Education for All
Literacy for life
Education for All

Literacy for life
The analysis and policy recommendations of this Report do not necessarily reflect the views of UNESCO. The Report is an independent publication commissioned by UNESCO on behalf of the international community. It is the product of a collaborative effort involving members of the Report Team and many other people, agencies, institutions and governments. Overall responsibility for the views and opinions expressed in the Report is taken by its Director.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNESCO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area, or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.
This fourth annual Education for All Global Monitoring Report, produced by an independent team housed at UNESCO, invites us to give renewed and bold attention to the global literacy challenge.

There are good reasons why literacy is at the core of Education for All (EFA) – a good quality basic education equips pupils with literacy skills for life and further learning; literate parents are more likely to send their children to school; literate people are better able to access continuing education opportunities; and literate societies are better geared to meet pressing development challenges.

Yet literacy is one of the most neglected EFA goals. The fact that some 770 million adults – about one-fifth of the world’s adult population – do not have basic literacy skills is not only morally indefensible but is also an appalling loss of human potential and economic capacity. The Report makes a powerful case to end this neglect by affirming that literacy is a right in itself, essential to achieve all the EFA goals and critically important for development. The emergence of knowledge societies makes literacy even more critical than in the past. Achieving widespread literacy can only happen in the context of building literate societies that encourage individuals to acquire and use their literacy skills.

Since its founding, UNESCO has played a lead role in defining literacy, relentlessly affirming its vital importance for development, and supporting country initiatives to expand adult learning. There has been remarkable progress over the past sixty years. The momentous challenge that persists is our collective responsibility. UNESCO is the lead agency and international coordinator of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003-2012), which states that ‘literacy for all 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.’ We are giving the Decade concrete support through our programmes, particularly through the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) launched in October 2005 during the 33rd session of UNESCO’s General Conference, and more broadly, through our international coordination of Education for All, which we are endeavouring to further strengthen.

The Decade is a framework for promoting international, regional and national efforts aimed at enabling millions of youth and adults to enjoy increased opportunities to acquire literacy skills. To achieve this, countries must commit to literacy at the highest political levels and assign more resources to youth and adult literacy programmes. As this Report informs us, literacy typically receives only 1% of the national education budget. International aid for literacy is minuscule as a share of aid to basic education, which is itself too low. Much bolder commitments are urgently required if the EFA goals are to be met.

Foreword
As in previous years, this Report examines progress towards the six EFA goals. The year 2005 has been particularly significant. On the one hand, it is now apparent, as the Report confirms, that the goal to achieve gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005 has not been met, despite very rapid progress, especially in a number of low-income countries. We must renew our commitment and move forward. On the other hand, resources for basic education are increasing: public spending on education is rising in developing countries and the international community has promised to increase its support, especially to sub-Saharan Africa, as reflected at the G-8 summit in Gleneagles in July 2005 and the United Nations World Summit in New York in September 2005. The challenge now is to translate broad commitments into specific actions in developing countries and to step up the pace of change everywhere. We only have ten years left and we must not fail.

I am confident that this Report provides a solid basis to recommit ourselves to achieving the six Education for All goals and, in particular, to making literacy a reality for all people in the world.

Koichiro Matsuura
Acknowledgements

Former Director Christopher Colclough initiated the work for this Report.

We are indebted to Peter Smith, UNESCO’s Assistant Director-General for Education (ADG/ED), to Aïcha Bah Diallo, former Assistant Director-General a.i., and to Abhimanyu Singh, Director of the Division of International Coordination and Monitoring for Education for All, and their colleagues for their support.

The Report benefited strongly from the advice of the international Editorial Board and its chairperson Ingemar Gustafsson, as well as from in-depth guidance from a small advisory group composed of Helen Abadzi, Anita Dighe, Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo, Vera Masagão Ribeiro, Anna Robinson-Pant, Alan Rogers, and Shigeru Aoyagi and Adama Ouane, both from UNESCO. It also profited from the over 120 people who took part in the web-based consultation on the outline, whose comments can be reviewed at: www.efareport.unesco.org

The EFA Report depends greatly on the work of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Former Director Denise Lievesley, Michael Millward, Director a. i., Said Belkachla, Michael Bruneforth, Brian Buffett, Simon Ellis, Alison Kennedy, Olivier Labé, Albert Motivans, Pascale Ratovondrahona, Ioulia Sementchouk, Mamadou Thiam, Subramaniyam Venkatraman, Peter Wallet, Yanhong Zhang and their colleagues contributed significantly to this Report, particularly in the preparation of Chapters 2 and 3 and the statistical tables.

