



East Asia and the Pacific¹

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, about 130 million adults in the East Asia and the Pacific 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,³ educational, economic, political and cultural opportunities.⁴ Yet, while on average 91% of the total adult population in East Asia and the Pacific as a whole can read and write with understanding, the literacy rates are well below this regional average in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, where they are under 80%. 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.⁵

The regional literacy rate has increased by almost ten percentage points since 1990, and many countries have made often-considerable progress, some of them (China, Singapore) increasing their chances of achieving the EFA adult literacy target of reducing current levels of illiteracy by 50% by 2015.

Literacy and equity

Women's literacy is of crucial importance in addressing wider issues of gender inequality. Yet, women still account for the vast majority (71%) of the region's adult illiterates, with only 92 literate women for every 100 literate men. Some countries – such as Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Papua New Guinea – show even higher gender disparities in literacy (GPI about 0.80 or less); these countries are also among those with the lowest overall literacy rates.

1. This is according to the EFA classification. See the Table for countries 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. Research in several countries shows that women who participate in literacy programmes have better knowledge of health and family planning, and are more likely to adopt preventive health measures such as immunization, or to seek medical help for themselves and their children.

4. Cultural diversity is enhanced by literacy programmes in minority languages, improving people's ability to engage with their own culture. This has been observed in programmes, from Malaysia to New Zealand, in which learners develop stories based on indigenous folktales.

5. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, findings from the 2001 Lao National Literacy Survey showed that, while the reported literacy rate of the population aged 15–59 was 72%, the tested literacy rate was only 45%, a difference of twenty-seven percentage points.

Illiteracy rates are highest in countries with the greatest **poverty**. The link between poverty and illiteracy is also observed at the household level. In Viet Nam, the literacy gap between the poorest and wealthiest households is about twenty-five percentage points (and the gap is nearly always greater for women than for men).

In countries where overall literacy rates are comparatively low, **urban/rural** disparities are also large.⁶ For various social, cultural or political reasons, certain population groups – such as migrants, indigenous people, and people with disabilities – find themselves excluded from mainstream society, often resulting in reduced access to formal education and literacy programmes.⁷

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 relatively high level of adult literacy in East Asia and the Pacific as a whole is to some extent the reflection of the overall high level of participation in education compared to most of the other developing regions.

Participation in **pre-primary education** is relatively high, with the gross enrolment ratio (GER) above 50% in the majority of countries with data available in 2002. On average, the universal **primary education** goal is within reach (with the region's NER of 92%), and many countries have either achieved it or are close to doing so. Yet, participation at that level remains low (NER about 85% or below) in many other countries, and some of them (the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand) may find it difficult to achieve UPE by 2015, although they are making progress.

Participation at higher levels of education is also high compared to most developing regions. The average GER in East Asia and the Pacific at the **secondary** level was 71% in 2002, whereas, in more than half of the countries with data available, GER at the **tertiary** level was above 16%, with participation levels higher than 50% in Australia, Japan, Macao (China), New Zealand

6. In China, illiteracy is concentrated in the country's rural, western regions, which have high percentages of minority populations and lower levels of economic development.

7. The China Adult Literacy Survey (a direct assessment of literacy skills) found a substantial difference in the literacy skills of native and migrants workers in five cities (Shanghai, Shenyang, Xian, Wuhan and Fuzhou). Literacy levels among urban-resident men and women were, on average, one-quarter of a standard deviation higher than among migrant men and women.

and the Republic of Korea, but still very low in other countries (with GER below 10% in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu).

There is a link between schooling and literacy levels 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 (under 80%) – including Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu – 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 11.2 years for the region as a whole.

Not surprisingly, the higher gender disparities in literacy in such countries stem from the generally low participation of girls in education. For example, while, for the region as a whole, as many girls as boys are enrolled in primary education on average, the GPI is about 0.90 or below in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Papua New Guinea, 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 many countries in the region with data available in 2001, of a cohort of pupils who enrol in primary education, less than 70% reach the last grade (Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu), while the survival rate is about 99% in China and the Republic of Korea. 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 45% of Grade 8 students in Indonesia, and 61% in the Philippines, did not reach the low benchmark in mathematics. The extent of underachievement is confirmed by other international student assessments. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2003 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 one-half of the student population of the corresponding age in Thailand, and more than three-quarters in Indonesia.

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 50:1 in Cambodia and Timor-Leste); and low level of teacher qualification and training: among the few countries with data available in 2002, less than 80% of primary-school teachers had received any training in the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar, for example, although in some of the remaining countries all teachers were trained (e.g. in Niue, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu). 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 East Asia and the Pacific countries.

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.⁸

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 who constitute the bulk of the current illiterate population.

8. Thailand is among those countries whose ministries of education have well-established departments or divisions of adult or non-formal education that oversee literacy programmes. In Indonesia, a literacy movement launched by the president in 2004 is designed to strengthen cooperation within government, encourage community participation and promote political awareness of the importance of literacy.

Many countries have, in the past, organized mass campaigns to promote literacy;⁹ and projects on a much smaller scale have targeted often excluded segments of the adult population. Yet, investment in such programmes must be increased and quality improved. Indeed, literacy teaching is often hindered by a lack of learning materials.

