

Defining and Measuring Literacy

Definitions and measures of literacy themselves pose an issue that requires considerable clarification (Keller-Cohen 1993). From medieval Europe through early 19th century America, to be “literate” meant simply to know how to write one’s name; and Europeans able to read and write in a “vernacular” language (like French) were originally not considered literate if they did not also master Latin – a situation mirrored centuries later in African countries where those able to transcribe their own language in Arabic characters, or even to read Arabic itself, didn’t satisfy the criterion if they couldn’t handle written English or French (Calvet 1976, Easton and Peach 1997; Graff 1986; Hinzen 1989). For several decades in the mid-20th century, literacy was somewhat accidentally and arbitrarily pegged to the equivalent of a 4th grade education, though in western countries it now is commonly taken to result from eight years of schooling (Levine 1982). More recent efforts to calibrate different levels and qualities of literacy (e.g. Wagner et al. 2002; WB, Oct. 2002) have yielded useful distinctions and tools that must be carefully taken into account in the exercise proposed here. (See Box 1 on the next page for alternate definitions of literacy.)

Assessing where we stand

The situation in regard to literacy remains disquieting. In absolute numbers, the world’s adult illiterate population continued to increase during the period 1980-1990, from an estimated 871 million to 879 million; but it began to decline slowly in the 1990s to an estimated 862 million today, in a total world adult population of more than 4.3 billion (UIS 2002 citing UN Population Division, World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision). Illiterates still represent therefore some 20% of the total. The figures presented in Annex 2 for the 23 countries selected as participants in the first round of the EFA-Fast-Track Initiative are even more telling.

Meeting the EFA goal of halving the proportion of illiterates worldwide by 2015 requires reducing the current figure of 862 million adult illiterates to 535 million, a drop of 327 million – and this over a period when nearly a billion net new inhabitants will be added to the globe. Unless there is concerted effort to accelerate the spread of literacy, however, recent studies by the UIS indicated that there may still be about 800 million adult illiterates in the world in 2015 (UIS 2002).

Literacy rates among women have been improving at a slightly faster rate than those among men – a six percentage point improvement over the last twelve years for women (from 69% in 1990 to 75% in 2002) compared to a four percentage point improvement for men (from 82% to 86%) over the same period. However, the majority of the world’s adult illiterates are still women, currently numbering 549 million compared to 313 million illiterate men, or 64% of the total of 862 million adult illiterates. In the absence of major additional efforts to spread literacy among women, it is estimated that there will still be 507 million illiterate female adults in 2015 compared to a projected 292 million illiterate adult males. Measuring where we stand, country by country, with respect to the more fundamental goal of ensuring quality basic education to underserved population groups and furnishing them with the tools they need to benefit from – and to manage -- local programs for poverty reduction, democratic governance and HIV/AIDS abatement is, however, much more difficult and yet just as important as an exercise in estimating literacy rates per se. That sort of assessment can only be carried out in tandem with the communities, development agencies and programs that are concerned with the related welfare or empowerment goals; and it involves determining – sector by sector – not just who knows what, but also the degree to which the underlying policies of beneficiary empowerment and participation are in fact in

place and the extent to which concerned populations have, and are using, the means to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge.¹

Box 1. Defining literacy and illiteracy

International Definitions

OECD-IALS: The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at work, and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.

UNESCO (1950s): A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his or her everyday life.

UNESCO (1970s): 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.

National Definitions

Nigeria and Niger, traditional: Jahili wanda aka daure ma idonsa (Hausa’ “An illiterate is a blindfolded person”)

Botswana 1991: “Illiterates include all persons with less than five years of education

India 2001: “Is considered illiterate any person who has not attained skill in reading and writing simple text and numeracy.”

Brazil 1998: “Is considered illiterate any person who says s/he doesn’t know how to read and write, or who has learned how to read and write but has forgotten or only knows to sign his name.”