Special thanks are due to all those who prepared background papers, notes and boxes for the Report. These were:

Marifat Abdullaeva, ActionAid, Carlos Aggio, Mark Agranovitch, John Aitchinson, Massimo Amadio, Juan B. Arrien, David Baker, Jill Balescut, Yembaru Batchuluun, Antonio Augusto Gomes Batista, Julien Bayou, Raja Bentaouet-Kattan, Alain Bentolila, Anne Bernard, K. Biswal, H.S. Bholia, Mohammed Bougroum, Jennifer Bowser, Shoshan Brosh-Vaitz, Don Bundy, Grace Bunyi, Roy Carr-Hill, John Cameron, Stuart Cameron, Nalini Chhetri, Munir Ahmed Choudhry, Roser Cusso, Aimé Damiba, Mark De Maeyer, Kendra Derousseau, Kamal Desai, Chris Duke, Jan Eldred, Karen Erickson, Makhoumy Fall, Iffat Farah, Benjamin Fernandez, Birger Fredriksen, Jonas Frister, Bruno Germain, Christine Glanz, Global Campaign for Education, Christophe Gouel, R. Govinda, Talmadge C. Guy, Hasan Hamomud, Ulrike Hanemann, Heribert Hinzen, Nour Laila Iskandar, Pascale Ratovondrahona, Ioulia Sementchouk, Mamadou Thiam, Subramaniyam Venkatraman, Peter Wallet, Yanhong Zhang and their colleagues contributed significantly to this Report, particularly in the preparation of Chapters 2 and 3 and the statistical tables.

The Report also benefited considerably from the advice and support of individuals, Divisions and Units within UNESCO’s Education Sector, the International Institute for Educational Planning, the International Bureau of Education, and the UNESCO Institute for Education,
including through a consultation on the outline. UNESCO’s Regional Bureaux provided helpful advice on country-level activities and helped facilitate commissioned studies. Sue Williams of UNESCO’s Bureau for Public Information has provided valuable advice and ongoing support to the promotion and dissemination of the Report.

We are grateful to Rosemary Bellew, Luc-Charles Gacougnolle and Laura Gregory in the Fast Track Initiative secretariat, and to Julia Benn, Valérie Gaveau and Simon Scott in OECD/DAC for their continuing support and helpful advice on international cooperation and aid data.

A number of individuals also contributed valuable advice and comments. These were: Namtip Aksornkool, Massimo Amadio, Shigeru Aoyago, David Archer, Valderama Asuncion, David Atchoarena, Corinne Bitoun, Francoise Caillods, Claire Calosci, John Coming, Bridget Crumpton, Roser Cusso, Stephanie Dolata, Marie Dorleans, Françoise du Pouget, Birger Fredriksen, Aurore Hagel, Marja Karjalainen, Christine Glanz, Werner Mauch, Adama Ouane, Taeko Okitsu, Muriel Poisson, Kenneth Ross, Mioko Saito, Pierre Runner, Margaret Sachs-Israel, Gaurav Siddhu, Ronald Siebes, Suzanne Stump, Emmanuelle Suso, Duncan Wilson. Special thanks to John Ryan who provided valuable comments on draft chapters.

The production of the Report benefited greatly from the editorial expertise of Rebecca Brite and Brian Smith. Wenda McNevin, Alison Clayson and Karima Pires also provided valuable editorial support. We would also like to thank Sonia Fernandez-Lauro, Anne Muller, Fouzia Jouot-Bellami, Catherine Ginisty, Judith Roca and their colleagues in the UNESCO Education Documentation Centre for their valuable support throughout the year with the website, distribution and assistance in many matters. Thank-you to Lotfi Ben Khelifa who has played an instrumental role with the timely distribution of the Report. Thanks also to Mary Konin and Chrysanthi Kolia for their logistical support. Special thanks to Richard Cadiou, Vincent Defourny, Igor Nuk and Fabienne Kouadio who facilitated the online consultation in collaboration with colleagues from the Education Documentation Centre.

