literacy. However, the processes of learning a language and of learning literacy are different. The first step is literacy in the language learners know, then subsequently classes to teach the additional language that programme

participants want to learn, using appropriate learning methods for these different processes.

In designing effective literacy programmes in a multilingual environment, it is essential to understand how people use different languages in their daily communication in both oral and written form, and what their attitudes towards different languages are. In situations of minority or indigenous languages, it is particularly important to consult with local communities to establish links between literacy providers and local institutions and activities. Local authoring and production of material must be the basis for the sustainable development of the literate environment (see section *Literate Environments* below), and for the incorporation of local knowledge as learning content. Multilingual approaches to literacy imply appropriate national language policies on the part of governments, and they will best promote the appropriate and most relevant use of languages in literacy acquisition by providing a framework, guidelines and funding for local initiatives, not a fixed or standardized programme.

Working with multiple languages

In Indonesia, SIL International developed a three-pronged approach to supporting literacy in a multilingual environment, which includes strategies for producing materials in minority languages:

1. Pre-formatted books using desktop publishing provided an easy way to insert the local language, producing accessible reading materials on topics of interest.
2. Literacy participants were also able to create booklets in their mother tongue based on their own stories, handicrafts, recipes and other aspects of their daily lives.
3. For local languages that were spoken rather than written, SIL initiated a participatory process of script development through Alphabet Design Workshops.

These dual language and trilingual (in local, national language and English) materials have already had an impact: for example, communities have been building pens for their chickens because of a booklet published in their own language about bird flu.

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Developing capacity for literacy

As many international meetings such as the 2007–2008 UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy have stated, there are three areas where a systematic approach to capacity development would make a difference.

Institutional capacity

Sustainable work in literacy depends in part on the vision, resources and capacity of the institutions which coordinate it. For literacy, this can be a complex matter, since often more than one government department is involved, together with a range of non-governmental and community-based organizations. There is a need for capacity in government to ensure overall planning, management and quality control, while at a programme level, it is organizations of civil society or other providers that require the full range of capacities to carry out literacy work. In order to sustain institutional capacity, it is essential to develop staff with the depth of experience to pass on high-level management and planning skills, mentoring and training others.

The national level is where the focus must be – with support for integrating literacy into development and education strategies. In implementing literacy programmes, the emphasis must be on capacity development in all aspects of literacy – from content development, material production and facilitator training, to management, monitoring, evaluation, research and planning. In these efforts, productive cooperation between civil society and governments will add value, based on regular and open communication and mutual support.

Capacity within programmes

This includes a range of other skills and levels:

- Managers: planning the programme within a district or province, mobilizing resources, keeping track of programme data, monitoring the quality of facilitation and learning, and compiling reports.
- Supervisors: giving support and encouragement to literacy facilitators, providing feedback and monitoring programme implementation, fostering community

ownership, linking with other development activities, collecting data on progress on the ground.

- **Facilitators:** a linchpin for effective literacy learning, well-trained facilitators are crucial for the success of any programme (see below).
- **Writers:** able to produce materials for learning, for entertainment, for instruction in useful skills and techniques, as well as documenting local life, culture and history.
- **Publishers and distributors of materials:** local publishing using appropriate technologies, and distribution using local outlets and networks.

Networking and community relations, accounting, data collection and analysis, and report-writing also form part of the skill-set needed for effective work on the ground.

Training and motivating facilitators

The success of literacy programmes largely depends on the facilitators and their efficiency depends on the training and regular supervision they are given. However, literacy facilitators are one of the least supported groups of educators worldwide. They receive little if any regular remuneration, lack job security, and receive few training opportunities and little ongoing professional support. This is a poor basis for major improvements in adult literacy.

Literacy facilitators are a diverse group. The great majority, especially in developing countries, come from the communities in which the literacy programme is situated. They often have no formal qualifications and no previous experience of teaching. Many of them are unpaid. A second group are qualified primary schoolteachers who teach adults after hours but do not get specific training for teaching adults. Literacy facilitators need professional training and status. Voluntarism makes a valuable contribution, but is likely to be unsustainable. A slow trend towards professionalization can be observed, especially in developed countries with long-term

professional training and entry qualifications for literacy facilitators.

Motivated, respected, supported and supervised teachers and facilitators are crucial to the success of literacy programmes.

Recognizing and supporting facilitators

Three of the twelve benchmarks on adult literacy promoted by the Global Campaign for Education and ActionAid and supported by many NGOs worldwide refer to literacy facilitators:

- Facilitators should be paid at least the equivalent of the minimum wage of a primary school teacher for all hours worked.
- Facilitators should receive substantial initial training and regular refresher training, as well as having opportunities for professional development.
- Facilitators should work with groups of no more than 30 learners and there should be at least one trainer/supervisor to 15 learner groups.