USA 1998: Literacy refers to “an individual’s ability to read, write and speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.” (Workforce Investment Act)

Related Concepts

Numeracy: Capacity to read and write numbers and represent quantities encountered in daily living (basic numeracy) plus comprehension of the four basic arithmetic operations and ability to solve practical problems through related written computation (advanced numeracy).

Functional literacy: Mastery of the elements of literacy, numeracy and technical knowledge required to competently exercise some job or social function.

Technical literacy: Ability to use productively a given technology and expressed understanding of the principle by which it operates. (There may thus be many varieties of technical literacy.)

Irreversible literacy or numeracy: Attainment of levels of literate and numerate competence that ensure retention of related skills after the cessation of instruction.

¹ This more dimensional assessment of people’s skills and knowledge – and of the environment that does or does not support their acquisition and use – can deliver us from one of the shortcomings of some current EFA literature and policy: a tendency to “fixate” on literacy per se and to conceive of educational programs on the model of vaccination campaigns devoted to “eradicating” the scourge of illiteracy.

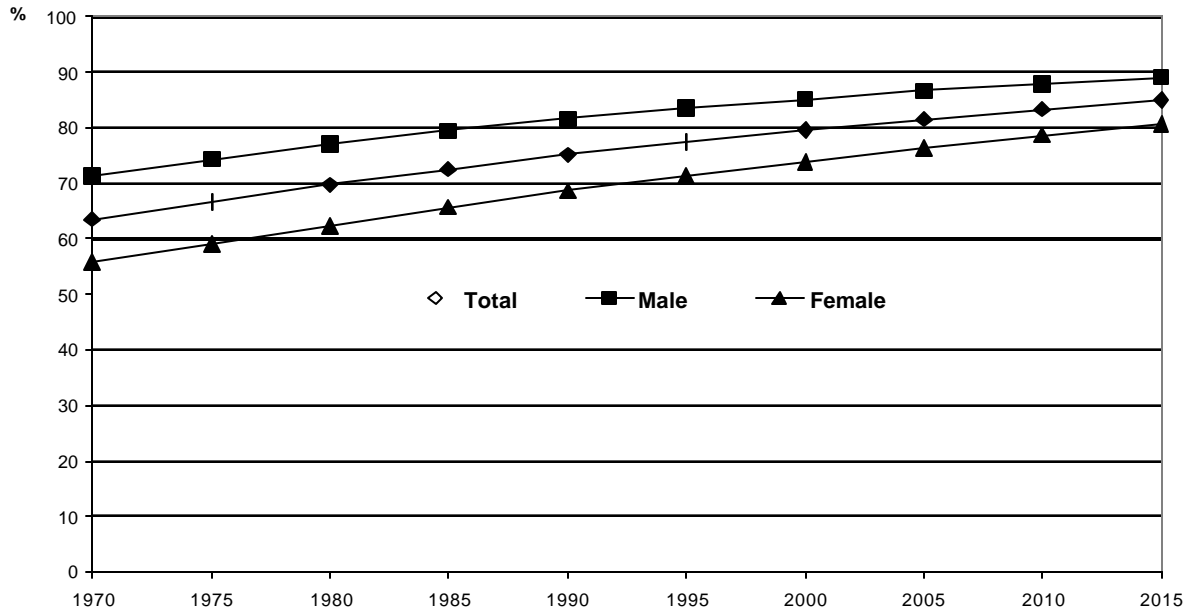
Charts 1 to 3 on the following pages summarize available data on world literacy rates by gender and the current situation in Fast Track Countries.

