

issue brief

Global Literacy



This CAFAmerica Issue Brief presents a synopsis of facts, research and funding opportunities for causes you care about. It isn't meant to be a comprehensive report, and for that reason, provides a list of resources and website where you can learn more.

We hope you will use this as a starting point to investigate your funding interests, and find out how you can make a global difference.

CAFAmerica

King Street Station
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 150
Alexandria, VA 22314-2840

Tel: 1 703 549 8931

Fax: 1 703 549 8934

Email: info@cafamerica.org

Web: www.cafamerica.org

EIN: 43-1634280

BACKGROUND

The inability to read and write makes tasks essential to adult life—completing a job application, reading medical instructions, selecting a candidate from an election ballot—difficult for far too many people around the world. Even persons who are functionally literate (those with skills ranging, according to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], from a “total inability to use the written word” to “an insufficient mastery of a set of sophisticated skills”) face significant handicaps to everyday living. The illiterate are effectively barred from civic participation in their own communities and from capitalizing on basic skills needed to improve their standard of living.

The problem of illiteracy is global. Today there are 774 million illiterate adults and children worldwide—approximately 1/5 of the world's population. The majority are women and the rural poor from sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America where growing populations, war and internal conflict, continuing gender disparities, and inadequate funding for basic education contribute to low literacy rates. Women represent over 60% of the illiterate population—exactly the same percentage as 10 years ago.¹

These figures hint at the dramatic payoff of educating young girls world wide. Not only do literate adults, and especially literate women, raise literate children, but higher literacy rates are also linked to improvements in health. A United Nations study of 46 nations indicated

that “a 1% rise in women's literacy is 3 times more likely to reduce deaths in children than a 1% rise in the number of doctors.”²

Literate adults are better able to benefit from health care systems and follow medical advice. Literacy in developing countries contributes to better sanitation and hygiene, and is crucial to educating men and women about birth control and HIV/AIDS. Literate women tend to marry later in life and to be better informed about birth control methods. Literate men are more likely to support their partners' reproductive choices.

CHALLENGES

Despite heartening progress towards achieving universal education and gender parity, advances are not occurring fast enough to meet the United Nation's goal of a 50% increase in global literacy by 2015.

Fallout from in-country conflicts and natural disasters magnifies challenges to increasing global literacy. For example, 95% of classrooms were destroyed in East Timor's civil war for independence. Regional instability similarly threatened education in Somalia: all of the schools in the nation's capital of Mogadishu were officially closed in October 2008 due to the threat of looming violence. Many schools in southern and central Somalia have been closed for years as a result of continuing conflict.³

For many countries, the need to choose between teaching a colloquial, spoken tongue or an official language poses an additional challenge. A nation's official language is



¹ www.un.org

² www.sil.org

³ www.ei-ie.org

issue brief

generally taught in formal, institutionalized educational settings while colloquial languages are often taught in informal settings. Being required to learn to read and write in a language very different from the language one speaks complicates an already formidable task. This is especially true for women who are often less likely to speak a country's official language than their male counterparts.

Illiteracy is not simply a problem of developing countries. The problem is shockingly prevalent in the most developed nations. The results of an international survey published in 2000 pointed to the alarming state of adult literacy in the world's most industrialized countries: The International Adult Literacy Survey revealed that as much as a quarter of the populations of 22 countries, "representing over 50% of the world's entire gross domestic product," lack basic literacy skills needed to complete tasks like filling out hospital forms and understanding insurance policies."⁴

In the United States, nearly 15% of the adult population, 30 million people, "don't read well enough to understand a newspaper story written at the eighth grade level or fill out a job application."⁵ A similar situation among adolescents exists in the United Kingdom. In 2000, the region was ranked seventh by the Programme for International Student Assessment, a study ranking international academic performance in math, science, and literacy.⁶ Six years later, the UK's ranking had dropped to 17th. Low teen literacy is also a problem in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and Spain—the lowest ranking countries in a European Commission study of reading levels among 15 year olds.⁷

SUCCESSSES

Increased awareness of the problem among both private and national organizations is the key to combatting illiteracy. And despite the challenges, enormous progress has been made over the past two centuries. Here are some notable achievements:

