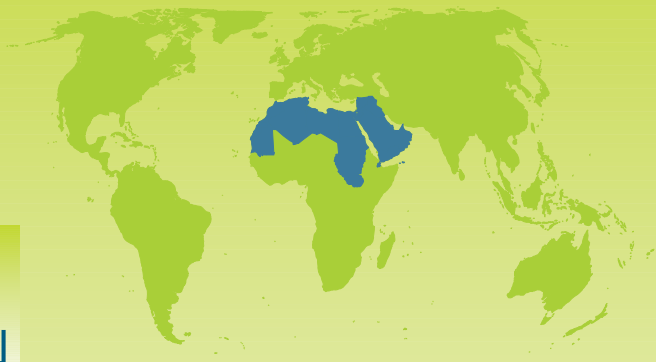




Regional
overview



Arab States¹

Literacy, besides being a fundamental human right, is a foundation not only for achieving EFA² but, more broadly, for reaching the overarching goal of reducing human poverty. And yet, 65 million adults in the Arab States region lack the basic learning tools to make informed decisions and participate fully in the development of their societies. Tackling the literacy challenge is a moral and development imperative for governments. It requires strengthening efforts to expand education and improve its quality, scaling up youth and adult learning opportunities, and developing literate environments.

Literacy: a basic human right still denied to many in the region

In addition to being a right in itself, literacy allows the pursuit of other human rights. It confers a wide set of benefits and strengthens the capabilities of individuals, families and communities to access health, educational, economic, political and cultural opportunities. Yet, on average only about 63% of the total adult population in the Arab States can read and write with understanding – one of the lowest adult literacy rates in the world. The levels are below this regional average in Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan and Yemen, but are about 90% or higher in Jordan, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories and Qatar. Evidence from direct assessments suggests that actual literacy levels may be much lower than reflected in data presented here, which are based on conventional methods of measurement that do not actually test a person's literacy skills.³

The regional literacy rate has increased by about thirteen percentage points since 1990, and most countries have made often-considerable progress, increasing their chances of achieving the EFA adult literacy target of reducing current levels of illiteracy by 50% by 2015 (with Bahrain, Jordan and the Palestinian Autonomous Territories likely to do so).

Literacy and equity

Women's literacy is of crucial importance in addressing wider issues of gender inequality. Yet, women still account for nearly two-thirds of the region's adult illiterates, with only 69 literate women for every 100 literate men. Most countries show substantial gender disparities in literacy, with the gender parity index (GPI) below the regional average in Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco and Yemen, all countries which are also among those with the lowest overall literacy rates.

Illiteracy rates are highest in countries with the greatest **poverty**. The link between poverty and illiteracy is also observed at the household level. In the Sudan, where the overall literacy rate is low (below 60%), the literacy gap between the poorest and wealthiest households is more than forty percentage points (and the gap is nearly always greater for women than for men).

1. This is according to the EFA classification. See the Table for countries or territories in the region.

2. There is a strong link between expanding access to literacy for adults and out-of-school youth and achieving the other EFA goals. For example, parents (particularly mothers) who have received an education – either through formal schooling or adult programmes – are more likely to send their children (particularly girls) to school. Likewise, literate parents are more likely to support their children in school, ensuring both their higher school retention and higher levels of learning achievement.

3. In Morocco, 45% of respondents in a sample reported being literate, but only 33% demonstrated basic competence in literacy.

In countries where overall literacy rates are comparatively low, urban/rural disparities are also large. One example is Morocco, where urban/rural disparities in literacy are extensive and compounded by gender. Disparities also exist within rural and urban areas; for example, nomadic populations (such as the Bedouin) tend to have lower literacy levels than the overall rural populations. For various social, cultural or political reasons, certain population groups – such as migrants and people with disabilities – find themselves excluded from mainstream society, often resulting in reduced access to formal education and literacy programmes. Studies from Egypt show that, in urban areas, migrants from the countryside are at a disadvantage compared with workers born in the cities.

