LITERACY AS A FOUNDATION FOR ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

1.1 Introduction

Literacy is a core component of the right to education as recognised by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right to literacy supports the pursuit of other human rights. In other words, literacy has the potential to enhance people’s ability to act in the pursuit of freedom (Amartya Sen), and to empower them to interpret and transform their realities (Paulo Freire). Strong literacy skills are associated with a range of valuable and desirable outcomes (St. Clair, 2010). The question, then, is not so much what literacy can do for people, but rather what people can do with literacy. How it is acquired and how it is used determines its value for the learner.

Literacy provides a basis for many other learning opportunities. The Belém Framework for Action (UIL, 2010), in its section on adult literacy, states that “Literacy is an indispensable foundation that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum” (ibid, p. 6). Literacy learning is an age-independent and continuous activity: skills acquired at a given time may be lost at another. Thus, the acquisition and development of literacy takes place before, during and after primary school, in and out of school, and through formal, non-formal and informal learning. It therefore covers the full spectrum of lifelong learning.

Our understanding of the world is increasingly mediated by the written word, in both print and digital forms. Therefore, the abilities to read, write and operate with numbers have become an essential requirement for active participation in society. Changes in the economy, the nature of work, the role of media and digitisation, as well as many other aspects of society, have underscored the importance of literacy today. Increasing amounts of information (including that which is available online) and the need to select and use knowledge from a range of sources, pose a challenge for people with poor reading and writing skills. Many people risk exclusion from the opportunity to use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and other social media. Young people and adults who struggle with reading, writing and operating with numbers are more vulnerable to poverty, social exclusion, unemployment, poor health, demographic changes, displacement and migration, and to the impacts of man-made and natural disasters.

Increasingly, teaching and learning reading, writing, language (written and spoken communication) and numeracy are viewed as part of a broader conception of key competencies, human resource development and lifelong learning. As such, literacy is less often perceived as a stand-alone set of skills to be developed and completed in a short time frame. Rather, literacy and numeracy are seen as fundamental components of a complex set of foundational skills (or basic competencies), which require sustained learning and updating. Governments’

1 ‘Literacy’ usually refers to a set of skills and practices comprising reading, writing and using numbers as mediated by written materials. The discussion presented here summarises the various issues that Member States include when talking about literacy.

2 Ralf St. Clair, drawing on the capability model, puts it slightly differently: the question is not whether literacy and literacy education matter (to the people who are learning, literacy education matters very much indeed), but in what ways it matters, and how we can understand and acknowledge these more deeply (St. Clair, 2010).
commitment to the acquisition of key literacy skills is essential to guarantee the fundamental right to education.

Improving adult literacy levels is one of the six Education for All (EFA) goals. This chapter starts with a review of the challenges involved in attaining this goal, especially in light of developments since EFA was launched in 1990. It further examines the evolution of the concept of ‘literacy’, followed by a discussion of the different ways literacy is measured and assessed. The last part draws lessons from the earlier sections and offers some points of reflection for stakeholders as they work to improve literacy levels by 2015.

1.2 Challenges in achieving EFA Goal 4

Education for All Goal 4 aims towards “Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults”. In May 2013, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) reported that, in 2011, 774 million adults (aged 15 and over), 63.8 per cent of them women, were unable to read and write. The global rate of adults able to read and write was 84.1 per cent (88.6% male and 79.9% female) compared to 89.5 per cent of youth (92.2% male and 86.8% female), where youth is defined as persons aged 15 to 24. More than half of adults who are unable to read and write (53%) live in South and West Asia, 24 per cent live in Sub-Saharan Africa, 12 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, 6.2 per cent in the Arab States and 4.6 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (UIS, 2013). It is estimated that less than two per cent of the global illiterate population live either in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, North America or Western Europe (UIS, 2013).

However, reported literacy rates only show a partial picture of the situation. For example, according to the European Labour Force survey in 2011, many of Europe’s 73 million low-educated adults (25–64 years old) are likely to experience literacy problems (European Commission, 2012). Poor literacy skills are probably affecting more people in Europe than governments are aware of. Most European countries have simply assumed that everyone who passes through compulsory education will be equipped with adequate literacy skills. However, various surveys have shown that this cannot be taken for granted. The recent report by the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (European Commission, 2012) points out that the majority of adults with literacy problems have attended at least compulsory schooling, but emerged without sufficient competences in reading and writing. As the global labour market continues to change, skills need to be upgraded on a frequent basis. Those without digital competences are increasingly excluded from many services and may have difficulties managing their day-to-day life. The aim of literacy policy therefore should not be to simply reduce so-called “illiteracy rates”, but to increase and develop basic skills, including a broad spectrum of literacy skills, and to create rich literate environments and learning societies.

As Table 1.1 shows, 35 countries have already reached or are close to reaching EFA goal 4. Fifty-four countries may be able to reach the goal by 2015 if they intensify efforts, and 29 countries are unlikely to reach the goal. While “illiteracy rates” are declining, the absolute number of adults reported as unable to read and write is not decreasing fast enough to represent substantial progress.

Who is being left behind?

- Women (representing globally two-thirds of all illiterates), but also men (especially in Europe and in some Caribbean countries)

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3 It should be noted that, in 2011, 25.4 per cent of the world’s population lived in South and West Asia, 12.5 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 32.6 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, 5.1 per cent in the Arab States, and 5.6 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean (data from the UIS Data Centre).

4 In 81 out of the 146 countries with available data, more women than men are illiterate. Of these countries, 21 show extreme gender disparity, with fewer than seven literate women for every ten literate men (UNESCO, 2012, p. 5).
Likely to reach EFA 4

Additional effort needed to reach EFA 4 by 2015

Unlikely to reach EFA 4 by 2015

No. of countries providing data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Likely to reach EFA 4</th>
<th>Additional effort needed to reach EFA 4</th>
<th>Unlikely to reach EFA 4 by 2015</th>
<th>No. of countries providing data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
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<td>28</td>
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<td>Europe and North America</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
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<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UIS, 2013

- People living in rural areas
- People living in countries affected by or emerging from conflict (UNESCO, 2011)
- The poor (UNESCO, 2010)
- Ethnic and linguistic minorities (see UNESCO, 2010)
- People with disabilities (WHO, 2011)

The Belém Framework for Action (UIL, 2010) emphasises the urgency of redoubling efforts to improve literacy levels by 2015. The interconnected nature of the six EFA goals is clear when we consider the impact that the achievement of Goal 4 would have on Goal 1 (early childhood care and education), Goal 2 (universal completion of primary education), Goal 3 (youth and adult learning needs), Goal 5 (gender parity and equality in education) and Goal 6 (quality of education) through more skilful parents, families and communities. In the same manner, the achievement of the other five EFA Goals would also have an impact on Goal 4. This interdependence reinforces the fact that literacy is trans-generational and lies at the heart of basic education for all.