- 150 years ago, only 10% of the world's adult population was literate, compared with 80% today.⁸
- According to the United Nations, the number of literate adults doubled from 1970 to 1998, from 1.5 billion to 3.3 billion. Today, 85% of all men and 74% of all women can read and write.⁹
- Thanks to a successful international conference in 2000 in Dakar, Senegal, nearly 200 participating governments put literacy on the UN's global agenda with the launch of the International Decade of Literacy (2003–2015). The "Dakar effect" drew needed attention to a previously neglected aim of universal education, one of the UN's Millennium Development Goals to be achieved by 2015.
- Another indication of the "Dakar effect" is the recent creation of a global literacy fund. In September 2008, the United States Agency for International Development pledged funding for the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) Fund in order to advance global literacy.
- UNESCO's International Day of Literacy, on September 8, 2008, centered on the theme of "literacy is the best remedy."
- Other forms of literacy such as technical, financial, and health literacy are also garnering more attention. Organizations like the Health Literacy Foundation stress the importance of full health literacy among underserved and medically vulnerable populations.

FIGHTING ILLITERACY WITH CAFAmerica

Reach Education Action Program (REAP), India

For the past ten years, REAP has been running an ambitious and aggressive campaign to tackle illiteracy in Mumbai, India and surrounding areas. Based on a concept of "4 Es"—education, entitlement (of rights), employment and empowerment—REAP offers non-formal education to those most in need. Through their

4 www.unesco.org

5 www.proliteracy.org

6 www.pisa.oecd.org

7 www.businessweek.com

8 www.unesco.org

9 www.un.org



network of “schools without walls,” REAP reaches out to educate children, including child laborers, homeless children, and tribal children living in impoverished rural provinces.

REAP projects include courses tailored for working children, remedial classes for students lagging behind, and programs to help school dropouts complete their studies. Programs targeting women include self-help groups, legal aid, and teacher training centers that produce between 60 and 80 graduates per year. REAP also offers boarding to girls from tribal communities as an incentive to complete high school. Following the success of their lodging program for girls, REAP is now considering a similar program for young boys.

REAP began in 1998 with 15 literacy centers; in less than ten years, the program has expanded to over 450 centers reaching 10,000 learners. Recent REAP initiatives include the ‘adoption’ of two local schools where children struggle with literacy. To learn more about these students, and other REAP projects, visit the REAP website at www.reapchild.org.

Buffelshoek Trust, South Africa

The Buffelshoek Trust adopts a “holistic” approach to combating poverty in Mpumalanga Province, a rural region in South Africa with one of the largest concentrations of poverty in the country. Of the 800,000 residents of Mpumalanga Province, approximately 25% are HIV positive and 70% are not economically active. Efforts to educate the children of Mpumalanga are complicated by malnutrition and lack of basic resources such as classrooms.

Despite such a challenging environment, the Buffelshoek Trust’s achievements are impressive. Its comprehensive education program includes teacher trainings, development of extracurricular activities, and literacy projects. Since 2001, the charity has built over 40 classrooms with electricity and seven computer centers, provided water resources to two villages, and furnished three libraries.

The Buffelshoek Trust also runs a literacy program targeted at teachers to improve teaching methods. “It further aims to improve literacy, language and communication skills of learners through school-manager and educator training with a view towards whole school development.” The Trust’s future plans include the construction of a school focused on math, science, and technology, as well as the creation of a health care facility for the community of Mpumalanga Province. To learn more about their literacy projects, visit the Buffelshoek Trust’s website at www.buffelshoektrust.co.za.

To give to the organizations listed here, or another international charity of your choice, visit CAFAmerica today at www.cafamerica.org. To support a specific initiative, please indicate its title program name on the CAFAmerica gift form.



RESOURCES

Reports and Publications

EFA – Global Monitoring Report 2008. UNESCO, 2008. The latest in a series of annual studies of the status of global education and the progress made towards achieving universal education, one of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals. This edition focuses on the feasibility of achieving "education for all" by 2015. To read the full report, visit <http://portal.unesco.org>.

Literacy, learning and health: Research report. Uta Papen and Sue Walters. Crown Copyright, October 2008. A publication of the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy. This report explores the relationship between literacy and health, and presents both the challenges and strategies involved. To download this free report, visit www.nrdc.org.uk.

Websites

Education International, www.ei-ie.org

Global Literacy Foundation, www.globalliteracy.net

International Literacy Institute, www.literacyonline.org

International Reading Association, www.reading.org

NEAR (Network for Education and Academic Rights), www.nearinternational.org

Reach Out and Read, www.reachoutandread.org

SIL International, www.sil.org

United Nation's Children Fund, www.unicef.org

United States Department of Education, www.ed.gov

The White House Symposium on Advancing Global Literacy, www.globalliteracy.gov

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