Formal schooling: a key factor for literacy acquisition

The expansion of schooling continues to be a powerful determinant of the spread of literacy around the world. Most people acquire their literacy skills in school; this is particularly the case for women. The Arab States region as a whole, with one of the lowest average adult literacy rates, is also one of the EFA regions where education participation remains low, with considerable gender disparities at the expense of girls and women, in particular in primary and secondary education (see Table).

For the vast majority of children, *pre-primary education* is still a luxury, with the gross enrolment ratio (GER) below 18% in more than half the countries with data available in 2002. Despite the continuing increases in *primary* enrolments – by more than 2 million between 1998 and 2002 – the goal of universal primary education (UPE) remains a distant one: the average net enrolment ratio (NER) is about 83%, and nearly 7 million primary-school-age children are not enrolled in primary schools, 58% of whom are girls. Only three countries – Qatar, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia – had achieved UPE by 2002; Algeria, Jordan and Morocco are about to do so. The remaining countries have either low chances of achieving, or are at risk of not achieving, the goal by 2015, although some are making solid progress, including Mauritania, where the NER in primary education rose from 35% in 1990 to nearly 68% in 2002.

Participation in higher levels of education is lower. The region's GER in *secondary education* was 65% in 2002, whereas in about two-thirds of the countries with data available GER at the *tertiary* level was less than 30%.

The link between schooling and literacy levels is also strong within the region: the higher the levels of participation in education, the higher the adult literacy rates. Thus, some of the countries with the lowest literacy rates in the region (around 50%) – including Mauritania and Morocco – are also those with the lowest levels of participation in education, as synthesized by the school life expectancy (SLE). In such countries, a child once enrolled in school can expect to receive less than 10 years of education on average, compared to 10.2 years for the region as a whole.

Not surprisingly, the higher gender disparities in literacy in such countries stem from the general low participation of girls in education. For example, while, for the region as a whole, on average 90 girls are enrolled in primary education for every 100 boys, the figure is lower in the Sudan (87) and even lower in Yemen (69), making it very difficult to achieve the gender parity goal even by 2015.

Quality of education matters for literacy acquisition

Formal schooling is a driving force for literacy expansion, provided that children who have access to it complete school and receive an education of good quality. Yet, in countries such as Mauritania, Morocco and Yemen, of a cohort of pupils who enrol in primary education, 25% to 50% do not reach the last grade. The survival rate varies from 49% in Mauritania to nearly 99% in Bahrain. Even among those who complete primary school, large numbers possess weak literacy and numeracy skills. Results from the third Trends in International Mathematics and Science Survey (TIMSS), conducted in 2003, showed that from about 33% to 60% of Grade 8 students did not reach the low benchmark in mathematics in the participating countries from the region (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia). The extent of underachievement is confirmed by other international student assessments. PISA 2003 data show that, while the overall share of 15-year-old students performing at or below level 1 of the mathematics scale was 21%, such students made up more than three-quarters of the student population of the corresponding age in the participating Arab State (Tunisia).

Among the factors that may explain the poor learning achievement in some countries in the region are: teacher shortages, resulting in overcrowded classrooms (with primary pupil/teacher ratios above 40:1 in Mauritania); and low level of teacher qualification and training: only 14% of primary-school teachers had

received any training in Lebanon, for example, although among the remaining few countries with data available in 2002 (including Egypt, Kuwait and Oman) all teachers were trained. As the *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005* pointed out, poor mastery of the curriculum, rigid teaching practices, lack of textbooks and other teaching materials, as well as insufficient instructional time (vital for better learning) are also causes for concern in some of the Arab States.

A three-pronged strategy to enhance literacy

Literacy is at the core of EFA and of efforts to reach the overarching goal of reducing poverty. Literacy must move up on the policy agenda and receive a high level of political commitment. This means, for example, that it must be integrated into education sector planning as well as key development documents such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).

Given its centrality to EFA, a three-pronged approach is required to move towards literate societies, encompassing:

- **Quality schooling for all children:** While access to school is a key determinant for literacy acquisition, equally imperative and important is to provide children with an education of good quality. But, simply waiting for UPE, even of good quality, to happen will not suffice.
- **Scaling up of youth and adult literacy programmes:** While almost all governments have explicit formal education policies, far fewer have adult literacy policies, and there is often a lack of coordination across different ministries and providers.⁴

Access to adult learning opportunities needs to be expanded for those who have either never been to school or who dropped out too early and now constitute the bulk of the current illiterate population. Many countries have been implementing literacy programmes. Yet, investment in such programmes must be increased and quality improved. Indeed, literacy teaching is often hindered by a lack of learning materials.