Capacity for research and evaluation

Research capacities vary considerably between country and region. This is most clearly evident when comparing the high investment and capacities in literacy research in North America and Europe, where there are research centres and academic journals, with the resources of many developing countries. On a global scale, there is a need for improved research capacity for investigating all aspects of adult literacy. Progress in this area requires a major shift in approach, from the allocation of small-scale funds within adult literacy programmes for 'monitoring and evaluation', to large-scale investment in programmes of literacy research and processes of institutional development. In most cases, this will require sustained collaboration between literacy providers, universities, and other specialist research institutions, such as government statistics departments.



Tackling the huge global literacy challenge demands a fully professional approach at all levels and in all areas of expertise. Capacity development requires vigorous efforts and new investment – short-term and inadequate capacity development is one of the major reasons for lack of progress in literacy. There is no cheap shortcut to professionalism.

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Literate environments

The literate environment is a concept now being used to evoke the larger context in which people learn and use literacy. This includes what people write and what they read; it refers to who produces, publishes and distributes text and materials and how and why they do it; it addresses the institutions that promote literacy as well as the purposes, languages, scripts, modes and methods of literacy. In other words, the concept is a way of understanding and describing what it means to be literate and what the wider connections of literacy may be. The literate environment is an expandable idea – one which offers ways to think about all the different aspects of promoting literacy in an integrated way.

The notion of a rich and dynamic literate environment was one of the three thrusts proposed by the 2006 EFA Global Monitoring Report as part of the strategy needed to address the literacy challenge systematically. Situated within the larger concept of a 'literate society', action to enrich the literate environment was deemed to include support for libraries, local language newspapers, book publishing and other related actions. This reflects the concern that people should not only acquire literacy competencies, but have the means and the opportunity to use them meaningfully and sustain them.

Up to the present, literacy policies generally have not focused on the literate environment, and there is more work to do to understand how policies might take the broader view that would address the literate environment in an integrated way. As a starting point, policy-makers would need answers to at least the following questions for a given context, although this is not an exhaustive list:

- What do people read? For what purposes – learning, information, entertainment, communication with others? Who reads?
- What does literacy give access to? Employment and jobs? A better job? New media and communication tools? Capacity to claim rights and services?
- What do people write? Who writes? How is it published or disseminated? In print or electronically? Who controls the channels of publication and distribution?
- How do people acquire literacy? In what institutions? Who teaches literacy and why?
- In what languages and scripts do people acquire literacy? What different purposes does literacy in different languages serve? How is literacy acquired in different languages? What are the gender patterns of literacy use in different languages?

The notion of a literate environment also has the flexibility to be applied at any level: individual, household, community/village/town/city, and for a country as a whole. In specific contexts, the promotion of a literate environment depends on an understanding of how different population groups define for themselves the purposes and uses of literacy.

The questions above relate to a variety of spheres of life – education, work, communication, media, and more – and, in policy terms, each is the responsibility of different government departments. It is therefore a complex undertaking to promote a richer and more dynamic literate environment – working with these multiple dimensions and fostering the cooperation necessary to do so is a key challenge in promoting literacy in today's world.

Something to read

'What can we read?' This is one of the regular cries of adolescents, youth and adults who pass through literacy programmes, frequently echoed by those who organize the programmes. The existence – or not – of materials that people want to read is a key parameter in enriching a literate environment.

Sometimes there is nothing culturally suitable for learners, or books are too expensive. In languages without a long written tradition, it may simply be that reading materials do not exist. Clearly, reading and writing improve through use, so opportunities to read and to produce materials are critical to sustained literacy for individuals and

"Literacy cannot sustain development if it is itself allowed to wither and die through lack of materials."

Koichiro Matsuura
Director-General
UNESCO



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communities. Making reading material available is a key strategy in developing a rich literate environment – enabling learners to produce their own materials and become writers themselves helps ensure that the literate environment is dynamic, motivating people both to write and to read.

For newly literate youth and adults, material should be relevant and familiar, with new concepts and language being introduced subsequently. Hence the local production of material by communities themselves is an important step, especially for ‘initial learning’ of ‘absolutely’ illiterate learners. Workshops to train local writers in different types of literature have shown themselves to be a valuable strategy. ‘Learner Generated Materials’ (LGM) can now be rapidly edited and reproduced using computer-based software, and translated into local languages or bilingual formats. These can include transcription of local testimonies, songs, folk-lore, epics and histories, for instance. Examples include the use of learner testimonies in Egypt, the production of CD-based materials in Nepal to enable local adaptation for linguistic and cultural variation, and REFLECT

where participative material production is integral to the method.

