

Executive summary

This fourth edition of the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* focuses on literacy, one of the most neglected of the six goals adopted in 2000 by 164 countries at the World Education Forum in Dakar (Senegal). The Report stresses the urgency of devoting increased policy attention and resources to literacy, emphasizing the profound benefits it confers on individuals, communities and nations (Chapter 5). Literacy skills are essential in today's knowledge societies. Understandings of literacy have evolved over the past fifty years to reflect these increasingly complex and demanding needs (Chapter 6). Drawing on a range of data sources, the Report analyses the scale of the literacy challenge (Chapter 7). A historical overview analyses how different societies have made the transition to widespread literacy, taking stock of the broader social context that motivates individuals to acquire and sustain their literacy skills (Chapter 8).

Building literate societies calls for a threefold strategy of quality schooling, youth and adult programmes and the promotion of literate environments (Chapter 9). This approach reflects the interconnected nature of the EFA goals, towards which the Report examines progress, notably the 2005 gender parity goal (Chapter 2). To accelerate the pace of change, sound national policies are required (Chapter 3). The international community must support these efforts: although aid to basic education is on the rise, it remains far short of needs (Chapter 4). The Report concludes by highlighting priority measures for the EFA goals to be achieved in the next ten years (Chapter 10).

Chapter 1

Literacy: the core of Education for All



Education for All comprises six inter-related goals that together reflect a holistic conception of educational

development. So far, the most dominant attention has focused on the goals that pertain to schooling: universal primary education (UPE), gender parity and quality.

Three key factors have contributed to the neglect of the goals on early childhood care and education, learning programmes for youth and adults, and literacy. First, these are about the creation of new educational opportunities, often through non-formal institutions. Second, national governments and the international community have tended to assume that investing in primary and secondary education and related programmes carries higher political and economic returns. The inclusion of only two EFA goals among the Millennium Development Goals has exacerbated this neglect. Finally, the neglected goals are difficult to define precisely and are stated in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Monitoring and measurement of progress is correspondingly difficult.

The wording of the literacy goal (goal 4) is itself problematic: strictly speaking, a 50% improvement in levels of literacy is impossible for countries that already have literacy rates above 67%. This Report, therefore, pragmatically interprets the goal as implying a 50% reduction in illiteracy rates, consistent with the wording and intentions of the 1990 Jomtien conference that initiated the entire Education for All movement.

By conventional measurement methods, some 771 million adults are illiterate, two-thirds of them women. This represents a serious violation of human rights for nearly a fifth of the world's adult population. Literacy strengthens the capabilities of individuals, families and communities to take advantage of health, educational, political, economic and cultural opportunities. Women's literacy is of crucial importance in addressing gender inequality.

As the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012) resolution states, 'literacy is at the heart of basic education for all and creating literate environments and societies is essential for achieving the goals of

eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality, and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy.'

A 'literate' society is more than a society with high literacy rates. Literate societies should enable individuals and groups to acquire, develop, sustain and use relevant literacy skills through basic schooling of good quality, youth and adult literacy programmes and environments in which literacy is valued by individuals, households, schools and communities. This *EFA Global Monitoring Report* aims to stimulate renewed national and international awareness of the crucial importance of literacy for achieving all the EFA goals and, more broadly, for vastly improving the lives of millions of people living in extreme poverty.

Chapter 2

EFA progress: where do we stand?



This chapter assesses progress towards the EFA goals, using the most recent global education data, for the 2002/2003 school year.

Progress towards UPE has been slow overall since the World Education Forum in Dakar. A total of 671 million children were enrolled in

primary school in 2002, up from 655 million in 1998. Across sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and the Arab States, however, enrolment ratios are rising rapidly and the gender gap is slowly narrowing, though many countries still combine low enrolment ratios with insufficient capacity to accommodate all children. Despite rising enrolments, about 100 million children of primary school age were still not enrolled in primary schools in 2002, of whom 55% were girls. Sub-Saharan Africa, and South and West Asia accounted for 70% of these out-of-school children. Ensuring that enrolled children remain in school until the last grade of primary schooling is a continuing challenge. In about one-third of countries with data, less than two-thirds of the pupils enrolled in primary school reach the last grade.

