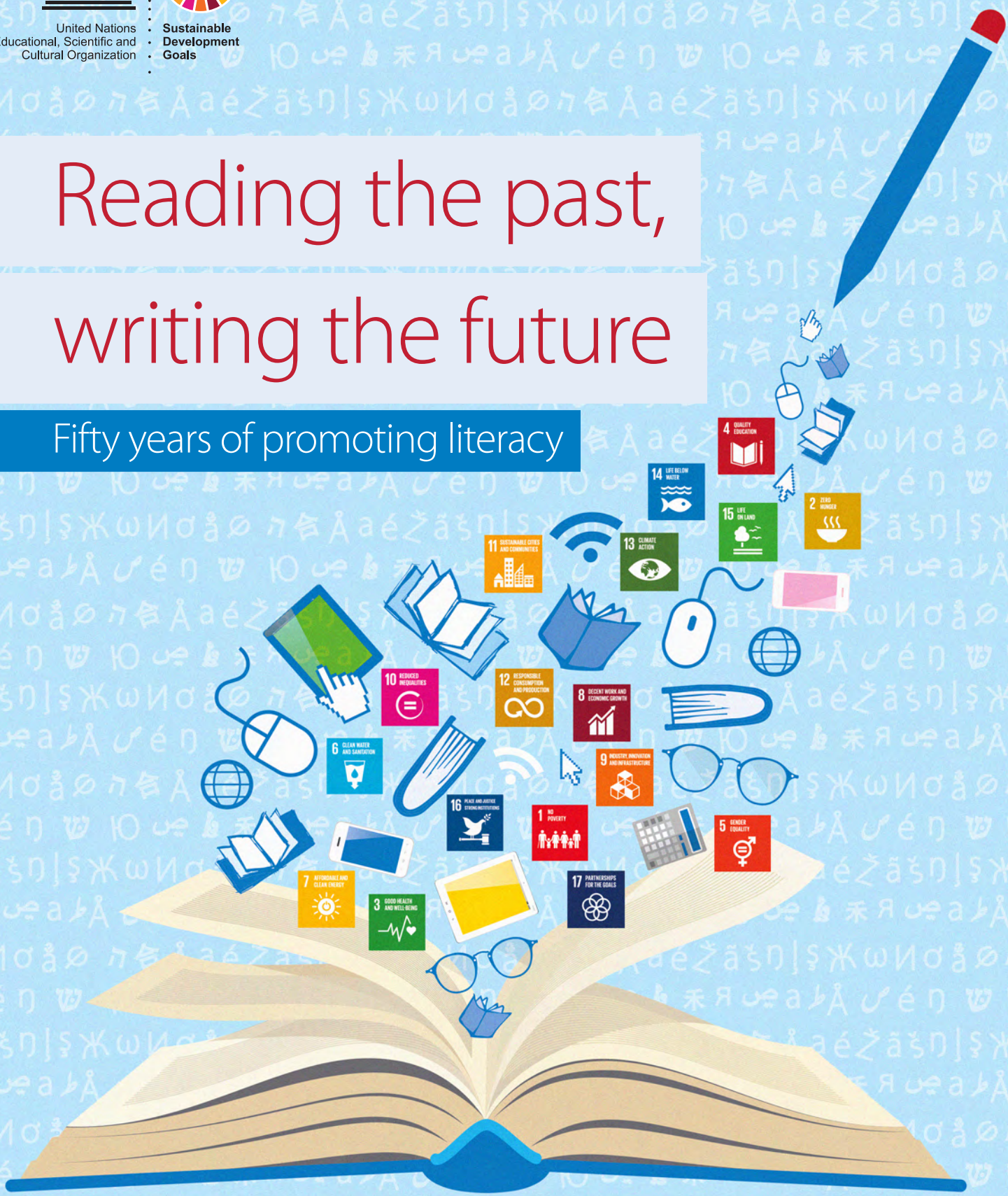
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Sustainable Development Goals

Reading the past, writing the future

Fifty years of promoting literacy



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United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education
Sector

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Reading the past, writing the future

Fifty years of promoting literacy

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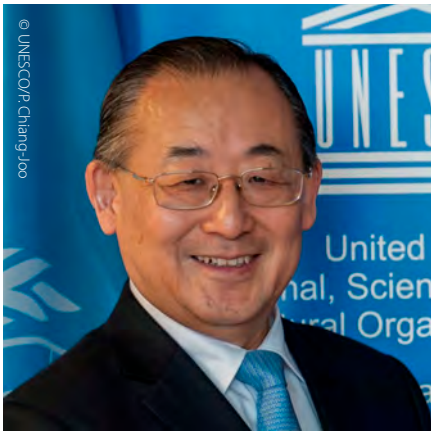
Foreword

For half a century, UNESCO has marked progress in literacy through the International Literacy Day, celebrated annually on 8 September.



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Every year since 1966, it has been an occasion to honour those governments, civil society organizations and individuals who made significant contributions to literacy in every part of the world. It has also given the opportunity to remind countries and the international community of the remaining challenge of the many millions who still lack access to the benefits of literacy.

Therefore, the fiftieth anniversary is both uplifting and sobering. As this review shows, progress in literacy – particularly among youth – is positive and encouraging. However, the review also highlights that the wider adult population has not benefited to the same extent in some regions. It is a troubling fact that there are now more adults without literacy compared with fifty years ago, meaning that our efforts have not kept pace with population growth.

This review traces the conceptual history of literacy: our understanding has grown and changed, and we are now in a better position to face the remaining challenges as long as we learn the lessons of the past. The voices of learners and others involved in literacy programmes illustrate the direct impact on their lives in meeting personal and community needs.

The international community has started on the journey towards 2030 and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education is covered by SDG 4: 'Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning', and is key to the achievement of the other goals. Inclusion is a key aspect of the SDG agenda, with the pledge that 'no one will be left behind'. This focus on equity in education and lifelong learning must lead to a renewed and strengthened commitment to support literacy promotion for all, including the 758 million youth and adults currently excluded from the networks of written communication.

Cooperation is more necessary than ever. As governments express and maintain political will they alone cannot respond to the literacy needs of diverse population groups, even with budgets to match. Accordingly, working with civil society, community-based organizations and the private sector as well as across ministries and departments is critical to providing appropriate literacy learning opportunities. These national efforts may also require external financial support, for which the international community has a responsibility.

The 'Global Alliance for Literacy within the Lifelong Learning Framework' launched by UNESCO on the occasion of ILD 2016 will help catalyze collaboration between countries and partners, within and beyond the education sector.

With over seventy years of experience since its creation, UNESCO will maintain its commitment to its unique mandate to promote literacy as part of the right to education, and will engage with governments and partners to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to acquire and use literacy in ways that are relevant to pursuing their goals and aspirations. This review is a further stimulus to reflect on the most appropriate strategies in this respect.

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Table of contents

List of figures and tables 6

Executive summary 7

I. Introduction 11

Sources and structure of the review 13
Defining literacy 14
Methods of assessing literacy progress 16

II. Reading the past: fifty years of progress 19

Spread of literacy since the mid-twentieth century 21
Uneven progress across decades and countries 23
Strong progress in fifty countries over the past fifteen years 28
Trends over fifty years 34

III. Sustained vision, changing approaches 37

The thread of changing conceptions 38
Literacy as a stand-alone skill 39
Functional literacy 48
Literacy for empowerment 56
Literacy as social practice 59

IV. Lessons and implications 65

V. Evolving context of literacy 69

SDG agenda 70
Lifelong learning: expanding the literacy vision 73
The digital society 74

VI. Concluding comments 77

VII. References and sources 81

Acronyms 90
Endnotes 91

List of figures and tables

Figures

Figure 1: The adult literacy rate has progressed at a constant pace since 1950 **21**
Figure 2: Most illiterate persons now live in Southern Asia or sub-Saharan Africa **21**
Figure 3: Youth literacy rates are higher than 90 per cent in most regions **22**
Figure 4: Progress towards gender parity in literacy started after 1990 **23**
Figure 5: Literacy has rapidly spread in several regions in the last twenty-five years **26**
Figure 6: The fifty countries are at very different stages of the transition towards universal adult literacy **29**
Figure 7: Five decades of data illustrate the diversity of pathways towards universal adult literacy **32**
Figure 8: The spread of literacy among women has been key to the success of the fifty countries **33**
Figure 9: Some of the fifty countries have reached universal youth literacy, others are progressing fast **34**

Tables

Table 1: Around 1950, adult literacy rates were low at the world level and extremely uneven across regions **24**
Table 2: Progress in literacy was slow in the 1950s and 1960s, and the number of illiterate adults increased **25**
Table 3: The majority of countries had reached adult literacy rates above 90 per cent in 2015 **27**
Table 4: Since 1990, the number of illiterate adults has declined, except in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania **28**
Table 5: Fifty countries across the world made remarkable progress in adult literacy between 2000 and 2015 **30**
Table 6: The fifty countries are progressing rapidly towards gender parity in youth literacy **33**
Table 7: Literacy is central to the SDG agenda **72**

Executive summary

The present publication takes stock of literacy initiatives world-wide over the last five decades and analyses how literacy campaigns, programmes and policies have changed to reflect the evolutions in our conceptual understanding of literacy.

Fifty countries have been selected in this review based on those that achieved strong progress during the Education for All (EFA) period between 2000 and 2015. These countries serve as a symbol of global progress and wider literacy efforts, although many challenges remain. The fifty selected countries are as follows, listed by region:

- **Latin America and the Caribbean**: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Peru, Plurinational State of Bolivia;
- **Northern Africa**: Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia;
- **Oceania**: Vanuatu;
- **South-Eastern Asia**: Lao People's Democratic Republic, Timor-Leste;
- **Southern Asia**: Bangladesh, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal, Pakistan;
- **Sub-Saharan Africa**: Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia;
- **Western Asia**: Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Yemen.

In each of the fifty countries, a literacy programme – often linked with policies and plans of the governments – has been highlighted as one example among many to demonstrate both the societal and personal benefits of literacy. Throughout this review, the voices of learners and other persons engaged in literacy programmes reflect the ways in which literacy has affected their lives, families and communities. The range of programmes illustrates the breadth of participation in literacy efforts and how important it is to engage all stakeholders.

As an introduction, **Section I** reflects on the definition of literacy and methods of assessment.

Section II outlines the spread of literacy over the long term, based on literacy data available for the largest possible sample of countries since 1950, which distinguish between 'literate' and 'illiterate' persons. While the analysis of literacy has moved away from this dichotomous approach towards a continuum of literacy competence, this dichotomy has been – and remains – the predominant basis for statistical surveys of literacy.

Around 1950, hardly more than half of all adults in the world were reported as being literate. Since then, the adult literacy rate at the world level has increased by 5 percentage points every decade on average, to 86 per cent in 2015. However, progress has been far from uniform across countries and regions. Four regional trends stand out:

- Eastern Asia and South-East Asia have almost universalized literacy thanks to steady progress since the 1960s. Given their large initial numbers of illiterate adults, this appears to be the greatest achievement of education policies and literacy interventions. Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have also reached high adult literacy and almost universal youth literacy in recent decades.[1]
- In Western Asia and Northern Africa, the rapid spread of literacy among young people – especially young women – is a decisive trend of the 1990s and 2000s (regional youth literacy rates reached almost 95 per cent in 2015). The spread of literacy has contributed to the demand for political freedom and socio-economic development expressed by young people in these regions, and will be crucial to their democratization and stabilization.

Bangladesh, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, 'Ganokendra' Programme, 2013.

- Southern Asia has made considerable progress since 1990, owing to the implementation of universal basic education policies (accompanied by the expansion of private schooling). The regional youth literacy rate rose from 60 per cent in 1990 to almost 90 per cent in 2015. However, progress has been hampered by factors including the persistence of extreme poverty and conflict in several countries of the region, in which schools are often targeted. The number of illiterate adults has merely stabilized and with 43.9 million illiterate young people in 2015, large-scale adult illiteracy will persist in Southern Asia for decades.
- Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania face specific difficulties and cannot be expected to reach universal youth literacy rates by 2030 if current trends continue. Owing to its rapid population growth, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in which the number of illiterate young people kept increasing throughout the EFA periods of 1990–2000 and 2000–15, accounting for almost half of the world total. Reaching universal adult literacy in sub- Saharan Africa may be considered the greatest development challenge of the twenty-first century, given its expected impacts on the status of women, fertility, children's development, economic productivity and political processes.

In all regions, the spread of literacy among women has been a key feature of the past fifty years. However, the gap between male and female literacy rates only started narrowing from 1990 onwards. Therefore, the rapid progress towards gender parity over the EFA periods of 1990–2000 and 2000–15 appears to be a radical change, which should keep unfolding over the SDG period of 2015–30 and beyond. Progress has been particularly dramatic in Northern Africa and Southern Asia, which had the widest gender disparities in 1990. These trends are even clearer among young people: the world has reached gender parity in youth literacy, including in seven out of ten regions.

Finally, the steady global progress towards universal literacy is largely due to the significant increase in the enrolment and completion of primary education over the last five decades. While expecting that this trend will continue, the 758 million youth and adults (over 2005–2014, projected to 745 million in 2015) who have not benefited from schooling cannot be neglected, meaning that strong policies and effective programmes for youth and adult literacy are essential strategies in the pursuit of learning societies.

Section III analyses how the conception of adult literacy has significantly changed over the last five decades, with this evolution influencing the way in which governments and other actors plan and implement literacy programmes. The section highlights four influential conceptions of literacy and how they are manifested in programmes on the ground across this period. On this basis, the section suggests key factors concerning why progress has been made through the approaches shaped by the changing concept. An underlying factor is the growing understanding of literacy as a continuum, moving away from a dichotomous approach of literate/illiterate towards a more context-sensitive approach linked to learning throughout one's life.

First, literacy is perceived as a stand-alone skill, promoted through campaigns focused on the decoding and encoding processes in reading and writing. Campaigns served to mobilize national populations and rally national efforts around a common literacy-related objective. Strong political will and dedicated governance structures gave the campaign approach the best chance of success. The results of large-scale campaigns manifested the tension between giving large numbers of people at least a fleeting opportunity to acquire literacy competencies, while often failing to lead to sustainable skills given that the competencies were not embedded in daily purposes of communication.

Second, in the 1970s, functional literacy set literacy learning in the context of improving skills for work and livelihood, largely focusing on small-scale initiatives that individuals and groups could undertake at the community level through gaining access to new knowledge, acquiring better management skills or participating in economic networks. The evolving understanding

Burkina Faso, Association for Promoting Non-Formal Education, Empowerment for women living in extreme poverty in Burkina Faso programme, 2014.

of literacy leads towards a more embedded approach, taking account of the purposes, conditions and contexts of its use. The *faire faire* approach in some sub-Saharan countries highlights the coordination of literacy through a joint commitment of the state with civil society in meeting national challenges while responding to local purposes and needs.

Third, with the strong influence of Paulo Freire in the 1970s, literacy learning moved away from the mere delivery of literacy towards questions of what literacy might mean for marginalized and poor populations. The learner-facilitator relationship significantly changed the central dynamic, where dialogue 'problematizes' the context of social justice and leads to processes of change. Through the flexibility, openness and pedagogical awareness of the facilitator, literacy may empower people to act in new ways through the dialogue process with and among learners.

Fourth, during the 1990s, research in literacy focused on social practices, with an emphasis on understanding the social context in which literacy is used and the connections with institutions, systems, structures and the exercise of power. With this new understanding, studies emerged exploring how literacy is practised in many different contexts across the world, revealing the great diversity of purposes, cultural messages, use of languages, dominant, subordinate and contesting practices of literacy. A fundamental insight from these studies was the plural nature of literacy, shaped in each case by context and purpose.

In retrospect, as illustrated in section III, the influence of changing conceptions of literacy is visible in the developments of literacy programmes on the ground, not in a linear fashion but rather as a slow but steady discernible trend. New influences and trends have emerged, some of which are already reshaping understandings of literacy. **Section IV** points out the lessons for the understanding and promotion of literacy. The complexity and variety of literacy and its connection with the whole of life at individual and societal levels is leading to a stronger intersectoral collaboration among stakeholders as part of broader educational efforts towards appropriate funding and increased quality.

Section V highlights the understanding of literacy as a means of communication conditioned by its socio-political context that will continue to evolve, whereby the sustainable development agenda, lifelong learning and the digital society are important influencing factors. Demand for literacy is an integral part of pursuing the SDGs, requiring purposeful and ongoing intersectoral collaboration.

Literacy promotion is complex and connects with the whole of life at the individual and societal levels. Multiple actors need to be engaged in intersectoral collaboration to embed literacy in specific contexts that shape, facilitate and constrain the practices of literacy and the ways in which people may acquire it. Flexibility, sensitivity to the wider environment and a constant questioning of where written communication fits into people's lives, livelihoods, relations and networks must underpin literacy promotion efforts. Based on programmes that emphasize respect, dialogue, negotiation and local ownership, the use of literacy will only grow if the purposes and needs of individuals and communities can be identified and built upon. Progress towards developing a culture of lifelong learning and a learning society will not become a reality without the recognition of non-formal and informal learning achievements and greater financial input.

As the international community moves on beyond the fifty years of past action in literacy and looks to 'writing the future' of the sustainable development agenda – which includes lifelong learning for all and will be increasingly mediated by people's interaction with technology –, the international community must deepen its commitment to including everyone in the opportunities of learning and expression afforded by literacy as we continue the search for the most equitable and relevant strategies to move forward.

Section I

Introduction

Introduction

As the international community celebrates fifty years of International Literacy Day, it is timely to pause and reflect on how far the world has come in promoting literacy and how the nature of the challenge has changed.

While there has been huge progress over this half century, the world keeps on changing, new understandings emerge, the population increases, and the goalposts shift. This review outlines both the progress and the challenges, tracing the changes in the conception of literacy and how policies and programmes have reflected this development. Throughout this review, the voices of learners and others engaged in literacy programmes reflect the ways in which literacy acquisition has affected their lives, families and communities.

Literacy is a key element in education of all kinds and for all age groups, as the UN Literacy Decade Plan of Action stressed:

> ***Literacy is central to all levels of education, especially basic education, through all delivery modes – formal, non-formal and informal. Literacy for all encompasses the educational needs of all human beings in all settings and contexts, in the North and the South, the urban and the rural, those in school and those out-of-school, adults and children, boys and girls, and men and women.***
>
> *(UN 2002:4)*

This focuses on literacy for youth and adults for two reasons: first, the literacy needs of these population groups have been consistently neglected in recent educational efforts, and in particular during the EFA period (UNESCO 2015a); and second, UNESCO has a unique mandate for promoting youth and adult literacy, alongside its mandate for other subsectors of education, which it shares with other multilateral agencies.

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of the scope in the selection of the countries and the statistical data.

In this review, the focus will be on the significant progress that countries have made over the last five decades. In line with the fiftieth anniversary, fifty countries have been selected as being symbolic of global progress, based on those that showed the strongest progress between 2000 and 2015. These fifty countries serve as examples of wider literacy efforts that are documented year by year in UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report.[2] In some cases, the review was able to document the country's literacy journey in the earlier decades of the fifty-year span. Selecting countries based on strong advances does not mean that the countries necessarily reached their own goals or wider EFA goals related to literacy. In fact, given the low starting point in some countries, progress is significant but modest, whereby the experience of the fifty countries demonstrates progress as well as clearly showing the challenge that remains.

This review will use the data internationally available, based largely – but not exclusively – on self-reported or proxy assessment methods.[3] The data are available on the website of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics.[4] Thus, the dilemma remains that discussions regarding literacy progress – including in this review – continue to use national literacy rates as a proxy indicator of progress, based on the literate/illiterate dichotomy. Until more nuanced and meaningful data become widely available, global literacy reports will continue to use data that are – in many cases – ambivalent.

Promoting literacy is not simply a matter of tracking progress at the national level; indeed, the real work is done by governments, civil society and others in thousands of communities and through a multitude of programmes. Fitting these programmes to local contexts is one of the strong features of successful literacy promotion. Thus, in each of the fifty countries, the review identifies a literacy programme – as one example among many – to demonstrate both the societal and personal benefits of literacy. The aim was to look for flagship programmes that have made a particularly significant contribution to literacy progress in the country, often linked with the expressed policy and plans of the government. However, the range of programmes illustrates the breadth of participation in literacy efforts and how important it is to engage all stakeholders.

Sources and structure of the review

The data on national literacy policies (in some cases including references to constitutions and laws) and programmes are largely drawn from databases managed by UNESCO: the database on the right to education, the database on effective literacy and numeracy practices of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and the database on educational planning of the UNESCO Institute for Educational Planning. The databases of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (Montreal) were the source of quantitative data.

In **Section II**, this publication presents an overall picture of progress in literacy globally based on statistical data, by region and in the fifty selected countries. **Section III** posits four major dimensions of change in the conception of literacy over the last half century and examines literacy policies and programmes through that lens. On this basis, the section suggests key factors concerning why progress has been made through the approaches shaped by the changing concept. **Section IV** summarizes the lessons for the understanding and promotion of literacy. **Section V** suggests emerging trends that will continue to shape literacy promotion in the future and highlights the abiding lessons of past experience. Finally, **Section VI** offers concluding comments.

Turkey, woman doing a writing exercise in a state primary school, Kağıthane, Istanbul, 1969.

Defining literacy

For governments and organizations like UNESCO that have a mandate to promote opportunities for all to benefit from the use of literacy, two fundamental dilemmas lurk just under the surface.

First, what is meant by literacy? UNESCO has given several definitions, notably in 1958, 1978 and in 2005. The first two definitions focused on the capacity to read and write a simple sentence, whereas by 2005 UNESCO had moved to a broader understanding of literacy, recognizing that the complexity of the phenomenon meant that any definition could not claim to be universal. As a working definition and in the context of assessing literacy, a meeting of experts adopted the following formulation:

> ***Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with various 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:21)*

This definition recognized three essential features, the first of which is that literacy is about the uses people make of it as a means of communication and expression, through a variety of media (cf also UNESCO 2015b). Literacy is not an abstract phenomenon of universal benefit, but rather is only as valuable as the uses to which people put it. Second, literacy is plural, being practised in particular contexts for particular purposes and using specific languages. Third, literacy involves a continuum of learning measured at different proficiency levels. The changing understanding of literacy has led to developments in how literacy provision is organized. The aim of providing literacy for as many people as possible can lead to a position – or a perception – that some stand-alone and standardized skill will suffice to meet people's needs, as a one-size-fits-all approach, delivered in the most extensive and efficient manner possible.

However, literacy promotion on a large scale need not proceed from such assumptions; rather, it may also focus on particular contexts and uses of literacy across a wide range of disparate groups within a country. UNESCO sought to address this dilemma in the early-2000s by recognizing that standardized approaches did not succeed as hoped and that many of those without access to literacy opportunities can only be reached through a more focused and contextualized approach (UNESCO 2003; UNESCO 2004). Changes in the perspectives of national governments – which are not always easily discernible – have moved in the same direction in some cases.

This review also uses a brief encapsulation of literacy as 'communication involving text'. Literacy 'involves text' because text is increasingly mixed with other modes, such as image and symbol, across manuscript, print and electronic media. Literacy is 'communication' since its function and value lie in communicating with others or oneself, alongside verbal and non-verbal modes.

The second dilemma concerns the extent to which there is a divide between literate and illiterate. The data that continue to be presented on an international level – for example, through the database of UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)[5] and in the GEMR[6] – show literacy rates with the underlying assumption that people are either literate or not. The last two decades of research on literacy practice have shown that literacy is rather a continuum within the communicative practice of communities and individuals (UNESCO 2004). In all contexts across the world, adults lie along a continuum of levels of competence, and studies have shown how adults with little or no competence find ways through proxies to cope with written communication. Others may be at a low level of competence, but have developed strategies that are adequate for their need to use written communication for essential purposes. The continuum of literacy is also reflected in individual competence, as literacy learning and improvement continue throughout life. Accordingly, the understanding of literacy as a continuum underlies the evolving conception as documented in this review, moving away from a dichotomous approach of literate/illiterate towards a more context-sensitive approach linked to learning throughout life.

Using the term 'literacy' in other domains

Another perspective on linkages with literacy derives from the extended use of the term 'literacy'. In addition to its primary connections to communication involving text, the term 'literacy' is used by stakeholders in other disciplines to refer to basic knowledge and competences in other domains. In this sense, literacies are often used as a shorthand for the capacity to access, understand, analyse or evaluate these areas. Some common areas include:

- Financial literacy: in OECD surveys,[7] this concept has addressed the financial knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of adults.
- Legal literacy: a more complex concept that includes the ability to navigate a legal process with understanding, recognize a legal right or responsibility and recognize when problems or conflicts are of a legal nature.[8]
- Medical or health literacy: this indicates how well a person can obtain the health information and services that they need, how well they understand them and how they use them to make good health decisions.[9]
- Media literacy: UNESCO defines this as 'a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy' (UNESCO 2016b).[10]
- Information literacy: this may be defined as being able to 'empower people in all walks of life to seek, evaluate, use and create information effectively to achieve their personal, social, occupational and educational goals.'[11]
- Environmental literacy: the Campaign for Environmental Literacy defines this as '…the capacity of an individual to act successfully in daily life on a broad understanding of how people and societies relate to each other and to natural systems, and how they might do so sustainably.'[12]

The extent of this more figurative use of 'literacy' is illustrated in some less obvious collocations, including emotional literacy, cultural literacy, social literacy… and even kitchen literacy.