For more information about the Report, please contact:
The Director
EFA Global Monitoring Report Team
c/o UNESCO
7 place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
e-mail: efareport@unesco.org
Tel.: +33 1 45 68 21 28
Fax: +33 1 45 68 56 41
www.efareport.unesco.org

Previous EFA Global Monitoring Reports
2005. Education for All – THE QUALITY IMPERATIVE
2003/4. Gender and Education for All – THE LEAP TO EQUALITY
2002. Education for All – IS THE WORLD ON TRACK?
Contents

Headline messages ......................................................... 16

Executive summary ...................................................... 18

**Chapter 1**

Literacy: the core of Education for All ......................... 27
  A holistic approach to Education for All .......................... 28
  Literacy for rights, capabilities and development ............... 30
  Literate individuals and literate societies ...................... 31
  Outline of the Report ................................................ 34

**Chapter 2**

EFA progress: where do we stand? ................................. 37
  Early childhood care and education ............................... 38
  Primary education ....................................................... 41
  Secondary and tertiary education ................................. 51
  Learning outcomes ..................................................... 58
  Literacy ................................................................. 63
  Assessing overall progress towards Education for All .......... 68
  Conclusion ............................................................ 71

**Chapter 3**

Country efforts: increasing momentum ......................... 75
  Planning for EFA ........................................................ 76
  Financing EFA .......................................................... 79
  Teachers for EFA ....................................................... 84
  The need for inclusion ............................................... 91
  Adapting to the context ............................................. 96
  Safe and healthy schools ........................................... 101

**Chapter 4**

International commitments: time to act ....................... 105
  New but uncertain international momentum in 2005 ........... 106
  Aid flows to education .............................................. 107
  Opportunities for improving international coordination of EFA 119
  2005 and beyond: from commitment to action ................ 130

**Chapter 5**

Why literacy matters .................................................... 135
  Literacy as a right .................................................... 136
  The benefits of literacy .............................................. 137
  Conclusion ............................................................ 145
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 6</th>
<th>Understandings of literacy .................................................. 147</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining and conceptualizing literacy .................................... 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understandings of literacy in the international community .......... 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other views of literacy ................................................................ 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A ‘global consensus’ on literacy? ............................................ 159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>Mapping the global literacy challenge ...................................... 160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Measuring and monitoring literacy ........................................... 162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The changing scale and scope of the global challenge ................. 164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where is the literacy challenge most pressing? ............................ 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social and demographic disparities in literacy rates .................... 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which background characteristics are most associated with literacy? 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy in excluded groups ................................................ 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Towards an expanded understanding of literacy ............................ 179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Global literacy: the emerging challenge .................................... 187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
<td>The making of literate societies ............................................. 189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction .............................................................................. 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy in historical perspective .......................................... 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Major determinants of literacy transitions ................................ 193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Languages and literacy .......................................................... 200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literacy practices ..................................................................... 205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literate environments and literacy ........................................... 207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion .............................................................................. 212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>Good policy, good practice ..................................................... 215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Four policy directions ............................................................. 216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Three strategic considerations ................................................ 216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting good practice in the learning and teaching of literacy .... 217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scaling up adult literacy programmes: the role of government ......... 230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bringing greater coherence to national literacy policies ............... 238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging the international community ....................................... 241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
<td>Setting priorities for action .................................................. 247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The EFA balance sheet ............................................................ 248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Priorities for action .............................................................. 249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex</td>
<td>......................................................................................... 251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appendices ............................................................................... 252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statistical annex ...................................................................... 263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aid data annex .......................................................................... 408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Glossary ................................................................................... 418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>References ............................................................................... 424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abbreviations ........................................................................... 445</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of figures, tables and text boxes

