

International Literacy Day 2021

Literacy for a human centred recovery: Narrowing the digital divide

Fact sheet

State of literacy: A snapshot before the COVID-19 pandemic

Youth and adult literacy

- The global adult literacy rate (aged 15 years and older) was 86 per cent in 2019, which has remained almost unchanged since 2015. Since 2015, the number of non-literate youth and adults had decreased by over 10 million to 773 million in 2019¹.
- The global youth literacy rate (aged 15-24 years) was 92 per cent in 2019, equivalent to 100 million youth lacking basic literacy skills. Youth literacy rates are generally higher than adult literacy rates, reflecting increased access to schooling for younger generations.
- Mirroring patterns of socio-economic inequalities, population growth, and development, literacy's progress has been uneven across different regions, countries and populations. Nearly one-half of the world's non-literate adults (47 per cent) reside in South and West Asia, while 27 per cent are in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Youth literacy rates were lower than the global youth literacy rate in low-income countries (73 per cent), in countries with fragile and conflict-affected situation (73 per cent) and in sub-Saharan Africa (76 per cent) in 2019.
- Gender gaps persist, with 63 per cent of non-literate adults being women in 2018, this proportion has not changed much since 2000 (64 per cent). The literacy rates for females were low in low-income countries (54 per cent) and in fragile and conflict-affected countries (56 per cent). Gender gaps in younger generation have shrunk in all regions over the past 26 years except for Central Asia and Europe and North America in which gender gap in youth literacy has not been a serious matter.
- An average of 18.9 per cent of adults in OECD countries had low literacy skills (Level 1 or below on the six-level scale) and around one in four adults (23.5 per cent) had low numeracy skills (Level 1 or below)².
- The literacy rate is expected to improve steadily to reach 94 per cent by 2030 for youth and 90 per

¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) database, and United Nations (2020) [Literacy for life, work, lifelong learning and education for democracy](#): Report of the Secretary-General (A/75/188). New York: UN.

² OECD (2019) [Skills Matter: Additional Results from the Survey of Adult Skills](#). Paris: OECD

cent for adults. In low-income countries, less than 70 per cent of adults and slightly more than 80 per cent of youth aged 15 to 24 years are projected to have basic literacy skills by 2030³.

- Increasingly, a higher level of literacy skill is demanded as societies undergo the fourth industrial revolution (Industry 4.0) and become more knowledge oriented. Artificial intelligence (AI), for instance, might impact on skill demands in employment requiring literacy and numeracy skills.⁴ This gives a new perspective to literacy efforts, while promoting ‘basic functional literacy skills for all’ remains a priority.
- Even before the pandemic, nearly 60 per cent of governments spent less than 4 per cent of their national education budget on adult literacy and education⁵.

Children and adolescents

- An estimated 258 million children, adolescents, and youth (about aged 6 – 17 years) were out of school in 2018, representing one-sixth of the global population of this age group.⁶
- Globally, more than 617 million children and adolescents did not achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics (more than 387 million children of primary school age and 230 million adolescents of lower secondary school age). If the current trend persists, more than one-half (56 per cent) of all children will leave primary school without minimum proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy, and the figure for adolescents could reach 61 per cent. More than four out of five children and adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa (88 per cent) and in Central and Southern Asia (81 per cent) will have the same issue⁷.

Literacy and language

- The promotion of literacy should be looked at from a perspective of multilingualism. Several international and regional languages have expanded as *lingua franca*, while the survival of numerous minority and indigenous languages is in danger. Some 40 per cent of the global population does not access education in a language they understand and use daily⁸.
- The five sub-Saharan African countries with the world’s lowest adult literacy rates are linguistically diverse⁹.

³ UIS and Global Monitoring Report (2020) [Meeting Commitments: Are countries on track to achieve SDG4?](#)

⁴ OECD (2017) [OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2017](#). Paris: OECD.

⁵ UIL (2019) [Fourth global report on adult learning and education: Leave no one behind – participation, equity and inclusion](#). Hamburg: UIL.

⁶ UIS (2019) [New Methodology shows that 258 million children, adolescents, and youth are out of school](#): Fact Sheet no.56. Montreal: UIS.

⁷ UIS (2017) [More than One-Half of Children and Adolescents Are Not Learning Worldwide](#). Fact Sheet No.46. Montreal: UIS.

⁸ UNESCO (2016) [40 per cent don’t access education in a language they understand](#). Paris: Global Monitoring Report

⁹ UNESCO (2020). [Global education monitoring report, 2020: Inclusion and education: all means all](#). Paris: UNESCO.