Literacy is also vital to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the goals of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD). The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) and UNESCO’s Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) have stressed the need for accelerated efforts in achieving EFA Goal 4. However, adult literacy has not received appropriate attention and resources. According to the 2011 Global Monitoring Report, the EFA target for reducing illiteracy rates by 2015 will be missed by a wide margin. This reflects a long-standing neglect of literacy in education policy (UNESCO, 2011). The latest Global Monitoring Report (2012) confirms that most countries will not achieve Goal 4.

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5 Target values for the EFA goal of reducing the adult illiteracy rate by 50% between 2000 and 2015 were calculated by UIS. The target values for each country were set at the latest adult literacy rate reported in the 2000 census decade (1995–2004), plus half of the difference between that literacy rate and 100 per cent. For example, if the adult literacy rate in a country was 60 per cent in 2000, the target was set at 60% + (100% - 60%) / 2 = 80%. In some cases, the target literacy rate was calculated in reference to literacy rates from years before or after 2000. Given that the adult literacy rate is a slow-moving indicator, the deviation from the exact target value can be assumed to be small in such cases. Projected literacy rates in 2015 were calculated by UIS with its Global Age-Specific Literacy Projections (GALP) model. The projected values were compared with the target and three prognoses generated: likely to reach or exceed the target, likely to reach the target with additional effort (if the projected value for 2015 is within 5 percentage points of the target), and unlikely to reach the target (if the projected value is more than 5 percentage points below the target).

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6 Despite being of critical importance for development, literacy was not included in the MDGs.
Of forty countries with an adult literacy rate below 90 per cent in 1998–2001, only three are expected to meet the goal of reducing their illiteracy rate by 50 per cent (UNESCO, 2012).

Progress towards achievement of EFA Goal 4 has been slow. Low prioritisation from policy-makers and, consequently, inadequate resource allocation have resulted in limitations in the delivery of literacy learning opportunities for adults. In some countries, the absolute numbers of young people and adults lacking literacy skills have increased. This is, of course, partially due to population growth, but also due to early school leaving and poor school quality. The quality and relevance of literacy provision for all age groups are of paramount importance for education policy. The literacy challenge must be addressed in a systematic way and through the lens of lifelong learning.

1.3 Evolving notions of literacy

While the concept of literacy has evolved over time, no global consensus on the definition has emerged. ‘Literacy’ is usually understood as the ability to read and to write. Numeracy, as mediated by written material, not oral numeracy, is often added as a complement or component of literacy. Increasingly, there is also mention of language skills, as most people live in multilingual contexts or have a migrant background and need to use oral and written communication in different languages. Terms such as literacies, literacy practices, basic literacy, initial or advanced literacy, functional literacy and post-literacy are used with widely different, and sometimes unclear, meanings in policy, programme and academic contexts. Indeed, these terms reflect the multidimensionality and complexity of literacy and underscore the urgent need to go further beyond the traditional dichotomy of “literate-illiterate”, as is also urged by the Belém Framework for Action (UIL, 2010).

One reason for the existence of differing meanings of the term literacy is the linguistic and cultural context in which the term is used. In many European languages, the word for literacy relates to the process of becoming familiar with the alphabet and the coding and decoding of words and text. By contrast, in languages such as English or Chinese, the word ‘literacy’ or ‘literate’ has been associated with a condition of being accustomed with literature or, more generally, with being well-educated and civilised. People struggling with reading and writing can find it humiliating if their lack of skills is equated with ignorance. In contexts where the majority of the population is literate, low literacy becomes a stigma, a hidden issue and a taboo subject, as recently demonstrated in Europe (European Commission, 2012, p.21). In addition to the usual dichotomy of ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’, there is an implicit assumption that once a person has become “literate”, this condition remains unchanged until the end of his or her life. Many languages lack words to describe the loss of literacy-proficiency over time.

UNESCO, in fulfilment of its normative function, has offered two operational definitions of what constitutes a literate person. In 1958, it was agreed that, “a person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life.” In 1978, UNESCO recommended the definition that “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.”

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8 For example, alfabetización in Spanish, alfabetização in Portuguese, alphabilisation in French, Alphabetisierung in German, alfabetiseren in Danish, Dutch and Swedish.
9 UNESCO’s 1958 literacy definition does not specify what is meant by “a simple statement” and “everyday life” (each individual’s everyday life is unique), and does not cover numeracy.
10 UNESCO’s 1978 literacy definition is still widely used. The notion of “functional literacy” has been heavily criticised as instrumental and biased towards economic activity. However, literacy is always “functional”, since it equips people with skills that allow them to function, so there is no need for such a qualifier. These definitions have been framed within education statistics, so they are mostly operational definitions for measurement purposes.

7 The changing perspective and the new tendency to reject the terms ‘illiteracy’ and ‘illiterates’ as inaccurate and detrimental to the understanding of the real situation was already identified more than 20 years ago resulting from a UNESCO conference on “Literacy and Basic Education in Europe on the Eve of the 21st Century” (see conclusions of Bélanger et al., 1992, pp. 205–206).
In 2003, UNESCO organised an expert meeting at which the following operational definition was proposed: “Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in community and wider society” (UNESCO, 2005a, p. 21).