⁴ Morocco merged the departments of adult literacy (from the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs) and non-formal education (from Education) to form a State Secretariat for Literacy and Non-Formal Education. It is designed to coordinate the growing number of public, private and civil society literacy providers. Its decentralized management structure includes national and local coordination committees chaired by senior political authorities.

Furthermore, it is essential to professionalize literacy educators, providing them with adequate pay and training. At present, they are paid little if any regular remuneration, lack job security, have few training opportunities and rarely benefit from ongoing professional support. These poor work conditions often result in frequent turnover, with serious implications for the quality of programmes.

Yet, interesting training innovations do exist, as does the use of new technologies such as television, computers and the Internet to both promote literacy and provide learning opportunities. The highly uneven access to information and communications technology (ICT), however, is a constraint in many contexts.

- **Development of environments conducive to the meaningful use of literacy:** Appropriate language, book, media and information policies are needed to develop environments in which literacy can flourish and be valued. The presence of printed and visual materials in households, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and the community encourages individuals to become literate and to integrate their literacy skills into their everyday lives. Comparative studies of educational achievement and literacy proficiency show that the quantity and use of literacy resources matter. A recent study in thirty-five countries found that exposure to home-based literacy activities was positively related to Grade 4 students' reading achievement.

Greater investment needed: national resources and external aid

Reaching the EFA goals by 2015 requires adequate and predictable funding for education. Although the appropriate level of spending depends on many factors, there is clearly a minimum level below which government spending cannot go without serious consequences for quality. Efforts are being made to invest more in education. Among the few countries with data available in 2002, the share of public funding on education in national income (GNP) was above the recommended benchmark of 6% in Morocco (6.6%), Tunisia (6.7%) and Yemen (10.3%), but well below that level in Lebanon (2.7%) and Oman (4.8%)

The priority given to literacy is often lower. Although reliable data on funding for youth and adult literacy are scarce, evidence suggests that the level of funding is very low in most developing countries, with literacy programmes representing just 1% of the total national education budget.

Higher levels of national expenditure do not in themselves ensure good practice and good quality, however. Greater attention must be paid to efficiency, in terms of how resources are being used in the education system. For example, central education ministry resources do not always reach the schools. Equity is another important dimension to be considered: too often, public spending is unequally distributed across income groups or geographically. Strategies that are inclusive of all children and adults, whatever their circumstances, are crucial for speeding up progress towards EFA.

While achieving the EFA goals is the prime responsibility of national governments, the least developed countries in the Arab States region, those with the lowest education indicators, will need more external assistance. Yet, while aid to basic education across all countries worldwide more than doubled between 1998 and 2003, it still accounted for less than 3% of total aid (and within this, the amount for adult literacy is minuscule). Even on the optimistic scenario that aid to basic education will increase to US\$3.3 billion a year from the current US\$2.1 billion, the total is still far short of the US\$7 billion a year estimated to be necessary to achieve UPE and gender parity alone. It is therefore urgent to scale up external financing to education, including to literacy, and to ensure that aid is directed towards those countries and populations that need it most.

Abbreviations

EDI Education for All development index. Composite index aimed at measuring overall progress towards EFA. Currently, the EDI incorporates only the four most quantifiable EFA goals: universal primary education as measured by the net enrolment ratio, adult literacy as measured by the adult literacy rate, gender as measured by the gender-specific EFA index (arithmetical mean of GPIs of primary and secondary gross enrolment ratios and of adult literacy rate), and quality of education as measured by the survival rate to Grade 5. Its value is the arithmetical mean of the observed values of these four indicators.

GER Gross enrolment ratio. Total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the official age group corresponding to this level of education. For the tertiary level, the population used is that of the five-year age group following on from the secondary school leaving age. The GER can exceed 100% due to late entry and/or repetition.