School systems are expanding rapidly beyond the primary level. The global number of secondary school students increased four times faster than that of primary school students. This expansion puts education systems under increasing pressure. Newly published data on learning outcomes suggest that average achievement levels have decreased in recent years in sub-Saharan African countries.

Despite rapid progress in several poor countries with low enrolment ratios, the 2005 gender parity goal has been missed in over ninety countries. Gender inequality is concentrated in the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, where girls continue to face sharp discrimination in access to schooling. At the secondary level, boys are under-represented in over fifty countries. Gender parity is the exception in tertiary education, found in only 4 of the 142 countries with data available.

The vast majority of the world's 771 million adult illiterates live in three regions: South and West Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and sub-Saharan Africa. Women continue to constitute a majority of the world's illiterates: 64%, unchanged from 1990. At the global level, only 88 adult women are considered literate for every 100 adult men. Regions with relatively low gender parity indices in adult literacy (GPIs) are South and West Asia (0.66), the Arab States (0.69), and sub-Saharan Africa (0.76). In Latin America and the Caribbean, and in East Asia and the Pacific, the GPIs are above the global average of 0.88.

Progress towards mass literacy is especially marked in the 15-24 age group, where expanded access to formal schooling helped raise the global literacy rate from 75% to 88% between 1970 and 2000-2004; the corresponding rates for developing countries were 66% and 85%.

The Education for All Development Index (EDI) provides a summary measure of a country's situation vis-à-vis EFA. It covers four goals: UPE, adult literacy, gender and education quality. The index for 2002 is computed for the 123 countries for which data are available on all four components. Changes in the EDI between 1998 and 2002 were moderate. On average, countries increased their index rating by 1.2%. Twenty-eight countries have very low EDI values; sixteen are in sub-Saharan Africa.

This chapter ends by analysing prospects of achieving by 2015 the goals of UPE, gender equality in primary and secondary education, and reduced levels of adult illiteracy.

Chapter 3

Country efforts: increasing momentum



Accelerating the pace of change to meet the EFA goals in ten years' time requires urgent and sustained attention

to planning, strategies to address access and quality, and adequate national resource allocations.

A recent study of national education plans from thirty-two countries showed that those in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa placed top priority on achieving UPE. Public spending on education as a share of national income increased between 1998 and 2002 in about two-thirds of countries with data, in some cases almost doubling. Higher levels of national expenditure do not in themselves assure good practice and good quality. Efficiency in terms of how resources are used in the education system is key. Several countries have undertaken initiatives to hold education stakeholders accountable for their performance and ensure that financial resources reach designated schools.

Despite increased recognition of the gains that result from eliminating fees at the primary level, 89 of the 103 countries with information available on this topic still charge fees, some legal and some illegal. Making school more affordable, by removing these costs and by providing free or cheap transport and school meals, acts as a powerful incentive for parents to send their children – especially their daughters – to school.

Addressing teacher shortages and training is a top priority for countries that still need to significantly increase the coverage of their primary school systems. In sub-Saharan Africa, pupil/teacher ratios typically exceed 40:1 and are as high as 70:1 in some countries. Projections show that in several countries, the number of teachers would have to increase by 20% per year to achieve UPE by 2015 and bring pupil/teacher ratios to 40:1. In only one-quarter of the approximately 100 developing countries with data available in 2002 have all or almost all primary teachers received some pedagogical training.

The evidence is also very strong that good health and nutrition are prerequisites for effective learning. Iron deficiency occurs among 50% of all children in developing countries, and helminth infections among

25-35% of all children. Low-cost interventions can make a major dent in related educational and human losses, leading to improved school attendance and better overall achievement.

Education for All is about reaching *all* children, youth and adults. The continued exclusion of children who are unregistered at birth, rural children, working children, children with disabilities and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds calls for specific steps to assure them access to school. Successful strategies leading to higher enrolment of girls typically focus on actions inside schools, within the community and at a broader societal level. Women teachers, fee-free schooling, schools closer to home with basic sanitation and separate toilets, protection against sexual violence and community support for girls' schooling are essential elements of a strategy towards greater gender equality.

