

# ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY

*This fact sheet presents the latest UIS literacy data available as of September 2011.*

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is the official source of data used to monitor education and literacy targets associated with Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals. The UIS collects data on youth and adult literacy through its annual survey on literacy and educational attainment. Adult literacy rates concern the population aged 15 years and older, while youth literacy rates cover the population between the ages of 15 to 24 years. The data are disseminated through the UIS Data Centre and featured in publications like the annual *Global Education Digest*. This fact sheet provides a summary of the main literacy statistics.

As part of the EFA goals, the international community has pledged to improve adult literacy levels by 50% between 2000 and 2015. While the number of illiterate persons has fallen over the past decade, 793 million adults – 64% of whom are women – still lack basic reading and writing skills (see **Table 1**). In 2009, the global adult literacy rate was 83.7%, compared to 89.3% for youth.

**Table 1. What are the data on literacy?**

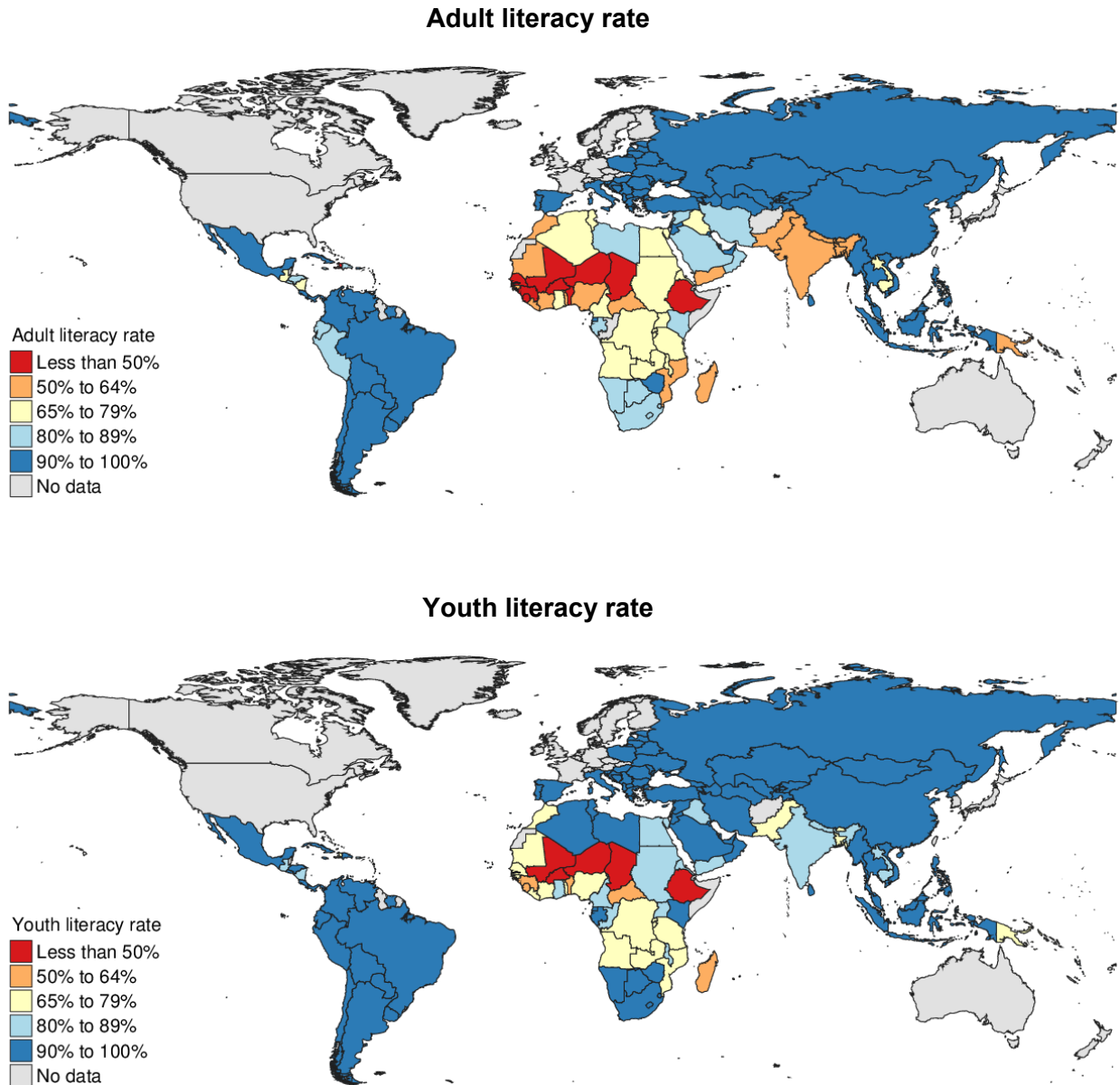
Global literacy rates and population numbers for adults and youth, 2009

Adult literacy rate, total	83.7%
Adult literacy rate, male	88.3%
Adult literacy rate, female	79.2%
Adult illiterate population, total	793.1 million
Adult illiterate population, female share	64.1%
Youth literacy rate, total	89.3%
Youth literacy rate, male	91.9%
Youth literacy rate, female	86.8%
Youth illiterate population, total	127.3 million
Youth illiterate population, female share	60.7%

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2011.