GNP Gross national product. Gross domestic product plus net receipts of income from abroad. As these receipts may be positive or negative, GNP may be greater or smaller than GDP. This latter indicator is the sum of gross value added by all resident producers in the economy, including distributive trades and transport, plus any product taxes and minus any subsidies not included in the value of the products.

GPI Gender parity index. Ratio of female to male values (or male to female, in certain cases) of a given indicator. A GPI of 1 indicates parity between sexes; a GPI above or below 1 indicates a disparity in favour of one sex over the other.

NER Net enrolment ratio. Enrolment of the official age group for a given level of education, expressed as a percentage of the population in that age group.

SLE School life expectancy. Number of years a child of school entrance age is expected to spend at school, including years spent on repetition. It is the sum of the age-specific enrolment ratios for primary, secondary, post-secondary non-tertiary and tertiary education (the gross enrolment ratio is used as a proxy to compensate for the lack of data by age for tertiary and partial data for the other ISCED levels).

Prospects for the achievement of the EFA goals⁵

UPE goal

- ▶ *Goal already achieved:* Qatar, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia.

UPE prospects

(projections made for fourteen countries that have not yet achieved the goal and with data available between 1990 and 2002):

- ▶ *High chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (3):* Algeria, Jordan, Morocco.
- ▶ *Low chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (7):* Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen.
- ▶ *At risk or serious risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (4):* Bahrain, Kuwait, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories, Saudi Arabia.

Adult literacy goal

- ▶ *Literacy rate above 97%:* None.

Adult literacy prospects

(projections made for ten countries with data available between 1990 and 2000–2004 and with adult literacy rates under 97%):

- ▶ *High chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (4):* Bahrain, Jordan, Palestinian Autonomous Territories, Saudi Arabia.
- ▶ *At risk or serious risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (6):* Algeria, Mauritania, Qatar, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia.

Gender goal (parity in primary and secondary education)

- ▶ *Goal already achieved:* Jordan, Oman, the United Arab Emirates.

Gender parity prospects

(projections made for fifteen countries that have not yet achieved the goal and with data available between 1990 and 2002):

- ▶ *Likely to achieve parity in 2005:* None.
- ▶ *Likely to miss parity in 2005 but achieve it in 2015 (2):* Egypt, Saudi Arabia.
- ▶ *At risk of not achieving parity even in 2015 (13):* Algeria, Bahrain*, Djibouti, Kuwait*, Lebanon, Mauritania*, Morocco, the Palestinian Autonomous Territories*, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Yemen.

* Parity achieved in primary, but not in secondary education.

These prospects are based on past trends. While they may not take into account recent policies, they remain a useful monitoring tool and a baseline to inform the educational policy changes that may be needed for countries to achieve the various EFA goals.

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5. These prospects are not comprehensive as they cover neither all the six EFA goals nor all countries or territories in the region.