A major obstacle to the achievement of EFA is the high proportion of countries experiencing, or recently emerged from, conflict, natural disasters and economic instability. Maintaining education systems during conflicts and other emergencies is essential to give children some stability, normality and hope for the future. In sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, other diseases and political conflict are expected to leave one-tenth of primary school age children orphaned by 2010, necessitating special interventions to provide them with support and learning opportunities.

Chapter 4

International commitments: time to act



The overarching goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty galvanized the international

community in 2005. The signs are that some significant breakthroughs are being made. The G8 countries agreed to debt relief for some of the world's poorest countries. Donors made commitments that could increase overall aid by more than 50% by 2010. Education should benefit from these developments, but funding still falls short of what is needed to achieve even a limited number of the EFA goals in the world's poorest countries.

Bilateral aid to education reached US\$4.65 billion in 2003, a 31% increase over its 2000 low of US\$3.55 billion,

but still well below the 1990 high of US\$5.71 billion (all at constant 2002 prices). The amount for basic education more than doubled between 1998 and 2003, but still accounted for less than 2% of total bilateral Official Development Assistance. Overall, nearly 60% of the bilateral commitments to education is still for the post-secondary level. Basic education's share averaged 28.3%. Disproportionate volumes of aid go to middle-income countries with relatively good social indicators, including primary school enrolment. Only three countries give more than 20% of their aid to South and West Asia, the region facing the largest EFA challenge in terms of numbers of people.

Major multilateral aid agencies committed US\$15.9 billion per year on average between 1999 and 2003, with education receiving 9.3%. Basic education received about 60% of that share. Combining both bilateral and multilateral sources, aid to basic education more than doubled between 1999 and 2003 but still only represented about 2.6% of all aid in 2003.

Few bilateral donors and development banks make explicit reference to literacy in their aid policies. There is a strong case for a new international dialogue on literacy, including its place in agency policies and in bilateral and multilateral discussions with governments.

Assuming that the share of funding that goes to basic education remains constant, the increased overall aid flows pledged at the G8 summit could result by 2010 in an annual total of approximately US\$3.3 billion for basic education, still far short of the US\$7 billion a year estimated as necessary to achieve UPE and gender parity alone. To reach the needed total, basic education's share of total aid would have to more than double from 2.6% to over 5.5%.

The world's poorest countries require predictable, long-term aid to carry through essential policy reforms. Such aid is particularly crucial for meeting recurrent costs – salaries, textbooks, learning materials, day-to-day administrative expenses – in countries with insufficient revenue to finance the steps necessary to achieve EFA. In 2005, the United Nations Millennium Project, the UK Commission for Africa and the G8 summit's Gleneagles Communiqué gave strong endorsement to the Fast Track Initiative (FTI). Although the FTI has taken the lead on better harmonization between donors, it has not directly mobilized significant additional resources for EFA. Efforts to harmonize aid should systematically include attention to technical assistance and cooperation, particularly at the country level, where the proliferation of sources of expertise continues. A premium should be placed on improving the knowledge base and sharing knowledge among countries with comparable problems.

Chapter 5

Why literacy matters



The right to literacy is implicit in the right to education recognized by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Other conventions and international declarations have since restated this right. Several instruments focus on the language of literacy acquisition. Many of these documents allow for an expanded interpretation of literacy, beyond reading and writing skills to, for instance, gaining access

to scientific and technical knowledge, legal information, culture and the media. Finally, and importantly, literacy has been recognized as a mechanism for the pursuit of other human rights.