Using the term 'literacy' in this extended way does not sever the links with the basic understanding of the term, but rather builds on it. There is a clear relationship, first in terms of the common element of manipulating knowledge and symbolic systems. More concretely, none of the derived 'literacies' can be accessed or mastered without some degree of communication involving text. In the pursuit of the SDGs, embedding literacy across the agenda will be essential, meaning that those without basic literacy will have little (or certainly less) chance to acquire competencies in other domains. Moreover, the use of this wider range of basic competencies will be part of achieving all seventeen SDGs as each one will require the learning of new skills and knowledge, as well as the capacity to imagine, analyse and evaluate new solutions. Therefore, promoting literacy – in its central meaning of communication involving text – is fundamental to acquiring other basic competencies as a necessary part of the collective effort to achieve the SDGs.

Methods of assessing literacy progress

Assessing literacy depends on how it is defined, and the evolving conceptions discussed above have led to changes in methods, moving increasingly from indirect to direct approaches:

- Indirect methods of assessment include self-reporting, often as the response to a census question regarding whether the person sees themselves as literate or not. Other methods include using a number of years of schooling as a proxy; for example, assuming that anyone who has completed four years of primary school is literate. Household surveys may ask the respondent whether they consider themselves literate or not, and may further enquire how many people in a household are literate. These indirect methods depend on individual perceptions and give no indication concerning whether a person can use written communication at an appropriate level in the society in which he/she lives.

- Direct methods seek to establish the level of literacy competence through a test. In its simplest form, this may involve asking a survey respondent to read a short piece of text. A more nuanced method tests a respondent's facility in dealing with texts of different kinds, such as narrative, tables or internet information. This is linked with the recognition that literacy is a continuum of communicative competence rather than a 'literate/illiterate' dichotomy. What matters is how well people are able to use literacy for their daily lives and livelihoods. The International Adult Literacy Survey was one of the first efforts to examine literacy skills based on levels of competence (OECD 2000). Designed and implemented by the OECD in twenty-three member countries between 1994 and 1998, the survey posited three levels and three different types of literacy (prose, document and quantitative literacy). Building on this first experience, the OECD developed the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey, with two rounds of data collection and ten participating countries (OECD 2011). The UIS drew on this approach by levels to develop the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), aiming to develop instruments for contexts where literacy was less widespread and there was a need to assess literacy at lower levels of competence (UNESCO-UIS 2009). Six pilot countries took part, with others experimenting with the LAMP methods. Most recently, the OECD developed the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC[13]), focusing on basic competences among adults in literacy and numeracy, with instruments being administered by computer to also test basic digital and problem-solving skills. A paper version is available for contexts where computers are not yet in use. About forty countries have taken part, mostly but not entirely among OECD members (OECD 2016).

- As UIL (2013) points out, a growing number of countries are adopting direct literacy assessment methods that focus on levels of literacy competence, rather than a literate/illiterate dichotomy. If literacy assessment is moving towards direct assessment methods, progress is nonetheless incremental, given that there are not yet data obtained by these methods on all countries of the world, let alone for the past five decades (UIL 2013).

- RAMAA (Action Research: Measuring Literacy Programme Participants' Learning Outcomes[14]) fills a gap that is currently not covered by the large-scale literacy assessments mentioned above. The purpose of RAMAA is to develop national capacities to monitor and evaluate the quality of literacy programmes, as well as informing policy-makers and development partners about the return on investment in literacy programmes by measuring the real level of literacy acquired, i.e. the actual performance of learners who complete courses. RAMAA is based on a methodological framework that takes into account cultural, educational and linguistic specificities as well as drawing on the knowledge and capacities of national experts from the participating countries. The first phase of RAMAA (2011–2014) involved five French-speaking African countries and an additional seven countries participated in the second phase (2015 onwards). The data collection processes build national capacities with an emphasis on ownership and sustainability, as well as opening up new prospects for literacy research and improved learning programmes.

The chart on the next page provides a graphical illustration of the story of literacy development over the past fifty years, which the rest of this review will examine.

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Section II

Reading the past: fifty years of progress

Reading the past: Fifty years of progress

Between the first International Literacy Day in 1966 and the fiftieth anniversary in 2016, there has been an unprecedented spread of literacy.

In 1966, in the aftermath of independence from colonial domination for many countries, literacy was emphasized as both a way to achieve personal and political liberation and as a tool for development.

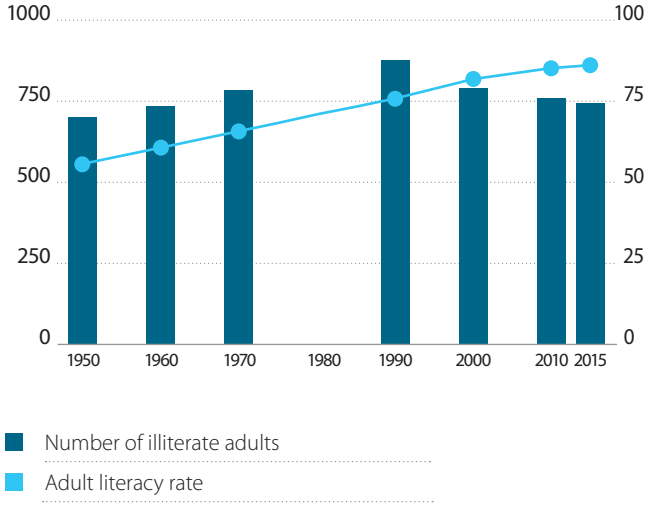
Nonetheless, despite large-scale literacy programmes and campaigns, the increase in literacy rates was slower than population growth, and the absolute number of illiterate persons was rapidly increasing at the world level. The objective at that time of the 'eradication of illiteracy' theme of the World Conference of Ministers of Education held in Tehran in 1965 appeared to be elusive. In 2016, in the wake of the international community's adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, universal literacy[15] seems achievable in the foreseeable future in a majority of countries, especially among young people.[16]

This section outlines the spread of literacy in the long term, based on literacy data available for the largest possible sample of countries since 1950.[17] Therefore, it uses a dichotomous definition of literacy, distinguishing between 'literate' and 'illiterate' persons, following now dated but long standard statistical practice. The first section outlines major trends at the world and regional levels. The second section details trends by decade, highlighting the diversity of country experience within regions. The third section identifies fifty countries that made particular progress during the EFA period of 2000–15, and thus whose experience is particularly relevant to literacy interventions to be conducted during the SDG period of 2015–30. The next section will analyse literacy policies and programmes run in those fifty countries between 1966 and 2016.

India, organization Jan Shikshan Sansthan Malappuram, Vocational and Skill Development for Sustainable Development programme, 2016.

Figure 1: The adult literacy rate has progressed at a constant pace since 1950

Number of illiterate adults (million, left axis) and adult literacy rate (per cent, right axis), world, 1950–2015



Sources: UNESCO (1972); UIS database.

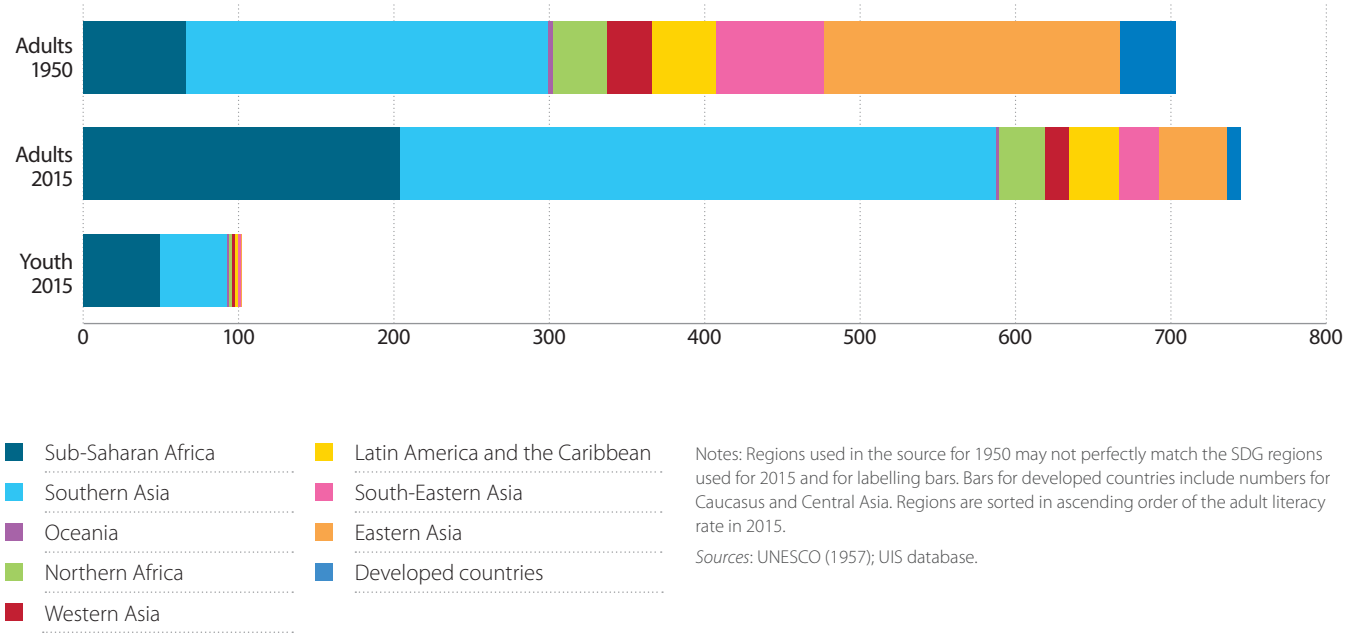
Spread of literacy since the mid-twentieth century

Literacy data published by UNESCO display a surprisingly steady trend. Since 1950, the adult literacy rate at the world level has increased by 5 percentage points every decade on average, from 55.7 per cent in 1950 to 86.2 per cent in 2015.[18] However, for four decades, the population growth was so rapid that the number of illiterate adults kept increasing, rising from 700 million in 1950 to 878 million in 1990. Since then, the number has fallen markedly to 745 million in 2015, although it remains higher than in 1950 despite decades of universal education policies, literacy interventions and the spread of print material and information and communications technology (ICT) (***Figure 1***).

These trends have been far from uniform across regions, meaning that the distribution of illiteracy across the world has been comprehensively reshaped (***Figure 2***). In 1950, Eastern and South-East Asia accounted for one-third of all illiterate adults, and Southern Asia for another third, while the remaining third was spread almost evenly across five other regions, including developed countries[19] (with significant numbers of illiterate adults in southern Europe). In 2015, Southern Asia accounted for more than half of all illiterate adults, and sub-Saharan Africa for more than one-quarter. The two regions were home to more than 90 per cent of illiterate young people in the world.

Figure 2: Most illiterate persons now live in Southern Asia or sub-Saharan Africa

Numbers of illiterate adults (aged 15 and above) and illiterate young people (aged 15–24) (million), by region, 1950 and 2015

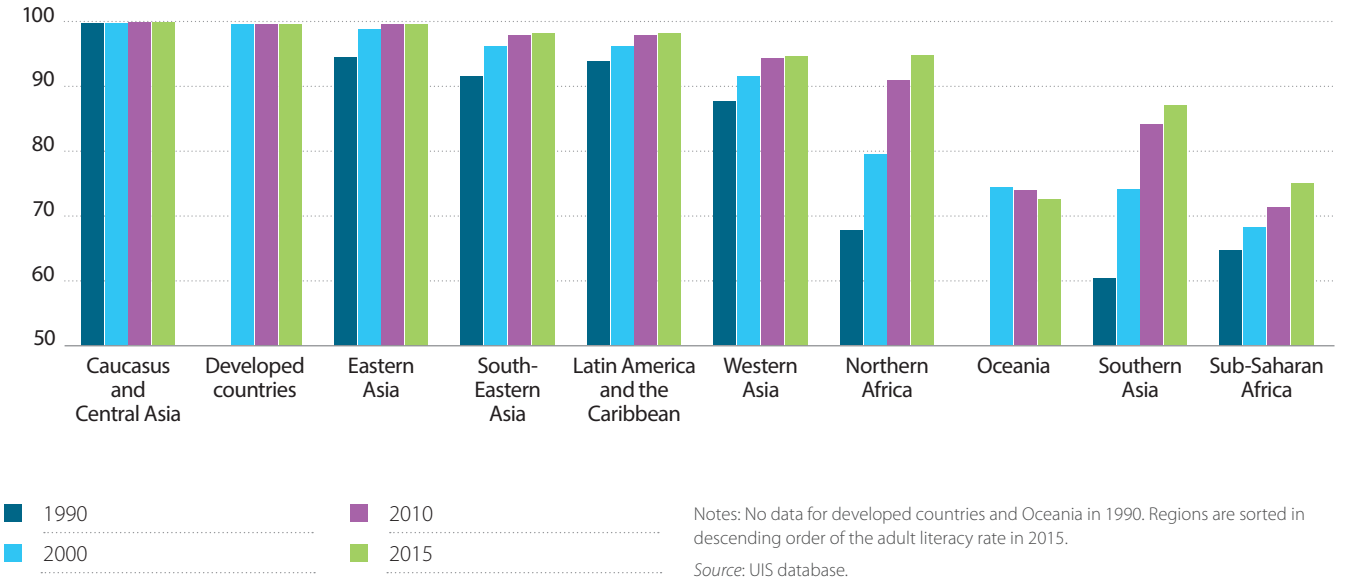


Notes: Regions used in the source for 1950 may not perfectly match the SDG regions used for 2015 and for labelling bars. Bars for developed countries include numbers for Caucasus and Central Asia. Regions are sorted in ascending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.

Sources: UNESCO (1957); UIS database.

Figure 3: Youth literacy rates are higher than 90 per cent in most regions

Youth literacy rates by region, 1990–2015 (per cent)



Notes: No data for developed countries and Oceania in 1990. Regions are sorted in descending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.

Source: UIS database.

Indeed, the spread of literacy among young people has been a decisive contribution of education and literacy policies during the EFA periods of 1990–2000 and 2000–15 in particular. In 2015, the youth literacy rate stood above 95.0 per cent in 101 out of 159 countries with data. While developed countries with data[20] and Caucasus and Central Asia maintained universal youth literacy, three major regions – Eastern Asia, South-East Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean – very nearly achieved it, with rates above 98 per cent in 2015 (***Figure 3***). The most dramatic change took place in Western Asia and especially Northern Africa, where high youth literacy rates close to 95 per cent were achieved from much lower levels within a generation. The reasons why Southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa now have comparable numbers of illiterate young people and account for most of the world total are quite distinct. In Southern Asia, literacy rates increased extremely rapidly and the number of illiterate young people more than halved, from 92.9 million in 1990 to 43.9 million in 2015. In sub-Saharan Africa, literacy spread slowly and the number of illiterate young people kept increasing, from 37.0 million in 1990 to 49.3 million in 2015.

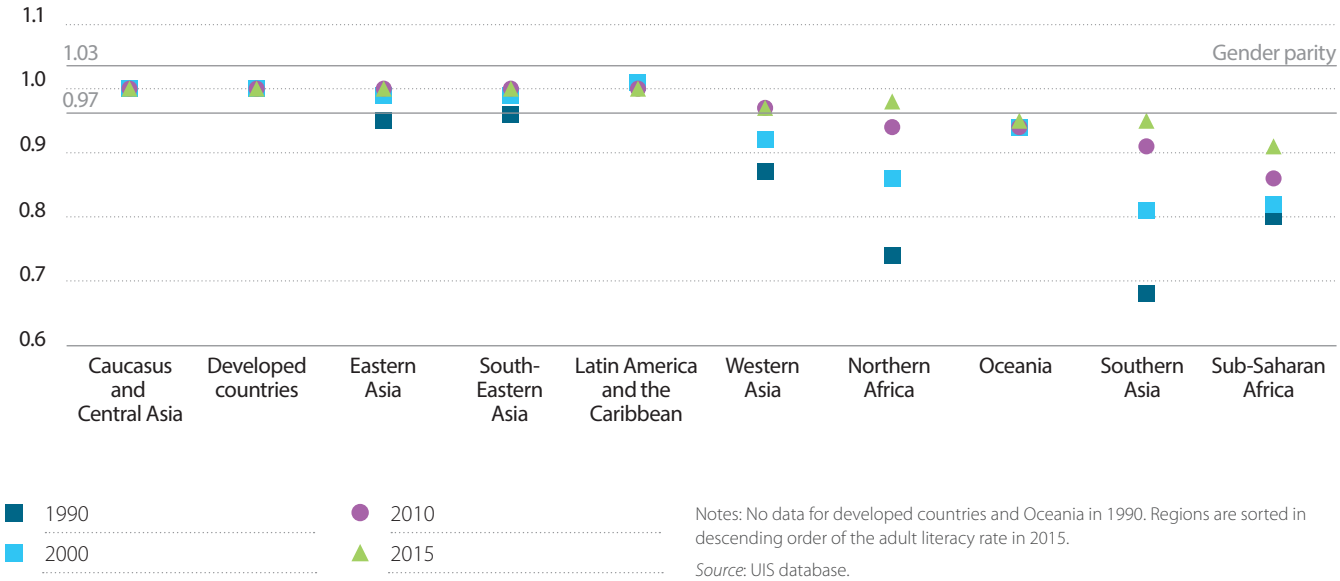
Finally, the spread of literacy among women has been a key feature of the fifty years since the first ILD was held in 1966. However, the gap between men and women only started narrowing from 1990 onwards, after male adult literacy rates had reached a threshold of 80 per cent. In 1960, 55.1 per cent of women in the world were literate, compared with 66.5 per cent of men, yielding a gender parity index (GPI) in the adult literacy rate of 0.83.[21] Across Africa and Asia, female adult literacy rates were 15–20 percentage points lower than male rates. In 1990, 69.5 per cent of women were literate, compared with 82.3 per cent of men, meaning that the GPI stood at 0.84, being not significantly higher than it had been thirty years earlier. Gender disparities remained extreme in Southern Asia, Western Asia, Northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

Therefore, rapid progress towards gender parity over the EFA periods appears to be a radical change, which should keep unfolding over the SDG period of 2015–30 and beyond. In 2015, 82.6 per cent of women were literate, compared with 89.8 per cent of men, with the GPI reaching 0.92. Four out of ten regions were at gender parity (defined as a GPI value between 0.97 and 1.03) and two others were very close to it. Progress has been particularly dramatic in Northern Africa and Southern Asia, which had the widest gender disparities in 1990. These trends are even clearer among young people: the world has reached gender parity in youth literacy (GPI value of 0.97), including in seven out of ten regions (***Figure 4***).[22]

Only sub-Saharan Africa had a GPI below 0.95 in 2015. In four regions that comprise mostly middle-income countries (Caucasus and Central Asia, Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean), there are now slightly higher numbers of illiterate young men than young women.

Figure 4: Progress towards gender parity in literacy started after 1990

Gender parity indices in youth literacy rates by region, 1990–2015



Notes: No data for developed countries and Oceania in 1990. Regions are sorted in descending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.

Source: UIS database.

Uneven progress across decades and countries

Around 1950, shortly after the end of the Second World War, hardly more than half of all adults in the world were literate

Efforts by UNESCO to document literacy started in the early-1950s, and a 1957 publication entitled *World Illiteracy at Mid-Century* offered a 200-page statistical monograph of the situation around 1950, which forms a strong baseline for the analysis of long-term trends (UNESCO 1957).

The ambition was to cover all parts of the world for the first time, using census or survey data collected between 1945 and 1954. Estimates of illiteracy rates and numbers were published for 198 countries and territories, many of them still under colonial domination or recently independent. They were complemented with historical records covering the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, available for a few countries in Europe and North America. Methodological concerns about source data were outlined in great detail. Indirect sources were used for a number of countries and territories, meaning that estimates were provided as ranges with a lower and an upper bound, as was the case for global, continental and regional figures.

Around 1950, the world was estimated to have 690–720 million illiterate adults (aged 15 and above), accounting for 43–45 per cent of the population (***Table 1***). Asia accounted for nearly three-quarters of the total, with the largest numbers in South Central Asia (including India) and East Asia (including China).[23] Owing to its much smaller population at the time, Africa had far fewer illiterate adults, with about 100 million. America followed with nearly 50 million, mostly in 'Middle' (Central) and South America. Noticeably, Europe still had a sizeable population of up to 25 million illiterate adults, concentrated in Southern Europe.

Nonetheless, rates painted a somewhat different picture compared with numbers. Adult literacy rates were the lowest in Africa, particularly Northern Africa, where only 10–15 per cent of adults were literate.[24] Within Asia, the rates were lowest in South Central Asia, at 15–20 per cent, and to a lesser extent in South-West Asia. At the country level, this translated into extremely low adult literacy rates: 0.3 per cent in the African population of Portuguese Guinea (Guinea-Bissau), 6.2 per cent in the Muslim population of Algeria – then administered by France – in 1948, 11.5 per cent in British-dominated Nigeria in 1952/53 (population aged 7 and above), 19.3 per cent in recently-independent India in 1951 and 19.9 per cent in Egypt in 1947. The three regions with the lowest literacy rates in 1950 – North Africa, Tropical and

Table 1: Around 1950, adult literacy rates were low at the world level and extremely uneven across regions

Estimated population and extent of illiteracy in the world, around 1950, by continents and regions

Continent and region	Estimated population		Estimated extent of illiteracy	
	Total (all ages) (millions)	Adults (15 years old and over) (millions)	Per cent of adult illiteracy	Number of adult illiterates (millions)
World total	**2,496**	**1,587**	**43–45**	**690–720**
Africa	**198**	**120**	**80–85**	**98–104**
Northern Africa	65	40	85–90	34–36
Tropical and Southern Africa	134	80	80–85	64–68
America	**330**	**223**	**20–21**	**45–47**
Northern America	168	126	3–4	4–5
Middle America	51	30	40–42	12–13
South America	111	67	42–44	28–29
Asia	**1,376**	**830**	**60–65**	**510–540**
South West Asia	62	37	75–80	28–30
South Central Asia	466	287	80–85	230–240
South East Asia	171	102	65–70	68–72
East Asia	617	404	45–50	180–200
Europe	**393**	**293**	**7–9**	**22–25**
Northern and Western Europe	133	102	1–2	1–2
Central Europe	128	96	2–3	2–3
Southern Europe	131	95	20–21	19–20
Oceania	**13**	**9**	**10–11**	**1**
USSR	**186**	**112**	**5–10**	**6–11**

Source: UNESCO (1957).

Southern Africa and South Central Asia – could rely on insufficient numbers of literate adults to ensure their development, given that the whole African continent had no more than 16–22 million literate adults, while South Central Asia had no more than 47–57 million.

In stark contrast, more than half of the adult population of East Asia was literate, and the same applied to several countries of South-East Asia, including Thailand (52.0 per cent in 1947) and the Philippines (60.0 per cent in 1948), while Japan had already reached universal literacy, with a rate of 97–98 per cent around 1950. Regional literacy rates were slightly higher in Middle and South America, although there was a wide gap between Southern Cone countries – including Argentina (86.4 per cent in 1947) and Chile (80.1 per cent in 1952) – and the most populated countries of the continent, namely Mexico (56.8 per cent in 1950, population aged 6 and above) and Brazil (49.4 per cent in 1950). With an adult literacy rate of only 10.5 per cent in 1950, Haiti already was an exception in the American continent. Meanwhile, today's developed countries had already achieved nearly universal literacy, with rates of 96.7, 96.4 and 97.5 per cent in 1947, 1946 and 1952, respectively, in Belgium, France and the United States of America. Southern Europe was an exception, with adult literacy rates as low as 55.9 per cent in Portugal in 1950 and 57.6 per cent in Malta in 1948.

During the 1950s and 1960s, progress was slow despite national efforts and international cooperation that followed decolonization

Literacy was a policy priority in many countries that gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968, René Maheu, the then-Director-General of UNESCO, noted that countries increasingly integrated literacy programmes into their wider education policies and economic and social planning, were structuring them through legal disposition and specialized institutions and were allocating them more funds, 'sometimes at the cost of heroic efforts', although 'these investments [were] often very modest in absolute terms' (UNESCO 1968: 10). Nonetheless, the World Conference of Ministers of Education on the Eradication of Illiteracy held in Tehran in 1965 and the first ILD in 1966 took place in the context of a perceived education crisis. The global adult literacy rate had only increased from 55.7 to 60.7 per cent between 1950 and 1960. Given population growth, this was insufficient to result in a decrease in the number of illiterate adults: in twenty countries totalling 53 million illiterate adults in 1965–66, the number was progressing by 11 per cent a year (ibid.).

The Tehran Congress and first ILD led to the publication of three successive UNESCO books, *Literacy 1965–67, Literacy 1967–1969 and Literacy 1969–1971* (UNESCO 1968, 1970, 1972). These documented literacy policies and programmes in a number of countries, as well as international cooperation, as well as providing statistics based on censuses and surveys collected since the mid-1950s. While not as comprehensive as the 1957 statistical monograph, *Literacy 1969–1971* allows an analysis of trends in literacy rates and illiteracy numbers over the two decades following 1950 (***Table 2***). At the world level, the adult literacy rate progressed by no more than 5 percentage points per decade, with two implications. First, while almost two-thirds of all adults were literate by 1970, universal literacy would not be achieved in the foreseeable future. Second, the number of illiterate adults increased even more rapidly during the 1960s than it had during the 1950s, by 6.5 per cent versus 5.0 per cent.