Producing materials flexibly requires new capacities at local level and needs therefore to be part of plans for programme training, funding, management and delivery. This requires a shift away from centralized and nationally ‘authorised’ materials and curriculum toward more diverse and responsive approaches.

In the Tharu literacy project in the south of Nepal, literacy classes operate only where there is a strong desire from the community. Based on a whole language methodology, the classes use materials created by the project staff and participants. The materials for the programme, in the local language, include ‘big books’ (for collective reading), songs that reflect local culture and knowledge, listening stories, word- and sentence-building materials, and Nepali reading materials. The materials cover themes that are locally relevant such as basic business and skill development, health and sanitation, and Tharu culture.

“Literacy can only be maintained if there is an adequate supply of reading material, for adolescents and adults as well as for school children, and for entertainment as well as for study.”

Education in a Multilingual World
UNESCO 2003

Many literacy instruction methods now advocate the use of authentic, ‘real life’ literacy materials – those that people need or want to read in their daily lives. These ‘real’ uses of literacy and materials increasingly involve the use of computers and other forms of digital technology, for example mobile phones.

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Assessing levels of literacy

Developing relevant policies for literacy calls for in-depth knowledge of the existing literacy and skills levels of the whole population and of diverse groups within it.

Using a consistent concept of what literacy for youth and adults means, a clear understanding of levels of literacy will make for more efficient programmes.

However, in many countries, literacy levels are assessed through census data or using proxy indicators such as number of years of schooling. These methods lead to unreliable statistics on levels of literacy in a population. It has become evident that the number of years of schooling is a poor indicator of literacy achievement, particularly in contexts of low quality schooling. Similarly, simply asking people whether or not they and the adult members of their household can read and write – as censuses often do – gives little insight into how people actually use literacy and numeracy or indeed whether they can use them at all in their daily lives. Presently, it is accepted that literacy and basic skills and competencies are located on a continuum of learning and are defined in relation to following social and cultural contexts. For these reasons, there continues to be a move towards direct assessment: using sample household surveys to test what level of literacy people actually have. These methods provide rich information on literacy capabilities and inequalities. Improved literacy assessment leads to better mapping of literacy needs, improved policy formulation and more reliable monitoring of impacts of literacy programmes.

Current trends in literacy measures – for example, the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), or the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP) – focus on assessing different levels and types of competencies. Rather than only counting those who have attended school or literacy programmes, these methods look at the applied use of skills in everyday life – ranging from determining whether people can read

simple signs and newspapers or write a letter to whether they are able to participate effectively in modern knowledge societies and in economic, political and social life. Literacy assessment has thus evolved far from the dichotomy of literate/illiterate and now posits other intermediate levels.

The measurement of literacy levels and basic competencies should also lead to obtaining information on the learning needs of various target populations. Adult literacy programmes do not simply aim to ‘make people literate’, but to enable people to reach appropriate levels of functional literacy that are suited to the requirements of their everyday lives. Finding out exactly who has which level of literacy is important in designing literacy programmes, and this needs appropriate, in-depth information and robust data. It is equally important to determine what the relevant learning needs are – this may also require the recognition, validation and certification of prior, experiential learning as well as of non-formal and informal learning.

OECD assessment of adult literacy

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) represents the largest comparative survey of adult literacy ever undertaken (1994-1998), and was designed to provide participating countries with information about the literacy and numeracy skills of their adult populations. A more recent comparative study was the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL, 2005). ALL measures adults’ prose, document, numeracy and problem-solving skills across five broad levels of proficiency. Level 3 has been denoted as the suitable minimum for managing the demands of work and daily life. This survey examines the impact of low skills on civic engagement, health and economic participation. It shows as an example that individuals who score at Levels 1 and 2 (the lower end of the scale) in the numeracy domain are two to three times more likely to be outside the labour force for six or more months than those with higher scores.

OECD is now developing a Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to assess literacy in the information age, understood as the “interest, attitude and ability of individuals to appropriately use socio-cultural tools, including digital technology and communication tools, to access, manage, integrate and evaluate information, construct new knowledge, and communicate with others” (OECD webpage – see page 67). It will be operational in 2011.

The Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP)

At the start of the Literacy Decade, UNESCO's Institute for Statistics in Montreal initiated LAMP precisely to improve literacy data. It has three main objectives:

1. To develop a methodology for providing quality data on the distribution of the literacy skills of adults and young people in developing countries. This methodology, based on the direct assessment approach, gives detailed insight into populations with a low level of literacy;
2. To obtain high-quality literacy data and to promote its effective use in formulating national policy, in monitoring and in designing appropriate interventions to improve literacy levels;
3. To build national capacities in the measurement of literacy, using LAMP data and methodologies.