Meanwhile, five different approaches to literacy have been identified in academic discussions:

1) literacy as skills, particularly the ability to read, write and calculate, sometimes called cognitive skills or a set of cognitive processes;
2) literacy as applied, practised and situated, or as tasks that require the written word, such as functional, family and work-based literacy;
3) literacy as a set of social and cultural practices embedded in specific socio-economic, political, cultural and linguistic contexts, including schools, family and community contexts;
4) literacy as capabilities, reflected in the ability of the person using the skills to achieve their purposes and their communicative goals; and
5) literacy as a tool for critical reflection and action for social change, also referred to as critical or transformative literacy.


The Belém Framework for Action presents key elements for understanding literacy today: (a) literacy as a continuum; (b) sustainable literacy as a target; (c) literacy as an empowering tool that enables participants to continue as lifelong learners; and (d) an enriched literate environment as essential support for continuing education, training and skills development beyond basic literacy skills (UIL, 2010, pp. 6 f.).

Eighty out of 120 countries reporting (or 67%) have adopted an official or working definition of literacy. But these still vary, from short statements, such as “literacy is seen as lifelong learning”, to those adding new concepts, such as digital competence. Official definitions often reflect a simple statement and/or refer to UNESCO’s official and operational definitions from 1958, 1978 and 2003. In a number of cases, the scope has been expanded by adding language competences, ICT competences, and essential practical skills.

In practice, many countries use more elaborate definitions that relate to the way in which literacy programmes are delivered, rather than how data are generated by departments of statistics in ministries of education or by national statistics authorities. Almost half of the 40 countries that have reported not having any official definition are OECD members in Europe and North America and this may reflect a shift towards embedding literacy in broader frameworks of skills, competencies or qualifications.

Table 1.2 shows that most countries include the domains of reading or writing (76 and 74 respectively) in their definitions. Twenty-seven countries mention both reading and writing (Table 1.3) while forty-nine have adopted definitions that explicitly include numeracy (Table 1.2). Most of these are located in Africa and Europe and North America. Forty-six countries refer to the three dimensions of reading, writing and numeracy in their definitions (Table 1.2) and a number include ICT skills (11), life skills (5) and language skills (21) (Table 1.3). Eighteen countries, mainly in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, emphasise the empowering nature of their literacy approach.

“Progress towards achievement of EFA Goal 4 has been slow. Low prioritisation from policy-makers and, consequently, limited resource allocation have resulted in limitations in the delivery of literacy learning opportunities for adults.”

11 Belgium and Lesotho
12 Bosnia and Herzegovina and France
13 Bangladesh, Jamaica, Namibia, Uganda and Zambia
### Table 1.2
Keywords used in literacy definitions (reading, writing and numeracy separately)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Numeracy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>76</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National progress reports for GRALE 2012; Responses to Question 1.2 “Has your country adopted or developed an official definition of literacy?” and Question 1.2.1 “Are other definitions used in practice?”

### Table 1.3
Keywords used in literacy definitions (reading, writing and numeracy combined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reading and writing</th>
<th>Reading, writing and numeracy</th>
<th>Total with combined definitions/total countries reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>19/31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23/40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14/25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>73/129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National progress reports for GRALE 2012; Responses to Question 1.2 “Has your country adopted or developed an official definition of literacy?” and Question 1.2.1 “Are other definitions used in practice?”

14 The total represents the number of countries that reported having an official or working definition of literacy. Each cell should be read as, for instance, “21 out of 31 African countries include reading in their definition.”
Despite their widespread inclusion in different definitions of literacy, keywords such as reading and writing are not necessarily understood in the same way. The understanding of these actions has also evolved over time. In some cases, reading is characterised as the identification of the letters of the alphabet, and in others as the ability to recognise familiar words. This could mean that just the image of the word is familiar enough for a person to grasp its sound or even its meaning without actually reading it. Sometimes this means decoding skills (sounding out a word), sometimes grasping the meaning of a word, and in some cases, even the ability to critically reflect and act on the meaning that has been grasped (Fransman, 2005). While some of these skills are essential for reading (knowing the alphabet or decoding familiar and unfamiliar words), they are not, in themselves, ‘reading’. A similar caveat applies to writing: in the past, several programmes or measurement efforts required individuals to write their names in order to demonstrate that they are proficient in writing. However, this task can be accomplished by ‘drawing’ a familiar shape rather than writing, whereas writing is understood as an activity intended to produce a piece of written text that embodies meaning.

Looking closely at the responses to the question of definitions, 23 countries, most of them in Europe, include attributes of the pedagogical approach to literacy. Though most of the definitions that make reference to language allow for literacy in any language, there are some exceptions that consider a person literate only if able to read, write and speak in a particular language (such as English in the case of the Bahamas). In the People’s Republic of China, given the characteristics of the script, two different standards have been established in the official literacy concept: 1) for rural populations, the ability to identify 1,500 Chinese characters; and 2) for employees of enterprises and institutions, as well as urban residents, the ability to identify 2,000 characters.

Fourteen countries related literacy to skill levels that are equivalent to schooling. For example, the National Education Law of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic identifies literacy as equivalent to grades one and two of formal primary school, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a person is only considered

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**Table 1.4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ICT skills</th>
<th>Life skills</th>
<th>Language skills</th>
<th>Critical thinking</th>
<th>Autonomy/empowerment</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>Arab States</td>
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<td>25</td>
</tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National progress reports for GRALE 2012; Responses to Question 1.2 “Has your country adopted or developed an official definition of literacy?” and Question 1.2.1 “Are other definitions used in practice?”

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15 In this table the total represents the number of countries that reported data. Each cell should be read as, for instance, five out of 31 African countries include language skills in their definition.
literate when having completed primary education. Although acceptable literacy levels can be treated as an equivalent to the intended outcomes of a schooling experience, it is important to consider that the results achieved by schooling can diverge from their intended outcomes. Thus, equating literacy with a certain number of years of schooling may be misleading; there is no guarantee that students acquire the required level of literacy within a certain time frame. Rather, it is dependent on the quality of the provision, languages, literate environments and other factors. 16

In Spain, ‘literacy’ is subsumed under the formula of ‘initial education’, referring to the development of the basic competencies required to access secondary education. Norway has developed a Framework for Basic Skills as a reference point and Malta aligns literacy courses with level one of the European Qualifications Framework.17 In Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, literacy is mainly perceived as an initial level and is subsumed under adult basic education.