Figures

2.1: Gross and net enrolment ratios in pre-primary education, 2002 .............................................................. 38
2.2: Change in gross enrolment ratios in pre-primary education between 1998 and 2002 ........................................... 40
2.3: Gross and net intake rates in primary education, 2002 .............................................................................................. 42
2.4: New entrants into primary education: distribution by age group, 2002 ................................................................. 42
2.5: Gross and net enrolment ratios in primary education, 2002 .................................................................................. 44
2.6: Net enrolment ratios in primary education, 1998 and 2002 .................................................................................. 45
2.7: Changes in net attendance rates by population group in Benin, 1996 and 2001 ......................................................... 46
2.8: Survival rates to the last grade of primary education, 1998/1999 and 2001/2002 ....................................................... 48
2.9: Survival rate to the last grade of primary education and percentage of primary school completers, selected countries, 2001 ........................................................................................................ 48
2.10: Gender disparities in GIRs in primary education, 1998 and 2002 ........................................................................ 49
2.11: Changes in gender disparities in GERs between 1998 and 2002 ......................................................................... 50
2.12: Percentage of repeaters in primary education, 2002 ............................................................................................ 51
2.14: Change in secondary gross enrolment ratios between 1998 and 2002 ............................................................... 53
2.15: Changes in the tertiary gross enrolment ratios between 1998 and 2002 ............................................................. 54
2.16: Comparison of gender disparities at the end of primary education and in transition to secondary education, 2001 .................................................................................................................. 55
2.17: Gender disparities in secondary gross enrolment ratios and GNP per capita, 2002 .................................................. 56
2.18: Change in gender disparities in tertiary gross enrolment ratios between 1998 and 2002 ........................................ 57
2.19: Results of SACMEQ II (2000–2002): numeracy skills of Grade 6 students in sub-Saharan Africa ..................... 58
2.20: Results of TIMSS 2003: mathematics achievement of Grade 8 students ............................................................ 59
2.21: Results of PISA 2003: mathematics skills of 15-year-old students ................................................................. 59
2.22: Evolution of TIMSS results between 1995 and 2003 ........................................................................................... 60
2.23: Evolution of PISA results between 2000 and 2003: reading .............................................................................. 60
2.25: Results of PISA 2003: gender disparities in mathematics achievement ............................................................. 61
2.26: Gender differences in attitudes towards reading, PIRLS 2001 ............................................................................. 62
2.27: Gender differences in mathematics and approaches to learning mathematics, TIMSS 2003 ............................... 62
2.29: The EDI in 2002 and its evolution since 1998 in countries with low EDI ............................................................ 69
3.1: Policy commitments related to EFA goals in 2001 and 2004 conference reports by sixty-nine countries ............ 78
3.2: Strategies and actions on issues affecting EFA goals reported to 2001 and 2004 conferences by sixty-nine countries ................................................................. 78
3.3: Total public expenditure on education as percentage of GNP, 2002 ................................................................... 79
3.4: Public expenditure on education as percentage of total government expenditure, 2002 ........................................ 80
3.5: Public education expenditure as a percentage of GNP, 1998 and 2002 .............................................................. 80
3.6: Share of public education expenditure by level, 2002 ......................................................................................... 82
3.7: Share of primary and secondary education in total public current expenditure on education, percentage change from 1998 to 2002 .......................................................... 82
3.8: Share of public and private education expenditure by level, 2002 ..................................................................... 84
3.9: Per-pupil household costs, by grade and area, 2004 ........................................................................................... 85
3.10: Share of personnel costs in total public current expenditure on education by level of national income, 2002 ........ 86
3.12: Percentage of trained primary-school teachers, 1998 and 2002 ..................................................................... 89