The programme is currently completing a pilot phase in five countries: El Salvador, Mongolia, Morocco, Niger and the Palestinian Autonomous Territories. In addition, Kenya completed a literacy survey in 2006 that was inspired by LAMP. Several further countries – including Jordan, Paraguay, Peru and Viet Nam – have also expressed interest in LAMP.

LAMP in Morocco

In countries like Morocco where very low literacy levels are evident, a precise determination of the percentage and number of people having poor literacy skills is not sufficient for those responsible for designing literacy programmes. What interests these decision-makers more is the detailed description and profile of this population.

The present LAMP architecture offers a means of attaining a two-fold objective: 1) gaining a precise idea of the distribution of literacy levels among the total adult population by constructing a literacy scale, and 2) gaining a detailed description of the population with the lowest literacy skills. The two goals are sequential and complementary. Construction of a literacy scale allows an evaluation of the population with weak literacy skills – those at the bottom of the scale. Then a module on 'basic components' targets people with poor skills and aims to provide a detailed profile of this population in terms of performance on the different basic component tasks. In turn, it is possible to fine-tune literacy programmes in terms of place of residence and individual characteristics of the population concerned, such as gender or employment.

Current initiatives in assessing literacy levels offer exciting possibilities for making literacy programmes more relevant to people's needs and purposes and more efficient. Making sure that assessment methods are feasible, appropriate to context and produce reliable, timely and useable data for policy-makers will be key in making the most of these new possibilities.

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Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluating literacy, knowing what is happening, what is effective and the impact it has, is critical to achieving positive and sustainable results. Monitoring and evaluation take place at three major levels:

- Global level, which reveals progress towards international goals such as the MDGs and EFA. The EFA Global Monitoring Report (GMR) undertakes this work on a yearly basis.
- National and sub-national levels, where monitoring and evaluation of literacy and NFE enables policy-makers and programme managers to take informed decisions and to measure progress made towards policy goals.
- Programme level: learning literacy should enable people to do things they could not do before and programmes should have clear goals and outcomes. The only way to know whether or not programmes are successful is to monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes.

Monitoring the provision of literacy and other non-formal learning

The GMR monitors the achievement of the six EFA goals. The fourth goal addresses literacy for adults and young people, while literacy learning is implied in all the other goals too – from early childhood, primary schooling and gender parity to programmes for lifelong learning. The sixth goal mentions literacy and numeracy as outcomes of learning that is of high quality. In 2006, the GMR focused on adult literacy particularly and continues to monitor literacy progress each year. The GMR continues to offer an authoritative analysis of literacy statistics and it consistently calls for greater attention to literacy for young people and adults.

Management Information System for Non-Formal Education and Literacy

Despite the global commitment to the much-cited 'expanded vision' of basic education which is moving beyond a focus on the schooling systems of the formal education sector, there is a clear absence of information available on **Non-Formal Education (NFE)**. However, the collective commitment to monitor progress systematically towards EFA targets implies the critical need for a **comprehensive** picture of the performance of the entire education sector, including non-formal education.

Most countries have Educational Management Information Systems to monitor formal education, but only in rare cases do such systems exist for non-formal education. At the same time, countries have increasingly voiced the need for reliable information and data on NFE. UNESCO responded to this challenge by developing an easy-to-use methodology and database tool for setting-up a Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS).

What is a NFE-MIS?

The NFE-MIS may be defined as a *system*, comprising the following components:

- A conceptual framework and a methodology for mapping and monitoring NFE which are locally appropriate and, at the same time, consistent within and between countries.
- Prototype data collection tools.
- A computerised database which can generate directories, summary reports and statistical reports.
- A dissemination strategy which ensures a two-way information flow between all NFE stakeholders.

The resulting handbook (2005) for setting up such a system is available online. It also includes a guide to building capacity to support implementation of the NFE-MIS.

What does the NFE-MIS do?

The NFE-MIS aims at providing policy-makers and planners with reliable, relevant and timely data to allow for informed decision-making, better planning and improved delivery of NFE. It allows countries to map NFE provision – who are the providers; what type of programmes are carried out, where, when, and how; who are the facilitators and who are the learners – as well as to monitor and evaluate the implementation of NFE programmes and to measure progress made towards policy goals.

The data provided also allow programme managers and providers to co-ordinate and implement their programmes better. Lastly, it also provides baseline data on learners on a sample basis which facilitates eventual impact studies.

The NFE-MIS is presently being set up in Bangladesh, Morocco, Niger, Senegal and Tanzania.