At the regional level, the distribution of illiterate adults started shifting during the 1960s, although changes do not appear to be dramatic at the scale of 'major regions'.[25] In 1970, Europe and North America were even closer to universal literacy than they had been in 1950, and their numbers of illiterate adults had decreased by nearly one-quarter within ten years. In the developing world, Latin America was the only major region in which the increase in the adult literacy rate was larger than the increase in the total population, whereby the number of illiterate adults started decreasing. In Africa and Asia, the same number increased by 19 and 37 million, respectively, between 1960 and 1970, although the adult literacy rate was increasing more rapidly and from a higher basis in Asia, where it reached 53.2 per cent in 1970, about 20 percentage points higher than in 1950. As a result, the share of Africa in the global number of illiterate adults started increasing, in a trend that would continue amplifying over the following decades.

Table 2: Progress in literacy was slow in the 1950s and 1960s, and the number of illiterate adults increased

Adult literacy (at ages 15 and above) around 1960 and 1970 (millions and per cent)

Major region	Around 1960				Around 1970			
	Adults	Literate adults	Illiterate adults	Illiteracy percentage	Adults	Literate adults	Illiterate adults	Illiteracy percentage
Africa	153	29	124	81.0	194	51.1	143	73.7
Northern America	136	133	3.3	2.4	161	158	2.5	1.5
Latin America	123	83.1	40	32.5	163	125	38.6	23.6
Asia	982	440	542	55.2	1,237	658	579	46.8
Europe	464	439	24.5	5.3	521	502	18.7	3.6
Oceania	10.6	9.4	1.2	11.5	13	11.8	1.4	10.3
World	**1,869**	**1,134**	**735**	**39.3**	**2,287**	**1,504**	**783.2**	**34.2**
(Arab States)	52.7	9.9	42.7	81.1	68.3	18.4	49.9	73.0

Notes: The first six major regions add up to the world total. The Arab States as a separate grouping are presented in parentheses as they are already partly included under Africa and partly under Asia.

Source: UNESCO (1972).

The 1970s and early 1980s witnessed an acceleration of progress in Latin America and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia

UIS data on literacy are available online for the years from 1970 onwards. There are too few observations between 1970 and 1984 to calculate regional or global figures, although country-level data are indicative of trends during the 1970s and early-1980s.

These years witnessed decisive change in three regions. First, the trend towards universal adult literacy in Southern Europe was about to reach completion, with rates of above 90 per cent in the countries with data in 1981, except Portugal, were only 79.4 per cent of adults were literate. Second, several major countries of Latin America were also universalizing adult literacy, led by Cuba (97.8 per cent in 1981), followed by Southern Cone countries and Costa Rica (above 90 per cent). Mexico (83.0 per cent in 1980) and Brazil (74.6 per cent in 1980) were not as advanced but had now covered half the distance from their 1950 rates to universal literacy. The literacy rate more than trebled in Haiti between 1950 and 1982, to a still very low level of 34.7 per cent. Third, literacy was progressing rapidly in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia. In the early-1980s, around 85 per cent of the adult population was literate in the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam, as well as about two-thirds in China and Indonesia.

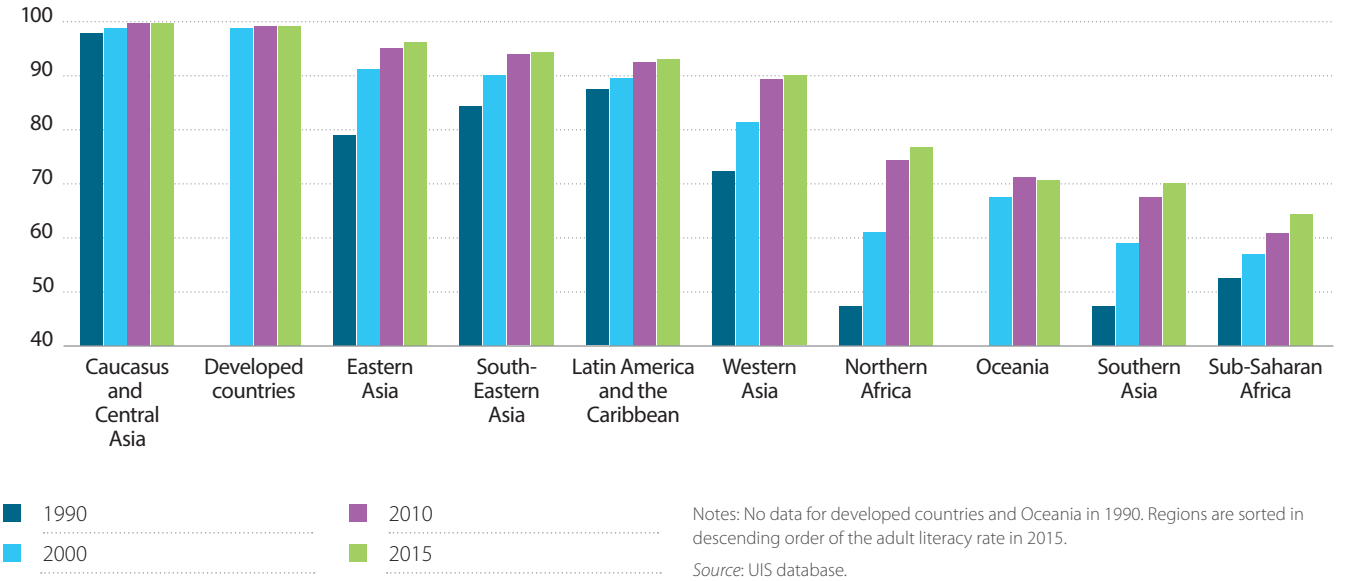
As a result, by the mid-1980s Africa (including Northern Africa) and Southern Asia concentrated countries with very low literacy rates. Seventeen out of twenty-nine countries with data in these regions had adult literacy rates below 40 per cent in 1970–84. This included countries with large populations such as Bangladesh (29.2 per cent in 1981), Egypt (38.2 per cent in 1976) and Pakistan (25.7 per cent in 1981). In the mid-1970s, less than 10 per cent of adults were literate in Burkina Faso and Mali. No country with data in Africa had reached an adult literacy rate of 80 per cent or more, and in Southern Asia only the Maldives and Sri Lanka had done so.

The 1990s and 2000s saw the implementation of EFA policies, and the number of illiterate persons started declining

The 1980s were marked by debt and terms-of-trade crises in many developing countries, leading to structural adjustment policies and weakening education and literacy policies. Launched at the Jomtien Conference in 1990, the EFA movement aimed to respond to these uncertainties, taking advantage of the prospects for international cooperation opened by the end of the Cold War. Nonetheless, socio-economic development during the 1990s was not as rapid as expected, leading to the definition of the EFA goals for 2000–15 at the World Education Forum held in Dakar in 2000, as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) covering the same period. Until the financial and economic crisis that started in 2007–08, the expansion of basic education was facilitated by exceptional economic growth and a major increase in official development assistance to low and lower middle-income countries.

Figure 5: Literacy has rapidly spread in several regions in the last twenty-five years

Adult literacy rates (per cent) by region, 1990–2015



Notes: No data for developed countries and Oceania in 1990. Regions are sorted in descending order of the adult literacy rate in 2015.

Source: UIS database.

Data availability greatly improved after 1985, meaning that regional and global figures can be computed for 1990, 2000 and 2015, allowing a broad assessment of progress over the two EFA periods.

- The first EFA period (1990–2000) saw the global adult literacy rate rapidly increase by 6.0 percentage points over ten years, to 81.9 per cent in 2000 (***Figure 5***). Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia nearly completed their transitions towards universal literacy, with rates above 90 per cent in 2000. Northern Africa and (to a lesser extent) Southern Asia started catching up. By contrast, sub-Saharan Africa made minimal progress, replacing Southern Asia as the region with the lowest rate by 2000.
- The second EFA period (2000–15) witnessed a marked slowdown in the global adult literacy rate, only increasing by 4.3 percentage points over fifteen years, to 86.2 per cent in 2015. This was largely a corollary of the relatively high rate already reached in 2000. Three regional trends stand out. First, progress towards universal literacy continued in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, while Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Western Asia reached rates above 90 per cent in 2010 and 2015, respectively. Second, Northern Africa and Southern Asia continued rapidly progressing. Third, Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa did not progress as much, raising concerns for their future: the adult literacy rate for sub-Saharan Africa was still as low as 64.4 per cent in 2015.

At the country level, a key development during the EFA periods was the increased number of countries with adult literacy rates above 95 per cent from twenty-two in 1990 to forty-five in 2000 and sixty-eight in 2015. A further twenty-three countries had rates above 90 per cent in 2015 (***Table 3***). Countries with near universal adult literacy now include – besides developed countries – emerging countries of Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (China: 96.4 per cent, Indonesia: 95.4 per cent, the Philippines: 96.6 per cent) and Latin America (Argentina: 98.1 per cent, Chile: 96.6 per cent). Since 2000, several countries have dramatically progressed, including the Plurinational State of Bolivia (95.1 per cent in 2015), which had lagged behind the rest of Latin America for decades, as well as several countries of Western Asia, including Jordan (98.0 per cent) or Turkey (95.7 per cent). In Southern Asia, only the Maldives has reached a rate above 95 per cent, while in sub-Saharan Africa only the Seychelles and Equatorial Guinea have done so.

Meanwhile, 30 countries continue to have adult literacy rates below 70 per cent, including fragile states affected by conflict, post-conflict or emergency situations that set them apart from the rest of their regions, such as Afghanistan (38.2 per cent), Haiti (60.7 per cent), Pakistan (56.4 per cent) and Timor-Leste (64.1 per cent). However, twenty-two of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in Western Africa, including Niger (19.1 per cent), the only country in the world with an adult literacy rate below 30 per cent in 2015.

Table 3: The majority of countries had reached adult literacy rates above 90 per cent in 2015

Number of countries by range of adult literacy rate and region, 2015 (per cent)

SDG region	Adult literacy rate								Total
	<40	40–50	50–60	60–70	70–80	80–90	90–95	>95	
Caucasus and Central Asia								8	8
Developed countries							1	23	24
Eastern Asia								4	4
South-Eastern Asia				1	2		4	4	11
Latin America and the Caribbean				1	1	6	7	14	29
Western Asia					2	1	4	6	13
Northern Africa					3	1	1		5
Oceania				1		1		6	8
Southern Asia	1		1	3	1	1	1	1	9
Sub-Saharan Africa	7	5	7	3	11	8	5	2	48
World	**8**	**5**	**8**	**9**	**20**	**18**	**23**	**68**	**159**

Note: Regions are sorted in decreasing order of adult literacy rate in 2015.

Source: UIS database.

Table 4: Since 1990, the number of illiterate adults has declined, except in sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania

Numbers of illiterate adults by SDG region, 1990–2015

SDG region	Numbers (million)			Change (per cent)		Share of world total (per cent)		
	1990	2000	2015	1990–2000	2000–2015	1990	2000	2015
Caucasus and Central Asia	0.9	0.4	0.1	-50.1	-77.4	0.1	0.1	0.0
Developed countries		10.4	8.8		-16.1		1.3	1.2
Eastern Asia	184.6	88.6	43.9	-52.0	-50.4	21.0	11.2	5.9
South-Eastern Asia	44.4	36.3	25.7	-18.1	-29.4	5.1	4.6	3.4
Latin America and the Caribbean	37.7	39.1	31.9	3.7	-18.3	4.3	4.9	4.3
Western Asia	22.2	21.0	15.9	-5.4	-24.3	2.5	2.7	2.1
Northern Africa	36.1	36.3	29.7	0.6	-18.1	4.1	4.6	4.0
Oceania		1.6	2.0		30.0		0.2	0.3
Southern Asia	394.9	389.5	383.7	-1.4	-1.5	45.0	49.3	51.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	142.2	166.2	203.4	16.9	22.4	16.2	21.0	27.3
World	**877.7**	**789.5**	**745.1**	**-10.0**	**-5.6**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Notes: No data for developed countries and Oceania in 1990. Regions are sorted by decreasing adult literacy rate in 2015.

Source: UIS database.

Owing to the deceleration in global population growth and the high rates of adult literacy reached by the majority of countries, the total number of illiterate adults started decreasing after peaking at 877.7 million in 1990, reaching 758.3 million in the 2005–2014 census decade and 745.1 million in 2015 (***Table 4***). A turning point was thus reached, answering the concern raised at the Tehran Congress in 1965. The decrease started in 1990–2000 in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia and continued over 2000–15. Within twenty-five years, the number of illiterate adults in those two regions combined collapsed from 229.0 million to 69.6 million. Other SDG regions followed mostly after 2000, including Latin America and the Caribbean, Western Asia and North Africa. At the same time, the number of illiterate adults merely stabilized in Southern Asia, which thus accounted for an increasing share of the world total, at more than half in 2015. The combination of explosive population growth and slow progress in adult literacy rates implied that the same number increased very rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa, by nearly 16.9 per cent in the first and 22.4 per cent in the second EFA period: in 2015, the region accounted for more than one-quarter the world total. A similar situation prevailed in Oceania, where the number of illiterate adults increased by 30.0 per cent over 2000–15.

Both the increase in adult literacy rates and the decrease in the global number of illiterate adults slowed down markedly in 2000–15 compared with 1990–2000. Despite fifty years of progress, the promotion of adult literacy should remain a priority for the SDG period of 2015–30 and the rest of the twenty-first century.

Strong progress in fifty countries over the past fifteen years

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the first ILD held in 1966, fifty of the world's nearly 200 countries were identified as being the most successful. Ideally, this would have involved comparing progress in literacy rates or illiterate person numbers over 1966–2016 and using test-based evidence. Unfortunately, country-level data for the mid-1960s are not available. As mentioned above, *Literacy 1969–1971* does not offer comprehensive country coverage. The UIS database available online – which starts with 1970 – has very few country observations before 1985, and is truly comprehensive from the 1995–2004 census decade onwards, whereby the adult literacy rate is available for both 2000 and 2015 for 157 countries and territories. Therefore, to allow selection from a sufficiently large number of countries, the present publication focuses on progress made during the EFA period of 2000–15.

Measuring progress over 50 years

The changing definitions of literacy and assessment methods make it challenging to identify trends over a period as long as fifty years. A straightforward method is to use whatever data on literacy rates were available for previous decades and compare them with the latest figures. However, the number of countries for which older data are available is limited. Where possible and appropriate, this review uses data of this kind.

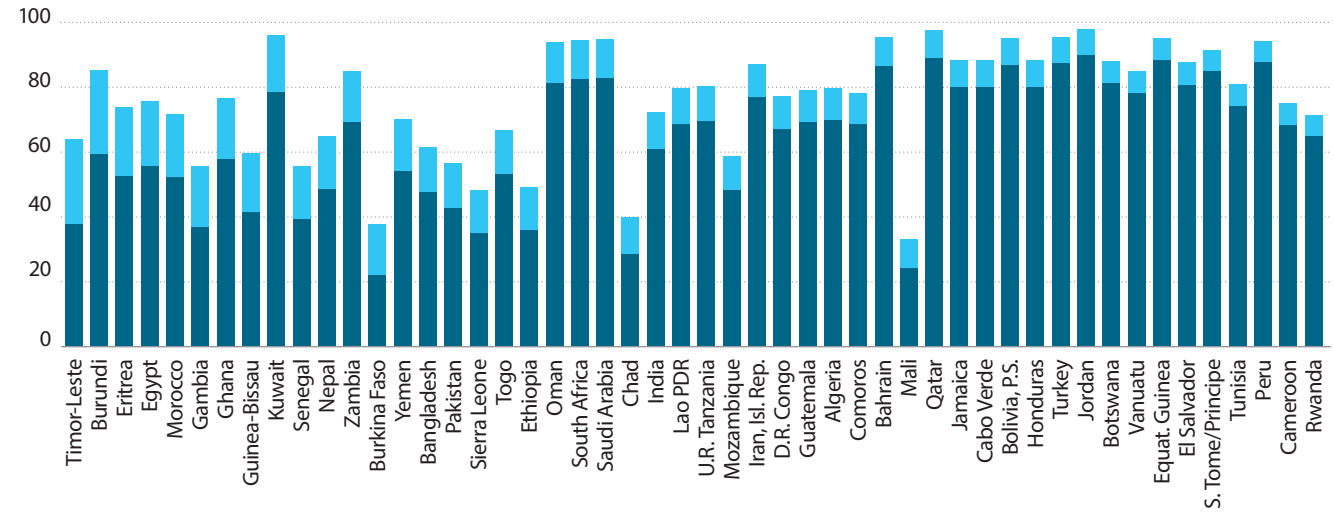
Another method is to use the latest data, looking at literacy rates for youth (15-24 years old) and older people (65 years+). Given that the latter were 15+ years old fifty years ago, the difference in the rates shows progress in the spread of literacy in the intervening decades. Of course, a lot happens in fifty years: people acquire literacy as adults or lose the competence that they once acquired, while the structure of the population changes through natural processes, migration and in other ways. In modelling this method for this review, it is significant to note that 80% of the countries identified in this way overlapped with those selected based on comparing data from 2000 to 2015.

Countries and territories were ranked in descending order of the absolute change in the adult literacy rate between 2000 and 2015, in percentage points. The fifty countries with the largest increase were selected.[26] Progress ranges between 26.5 percentage points in Timor-Leste and 6.4 percentage points in Rwanda, indicating very different country experiences across this large sample. The fifty countries are spread over seven of the ten SDG regions.[27] They include large proportions of countries in the four regions with the lowest regional rates: 24 out of 51 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, in all parts of the continent; 5 out of 9 countries in Southern Asia; 4 out of 5 countries in Northern Africa; and 8 out of 13 countries in Western Asia. In the other regions, they include countries that had a distinct disadvantage until 2000, but have been catching up since then: 6 out of 48 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, including countries in Central America and the Plurinational State of Bolivia; 2 out of 11 countries in South-Eastern Asia (Lao PDR and Timor-Leste); and 1 out of 20 countries in Oceania (Vanuatu) (***Table 5***).

The choice of 2000–15 as the reference period leads to the inclusion of countries that have succeeded in almost universalizing adult literacy based on progress made in previous decades, including those in Western Asia, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Peru and South Africa. However, the same choice also leads to the inclusion of countries that had among the lowest adult literacy rates in 2000 and still have a long way to go: in fourteen of the fifty countries – most of them in sub-Saharan Africa – no more than one-third to two-thirds of adults were literate in 2015 (***Figure 6***).

Figure 6: The fifty countries are at very different stages of the transition towards universal adult literacy

Adult literacy rate in 2000 and progress over 2000–15 (per cent)



Adult literacy rate in 2000

Progress over 2000–15

Note: Countries are sorted by decreasing change in adult literacy between 2000 and 2015 in percentage points.

Source: UIS database.

Table 5: Fifty countries across the world made remarkable progress in adult literacy between 2000 and 2015

SDG region	Country	Adult literacy rate (per cent)		Progress, 2000–2015	
		2000	2015	(pp)	(per cent)
South-Eastern Asia	Lao PDR	68.7	79.9	11.1	16.2
	Timor-Leste	37.6	64.1	26.5	70.4
Southern Asia	Bangladesh	47.5	61.5	14.0	29.5
	India	61.0	72.2	11.2	18.4
	Iran, Isl. Rep.	77.0	87.2	10.2	13.2
	Nepal	48.6	64.7	16.1	33.0
	Pakistan	42.7	56.4	13.7	32.2
Western Asia	Bahrain	86.5	95.7	9.2	10.6
	Jordan	89.9	98.0	8.1	9.0
	Kuwait	78.4	96.1	17.7	22.6
	Oman	81.4	94.0	12.6	15.5
	Qatar	89.0	97.8	8.8	9.9
	Saudi Arabia	82.9	94.8	12.0	14.5
	Turkey	87.4	95.7	8.3	9.5
	Yemen	54.2	70.0	15.8	29.1
Latin America and the Caribbean	Bolivia, P.S.	86.7	95.1	8.4	10.6
	El Salvador	80.8	87.6	6.9	7.8
	Guatemala	69.1	79.1	10.0	15.0
	Honduras	80.0	88.4	8.4	9.7
	Jamaica	79.9	88.5	8.6	10.7
	Peru	87.7	94.4	6.7	7.6
Northern Africa	Algeria	69.9	79.6	9.7	13.9
	Egypt	55.6	75.8	20.3	36.4
	Morocco	52.3	71.7	19.4	37.1
	Tunisia	74.3	81.1	6.8	8.1

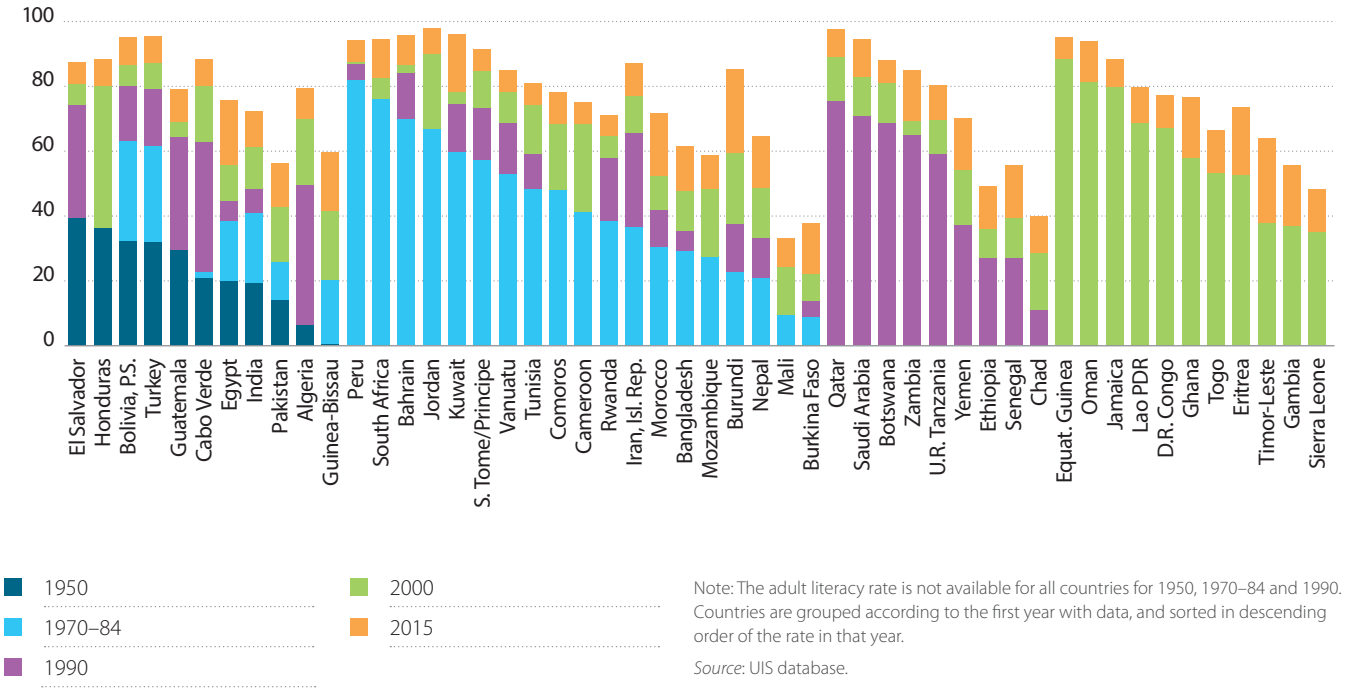
SDG region	Country	Adult literacy rate (per cent)		Progress, 2000–2015	
		2000	2015	(pp)	(per cent)
Sub-Saharan Africa	Botswana	81.2	88.2	7.0	8.9
	Burkina Faso	21.8	37.7	15.9	73.0
	Burundi	59.3	85.5	26.2	44.2
	Cabo Verde	80.0	88.5	8.4	10.5
	Cameroon	68.4	75.0	6.6	9.6
	Chad	28.4	40.0	11.6	41.0
	Comoros	68.5	78.1	9.6	14.1
	D.R. Congo	67.2	77.2	10.0	14.4
	Equat. Guinea	88.3	95.2	6.9	8.5
	Eritrea	52.5	73.8	21.3	40.6
	Ethiopia	35.9	49.0	13.1	36.6
	Gambia	36.8	55.6	18.8	50.9
	Ghana	57.9	76.6	18.7	32.3
	Guinea-Bissau	41.4	59.8	18.4	44.5
	Mali	24.0	33.1	9.1	37.8
	Mozambique	48.2	58.8	10.7	22.2
	Rwanda	64.9	71.2	6.4	9.8
	S. Tome/Principe	84.9	91.7	6.8	9.1
	Senegal	39.3	55.6	16.3	41.6
	Sierra Leone	34.8	48.4	13.6	39.1
	South Africa	82.4	94.6	12.2	14.8
	Togo	53.2	66.5	13.4	25.1
	U.R. Tanzania	69.4	80.4	10.9	15.7
	Zambia	69.1	85.1	16.0	23.1
Oceania	Vanuatu	78.1	85.1	7.0	8.7

Note: Countries are sorted by decreasing change in adult literacy between 2000 and 2015 in percentage points.

Source: UIS database.

