Committee: UNESCO
Agenda: Improving Literacy Rates in Developing Countries
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Introduction

Low literacy rates in many developing countries hinder efforts to improve the quality of life across various communities. This issue has garnered increasing attention from researchers and institutions in recent years. Currently, the global illiterate population stands at nearly 754 million, with 76% concentrated in less economically developed countries (LEDCs) in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The problem is compounded by the scarcity of nationally representative studies on literacy rates in these regions. Without accurate data on "where the quality of learning is weakest," governments and organizations face challenges in designing effective and equitable education and intervention programs. For instance, research in several countries, including Sudan, revealed that "over 40% of the national sample were unable to read a single word."

Literacy—the ability to read and write—is a fundamental skill for accessing education and economic opportunities in modern societies. Written communication offers significant advantages in disseminating and preserving knowledge and ideas across large populations, historically contributing to the advancement of civilizations. In its absence, children are deprived of learning opportunities, schools struggle with the quality of teaching, adults face limited career prospects, and older populations encounter challenges in managing their health. Consequently, improving literacy rates is a proven pathway for individuals and nations to transition to middle-income status, fostering personal and societal development.

Literate and illiterate world population

The share of adults aged 15 and older who can read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life.
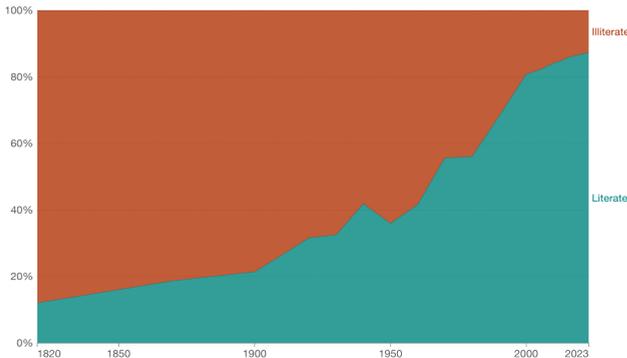
[Source: World Bank]

UNESCO has long recognized literacy as a key component of socioeconomic development. For a country to progress beyond basic manufacturing and transition into industries driven by technology and knowledge, it requires a workforce that is not only literate but also well-educated. Over the decades, the UN, national governments, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have launched numerous initiatives to improve global literacy rates. While the worldwide literacy rate has increased by an average of 2–4% per decade since the mid-20th century, significant work remains to be done.

Definition of Key Terms

Literacy

Literacy refers to the ability to read and write at a level that enables text comprehension and effective written communication. It is a fundamental skill necessary for formal education, knowledge acquisition, and advancement in various domains. Literacy empowers individuals by providing access to opportunities and is essential for

success in many careers and life situations.

Disciplinary Literacy	**advanced reading/writing to learn** *specialized reading strategies unique to subject areas*	**TIER I** Provide accommodations, modifications, scaffolds that ensure struggling learners can access the same essential content knowledge as their non-struggling peers
Content Literacy	**reading/writing to learn** *vocabulary, comprehension, writing strategies used across all subjects*	
Basic Literacy	**learning to read/write** *intervention for basic skills, including words study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, writing*	**TIER II & III** Remediate to develop basic skills

Literacy Interventions

Literacy interventions are strategies and programs designed to improve reading and writing skills among specific populations. These initiatives, such as remedial courses, community-led programs, and specialized instruction, often include assessment, targeted programming, and ongoing evaluation. Interventions may focus on specific demographics, such as age or ethnic groups, to accelerate literacy acquisition.

Early Childhood Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE), also known as nursery education, embodies the whole process of structured learning and development programs aimed at children between birth and the age of eight years old at which the child transitions into the formal K-12 education system. ECE focuses on comprehensive development throughout the cognitive, social, and physical domains. ECE activities include foundational skill-building, play, guidance, and peer interactions. This period of education is integral as the stimulation and development from ECE are necessary for later academic success. Recent research shows that access to high-quality ECE education is a strong predictor of later learning attitudes and academic performance.

