For more than 60 years the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has tracked the progress of nations around the globe in achieving higher rates of adult literacy. Though nations may define literacy somewhat differently, most consider literacy as the ability to read and write simple statements in either a national or an indigenous language. Across the latter half of the 20th century, literacy rates of adults ages 15 years and older increased from 56 percent in 1950 to 70 percent in 1980, 75 percent in 1990, and 82 percent in 2004.

UNESCO's compilation of data obtained from member nations during the years 2000 to 2004 indicate that from 1990, illiteracy among adults fell [p. 475 ↓] by some 100 million, from around 870 million to 770 million, or about one fifth of the world's adult population. UNESCO data on the worldwide distribution of adult illiterates are presented next, followed by a brief discussion of some of the lessons learned in the years that UNESCO has worked to stimulate adult literacy education, primarily among developing nations.

**Adult Illiteracy Worldwide**

The overwhelming majority of the world's illiterate adults live in the less-developed regions of the world, including South and West Asia (41 percent of adults are illiterate), sub-Saharan Africa (40 percent), the Arab States (37 percent), Latin America and the Caribbean (10 percent), and East Asia and the Pacific (9 percent). In 1990, which was celebrated around the world as International Literacy Year, UNESCO and its member nations made a major effort to promote the education of women. At that time women comprised about two thirds of the world's illiterate adults. Unfortunately, over a decade later, women still make up about two thirds of the world's illiterate adults. Women are particularly vulnerable to illiteracy in East Asia and the Pacific, where they constitute almost 72 percent of adult illiterates; the Arab States (64 percent); Southern Asia (62 percent); and sub-Saharan Africa, where women constitute about 60 percent of adult illiterates.
Globally, in terms of the extent to which literacy rates for women are at parity with those for men, 88 women are literate for each 100 men, indicating an 88 percent parity rate of women’s literacy to men’s literacy for the world. These parity rates are lower (.66 to .76) for the regions cited in the previous paragraph.

Some Lessons Learned

Among the important lessons distilled from the international communities’ work to raise the world’s literacy rate for adults, two are especially important: (1) Adult literacy programs generally produce multiplier effects, meaning that important outcomes beyond the learning of literacy are frequently forthcoming, and (2) adult literacy programs often have intergenerational consequences, meaning that improving adult literacy, especially that of women, increases the likelihood of children’s education.

Multiplier Effects in Adult Literacy Education

In 1984 UNESCO awarded a literacy prize to the National Institute for Adult Education of Mexico. In 3 years the institute enrolled nearly 3 million adults, of which some 1 million became literate in that time. In teaching literacy, the institute’s instructional materials integrated the teaching of literacy with the teaching of knowledge important in the day-to-day lives of the adults. This way, in addition to acquiring literacy, the participants also acquired knowledge about health, nutrition, education, and other vital concerns.

The National Institute for Adult Education of Mexico program is just one of many recognized by UNESCO for the approach to literacy education that illustrates that governments can expect multiple returns on investments in adult literacy education in at least five areas:

[p. 476 ↓]
Intergenerational Effects of Adult Literacy Education

The fifth item in the previous list is especially important because it reveals the effects that educating adults can have on the educational opportunities and achievements of children. In 1983 a UNESCO literacy prize was presented to the Department of Adult Education of the Government of Kenya whose program reached more than a million adults, nearly four fifths of whom were women. The prize citation noted the excellent results achieved both directly through the program and indirectly through its impact upon the school enrollment and retention of the children of participants.

Research published by UNESCO illustrates the effects of girls’ and women’s education on children and their educational development at various stages from before birth to the school years:

*Before Pregnancy.* Better-educated girls/women show higher economic productivity, better personal health care, and lower fertility rates; hence they produce smaller families. The latter, in turn, is related to the preschool cognitive development of children and their subsequent achievement in school.

*During Pregnancy and at Birth.* Better-educated women provide better prenatal care, produce more full-term babies, and provide better postnatal care; this results in fewer babies with learning disabilities.

*Before Going to School.* Better-educated women produce better children's health care; better cognitive, language, and preliteracy development; and better preparation for schoolwork.

*During the School Years.* Better-educated women produce higher participation rates in schooling, better management of homework, and better advocacy for children's education and negotiation of school-child
conflicts. In addition they produce children who achieve higher levels of education and literacy.

Because of these effects of women’s education, UNESCO has for decades recommended that nations should pay special attention to the need for resources to provide literacy educational opportunities to the millions of less-literate women who will bring the next generation of children into the world. In 2003, the UN Decade of Literacy was launched with the first year of the decade devoted to issues of gender, with a focus on the literacy needs of girls and women to bring them to parity with the literacy rates of men.

Improving the Monitoring of Adult Literacy

As indicated earlier, adult literacy/illiteracy rates in developing nations are presently determined by a variety of methods. These methods are mostly based on self-reports in census surveys. But studies comparing these self-reports with direct assessments using literacy tests suggest that the traditional methods for determining literacy rates may overstate the extent of literacy. In the 2006 report on UNESCO’s Education for All initiative, a report on the monitoring of adult literacy around the world, it is noted,

In Morocco, 45 percent of respondents in a sample reported being literate, but only 33 percent demonstrated basic competence in literacy. Similar patterns are found in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nicaragua and the United Republic of Tanzania. Among Ethiopian women with one year of schooling, although 59 percent were considered literate by household assessments, only 27 percent passed a simple reading test.

Because of the diversity of methods used to indicate literacy rates and the mixed results of studies such as the foregoing, UNESCO is developing new methods of measuring adult literacy to use in monitoring the achievement of adult literacy in developing nations in the coming decades.

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See also

Further Readings