The notion of literacy as a gradual or continuous learning process is expressed in definitions from five countries (one quotes UNESCO’s operational definition from 2003), most of them in Latin America and the Caribbean. 18 Ten countries explicitly use the term “lifelong learning” or “lifelong learner” in their literacy concept.19

16 This was demonstrated by the results of the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which tested reading competency levels at grade four: 50 per cent of children in low-income countries perform at or below the level of the lowest five per cent in high-income countries (Crouch, 2012). According to the 2012 EFA Global Monitoring Report, out of around 650 million children of primary school age, as many as 250 million either do not reach grade four or, if they do, fail to attain minimum learning standards (UNESCO, 2012, p.122).

17 The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was agreed upon by European institutions in 2008 with the aim of relating different European countries’ national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework. It enables individuals and employers to better understand and compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems.

18 Bangladesh (UNESCO 2003 operational definition), El Salvador, Guyana, Slovenia and Uruguay

19 Bangladesh, Botswana, Cape Verde, Croatia, Dominican Republic, Mexico, Portugal, Scotland (United Kingdom), South Africa, and Uruguay

Based on the national progress reports, a majority of the official definitions focus on the reading, writing and numeracy skills necessary to perform simple tasks in everyday life. However, in some cases, these basic skills are referred to as “literacy, language and numeracy”, “skills for life” (literacy, numeracy and ICT skills) or “essential skills.” In spite of initiatives to integrate novel dimensions such as ICT skills, very little attention is given in the national progress reports to including the development of critical, creative and independent thinking within the concept of basic or essential skills.

Meanwhile, there are also efforts to review existing terms and to create new ones that acknowledge in more differentiated ways the two aspects of literacy education: the process of teaching and learning, and the outcomes (specific levels of literacy skills) resulting from this process. Conflicting views of literacy often exist as part of a fundamental tension between the breadth, complexity and context of learning processes and the precision required to measure and assess the outcomes of the process. In other words, the way ‘literacy’ is conceptualised has implications for how it is taught and learned, and for how it is measured. The assessment of a population’s literacy skills based on comparable, pre-determined standards has become an important national and international policy concern.

As for the instrumental purpose of literacy training, economic objectives (literacy for employability, for self-employment, for self-reliance, for economic development and growth) prevail. Some countries have developed more integrated approaches, such as family literacy or literacy embedded in vocational training and education. This is most explicit in National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), which have defined specific entry levels of basic literacy and numeracy. The establishment of such frameworks in many countries, which allow for equivalencies between formally and non-formally acquired skills, have helped pave the way for the recognition of literacy as a learning continuum and a foundation of lifelong learning.
None of the official literacy definitions mention the importance of literate environments. If the aim is to develop literate societies as well as individuals, then the quality of the literate environment and its characteristics are just as crucial as literacy training programmes in motivating, developing and sustaining literacy skills. The challenge is to include the features of literate environments in practical interventions and assessments for literacy promotion.20

In sum, the understandings of literacy, as reflected in diverse definitions, have evolved alongside new social and pedagogical theories, as well as technological and other developments characteristic of increasingly complex knowledge-based and globalized societies. While there are a few countries that continue to use UNESCO’s 1958 and 1978 definitions, more and more countries consider literacy as a set of key competencies involving written communication, and the ability to access and critically process information, and to pursue and organize one’s own learning.

When literacy is conceived as a continuum there is no definite line between “literate” and “non-literate”. Rather, literacy becomes a kind of moving target. Therefore, the dichotomy reflected in the widespread use of the terms “illiterates” and “literate” not only creates a conceptual problem, but also has serious policy implications, starting with potentially misleading discourse on the target of “eradicating” illiteracy. Nonetheless, the evolving notion of literacy as a continuum has increased interest in the direct measurement of skills levels in many countries.

1.4 Measuring literacy

The United Nations system and many countries have used UNESCO’s operational definitions21 as a basis for censuses and literacy surveys. At the same time, other conceptions of literacy that go beyond the 1958 and 1978 (official) definitions have also been developed and advanced.

The three UNESCO operational definitions (1958, 1978 and 2003) were primarily developed for measurement purposes: The first two were included in recommendations for education statistics, and the most recent was prepared as a foundation for UNESCO’s Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP). Although the concept of ‘literacy’ has broadened due to a more profound understanding of its complexities, this does not mean that components defined for measurement also have to be broad. In the case of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and LAMP, the broad and multi-dimensional definition of literacy was broken down into three domains: reading, writing22 and numeracy.23 Each can be seen as a continuum of skills that can be further differentiated into sub-dimensions.

In order to monitor the implementation of the Belém Framework for Action, Member States committed themselves to “investing in a process to develop a set of comparable indicators for literacy as a continuum and for adult education” (UIL, 2010, p. 10). A number of challenges stem from these internationally adopted commitments, as they seek to measure literacy both as a continuum and through the use of comparable indicators. The requirement to measure literacy skills levels as a continuum is incompatible with a clear line between ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ individuals.24

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20 Some innovative approaches have already been developed to measure, for example, the “density of the literate environment” as a component of UNESCO’s Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), or “valued practices” by using ethnographic and practice-based approaches (see case studies from Nepal and Mozambique by Maddox and Esposito, 2011; Maddox et al., 2012; Maddox and Esposito, 2013).

21 See Section 1.3.

22 Even if none of these studies measure writing skills.

23 More precisely, these are: prose literacy (reading continuous texts), document literacy (reading non-continuous texts present in forms, graphics, etc.), and numeracy or, in IALS, quantitative literacy (using arithmetical operations on numbers presented in written form).

24 This does not preclude the possibility of defining a threshold in each continuum considered acceptable at one time. This threshold has to be specified in terms of the actual skills and tasks an individual can perform, and can be revisited and redefined according to changing needs and challenges.
Some countries – often in the context of National Qualifications Frameworks – have already established a scale of different levels of literacy and basic skills development. For example, the EU High Level Expert Group on Literacy proposes three levels of literacy\(^\text{25}\) broadly equivalent to PISA\(^\text{26}\) levels 1, 2 and 3:

1) baseline literacy (the ability to read and write at a level that enables self-confidence and motivation for further development);
2) functional literacy (the ability to read and write at a level that enables development and functioning in society at home, school and work); and
3) multiple literacy (the ability to use reading and writing skills in order to produce, understand, interpret and critically evaluate multimodal texts).