## Figure 1. Where are literacy rates lowest and highest in the world?

Global maps of literacy rates for adults and youth, 2009

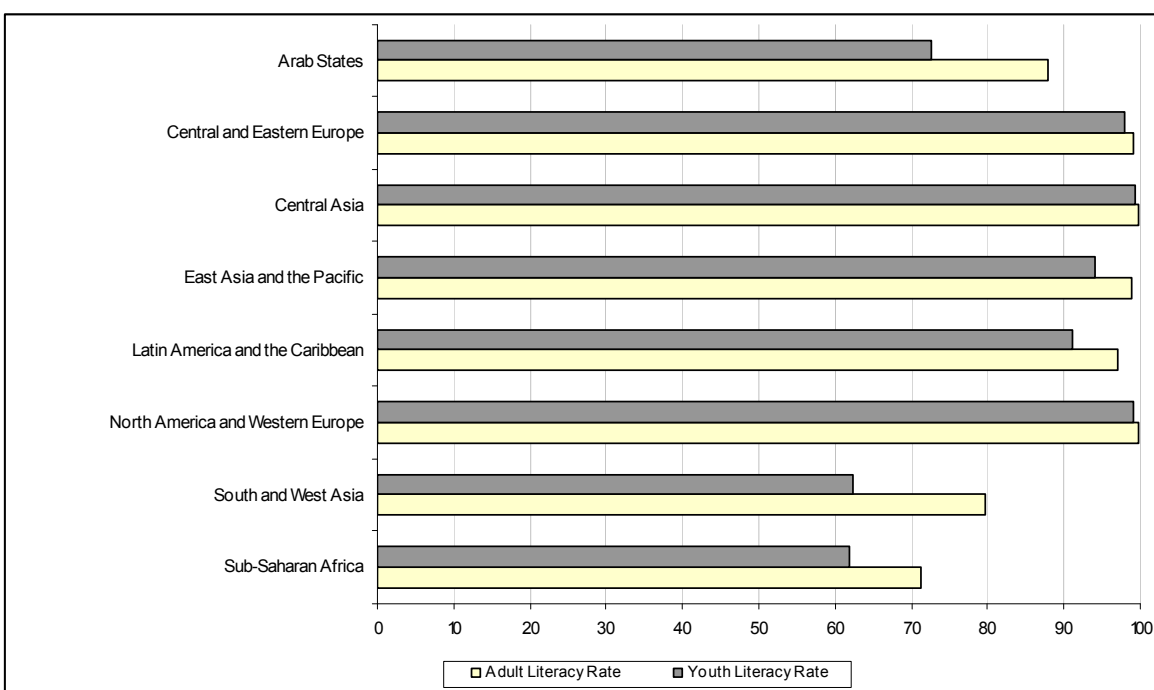


Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2011.

The lowest literacy rates are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia (see **Figure 1**). Adult literacy rates were below 50% in the following 11 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Haiti, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. In North America and Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the average adult and youth literacy rates were greater than 90% (see **Figure 2**). However, it is important to note that regional averages can mask disparities at the country level. This is most apparent in sub-Saharan Africa, where the adult literacy rate ranges from 26% in Mali to 93% in Equatorial Guinea.

**Figure 2. What is the global distribution of adult and youth literacy?**

Literacy rates by region, 2009



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2011.

The region of South and West Asia is home to more than one-half of the global illiterate population (51.8%). In addition, 21.4% of all illiterate adults live in sub-Saharan Africa, 12.8% in East Asia and the Pacific, 7.6% in the Arab States and 4.6% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Less than 2% of the global illiterate population lives in North America and Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, and Central Asia combined.

For more information, please consult the UIS website at [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org) to access the database and subscribe to an email alert service concerning the Institute's latest publications and data releases.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics  
PO Box 6128, Succursale Centre-Ville, Montreal, QC H3C 3J7, Canada  
Tel: +1 514-343-6880 / Fax: +1 514-343-5740 / Email: [information@uis.unesco.org](mailto:information@uis.unesco.org)