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>Primary teacher salaries and comparison with GDP per capita: entry level and after fifteen years' experience (PPP US$, 1999)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>Median share of female teachers in various levels of education by region, 2002</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>Education and armed conflict</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Proportion of ODA to least developed countries in total ODA, 1990–2003</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Bilateral aid commitments to education, 1990–2003 (amounts in constant 2002 US$ billions, and the share of education in total bilateral ODA)</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Bilateral aid commitments to basic education, 1993–2003 (amounts in constant 2002 US$ billions, and the share of basic education in total bilateral ODA)</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Contribution of individual DAC countries to total bilateral aid to education, 1999–2003</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Contribution of individual DAC countries to total bilateral aid to basic education, 1999–2003</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Bilateral commitments to education: sub-sector breakdown excluding 'education, level unspecified', 1999–2003</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Relative priorities given to education and basic education by each bilateral donor country, 1999–2003</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Aid to education and basic education as percentages of GNI, five-year annual averages, 1999–2003</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>Proportion of budget support in total ODA, 1999–2003, by type of donor</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>Share of disbursements in 2003 for education by Australia, Sweden and the United Kingdom, by original year of commitments</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>Regional distribution of bilateral aid to education, 1999–2003</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>World Bank education lending, amount and as percentage of World Bank total lending per year, 1963–2004</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>Composition of total World Bank education lending for 1990–2004</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>Regional distribution of World Bank education lending (new commitments), annual averages, 1990–2004</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>DAC members' ODA: 1990–2004 and simulations to 2006 and 2010 (Amount in constant 2003 US$ billions and % share of GNI)</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Inequality in income and inequality in literacy in OECD countries, 1994–98</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Adult literacy rates: global and regional trends in gender parity, 1970 to 2000–2004</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Youth and adult literacy rates for selected countries, 2000–2004</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Distribution of global adult illiterate population, 2000–2004</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>Adult literacy rates by gender in fifty-five low-literacy developing countries, 2000–2004</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>Literacy rate and poverty</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>Relationship between adult literacy and average household expenditure in India, by selected states</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>Literacy rates for select age groups, 2000–2004</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>Adult literacy rates by urban/rural residence, 2000–2004</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>Comparison of adult literacy rates by poorest and richest wealth quintiles</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>Adult literacy rates by three educational levels: no schooling, 1–3 years of schooling and 4–6 years of schooling, 2000</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.11</td>
<td>Distribution of adults by level of prose literacy proficiency, 1994–1998</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Trends in literacy rates in developing countries, 1900–1950</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Estimated adult literacy rates for selected countries circa 1950</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Mean unadjusted primary enrolment rates in developing regions, 1880 to 1935–40</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Association between unadjusted primary enrolment rate (1935–40) and adult literacy rate (circa 1950), for thirty-nine countries or territories</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>Percentage of Grade 4 students in high-level home literacy environments (HLE) and average reading achievement score, by country, 2001</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>Grade 6 student reports of quantity of books in their homes in fifteen African education systems, 2000</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>Prevalence of newspapers, magazines and televisions in students’ homes in fifteen African education systems, 2000</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>Percentage of Grade 6 students attending schools where there is no school or classroom library, by country, and area of residence, 2000</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>Percentage of Grade 6 pupils in classrooms where there are no books available, by country and area of residence, 2000</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.1: Correlations between measures of educational expansion and educational attainment, and literacy rates
(Number of countries in parentheses) ................................................................. 195
8.2: Literacy needs and languages .................................................................. 203
8.3: Reported and effective adult literacy in Papua New Guinea, 1996 ............. 212
9.1: Three approaches to literacy acquisition .................................................. 218
9.2: Ranking of incentives other than basic pay for literacy educators in 67 programmes .......................................................... 227
9.3: Examples of financial allocations to non-formal education and literacy .... 234
9.4: Literacy programme costs per learner ...................................................... 235
9.5: The scale of the Dakar challenge, by region and development level .......... 237
9.6: Estimated costs of achieving the literacy component of Dakar goal 4 ......... 237
9.7: Two approaches to financing literacy programmes .................................... 241
9.8: Adult literacy targets in twenty-five developing and transition countries ... 242
9.9: Literacy in bilateral and development bank aid policies ......................... 243
9.10: Average annual funding for literacy, selected agencies ......................... 244
9.11: Trends in major aid-financed literacy projects and programmes .............. 245

