

ADULT LITERACY RATE		
Education	Literacy	Core indicator

1. INDICATOR

- (a) **Name:** Adult literacy rate.
- (b) **Brief Definition:** The proportion of the adult population aged 15 years and over that is literate.
- (c) **Unit of Measurement:** expressed as a rate (%).
- (d) **Placement in the CSD Indicator Set:** Education/Literacy.

2. POLICY RELEVANCE

- (a) **Purpose:** This indicator provides a measure of the stock of literate persons within the adult population who are capable of using written words in daily life and to continue to learn. It reflects the accumulated accomplishment of education in spreading literacy. Any shortfall in literacy would provide indications of efforts required in the future to extend literacy to the remaining adult illiterate population.
- (b) **Relevance to Sustainable/Unsustainable Development (theme/sub-theme):** Literacy is critical for promoting and communicating sustainable development and improving the capacity of people to address environment and development issues. It facilitates the achievement of environmental and ethical awareness, values, and skills consistent with sustainable development and effective public participation in decision-making.
- (c) **International Conventions and Agreements:** the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) and the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD).
- (d) **International Targets/Recommended Standards:** The general target is full literacy, i.e., 100% adult literacy rate. This is the goal of most national efforts and international campaigns to eradicate illiteracy. The EFA and MDG goals are to improve the literacy rate by 50% from 2000 levels by 2015.
- (e) **Linkages to Other Indicators:** Literacy is closely linked to indicators reflecting basic needs such as education, capacity building, information and communication, and the role of major groups. The literacy rate indicates the status or stock of literates at a given point in time. It is often linked to the number of out-of-school children representing those that would gain literacy skills unless they are enrolled or attending primary school. School enrolment ratios and the number of pupils reaching grade 5 of primary education, both having an impact on the future stock of literates.

3. METHODOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

(a) **Underlying Definitions and Concepts:** The *Revised Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics* suggests the following definitions for statistical purposes:

(i) A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement related to his/her everyday life.

(ii) A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community's development.

Persons who do not fulfill (i) or (ii) are termed illiterates or functional illiterates. Adult literacy measurement applies to the population aged 15 years and over, and data are generally available by sex, age-group, and urban/rural areas.

(b) **Measurement Methods:** To calculate the adult literacy rate, divide the number of literates aged 15 years and over by the corresponding total population aged 15 years and over and multiplied by 100.

(c) **Limitations of the Indicator:** As literacy is a relative concept, no single measure can separate the literate from the illiterate. A cut-off point is not totally appropriate because there are many different forms and degrees of literacy. A person might be literate in numeric terms, but have difficulty with text comprehension. Literacy can be defined in terms of work, school, home, and social spheres. Each area of life requires different types of literacy skills.

Literacy status is mostly based on self-declaration or declaration of the head of household, which gives rise to concerns about data reliability and consequently comparability, especially for females in many developing countries. Some countries estimate literacy rates by making inference using data on educational attainment, such as by equating persons with no schooling or incomplete primary education as illiterates in the absence of theoretical and empirical basis. Increasingly, it is deemed critical that literacy should be determined by actual assessment of reading, writing and numeracy abilities of each person within a social context. Although direct assessment of literacy is time-consuming, costly and operationally complex, the UIS is currently developing the Literacy Assessment Monitoring Programme (LAMP) as an international instrument in order to provide cross-nationally comparable measurements on literacy skills for those countries of the world that participate.

(d) **Status of the methodology:** This indicator has the status of an international recommendation since the basic data elements to derive it are included in the *Revised Recommendation concerning the International Standardization of Education Statistics* adopted by the UNESCO General Conference at its twentieth session, Paris, 1978. In the latest revised Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses in 1999, the concerned UN agencies co-operated with international experts in upgrading the methodology used in collecting statistics on literacy and educational characteristics. Further development of literacy test instruments (such as UIS' LAMP), and their use in spreading the practice of literacy test measurement shall help to improve the quality of

international statistics on literacy which in turn will permit targeted policy interventions in those countries where it is needed.

(e) Alternative Definitions: To meet the limitations discussed in 4c above, the definition and measurement of functional literacy represents an improved indicator. This is usually measured for three to five components of literacy such as "prose", "document", and "numeracy" domains. The aim is to measure the degree of functionality, rather than the dichotomy literate vs. illiterate. In order to undertake a direct assessment of literacy skills, measurement instruments such as LAMP are required.

4. ASSESSMENT OF DATA

(a) Data Needed to Compile the Indicator: Data on the number of literates or illiterates and the corresponding population aged 15 years and over.

(b) National and International Data Availability and Sources: Data are usually collected during national population censuses, or during household surveys or literacy surveys. Official statistics exist for most countries in the world but are often out-of-date due to census taking every ten years and late census data release. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), through its Institute for Statistics (UIS), undertakes an annual data collection of the latest available international literacy data. The UIS also makes available forecasted literacy rates that are based on a newly developed demographic projection model. In principle, literacy data are available at both the national and sub-national levels. For sound measurement, the ratio must be supported by consistent data by gender, age-group and area (such as rural/urban zones). The primary data sources are national population censuses and household surveys. International data sources include the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the Statistics Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA).

(c) Data References: The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) WEB site: <http://www.uis.unesco.org>; the UIS Global Education Digests (GED), the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Reports (see "Literacy for Life" (2006)); the UNDP Human Development Reports; the World Bank World Development Indicators Reports.

5. AGENCIES INVOLVED IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDICATOR

(a) Lead Agency: The lead agency is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The contact point is the Director, UNESCO Institute for Statistics; e-mail: uis@unesco.org and fax (1-514) 343-5740

(b) Other Contributing Organizations: The Statistics Division of the United Nations DESA also collects and publishes statistics on literacy from national population censuses, apart from providing the data to UNESCO for processing and dissemination.

6. REFERENCES

(a) Readings: The UIS Global Education Digests (GED), the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Reports (see “Literacy for Life” (2006)); the UNDP Human Development Reports; the World Bank World Development Indicators Reports., Compendium of Statistics on Illiteracy: 1995 Edition, UNESCO, Paris. 1995.

(b) Internet site: <http://www.uis.unesco.org>