The ‘multiple literacy’ level has been identified by the OECD as the minimum threshold that enables people to meet lifelong learning requirements (European Commission, 2012, pp.13 and 103).

When asked how literacy data are obtained, 105 countries indicated that their literacy data (essentially counts of “literates” and “illiterates” and estimated literacy rates) are based on a single question asked in their population census and/or household surveys (Table 1.5). This question is usually phrased in very simple terms: “Can you read and write?”, or a variation of this. It is posed to each individual above a given age, or to a single individual who answers on behalf of the whole household. Data gathered from questions such as these pose problems, as 1) they frame the issue as a dichotomy, 2) they are dependent on what each individual understands as “reading” and “writing”, and 3) they do not reflect the differences in the individuals who report the answers. Several countries have tried to improve the wording by including specific tasks in questions such as, “Can you read a simple message?” or “Can you write down a message for someone else?”. Aside from the fact that these different questions and reporting strategies add to the complexity of compiling data.

### Table 1.5
Methods for obtaining literacy data in countries (a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Population census</th>
<th>Household survey</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Neither of these</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National progress reports for GRALE 2012; Responses to Question 1.3 “How is literacy data obtained in your country?”

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\(^{25}\) The model proposed by the Expert Group actually includes ‘learning to learn’ as a cross-competence, literacy and numeracy at the three levels, and digital competence and communication as enabling and facilitating competences.

\(^{26}\) PISA is the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment. It is important to note that PISA does not measure writing.

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\(^{27}\) In this table, the total represents the number of countries that reported data. Each cell should be read as, for instance, “28 out of 31 African countries produced literacy data through population census” (but not necessarily in this way only).
internationally, the underlying definitions of literacy and measurement modes are not strictly comparable. Most of these literacy statistics rely on information that is self-reported or reported by someone on behalf of an entire household.

While the rationale for using such measurement strategies is well-known (UIS, 2008, p.18), these statistics nonetheless provide limited representations of the literacy situation in each country and ignore developments that have been made in the literacy field over the past decades. Interestingly, several national progress reports28 mentioned that the literacy figures that are currently available are unreliable because of these issues, going on to suggest conducting studies to test actual literacy levels. These studies are, however, more demanding in financial and technical terms. Certainly, running a reliable literacy test would be more expensive than including a simple question in an existing (household) survey.

In presenting data on educational attainment (usually gathered through a household survey), 73 countries simply accept the number of school years attended as an indicator of a given level of skills, though this is quite unreliable (see Table 1.6). By contrast, 47 countries produce their literacy data through some form of skills measurement (testing). In Europe and North America, national governments and the OECD began a series of adult literacy surveys based on direct testing in the 1990s. Currently, 24 OECD countries are participating in the first cycle of a new Programme for the International Assessment of Adults Competencies (PIAAC), which will release its results in October 2013. Sixteen countries mention participation in PIAAC in their national progress reports.

Table 1.6
Methods for obtaining literacy data in countries (b)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Educational attainment</th>
<th>Testing</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National progress reports for GRALE 2012; Responses to Question 1.3 “How is literacy data obtained in your country?”

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28 For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, the Gambia, Ghana, Jamaica, Kenya, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malawi, Mexico, Mongolia, Namibia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Serbia, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Uruguay and Zambia.
In addition, a considerable number of African, Arab, Asian and Latin American countries report the use of direct testing approaches to generate literacy data. UNESCO’s Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), initiated in 2003, may have had an influence on this trend. Skills-testing is both technically and financially demanding. Furthermore, it is difficult to judge the reliability of data as detailed information on the methodologies used is often unavailable. In other cases, test results are compromised by evidence of serious methodological flaws. For instance, one national literacy survey with a composite score on literacy used information on reading, writing, arithmetic and general knowledge, but the general knowledge section had no relationship with literacy skills (Guadalupe and Cardoso, 2011, p. 205).

National progress reports indicate a diversity of approaches to generating literacy data. Examples include the following:29

- **General household surveys**
  With its 2009 General Household Survey and the 2011 National Census, South Africa began to obtain a more nuanced view of literacy. Respondents who had finished schooling before grade seven were asked to state their level of competence in various tasks, ranging from writing one’s name to completing a form (McKay, 2012). Meanwhile, in countries such as Brazil, Cambodia and Indonesia, national household survey data have been used to map and identify municipalities and provinces with the highest levels of poverty, and those that are most likely to face major literacy challenges. These provinces were then targeted for literacy interventions.

- **National literacy surveys**
  Botswana has included a test in its National Literacy Surveys, which are conducted every ten years since 1993 to systematically monitor the evolution of literacy in the country (Hanemann, 2005). The Lao People’s Democratic Republic implemented a National Literacy Survey in 2001, which showed that, while the reported literacy rate of the population aged 15–59 was 72 per cent, only 45 per cent of the population was found to perform at an acceptable level (UNESCO, 2006). Since 1989, Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Surveys (FLEMMS) have been conducted in the Philippines to provide information on basic and functional literacy status and exposure to mass media. The 2008 FLEMMS was conducted in coordination with the Literacy Coordinating Council and the Department of Education, and consisted of a self-administered questionnaire which was completed by 69,482 individuals aged 10–64 years in 25,505 households sampled for the survey. The fifth in a series of FLEMMS is currently under preparation.30

- **Test-based literacy surveys**
  Bangladesh has listed a number of test-based literacy surveys conducted in the period from 2002 to 2010, including a survey called Education Watch, conducted by a civil society umbrella organisation (Campaign for Popular Education) in 2002, and another one by an experienced NGO in cooperation with UNESCO Dhaka in 2005. The Bureau of Statistics also conducted a “Literacy Assessment Survey” in 2008. In 2007, as part of the Education Watch Initiative, the Coalition for Education Solomon Islands and the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE) conducted a standardised test to assess literacy

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29 This list is not based on a detailed appraisal of each experience reported under the open section of question 1.3, which asked countries for any other methodology (next to the categories mentioned in Tables 1.5 and 1.6) used for obtaining literacy data.