Literacy can be associated with a wide spectrum of benefits. Human benefits are deeply tied to an individual's self-esteem, confidence and personal empowerment. Related to this is the increased civic engagement – whether in labour unions, community activities or politics – found to be correlated with participation in adult literacy programmes. Cultural diversity is enhanced by literacy programmes in minority languages, improving people's ability to engage with their own culture. Research shows that women who participate in literacy programmes have better knowledge of health and family planning, and are more likely to adopt preventive health measures like immunization or to seek medical help for themselves and their children. The correlation between education and lower birth rates is well established, though little research has been done on the impact of adult literacy programmes on reproductive behaviour. Educated parents, especially mothers – whether through formal schooling or adult programmes – are more likely to send their children to school and to help them with their studies.

The economic returns to education have been extensively studied, especially in terms of increased individual income and economic growth. Several studies have attempted to disentangle the impact of literacy on growth from that of the number of years in school. One study on forty-four African countries, for example, found that literacy was among the variables with a positive effect on GDP per capita. The sparse evidence that exists

indicates that the returns to investment in adult literacy programmes are generally comparable to those of investment in primary education.

Chapter 6

Understandings of literacy



Definitions and understandings of literacy have broadened considerably over the past fifty years, influenced by academic

research, international policy agendas and national priorities. In all understandings, literacy embodies reading and writing skills. Numeracy is generally understood as a supplement to or component of literacy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the notion of 'functional literacy' gained ground and emphasized links among literacy, productivity and overall socio-economic development. Recent perspectives look at the ways in which literacy is used and practised in different social and cultural contexts. Many educators have come to view literacy as an active process of learning involving social awareness and critical reflection, which can empower individuals and groups to promote social change.

Since the 1950s, international organizations – UNESCO in particular – have played an influential role in developing policies on literacy, drawing on emerging conceptual understandings. During the 1960s and 1970s, the international policy community stressed the role of literacy in economic growth and national development, especially in newly independent countries. Reflecting this emerging understanding, UNESCO's General Conference in 1978 adopted a definition of functional literacy still in use today: 'A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his (or her) own and the community's development.' Over the 1980s and 1990s, definitions of literacy broadened to accommodate the challenges of globalization, including the impact of new technology and information media and the emergence of knowledge economies. Greater attention has also been paid to the language or languages in which literacy is learned and practised.

Reflecting these concerns, the World Declaration on Education for All, made in Jomtien in 1990, placed the challenge of literacy within the broader context of

meeting the basic learning needs of every child, youth and adult. There is emerging awareness of the broader social context in which literacy is encouraged, acquired, developed and sustained: literacy is no longer exclusively understood as an individual phenomenon, but is seen also as a contextual and societal one.

Chapter 7

Mapping the global literacy challenge



This chapter highlights major trends and patterns of adult and youth literacy at the global, regional, national and subnational

levels. It draws upon an array of measures of literacy, including those based on conventional and non-conventional assessments. Conventional cross-national comparisons generally draw upon official national census estimates that are not obtained through direct testing of literacy skills. Censuses vary considerably in how they classify a person as literate, who they consider in the adult population and how frequently they are carried out. For these reasons, census literacy figures should be treated with caution.

Conventional literacy data show that the global literacy rate increased from 56% in 1950 to 70% in 1980, 75% in 1990 and 82% in 2000–2004. It is expected to reach about 86% by 2015. Worldwide, the adult literacy rate increased at a faster pace in the 1970s than in subsequent decades. In sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and the Arab States, literacy rates increased by more than 10% between 1990 and 2000.

Most of the 771 million adults unable to read and write are concentrated in South and West Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and East Asia and the Pacific. Prospects for meeting the literacy goal hinge largely on progress in the twelve countries where 75% of those without these skills live.

Illiteracy tends to prevail in low-income countries where severe poverty is widespread. The links between poverty and illiteracy can also be studied at the household level, where evidence from thirty developing countries indicates that literacy levels correlate strongly with wealth. Additional key socio-demographic variables – namely, age, gender, urban/rural residence and schooling – were also found to be highly predictive.

In countries where adult literacy rates are comparatively low, there are significant disparities between – and within – rural and urban areas. Pastoralist and nomadic populations, who number in the tens of millions across the African drylands, the Middle East and parts of Asia, have much lower literacy levels than other rural populations. Indigenous groups, linguistic minorities, migrants and people with disabilities are among populations with lower literacy rates, reflecting exclusion from mainstream society and reduced access to formal education and literacy programmes.