Figure 7: Five decades of data illustrate the diversity of pathways towards universal adult literacy

Adult literacy rate reached between 1950 and 2015 (per cent)



Note: The adult literacy rate is not available for all countries for 1950, 1970–84 and 1990. Countries are grouped according to the first year with data, and sorted in descending order of the rate in that year.

Source: UIS database.

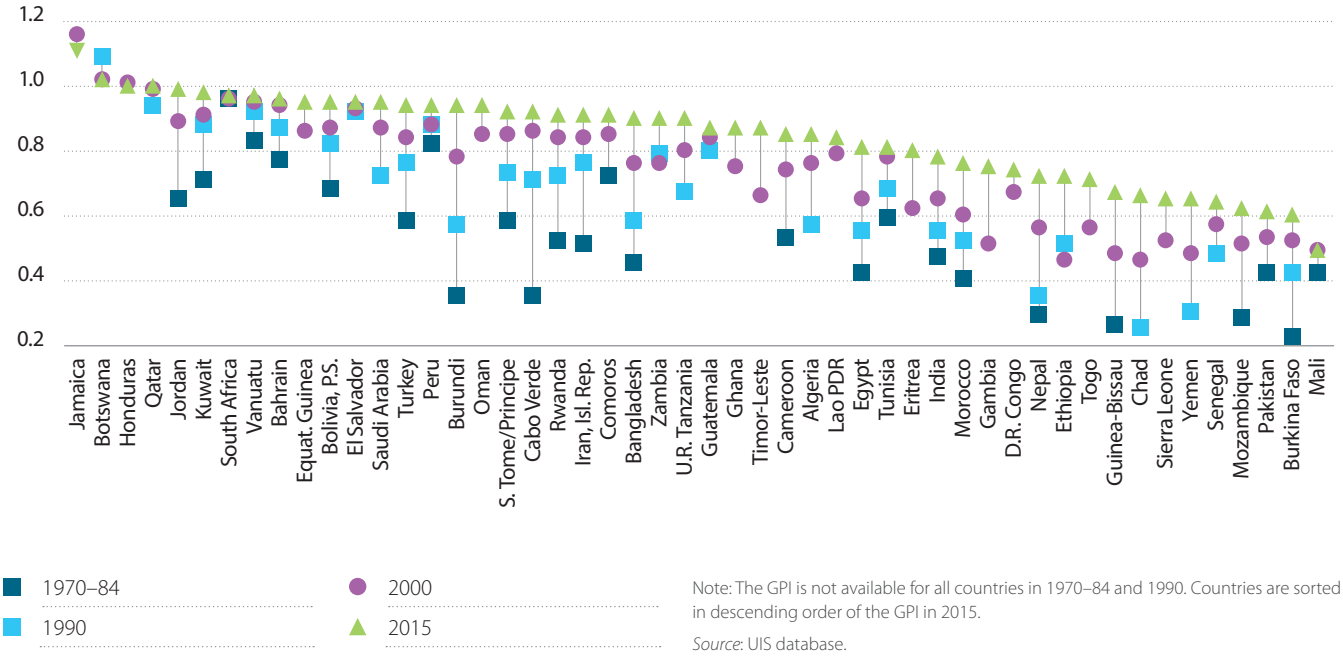
Data available for earlier decades reveal noticeable similarities and differences in the pathways followed by countries since the 1950s (***Figure 7***). Turkey and the Plurinational State of Bolivia have had strikingly similar adult literacy rates in the five decades for which data are available. Sao Tome and Principe and Vanuatu have progressed at the same pace since the 1970s. On the other hand, Burundi and Nepal had similar rates until 1990, before subsequently diverging: in 2015, the adult literacy rate was more than 20 percentage points higher in Burundi than in Nepal. The Islamic Republic of Iran had a slightly lower adult literacy rate than Rwanda in the late-1970s, although literacy has progressed more rapidly in the former in every decade since then, resulting in a 16 percentage point gap between the two countries in 2015.

The spread of literacy among women has been key to the success of the fifty countries (***Figure 8***). All twenty-six countries with data for 1970–84 had severe gender disparities at the expense of women. South Africa was the only country close to gender parity, with a GPI of 0.96 in 1980, with a significant distance to the second-highest GPI of 0.83 in Vanuatu in 1979. The then Upper-Volta (Burkina Faso) had the lowest index value at 0.22 in 1975, when 3.2 per cent of women and 14.5 per cent of men were literate. Since then, the GPI has increased markedly in the fifty countries in the selection, with very few exceptions or reversals. In 2015, one country (Jamaica) had a strong gender disparity favouring women (93.0 per cent of women and 83.9 per cent of men were literate), six countries had reached gender parity and eighteen more had index values at or above 0.90. However, very wide gender disparities persist in the remaining twenty-five countries.

Youth literacy rates give an indication of the future of literacy in the fifty countries (***Figure 9***). All countries in Western Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean in the selection (as well as a handful of sub-Saharan African countries, including South Africa) had already reached nearly universal youth literacy in 2000, and could thus make only minimal progress over 2000–15. Therefore, in these countries, future increases in adult literacy will result from the replacement of elderly generations, rather than the further expansion of basic education. On the other hand, successful EFA policies explain very large increases in youth literacy rates in other countries of the selection; for instance, Burkina Faso, Senegal and Morocco achieved increases of 20–25 percentage points within fifteen years, from bases of about 30, 50 and 70 per cent, respectively, in 2015. Comparable achievements are observed in countries with very large populations such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, India and Pakistan. Continued investment in the school infrastructures and the quality of education will be crucial to sustain these gains and reach universal youth literacy. This is particularly relevant for ten countries in which the youth literacy rate was still below 70 per cent in 2015, among which Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali stand out, with rates close to 50 per cent. Even if basic education spreads rapidly over the SDG period of 2015–30, these countries will have a large proportion of illiterate adults well into the future.

Figure 8: The spread of literacy among women has been key to the success of the fifty countries

Gender parity indices of adult literacy rates, 1970–84 to 2015



Note: The GPI is not available for all countries in 1970–84 and 1990. Countries are sorted in descending order of the GPI in 2015.

Source: UIS database.

Gender-specific youth literacy rates point to the transformation of societies that the increase in girls' education and literacy are generating (***Table 6***). In 1970–84, only one of the twenty-five countries with data was at gender parity, while in all of the other countries youth literacy rates were much lower among girls compared with boys. By 1990, the situation had barely improved, although four countries out of thirty were now at gender parity. In stark contrast, the EFA periods of 1990–2000 and particularly 2000–15 resulted in the massive enrolment of girls in basic education, whereby in 2015 more than half the fifty countries were at gender parity and a further four had higher female than male youth literacy rates. Only eight of the fifty countries had GPI values below 0.90: Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Pakistan, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Yemen. The pathway followed by Bangladesh – where the GPI increased from 0.61 in 1981 to 0.90 in 2000 and 1.07 in 2015 – is particularly remarkable, although it is far from being an exception: increases in the GPI of more than 0.40 between 1970–84 and 2015 took place in seven other countries, including Yemen and Mozambique, where the GPI was still below 0.90 in 2015. Mali appears to be an exception, where the GPI stagnated at 0.65 between 2000 and 2015.

Table 6: The fifty countries are progressing rapidly towards gender parity in youth literacy

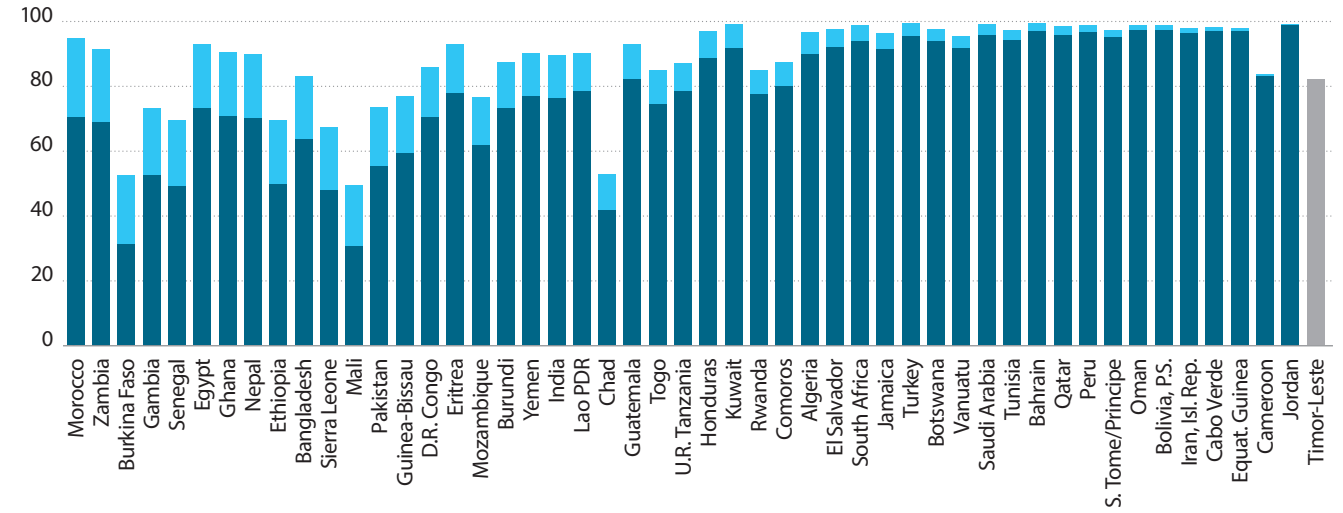
Number of countries by range of GPI, 1970–84 to 2015

	1970–84	1990	2000	2015
Severe gender disparities against women (GPI below 0.90)	22	16	22	8
Gender disparities against women (GPI between 0.90 and 0.97)	2	8	9	11
Gender parity (GPI between 0.97 and 1.03)	1	4	15	27
Gender disparities against men (GPI above 1.03)	0	2	3	4
Number of countries with data	**25**	**30**	**49**	**50**

Source: UIS database.

Figure 9: Some of the fifty countries have reached universal youth literacy, others are progressing fast

Youth literacy rate in 2000 and progress over 2000–15 (per cent)



Youth literacy rate, 2000

Progress 2000-2015

Notes: No figure is available for Timor-Leste in 2000, hence the pink bar indicates the rate achieved in 2015. Countries are sorted by decreasing change in youth literacy between 2000 and 2015 in percentage points.

Source: UIS database.

Trends over fifty years

Conventional, dichotomous literacy figures drawn from census or surveys illustrate the spread of literacy that has taken place since 1950. According to these figures, 86.2 per cent of adults and 91.4 per cent of young people were literate in 2015, which meant that they satisfied the older definitions of literacy such as the ability to read and write, understanding a short, simple statement on their everyday life. The number of illiterate persons was still higher in 2015 than it had been in 1950, owing to rapid population growth, although it had been falling since 1990. Four regional trends stand out:

- Eastern Asia, South-Eastern Asia and to a lesser extent Latin America and the Caribbean have almost universalized literacy thanks to steady progress since the 1960s. Given their large numbers of illiterate adults around 1950, the spread of literacy in Eastern Asia and South-Eastern Asia appears to be the greatest achievement of education policies and literacy interventions in the second half of the twentieth century, having fuelled dramatic economic growth and human development in many countries within these regions.
- In Western Asia and Northern Africa, the rapid spread of literacy among young people – especially young women – is a decisive trend of the 1990s and 2000s. The spread of literacy has contributed to the demand for political freedom and socio-economic development expressed by young people in these regions, and will be crucial to their democratization and stabilization.
- Southern Asia has made considerable progress since 1990, owing to the implementation of universal basic education policies (accompanied with the expansion of private schooling). However, progress has been hampered by factors including the persistence of extreme poverty and conflict in several countries of the region, in which schools are often targeted. The number of illiterate adults has merely stabilized and large-scale adult illiteracy will persist in Southern Asia for decades.

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Ecuador, Ministry of Education, Basic Education for Youth and Adults Project, 2014.

- Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania are facing specific difficulties and cannot be expected to reach universal youth literacy rates by 2030 if current trends continue. Owing to its rapid population growth, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in which the number of illiterate young people has continued increasing since 1990. Reaching universal adult literacy in sub-Saharan Africa may be considered the greatest development challenge of the twenty-first century, given its expected impacts on the status of women, fertility, children's development, economic productivity and political processes. Oceania faces a comparable challenge, with literacy rates stagnating since 2000, at a particularly low level among young people.

The steady global progress towards universal literacy – particularly among youth – is largely due to the significant increases in enrolment and completion of primary education over the last five decades. While expecting that this trend will continue, some children still have no access to school, and the outcome of poor schooling in some places has resulted in large numbers of inadequately literate young adults. Thus, the 745 million youth and adults[28] – of whom 63 per cent are women – who did not benefit from schooling cannot be neglected, meaning that strong policies and effective programmes for youth and adult literacy are essential strategies in the pursuit of learning societies. Therefore, the content and status of female literacy programmes are key when debating questions about quality and equity within the SDG goals (Robinson-Pant 2016).

Section III

Sustained vision, changing approaches

Sustained vision, changing approaches

The conception of adult literacy has significantly changed over the last five decades, influencing the way in which governments and other actors plan and implement literacy programmes.

The thread of changing conceptions

This section follows the development of the concept using four broad conceptions of literacy that characterized successive periods of the last fifty years. These are necessarily somewhat arbitrary, and the period cannot be segmented into discrete sections.

The four categories or trends of understanding literacy are as follows:

- **Literacy as a stand-alone skill**: focused on the decoding and encoding processes in reading and writing, acquired as a stand-alone skill.
- **Functional literacy**: as an instrument to enhance the use of skills and the quality of life and livelihood.
- **Literacy as empowerment**: as a means to understand and question the world and problematize social structures and the exercise of power, reflecting literacy as a liberating process.
- **Literacy as social practice**: approaches taking into account diverse and plural literacies in the varied contexts and lives of learners.

The policies and programmes that will illustrate these trends are not proposed as models, but rather as examples of ways in which the promotion of literacy has progressed in the light of its conceptual development. No evaluation was intended or undertaken in the context of this review, with the selection of programmes based on the extent to which the programme reflected national policy and made a significant impact on literacy progress. The programmes broadly illustrate one of the evolving concepts of literacy as described in the following sections. However, two provisos are necessary:

- Any particular programme may include elements of more than one concept of literacy, whereby programmes illustrate one of the trends of the development of the conception of literacy but cannot be tied exclusively to a single trend. Given that literacy is a complex notion, programmes reflect this complexity, particularly in the way in which they are implemented;
- The historical development of literacy concepts and programmes has not developed in a linear fashion, meaning that some recent programmes may illustrate earlier literacy concepts and some older programmes may foreshadow changing concepts. Therefore, in each of the following sections, the programmes may be drawn from different decades, not necessarily the one in which the concept was initially developed.

The following sections examine how trends in the understanding of literacy over fifty years have been manifested in policy and programmes in the fifty selected countries. It is pertinent to ask why they have made progress through the different approaches that they adopted. Each section below proposes answers to this question by suggesting major factors that made a difference to the impact of literacy efforts, while recognizing that many other variables are part of the equation.

Spain, Lifelong Learning School for Community Development Polígono Sur, 'Networking as an Educational Project', 2014.

Literacy as a stand-alone skill

For centuries, literacy was the preserve of the elite, who used it to record the rulers' decisions and accounts or as guardians and interpreters of holy writings. Early attempts to give the common people access to literacy were often resisted: in the fifteenth century in Korea, King Sejong's development of an alphabet that would replace the need to use Chinese and enable people to read and write directly in Korean took hundreds of years to become the norm. In the sixteenth century, Luther's efforts to enable universal access to holy scriptures by using everyday German – rather than Latin – were welcomed by some but resisted by powerful elites. From the nineteenth century and with growing industrialization, governments in some parts of the world began to promote universal literacy through schooling, perceiving literacy as an individual skill that everyone should acquire as a basis for education and a means of contributing to rapidly-growing national economies.

> ***In countries where there had been no widespread written tradition, illiteracy became an 'evil' to be 'eradicated'.***
>
> *World Conference 1965*

Literacy as a skill – the three Rs: reading, writing, arithmetic[29] – was eventually seen as holding universal value for everyone, whatever their context. In countries where there had been no widespread written tradition, illiteracy became an 'evil' to be 'eradicated' (World Conference 1965), and literacy campaigns emerged as a standardized approach to impart literacy to a large population.

Thus, governments or other large institutions such as development actors organized campaigns to impart literacy to a large population or even a whole country. This approach aimed towards the efficient and extensive transfer of literacy, albeit without consideration of existing patterns of communication – both written and oral – or the diverse purposes for which learners may wish to use written communication. Furthermore, literacy campaigns have often been associated with the propagation of a dominant ideology, either implicitly or explicitly. For example, in the last century, some socialist countries saw literacy promotion as a means of promoting a particular conception of society and of forms of governance, backed by political commitment and social mobilization (Hanemann 2015a).

Nevertheless, even if a campaign was conceived in this way, there was no inevitability about how learners might use literacy. Even within such a top-down process, it is possible for individuals and groups to appropriate literacy for their own purposes, which may contest the dominant ideology.

Morocco, Illiteracy Eradication Directorate, Ministry of National Education, Literacy and Post-literacy Programme, 2012.

Over the last fifty years, large-scale literacy campaigns have taken place in at least twenty countries, with most being organized before 1990. Among the fifty countries included in this review, Hanemann (2015a) indicates that fourteen countries have organized literacy 'campaigns or programmes' of national scale since 2000. In fact, a distinction may be made between a campaign and programme, while the latter being more restricted in scope and targeted towards specific groups within the population rather than the population as a whole. The extent, political visibility, methods, management structures and level of standardization lie along a continuum that is still evolving.

While every 'campaign' has its own origins and is organized in different ways, the examples identified among the fifty countries of this review show some common features in achieving results, namely: political will, governance, reaching large numbers and increasing diversification.

Political will

Literacy campaigns took place at the national level almost by definition and thus depended on the political backing of national leaders and institutions.

The first president of **Tanzania** – himself an educator – gave high priority to adult education as lever of national development and thus launched a mass literacy campaign that promoted a standard literacy in Kiswahili and was based on a philosophy of liberation. This strong, high-level support led to increases in the literacy rate from 61 per cent in 1975 to 91 per cent in 1986 (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training 2012). However, once the president retired, other areas of national development were prioritized and neither the campaign nor the literacy levels could be sustained. Over the last six decades, royal pronouncements in **Morocco** have given repeated impetus to literacy efforts and in particular a major campaign in 2003 that reached one million people (Royaume du Maroc 2004). High-level support of a more ideological nature during the socialist regime (1974-1991) in **Ethiopia** gave rise to a series of six-month campaigns that reached 9.57 million adults through fifteen languages from 1979 to 1983 (Ministry of Education (Ethiopia) 1984). From 1999 to 2004, literacy efforts in **Tunisia** were given continuous support by the president, with the creation of a National Adult Education Programme aiming to raise the adult literacy rate by seven percentage points over five years (République Tunisienne, Ministère de l'Education et de la Formation 2008).

> ***Our present task is therefore primarily that of helping people to acquire the tools of development – the literacy, the knowledge of health needs, the need for improved production, the need to improve dwelling places, and the basic skills necessary to meet all these demands.***
>
> *Julius Nyerere, first President of the United Republic of Tanzania Opening Speech to the International Adult Education Conference, Dar es Salaam, 21 June 1976*

Political will is also expressed through national constitutions, in two ways: first, a general right to education is enshrined in articles of the constitution of most of the countries of this review, often stating that education is free and compulsory; and second, there may be a reference to adult learning or literacy. **Pakistan**'s 1973 constitution recognized the importance of literacy and the need to 'eradicate illiteracy' within the minimum possible time. The Constitution of **Guinea-Bissau** stated that *the State shall consider the elimination of illiteracy as its fundamental task* (Article 16). Similarly, the 2004 Constitution of **Mozambique** spoke of promoting *an educational strategy that aims towards national unity, wiping out illiteracy*… (Article 113). The 1993 Constitution of **Peru** even asserts that '*the State guarantees the eradication of illiteracy*' (Article 17) and the constitution of newly-independent **Sao Tome e Principe** in 1975 addressed the challenge of a literacy rate of only 20 per cent at that time (Viegas and Bonfim 2008) by stating (Article 55) that *the State must eradicate illiteracy*. **Jordan**'s 1952 constitution committed the state *to ensure education […] within the limits of its possibilities* and in the same year instituted an adult learning programme initially targeting military personnel, before broadening it to the whole population. The **Kuwait** Constitution also enshrined the commitment to *eradicate illiteracy* in 1962.

At a more operational level, educational plans and strategies indicate the relative priority of literacy promotion. In successive national plans for development and for education between 1962 and 1985, **Nepal** persistently launched and relaunched literacy campaigns, although by the end of that period it was moving away from a standardized approach towards one that linked literacy with local livelihoods. **India** moved from a smaller farmers' literacy programme in the 1960s to much larger nationwide efforts in 1978, with the formation of the 'National Adult Education Programme' and later the creation of the National Literacy Mission. In a more programmatic way, the Ibero-American cooperation PAEBA (Programa de Alfabetización y Educación Básica de Adultos – Adult Literacy and Basic Education Programme) gave impetus to literacy in **Honduras**, **El Salvador** and **Peru** (as well as Nicaragua, Paraguay and the Dominican Republic) from 1992 until 2010. **Equatorial Guinea** included the right to education in general in its 1991 constitution, but set its commitment to adult literacy in the context of its Action Plan of the National Programme for EFA: it currently has the highest adult literacy rate in sub-Saharan Africa, at 95 per cent in 2015.[30]

Vanuatu and Timor-Leste – both of more recent independence – have addressed literacy promotion through laws and policies in education rather than through constitutional provisions. Thus, **Vanuatu**'s Education Master Plan (1999) provided the basis for new commitments in literacy by working through three programmes – both governmental and non-governmental – linked with rural community development. Programmes incorporate mother-tongue instruction, utilize learning materials translated into local languages and support the acquisition and development of vocational skills. These commitments were further strengthened through the country's *EFA National Plan of Action 2001-2015* and again with the formulation of an *Education Sector Strategy 2007-2015*. While the initiatives were not billed as a 'campaign', they highlighted adult literacy promotion as part of broader 'lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

In the northwest of Malekula Island, **Vanuatu**, Kency Philip, a 19-year old student at the Pektel RTC, explains how the training provides him with a new career path.[31]

> "I attended primary school up to Year 6 (age 12), but then I failed my exam and was pushed out of the school system. I wanted to work and help my family, but I didn't have any skills to offer in the village. Then I heard about the Pektel RTC and I saw that trainees who came to this RTC were serious in their careers (…) Learning carpentry and furniture-making are life skills that I will always be able to use. I want to build my own house or to work in a company to earn income for myself and my family."

In **Timor-Leste**, it was only after the country's effective independence in 2002 that polices addressing literacy were formulated: the National Education Policy of 2007 called for the promotion of non-formal education and adult literacy, leading to the 'eradication of illiteracy'. Action followed quickly, with implementation of a programme based on Cuba's *Yes, I can* methods, with 200,000 people (25 per cent of the population) achieving basic literacy in five years (Apted 2015).

In conclusion, it is clear that political will is central in adopting policies to promote literacy, although it is equally apparent that it is insufficient to ensure implementation, let alone impact. Political will must be accompanied with institutional measures and budget commitments as part of the governance structures that are put in place.

Timor-Leste adopted the Cuban campaign model "Yo, Si Puedo!". Bob Boughton, an Australian academic who led the evaluation team, analysed its success in reaching over 200,000 people.

> "Initially, Cuba provided instructional DVDs/videos in Portuguese, one of the country's official languages. However, because the majority of the low literate population spoke Tetum (an Indigenous lingua franca), the Cuban mission worked with the government to produce a new set "Los, Hau Bele", after which it reached many more people."

Governance

Governance includes the institutions set up for literacy, their decision-making processes, the nature and extent of decentralization and the lines of accountability. This section examines the institutional structures and their impact on literacy promotion. Questions of accountability and decentralization arise in III.3.c below in relation to a particular approach to coordination.

It is noteworthy that policy pronouncements and national commitments to literacy had much greater chances of achieving success when governments created agencies dedicated to literacy promotion or institutionalized a national programme. Egypt, Jamaica the Lao PDR and Yemen are among those that developed such agencies. Already in the early-1970s, **Egypt** took steps towards establishing state structures to promote literacy, with a ten-year plan launched at that time. It was under the impulse of the Jomtien process in 1990 that the General Authority on Literacy and Adult Education (now the General Authority for Adult Education – GAAE) was formed, as a semi-autonomous agency, opening literacy centres across the country. Implementation began in 1993, developing and deploying the official literacy curriculum *Learn and be Enlightened*; indeed, GAAE is the only provider of officially recognized literacy certification.

In 1972, **Jamaica** established the *National Literacy Board*, which later became the Jamaican Movement for the Advancement of Literacy (JAMAL – 1974) and then the Jamaica Foundation for Lifelong Learning (JFLL 2008). Throughout its history, it has maintained its mandate to 'eradicate illiteracy in Jamaica as soon as possible' and 'improve the literacy skills of the population' (JFLL 2008). JAMAL adopted a mass literacy approach, implementing a national literacy campaign that successfully

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Jamaica, Literacy, Adult education.

enrolled 48,000 students in 3,833 classes, reducing illiteracy to 32 per cent by 1975 (JFLL 2008). By the mid-1990s, JAMAL's mass literacy campaign had evolved to include a wider range of literacy education that reflected the changing economic, social and technological environment. In revising their core curriculum to include numeracy, life skills and workplace learning, programming became more relevant and responsive to the needs of the adult population of Jamaica. One such program was the *Autoskills* programme, which allowed adult learners to reinforce literacy and numeracy skills through a modularized computer programme. The programme leveraged technology to allow adult learners to improve their mathematics and English skills at their own pace and receive individualized feedback specific to their learning needs.

