



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education
2030

Asia-Pacific Overview: Sustainable Development Goal 4

TARGET

4.6



1. Defining Target 4.6

Target 4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy

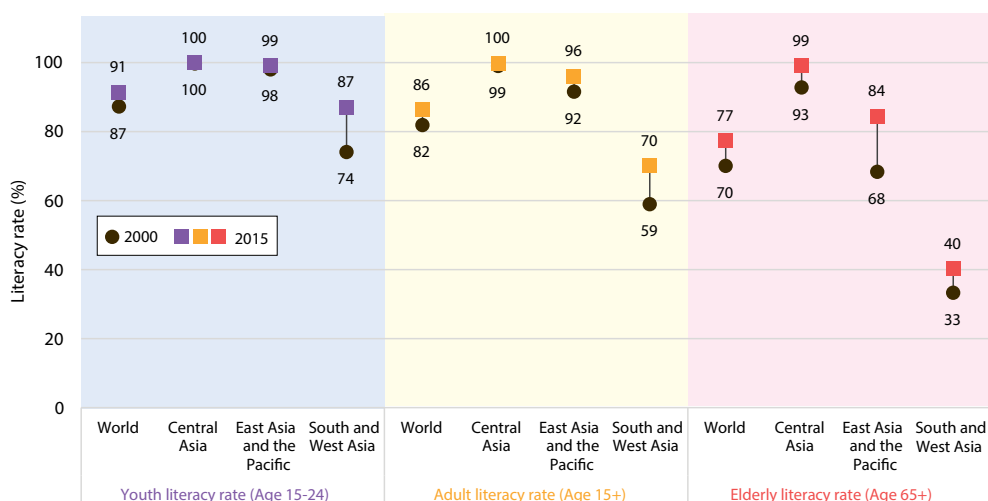
This target aims at ensuring that all young people and adults acquire 'relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education' (UNESCO, 2016). It is underpinned by the concept of literacy as a continuum of proficiency levels, which is developed from basic to more advanced levels throughout lives. This target is concerned with not only the mastery of functional literacy skills of recognized proficiency levels but also their application in specific contexts. Shifting from the dichotomous notion of literacy, by which one can be either literate or illiterate, to the notion of literacy as a continuum, has considerable implications on policies, practices, monitoring and national system building. Given the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs, efforts to achieve this specific target also require consideration of its potential interlinkages with other SDG4 targets as well as non-education SDGs.

2. Regional and Sub-regional Overview: Target 4.6

Remarkable progress made but the Asia-Pacific region remains home to 46 per cent of the world's illiterate youths and 61 per cent of illiterate adults.

In the Asia-Pacific region, especially in East Asia and South Asia, considerable progress has been made in youth and adult literacy. Between 1990 and 2015, the adult literacy rates (aged 15 years and older) increased from 47% to 70% in South Asia and 79% to 96% in East Asia (UIS, 2016). Since 2000, the youth literacy rate (aged 15 to 24) has improved tremendously, nearing universal youth literacy in many parts of the Asia-Pacific region (see Figure 1). Moreover, the region has met gender parity; both boys and girls equally acquiring literacy skills. However, despite the overall regional progress in the youth literacy rate, almost 46 per cent of the world's illiterate young people live in the region (UIS Data Centre).

FIGURE 1: Literacy rates, youth, adult and elderly, 2000 and 2015

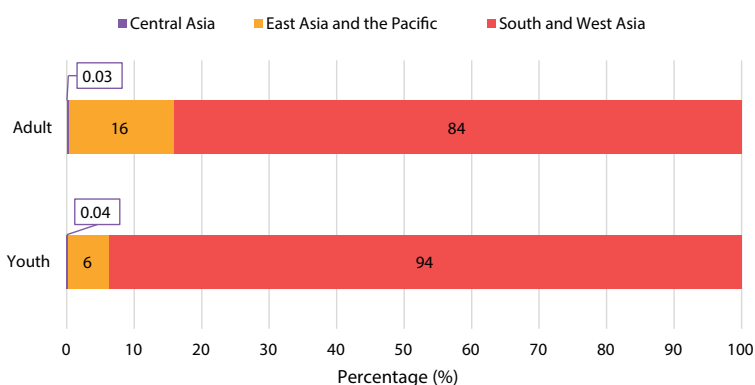


Source: Created by UIS-AIMS, UNESCO Bangkok, UIS Data Centre, accessed in September 2016

South and West Asia is the biggest contributor to the region's illiterate youth and adult population. For every 100 illiterate youth in Asia-Pacific, 94 are from South and West Asia (see Figure 2). Although the literacy rate for young women improved from 66 per cent to 84 per cent between 2000 and 2015, the gender parity was still slightly in favor of young men (GPI: 0.95) (UIS Data Centre).

Regarding adults, despite significant progress, the region was still home to 61 per cent of adults who lack basic literacy skills worldwide in 2015, and two-thirds of them were female (UIS Data Centre). South and West Asia lags behind, compared to other Asia-Pacific sub-regions, which accounted for only 70 per cent in the adult literacy rate (see Figure 1). It is notable that for every 100 illiterate adults in Asia-Pacific, 84 are from South and West Asia (see Figure 2). While Central Asia and East Asia and the Pacific maintained gender balance in 2015, in South and West Asia only 60 per cent of adult female population were literate, compared to 80 per cent for the male counterparts (UIS Data Centre).