Adult Literacy

Adult literacy is the ability to read and write in adults, especially related to those who did not acquire such language skills during childhood. Adult literacy is generally important as such abilities are directly related to economic outcomes and community development. Intervention involves developing the necessary skills amid the unique contexts and barriers such as work and family responsibilities, gaps in previous education, and psychological barriers to learning that adults face. As a result, these circumstances need to be taken into account in designing adult literacy interventions: typically, flexible teaching methods and practical curriculum are used to maximize direct learning outcomes.

Non-formal education

This refers to structured and unstructured intervention initiatives that occur outside the formal K-12 educational institutions, generally in a community or vocational education background. To adjust, initiatives are typically more flexible, learner-centered, and adaptable. Reaching a wider group of learners, non-formal education serves as a key complement to formal schooling's shortcomings in knowledge, skill, and social inclusion.

History

Countries began to start adult literacy campaigns across different regions in the postwar era. This was when academics in the linguistics field began to understand literacy as a socioeconomic concept with wider ramifications: previously literacy was solely viewed as the academic ability to recognize words and letters (alphabetical literacy) while later literacy began to be considered as a social and cultural concept (functional literacy). The research was expanded to sociology and policy, and the first modern literacy initiatives began to take root in this era. For example, Kenya first established literacy initiatives in the 1950s with its 10-year plan on education. There, instructors worked with residents to teach reading and writing to a population of all ages who had not attended school. To increase interest, language

was approached as a practically applicable skill, and culturally and socially relevant materials were used in instruction. These early programs laid the groundwork for greater insights into literacy development and later structured approaches.

In the 1970s and 1980s, UNESCO began to expand its reach. It started to focus on integrated educational reforms and community-based interventions with new collaborations with local educational institutions and local NGOs. In Senegal, for example, UNESCO collaborated with local NGOs to create community reading centers (CRCs) and literacy villages that combined adult education with vocational training. These villages not only taught reading and writing but also additionally delivered classes that taught skills like carpentry, tailoring, and basic business management.

At the onset of the 21st century, initiatives began to broaden to not only tackle adults who did not have the opportunity to attend school but also include the wider population from early childhood education to lifelong learning initiatives. Early childhood literacy programs engaged families and communities to support children's initial reading experiences. Initiatives trained educators, and they in turn introduced story-telling sessions using local folklore to spark interest in reading for those in the local community. Such improved pedagogical methods led to higher literacy rates among both children and adults.

Lately, the newest trend in addressing literacy challenges has been the incorporation of data analysis and communication technology (CT) in addressing literacy challenges. Initiatives like Save the Children's Literacy Boost in Rwanda combined home and community-based interventions with school improvements, providing book banks, reading clubs, and teacher training to enhance early reading skills. Other examples include mobile literacy apps developed in partnership with tech companies in Indonesia, enabling learners to access educational content even in areas without traditional school infrastructure. These new projects now employ mobile data platforms

to monitor literacy program outcomes in real-time, ensuring flexibility and responsiveness to community needs.
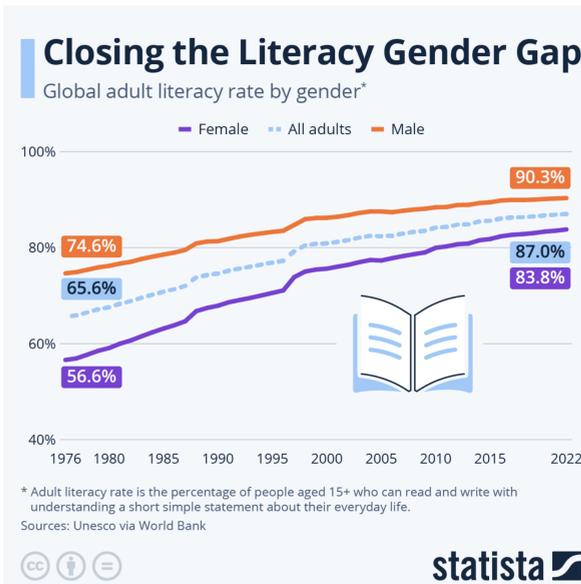
Changes in approaches to education and literacy