In **Jamaica**, Cleopatra Francis was able to join the JAMAL Programme and enjoyed having a second chance to learn.[32]

> "My literacy level was discouragingly low. But I had the passion and ambition that I wanted to get some subjects, because I did not want to remain at the level I was at. I heard about the JAMAL programme from friends of mine, inquired further about it and started attending classes thereafter."

The **Lao PDR** set up a Department of Non-formal Education in 1993 when it was tasked with 'eradicating illiteracy and providing continuing education for ethnic groups nationwide', although its role was hampered by lack of a specific policy on adult education. The latter was only formulated in 2011, with plans for four types of NFE, including literacy and skills development. In 2004, the government partnered with UNESCO to pilot Community Learning Centres (CLCs) in an attempt to spur grass roots community action towards literacy promotion. With UNESCO support, the plans were implemented through a network of CLCs, through which 113,683 people acquired literacy, skills and school equivalency qualifications in 2007-8 (Sengthong 2008). CLCs have become important in developing rural and hard-to-reach communities, where they have been instrumental in improving the quality of life for ethnic minorities and disadvantaged groups, especially for girls and women. CLCs currently serve as the main site of literacy activities, continuing education and basic vocational/skills training.

In 1998, **Yemen** adopted the National Strategy for Literacy and Adult Education for a 22-year period with the goal of raising the literacy levels of almost 2.5 million people and reaching all twenty-one Yemeni governorates (Republic of Yemen, Ministry of Education 2009). The Literacy and Adult Education Organization worked to set up learning levels, identify the beneficiaries, train the trainers and raise awareness 'of the harms of illiteracy' through a media campaign.

Without creating an agency as such, **Tunisia**, Jordan and Sao Tome e Principe have set up sustainable strategies and programmes. In 2000, Tunisia launched the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) to create a knowledge-based society and introduce the principle of lifelong learning. The NAEP structure ensured the monitoring of teacher training and literacy classes, reviewed teaching and learning materials, mobilized the actors in literacy and raised awareness among the communities.

In the early-1950s **Jordan** set up the Adult Learning and Illiteracy Elimination Programme, putting it into a regulatory framework by an Education Act in 1964. Since then, it has been a significant instrument in bringing literacy to youth and adults, achieving a 98 per cent literacy rate by 2015 (UIS). Over the years, the Ministry of Education has worked closely with various stakeholders such as the Ministry of Social Development, UNESCO and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to improve curricula and teaching methods to optimize its relevance and contribution to broader national development. Nevertheless, the fragmentation of non-formal education involving too many providers and partner ministries undermined its effectiveness. This led to the creation of a new structure in 2005, charged with coordinating all areas of adult learning provision.

Sao Tome e Principe developed a literacy programme immediately after independence with the input of Paulo Freire and the literacy rate – particularly among youth – quickly rose to 94 per cent (Viegas and Bonfim 2008). However, no institution or strategy was in place, and the country lost ground. It was not until 2001 that a Literacy Partnership Programme was set up, with external support. By 2008, over 10,000 people had benefited from the programme and this gave impetus for the government to sustain literacy efforts up to the present (Viegas and Bonfim 2008).

Maurilane Biccas, professor and researcher at the Faculty of Education, University of Sao Paulo, Brasil, describes the common thread for the Literacy programme in **Sao Tome and Principe**.[33]

> "The initial idea since the first mission, was always to elaborate a political-pedagogical project from a road map and concepts built together with the country."

Institutionalizing the governance structures of literacy promotion enabled countries to take a more focused approach, professionalize literacy provision and implement policies in a coordinated, long-term and systematic way. Institutions are a necessary condition, but not a sufficient one. Their level of performance depends on budgets and financing (see §IV below) as well as other factors in the socio-economic environment.

Well organized campaigns demonstrated the advantage of being able to reach significant segments of the population, offering large numbers an opportunity to acquire literacy.

Reaching large numbers

Over the last fifty years, the ways in which governments have expressed the objectives of mass literacy campaigns have remained remarkably similar. At some point, almost all have referred to the 'eradication of illiteracy' or the 'fight against illiteracy' (World Conference 1965), using this deficit language rather than the more positive expressions of the same purpose, such as 'promoting literacy for all' or 'universalizing literacy' (UN 2015; UNESCO 2009). While all such expressions – both deficit-based and positive – have been the subject to criticism in more recent decades, they served to mobilize national populations and rally national efforts around a common objective of reaching large numbers of people nationwide with literacy. However, the 'mass campaign' objectives were fundamentally an approach of government to what was considered a problem in the same terms as a disease or even an 'evil' (World Conference 1965) to which a blanket solution could be applied. What remained invisible in planning for these campaigns was the purposes for which people might want or require the use of literacy and the societal patterns of oral and written communication as part of which new literacy competences might be deployed. In this tension lie both the positive results and the drawbacks of the campaign approach: on the one hand, large numbers of people had at a least a fleeting opportunity to acquire literacy competences, although on the other hand, the competences were not embedded in daily purposes of communication and thus had little chance of being sustained. The fifty countries of this review provide some examples of the large numbers being reached through literacy campaigns.

Through the National Policy on Education (1986), to the Total Literacy Campaign (1995) and the Saakshar Bharat Mission (2009), **India** has engaged large-scale efforts to reach the many millions of adults without literacy. As a measure of the results achieved, the National Literacy Mission Authority certified over 14 million adults for their proficiencies in reading, writing and numeracy between 2009 and 2012.[34] In **El Salvador**, the implementation of PAEBA, the National Literacy Programme (since 2010) and other flexible programmes saw youth literacy rates rise to 97.14 by 2012 (GES 2014), with over 1 million adults targeted since 2007: the adult rate (15+) was estimated at almost 89 per cent in 2014 (El Salvador 2015). In Honduras, from 1997 to 2004, 252,395 completed the PAEBA course (all levels), with 52 per cent male participants and 48 per cent female, while 49 per cent of the participants were in the 16-30 age range (MAEC 2005). Peru also participated in PAEBA, with 85,000 learners taking part between 2002 and 2007.

With literacy levels already being relatively high at 94 per cent in that period (UNESCO 2015a), the programme focused on the socially marginalized and remote communities and used ICTs to facilitate access to learning. The programme combined literacy and numeracy with vocational training and offered learners opportunities to transfer to the formal educational system. PAEBA pursued two related outcomes – social and economic – aiming at community development through greater social interaction and improved work performance for economic progress.

An educator from the PAEBA-Peru describes his role within the programme.[35]

> "There are old people and people of all ages, people who have never been to school, people who have failed school, people who have had problems from the start to read and write. Therefore, we need to apply different strategies within the same group to help these people to read, write and progress in their personal development."

In **Tanzania**, the Integrated Community-based Adult Education (ICBAE) programme was created in 1993 to address falling literacy rates. The programme reflected the aim of reaching large numbers of people – thus a 'mass campaign' with national scope – but also adopted the emerging methods of REFLECT[36], which aimed to meet learners' needs in context. The programme had almost 14 million learners between 2000 and 2014 and in the ten years from 2005 to 2014 around 3 million adults acquired literacy competences, while a further 6 million acquired new skills to improve their livelihoods.[37]

A female adult learner from the Qudan'gonyi ICBAE Centre in Hanang District, **Tanzania**, shares how the ICBAE programme has contributed to her personal empowerment.[38]

> "You can see us participating fully in repairing shoes, which was previously looked on as a job for males, but now the ICBAE has empowered us. I can read books, newspapers and write letters to my friends. Besides that, we have formed an income-generating activity, we repair shoes for people in the community and earn income to support our families."

Mozambique, Associação Progresso, Literacy in Local Languages, Springboard for Gender Equality programme, 2015.

In **Morocco**, the new department created in the 1990s (now the Agence Nationale de Lutte contre l'Analphabétisme – National Agency for the Fight against Illiteracy) worked on professionalizing literacy provision – curriculum, cycle, training – all of which were improved as the new millennium began. As a result, 6 million adults participated in the decade from 2002 to 2012, compared with 2 million over the previous twenty years (Royaume du Maroc 2012). In **Egypt**, the results of the campaigns run by the GAAE in the 1997-2009 period showed that the programme reached 8.241 million people, 48 per cent of whom were women, with 69 per cent overall being 'successful' (Arab Republic of Egypt 2008; Ministry of Education – Egypt 2010). Between 1996 and 2010, Egypt boosted its adult literacy rate from 60 per cent to 75 per cent (Ministry of Education – Egypt 2010), while the youth literacy rate rose from 73 per cent to 89 per cent.

Following a philosophy of education that is based on the quest of knowledge and considers literacy as the major means to empowering communities, individual and society, **Kuwait** extended its National Illiteracy Eradication programme launched in 1964 to the large contingent of foreign workers in 2013. The Ministry of Education counts eighty-five literacy centres equally divided for men and women, with 20,000 enrolled in 2014.[39] The country has one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab world at 96.1 per cent in 2015.

Both **Mozambique** and **Guinea-Bissau** adopted national objectives to 'eradicate illiteracy' but have struggled to achieve effective results. This is partly owing to a low resource base, but perhaps also due to a hesitant use of the languages people speak, delivering literacy programmes to a large extent in Portuguese, a factor that Paulo Freire – who assisted Guinea-Bissau in organizing its campaign – identified as problematic, tending to reinforce social cleavages rather than solving them (Freire and Faúndez 1985).

Equatorial Guinea also aimed at the eradication of illiteracy in 2003, but in practice targeted specific groups where literacy rates were weak, namely among young and adult women in poor, remote areas. In 2007, the government approved the National Education Programme for Adult, Young and Adolescent Women in Illiteracy Situation, which combines literacy, vocational training and microcredits, leading to a wider women's literacy thrust from 2009.

In **Equatorial Guinea**, Eulalia Envó Bela, Minister of Social Affairs and Promotion of Women, explains her vision of education as a vector for women's empowerment.[40]

> ❝ Only an education can help women not to be discriminated against and excluded from a true social participation. ❞

Those who participated in campaigns often lacked sufficient time to practice and become fluent readers[41] and thus some lost their skills through lack of use; moreover, campaigns rarely provided opportunities for continued learning. The objectives of the campaign approach were overwhelmingly numerical, concerned to 'make the masses literate', whatever the human, educational or social benefits might or might not be. However, the campaign approach was by no means monolithic and it evolved in its objectives and processes, as the next section will show.

Towards a diversified approach

A central question in literacy campaigns is the extent to which they take into account the diversity of the population that they seek to reach. Reaching the maximum number of people frequently entails using a single curriculum with standardized materials and a common aim. However, most countries must address populations in diverse circumstances. Recognizing the need for a variety of approaches implies moving from a supply-driven to more of a demand-driven process, where consideration of the characteristics, needs and patterns of communication of learners becomes a central vector in planning (see Easton 2014).

Thus, the notion of a literacy campaign has evolved over the years, given that the expression of objectives, governance and organization have changed in many countries. This is clearly illustrated by the case of **Nepal**. In the early-1950s, adult literacy was one of the government's major targets, as it was considered as '*critically essential to the development and survival of democracy*'. By the 1980s, the concept of the CLC was developed, while by the end of the 1990s the concept had been revitalized and further broadened from a 'reading' centre to a 'learning' centre. CLCs provided basic literacy instruction but integrated it into broader learning purposes. In 2008, the policies adopted by the Non-formal Adult Education Centre (NFEC) (Dahal 2008) gave pride of place to CLCs as local 'centres of educational activities' under community responsibility and charged with offering learning opportunities with multiple approaches and local relevance. The same policies also included a statement that 'the literacy campaign will be developed as the main policy strategy for the eradication of illiteracy…'. Thus, the national-level discourse of a 'campaign' and its objectives are retained, while governance and delivery are localized. The 'campaign' becomes national in terms of political will, but local in terms of organization.

Nepal, children doing exercises at Jagadguru School, 2013.

Ethiopia, reading session in a group, 2016.

The **Moroccan** programme diversified its delivery structures to the extent that by 2012 1,179 NGOs/community-based organizations (CBOs) were contracted to provide functionally-oriented literacy instruction (Royaume du Maroc 2012). **India** recognized that its national campaigns had suffered from a lack of effective mobilization at the local level. The objectives now cover vocational education and skill development, applied science and sports, as well as basic literacy/basic education. The mission's focus is on women and adolescents, with gender considered in conjunction with caste, ethnicity, religion and disability. The mission has developed specific targets and strategies tailored to addressing the nuances inhibiting the acquisition of literacy within each community. Due to this revised approach, Saakshar Bharat is described as a 'people's programme', with the government acting as facilitator and resource provider while working closely with local communities to tailor the programme to their needs, across 372 districts.[42]

In terms of broadening objectives, the provincial efforts in Punjab (**Pakistan**) face the challenge of over 27 million adults without literacy (Ministry of Education 2014) and it is the only province with a government department dedicated to literacy and non-formal education. It has persisted in organizing general literacy programmes, as well as introducing more targeted interventions; for example, focused on rural women and livelihoods. Evaluations have shown that the Non-Formal Literacy Education Programme in Pakistan have benefited around 0.81 million out-of-school children, youth and adults (60 per cent of them female), by equipping learners not only with basic literacy competences but also with skills to pursue a decent livelihood, contributing towards the social and economic development of their families and communities.[43] One of the major impacts of the programme has been promoting a culture of intergenerational and lifelong learning by changing people's perceptions about the importance of education in everyday life. The distribution of free teaching-learning materials as well as the recruitment and training of facilitators and advocacy campaigns through mass media supported the programme's implementation.

Similar developments have taken place in **Ethiopia**, where the National Adult Education Strategy shifted to a more functional approach in 2008, with a broadening of focus to include life skills such as primary health care, the prevention of diseases, family planning, environment, agriculture, marketing, banking and gender issues. Increasingly, partnerships in literacy provision developed with civil society organizations: 40 were listed in 2008 (FDRE 2008). The fourth plan (2010-2015) made Integrated Functional Adult literacy one of the priorities and allocated over 8 per cent of the education budget (Gelena 2014). As a result of increased political support and funding, the total number of adults enrolled in the two-year Functional Adult Literacy programme rose between 2007/8 and 2012/13, from 152,763 to

3,415,776, although it is unclear how many completed. In 2014, the target was to enrol 10.6 million learners, of which 4.1 million actually enrolled (Ministry of Education (Ethiopia) 2014). The adult literacy rate was expected to reach 49 per cent in 2015, up from 35 per cent in 2003, which also demonstrates the size of the ongoing literacy challenge.

National campaigns have made significant contributions to increasing the headline rates of adult literacy through their coverage and the mobilization that they have achieved. The criticisms that such short-term investments and a lack of attention to the purposes and literate environments of learners are valid, whereby large-scale national programmes will need to evolve if relevant lifelong learning opportunities are to be accessible and effective. Hanemann (2015a) pointed out that campaigns may have their origins in political ambitions, although implementation shows that a more nuanced approach is required, even if large-scale efforts continue.

Functional literacy

The 1970s saw a move towards linking literacy with development and with vocational skills, reflecting a recognition that literacy serves as a key competence in the pursuit of socio-economic development. Labelled 'functional literacy', it went beyond the concept of literacy as a universal stand-alone skill and focused on its role in acquiring or improving the skills necessary to sustain a viable livelihood (World Conference 1965; UNESCO 1978). Thus, this approach engendered efforts to promote literacy in the context of the vocational needs of learners, and the Experimental World Literacy Programme (UNESCO/UNDP 1976) embodied this approach. Promoted internationally by UN agencies, it initiated programmes across eleven countries: Algeria, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guinea, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Madagascar, Mali, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Republic of Tanzania. Assessments of this programme indicated that the approach was too narrowly conceived (Lind 2008) and gave little attention to the communicative purposes of literacy beyond its instrumental function in the context of the working environment.

In the following decades, the concept of functional literacy was taken up in a more diversified manner as literacy learning was seen as a means to expand development opportunities of all kinds, in particular enabling those hitherto without access to literacy to use written communication in developing their livelihoods. The focus was largely on small-scale initiatives that individuals and groups could undertake at the community level, through gaining access to new knowledge (on agriculture, processing and marketing produce, crafts and trades), acquiring better management skills (keeping accounts, documenting meetings and decisions, recording harvests, managing irrigation) or participating in economic networks (cooperatives, government registration, funding proposals and reports). Functional literacy also made links to areas of knowledge where heightened awareness could lead to improved quality of life, such as mother, child and reproductive health, HIV and AIDS prevention and care, environmental conservation and civic participation.

The increased attention to functional literacy became visible in two ways: first, in the discourse and policy pronouncements of government and other agencies; and second, in the way in which literacy learning programmes made connections with livelihoods and improvements in the quality of life.

'Functional' discourse

In shaping the perceptions of the functional value of literacy, a clear expression of support for this approach was critical, resulting in the inclusion of 'functional' discourse in policies and plans.

Turkey's Primary Education Law of 1961 already guaranteed that 'citizens who are out of primary education age or those who could not continue his/her education for any reason' are given the right to receive education in remedial classrooms and courses to increase general knowledge as a means to access better career and educational opportunities. 1973 saw the integration of adult education into the education system, and in 1983 a Regulation on Non-Formal Education called for basic literacy, numeracy, vocational skills and skills for income-generating activities as a top priority of adult education. Basic literacy is considered to be only a first level on the road to social and cultural skills, training for economic activity and programmes on health and environment.

The Constitution of **Algeria** – adopted in 1963 and revised in 2008 – promulgated education as a fundamental vector of socio-economic change. A National Literacy Centre was established in 1964 (now a National Office of Literacy and Adult Education) to design and implement a strategy to 'fight against illiteracy' and promote continuing education. The functional focus increased in 2004 when the 'globalisation of the economy' and the resulting 'merciless competition' led to strengthened literacy efforts, particularly among women and rural populations (Ministère de l'Education Nationale (Algérie) 2004).

In sub-Saharan Africa, **Zambia** first introduced 'functional literacy' in 1971 as a means of teaching adult literacy learners to apply knowledge to solve community and personal problems. Despite having no formal policy or qualifications framework in place at the time, skills development programmes developed, especially in agriculture. In the Education Sector Plan 2008-2010, the government recognized adult literacy 'as a critical instrument in the eradication of poverty' and in 2012 the First Draft of the National Policy of Adult Education was introduced. It defined literacy not only in terms of individual skill but also as 'for use and application for effective functioning of self, family, community and environment in which one is found'. Under this policy,

Bangladesh, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, 'Ganokendra' Programme, 2013.

the focus of adult education was to provide training in basic literacy and numeracy, entrepreneurship, ICT, civic education, environment and health education.

As observed in the previous section, the discourse of 'campaigns' not only has a long history but also continues at present. Therefore, the shift to a more functional approach occurred alongside the earlier trend, and functional approaches continue to attract wide-ranging support. In **Bangladesh**, the 1972 Constitution of the newly-independent country committed the state to 'removing illiteracy' and two large campaigns ensued in the following two decades. It was not until 2000 – under the impulse of a poverty reduction strategy and the MDGs – that a policy on non-formal education, including adult literacy, was formulated, setting literacy in the context of 'access to lifelong learning opportunities for improving the quality of life' (p.5) and the acquisition of livelihood skills. This more functional approach found further expression in the 2012 definition of literacy, which concluded by stating that it 'involves a continuum of learning that enables individuals to develop their potentials and knowledge base and to participate fully in community affairs and wider social and developmental context' (UNESCO 2005a).

Following independence in 1975, the **Comoros** engaged in two series of large-scale campaigns, although it was not until 2005 that formal educational planning in the context of the EFA goals was undertaken. In that framework, promoting adult literacy was linked with problem-solving, job training and ongoing learning. Development plans from 2006 also stressed the connections between education and the socio-economic development of the country. The Intermediate Plan 2013-2015 spoke explicitly of promoting the provision of functional literacy and 'pre-vocational post-literacy'.

Pre-dating the current constitution (adopted in 1997) in **Gambia**, reference to functional literacy was already a focus of the 1988-2003 Education Policy. The National Declaration of Education in the year following the adoption of the constitution included youth and adults, although it was not until the National Education Policy of 2004-2015 that the notion of 'functional literacy' returned, in the context of a demand-driven and community-focused approach. In **Ghana**, the first constitution of the independent country (1961) laid down the principle of the right to education for all citizens, and the revised constitution of 1992 (Article 38 Section 1d) states that 'functional literacy shall be encouraged or intensified as far as possible', linking it with

'free vocational training'. The Free and Compulsory Education Act of 1995 drew attention to the gap between women and men, serving as a stimulus for NGOs to become active in education for women's empowerment and broader development-related literacy, as exemplified in the next section.

The **Eritrean** constitution (1997) enshrined the right to 'equal access to […] education' for all citizens, with some smaller literacy projects being carried out during that decade. A National Policy on Adult Education (2005) gave the definition of adult learning as 'literacy and continuing education that embraces […] advocacy and civic education, life skills and vocational training programmes'.

Since the end of the civil war in **Sierra Leone** in 2002, the government has set the promotion of literacy in the context of poverty reduction. The ensuing Education Sector Plan (2007) linked literacy with skills development 'with the aim of bringing about an improvement in the quality of life and the achievement of sustainable development'. Moreover, it also noted that 'literate parents are more likely to send their children to school'. Thus, adult literacy was also seen as a key component of promoting universal primary schooling.

For learners on the ground, it was not merely the discourse of functional literacy that made a difference, but particularly the ways in which literacy promotion connected with the possibilities of improving their quality of life.

Functional connections

Literacy learning programmes may make functional connections between literacy and its application in various domains of life and livelihood in different ways. As shown in the discourse noted above, the literacy acquisition process may lead to other kinds of training later, or participation in other development activities once a level of literacy has been achieved: an approach sometimes known as 'literacy first' (Rogers 2000). Alternatively, literacy learning may take place together with the learning of other skills; for example, training in marketing produce may include teaching literacy as needed to make the most of the livelihood skill.

In the programmes of Eritrea, Turkey, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, the gender dimension is a central feature in that the creation of new opportunities and autonomy for women is in focus (cf UN 1996). The examples demonstrate that functional literacy goes beyond the mere assimilation of new skills and facilitates their use in empowering women to gain a new place and status in society, while recognizing that other societal factors also constrain or enable more equitable gender relations.

In **Bangladesh**, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM) – an NGO active in promoting CLCs since 1992 – enrols learners first in basic literacy courses and then in 'post-literacy' courses. In fact, use of the term 'post-literacy' is an indication that initial literacy is taught separately, with its applications addressed in later courses. In the case of the CLCs, they addressed a wide range of further skills: in addition to vocational and livelihood training, the process of learning also addressed important intangible areas such as peaceful coexistence, social empowerment and cultural promotion.

When Amina enrolled for the literacy classes in the Narshangdi District, **Bangladesh**, she was 39, newly-widowed and left destitute with three young children. She shares how the Dhaka Ahsania Mission programme has changed her life.[44]

> "Literacy and skills training through Chaderhat Ganokendra changed my life. The loan from the micro-finance programme of DAM was a great support to apply my training in banana cultivation. Now I earn enough to feed my family, which was a big dream for me. I also go around helping others take care of their banana gardens. I encourage other distressed women to become self-reliant citing my own example. I am sure many poor families can change their condition with education and training from Ganokendra backed up by small loans from a local institution."

In the **Comoros**, basic literacy was followed by training to set up income-generating initiatives, drawing on the expertise from a range of different organizations, principally NGOs. The national literacy agency gained support from the Technical and Vocational Training Office for courses supporting women's groups.

The National Women and Development Network (Réseau National des Femmes et Développement RNFD) is promoting literacy for women in rural environments in **Comoros**. Jacqueline Assoumany, the president, shares her thoughts.[45]

> "I retired in 2004 and continued to progress. I was appointed as the head of the education department within the national network of women and development … I thought I had the chance to study so why not help these women."

After independence, **Eritrea**'s Ministry of Education carried out small and fragmented literacy projects, supported by other branches of government and targeting women, the army and prisoners. Under the 2005 National Policy of Adult Education, Eritrea organized literacy and post-literacy courses, with the latter focusing on vocational and life skills training, advocacy, communication, language and computer training. In addition, radio programmes supported learning in health and agriculture, as well as targeting teachers to improve their instructional techniques. Rural community libraries are also part of the strategy to enable learners to exercise their literacy competences.

In **Ghana**, the NGO Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation launched its literacy programmes in 1972 in rural areas, using twenty-two local languages. Functional literacy training is followed by advanced literacy in the local language and English, covering topics such as HIV prevention, income generation, a rights-based approach to empowerment and promoting gender equality. The functional component also includes business-related techniques from start-up to marketing, together with raising learners' awareness of citizen rights and peaceful ways of reform. It is noteworthy that over 500,000 people have gained literacy skills since the organization's inception.[46]

The Mother-Child Education Foundation in **Turkey** partnered with the government from 1995, first to run a functional literacy programme for adults, and later a project focusing on women's education. In 2011, the Foundation initiated a Web-Based Literacy Programme aimed at newly-literate youth and adults wishing to strengthen their literacy competences or prepare for first- and second-level literacy examinations. A 2012 evaluation (Durgunoğlu and Gençay 2013) found that those using web-based learning performed as well as a control group learning face to face, while they also acquired new ICT skills in the process. This kind of literacy reinforcement combined with learning to use technology foreshadows the way in which literacy learning is likely to evolve.