The Arab States: selected education indicators

Countries	Total population (thousands) 2002	Compulsory education (age group)	Adult literacy rate 2000–2004 ¹		Pre-primary education		Primary education						Secondary education		Tertiary education		Total public expenditure on education as % of GNP 2002	EFA Development Index (EDI) 2002	Countries
			Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	GER 2002		NER 2002	GER's GPI (F/M) 2002	Survival rate to Grade 5 Total (%) 2001	% of female teachers 2002	% of trained teachers 2002	Pupil/teacher ratio 2002	GER 2002		GER 2002				
					Total (%)	GPI (F/M)							Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)			
Algeria	31 266	6-16	69.8	0.76	3.8	0.99	94.9	0.93	97.0	49	98	28	80.0	1.07	20.5	...	...	0.877	Algeria
Bahrain	709	...	87.7	0.90	36.7	0.94	89.9	1.00	99.1	76	...	16	95.6	1.07	33.2	1.89	...	0.930	Bahrain
Djibouti	693	6-15	...	...	1.2	0.99	35.6	0.79	80.2	30	...	34	24.3	0.68	1.8	0.81	...	0.629	Djibouti
Egypt	70 507	6-13	55.6	0.65	13.7	0.95	91.4	0.95	98.0	54	100	22	85.3	0.94	29.4	...	...	0.828	Egypt
Iraq	24 510	6-11	...	...	3.8	0.98	90.5	0.83	...	...	...	19	42.7	0.71	<i>14.1</i>	<i>0.54</i>	...	...	Iraq
Jordan	5 329	6-16	89.9	0.89	30.4	0.93	92.0	1.01	97.1	64	...	20	86.0	1.02	34.8	1.10	...	0.946	Jordan
Kuwait	2 443	6-14	82.9	0.96	69.9	1.00	83.4	1.00	...	83	100	13	89.3	1.06	...	...	...	0.914	Kuwait
Lebanon	3 596	6-12	...	...	74.8	0.98	90.6	0.97	91.9	87	14	17	79.4	1.09	44.3	1.19	2.7	0.909	Lebanon
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	5 445	6-15	81.7	0.77	7.8	0.96	...	1.00	...	...	...	...	104.7	1.06	58.1	1.09	...	...	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya
Mauritania ²	2 807	6-14	51.2	0.53	1.9	...	67.5	0.97	60.6	25	...	41	22.6	0.79	3.5	0.27	...	0.640	Mauritania ²
Morocco	30 072	6-14	50.7	0.61	56.1	0.62	89.6	0.90	81.2	44	...	28	45.0	0.83	10.8	0.84	6.6	0.749	Morocco
Oman	2 768	...	74.4	0.80	5.5	0.84	71.9	0.99	98.0	57	100	21	80.5	0.96	7.5	<i>1.67</i>	4.8	0.843	Oman
Palestinian A. T.	3 433	6-15	91.9	0.91	27.4	0.96	90.9	1.00	...	62	...	36	87.9	1.06	34.8	1.04	...	0.950	Palestinian A. T.
Qatar	601	6-14	89.2	...	33.9	0.92	94.5	0.97	...	83	...	12	93.9	1.04	22.0	2.71	...	...	Qatar
Saudi Arabia	23 520	6-11	79.4	0.80	4.9	0.94	54.4	0.96	91.5	51	93	12	66.9	0.90	25.4	1.47	...	0.789	Saudi Arabia
Sudan ³	32 878	6-13	59.0	0.72	26.6	0.86	...	0.87	84.3	62	...	29	35.4	0.84	...	...	...	...	Sudan ³
Syrian Arab Republic	17 381	6-12	82.9	0.82	10.5	0.94	97.9	0.95	91.4	68	88	24	48.3	0.92	...	...	...	0.908	Syrian Arab Republic
Tunisia	9 728	6-16	74.3	0.78	21.6	0.99	97.3	0.96	96.2	50	94	22	77.6	1.08	26.7	1.28	6.7	0.895	Tunisia
United Arab Emirates	2 937	6-15	77.3	1.07	75.3	0.99	83.1	0.97	92.5	80	...	15	78.7	1.03	34.7	2.55	...	0.886	United Arab Emirates
Yemen ²	19 315	6-14	49.0	0.41	0.7	0.93	71.8	0.69	75.9	...	...	...	47.3	0.45	...	...	<i>10.3</i>	0.622	Yemen ²
Arab States	289 938	...	62.7	0.69	17.7	0.98	82.6	0.90	94.3	62	...	21	65.0	0.91	26.0	1.37	...	...	Arab States
Developing countries	4 937 089	...	76.4	0.83	34.3	1.01	83.2	0.93	81.2	62	81	28	58.3	0.92	13.0	1.76	4.5	...	Developing countries
World	6 210 815	...	76.4	0.83	48.6	1.03	84.6	0.94	89.7	73	...	22	65.2	0.94	26.7	1.28	4.6	...	World

Notes: Data in bold italics are for 2000/2001. Data in italics are for 2001/2002. Data in bold are for 2003/2004.

1. Data refer to the most recent year available during the period specified.

2. Current Fast-Track Initiative countries (FTI).

3. Literacy data for the most recent year do not include some geographic regions.

Sources: UNESCO Institute for Statistics; EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, statistical annex.