Evaluating literacy programmes

Governments, funders, literacy providers, academics, communities, and learners would all like to know the same thing about literacy programmes: 1) Do they work well? 2) What is the impact of literacy learning on people's lives?

In order to answer these questions, evaluations of literacy programmes must look at a range of aspects:

- Formative assessment during the programme
 - Determinants of quality: what are the factors that make for a good quality programme? How appropriate are the methods and materials for the group concerned? How well-trained are the facilitators? What are the programme costs? How relevant is the content to learners and how

does the process prepare learners to use literacy to improve their lives?

■ Evaluation of immediate outcomes

- Learning outcomes: have learners acquired the knowledge and skills at the end of the programme as planned?
- Learning achievements: what levels and kinds of literacy have learners mastered?

■ Long-term evaluation and impact studies

- Uses of literacy skills: to what extent and in what ways do the beneficiaries of literacy programmes use the competencies they have acquired?
- Impact of literacy programmes: the aim is to measure quantitatively and qualitatively the impact of literacy programmes on the beneficiaries' lives and work, on their families and their community.

Where there are reliable baseline data, studies may use statistical methods to test for differences in income or social participation. Alternatively, or in addition, studies question learners directly about their learning experience and the changes that literacy competence has brought. In this way, it is possible to see what impact literacy has, while remembering that other factors, unconnected with literacy, may also have contributed to particular changes.

Many of the examples of literacy programmes included in this publication demonstrate answers to questions of effectiveness and impact and are drawn from programme evaluations.

More evaluations of impact would help in understanding where literacy can be of most use, both in terms of life at community level and in terms of its connections with other aims of development. The second half of the Literacy Decade should make such evaluations a priority.

Measuring the impact in Brazil

A study of the impact of the Brasil Alfabetizado programme suggested that literacy has the largest and most statistically significant effects on the areas of child education, child labour, and access to the labour market. The labour market premium for being literate is at least an average increase of 19 per cent on the lifelong earnings of the individual.

Multiple impacts in Mongolia

An evaluation of Surch Amidarya: Learning for Life (Non-Formal Basic Distance Education in Mongolia) examined its impact from a variety of perspectives. As well as assessing its impact on the quality of life of the learners, the study looked at impact on national policy, professional and technical capacity, and partnerships. In terms of the implications of these impacts for further work, the evaluation examined the relevance of approach and of content, the effectiveness of the programme, as well as its potential for sustainability and replicability.

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Funding literacy

The scale of funding for adult literacy is currently insufficient for the size and nature of the task.

The sources of funding for adult literacy programmes include national governments, aid donors, the private sector, foundations, religious and civil society organizations and community and individual benefactors. The inter-connected nature of adult literacy with the other Education for All goals and the MDGs means that the lack of financial commitment for literacy will reduce the scope for achieving the other goals. In the surveys undertaken at the halfway point of the Literacy Decade, many government and civil society literacy providers identified lack of finance as a key concern.

The challenge is so great that current levels of funding are not adequate to meet the goals of the UN Literacy Decade. That is the clear message that emerged from the review of the first five years of the Decade, underlined by the findings of the EFA Global Monitoring Report in its editions since 2006. Lack of adequate finance is not the only challenge to adult literacy but it remains the most important barrier to progress. It affects programme costs, and limits broader investment in programme quality, innovation, sustainability and research.

Government funding for literacy

Many middle-income countries are able to meet their own financial needs for adult literacy. This includes some of the countries with high numbers of functionally illiterate youth and adults, such as Brazil, China and India. India increased its adult literacy expenditure by 50 per cent in 2008–9 and planned to multiply the allocation threefold. Several countries participating in LIFE have increased their budgets for literacy. For example, Burkina Faso increased the share of education funding for literacy from 1 to 7 per cent, in Senegal the budget increased from 1 to 3 per cent, and in Mali, it increased from 500 million to 4 billion CFA francs. Several countries have established new 'national funds' for literacy enabling support from a diversity of funding providers and have integrated adult literacy into national education plans.

Many countries spend only 1 per cent or less of their national education budget on adult literacy, but other ministries may also budget funds for literacy – for example, ministries of health, labour, or social affairs. The Global Campaign for Education and ActionAid, at the Abuja International Workshop on Adult Literacy (2007), promoted a benchmark of a minimum of 3 per cent of education budgets for adult literacy, a target proposed also by LIFE.

Some bilateral and multilateral agencies give valuable support to literacy, working with governments to improve literacy provision.

Civil Society and Private Sources of Funding

Most civil society investment relies on funding from international donor organizations and other sources, according to a 2008 survey. Many civil society organizations responding to the survey also noted that adequate access to funds is a challenge, particularly affecting the continuity of programmes and the ability to respond to expressed needs.