Since the early stages of literacy initiatives, the evolution of educational paradigms has newly shaped literacy programs as well. Traditional learning methods based on structured classroom learning and rote memory recall are now giving way to interactive, practical, and student-centered education. New methods such as story-based or technology-based adaptive education are rising trends. However, the gap between policy and practice is still a challenge that needs to be addressed. Projects like Ethiopia's "Community Learning Centers" have attempted to address these barriers by establishing locally managed schools that adapt national curricula to suit community needs, but scalability and consistent quality remain issues that require continued attention. Governments should go beyond designing innovative approaches to ensure such programs and initiatives are effective on the field and reach communities effectively, especially in remote or under-resourced towns.

As the world increasingly becomes digitized with the advancement of new connectivity technology and novel Artificial Intelligence ("AI") models, putting such new tools into literacy education presents unprecedented opportunities. Initiatives like digital book banks and mobile learning in rural Rwanda and India have shown promise, providing interactive lessons and digital libraries that engage learners in innovative ways. For instance, the "One Laptop per Child" project in Rwanda delivered laptops to students, preloaded with educational software and digital books, bridging the gap between traditional literacy and digital skills. However, as similarly discussed in the last paragraph, widespread adoption is challenged by infrastructure limitations, teaching training gaps, and funding. As a result, delegates

should seek to balance such realistic limitations with ambitious new programs. A good case study can be Kenya's Book Dash workshops where community members work together to create low-cost locally contextualized reading materials, appropriately adapting technology to fit local needs.

Gender Disparities and Inclusivity

Gender gaps in literacy persist, particularly in regions like sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. Social norms, economic barriers, and safety concerns often restrict girls' and women's access to education. Programs must tackle these sociocultural barriers head-on. Efforts such as community-led women's literacy circles in Nepal and gender-sensitive teaching practices in West Africa are examples of initiatives aiming to close the gender gap by creating supportive learning environments for girls and women. In Bangladesh, a project called "Empower Her Literacy" provided mobile literacy centers for women, scheduling classes at times convenient for mothers and creating safe spaces for learning. These programs not only improve literacy rates among women but also strengthen community structures by empowering female leaders, thereby fostering broader social change and economic development.

Closing the Literacy Gender Gap

Global adult literacy rate by gender*

Female   All adults   Male

90.3%

74.6%

87.0%

65.6%

83.8%

56.6%

1976 1980 1985 1990 1995 2000 2005 2010 2015 2022

* Adult literacy rate is the percentage of people aged 15+ who can read and write with understanding a short simple statement about their everyday life.
Sources: Unesco via World Bank

statista

[Source: Statista]

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

African Governments

Governments on the African continent play an integral role in shaping literacy goals on the continent. Many nations are now aligning with frameworks like Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 to prioritize literacy to drive socio-economic development. Ethiopia recently launched nationwide literacy campaigns aimed at its adult population, emphasizing local community-based language instruction and community-driven learning centers.

International Organizations

International players including UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank tend to provide strategic frameworks, technical support, and funding. UNESCO in particular advocates for inclusivity and cultural relevance in literacy intervention programs.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Save the Children, Room to Read, and different local groups operate community-based interventions both independently and in partnership with the aforementioned bodies in each of the local communities. For example, Save the Children's Literacy Boost program in Rwanda complements school-based efforts run by the government. These actors also are pioneers in implementing and innovating literacy initiatives. Examples include mobile libraries or digital literacy tools. They also advocate for policy changes, galvanize community support, and deliver direct services, in result bridging gaps that government programs may not cover due to resource constraints or logistical challenges.

