



INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY 2008

Literacy is the best remedy

This year's **International Literacy Day** puts the spotlight on the connections between literacy and health. Today's gravest health concerns cannot be adequately addressed unless literacy finds a central place in public health policies and strategies. Numerous studies have demonstrated that higher literacy rates enhance people's chances to live healthy lives.

The World's Literacy Challenge

Where we stand

- Adult literacy remains a serious global issue: almost one in five adults (out of whom two-thirds are women), a total of 774 million people, cannot read and/or write.
- 75 million children of primary school age are out of school.
- Direct testing of literacy levels suggests that the global challenge is much greater than conventional measurements indicate.
- The vast majority of illiterate adults are concentrated in three regions (East Asia, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa). Since the 1985-1994 period, the number of illiterates has fallen by almost 100 million, primarily due to a marked reduction in China.
- More than three-quarters of the world's illiterates live in only fifteen countries, including eight of the nine high population countries (E-9): Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Pakistan.
- A large number of countries are at risk of not achieving the adult literacy goal (EFA Goal 4) adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar (2000) (see table 5.2 attached).
 - Of the 101 countries still far from achieving 'universal literacy', 72 will not succeed in halving their adult illiteracy rates by 2015 if current trends continue unchanged.
 - Most countries at risk of not achieving the literacy goal are in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Funding for scaling-up literacy programmes is grossly insufficient. Literacy programmes receive a mere 1% of the national education budget in many countries.

PROJECTIONS: With population growth, the prediction is that by 2015 the absolute number of non-literate adults (over 15 years) will fall only to 706 million from the current level of 774 million – plainly an unacceptable rate of progress.

The trends

- The adult literacy rate in developing countries increased from 68% to 79% between the periods 1985–1994 and 2000–2006.
- Even if the percentage of literate adults is increasing, in some regions the rate of population growth is such that the absolute numbers of non-literate adults continue to climb.
- Worldwide, the overall percentage of women who are non-literate has remained virtually unchanged in the last 20 years: 63% of non-literate adults were women in 1985-1994 as compared to 64% in 2000-2006.

The Links between Literacy and Health

Research has repeatedly demonstrated the direct correlation between people's level of literacy and their chances to maintain good health

- Nearly ten million children die every year before reaching age 5, most often of preventable infectious diseases. Children living in poor conditions are less likely to be treated for serious illness.
- The risk of contracting malaria – which claims over one million lives each year – is significantly increased amongst illiterate populations.
- Women with secondary education are five times more likely to be informed about HIV and AIDS than women who are illiterate.
- Child mortality rates are higher when the mother is illiterate.
- Participation in early childhood care and education (ECCE) improves young children's health, nutrition and well-being, and increases their readiness for primary school.
- An illiterate person is more vulnerable to ill-health, and less likely to seek medical help for themselves, their family or their community.
- Eradicating extreme poverty, promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and combating HIV and malaria cannot be achieved without a literacy dimension.
- Innovative and successful literacy practices show that, when health is at stake, literacy has a major role to play.

Literacy increases awareness and influences the behaviour of individuals, families and communities.

Literacy improves communication skills, gives access to knowledge and builds the self-confidence and self-esteem needed to make decisions.

A learner's story from the Brazilian Programme "Alfabetizando com Saúde" run by the Curitiba City Council.

L. had been interned at the psychiatric Hospital for 20 years; she always avoided communicating with people, being considered as handicapped. Now she lives at a home that is part of the Health Department programme called 'Therapeutic Residence'; she participated

actively in the programme "Alfabetizando com Saúde". Now that she has acquired basic literacy she studies at the fundamental level in the neighbourhood school.

The way forward

The **literacy challenge** can be met only through:

Stronger commitment to literacy: Greater leadership and stronger policies are necessary to ensure high-quality literacy provision;

More effective literacy programme delivery: through scaling-up of effective literacy programmes, strengthening of capacity development of literacy actors, and further attention to ensuring and sustaining a literate environment through the promotion of writing and authorship, printed and electronic materials, publishing and distribution;

Increased resources for literacy: It is estimated that at least **US\$ 2.5 billion**, from both governments and aid agencies, would be required annually up to 2015 to make significant progress towards the literacy goals, through investment in adult literacy programmes.

UNESCO's response

The UNLD, under UNESCO's coordination, is the main overarching framework for addressing the global literacy challenge. In setting up the UN Literacy Decade (2003-2012), the countries of the world showed their determination to raise the profile of literacy and galvanize commitment and action. At its halfway point, the Decade continues to be a key reference and stimulus for pursuing a vision of Literacy for All as the foundation of lifelong learning and a tool for empowering individuals and their communities.

As coordinator of the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012), UNESCO:

- Stimulates and contributes to the debates surrounding the nature and provision of literacy;
- Coordinates the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), to increase literacy levels in 35 countries where the literacy rate is less than 50 per cent or where there are more than 10 million non-literate adults;
- Undertakes research and development for assessing and monitoring literacy and non-formal education, by setting-up Non-Formal Education Management Information Systems (NFE/MIS) and through the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP);
- Facilitates the development of appropriate national policies for non-formal education and literacy;
- Conducts work on the capacity-building of literacy facilitators, and on sensitivity to gender issues in designing literacy materials and programmes;

- Engages in advocacy for literacy through the annual International Literacy Day and the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes, the Adult Learners' Week, and the Literacy Research Prize.
- UNESCO monitors annually the progress made by countries to meet the Education for All (EFA) goals related to literacy, through the EFA Global Monitoring Report.

EFA GOALS

www.unesco.org/education/efa

The Education for All movement is a global commitment to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults. The movement was launched at the [World Conference on Education for All](#) in 1990, when representatives of the international community agreed to universalize primary education and massively reduce illiteracy by the end of the decade.

Ten years later, with many countries far from having reached this goal, the international community met again in [Dakar](#), Senegal, and affirmed their commitment to achieving Education for All by the year 2015. They identified six key education goals which aim to meet the learning needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015.

The six goals are:

[Goal 1: Expand early childhood care and education](#)

[Goal 2: Provide free and compulsory primary education for all](#)

[Goal 3: Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults](#)

[Goal 4: Increase adult literacy by 50 per cent](#)

[Goal 5: Achieve gender parity by 2005, gender equality by 2015](#)

[Goal 6: Improve the quality of education](#)

Millennium Development Goals

www.undp.org/mdg

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the **Millennium Declaration** that was adopted by 189 nations-and signed by 147 heads of state and governments during the [UN Millennium Summit](#) in September 2000.

[Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger](#)

[Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education](#)

[Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women](#)

[Goal 4: Reduce child mortality](#)

[Goal 5: Improve maternal health](#)

[Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases](#)

[Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability](#)

[Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development](#)

Other Useful links:

EFA Global Monitoring Report: www.efareport.unesco.org

UNESCO Institute for Statistics: www.uis.unesco.org