In **Turkey**, the Father Support Programme is a Mother-Child Education Foundation's programme that empowers fathers, as a participant testifies.[47]

> "The programme showed us the way, rather than made us change. It gave me some basic, technical knowledge (…) It enabled me to implement my ideas better."

Programmes in Zambia, Gambia, Sierra Leone and Algeria exemplify the approach of embedding literacy learning in programmes that also teach other skills. **Zambia**'s 2012 policy pushed for greater links between literacy programmes and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), partly based on the experience of organizations such as the People's Action Forum (PAF). Founded in 1994, PAF's programmes addressed the 'helplessness' of rural people and promoted awareness of their rights and empowerment to take control of their own destinies. Using the REFLECT approach to literacy, communities prioritized their needs and solutions, often combining literacy with food security, health issues, economic empowerment and advocacy with other partners. Within a framework of decentralized implementation, NGOs and CBOs in **Gambia** designed adult and non-formal education programmes in accordance with specific ecological, economic and cultural conditions in different regions of the country. The Foundation for Research on Women's Health Productivity and the Environment (BAFROW 2016a,b) has worked in reproductive health education since 1990, together with literacy and relevant reading material in the women's local language. Building skills in communication, advocacy and lobbying and community mobilization was also part of the learning process. Learners' high motivation for this approach led to an increase in women's literacy from 10 per cent in 1990 to 70 per cent in 2010 (BAFROW 2016b).

During the war in **Sierra Leone**, some adult and out-of-school education programmes took place and now the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in partnership with various local NGOs implements community education and adult literacy programmes. In 2007, the Support to Strengthen the Capacity of the Community Education Centres for Literacy and Vocational Skills for Women and Girls programme was launched to target functionally illiterate youths and adults as an integrated programme combining literacy, vocational and life skills training activities with the provision of financial and technical assistance, enabling participants to establish income-generating activities. The community plays a critical role in the implementation of the programme and provides venues for literacy classes in so-called Community Education Centres. However, adult learning has no overall institutional framework and ambiguities surround the use of languages in the programmes.

In 2006, the Ministry of Education of **Saudi Arabia** launched a community-based adult literacy programme in underprivileged communities throughout Saudi Arabia. The programme – called 'Learning Neighbourhood' – offers educational and vocational training in non-formal settings to support lifelong learning among less-privileged women. The aim is to empower these women, educationally, economically and socially. In 2015, the programme was running in seventy-seven locations throughout Saudi Arabia, with a total enrolment of 55,646 learners since its inception.[48]

The **Algerian** Literacy Association –known by the Arabic acronym IQRAA (meaning *Read*) – established in 1990, focused on women's literacy with the dual aim of providing literacy learning opportunities and promoting human development. This meant not only linking literacy with training in trades and income generation, but also developing intangible skills for women's empowerment such as solidarity, human rights, respect, gender equality and economic autonomy. Literacy is seen as one means of learning other skills and becoming more independent in society. It is worth noting that IQRAA has contributed to the lives of over 1.6 million people since its inception, 90 per cent of whom are women.[49]

Soumya, a 46-year-old embroiderer and former learner in Attatba, Wilaya de Tipaza in **Algeria**, shares her gratitude for the possibilities that the Literacy Training and Integration of Women Programme has brought her.[50]

> "Our centre is a centre of reconciliation. It has allowed us to meet other people; to get to know each other and to share our daily worries (…) It has especially helped us to build the peace we were aspiring to. Then, I enjoyed the benefits of microcredit given by the State and I created my own studio. Today I live for my work; and four girls from the village are working with me, isn't life grand?"

In conclusion, the functional connections of literacy lie along a continuum, whereby literacy is acquired first and separately or – at the other end of the spectrum – learned only insofar as it is a necessary part of learning other skills. The evolving understanding of literacy leads towards the latter position, reflecting a more embedded approach, taking full account of the purposes, conditions and contexts of its use, with the recognition that literacy is only as valuable as the uses to which people wish to put it. As Rogers (2001b) argued, the search for a deeper understanding of the links between literacy and development leave us with questions about whose literacy and whose development will be pursued and sets those discussions at the heart of determining what impact literacy may have.

Coordinating functional literacy provision

In the 1990s, the government of Senegal re-examined its approach to national development and moved towards putting communities at the centre of development interventions and efforts. This process led to a commitment to respect and work with the diversity of Senegal's communities and seek ways of conjoining the efforts of the state with those of civil society, the private sector and communities themselves. This required partnerships based on principles of transparency, responsibility, equity, effectiveness, efficiency, rule of law and corruption control (Diagne and Sall 2006). In the area of adult literacy promotion, this gave rise to a new strategy based on partnership between central government and organizations of civil society, including national and international NGOs and CBOs.

Algeria, Algerian Association for Literacy IQRAA, programme 'Literacy, training and Integration of Women', 2014.

Mali, Association of Women Teachers in Mali (AFEM), Training Centre.

Based on outsourcing to such organizations – or *faire faire*, as it was coined in French – literacy programmes were to be implemented locally in accordance with local needs and conditions, using local languages and drawing on cultural patterns of community organization. This model introduced flexibility into literacy programming, giving freedom to design the process of literacy learning, produce local materials and link literacy with the livelihoods and other needs as defined by local people.

The *faire faire* model brought literacy learning closer to the purposes and aspirations of the learners and proved effective in embedding literacy more strongly in the local social and economic fabric. As a result, the model has been taken up across West Africa and beyond. Programmes in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Senegal and Togo – countries included in this review – all reflect the *faire faire* approach.

Senegal developed a project (PAPA project – Projet d'Appui au Plan d'Action) for financing, standard-setting, quality control, monitoring and evaluation that was essential to ensure a positive impact through the many partner organizations. The project also focused on developing the national capacities needed for the *faire faire* approach and enabled experimentation with alternative delivery modes on the ground. In 2001, the Constitution (article 21) enshrined the responsibility of the national institutions from the public and private sectors to actively participate and join in the national effort for literacy.

In **Mali**, the literacy challenge is considerable, with 76 per cent of adults without literacy in 2008 (Aitchison and Alidou 2009), although efforts date back to the 1960s. Since 1995, the government of Mali has adopted the *faire faire* strategy and encouraged civil society involvement. The rate of adults without literacy had reduced to 66 per cent by 2015 as a result of the activities of civil society partners. In order to foster common objectives and mutual trust as key elements for efficient collaboration, the government of Mali created a National Consensus Subcommittee for the Development of Non-Formal Education (Sous Comité National de Concertation pour le Développement de l'Education Non Formelle SCNCDENF).

TOSTAN is an international NGO based in Africa that began promoting literacy in the early-1990s and became a partner in the *faire faire* strategy first in Senegal. It has improved the educational situation of women learners not only by increasing the literacy rate but also by improving health and living conditions. TOSTAN has reached 176 communities in ten regions and opened a training centre with the aim of sharing its philosophy and model with others. The programme has been implemented in twenty-two national languages in ten countries including Mali – in forty communities across two regions – and has had a positive impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.[51] In 2010, the Government of Senegal and their partners decided to adopt TOSTAN's human rights model as the centrepiece of their National Action Plan to end female genital cutting, based on the results of a study conducted by the Senegalese Government's Ministry

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Senegal, Tostan Literacy Project, Village of Cheikh Anta Diop.

of Family Affairs, National Solidarity and Women's Enterprise and Microcredit. Such an impact illustrates the added value of the *faire faire* framework of participation and consensus in which literacy stakeholders work.

In Mali and Senegal, the **Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme** (CEP) works with rural and remote African communities to bring positive social transformation and sustainable development. Learners from Mali and Senegal share their experience with the programme.[52]

> "The Tostan programme allowed me to be more open to ideas. In class we learn many things that allow us to be informed and participatory.
>
> This education has given us so much that makes a difference in our daily lives. We take the kids to the hospital when they are ill rather than try to treat them ourselves with leaves and plants. We understand the importance of washing our hands, and we have cleared off any branches and water puddles that attract malaria mosquitoes. Now, we clean the entire village once a week."

Following a number of literacy campaigns and programmes conducted from independence until the late-1980s, **Burkina Faso** adopted a stronger literacy policy in 1988 and established a Ministry of Basic Education and Mass Literacy. Despite its name – which is reminiscent of a campaign approach – literacy programmes were organized at the community level with civil society engagement, leading to the adoption of the *faire faire* strategy in 1999. In terms of implementation, Burkina Faso established a Fund for Literacy and Non-Formal Education (FONAENF) to allocate public funds to support programmes proposed by literacy providers. Through these partnerships, educational opportunities expanded and diversified, while the government played its role of quality control through monitoring and evaluation of the learning process.

The *Tin Tua* association is one Burkinabe NGO promoting literacy at the local level, which has developed a curriculum in five local languages covering basic literacy and numeracy skills, linked to adapting appropriate technologies to fight against desertification and improve agriculture, health, traditional livestock and crafts. *Tin Tua* reaches some 40,000 learners annually, half of whom are women, across some 750 villages of the country, where the rural literacy rate is one of the lowest in the world at 26 per cent, as well as only 18 per cent for women.[53]

The *faire faire* approach in **Togo** dates more recently. Adopted in 2010, it followed four decades of varying attention to the literacy challenge. In 1988, the Togolese cotton society SOTOCO implemented a large literacy campaign that had an impact on production by developing skills to use new techniques and manage production. Within the poverty reduction programme, the government initiated literacy programmes in 1997 including

Chad, Federation of Associations for the Promotion of Guera Languages, Mother Tongue Literacy in the Guera Region programme, 2013.

gender, human rights, peacebuilding and tolerance. The government continues to devote efforts to literacy programmes within the Accelerated Growth and Promotion of Employment Strategy and will implement the *faire faire* strategy in its Education Sector Plan 2010-2020 to better support rural communities' initiative in literacy activities and create a support fund.

Since the 1990s, **Chad** has developed a series of plans to promote education, including adult literacy: the adult literacy rate stood at 28 per cent in 2000 (UIS). The EFA movement gave added impetus, with three successive education plans (PARSET[54] – Chad Education Sector Reform Project 2002-2015) focused on the impact on poverty reduction. Chad officially implemented the *faire faire* strategy in 2000. The language of literacy learning is the learner's mother tongue with a potential transition to official languages of French and Arabic. *Faire faire* is structured to provide overall coordination, while communities themselves initiate literacy programmes and are in charge of facilitators and the literacy centres.

The *Federation of Associations for the Promotion of the Guera Languages* (FAPLG) is a civil society organization formed in 2001 with the aim of developing the twenty-six languages of the Guera region, promoting language teaching and education and creating income-generating activities to improve the very low levels of literacy by 2025, as well as promoting the continuing education of farmers, especially women.[55] In 2012, key actors including the FAPLG participated in decisions on the National Literacy Plan for Chad, which prepared a guide based on the reality of the country and especially each community.

Adama Ali is a learner enrolled with the **FAPLG classes** who lives in Banda, southern Chad in the Daju community. He describes the impact of literacy on her daily life.[56]

> ❝ I got married when I was very young; I didn't have the opportunity to go to school like the other girls in the town, who have now become civil servants, but now, with what I have learnt at the literacy centre, I'm very happy because I can read and write. My life has changed, and I can be better organized at home. ❞

In summary, the *faire faire* approach has enabled increased efforts for literacy through a substantial joint commitment of the state with technical and financial partners in meeting challenges, responding to local purposes and using local languages. Questions of coordination and quality control remain, although the strategy has enabled increased efforts in meeting the vast literacy challenge that countries in West and Central Africa continue to face.

The functional approach connected literacy with knowledge and skills that were directly relevant to the livelihoods of the learners. However, it paid less attention to the broader context of the place of the learner in society and the social structures within which the learner acquired and practised literacy. This was to change with the advent of empowering strategies.

Literacy for empowerment

Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator and winner of a UNESCO International Literacy Prize in 1975, pioneered an approach to literacy learning that moved away from the mere provision or delivery of literacy towards questions of what literacy might mean for marginalized and poor populations, putting learners as 'change agents' at the centre of the process. Concerned that both education and development were done to people by others, he developed the literacy learning process as a locus of 'conscientization' in the course of which communities became aware of the social structures that kept them poor and marginalized and the possibility of them taking charge of change. Freire's critique of 'banking' and 'domesticating' types of education challenged conventional, top-down, pre-packaged teaching, proposing rather to start with key words that expressed the concerns and social structures that learners faced (Freire 1973). He reconceptualized literacy as a radical political act, 'breaking the silence' of oppression and questioning the structures that maintain it. In literacy learning, the learner-facilitator relationship becomes the central dynamic of the dialogue, which 'problematizes' the socio-political context and leads to transformation and social change (Bartlett 2010). Through this process of critical thinking and transformation more than through its instrumentality, literacy may empower people to act in new ways. The political impact of literacy was articulated internationally in the Persepolis Declaration of 1975, seeing literacy as 'a contribution to the liberation of man *[sic]* and to his full development' (Declaration of Persepolis 1976).

> ***'To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate those techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands: it is to communicate graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorising sentences, words or syllables – lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe – but rather an attitude of creation and re-creation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one's context.'***
>
> *Paulo Freire. 1973. Education: The Practice of Freedom*

In the 1990s, Freire's approach was taken up in the REFLECT method, which put literacy learning in the context of community mobilization based on an analysis of the local socio-economic and cultural context (Archer and Cottingham 1996a). No prior learning materials were given, but literacy competences developed as community members wrote down key words and phrases from the discussion. Freire's own approach and REFLECT both put literacy learning in the framework of human rights, aiming to give voice to those whose rights were limited or denied (cf also CONFINTEA V 1997). The REFLECT method worked with small groups at the community level and thus reached limited numbers of learners.

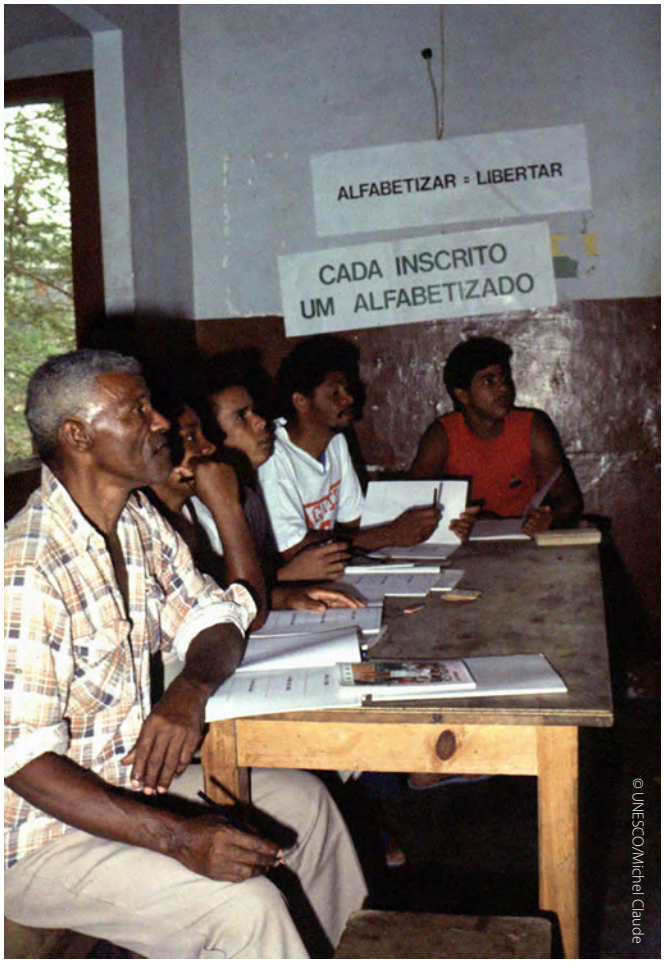
In terms of development processes, empowerment may be broadly understood as 'power through greater confidence in one's ability to successfully undertake some form of action' (Oakley and Clayton 2000:4). Other aspects may include the extension of networks and relations with other organizations, or enabling increasing access to economic resources (ibid.). Programmes from the fifty selected countries illustrate the pursuit of literacy for empowerment in two ways: first, by defining the objectives and outcomes of literacy learning in terms of enabling learners to act more consciously to change their own environment; and second, by the way in which the educator has assumed the role of a facilitator of a process, rather than a transmitter of knowledge.

Empowering objectives

Cabo Verde was one country – among others already cited – that took up Freire's approach, even though the constitution kept the language of 'eradicating illiteracy'. Since independence in 1975, Cabo Verde has given high priority to adult literacy and education, investing over 8 per cent of its national education budget in these programmes (Aitchison and Alidou 2009). It is also one of the few countries that developed a systematic policy after the fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V 1997), including legislative and administrative frameworks. Using Crioulo – the national language – the resulting Adult Learning and Education programme (EdFoA) aims at empowering people to exercise a profession, boosting confidence and self-esteem in learning that draws on the lessons of real life, as Freire advocated. The programme – implemented by the Ministry of Education – provides graduates with certification recognized by the State. Furthermore, the teachers are trained and have the same social status and compensation as the teachers of the formal education sector. A country study found that 12 per cent of the population participate in adult learning programmes (Aitchison and Alidou 2009).

Lourença de Brito, a learner from Ribeira Grande de Santiago in **Cabo Verde**, shares her joy about the positive impact of the EdFoA programme.[57]

> "If I had been sent to school when I was a little girl, I would certainly be somebody today because I'm inquisitive. But I wasn't sent to school because I had to work on the farm, tend the animals and fetch wood. Now I am really happy and only God knows what joy I feel!"



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Cape Verde, Sao Felipe prison.

In the Great Lakes region of Africa in particular, rights-based literacy programmes have been part of responses to conflict, whether organized by government or civil society organizations. The response has often been twofold: literacy as a means to develop productive skills in an effort to rebuild broken livelihoods (Rwanda) and literacy learning as a process of dialogue aiming at peacebuilding (Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi – see following section).

Rwanda's dreadful suffering in the 1990s partly resulted from a manipulation of uneducated members of society by ruling elites, as indicated in the National Report for CONFINTEA VI (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, département de l'Alphabétisation. 2008). Since then, the government's literacy and adult learning strategy has aimed to develop 'a literate society where all Rwandans have access to, and make full use of reading and writing and life skills for personal, family, community and national development, thus contributing to building a peaceful and prosperous country' (Republic of Rwanda 2014). With over one million members nationwide, the Pentecostal Church of Rwanda has contributed to this strategy by emphasizing the 'holistic development of human beings' based on respect for human values. To further this objective, the church has developed training in productive skills in vocational training centres throughout the country, in addition to basic literacy. This approach promotes the dignity of work and, beyond technical skills, gives new purpose in constructing individual and collective futures.

Elias Musabyimana, living in the Kabuga Region, reflects on the change brought about in his life by the literacy programme of the Pentecostal Church of **Rwanda**, as well as his ensuing dedication to helping his country.[58]

> "When I was 11 years old, a Pastor took me to a literacy class. That was what made me interested in going to primary school. After school I became committed to serving the Rwandese community torn apart by genocide, to build peace through literacy… I am proud to serve others as my church has served me."

Freire's influence has been felt around the world (Bartlett 2010), nowhere more so than in his native Latin America. Bolivia and Guatemala both drew on Freirean approaches in promoting literacy among marginalized groups, many of which were indigenous groups.

Despite sporadic efforts to promote education since the independence of **Bolivia** in 1825, there was still no universal education fifty years ago: it remained the preserve of the elite, while the indigenous populations of the country were either assimilated into the 'mainstream' or simply left out. Even though the 1938 constitution already enshrined the right to free and compulsory education, it was not applied. As primary education gained ground after the reform of 1995, the adult literacy rate climbed from 80 per cent in 1992 to 96 per cent in 2014 (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia 2014). From 2006 onwards, a national literacy effort also contributed to the rise in literacy. The current Constitution of Bolivia (2009) enshrines the right to education without discrimination.

Drawing on the teachings of Paulo Freire, literacy was conceived to be universal (fulfilling the right to education), liberating (breaking out of dependency), democratic and participatory (active learners), respecting diverse cultural identity, as well as being intercultural and bilingual (Educación en Bolivia 2016). Learning to read and write was seen as an act of empowerment and an integral measure to promote the social project of the government.

The constitution and laws on education in **Guatemala** since 1985 have promoted both the right to education 'without any discrimination whatsoever' and the 'eradication of illiteracy'. In order to strengthen the participation of the indigenous population of Guatemala in education, the Bi-Alfa project was launched in 1997, in common with Bolivia, Paraguay and Mexico. It aimed to contribute to a Strategy for the Elimination of Discrimination against the Peasant and Indigenous Peoples of Latin America, targeting those who had suffered displacement, conflict or natural disaster. Literacy instruction took place simultaneously in both the indigenous language and Spanish, sending an important message about the equality of status of the indigenous language and thus raising cultural self-esteem and confidence. Drawing on Freirean methods, the programme used generative words and phrases relating to rights, gender equality, health and sustainable economic development. New ideas learned through the programme were set in the context of traditional cultural beliefs. The programme also addressed gender inequality, promoted through gender-differentiated learning environments and materials, ensuring that traditional patterns of male domination did not disturb the women's learning. New awareness – with some trepidation – on the part of the women was met with perplexity or disapproval from men. These complex reactions illustrate both the transformative effect of promoting gender equality through learning and the fact that the literacy learning environment can provide a social space for dialogue around cultural identity and change.

Role of the educator

The educator is at the heart of empowering approaches to literacy, fostering a dialogue based on the learners' concerns and turning the resulting conversation into literacy learning. The flexibility and sensitivity of the educator as well as their capacity to adapt learning strategies to the dynamic of the moment are central to achieving both literacy and empowerment.

It is only since relative peace returned to the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** that the government turned its attention to policies for literacy and non-formal education: the first strategy dates from 2012, following earlier government pronouncements on literacy and education. Advocating a partnership approach, implementation was almost entirely through NGOs. One such initiative was the literacy programme of the Collectif Alpha known as UJUVI in North Kivu, where the lack of stability and poor governance had left local populations in a permanent state of insecurity. The NGO launched a programme entitled 'Literacy for the peaceful existence of communities and good governance'. The vision underlying this effort was to enable new literates to work positively for peaceful coexistence among communities through a conscientizing approach (cf Freire). This vision took shape in 2006, as educators listened to learners' concerns about conflicts between individuals and communities. Literacy sessions included mediation, conflict resolution and traditional ways of encouraging dialogue and reconciliation. Among the results are almost 3,000 cases of resolved conflicts.[59]

Louise Cheftaine, learner from the Literacy for the Peaceful Coexistence of Communities and Good Governance programme in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, shares her story about how the new abilities have helped to bring peace to her neighbourhood.[60]

> "In this society it is considered a waste of time to educate a woman because she will just end up doing the housework. My parents believed in this non-progressive philosophy and as a result I was not considered an heir and deprived of my inheritance (…) Since I have followed the literacy programme, I feel free. I am involved in trying to resolve problems in my community, and thanks to the collaboration and discussion with local leaders, I have been instrumental in removing the insecurity."

In **Burundi**, government programmes have evolved in the light of the post-conflict situation. The long-standing National Literacy Service (created in 1991) focused on functional literacy, stressing the links with local issues, self-help groups and income generation. It has now responded to situations of lingering mistrust and suspicion through programmes that welcome all people regardless of their gender, ethnic group, religion and region, whereby participants learn to work through relationships, ultimately working for full reconciliation. The method used for learning to read and write is based on the Freirean principles, with learners actively participating in their own learning. In general, the educator begins classes with a poster problem, typically depicting a theme selected to evoke a local problem. Literacy training themes relate to human rights in general with a particular emphasis on children's and women's rights and the ideals of peace, such as tolerance and peaceful coexistence in everyday life, as well as including more functional topics such as agriculture, livestock farming, nutrition, decent housing, health, reproductive health, hygiene, savings and trades.

Prime Hakiza, programme director points out the effects of the National Literacy Programme in **Burundi**.[61]

> "Literacy has encouraged reconciliation between populations separated by war. Meetings in the literacy courses have brought the two camps together and cleared the atmosphere of mistrust."

Literacy is an enabling factor in empowering people to claim their rights and take charge of change in their own context. The examples of the six countries above – all of which have made significant progress in literacy over the last two decades – illustrate that literacy may be combined with different purposes and aim at different outcomes in relation to empowering processes. There are two common factors: first, the literacy learning process provided an opportunity and a place where dialogue could take place on a regular basis as part of the socio-economic change that the communities faced; and second, the learning process in literacy acquisition opened up new ideas and means of communication, thus offering new horizons of possibility while rooting change in the dynamic of cultural identity and change.

Literacy as social practice

During the 1990s, research in literacy focused on social practices, with an emphasis on understanding the context in which literacy is used. Written communication takes place in a social context and thus connects with institutions, systems, structures and the exercise of power. In this sense, literacy is not 'autonomous' but rather 'ideological' (Street 1984) in that its acquisition and use are conditioned – indeed constrained – by questions such as: who requires the use of literacy? Who controls the flow of written communication? Whose power is strengthened or weakened? Who in society benefits from literacy? Elites and institutions may abrogate to themselves the advantages of using literacy while others are excluded from this kind of communication. Therefore, the practice of literacy is culturally embedded and differs in its purposes, uses, languages and in its place in networks of communication according to the context (Street 1995, 2005).