30 In this survey, “a functionally literate person is one who can read, write and compute or one who can read, write and comprehend. Persons who completed high school or a higher level of education are also considered functionally literate” (http://www.census.gov.ph/content/almost-nine-out-ten-filipinos-are-functionally-literate-final-results-2008-functional)
levels, which indicated a crisis in literacy, in school quality and in youth engagement in learning (ASPBAE, 2007). A similar Education Experience Survey and Literacy Assessment was conducted by ASPBAE in collaboration with the Papua New Guinea Education Advocacy Network (PEAN) in five provinces in Papua New Guinea from 2009 to 2011, indicating a comparable literacy situation (ASPBAE, 2011).

- **Test-based large-scale government literacy surveys**
  Direct testing was carried out in Germany in 2010 and was published as the Level One Study in early 2011. A random sample of 7,035 adults aged 18–64, and an additional random sample of 1,401 adults with low literacy skills were tested. The results showed that a total of 7.5 million adults, which is around 14 per cent of the economically active population, possess very poor literacy skills. A new round of the Level One Study is planned to take place in connection with the PIAAC. In England (United Kingdom), there have been large-scale government surveys in 2003 and 2010–11 to identify the levels of literacy, numeracy and information technology of adults (ages 16–65). A test was administered to respondents face-to-face using a computer programme. In 2007, the French Agence nationale de lutte contre l’illetrisme (ANLCI) began a series of regional surveys ("information et vie quotidienne" – IVQ), which was expected to be concluded in 2012 in France. Following an agreement signed in 2010 between ANLCI and the Headquarters of the Military Service, ANLCI has developed an adapted testing tool for the military, which will also be used in Vocational Training Centres.

- **Online self-assessment**
  Canada and New Zealand have made online tools available to motivate citizens to test their skills levels and, if required, to enrol in related programmes. UNESCO’s LAMP programme has been fully implemented in Jordan, Mongolia, Palestine and Paraguay. Other countries (El Salvador, Morocco, Niger, and Viet Nam) completed the field trial but further implementation was deferred for political and/or financial reasons. Afghanistan, Jamaica, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Namibia are currently implementing LAMP.

A few countries reported having national data collection systems (e.g., Cape Verde) and National Adult Literacy Management Information Systems (e.g., Uganda), though these are more concerned with data storage than data generation. Other countries mention national surveys on specific topics, such as demographic and health surveys (the Dominican Republic, Sierra Leone), surveys on economically active populations (Spain, Switzerland) that include literacy, or local-level censuses in districts with high illiteracy rates (Indonesia). By and large, the literacy questions included in these surveys mirror conventional census questions, such as “Are you literate? Yes or no.” UNICEF is assisting a number of countries in implementing Multi-indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), which follow a similar approach. In Serbia, for example, an MICS study conducted in 2010, included a literacy test. This study will be implemented every three years from 2012. Morocco carried out a national survey on ‘illiteracy’ and non-schooling in 2006, and plans to conduct follow-up surveys.

It is worth noting that several countries used multiple methods to produce literacy data, including population censuses and household surveys. However, when various methods are used at different times, this creates challenges with regard to the comparability of the data. On the other hand, a number of countries reported that they rely on one method (i.e. household survey, educational attainment or testing) as the sole source of literacy data.

Asked whether they have changed literacy data collection methods since 2006 (the UNLD mid-term review), 38 countries (32%) reported changes, while a majority of 81 (68%) did not. Those that had changed their methods were requested to select the options that best describe the changes.
The results are shown in Table 1.7. Twenty-four countries reported that their changes involve a new assessment of youth and/or adult literacy skills, and 20 countries indicated making changes, due to new definitions, for policy or for data collection only. Eight countries experienced an increase in the frequency of producing literacy data without significant conceptual changes.

A few countries gave very specific reasons for the changes in their data collection:

- Better coordination between the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Central Bureau of Statistics in Indonesia, supported by a Memorandum of Understanding.
- Implementation of the new National Literacy Policy starting in 2012 in Solomon Islands, incorporating some of the changes recommended by the ASPBAE Education Experience Survey.
- In 2007, the Tertiary Education Commission developed a Literacy and Numeracy Assessment Tool[^31] for adults in New Zealand. This is a predominantly online, adaptive, diagnostic assessment tool that helps learners to assess their literacy and numeracy competencies within the established Learning Progressions Framework.
- The Level One Study conducted in 2010 in Germany has involved a methodological change, from a case study to a sample-based survey.
- With the PIAAC, new elements have been introduced into direct testing of literacy skills, such as problem-solving in a technology-rich environment, using ICT skills, and questions on the skills requirements of the respondent’s current/last job.

[^31]: [http://www.literacyandnumeracyforadults.com/resources/356174](http://www.literacyandnumeracyforadults.com/resources/356174)

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### Table 1.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>New conceptual literacy definition in place for policy</th>
<th>New conceptual literacy definition in place for data collection only</th>
<th>New assessment of youth and/or adults’ literacy skills</th>
<th>Increase in frequency of collection without significant conceptual changes</th>
<th>Other changes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab States</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia and the Pacific</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe and North America</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National progress reports for GRALE 2012; Responses to Question 1.4 “Has your country changed literacy data collection methods since the UNLD mid-term review in 2006?”
In 2007, the Scottish government signed an agreement with local governments to report on a Single Outcome Agreement within a National Performance Framework. In 2009, they conducted a survey-based literacy assessment.

Given the above, it is significant to note that almost three out of four responding countries (88 of 118 countries) indicated that they face challenges in collecting literacy data. Among the challenges listed, the most prominent reported were the following:

- Access-related and logistical challenges (literacy interventions in remote areas); lack of political will; lack of resources; lack of capacity and personnel turnover; lack of clear and standardised data collection instruments; problems with adapting the instruments to local languages; and lack of competent data collectors on the ground (e.g., Afghanistan, Barbados, Belize, Bhutan, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Greece, Honduras, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Lesotho, Paraguay, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Scotland [United Kingdom], Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Suriname, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe).