Literacy in the context of the COVID-19 crisis

Impact of COVID-19 on education

- The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious negative impact on quality of education in general and developing literacy skills specifically. At the beginning of the pandemic, schools were closed in more than 190 countries, affecting the education of 90 per cent of the world's student population of 1.57 billion.
- An average child had lost 54 per cent of a year's contact time by November 2020. This can be equal to over a year of learning lost when we consider the loss of previous knowledge¹⁰.
- Overall, about 40 per cent of low- and lower-middle-income countries have not supported learners at risk of exclusion during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as those living in remote areas, the poor, linguistic minorities and learners with disabilities¹¹.
- Responses to the COVID-19 school closures included [remote learning solutions](#) ranging from distributing paper-based take home materials to providing lessons through broadcast media (such as TV and radio) and digital platforms. Radio was the most widely used media among low-income countries (92 per cent) while being used much less in high-income countries (25 per cent).
- 826 million students (50 per cent) kept out of classrooms by the pandemic do not have access to a computer at home, according to a recent study by the [UNESCO Institute of Statistics](#) (UIS) and the [Teacher Task Force](#)¹². Such contexts challenge the total shift towards digital and online learning for many children and youth.
- Across pre-primary, primary and secondary levels, 49 per cent of countries increased their expenditure in education to support schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 60 per cent of countries in each income group were expected to raise their education budgets in 2021 as compared to the levels in 2020. Recalling the two-year time lag between the 2008 financial crisis and the resulting education budget cuts, it will be critical to sustain this investment in education in the coming years, with a particular focus on the vulnerable and marginalized learners¹³.
- Due to the COVID-19 crisis, the annual funding gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG4 risks increasing from US\$148 billion to US\$ 200 billion annually¹⁴.

Youth and adult literacy in times of COVID-19

- Many non-literate youth and adults have been disproportionately hit harder by educational, social and economic impacts of the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, many countries did not explicitly include adult literacy programmes in their education response plans. The majority of existing adult literacy programmes were suspended, with just a few courses continuing virtually, through TV and radio, or in open air, where possible¹⁵.

¹⁰ UIS (2021) [Pandemic-related disruptions to schooling and impact on learning proficiency indicators: A focus on the early grades](#). Montreal: UIS. The UIS adopted 'forgetting ratio of 2.0' for its model in light of the loss of skills acquired by learners even before the interruption. In this model, for every month of contact time lost, two months of learning are assumed to have been lost.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² UNESCO (2020). [Learning through radio and television in the time of COVID-19](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹³ UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank, and OECD (2021). [What's Next: Lessons on Education Recovery: Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education amid the COVID-19 Pandemic](#). Paris. New York and Washington, D.C.: UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank, and OECD.

¹⁴ Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) [Act now: Reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG4](#). In support of the COVID-19 Global Education Coalition launched by UNESCO. Policy paper 42. Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁵ UNESCO. 2020. [International Literacy Day: background paper on 'youth and adult literacy in the time of COVID-19: impacts and revelations'](#). Paris: UNESCO. & UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2020) [Open and distance learning to support youth and adult learning. UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response](#): Education Sector Issue note n.2.5. Paris: UNESCO.

- Youth and adult literacy educators, whose working conditions prior to the pandemic were already fragile and poor, have encountered more challenges. Those challenges include worsened working conditions, technologically poor infrastructure, lack of accessible, free, distance and digital learning materials, and inadequate digital skills and training opportunities. In some cases, educators' salaries were only partially paid, while in others, they were fully suspended¹⁶.
- Minority language speakers' risk being left behind in COVID-19 education responses as emergency education provision tend to be provided only in major national or international languages¹⁷.
- For the 29 member countries of the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning (20 countries with an adult literacy rate below 50 per cent and the E-9 countries) to achieve SDG Target 4.6 on youth and adult literacy by 2030, a funding gap is estimated to be US\$ 17 billion. US\$ 12 billion is needed by the 20 countries alone. It is assumed that the funding gap would be smaller in the E-9 countries, if they allocate at least 3 per cent of national education budgets to youth and adult literacy¹⁸.

¹⁶ UNESCO (2020) [Youth and adult literacy educators: Status, challenges, and opportunities towards professionalization](#). Concept note for the webinar organized on the occasion of the World Teachers' Day 2020 'Teachers: Leading in Crisis: Reimagining the future'. Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁷ UNESCO. 2021. [Minority language speakers' risk being left behind in COVID-19 education response](#). Paris: UNESCO.

¹⁸ UIL (2020) [Global Alliance for Literacy within the Framework of Lifelong Learning \(GAL\): Report of the General Meeting on 28 and 29 October 2020](#). Hamburg: UIL.