FIGURE 2: Illiteracy rates, adult and youth, 2015



Source: Created by UIS-AIMS, UNESCO Bangkok, UIS Data Centre, accessed in September 2016

Data based on direct measurement provides a more nuanced picture. OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) in Round 1 (2008-2013) and Round 2 (2012-2016), for instance, measured literacy and numeracy skills, using a five-level scale. The proportion of 55-65 year-old adults who did not reach the lowest level (Level 1) were more than 50% in Indonesia (Jakarta), a quarter in Singapore, more than 10 % in the Republic of Korea and nearly 5% in Japan.¹ The 2013 UNESCO Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (LAMP), which measured reading comprehension (prose literacy) levels, using a three-level scale, revealed that the proportion of adults with no skills or having mastered only the lowest level was 26 per cent in Mongolia, even though the adult literacy rate was more than 98 per cent in 2010.²

1 <http://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/aboutpiaac.htm>

2 <http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Pages/lamp-literacy-assessment.aspx>

It is important to note the remarkable progress made in youth and adult literacy as a result of efforts of countries and partners for enhancing national systems, policies, interventions and monitoring. However, progress has not been sufficient, considering population growth has been uneven across countries and populations. The literacy rates for older generations remain low across the region except for Central Asia. Although not all adults and young people may achieve relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills by 2030 (UNESCO, 2016), the international community is accountable for its commitment to making this a reality for “a substantial proportion of adults” (ED2030 FFA, 2016).

Issues and Challenges

- » **Prevailing disparities:** There are significant disparities in literacy progress across countries and populations in the region. In particular, persisting gaps between male and female, rural and urban, and between generations, are alarming. Disaggregation of literacy data by sex, age, location and ethnic and linguistic affiliation is insufficient and need to be collected, analyzed and used in order to accurately identify where the most disadvantage populations are.
- » **Preoccupation with the dichotomous notion of literacy vs illiteracy:** National policies on data collection and monitoring of literacy are still based on the conventional dichotomous notion of literacy. This leads to the simplification of categories of people into ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’ and fails to cater to the real needs of learners and limits the relevance and accuracy of data as evidence to inform policies and programmes.
- » **Limitation of conventional literacy statistics:** There are large gaps between the literacy rates/numbers of illiterates in conventional statistics and those based on direct assessments of literacy skills. Beyond conventional statistics, which use the census and survey data based on self-reporting and/or numbers of school years, there is a need to develop and use appropriate tools to assess the proficiency levels and types of literacy skills that people possess, as well as to conduct research to obtain a more nuanced picture about the state of literacy.
- » **Political will insufficiently translated into action:** Allocation of budget to adult and youth literacy programmes is still low and remains a low priority for governments and ministries. Although the regional adult literacy rate increased from 59% to 70% during the period of 2000 – 2015, the current level of efforts across countries will not allow the region to achieve the rate of more than 80% by 2030.
- » **Insufficient attention to creating literate environments:** There is a lack of provision for post-literacy and continuing education programmes to retain literacy skills and relevant technical skills that are linked with economic opportunities such as micro-financing. The importance of building and ensuring supportive environments through the availability of libraries, books, newspapers, magazines and ICT devices in the language that people are familiar with, are often neglected and not seen as an essential part of literacy efforts to support neo-literates.

3. Lessons Learned and the Way Forward

- » **Place literacy at the core of lifelong learning:** Successful experiences point to the fact that literacy must be promoted through lifelong and life-wide approaches that link formal and non-formal education, and informal learning, as well as the world of work. Acquisition of functional literacy, skill development and further lifelong learning opportunities help to ensure the use, retention and advancement of acquired skills.
- » **Political will must be accompanied by adequate resources:** There has been too much lip service in literacy policies. Efforts to promote literacy must be backed by adequate and predictable resources in order to move beyond the pilots to scaling up and creating sustained literacy environments. Resource commitment is not only financial in nature, but also pertains to ensuring the sufficient generation and full utilization of local experts and locally developed learning materials. Ownership of policies and programmes must be cultivated from the national to the community levels.

- » **Call for expanding direct assessment of literacy skills:** A global indicator for Target 4.6, which is the percentage of the population by age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional literacy and numeracy skills, calls for reinforcement of monitoring efforts, especially expansion of the direct assessments of skills, in light of the shift of the concept of literacy from the dichotomous notion of literacy to literacy as a continuum of proficiency levels.
- » **Build and deliver on the positive impacts of inter-sectoral cooperation:** Literacy as the foundational skill for all social, cultural and economic activities and engagement, must go beyond the simple application of the skills in education. Literacy must be embedded in broader efforts for inclusive, sustainable development (e.g. skills development, rural transformation, health, agriculture), supported by inclusive governance and shared responsibilities.
- » **Harness the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT):** ICT devices could be effectively utilized to promote literacy and literate environments.
- » **Evidence-based innovation:** Adapting scientifically proven methods as well as embracing new and local expertise, knowledge and resources, and their adaptation in teaching and learning contributes to greater impacts on learners.

4. Global and Regional Documents Linked to Target 4.6

- Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education 2015, UNESCO (2015)
- 3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 3), UIL (2016)
- 2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Rethinking Literacy. UIL. 2013
- ASEAN Declaration for Strengthening Education for Out of School Children and Youth ASEAN, 2016
- Global Alliance for Literacy within the framework of lifelong learning (GAL) Information Note, UNESCO, 2016
- Literacy for Life (Resolution adopted by the General Assembly Dec 18 2014), UN, 2014
- Narrowing the Gender Gap: Empowering Women through Literacy Programmes, UNESCO, 2014
- New Delhi Agreement for enhancing SAARC collaboration for Education 2030 (Adopted by the participants of the Sub-Regional Conference on “EFA Unfinished and Post 2015 Education Agendas in SAARC countries”, 13 -14 October 2015, New Delhi, India)

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