- Lack of security; unstable accommodation of population; migration of labour force (e.g., Afghanistan, Cambodia, China, Jordan, Montenegro, Palestine, Romania, Serbia); certain population groups’ (e.g., women, elderly people) reluctance to take a literacy test or failure to report their true level of literacy (e.g., Bangladesh, Chile, Uruguay).

- Uncoordinated and parallel data collections, no integration within the literacy sub-sector and no sector-wide integration: Adult literacy data are not included in existing Education Management Information Systems and/or non-governmental (private) providers of adult learning programmes are reluctant to report data to the ministry (e.g., Egypt, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Spain).

- Lack of credibility of literacy rates given the way they are produced (self-reported, educational attainment levels, etc.) and no nationally agreed assessment of literacy skills in place (no direct testing) to provide a reliable picture of the actual distribution of skills in the country (e.g., Mauritius, Mongolia, Tunisia).

- Inability to generate reliable data on the current literacy rate on a regular basis (e.g., Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guyana, Jamaica, Latvia, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Poland, Slovenia, Trinidad and Tobago).

- There is no literacy definition in place that can guide the collection of literacy data (e.g., Nauru), and definitions that are not based on research may not apply because who is or is not literate is dependent on context and time (e.g., Netherlands, Philippines).

- More specific challenges with the conduct of the 2003 survey (literacy and numeracy tests) in England (United Kingdom) include: the scope of the research in terms of age, the linkage between numeracy and literacy and the difficulty of assessing particular skills such as writing and listening.

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32 Only 25 per cent (30 countries) reported not facing challenges.

33 The 2011 report was not yet published at the time this country report was delivered to UIL. However, data (headline findings) were already made available in the form of a research paper in December 2011.
The Republic of Korea presents a contrasting view, and has expressed confidence that their already high literacy rate (98.3%), which is based on a survey by the National Institute of the Korean Language, makes collecting literacy data “a relatively less important issue”. Nevertheless, some independent researchers are particularly concerned about the neglect of broader life skills, such as debate and discussion, creative writing, creative problem solving, hands-on learning and independent study. They suggest that an exclusive focus on a few skills or key competencies in the curricula, and teaching and learning strategies that concentrate too much on preparing learners to pass tests, can also become a problem (e.g., Jambor, 2010).

Difficult decisions need to be made about what kind of literacy is worth assessing, and for what purposes, particularly in developing countries. What this means, in practice, is that governments must decide where to invest the limited resources allocated for literacy. However, here a dilemma emerges: funds spent producing reliable data are taken away from programme delivery; yet, effective programme delivery requires reliable data. The national progress reports imply that governments should revise their policies on literacy measurement and allocate the required resources, not only financial but also professional, to run reliable literacy measurement and testing initiatives.

In response to the challenge of producing comparable statistical literacy data, large cross-country surveys have been developed. Many are based on the IALS model initiated by the OECD in the 1990s, such as PIAAC (among industrialised countries) and LAMP. Several OECD countries mentioned in their progress reports that they are participating in the new PIAAC programme and are expecting their first results in 2013. UNESCO’s LAMP programme has tried to adapt to a variety of contexts, languages and scripts. It pays particular attention to potential ethnocentric biases and to more culturally, linguistically and context-sensitive ways of measuring literacy levels in non-OECD countries.

Comparability is a major concern, but validity is another. For instance, LAMP recognises that several reading components are specific to language and script and cannot be compared in a meaningful way. LAMP has been open to learning from other approaches, such as ethnographic studies carried out in field tests in El Salvador, Mongolia and Paraguay. However, the challenge remains of balancing international, national and local needs, as well as feasibility and affordability, for general use of these direct assessment models.

It is difficult to establish an international standard for a minimum literacy threshold to be reached by all countries in any context and at any time in order to fulfil the requirement of comparability. The contexts are simply too diverse. Globally comparable indicators need to be very general, adaptable to specific situations, and based on a broad consensus. Moreover, the production of global and comparable data requires more professional expertise, time and funding than merely compiling literacy rates. It also entails many epistemological, institutional, and political challenges. An attempt to align a national skills framework to the OECD Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALLS) survey to measure adult literacy and numeracy has been undertaken in Australia (see Box 1.1). However, this has also raised questions about the appropriateness of using international indicators to monitor progress against national objectives and about the need to do so in a more contextualised and nuanced manner.

There are considerable difficulties in standardising literacy levels, instruments and survey procedures across countries, and in establishing best practices for all components of such a survey. Related concerns were already formulated by the methodological review of the first round of IALS (National Centre for Educational Statistics, 1997: Appendix A, pp.14–15).

Another issue is the importance of differentiating “reading” and “reading components” (knowledge of a script, knowledge of a script, knowledge of a script).
Research conducted by a team from the Work-based Education Centre at Victoria University in Australia has shown that alignment between the frameworks of the international OECD Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALLS) survey and the national Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) is achievable. Furthermore, this alignment offers the potential for measuring progress compared to national objectives more regularly. The ACSF offers a way of monitoring any improvements in adult literacy and numeracy in a more nuanced manner than the ALLS. The principal flaws of the ALLS are: a) It is designed to provide a summary of literacy and numeracy skills rather than to act as an assessment tool; and b) it is only administered every ten years. By contrast, the ACSF can be applied at an individual level and provides evidence of progress. In addition, data about a learner’s performance in core skills can be gathered at frequent intervals.

In their conclusions, the authors raise a more fundamental issue by asking if the stipulation of skills levels, as measured by the ALLS or PIAAC surveys, is the most appropriate indicator of the work being done in Australia to help people develop their literacy and numeracy skills. While acknowledging the relevance of indicators used by the ALLS and the PIAAC surveys in the international context in providing a comparable measure of Australia’s position against other OECD countries, the research team emphasises the need to also use national indicators, such as those developed by the ACSF, that have greater contextual meaning, and to allow for more detailed and regular monitoring of progress against national objectives.