Text boxes

1.1: The Dakar Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals ................................................................. 28
1.2: Interpretation of EFA goals 3 and 4 ............................................................ 29
1.3: Senegal’s Éducation qualifiante des jeunes et des adultes .................................................. 30
1.4: A renewed attention to literacy .................................................................. 32
1.5: Creating literate societies: Japan, Cuba and Germany .............................. 32
2.1: Closing gaps in participation in primary education: the case of Benin ........ 46
2.2: How many children are out of school? .................................................... 47
2.3: Measuring progress towards the adult literacy target ............................ 66
2.4: Gender disparities in enrolment ratios ...................................................... 72
3.1: National strategies addressing EFA goals: some country examples .......... 77
3.2: Civil society involvement in EFA planning and monitoring ..................... 79
3.3: Social accountability to improve education spending in Uganda ............ 83
3.4: Equity in public education spending in Mozambique .............................. 83
3.5: Household education expenditures in Cambodia ..................................... 84
3.6: The impact of HIV/AIDS on education systems in five countries of sub-Saharan Africa .......................... 88
3.7: Teacher salaries and working conditions in Latin America .................... 90
3.8: The Northern Areas Community Schools Programme in Pakistan ........ 94
3.9: The Niger’s strategy to eliminate gender bias in schooling ................... 96
3.10: The impact of the 2004 tsunami on education systems ....................... 98
3.11: Principles of emergency education ......................................................... 99
3.12: Economic shocks and the quality of education: the Argentine case ........ 100
4.1: A debt swap for education in Argentina .................................................. 117
4.2: The Fast Track Initiative – building an international compact .................. 120
4.3: Resource mobilization and capacity-building by the FTI ......................... 121
4.4: The Netherlands and France in support of the FTI ................................. 122
4.5: The FTI in Mozambique – the donors’ view ............................................ 123
4.6: Yemen benefits from the FTI ................................................................. 123
4.7: Silent partnerships at work in Mali and Malawi ..................................... 125
4.8: Building capacity to meet demand ......................................................... 127
The Report at a glance

Progress towards Education for All

Steady progress has been made since 1998, especially towards universal primary education (UPE) and gender parity among the poorest countries, but the pace is insufficient for the goals to be met in the remaining ten years to 2015.

Encouraging trends represent considerable achievements in many low-income countries:

- Primary-school enrolments are up sharply in both sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia, with nearly 20 million new students in each region.
- Globally, 47 countries have achieved UPE (out of 163 with data available).
- Projections show that 20 additional countries (out of 90 with the relevant data) are on track to achieve UPE by 2015; 44 countries are making good progress but are unlikely to achieve the goal by 2015.
- Girls’ primary enrolments have also risen rapidly, especially in some of the lowest-income countries of sub-Saharan Africa, and South and West Asia.
- Gender and educational quality measures are increasingly visible in national education plans.
- Public spending on education has increased as a share of national income in about 70 countries (out of 110 with data).
- Aid for basic education more than doubled between 1999 and 2003 and, following the G8 summit, could rise to US$3.3 billion per year by 2010.
- The Fast Track Initiative has emerged as a key coordinating mechanism for aid agencies.

Major Education for All challenges remain:

- **UPE is not assured:**
  - About 100 million children are still not enrolled in primary school, 55% of them girls.
  - 23 countries are at risk of not achieving UPE by 2015, as their net enrolment ratios are declining.
  - Primary-school fees, a major barrier to access, are still collected in 89 countries (out of 103 surveyed).
  - High fertility rates, HIV/AIDS and armed conflict continue to exert pressure on education systems in the regions with the greatest EFA challenges.

- **The 2005 gender parity target has been missed by 94 countries out of 149 with data:**
  - 86 countries are at risk of not achieving gender parity even by 2015.
  - 76 out of 180 countries have not reached gender parity at primary level, and the disparities are nearly always at the expense of girls.
  - 115 countries (out of 172 with data) still have disparities at secondary level, with boys being under-represented in nearly half, in marked contrast to the primary level.

- **Quality is too low:**
  - Enrolments in early childhood care and education programmes have remained static.
  - Fewer than two-thirds of primary-school pupils reach the last grade in 41 countries (out of 133 with data).
  - In many countries, primary teacher numbers would have to increase by 20% a year to reduce pupil/teacher ratios to 40:1 and to achieve UPE by 2015.
  - Many primary-school teachers lack adequate qualifications.