Since the 1980s, concerns about the quality of literacy statistics have gained momentum. Alternative measures incorporate direct assessments that test literacy skills on various scales. They conceive of literacy as a multidimensional phenomenon, embracing several skill domains. Comparative assessments such as the International Adult Literacy Survey, conducted in some twenty developed countries, found that significant proportions of the adult population possessed relatively weak literacy and numeracy skills.

Evidence from direct assessments of literacy show that conventional assessment methods usually overstate actual literacy levels. Several developing countries are designing literacy surveys to provide more accurate knowledge about literacy, including Brazil, China and Botswana. To allow countries to make informed policy decisions, more – and more regular – direct assessments are needed, but they must be relatively simple, rapid and inexpensive to obtain.

Chapter 8

The making of literate societies



Today, more than 80% of the global population over age 15 is reported to possess at least minimal reading and

writing skills. This reflects an unprecedented social transformation since the mid-nineteenth century, when only about 10% of the world's adults could read or write. The dramatic increase in adult literacy rates happened despite the quintupling of the world population, from about 1.2 billion in 1850 to over 6.4 billion today.

The spread of formal schooling, well-organized literacy campaigns and policies supporting adult learning

opportunities have all played influential roles in enabling people to acquire basic literacy skills. The broader social context is equally powerful: the motivations to become and remain literate are closely related to the quality and variety of the literate environments found at home, at work and in society. Language policies have also had a decisive impact on the spread of literacy.

The expansion of formal schooling is the single most important factor driving the spread of literacy worldwide over the past two centuries, especially during the past fifty years. Its impact spans historical periods and geography. Schools have been, and continue to be, the context in which most people acquire their core literacy skills.

Many countries have also organized mass campaigns to promote literacy, often against a backdrop of nation building, societal transformation and decolonization. Governments of Socialist countries (e.g. the former Soviet Union, China, Viet Nam, Cuba) were particularly active in promoting mass literacy, as were those of some non-Socialist countries (e.g. Thailand, Brazil). The effectiveness of such campaigns in raising literacy rates, however, has varied considerably. Successful campaigns generally involved follow-up initiatives to enrich literate environments and provide adults with continuing learning opportunities.

Widespread literacy can never be considered a won cause. Economic decline and political crisis can lead to stagnation in schooling and literacy, even in countries where educational infrastructures are solid. In addition, pockets of illiteracy persist in most highly literate and schooled societies. International surveys of literacy skills in developed countries reveal that, while most adults perform well, about 10% have substandard skill levels often due to factors such as poverty, low socio-economic status, ill health and disabilities.

Language policies and practices have played, and continue to play, an important role in literacy and the development of literate communities. National language policies – the designation of an official language, the choice of language of instruction in schools and adult learning programmes – can facilitate or hinder language development and literacy acquisition. Research consistently shows that learning to read and write in one’s mother tongue enhances access to literacy in other languages. Yet literacy efforts in many countries lack a clear language policy.

Printed and visual materials in households, communities, schools, workplaces and the wider community encourage individuals to become literate and to integrate their skills in everyday life. Comparative studies of academic achievement show that the quantity and use of literacy resources influence achievement levels and literacy proficiency. Policies related to book

publishing, the media and access to information play an influential role in developing facilitating environments in which literacy can flourish.

Chapter 9

Good policy, good practice



Literacy is more than a single goal; it is at the centre of the whole EFA endeavour. The Report advocates a three-pronged strategy comprising (a) quality schooling for all children, (b) the scaling up of literacy programmes for youth and adults, and (c) the development of environments conducive to the meaningful use of literacy. Relatively few governments have coherent,

long-term national literacy policies encompassing attention to governance, programme design and delivery, human and financial resources and the promotion of an environment in which individuals are encouraged to become literate and to sustain their skills.

Ministries of education have prime responsibility for literacy policy: they are best placed to integrate literacy into education sector strategies, promote lifelong learning, coordinate publicly financed programmes and partnerships, and regulate accreditation systems. In practice, however, responsibility for literacy is often shared by several ministries. Central guidance and coordination has to be dovetailed with local implementation and community ownership.