Private organizations that fund literacy include multinational corporations, philanthropic foundations, private donors, religious organizations, and individual and community benefactors. The private sector has potential as a source of increased funding for literacy, through both direct support to literacy programmes and work-related training schemes, as part of corporate social responsibility. However, there are few figures about the extent to which these sources of funding contribute to literacy programmes.

What does literacy cost?

In the first half of the Literacy Decade, there has been some progress in terms of costing literacy programmes, and international surveys have shown that the cost per learner per year should lie in the range of US\$50–100. Many countries do not spend even the minimum required, which lends weight to the argument that budgeting for higher costs would mean higher quality outcomes.

Caution is required in comparisons of costs, however, because of differences in what is included and excluded and the outcomes that one might reasonably expect. In Brazil, research showed that costs range from US\$40 to 182, but warned that low costs undermined the ability of programmes to maintain norms of provision, such as an adequate number of contact hours. The figure of US\$50–100 per learner probably also under-estimates the cost of other aspects of running a literacy programme, such as initial and in-service training, professional development, research capacity, venues and equipment – which typically suffer from neglect and undermine quality.

What does illiteracy cost?

When people cannot use literacy adequately for work and other purposes in their daily life, it costs the individual and potentially society as a whole, both economically and socially. These costs are being measured and could become an important factor in assessing the relative value of investing in literacy. The cost of doing nothing may be as much as the investments that are required. There are studies from the Netherlands, Switzerland and the Philippines on this question (see sources below) – the Dutch study claimed that a structural approach to low literacy would give a national saving of 537 million Euros per year. The Swiss study calculated lost income and increased social and unemployment costs, arriving at an estimated annual cost of low and no literacy to the economy of more than 800 million Euros, which the study felt was a conservative estimate. In the Philippines, estimates showed that the government could potentially save US\$285 million per year if it invested in a literacy programme for the very poor which would increase skills, employability and earning capacity to a level that is above the poverty line. Two further studies are in progress currently (2008) in Latin America, one by UNESCO and ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), and the other by *Programa Estado Nación* (Nation State Programme) from Costa Rica. Other countries are increasingly showing interest in studies of this kind.

Where could more funding come from?

From the examples given, some governments are making an effort to increase their literacy budgets, alongside commitments to other aspects of education. The benchmark percentage of 3 per cent of education budgets for literacy is a reasonable and attainable target. However, in some countries with high numbers of illiterate people and a relatively small education budget, 3 per cent may not be nearly enough. While a benchmark serves as a useful point of reference, actual funding needs and budget provision will depend on the context. Support for literacy from international donors is currently too low – both the aims of the Literacy Decade and the EFA goal on literacy continue to be relatively neglected by the international community. The Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) in 2006, the Abuja Call for Action (2007), and

the UNESCO Regional Conferences in Support of Global Literacy (2007–8) have all called on the EFA Fast Track Initiative to extend the scope of its Catalytic Fund so that it explicitly and consistently includes youth and adult literacy. Up to the present, EFA-FTI funding for literacy has been the exception rather than the rule.

Potential funders of literacy, both government and international, often query the impact of literacy programmes or cite low quality. It is striking that concern for low quality in primary schooling never leads to a reluctance to invest, but rather to increased investment. A similar commitment to literacy is essential.

In 2006 the EFA Global Monitoring Report estimated that achieving the EFA literacy goal would cost US\$2.5 billion per year for several years.

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Partnerships for literacy

Literacy learning opportunities need the support of many different institutions, not just the education system.

Governments have a responsibility to make sure that everyone has the chance to acquire literacy, but they must bring in multiple partners. **Civil society** has always been a crucial partner in youth and adult literacy, designing flexible programmes for specific groups at community level and lobbying for the interests of vulnerable populations. It is in **communities** themselves that literacy is practised and sustained – community engagement is fundamental to ownership and developing a relevant literate environment.

The **private sector** has a particular interest in an educated workforce and has developed workplace literacy and skills programmes. **Universities** and research institutes have up to now taken only a limited interest in literacy and need to take a stronger role by providing the evidence of solid research for sound policy-making and analyzing good practice.

Examples of fruitful partnerships from different regions of the world, and internationally, serve to highlight the strong potential for more cooperation.

South-South cooperation

Similar contexts experience similar challenges. Cooperation among countries of the 'South' has the advantage of applying recent experience to literacy programmes in comparable situations. As part of its cooperation with the lusophone countries of Africa, Brazil supports capacity development (also in Haiti) through workshops in monitoring, evaluation and gathering data on literacy, training of facilitators, materials development, use of local languages and financing of literacy and NFE. This solid base of exchange will also feed into the sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), which Brazil will host in 2009.