- **Literacy gets short shrift:**
  - 771 million people aged 15 and above live without basic literacy skills.
  - Governments and aid agencies give insufficient priority and finance to youth and adult literacy programmes.

- **Aid for basic education is still inadequate:**
  - At US$4.7 billion in 2003, bilateral aid to education – 60% of which still goes to post-secondary education – has increased since 1998 but remains well below the 1990 high of US$5.7 billion.
  - Total aid to basic education accounts for only 2.6% of Official Development Assistance; within this category, adult literacy’s share is minuscule.
  - While aid to basic education will likely increase in line with overall aid, its share would have to double to reach the estimated US$7 billion a year necessary just to achieve UPE and gender parity.
  - Disproportionate volumes of bilateral aid go to middle-income countries with relatively high primary enrolments.
  - By mid-2005, the Fast Track Initiative had resulted in pledges of only US$298 million.
Literacy is:
- A right still denied to nearly a fifth of the world’s adult population.
- Essential to achieving each of the EFA goals.
- A societal and an individual phenomenon, with attention needed to both dimensions.
- Crucial for economic, social and political participation and development, especially in today’s knowledge societies.
- Key to enhancing human capabilities, with wide-ranging benefits including critical thinking, improved health and family planning, HIV/AIDS prevention, children’s education, poverty reduction and active citizenship.

The literacy challenge has absolute and relative dimensions, particularly affects the poor, women and marginalized groups, and is much greater than conventional measures indicate:
- In absolute numbers, those without literacy skills are mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific. Prospects for meeting the 2015 goal hinge largely on progress in the 12 countries where 75% of those without literacy skills live.
- In relative terms, the regions with the lowest literacy rates are sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, and the Arab States, all with literacy rates around only 60%, despite increases of more than 10 percentage points since 1990.
- Illiteracy is associated to a significant extent with extreme poverty.
- Women are less literate than men: worldwide, only 88 adult women are considered literate for every 100 adult men, with much lower numbers in low-income countries such as Bangladesh (62 per 100 men) and Pakistan (57 per 100 men).
- 132 of the 771 million people without literacy skills are aged 15 to 24, despite an increase in this group’s literacy rate to 85%, from 75% in 1970.
- Direct testing of literacy suggests that the global challenge is much greater than the conventional numbers, based on indirect assessments, would indicate, and that it affects both developed and developing countries.

The literacy challenge can be met only if:
- Political leaders at the highest level commit themselves to action.
- Countries adopt explicit literacy policies to:
  - Expand quality primary and lower-secondary education;
  - Scale up youth and adult literacy programmes;
  - Develop rich literate environments.

Scaling up literacy programmes for youth and adults requires:
- Active government responsibility for adult literacy policy and financing as part of education sector planning.
- Clear frameworks to coordinate public, private and civil society provision of literacy programmes.
- Increased budgetary and aid allocations. Literacy programmes receive a mere 1% of the education budget in many countries. An additional US$2.5 billion a year to 2015 will likely be needed to make significant progress towards the Dakar literacy goal.
- Basing programmes on an understanding of learners’ demands, especially their language preferences and their motivations for attending class, in consultation with local communities.
- Curricula that build on these demands, with clearly stated learning objectives and the provision of adequate learning materials.
- Adequate pay, professional status and training opportunities for literacy educators.
- Appropriate language policies, as most countries facing stark literacy challenges are linguistically diverse. The use of mother tongues is pedagogically sound but must offer a smooth transition to learning opportunities in regional and official languages.

Developing literate environments and literate societies requires sustained attention to:
- Language policies.
- Book publishing policies.
- Media policies.
- Access to information.
- Policies to get books and reading materials into schools and homes.

Acquiring, improving and using literacy skills happens at all levels of education, and in multiple formal and non-formal contexts. Achieving each of the EFA goals depends strongly on policies that foster literate societies and set high standards for literacy, the foundation for further learning.
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.
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.