Box 1.1
Aligning international frameworks with a national framework to measure adult literacy and numeracy: an example from Australia

Research conducted by a team from the Work-based Education Centre at Victoria University in Australia has shown that alignment between the frameworks of the international OECD Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALLS) survey and the national Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) is achievable. Furthermore, this alignment offers the potential for measuring progress compared to national objectives more regularly. The ACSF offers a way of monitoring any improvements in adult literacy and numeracy in a more nuanced manner than the ALLS. The principal flaws of the ALLS are: a) It is designed to provide a summary of literacy and numeracy skills rather than to act as an assessment tool; and b) it is only administered every ten years. By contrast, the ACSF can be applied at an individual level and provides evidence of progress. In addition, data about a learner’s performance in core skills can be gathered at frequent intervals.

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Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2012

decoding skills, fluency and automaticity), which are pre-requisites for reading. Information on reading components is crucial to inform interventions.

Overall, the responses of the reporting countries indicate that most of the data collection is still based on the traditional dichotomous approach in determining literacy and illiteracy rates. The vast majority of these rates consist of estimates based on national censuses, household surveys and educational attainment data. They combine several approaches to questioning (self-reported or reported by someone else in the household), yielding information of limited reliability. However, this method of measuring literacy ignores substantive conceptual developments over the past 50 years, in particular the understanding of literacy as a continuum.

Many countries who consider the currently available literacy figures to be unreliable because of the above-mentioned issues suggest conducting studies to test actual literacy levels. However, they also recognise that undertaking such studies would require more resources than are currently allocated. This is particularly challenging in low-income countries. While this raises questions about the cost-effectiveness of literacy interventions, especially when there is a lack of meaningful literacy data, many national governments are establishing policies to increase resource allocation and to improve their literacy data.

More qualitative approaches, such as participatory and ethnographic identification and measurement of valued literacy practices of individuals, can serve as a complement to large, standardised cross-country surveys. In addition to literacy practices, data may also be generated on literate environments using a set of observable variables. In addition to measuring the level at which an individual is able to perform different tasks that involve the use of written materials, it is important also to measure the impact that different literacy programmes or interventions can have on learners’ lives. This kind of information should include longitudinal studies and consider different domains, helping policy-makers to make decisions on investment in literacy provision.
1.5 Conclusion

The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) marked an important milestone by stressing the importance of literacy as an indispensable foundation for independent learning at all stages of the learning continuum. Member States committed themselves to 1) ensuring that all surveys and data collection recognise literacy as a continuum, and 2) investing in a process to develop comparable indicators for literacy. Yet this commitment is posing almost insurmountable challenges to the task of understanding and measuring literacy in different and internationally comparable ways.

There is still no common understanding of how to approach literacy as a continuum and a lifelong learning process. Some countries use elements of UNESCO’s operational definition from 2003. Others have begun discussing how to align their approach with the lifelong learning paradigm and the need to establish a standardised, level-based system that is able to provide reliable and comparable data. In the meantime there is a growing number of practices that treat literacy as a lifelong learning process. Integrated approaches such as intergenerational learning, family literacy and literacy embedded in technical and vocational education and training, as well as mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of all forms of learning, position literacy within lifelong learning. National and regional qualifications frameworks with different skills and qualifications levels that allow for equivalencies between formally and non-formally acquired skills have helped pave the way for the recognition of literacy as a learning continuum and a foundation of lifelong learning.

The challenge of generating reliable, credible and comparable literacy data at the international level also complicates the task of assessing and analysing the progress of countries in relation to EFA Goal 4.

The EFA Global Monitoring Report “Literacy for Life” (UNESCO, 2005) signified differences in literacy results based on indirect and direct assessments. Recent small-scale studies conducted by ASPBAE in the Pacific show that only one-third of respondents who declare themselves to be “literate” were able to pass a relatively simple literacy test. In short, the analysis of national progress based on literacy data expressed in numbers and rates (including what has been explained in this chapter) raises concerns about validity and reliability, meaning that such data can only have referential value.

For the moment, most countries continue to use the traditional methods mentioned above (population censuses, household surveys, and educational attainment) to estimate literacy rates, which are still based on the dichotomous approach of classifying a person as either literate or illiterate. However, there are increasing efforts at local, national and international levels to conduct specific literacy surveys that involve the direct measurement (testing) of literacy skills. Even if the quality of the data produced is not always known, more and more countries have engaged in discussions and initiatives that advance the concept of literacy as a continuum and improve the quality of literacy provision and data.

In sum, there is little indication of major changes since 2009 with regard to literacy definitions and how countries produce literacy data. This does not mean that there is a lack of awareness of existing limitations, contradictions and problems. There are many years of experience and interesting innovative initiatives to build upon. Examples from different countries show that conceptual shifts and pragmatic approaches, which are cost-effective and help to set strategic priorities, are possible.

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36 The evidence that the UNESCO Institute for Statistics compiles and publishes, which is based on Member States’ submissions, is not commensurate with what experts, practitioners and stakeholders think about literacy.

37 For example: In Shefa Province (ASPBAE, 2011a), five provinces in Papua New Guinea (ASPBAE, 2011) and Solomon Islands (ASPBAE, 2007).
Key messages:

- Substantial progress has been made towards meeting Education for All Goal 4 (50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults), but many disadvantaged individuals and groups are still left behind.

- Literacy is a continuum, not a dichotomy. Learning and using literacy skills is a continuous, context-bound process that takes place both within and outside explicitly educational settings and throughout life. This understanding implies concerted development of cross-sectoral policy.

- Literacy policy must focus on raising and developing basic skills as a whole and include creating rich literate environments and learning societies. The lens of lifelong and life-wide learning is the most promising perspective for addressing the literacy challenge.

- Literacy rates are largely based on simplistic and unreliable data and methods. Direct testing is gaining momentum, but is complex and expensive. To move forward, a dual approach is needed: developing culturally appropriate measurement tools and methods, and improving the quality of conventional, cost-effective self-reporting surveys.

- The generation and exchange of reliable and comparable research is indispensable for informed policymaking at all levels, including the international level. Consensus-building in the community of Member States to identify policy-relevant research needs and demands would bring benefits for all. It would be appropriate for UNESCO to moderate this process.
Bibliography


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