Chart 1: Literacy rates in Fast Track Countries

Countries	Illiteracy rate, adult (% of people 15+)			Youth illiteracy rate (% of people age 15-24)			Illiteracy, adult (people 15+) (in thousand)			Youth illiteracy (people age 15-24) (in thousand)		
	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
Albania	15.3	23.0	7.9	2.2	3.6	0.9	336	248	88	12	9	3
Bangladesh	60.0	69.8	50.6	51.6	60.3	43.3	50,558	28,445	22,035	14,441	8,168	6,267
Bolivia	14.6	20.8	8.1	4.2	6.4	2.0	733	535	199	68	51	16
Burkina Faso	76.1	85.9	66.1	65.4	76.7	54.2	4,504	2,723	1,817	1,568	935	639
Congo, Dem. Rep.	38.6	49.8	26.9	18.3	25.1	11.6	10,078	6,636	3,437	1,769	1,209	558
Ethiopia	60.9	69.0	52.9	45.0	51.3	38.8	21,005	12,062	8,996	5,408	3,081	2,333
Gambia, The	63.4	70.3	56.3	42.8	50.7	34.8	494	279	215	100	60	40
Ghana	28.4	36.8	19.7	8.9	11.4	6.4	3,239	2,125	1,112	368	235	134
Guinea	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Guyana	1.5	1.9	1.1	0.2	0.2	0.2	8	5	3	0.3	0.2	0.2
Honduras	25.0	25.0	25.1	14.9	13.4	16.5	934	467	467	200	88	112
India	42.8	54.6	31.6	27.4	35.2	20.3	286,951	177,689	109,367	52,125	32,090	20,050
Mauritania	59.8	69.9	49.3	51.1	59.4	42.9	890	530	360	268	155	113
Mozambique	56.0	71.3	40.0	39.4	53.8	24.9	5,741	3,728	2,008	1,422	971	448
Nicaragua	33.5	33.3	33.8	28.4	27.7	29.0	975	494	481	308	150	158
Niger	84.0	91.5	76.2	77.0	86.2	67.7	4,564	2,483	2,072	1,623	892	726
Nigeria	36.0	43.9	27.8	13.1	15.7	10.4	22,510	13,715	8,698	3,001	1,776	1,214
Pakistan	56.8	72.1	42.6	43.0	58.1	28.9	46,702	28,871	17,980	11,685	7,677	4,034
Tanzania	25.0	33.5	16.1	9.5	12.1	6.8	4,827	3,299	1,528	684	439	245
Uganda	33.0	43.2	22.5	21.3	27.9	14.6	3,902	2,572	1,324	998	655	342
Vietnam	7.5	9.3	5.5	4.8	4.6	5.0	3,901	2,463	1,419	759	359	400
Yemen, Rep.	53.6	74.7	32.5	35.0	53.8	17.1	4,914	3,525	1,444	1,165	874	292
Zambia	21.8	28.5	14.8	11.8	14.5	9.2	1,215	793	411	254	155	100

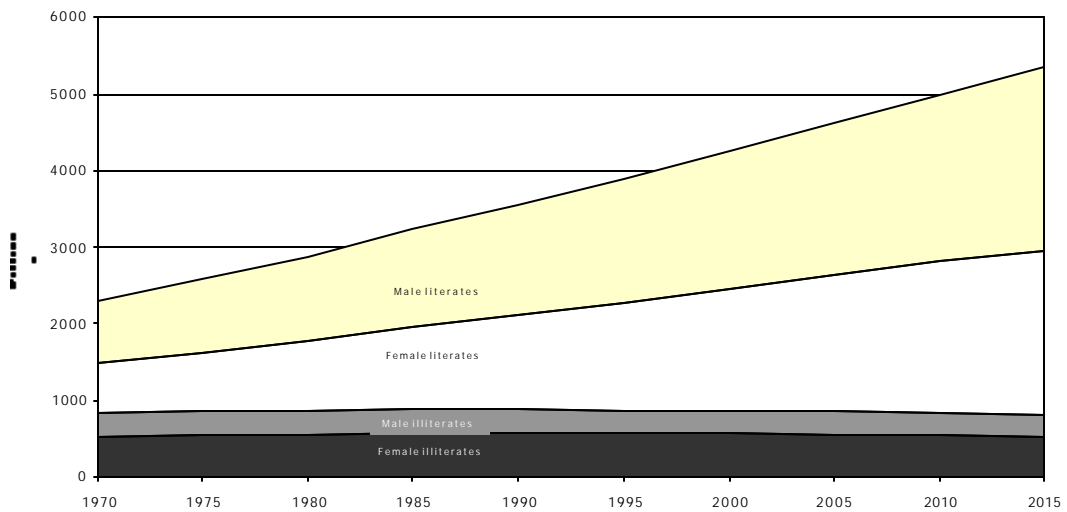
Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, July 2002 assessment