Initiating literacy campaigns, national programmes and broad partnerships is complex: national, regional and local management structures need to be set up, materials developed, and coordinators and facilitators recruited and trained. Partnerships are very diverse and vital but they are often threatened by fragmentation or even competition. Putting literacy on everyone’s agenda, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of different agencies and establishing national coordination mechanisms among and between providers are essential for effective literacy programmes.

Learners’ knowledge and wishes should inform adult learning programmes and be their starting point – an axiom that is not applied uniformly. Sensitivity to the adult learner’s cultural background, mother tongue and life experience is required. A relevant curriculum that

builds on learners' demands and circumstances is conducive to better learning outcomes. It should clearly spell out learning objectives and strike a balance between relevance to local contexts and to wider opportunities. Programmes must have sensible timetables and be sensitive to age and gender issues.

Instructors are vital to the success of literacy programmes, but they are paid little if any regular remuneration, lack job security, have few training opportunities and rarely benefit from ongoing professional support. Unless the professional development of literacy educators and their trainers is taken seriously, progress towards more literate societies will be severely constrained. Training of literacy educators, where it exists, is often in a national or official language while their work is carried out in local ones. Worldwide, conditions of employment for adult literacy educators are very poor, especially compared to those of teachers in formal education. This situation results in frequent turnover, with serious implications for quality.

Distance learning and information and communication technology (ICT) can provide opportunities for informal and non-formal literacy learning by adults, though access to technology is highly uneven in many places. ICT and distance learning have more immediate potential for offering professional development to literacy educators rather than for running programmes per se.

A majority of countries facing salient literacy challenges are linguistically diverse. Decisions on language must balance political and ethnic sensitivity, pedagogical effectiveness, costs and learner preferences. The extra cost of training teachers and developing materials in multiple languages must be weighed against the inefficiency of teaching in languages that learners do not understand. A multilingual policy should also ensure that learners have opportunities to gain literacy skills in a second/official language that may be of wider use.

In many countries, adult literacy programmes represent just 1% of the total national education budget. Policy-makers need to come up with baseline figures for significantly expanding national programmes. Basic costs for good-quality literacy programmes include start-up expenses, training, development and printing of learning materials, payment of literacy educators and operating costs. For a recent sample of twenty-nine literacy programmes, the average cost per learner having completed a programme came to US\$68 in sub-Saharan Africa, US\$32 in Asia and US\$83 in Latin America. Preliminary, broad-brush work suggests that US\$26 billion would be required to enable more than 550 million people (nearly half in South and West Asia) to complete a literacy programme of 400 hours. This

amounts to at least US\$2.5 billion a year from now to 2015, a tall order for countries and the international community.

Chapter 10

Setting priorities for action



Only ten years are left to achieve the EFA goals. The needs remain enormous at all levels of education, formal and non-formal. Literacy, as this Report argues, must become a cross-cutting political priority at the core of Education for All. If direct measures were used to assess literacy skills, the number of adults with weak or no skills would climb well above

the already staggering figure of 771 million as conventionally measured.

This chapter proposes nine areas that require attention if EFA is to be achieved:

1. Sustain attention on achieving good-quality, universal primary education and lower secondary education – abolishing fees, reaching the most disadvantaged, training teachers and implementing low-cost school health and nutrition measures.
2. Recommit to the gender goal.
3. Further increase efficient public spending on education.
4. Move youth and adult literacy up on the national and international agendas.
5. Focus on literate societies, not just on literate individuals.
6. Clearly define government responsibility for youth and adult literacy programmes.
7. Double the aid allocated to basic education to reach US\$7 billion.
8. Focus aid on the countries with the greatest educational needs.
9. Complement the flow of funds with analytical and knowledge support.

The groundswell of support for halving the number of people living in extreme poverty in the next decade must translate into long-term commitments that recognize the indispensable role that education – with literacy at its core – plays in bettering the lives of individuals, their communities and nations. ■