A further strand of research concerns the literate environment (cf Easton 2014), understood as the wider context in which written communication is used. The concept broadened from questions regarding the availability of reading material to issues of who required or needed the use of literacy and why (demand side) and how literacy acquisition is structured (supply side). This led to examining the many connections that literacy has not only with functional areas (livelihood, work, further learning), but also with writing, self-expression, cultural and spiritual development, as well as institutions. Thus, the analysis of literate environments in particular contexts becomes a means of understanding the nature of diverse literacies and the linkages between acquisition and uses.

With these new understandings studies emerged exploring how literacy is practised in many different contexts across the world, revealing the great diversity of purposes, cultural messages, use of languages, individual and collective significance, as well as dominant, subordinate and 'contesting' practices of literacy. The ideological model provided powerful new insights into the nature and practice of literacy and influenced the debate about the kinds of literacy that might be promoted and whose purposes they serve. The implications of this theoretical framework for literacy programmes were hardly explored by the research community in the development of the model, although its social, political and contextual dimensions clearly had (and still have) consequences for literacy promotion and acquisition. Nevertheless, the understanding of literacy as social practice echoed the work of Freire in that literacy use is situated squarely in the realm of social and political action.

A fundamental insight from these studies was the notion that literacy is plural, reflecting not one standard literacy but diverse literacies. The emphasis on context, purpose, language, actors and the relations between them quickly led to the view that the nature and value of literacy depend on how it is practised, and these practices are socially and culturally embedded. Already taking shape in the 1990s (Street 1995), UNESCO reflected the plural understanding in its position paper on literacy in 2004, stating that 'literacy is not uniform, but is instead culturally and linguistically and even temporally diverse. […] Constraints on its acquisition and application lie not simply in the individual, but also in relations and patterns of communication structured by society' (UNESCO 2004: 13).

The recognition of diverse literacies based on literacy practices has implications for learning programmes. An understanding and respect of the particular context of learning will shape the way in which literacy is acquired with the aim of fitting literacy learning into the context of its immediate use by learners. This principle is reflected in the *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education* (UNESCO 2015b: 12), which includes in quality adult learning the goal of 'developing appropriate content and modes of delivery, preferably using the mother tongue as the language of instruction, and adopting learner-centred pedagogy, supported by ICT and open educational resources.' The contextualization of literacy also draws on educational approaches such as experiential learning, where the cycle of action, reflection, learning and further action enables the learner to access now horizons of knowledge and understanding (McLeod 2013).

Iran, teacher with an adult learner at the blackboard during a class, Literacy pilot project.

Diverse purposes

Literacy programmes that take account of the wide diversity of contexts and purposes in which literacy learning takes place could be found throughout the past fifty years, without necessarily being recognized as promoting diverse literacies. The integration of literacy learning with the diverse purposes and existing processes of social change in communities is a further expression of the plural nature of literacy. The following five countries all manifest movement – dynamic but tentative – towards diverse literacies.

Literacy promotion in the Islamic Republic of **Iran** witnessed a series of centralized campaigns, both before and after the 1979 revolution. Literacy efforts focused on government employees, military personnel and later the adult population in the framework of promoting religious-ethical ideas and functional uses of literacy. Seeds of more diverse approaches were sown as NGO partnerships developed and specific geographic, social and cultural conditions were taken into account. The Literacy Movement Organization developed CLCs across the country, with 3,500 by 2008 (Education Department, National Commission UNESCO 2008). At the same time, literacy began to be defined as part of a 'continuum of adult education and lifelong learning' with diversified initiatives in terms of target groups and content, particularly concerning girls and women, as well as a wide range of life skills. Adult education gained in priority on the government's agenda and was seen as central to promoting education more broadly; thus, a programme entitled *Literacy for Students' Illiterate Parents* linked child and adult learning across formal and non-formal modes, with a mutually reinforcing effect on learning between the generations. As literacy learning has become more of a process of social development and interaction, the focus on the instrumental value of literacy has given way to more intangible impacts on communication, 'self-dignity' and values.

Bahrain launched its intergenerational educational empowerment programme for parents (especially mothers) and pre-school children living in poverty in 2000. It targets entire families from low-income and socially disadvantaged families. This programme has had positive impacts in parenting skills and home environments for early learning. The Education Act of 2005 stated in Article 9 that 'the eradication of illiteracy and the provision of adult education is a national responsibility whose objective is to raise the standards of the citizens culturally, socially, and professionally'. Two of the main objectives of the programme are to help women to reinforce the literacy skills they acquired during the first stage (basic literacy) and help them to deal with the changing economic and social situation in general.

The National Education for All Plan for **Qatar** was formulated for the period 2001-2015. With a view to implementing the plan, a set of measures, procedures and programmes were put in place addressing each key area of the plan and the 2003 Constitution mentioned the right to education for all citizens. One of the major impediments to achieving a true information-based society is the lack of advanced ICT skills and knowledge among the population. Qatar is implementing a digital literacy and ICT skills programmes to mitigate this problem. According to the Qatar National Development Strategy 2011-2016, the government will support flexible literacy and numeracy programmes for adults. Adult education programmes focusing on the world of work and lifelong learning have targeted women, aiming to make up for this by training women in modern technologies, thus preparing them to join the changing labour market.

Oman has been able to raise literacy levels and is now expanding the scope of adult education. Adopting and implementing strategies to improve and modernize education as a whole – and involving government and social sectors in doing so – the government launched the 'learning village' programme in 2004 to meet the literacy needs of remote areas. It emphasizes principles of reading, writing, arithmetic and life skills through collaboration between all public and private organizations. The life skills curriculum is delivered by various bodies, including Religious Affairs, Ministry of Health, Royal Oman Police, Civil Defence and other organizations in or close to the village. Moreover, in an effort to raise the status and professional level of literacy education in Oman, the Ministry of Education – in collaboration with Sultan Qabous University and other civil and education organization – has developed a comprehensive, specialized training programme for literacy instructors, as well as a programme of revising, re-writing, adapting and developing books, literacy materials and teaching methods (Hammoud 2001). The collaboration between the government, higher education and civil society has been considered one of the many contributing factors to the project's success.

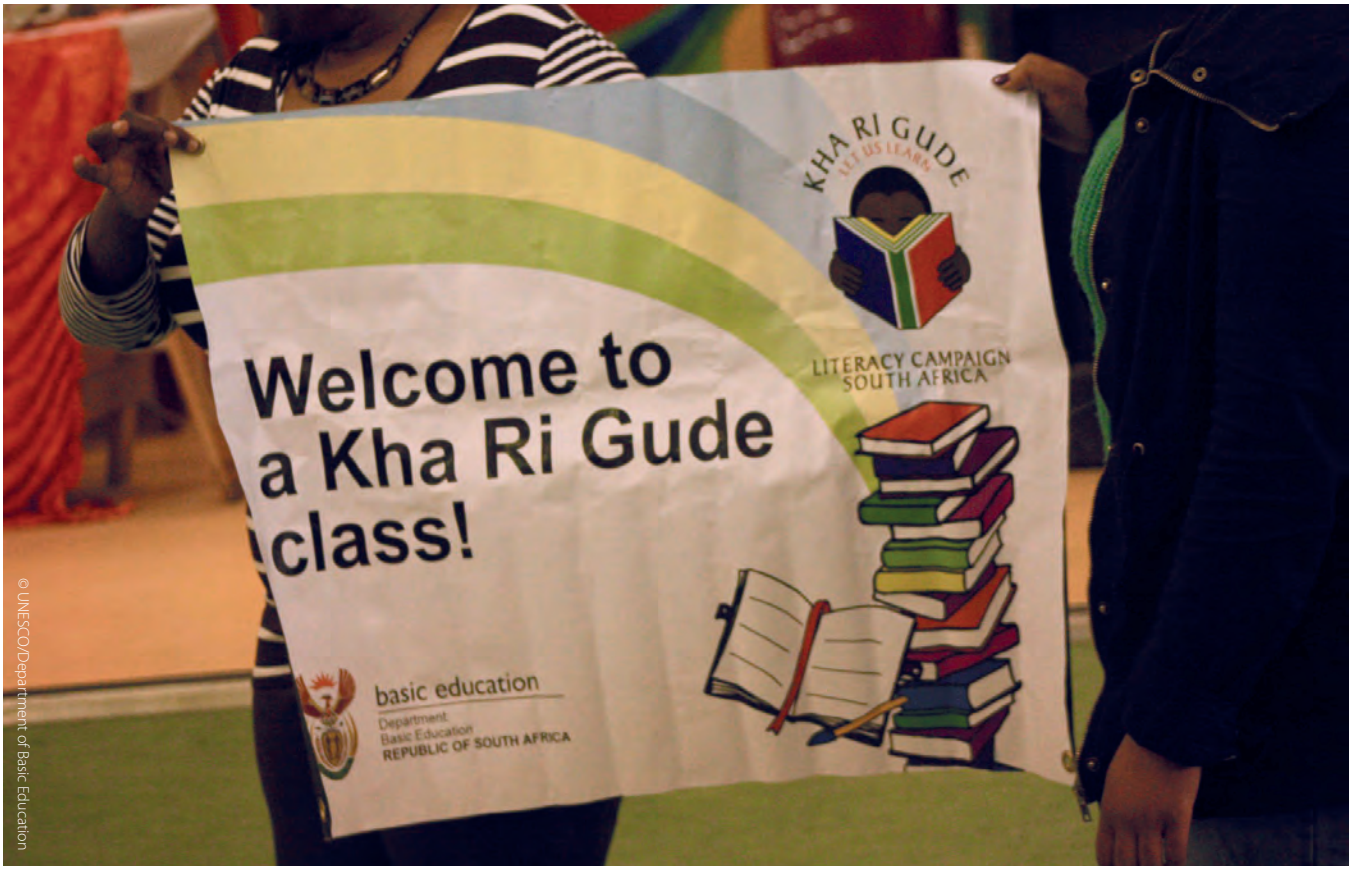
Botswana's promotion of adult literacy presents a picture of enduring commitment, lesson learning and evolving programming. Literacy was already shown as a national priority in 1977 under the First National Education Policy, leading to a mass literacy campaign launched in 1981. Aiming – as one might expect – to *eradicate illiteracy*, the campaign lasted until the revision of education policy in 1994. The new approach aimed to make literacy promotion a component within a larger national training policy that included vocational programmes. The strategy moved away from stand-alone literacy towards a functional approach that could respond to current social issues, such as HIV and AIDS, gender awareness and environmental education. The resulting National Literacy Programme (NLP) saw the adult literacy rate rise to 75 per cent by 1999 having been 34 per cent in 1981 (Botswana 2005). Several evaluation reports (Maruatona and Mokgosi 2006) of the NLP indicated that it had failed to address learners' basic needs and interests and had been unable to reach the poorest and most remote communities. Around the same time, the government adopted a new definition of literacy as 'a responsive and context specific multidimensional lifelong learning process…', revealing an approach focused on the circumstances and purposes of learners. This resulted in the Adult Basic Education Programme (ABEP) in 2010, known as *Thuto Ga E Golelwe (It's never too late to learn)*. It is a comprehensive, outcome-based, modularized lifelong educational and skills training programme for out-of-school adults and youth who have never attended school. ABEP strategically seeks to educate the most marginalized groups in Botswana's population, including ethnic minorities, disadvantaged and rural communities and people with special learning needs. These groups have traditionally had the least access to quality educational opportunities and as a result they have the lowest rates of literacy and high rates of poverty and unemployment. In creating contextualized lifelong learning opportunities that specifically address the circumstances of these groups, ABEP provides literacy and skills education to more than half of the Botswana's rural population.

Multiple languages

The use of local, minority or indigenous languages is a further manifestation of approaches recognizing diverse literacies, as a means of enabling learning to take place on the learners' terms and giving opportunity for new ways of expressing identity. This approach also stresses the sociocultural context in which learning takes place and recognizes the value and role of using the language of the learners, within a multilingual approach that subsequently gives access to other languages.

The situation in **South Africa** reflected a traditional starting point, with national campaigns, mass mobilization, centralized delivery and purposes articulated as 'breaking the back of illiteracy'. These initiatives were part of the new democratic processes after 1994, and the right to adult education was included in the 1996 constitution. Large-scale provision of literacy was organized under the Adult Basic Education and Training framework, which focused on literacy and functional skills. Concerned about the ongoing literacy challenge, the government launched a further campaign called *Kha Ri Gude (Let us learn)* in 2007, with the participation of a wider range of governmental and non-governmental bodies. This initiative was transformational in that the approach recognized the diverse learning needs of different groups using an integrated and multilingual approach. The latter is in line with the language policy of South Africa, which gives official recognition to 11 languages, with others also in use. In this way, the programme was more inclusive and achieved greater success, with 90 per cent of the 4.2 million learners enrolled between 2008 and 2015 completing the course.[62]

Improvements in the literacy rate in **Cameroon** are largely attributed to increases in enrolment and completion of primary schooling, whereas adult literacy promotion has not figured high on the list of government priorities. It was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Youth and Sports from the 1970s, where it has remained. Early efforts were limited to small catch-up literacy courses in the official languages (French and English) for out-of-school children and unschooled adults. Hesitancy in adopting local languages as the medium for initial literacy instruction meant that rural communities and particularly women were de facto excluded and literacy efforts did not address the needs of these learners. A National Literacy Committee and Programme were established in 1990, although they were under-resourced and unable to address the literacy challenge in a period when school enrolments were falling as a result of the economic situation. In



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South Africa, Department of Basic Education, 'Kha ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign', 2016.

Cameroon, woman writing on a blackboard during a class for adults, 1963.

this context, adult literacy programming has been the almost exclusive preserve of civil society, focusing on local-level initiatives using local languages. One such NGO is the National Association of Cameroon Language Committees (NACALCO), originally formed in the 1980s. Based on principles of local organization and with few outside resources, NACALCO promotes adult literacy based on local language, culture and learning needs, providing facilitator training and support for local material production. Participation in the programme depends on local communities taking initiative to set up a committee, determine what its literacy needs are and how to meet them. Being modest in its scope, above all NACALCO seeks to respect the diversity of literacies that communities may identify as having value in their context.

In conclusion, it is clear that marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples, minorities or remote rural populations are among those whose literacy needs may require the most attention to diversity, of purpose, culture and language. They frequently face other ecological and infrastructure challenges and literacy must be integrated with the learning of skills to tackle them. Reaching such populations demands special effort and increased investment, reflecting the price of equity.

Section IV

Lessons and implications

Lessons and implications

In the fifty countries of this review, the changing conceptions of literacy have influenced both government policies and literacy programmes.

A strong central concern to promote literacy across the whole of a nation has kept the 'campaign' approach alive even as it has moved away from standardized approaches. Functional and empowering approaches have been woven together in many programmes, with varied expressions of their respective principles. Under the influence of the SDGs, lifelong learning is also emerging as a key principle for literacy programming, which may have a greater impact in the future. Several important implications emerge from this review.

Complexity

Literacy promotion is complex and connects with the whole of life at the individual and societal levels. It is embedded in context and this shapes, facilitates and constrains the practices of literacy, as well as the ways in which it may be acquired. Engaging multiple actors, researching patterns of communication, understanding the use of languages and discovering actual and potential purposes of literacy will be essential in addressing this complexity. Owing to these complex connections, intersectoral collaboration is a *sine qua non* to maximize the benefits of literacy learning as part of broader educational efforts (UNESCO 2016a; UIL 2016a).

Diverse approaches

No single approach to literacy learning is adequate: it will vary from one group to another, from women to men and old to young, from one sociocultural context to another and from one-time period to another. Flexibility, sensitivity to the wider environment and a constant questioning of where literacy fits into people's lives, livelihoods, relations and networks must underpin literacy promotion efforts.

Demand orientation

The use of literacy will only grow if the purposes and needs of individuals and communities can be identified and built upon. This is a factor that differentiates the four main conceptions discussed: large scale literacy provision, functional literacy, literacy for empowerment and literacy as social practice. In general terms, promoters of standardized literacy never asked learners about the purposes, functional approaches assumed certain (economic) connections, empowering approaches provided a space for learners to discuss what their purposes might be and the approach addressing diverse literacies assumed that differences are critical factors of programme design. As an overall lesson, respect, dialogue, negotiation and local ownership are key.

Governance

The relations between actors are a critical factor. The nature of governance structures will define the role of the government in providing coordination, funding, regulation and quality control, as well as determining how to manage connections with multiple and diverse partners. A national framework is recommended to integrate literacy and adult education policy into the national policy for education and social. Effective intersectoral collaboration in which private sector should play a pro-active role will facilitate more targeted approaches to different groups of learners, as diverse purposes and circumstances are taken into account. The outsourcing of the *faire faire* approach enabled greater local sensitivity and participation in decisions regarding literacy programming. At the same time, the strength of dialogue between implementation agencies or NGOs and the communities that they serve will affect relevance and ownership at the local level. Having an awareness of these dimensions and devoting constant attention to the relational context are crucial to enabling sustainable and effective learning processes.

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Thailand, Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia of the Mahidol University, Patani Malay-Thai Bi/Multilingual Education Project', 2016.

Quality

Assuring the quality of teaching and learning requires monitoring both inputs and learning outcomes. The capacity of teachers is a key element, requiring professional development and adequate conditions to match the characteristics of a high-status profession, given that quality never comes cheap. Officially certifying learning achievements also opens up recognized pathways of lifelong learning. Understanding how the literate environment is structured and therefore what kinds of literacy are required improves motivation and the quality of learning.

Resources

Across all the approaches reviewed, funding for adult education and literacy has rarely been adequate. It is well known that adult literacy is low on the budgetary priorities of governments and their funding partners (UNESCO 2015a), which is one of the reasons why progress continues to be slow in certain regions and countries. Among the fifty countries in this review, only four devote 3 per cent or more of their educational budget to adult education: Bolivia, Cabo Verde, Equatorial Guinea and Mozambique. The 3 per cent level was proposed by civil society organizations as a benchmark for a minimal allocation to adult education and literacy (Archer 2005). International aid to adult education and literacy fares no better. The members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) devote the lowest proportion of their total aid to education – 1.4 per cent – to 'basic skills for youth and adults' (OECD 2014). While there is no benchmark for aid allocations, few DAC members devote more than 3 per cent of their individual funding of education to this area. Notable exceptions are Canada, Germany, Switzerland and the USA, whose proportions range from 7 per cent to 14 per cent. The direction of aid depends on bilateral agreements on priorities for educational investment and contexts differ. Among the fifty countries of this review, only twelve received funding in excess of one million US dollars from DAC donors in 2014 for 'basic skills for youth and adults', with large variation from year to year.

Section V

Evolving context of literacy

Evolving context of literacy

Thousands of communities around the world will continue to shape the kinds of literacy that are relevant to their lives, cultures, goals and aspirations. At the global level, three large trends constitute a framework for dialogue and support in promoting literacy: the SDGs, lifelong learning and the digital society.

SDG agenda

In 2015, the international community adopted seventeen SDGs, whose achievement is deemed to enable the full and equitable development of everyone on the planet, doing so in a manner that respects and can be sustained by the resources of the planet. As indicated above, education figures as one of the means to achieve this (SDG 4). Therefore, how will literacy promotion be linked with the pursuit of the SDG agenda?

On the basis that literacy is essentially communication involving text, literacy is a foundational means of further learning insofar as nearly all structured learning opportunities make use of text. This applies across all disciplines and domains of social activity – 'life-wide' in Hanemann's (2015b) terms – whereby acquiring literacy and crucially continuing to expand use of it to new areas of communication and experience becomes one hallmark of lifelong learning. Equally, expanding competence in numeracy will be essential in addressing mathematical problems associated with local measures to implement the SDG agenda. Lifelong learning is both an individual and collective process, whereby individuals' circumstances, needs and aspirations change and learning strategies are adopted to adjust and make the most of these changes.

> ***Education and lifelong learning can support the SDGs with […] focus on literacy acquisition and retention or on specific knowledge to generate behavioural change, showing that education can facilitate changes in values, world views and behaviour…***
>
> *(UNESCO 2016a:11)*

At the same time, changes occurring at community or societal level also bring new learning challenges to whole groups of people. The links between socio-economic and cultural change and literacy reinforce the understanding of literacy – or rather literacies – as social practice, structured by a particular context and a means to further shape the context (cf Street 1995). An understanding of the diversity of literacies will be critically important in situations where change is both rapid and profound.

The particular SDG target (SDG 4.6) for youth and adult literacy calls for countries 'by 2030, to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy' (UN 2015:15). Based on the understanding of literacy as a continuum of levels and not a dichotomy (literate/illiterate), UNESCO interpreted this target to aim at an ambitious level of performance, as follows:

> ***Therefore, action for this target aims at ensuring that by 2030, all young people and adults across the world should have achieved relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education.***
>
> *(UNESCO 2016c:6)*

Madagascar, Platform of Associations in Charge of ASAMA and Post-ASAMA, Action for Inclusive Education in Madagascar, 2015.

The SDG agenda is broad and comprehensive, and the seventeen SDGs are largely focused on improvements in the quality of life, while also devoting attention to societal relations (gender, equity, peace, justice, institutions), but not the processes of achieving them. However, it is here that literacy – and education more broadly – come sharply into focus. Communication involving text is necessarily a part of the processes of achieving each goal, whereby literacy promotion (initial acquisition, reinforcement of literacy skills, use in new domains) is one of the means that efforts across the SDG agenda will deploy (Hanemann 2016).

SD Goal 4.5 calls on governments and their partners to: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education (UN 2015), which is a particularly important goal regarding literacy considering that two-thirds of the remaining people in need are females. However, their specific and multiple needs and roles should be better taken account in planning and policies (Robinson-Pant 2016b).

The process of literacy acquisition and use may empower learners – individually and collectively – to take initiative, understand and take risks, as well as more generally feeling more capable of acting on one's environment (Easton 2014; UNESCO 2005b), through 'greater agency to address complex sustainability issues,' as the *Global Education Monitoring Report* expresses it (UNESCO 2016a:11). This intangible effect is crucial for the confidence needed not only to face change but also to influence its direction.

Social change implies the expansion of information access, increased knowledge, institutional development, transforming and transformed relationships and many other far-reaching consequences, all of which presuppose communication, exchange, reflection and learning. The use of literacy in all of its modes will be an essential part of these processes: being excluded from the networks of written communication leaves people with a reduced opportunity to shape the implementation of the SDGs.

The SDG agenda may also contribute to literacy promotion. As communities pursue the SDGs in their own context, progress in different areas of development – including health, agriculture, poverty reduction and gender equality – create a demand, opportunities and conducive environments for people to acquire, use and advance their literacy skills. Increased respect for human rights, social justice, equality, diversity and environmental sustainability can generate motivations and incentives for literacy learning.

More specifically, how does literacy connect with SDGs? The *Global Education Monitoring Report* (UNESCO 2016a) develops the links between education as a whole and the SDGs. In terms of the specific link between literacy and the SDGs, studies referenced by the 2006 EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2005b) and its background papers[63] and more recently by Easton's analysis of the literate environment in Africa (Easton 2014) point in the direction of the following links with a number of the goals, clearly acknowledging the proviso that many other variables also affect progress towards these goals (***Table 7***).

Table 7: Literacy is central to the SDG agenda

Links between selected SDGs and literacy

SDG Goal	Evidence of links with literacy	Sources of evidence
Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere	• People become more willing to take initiatives in developing their livelihoods • Women organize/lead women's savings and credit groups • Microcredit programmes are intermeshed with literacy training • Producer organizations develop capacities to market cotton crops, manage agricultural credit, improve community food security and organize village stores for veterinary medicines and other supplies	Patel 2005; Stromquist 2005; Easton 2014; DFID 2002; Oxenham et al. 2002; Katahoire 2001 Burchfield et al. 2002; Sika and Strasser, 2001 Oxenham et al. 2002
Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	• Agricultural management and marketing take place at the local level • Farmers access technical training for agriculture and livestock raising • Modern agricultural techniques spread farther afield	DFID 2002; Nwonwu 2008; Bingen and Staatz 2000 Oxenham et al. 2002 Carron and Riga 1989; Carr-Hill et al. 2001
Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	• Maternal health improves • Child and family health improve • More people benefit from HIV/AIDS education campaigns	TOSTAN 2005; McTavish et al. 2010 Caldwell 1979; Oxenham et al. 2002, Lauglo 2001; Robinson-Pant 2005 Robinson-Pant 2005; Farah 2005; PACT 2003; DFID 2002. Burchfield et al. 2002
Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning	• Literacy is key to developing foundational cognitive skills • Literate parents enrol children in school	Boissiere et al. 1985; Abadzi 2003; Patel 2005 Easton 2014; Robinson-Pant 2005
Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	• Literacy learning brings psychological empowerment and increased self-esteem • Literacy facilitates greater economic activity on the part of women	Burchfield 1996; Patel 2005 Cameron and Cameron 2005
Goal 6: Ensure access to water and sanitation for all	• Literacy enabled a community to write proposal to raise money to have a tube well dug	Archer and Cottingham 1996b
Goal 8: Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all	• Literacy positively influences economic growth • Individuals increase their labour productivity • Literacy increases the chance of doing decent work	Coulombe et al. 2004 Coulombe et al. 2004 ILO 2002
Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries	• Multilingual and mother-tongue literacy give recognition to minorities and their languages	Robinson 2005, 2016; Chebanne et al. 2001
Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	• Literacy promotion is a critical aspect of the Learning cities initiative	UIL 2015
Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	• Farmers reconsidered and improved their uses of land, water, crops	Archer and Cottingham 1996b
Goal 15: Sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss	• Households reduced amount of wood fuel used • Communities set up forest and water user groups	Katahoire 2001 Cameron and Cameron 2005

SDG Goal	Evidence of links with literacy	Sources of evidence
Goal 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies	Literacy leads to… • …greater political participation • …democracy • …awareness of different values • …increased capabilities in social cooperation leading to improved advocacy and/or ability to compete in markets	Olatokun 2007; Stromquist 1995; Purcell-Gates and Waterman 2000 Easton 2014; Demaine 2004 Farah 2005 Ashe and Parrott 2001; Comings et al.1997; Oxenham and Aoki 1999
Goal 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development	• The UN Literacy Decade and the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) generated partnerships across the world, and the new Global Alliance for Literacy brings literacy and SD stakeholders together	UNESCO 2013; UIL 2012, 2016b

Sources: Easton 2014; UNESCO 2005b, 2016a.