The Private Sector

Private companies in the technology and publishing sectors provide the physical or digital resources that are necessary for literacy development in exchange for payment. Although profit-driven, some private sector initiatives align with corporate social responsibility goals, investing in literacy as a means to develop a more skilled workforce and stimulate economic growth.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of Event
1945	UNESCO is founded, establishing literacy as a core component of its mission to promote peace and sustainable development.
1960	UNESCO launches the "Decade for Literacy," a global campaign to reduce illiteracy worldwide through community programs.
2000	The United Nations adopts the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with universal primary education as a key target.
2015	MDGs conclude, having increased global literacy rates; focus shifts to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
2015	The SDGs are adopted, with Goal 4 specifically aimed at ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and literacy for all.
2017	UIS Fact Sheet No. 45 is published, highlighting global literacy trends and ongoing challenges.
Present	Expansion of digital literacy initiatives and community-based programs, such as Save the Children's Literacy Boost in Rwanda.
Ongoing	UNESCO collaborates with partners to support the implementation of Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063 goals related to literacy.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Since the end of the war, literacy initiatives by countless actors

have been enacted. While many programs have achieved significant progress, challenges remain, and looking back we can both see many successes and pitfalls throughout different programs.

Programs such as the ["Literacy Boost" in Rwanda](#) and community learning centers in India have demonstrated that integrated approaches—combining teacher training, community engagement, and access to reading materials—can lead to marked improvements in literacy. Contextually tailored interventions, robust community involvement, and well-supported educators are key to advancing literacy.

Despite progress, many literacy programs face hurdles.

Inconsistent funding, infrastructural limitations, and cultural barriers often impede scalability. Programs that do not adequately consider local languages or cultural contexts can fail to engage learners effectively. For example, in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, literacy materials that overlook indigenous languages have limited impact. Additionally, gender disparities persist in certain regions, with social norms hindering women's access to education despite targeted initiatives. Policy implementation gaps, where well-designed strategies are not executed effectively at the local level, further diminish the potential impact.

Possible Solutions

1. Inclusive Curriculum Reform: While the general traditional curriculum can increase literacy in the community to a degree, to fundamentally engage with the learners educational content is best rooted in local culture, languages, and values. This resonation with learners not only bolsters reading skills but also preserves cultural heritage and instills pride in local identities. Inclusive curricula also adapt to different learning styles and needs, ensuring that marginalized groups, such as children with disabilities, have equitable access to quality education. Projects in countries like Ghana have redesigned literacy curricula to

include indigenous narratives, practical life skills, and local history. The Mother Tongue Education projects, including [the National Literacy Accelerated Programme (NALAP) and the RIPE project](), in Ghana promote literacy in local languages at early grades, which has led to improved comprehension and retention among students.

2. Instructor Training and Support: Whether for formal education or community-based intervention, effective literacy outcomes depend on well-trained educators who are equipped with innovative teaching methods and resources. Intensive teacher training programs that focus on phonics-based instruction and continuous professional development can contribute significantly to effectively boosting reading skills among primary students. Improving working conditions, offering competitive salaries, and providing career advancement opportunities are also critical to retaining quality educators. Programs like ["Teach for All"]() have successfully recruited and trained passionate teachers for underserved areas.

3. Community and Family Engagement: Involving families and communities in literacy efforts can multiply impact. Parents can empower and support their children's learning at home and foster a culture of reading. This not only improves children's skills but also raises adult literacy rates as family members learn together. For example, in Brazil, [community-run libraries]() and [storytelling festivals]() have successfully improved local attitudes toward reading, not only integrating literacy into daily life but also strengthening community bonds.

4. Access to Resources and Materials: The availability of quality reading materials is vital for literacy improvement. Projects like the establishment of community libraries in Ethiopia by ["Ethiopia Reads"]() have increased access to books in local languages, stimulating a culture of reading and lifelong learning. In LA, the ["Book Truck"]() travels to under-resourced areas,

offering free books and literacy activities, addressing the challenge of limited infrastructure. By collaborating with local publishers to produce affordable and relevant books, these initiatives ensure that learners have materials that reflect their experiences and contexts. This approach not only improves literacy but also fosters local publishing industries and content creation that support long-term literacy sustainability.

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