Cuba cooperates with a number of Latin American countries and beyond in applying its *Yo sí puedo* literacy method, based on video and a structured phonics approach. With Cuban technical guidance, programmes range from national campaigns, as in Venezuela, to experimental programmes, as in some African countries.

Literacy partners: actual and potential

- Relevant government ministries
- Parliamentarians
- Non-governmental organizations
- Community-based organizations
- Families, clans and villages
- Municipalities and local governments
- National and international development agencies
- Private sector
- Foundations
- Faith-based organizations
- Unions
- Schools
- Universities and colleges
- Youth organizations
- Clubs

The African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) stimulates cooperation across Africa in developing policies for the use of languages, both societally and in education. This should increasingly include the exchange of experiences of multilingual approaches which are a key strategy for effective literacy learning and use in Africa.

Engaging universities in literacy and basic education

The Talloires Declaration of 2005 expressed a new commitment on the part of higher education institutions to promote their civic roles and social responsibilities. The resulting Talloires Network, now numbering over 50 major universities worldwide, has a special focus on promoting literacy (see box). In 2006, the Global Education Consortium of Colleges and Universities came into existence, as an interest group of over 125 academic enterprises involved in supporting Education for All (EFA). Both networks work with UNESCO around collaborating on capacity development, curriculum development, university literacy mentoring programmes and a research agenda emphasizing policy-makers' needs.

Talloires Network Global Project

The focus of this inter-university project is Literacy: the Heart of Education for All. This cause is espoused by the members of the network as part of their responsibilities to the immediate community, as well as to the global community.



Partnership with international organizations

UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) supports women's access to literacy; access to information and learning on reproductive health.

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) supports adult (female) literacy programmes and in some contexts, non-formal equivalency programmes for out-of-school adolescents, which include literacy and numeracy.

FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) focuses on rural people and literacy among farmers and fishermen, linked with basic technical skills.

UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) facilitates access for refugees to the local school system, for example in urban environments, and cooperates with NGOs in adult learning programmes in refugee camp settings.

WHO (World Health Organization) and **ILO** (International Labour Office) have concerns where literacy plays a role in access to information and work opportunities.

The **World Bank** is the largest external funder of education, with a focus on Universal Primary Education. Its engagement with youth and adult literacy is less developed, with some commitment based on the instrumental role of adult literacy in expanding primary education, and in processes of poverty reduction and economic growth.

The UN Literacy Decade will only achieve its aims with stronger networking and partnerships which leverage these comparative advantages.

Partnership for work in Norway

Depending on how the statistics are interpreted, at least 400,000 adults (aged 16 – 65) in Norway score below the level in reading and numeracy that is considered a minimum to function in a satisfactory way in working life and social life.

The Programme Basic Skills in Working Life started in 2006 to address these challenges. The purpose of the programme is to fund and monitor basic learning projects in enterprises, or projects aiming at preparing people for working life in cooperation with the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. The programme is funded by the National Budget, making it financially viable for private and public enterprises to start up basic skills development schemes for their employees and job-seekers. Cooperation among these various government entities and the private sector was an essential element of success.

To increase the quality of teaching and ensure an education tailored to the needs of the individual, a national framework for basic skills for adults has been developed as a sub-project under the programme. The framework comprises descriptions of levels of competence, guidelines for providers, mapping tools and tests and a model for teacher training.

Mobilizing partners in Brazil

AlfaSol is a literacy NGO in Brazil, and one of its innovative approaches is the formation of an unprecedented set of partnerships. Since its creation, AlfaSol has established partnerships with 212 Institutions of Higher Education, 182 private companies, State Governments and City Halls, international organizations, NGOs and individuals.

The Institutions of Higher Education collaborate in developing pedagogical projects and adapting teaching materials, besides providing continued training for local literacy teachers. They also participate in monitoring and evaluation activities during the courses.

Other partners and their particular roles:

- Private companies finance literacy courses in some municipalities and support other AlfaSol activities;
- State Governments are responsible for partially financing literacy courses in some municipalities;
- City Halls support the mobilization of the communities, besides offering basic infrastructure for the courses, in addition to the transportation of teachers and the supply of nutritional supplementation. They are encouraged to establish or expand the provision of Youth and Adult Education (YAE) classes;
- International organizations provide technical cooperation, not only in the fields of literacy and YAE but also in cross-cutting activities such as gender, race and health, which are included in the content of the literacy courses. Also, they provide funds that support technical cooperation projects executed in developing countries;
- NGOs mobilize communities and provide the infrastructure for the literacy courses in those communities;
- Individuals can contribute through the campaign 'Adopt a Student', by which one can finance the literacy process of a student. Local citizens are important agents in the mobilization of their communities, which fosters the sustainability of AlfaSol's activities.