It is noteworthy that the studies referenced in the table focus on the individual and community-level benefits of literacy acquisition and use. This is largely because those without literacy and those who acquire it in adult learning programmes are not – almost by definition – actively involved in the pursuit of the seventeen goals at the national and international levels, but rather they actively improve the quality of life in their immediate context. As a parenthetic remark, this should give the international community pause for thought concerning what processes may best enable marginalized communities to own and achieve SDG-related objectives in a contextualized way at the local level.

In the future, more research studies on the impact of intersectoral collaboration in education will serve to shed new light for policy-makers concerning how to connect literacy with development outcomes.

At the national level, studies have shown the relationship between levels of education and economic development, often based on numbers of years of schooling. Studies isolating literacy levels as such are less frequent: Cameron and Cameron (2005) cite a study using data from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) finding that 'literacy scores had a positive and significant effect on both short-run growth and long-run levels of GDP per capita, and on labour productivity.' There are no studies at present exploring the relationship between literacy levels and the SDGs and addressing the resource and environmental issues.

The links between education, learning, literacy and progress in all areas of the SDGs imply extensive intersectoral collaboration. Those ministerial departments and agencies responsible for a specific SDG – and the learning that it involves – must plan for focused learning initiatives and identify professional educational support to implement them. Educational ministries, institutions and agencies must seek appropriate partners in developing learning opportunities that enable diverse population groups to access the necessary knowledge and skills for the SDGs that the groups pursue.

At the international level, the newly-established Global Alliance for Literacy provides a forum for maximizing intersectoral support for literacy as part of the SDG agenda and within a lifelong learning perspective. It offers the opportunity to create links in two dimensions: first, between the literacy community and professional communities in other areas; and second, among the diverse actors involved, namely governments, intergovernmental organizations and networks, civil society, UN agencies, multi- and bilateral agencies, the private sector and others.

Lifelong learning: expanding the literacy vision

The evolution of the concept of literacy illustrated by the examples of the previous section has led to the twin notions that literacies are multiple and diverse and that they are part of a much larger process of lifelong learning. This understanding has provided a conceptual accompaniment for the goals related to literacy of the EFA agenda (UNESCO 2005) and it equally underpins the adoption of lifelong learning as the guiding principle to frame the Sustainable Development Goal 4 on education, aiming to '*ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning*.' The Belém Framework for Action (UIL 2010) gave adult learning and education prominence in the lifelong learning process and the Incheon Declaration of 2015 linked lifelong learning with the pursuit of sustainable development, human potential and global citizenship (World Education Forum 2015). The notion of learning throughout life implies continuous development of learning needs and processes – individually and societally – as sociocultural change takes place. Lifelong learning has as its purpose to 'create learning opportunities across different settings over an individual's whole life. Learning and the learner are at the centre of the lifelong learning philosophy, one of the core goals being to "unlock" people's potential' (Hanemann 2015b:6).

As the same author spells out, the place of literacy is central in lifelong and life-wide learning in the following ways:

- As a continuous learning process across all ages and generations, situated in social contexts and going beyond learning in the classroom;
- As a continuum of proficiency levels, combining with the development of other skills.

Literacy learning and levels of achievement should be integral to defining national qualifications frameworks to allow for the recognition and certification of achievement resulting from non-formal or even informal learning (Robinson-Pant 2016a). The establishment of mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of basic knowledge and competences regardless of the pathways through which they were acquired is central to achieving lifelong learning for all. Linkages between literacy acquisition and the learning of other skills and competences provide opportunities for ongoing learning. From this perspective, connections between literacy programmes and TVET courses will be particularly productive, especially for low-literate and low-skilled learners.

The understanding of the place of literacy in lifelong learning is relevant to all contexts regardless of their state of development. According to the results of the Survey of Adult Skills'[64] (OECD 2011), the countries that have achieved impressive progress in improving the skills of their population have established 'systems that combine high-quality initial education with opportunities and incentives for the entire population to continue to develop proficiency in reading and numeracy whether outside work or at the workplace, after initial education and training are completed' (OECD 2013: 32).

If lifelong learning is both necessary and desirable, this does not mean that possibilities are available or accessible to those who need or want it. Circumstances of geography, economic situation or the constraints of work may deprive youth and adults of opportunities, or provision may simply not exist; for example, the limited availability of TVET to many disadvantaged groups (UNESCO 2012). The integration of a lifelong learning approach to youth and adult literacy remains in its infancy but receives increasing attention as new kinds of literacy are required to keep up with the evolving requirements of life and livelihood; for example, the need to master the use of ICTs.

These factors clearly demonstrate that the links with wider educational, socio-economic and political structures and processes give literacy its importance in lifelong learning. This is significant for the analysis of how literacy is part of development processes in two ways:

- In assessing the benefits that literacy brings, it is essential to recognize that other variables of the context of learning and use affect what and how large the benefits may be (cf Easton 2014:164). In broadly favourable circumstances, acquiring literacy leads to considerable new opportunities, but not always. Literacy may also be a tool in the hands of those who would exploit and take advantage of others.
- It is difficult to isolate the benefits of literacy as such, since the education that literacy underpins and enables often leads to greater social and economic development, as well as cultural and political benefits, individually and collectively (Basu et al. 2009).

The digital society

Nowhere is the need for lifelong learning more evident than in the domain of digital technologies, which pervade increasingly more parts of life and effect rapid and far-reaching change in work and social life, from access to information, networking and media to e/m government, e/m commerce and the delivery of services. The spread of ICTs across the world illustrates both the new opportunities that they offer as well as the inequalities in the distribution of these opportunities. According to the World Bank report (2016), more households in developing countries own a mobile phone than have access to electricity or clean water, and nearly 70 per cent of the bottom fifth of the population in developing countries own a mobile phone (p.2). However, worldwide, some 4 billion people (60 per cent) do not have any internet access, nearly 2 billion do not use a mobile phone and almost half a billion live outside areas with a mobile signal (p.4). Owing to low internet access, the lives of the majority of the world's people remain largely untouched by the digital revolution, with only around 15 per cent able to afford access to broadband internet (p.6). The World Bank further notes that access is only one aspect of benefiting from digital opportunities, whereby the capacity to make use of them is also crucial.

As digital processes lead to the automation of routine work, there will be a greater need for those with ICT skills who are able to make full use of digital devices, process the informational output and further develop the programmes and applications involved. This presupposes not only literacy for basic communication purposes, but also higher order skills in manipulating, interpreting, displaying and communicating data. In other words, the adolescent today who has not achieved basic

literacy and numeracy competences through schooling and who catches up through non-formal learning must move quickly to master the skills necessary for processing digital data and information. The speed of the development and adoption of ICTs requires equally fast learning: 'In an extremely dynamic global market where products and processes change rapidly, a basic education in literacy and numeracy as well as fast and efficient continued learning are critical' (UNDP 2015: 130). However, the gap between the growing universalization of ICTs and the capacity to benefit from them is critical; for example, in Africa, seven out of ten people who do not use the internet say that they do not know how to use it (World Bank 2016:123).

If the right to education is long established, there is also an increasing trend to see access to the internet as a right. This is currently the case where internet access is already almost universal, such as in Europe, where the European Parliament has affirmed that the right of internet access is 'a guarantee of the right to education', given that 'e-illiteracy will be the new illiteracy of the 21st century' (European Parliament 2009). In contexts that are currently technology-poor, the same linkages between education and internet access will quickly gain the same status, and educational policies and strategies must move in that direction.

The question arises concerning the place of ICTs themselves in the learning process. While the manipulation of digital technology requires a minimum of literacy competence, ICT devices can quickly become the medium of learning – replacing or accompanying pen and paper – as well as the source of further learning material. It is important to note that the use of ICTs in connection with literacy learning serves to reinforce skills rather than providing a means for initial acquisition as such (Aker and Mbiti 2010). ICTs are creating a paradigm shift in the way in which people live, as well as how they learn. New multimedia learning material combined with advanced techniques like Sound To Text (STT) and Text To Sound (TTS) will influence the way in which we define basic literacy. As well as addressing issues related to how people will acquire basic digital skills, the use of digital media in literacy requires greater attention to solving the digital divide so that the benefits are increasingly extended to all.

What does this mean for the further evolution of trends in literacy? With their mix of text, graphics, icons, pictures and symbols, digital documents are already replacing print-based materials, and this trend will continue. Again, we already see that digital devices are introduced early in the literacy learning process. As they become increasingly ubiquitous as learning tools, basic literacy will include how to manipulate them, which is now almost a universal set of skills. Literacy acquisition programmes must increasingly plan to include an introduction to ICT devices as part of the instruction process, as soon as possible. For some learners, it may even be appropriate to link basic literacy learning with the skills needed to access and use smartphones, tablets of other devices, thus including notions not only of representation of verbal meaning (alphabetic or other) but also the manipulation of the symbols and icons on the screen. Adult learners in Niger have benefited from this kind of integration in learning literacy in their own languages (Aker and Mbiti 2010). ICTs also give opportunities to strengthen literacy skills in informal ways as learners become more familiar with their use in everyday life.

The purposes to which ICTs are put become increasingly diversified, and this will continue in the future as the vast possibilities of ICTs continue to expand. Scope for self-expression and cultural creativity will be expanded, although the dominance of certain languages and bodies of knowledge on the internet also brings the danger of cultural loss and reduced diversity. Literacy promotion must include persistent efforts to include writing and expression (in all modes) if the diversity of the world's knowledge, cultures, identities and histories are to continue to enrich our common human experience.

The question is how will literacy be best developed in the light of ever-evolving demands on its use? Clearly, all of the well-known strategies such as identifying the purposes of literacy, its place in communication patterns, mother-tongue-based multilingual approaches and embedding literacy learning in the learning of other skills will continue to be foundational to address learners' needs in relevant and context-sensitive ways. It is perhaps the last feature – embedding literacy with other learning – that will count for the most, since it proposes a learning mode that directly connects with prospective **uses** of literacy. A rights-based approach must continue to underpin the provision of literacy to marginalized groups, and the 'functional' approach should be broadened to mean not so much a livelihood focus but rather a focus on the purposes that people define for themselves. This echoes Amartya Sen's (1999) central focus in development, which should give the opportunity to improve 'our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value'. Literacy is one of those capabilities.

These trends certainly mean that the older discourse of 'eradicating illiteracy', 'fighting the curse of illiteracy' and other such disease-related metaphors have no place; indeed, they are counterproductive to the promotion of diverse literacies, learned, owned and shared across cultural spheres. The political will that often found expression in the older discourse is even more necessary today, albeit with the thrust – already visible in many of the examples in this review – of empowering multiple actors to work with diverse communities in enriching communication potential through relevant literacies.

Section VI

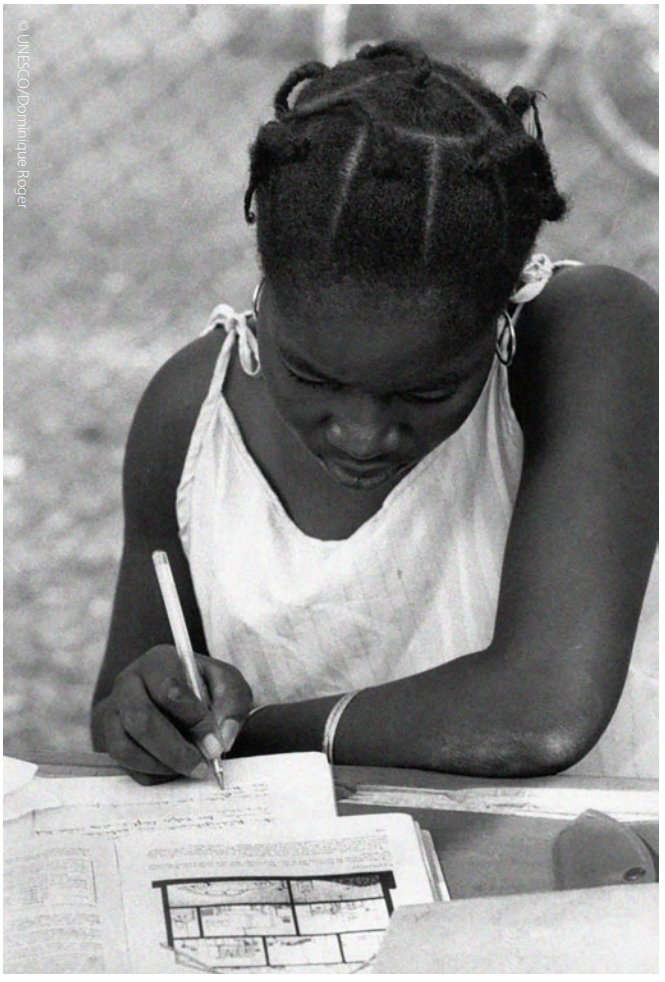
Concluding comments

Concluding comments

This review has examined the progress, policies and programmes that have characterized the spread of literacy in the fifty countries that have achieved the best progress during the EFA period.

The analysis of progress in the rates of literacy for adults, youth, men and women showed how significant this period of history has been, with some regions achieving high levels of literacy across the whole population.

Other regions still face a major challenge that governments, civil society and the international community must address with vigour and resources. Programmes in each country have shown the strong connections between policy, governance, partnerships, contextual sensitivity and the effective use of literacy to improve the lives of individuals, communities and nations.



Senegal, woman writing during a literacy class.

These programmes reflect the evolving understandings of literacy and its implications, as well as demonstrating the complex dynamics of national policies and the acquisition of literacy on the ground. In proceeding in this way, the instrumental nature of literacy – its value for learning and engaging in activities intended to improve the quality of life – has been in focus. However, it clearly emerges from this review that the relationship between literacy and these kinds of impact is by no means simple or direct. Literacy – communication involving text – forms part of the range of communication possibilities (oral, visual, etc.) with which it constantly interacts. Whatever positive effects occur in people's lives as a result of improved communication cannot be imputed to literacy alone; rather, other factors – economic environment, political participation, labour market structure, social inclusion/exclusion, for example – also play a major role. Literacy is a contributing factor in many situations, insofar as individuals and communities find themselves in a better position to leverage other resources and opportunities through it.

Setting literacy in its larger context highlights its importance. Even (or particularly) in societies where written communication is less widespread, decisions are taken on behalf of others by those who make use of literacy in running institutions and maintaining power structures. Eliminating the exclusion from the social and political processes that take place in large part through the production and use of text is a major motivation to understand how the diverse purposes and kinds of literacy are structured and thus promote their acquisition.

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Ecuador, Ministry of Education, Basic Education for Youth and Adults Project, 2014.

Overall, funding for adult literacy is too low in terms of the levels of budgetary allocation at the national level as well as external support. At current levels of investment, it is unlikely that quality literacy learning opportunities will be widely available, especially in countries that continue to face a large literacy challenge. The diversity of literacy programmes, the wide variety of learning purposes and target groups and the range of learning outcomes are fundamental characteristics of promoting literacy for youth and adults, although governments and their international funding partners often prefer to deal with standardized results. Acknowledging and owning this diversity will be essential to increase investment, given that it is clear that progress towards lifelong learning and a learning society will not become a reality without greater financial input.

As the international community moves on beyond the fifty years of past action in literacy and looks to 'writing the future' of the sustainable development agenda that includes lifelong learning and will be increasingly mediated by people's interaction with technology, the engagement of all actors and stakeholders – in particular governments and their partners – is a condition of further progress. This must be based on the commitment to include everyone in the opportunities of learning and expression afforded by literacy, as we continue the search for the most equitable and relevant strategies to move forward.

Section VII

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The statistics referenced in the body of this report were provided by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) country database. Accessible at: http://www.uis.unesco.org/Pages/default.aspx

Acronyms

ABEP	Adult Basic Education Programme
ADEA	Association for the Development of Education in Africa
AIDS	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
ALL	Adult literacy and Lifeskills
BRAC	(formerly) Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CLC	Community Learning Centres
CBO	Community-based organization
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DAM	Dhaka Ahsania Mission
DIFD	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
EdFoA	Education formation des adultes
EFA	Education for All
EWLP	Experimental World Literacy Programme
FAPLG	Fédération des Association pour la Promotion des Langues du Guéra/Federation of Associations for the Promotion of the Guera Languages
GAAE	General Authority for Adult Education
GEM	Report Global Education Monitoring Report
GRALE	Global Report on Adult Learning and Education
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICT	Information and communication technology
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ICBAE	Integrated Community-based Adult Education
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO)
ILO	International Labour Office/Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund

JAMAL	Jamaican Movement for the Advancement of Literacy
LAMP	Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (UIS)
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NACALCO	National Association of Cameroon Language Committees
NAEP	National Adult Education Programme
NLP	National Literacy Programme
NFE	Non-formal education
NFEC	Non-formal Adult Education Centre
NGO	Non-government organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAEBA	Programa de Alfabetización y Educación Básica de Adultos
PAF	People's Action Forum
PARSET	Projet d'appui à la reconstruction de l'éducation au Tchad
PIAAC	Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (OECD)
RAMAA	Recherche Action: Mesure des apprentissages des bénéficiaires des programmes d'alphabétisation
REFLECT	(originally an abbreviation for) Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Technique
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
TVET	Technical and vocational education and training
UIL	UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNDP	United Nations Population Division
WEF	World Education Forum

Endnotes

1. 'Universal' literacy refers to the achievement of a certain literacy level by a high proportion of the population group, defined based on conventional statistical assessments. In reality, literacy is a continuum of proficiency levels, literacy learning continues throughout life and no population can ever be said to be '100% literate'.
2. Formerly the EFA Global Monitoring Report.
3. See §3 below.
4. http://www.uis.unesco.org/
5. http://www.uis.unesco.org/datacentre/
6. http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/
7. http://www.oecd.org/daf/fin/financial-education/2015finlitmeasurementexercise.htm
8. http://www.johnhoward.ca/document/litcou/english/page05.htm
9. https://medlineplus.gov/healthliteracy.html
10. http://milunesco.unaoc.org/
11. Alexandria Proclamation on Information Literacy and Lifelong Learning, cited in Horton 2008.
12. http://www.fundee.org/facts/envlit/whatisenvlit.htm
13. The OECD now refers to PIAAC as the Survey of Adult Skills.
14. See http://www.uil.unesco.org/literacy-and-basic-skills/assessment-and-monitoring-ramaa
15. It is important to note that 'universal literacy' refers to the achievement of a certain literacy level by a high proportion of the population group, defined based on conventional statistical assessments: the phrase is used in this review in this limited, technical sense. In reality, literacy is a continuum of proficiency levels, literacy learning continues throughout life and no population can ever be said to be '100% literate'.
16. Adult literacy figures refer to persons aged 15 and above and youth literacy figures to persons aged 15–24.
17. The availability of quality data determines the use of 1950 rather than 1966 as the starting point (see below).
18. Figures for 2015 are projections made by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). The latest UIS estimates drawn from census or survey data pertain to the 2005–14 census decade and are used for 2010 in this publication.
19. 'Developed countries' in this section refers to the SDG region of the same name, which includes Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand.
20. Many developed countries believe that they have already reached universal literacy and no longer publish literacy rates.
21. The GPI is the ratio of the female value of the adult literacy rate to the male value. Values between 0.97 and 1.03 are considered to indicate gender parity. Values below 0.97 indicate disparities at the expense of women, and values above 1.03 disparities at the expense of men.
22. One qualification is that women still comprise the majority of illiterate young people in the world (56.5 per cent in 2015, down from 62.6 per cent in 1990) as well as the majority of illiterate adults (about 63 per cent throughout 1990–2015).
23. The continents and regions here are defined as in the source, and may differ somewhat from SDG regions used in the present publication in terms of the names and countries included. 'Tropical and Southern Africa' corresponds to sub-Saharan Africa, 'Middle' and 'South America' to Latin America and the Caribbean, 'South West Asia' to Western Asia, 'South Central Asia' to Southern Asia and 'Oceania' to the Pacific. 'Northern America', 'Europe' and the 'U.S.S.R.' together correspond more or less to developed countries, although this SDG region excludes countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia that used to belong to the USSR, and includes Japan as well as Australia and New Zealand, which belonged to 'East Asia' and 'Oceania', respectively, in the 1957 publication.
24. Illiteracy rates in the source are converted into literacy rates in this paragraph to facilitate comparison with more recent sources.
25. The 'major regions' in *Literacy 1969–1971* are continents and thus they differ from the SDG regions used in the present publication.
26. Among the fifty countries and territories, only one – Reunion island, which ranked forty-second – is not an independent country (it is a French overseas region). It was thus excluded from the selection and replaced with Rwanda, which initially ranked fifty-first.
27. The three remaining regions are Caucasus and Central Asia, developed countries [SDG region] and Eastern Asia, where most countries were already close to universal adult literacy in 2000.
28. UIS projection. The latest UIS estimate is 758 million for the 2005–14 census decade.
29. In recent work, numeracy is sometimes held to be part of literacy or separate from it.
30. http://www.uis.unesco.org/DataCentre/Pages/country-profile.aspx?code=GNQ
31. https://www.oxfam.org.nz/what-we-do/where-we-work/vanuatu/education-and-skills/training-for-a-brighter-future
32. http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/latestnews/Successful-participants-hail-Adult-Education-programme
33. http://www.alfasol.org.br/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2014/10/20110822162724_revista_trajetoria2010.pdf
34. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=14&country=IN&programme=132
35. http://repositorio.minedu.gob.pe/bitstream/handle/123456789/1238/769.%20Un%20modelo%20para%20la%20construcci%C3%B3n%20de%20la%20Educaci%C3%B3n%20B%C3%A1sica%20Alternativa%20La%20experiencia%20del%20PAEBA%20Per%C3%BA%202003-2008.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

36. REFLECT was originally an abbreviation for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques.

37. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=4&programme=228

38. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=13&country=TZ&programme=228

39. http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UIL/confintea/pdf/National_Reports/Arab%20States/Kuwait.pdf

40. http://www.guineaecuatorialpress.com/noticia.php?id=1226

41. Writing was not in focus in large-scale campaigns.

42. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=14&country=IN&programme=132

43. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=9&programme=164

44. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002230/223029e.pdf

45. http://www.ambafrance-km.org/Portrait-de-la-Femme-du-mois,703

46. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=13&country=GH&programme=11

47. http://www.acev.org/en/kaynaklarimiz/arastirmalarimiz-ve-yayinlarimiz

48. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=12&country=SA&programme=210

49. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=12&country=DZ&programme=177

50. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002294/229422e.pdf

51. http://www.tostan.org/

52. http://www.tostan.org/blog/keinti-coulibaly-shares-her-journey-economic-empowerment
http://www.tostan.org/blog/feeling-finally-being-seen-was-incredible

53. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/literacy-prizes/unesco-king-sejong-prize/winners-2009/tin-tua-burkina-faso/

54. Projet d'appui à la reconstruction de l'éducation au Tchad.

55. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002230/223029e.pdf

56. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002230/223029e.pdf

57. http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/literacy/literacy-prizes/2010/cape-vert/

58. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002175/217539E.pdf

59. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002113/211318e.pdf

60. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002113/211318E.pdf

61. http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002113/211318E.pdf

62. http://www.unesco.org/uil/litbase/?menu=13&country=ZA&programme=69

63. Cameron and Cameron 2005; Farah 2005; Patel 2005; Robinson-Pant 2005; Stromquist 2005.

64. A product of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competences (PIAAC).

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Education
Sector

Reading the past, writing the future

Reading the past, writing the future: Fifty years of promoting literacy takes stock of youth and adult literacy interventions which have been implemented since 1966, when UNESCO held its first International Literacy Day. The publication sheds light on the literacy-related challenges the world is now facing, as it embarks on the implementation of the2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

The publication begins with an analysis of trends in literacy rates at the regional and global levels, and identifies fifty countries that have made notable progress. It then reflects on emerging conceptions of literacy, from 'literacy as a stand-alone skill' to 'functional literacy' for work and livelihood, to 'literacy for empowerment' of poor and marginalized populations and finally to 'literacy as social practice', shaped by the cultural context in which it is applied. These four conceptions are illustrated by a wide range of literacy campaigns, programmes and policies, implemented within the fifty selected countries. Finally, the publication envisages the possible future of literacy from the perspective of sustainable development, lifelong learning and digital societies, with a focus on the need for urgency of action.

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