Chart 2: World adult literacy rates, 1970-2015



Source: UNESCO, 2002

Chart 3: Literates and illiterates by sex, 1970-2015



Source: UNESCO 2002

The World Bank's Support for Adult and Nonformal Education

Between 1968 and 2001, the World Bank assisted client countries in approximately 100 education projects with components of nonformal basic education and training for adults and youth. Between 1971 and 1975, adult literacy featured in every education project in East Africa. Most of these components were relatively minor, with only six attracting more than US\$10 million over their lives. Nonetheless, governments in all regions borrowed, with those in East Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East and North Africa attracting the largest proportions. In 1977, the government of Indonesia sought Bank's assistance in support of a large, free standing program dedicated solely to adult and youth non-formal education, and until 1992, was the only country to do so.

Largely because of Indonesia, the share of adult basic education in the Bank's lending for education rose from 1.3 per cent in the early 1970s to 5.2 per cent later in the decade. By 1984, however, it had declined to 1.7 per cent.

Since early 1990's, the Bank has been assisting a number of governments in specialized, free standing projects in adult and non-formal education: Ghana (1992-1997, 1999-on-going), Bangladesh (1996-2001, 2001-on-going), Senegal (1996-2001), Côte d'Ivoire (1999-on-going), and Morocco (2002-on-going). In addition, a number of education projects include components on adult/ youth literacy and non-formal education, in, for example: Benin, Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Chad, Chile, Guinea, Lesotho, Mali, Mexico, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Philippines, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, The Gambia, Togo, and Uganda.