Websites

AlfaSol: www.alfabetizacao.org.br

Talloires Network: www.talloiresnetwork.blogspot.com

Yo sí puedo method: www.alfabetizacion.rimed.cu

CONFINTEA VI: www.unesco.org/uil/en/focus/confintea.htm

African Academy of Languages: www.acalan.org

UN agencies: www.<acronym>.org

Call to Action

Literacy is the key means of initial and lifelong learning.

Literacy is a key parameter of development.

Literacy is a crucial indicator of human well-being.

And so...

- It is unacceptable that almost one in five adults still cannot read and write and that millions more do not have levels of literacy adequate for the needs of their lives and work.
- With population growth, the prediction is that, by 2015, the absolute number of illiterate adults (over 15 years) will fall from 774 million to 706 million, progress which is too slow to meet the EFA or MDG targets.
- It is urgent to provide quality education for all young people and adults, as well as children in school, in order that they have the basic competencies they need to continue learning.
- Greater and more consistent investment in the capacity needed for high-quality literacy programmes is an urgent imperative.

In the light of these challenges...

We need a new agenda for literacy – one that firmly embeds literacy in the right to education and the goal of sustainable development.

The second half of the Decade – 2008 to the end of 2012 – gives an opportunity for a new thrust which must be sustained beyond the end of the Decade. While working as hard as possible towards the target dates of the Decade and of EFA (2015), we must plan further ahead.

In order to shape the literacy agenda, there is an urgent need for renewed momentum, with fresh and innovative ideas and a clearly articulated vision. At the global level, three key actions are necessary:

- Mobilizing stronger commitment to literacy
- Reinforcing more effective literacy programme delivery
- Harnessing new resources for literacy

1) Stronger Commitment

Youth and adults without literacy skills, while heterogeneous in their characteristics, constitute as a whole a group that needs greater attention, with particular concern to address issues of gender, young people, poverty and marginalization. A much stronger consciousness is needed of the educational injustice which such youth and adults suffer. Furthermore, stronger evidence is needed of the benefits of literacy and the costs of illiteracy in order to convince decision-makers to invest in literacy. In addition, changing policy will require:

- Advocacy on a much bigger scale, involving a wide range of stakeholders, based on the right to basic education, the right to development, the essential need for literacy in today's knowledge-based economy and the importance of lifelong learning;
- Greater political will and stronger policies aiming at high-quality literacy provision with international benchmarks providing a starting point;
- A clearer picture of what the real needs are and what works in meeting them through improved assessment, monitoring and evaluation of literacy for better policy-making and planning;
- More dynamic partnerships at grassroots, national, regional and international levels based on a common vision of the value of literacy.

2) More Effective Delivery on the Ground

Designing relevant and effective literacy programmes calls for an orientation of national and international support towards the needs and characteristics of communities. The most critical investment in good programmes is capacity development – at all levels and in all areas of literacy provision. This will require:

- Increasing the scale and quality of delivery, while responding to diverse contexts;
- Strengthened capacity development of literacy actors as an integral part of all literacy programmes;

- Enriching the literate environment through the promotion of writing and authorship, printed and electronic materials, publishing and distribution, with ongoing opportunities for using literacy and for further learning;
- More focused attention on numeracy as a set of distinctive but related skills and as a specific initiative led by UNESCO;
- Better exchange of information on what works;
- Research, with full participation of universities, to provide reliable data and evidence-based alternatives to policy-makers.

3) New Resources for Literacy

Providing quality basic education for all, costs about US\$11 billion more than the current resources available, according to current estimates. Within that, the resources for youth and adult literacy are presently minimal. Additional funding for literacy must be part of the wider increase in resources for Education for All. This will require:

- More information on literacy programme costs and on the opportunity cost of illiteracy to meet the challenge of diverse needs and contexts;
- Increased budgets – at least 3 per cent of national education budgets for adult literacy;
- Increased financial support from donors, with a clear commitment to include adult literacy investments in the EFA Fast Track Initiative, Sector-Wide Approaches and other aid for poverty reduction.

For further information:

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Literacy is part of achieving full individual potential, learning for growth and change, communication within and across cultures, and participation in social and economic opportunities.

Acquiring literacy at a local level and using it meaningfully broadens horizons to a global level.

Where knowledge and the processing of information are increasingly the means of social mobility and economic progress, learning throughout life is the norm, and literacy is the key.



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education Sector
Division for the Coordination
of United Nations Priorities in Education