

# Literacy and non-formal education



**L**iteracy and non-formal education are specifically mentioned in three of the six Dakar goals. This is a measure of their importance for achieving Education for All. The magnitude of the EFA challenge implies that, in addition to ensuring primary schooling, more efforts are needed to develop literacy and non-formal education so as to reach those children, youths and adults who are unreached by the formal system.

While many educational authorities are fully aware of the need for literacy and non-formal education, these sub-sectors suffer from a lack of recognition. This translates into insufficient training, low salary and status of literacy teachers, insufficient co-ordination between non-formal education providers (government and NGOs) and inadequacy of public investment. Often perceived as second class, literacy and non-formal education are undervalued by parents and communities and receive less national and external funding than the formal system.

As a consequence, most literacy and non-formal education activities are run by NGOs and non-profit organizations rather than governments and, despite the extent of the problem, projects are relatively small-scale.

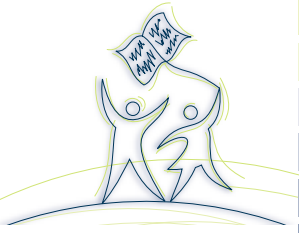
## What is literacy?

Considerable evolution in thinking about literacy has occurred in recent years. Illiteracy is now viewed as a structural phenomenon and a social responsibility. Likewise, whereas literacy used to be viewed as a panacea for educational development, it is now seen in the broader context of educational and socio-economic interventions.

Literacy is always "functional", that is, meaningful and useful for children, young people and adults. And literacy learning needs and uses change over time. Being able to read, write and calculate in today's complex world is not enough. Skills training, health and environmental education, and computer literacy are increasingly considered part of the literacy endeavour.

## The scope of illiteracy

There are today worldwide still more than 550 million female and 300 million male adult illiterates. To achieve the Dakar literacy goal, the world's adult illiteracy rate has to be reduced from its current level of 21 per cent to about 10 percent by 2015. In other words, the literacy rate for adults must reach at least 90 percent by 2015. This means that the number of adult literates will have to increase annually by 92 million, or 42 percent more than the current figure. Such a rate represents 1.3 times the previous effort.



While some regions of the world, notably East Asia, the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, could meet the Dakar literacy goal by maintaining almost the same efforts as in the past decade, other regions face substantial challenges. The challenge is particularly acute in the least developed countries, where success will require more than a doubling of past efforts. Egypt and India will have to double their efforts, while Bangladesh and Pakistan will have to triple them.

## Who is doing what in literacy and non-formal education?

Governments, non-governmental organizations and UN agencies, mainly UNESCO, are active in literacy and non-formal education. Some examples of government activities include Egypt's National Campaign for Literacy and Adult Education and India's National Literacy Mission. Other examples to be mentioned are Guatemala's Basic Education for Work Project which targets sixty communities in the country's poor rural areas. UNESCO Bangkok's APPEAL programme has for many years promoted community learning centres in the region, providing literacy and non-formal education to communities.

UNESCO focuses on support for literacy and non-formal education at the international, regional, national and community levels, with particular emphasis on women's literacy and on projects addressing marginalized youth, and rural and indigenous populations. Actions include policy advice, capacity building and concrete country- and community-based activities. Considering the new vision of literacy, UNESCO's activities in this field include health, basic skills training, income generating schemes, and civic and cultural development.

NGOs have promoted new methods, such as ActionAid's participatory, learner-centred approach (known as REFLECT). In many countries NGOs link literacy with local income-generation and cultural development. Since adults learn what is useful and relevant for them in their own circumstances, it is often local NGO programmes which are most effective. Frequently they promote literacy in the local language, as well as in widely-spoken languages which adults want to learn.

## Monitoring non-formal programmes

Current EFA monitoring systems are mainly based on formal education. The role played by non-formal programmes is often underestimated. Non-formal education information systems need to be set up to facilitate comprehensive monitoring and evaluation. In 2000, UNESCO initiated a programme to develop a comparative and adaptable methodology for monitoring non-formal education initiatives and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics has also taken preliminary steps to develop new indicators for the non-formal sector.

## Next steps

Mindful of the magnitude of the problem and the enormous task ahead, the United Nations General Assembly is planning to proclaim in 2002 a United Nations Decade for Literacy within the global efforts for Education for All and is expected to entrust UNESCO with the task of leading the ten-year challenge. The prime purpose of the decade is to mobilize governments and civil society to recognize the importance of creating literate environments and providing quality non-formal learning opportunities.

For further information, contact:

The Dakar Follow-up Unit, Education Sector, UNESCO  
7, Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France  
Fax: 33 (0) 1 45 68 56 26/27 • E-mail: efa@unesco.org

Visit the Education for All website on [www.unesco.org/education/efa](http://www.unesco.org/education/efa)