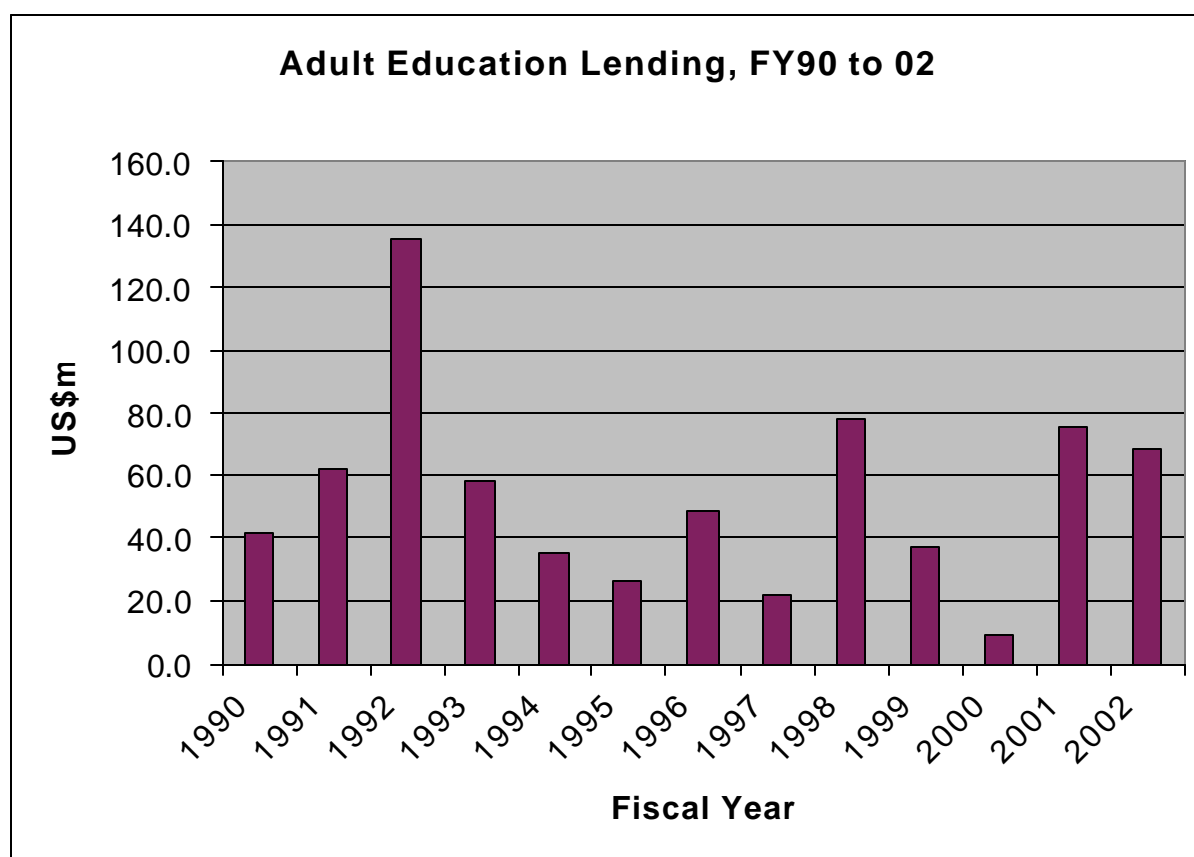


Chart 4: Adult Education Lending by the Bank since 1990

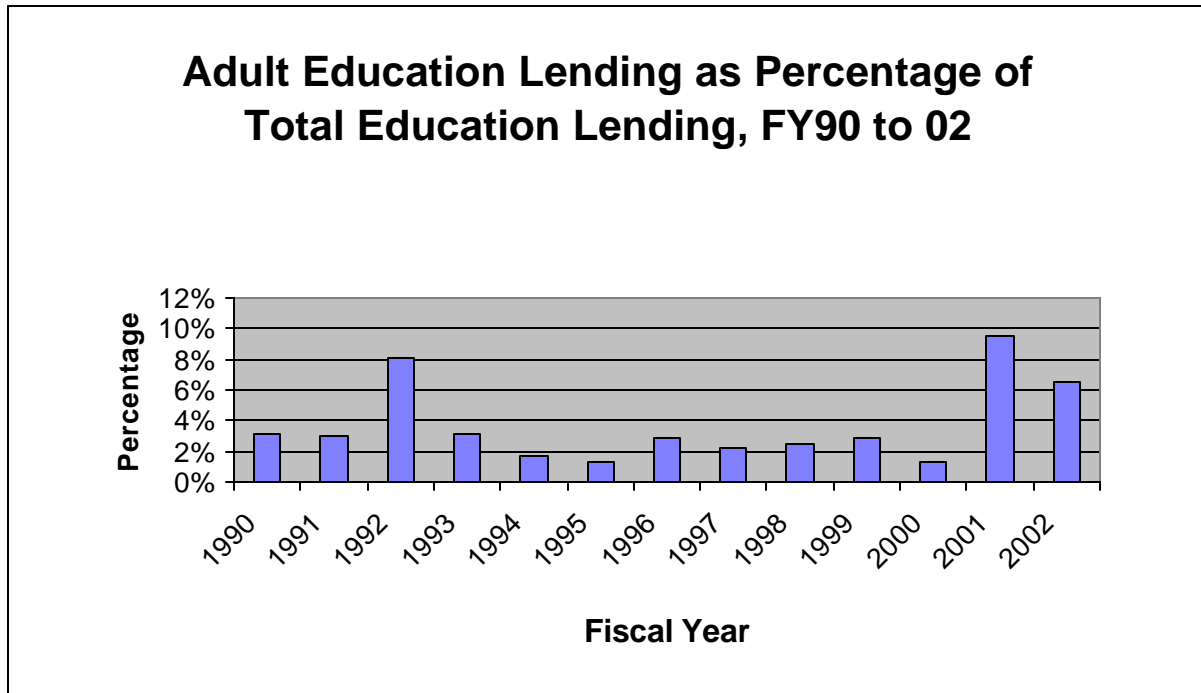


Chart 5: Bank Lending in Adult Education
As a Proportion of Overall Education Lending