

Report on Global Literacy

Literacy is a key skill which is used to measure the education of a population. The international community consider literacy as a key facilitator and goal of development. Having basic reading and writing skills is very important as it enhances the working capabilities of a person and enables them to participate fully in society. It also drives sustainable development with reduced poverty, improved health and nutrition, and greater participation in the labour market. Without literacy skills, workers are stuck in the lowest paid jobs and their standard of living remains low.

Literacy rates are judged by looking at the percentage of people over 15 in a country who can read and write. Global literacy levels are higher than ever with adult literacy at 85% and youth literacy at 91%. However, 758 million (17%) of the world's adult population still lack basic reading and writing skills.

History

The earliest forms of written communication date back to 3500 BC when only a very small number of people learnt to read and write. In those days, people who knew how to read held public performances to display their skills. For centuries literacy remained a very restricted technology closely associated with the exercise of power. In the 19th century access to education was limited and, as a result, only 12% of the world population were able to read and write. Literacy accelerated in the 20th century when basic education became a global priority. Today the younger generation are better educated than ever before and estimates of global literacy and school attendance are above 80%.

Current Trends

In most developed countries literacy rates are at, or near 100%. All countries outside of Africa and Afghanistan have literacy rates above 50%. The poorest countries in the world, often where basic education is limited, still have very large segments of the population who are illiterate. The lowest national literacy rates are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and in Southern Asia. Youth literacy rates (aged 15 to 24) are generally higher than adult literacy rates, reflecting increased access to good education and schooling among the younger generations. Nevertheless, youth literacy rates remain low in several countries, which suggests problems with low access to schooling, early school leaving or a poor quality of education.

In Southern Asia basic literacy skills have more than doubled in 50 years from 39% to 84% today. Similarly the literacy rate was very low in Bhutan (15%) and Nepal (21%) with both countries making tremendous progress over the years to reach 87% and 85% respectively.

The Generation Gap

In many countries there is a large difference in literacy rates across generations. This is most evident in low and middle income countries where less than 30% of the older generation are literate, compared with 90% of the younger generation.

Younger generations are progressively better educated than older generations. The high youth literacy rates indicates that as time passes, the literacy rate for the overall population will continue to increase. These changes are happening particularly quickly in the least educated regions of our world such as Northern Africa and the Middle East where drastic improvements have been seen in just one generation.

The Gender Gap

There is little or no difference between male and female adult literacy rates in developed regions. However, in developing countries there are relatively large gender gaps to the detriment of women, with women nearly one-quarter less likely to be literate than men in the same age group. Gender disparities in literacy skills are generally smaller amongst youths and improving more quickly over time.

Gender is one of the biggest reasons why children are denied an education. Efforts to expand literacy skills among women and girls often face deeply rooted social barriers. Poverty forces many families to choose which child to send to school and illiterate parents may not readily appreciate the value of literacy for their daughters. This is prevalent in traditional, rural societies where the expectation is that girls will remain at home. Despite recent advances in education for girls, a generation of young women has been left behind with over 100 million in developing countries unable to read a single sentence.

Literacy Rates and Economic Growth

The economic prosperity of a country depends entirely on the resources it has. Developing the skills and knowledge of the population is regarded as a key strategy for promoting national economic growth. Recent studies have suggested that investment in human capital such as education and skills training, is three times as important to growth over time as investment in physical capital, such as machinery and equipment. Skills investment will yield large returns. A country that focuses on promoting strong literacy skills widely throughout its population will be more successful in fostering growth and wellbeing than one in which the gap between high-skill and low-skill groups is large.

Progress

Adult and youth literacy rates have improved and the gender gap has shrunk significantly in all regions of the world. Over the past 25 years the following progress has been made in global literacy rates:

adult from 76% to 85%

youth from 83% to 91%

women from 71% of the older cohort to 90%

The regions of Eastern Asia, Northern Africa, Southern Asia and Western Asia have made the greatest progress in adult literacy. The table below shows the progress made in each world region over the past 25 years:

Adult Literacy Progress		
World Region	1990	2011
Arab States	55%	77%

Central and Eastern Europe	96%	99%
Central Asia	98%	100%
East Asia and the Pacific	82%	95%
Latin America and the Caribbean	86%	92%
South and West Asia	47%	63%
Sub-Saharan Africa	53%	59%

Young people in Africa and Asia are much more likely to be literate than 50 years ago. This increased the most in Northern Africa from 68% in 1990 to 95% in 2015 and in Southern Asia from 60% to 87%. Female literacy rates also made good progress in these areas. Five decades ago only around a quarter of young women were able to read and write in both regions whereas 94% and 88% were literate in 2014. In sub-Saharan Africa, a larger share of young women (66%) is also literate compared to 50 years ago (23%). Out of 158 countries, 112 achieved gender parity in 2014. Countries that made the greatest progress include Cambodia, Eritrea, Libya, Rwanda and Tunisia. Despite this progress, gender disparity in youth literacy remains persistent in almost one in five countries. One of the few exceptions is Lesotho, where there is a large disparity at the expense of young men. Nevertheless, real progress occurred in all countries, and although disparities still exist, they are not as large as they were 50 years ago.

The momentum of progress must be maintained and continuing efforts made in all countries to ensure that everyone, regardless of age and sex, acquires reading and writing skills, as called for in the new global Education 2030 agenda. Raising literacy levels remains a formidable challenge across the world.