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. Yet, more than half the countries in East Asia

9. China and Viet Nam organized a series of campaigns from the 1940s to the 1980s that were relatively effective in reaching large segments of the illiterate adult population. In the southern part of the latter country, literacy rates increased from 75% to 86% over the course of a shorter campaign (1976–77). Thailand successfully carried out several literacy campaigns, the first running from 1942 to 1945.

and the Pacific spend less than 5% of their national income (GNP) on education, below the 6% recommended. Few countries reach or exceed this benchmark (Fiji, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Micronesia [Federated States of], New Zealand, Palau and Vanuatu). Efforts are being made to invest more in education. The share of public funding on education in national income (GNP) increased between 1998 and 2002 in the majority of countries with data available in the region, more than doubling in Malaysia. This generally positive trend was, however, offset by declines in some countries. Decreases in spending shares were particularly significant in Macao (China) and the Philippines.

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 East Asia and the Pacific 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 in 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 goals¹⁰

UPE goal

- ▶ *Goal already achieved:* Fiji, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Samoa, Tonga.

UPE prospects

(projections made for ten 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):* Cambodia, Indonesia, Vanuatu.
- ▶ *Low chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (4):* the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Macao (China), Myanmar, Thailand.
- ▶ *At risk or serious risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (3):* Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Viet Nam.

Adult literacy goal

- ▶ *Literacy rate above 97%:* Samoa, Tonga.

Adult literacy prospects

(projections made for eleven 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):* China, Macao (China), Singapore, Thailand.
- ▶ *At risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (4):* Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Viet Nam.
- ▶ *At serious risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (3):* Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Papua New Guinea.

Gender goal (parity in primary and secondary education)

- ▶ *Goal already achieved:* Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea.

Gender parity prospects

(projections made for twelve 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:* None.
- ▶ *At risk of not achieving parity even in 2015 (12):* Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Macao (China), Malaysia*, Myanmar, New Zealand*, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines*, Samoa*, Tonga*, Vanuatu*, Viet Nam.

* 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.

ED/2006/EFA/MRT/PI/EA/1

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

East Asia and the Pacific: 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
			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)		
			Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)	Total (%)	GPI (F/M)		
East Asia																		
Brunei Darussalam	350	5-16	92.7	0.95	48.5	1.01	...	1.00	93.0	71	...	13	89.6	1.06	13.0	1.76	...	...
Cambodia	13 810	...	73.6	0.76	7.0	1.05	93.3	0.90	60.9	40	96	56	25.2	0.64	3.4	0.40	1.9	0.761
China	1 294 867	6-14	90.9	0.91	36.4	0.92	94.6	1.00	99.0	53	97	21	70.3	0.97	15.8	0.84	...	0.954
Democratic People's Rep. of Korea	22 541	6-15	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Indonesia	217 131	7-15	87.9	0.90	21.4	1.09	92.4	0.98	89.1	54	94	20	60.7	0.99	16.4	0.80	1.3	0.923
Japan	127 478	6-15	...	...	84.9	1.03	99.9	1.00	...	65	...	20	102.0	1.00	50.7	0.88	3.5	...
Lao People's Democratic Republic	5 529	6-10	68.7	0.79	8.0	1.05	85.0	0.87	64.1	44	78	31	43.7	0.74	5.3	0.57	2.8	0.745
Macao, China	460	5-14	91.3	0.92	85.3	0.95	87.2	0.93	99.7	89	90	26	90.9	1.07	80.8	0.52	3.0	0.928
Malaysia	23 965	...	88.7	0.93	98.8	1.08	93.1	1.00	87.1	68	...	19	70.3	1.11	29.3	1.28	8.7	0.908
Myanmar	48 852	5-9	89.7	0.92	...	...	84.2	1.01	64.6	77	65	33	39.0	0.94	17.5	...	1.3	0.834
Philippines	78 580	6-12	92.6	1.00	38.5	1.04	93.7	0.99	76.0	89	...	35	84.0	1.10	30.0	1.28	2.9	0.898
Republic of Korea ²	47 430	6-15	...	...	85.8	1.01	99.8	0.99	99.9	73	...	30	90.5	1.00	85.4	0.61	4.2	0.990
Singapore	4 183	6-16	92.5	0.92	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Thailand	62 193	6-14	92.6	0.95	88.2	0.99	85.4	0.96	...	58	...	21	76.7	1.00	38.8	1.17	4.7	...
Viet Nam ³	80 278	6-14	90.3	0.93	45.3	0.94	94.0	0.93	87.1	78	87	25	72.4	0.93	10.0	0.76	...	0.910
The Pacific																		
Australia	19 544	5-15	...	...	101.7	1.00	96.8	1.00	...	...	...	...	153.7	0.97	74.3	1.23	5.0	...
Cook Islands	18	5-15	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	86	...	18	...	...	...	...	...	...
Fiji	831	6-15	92.9	0.97	...	...	99.8	1.00	88.5	57	97	28	80.4	1.07	...	...	5.9	0.944
Kiribati	87	6-15	...	...	...	...	...	1.16	...	71	...	22	104.4	1.13	...	...	...	...
Marshall Islands	52	6-14	...	...	51.5	0.97	84.4	0.93	...	34	...	17	75.7	1.02	18.1	1.29	9.1	...
Micronesia (Federated States of)	108	6-13	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	6.2	...
Nauru	13	6-16	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
New Zealand	3 846	5-16	...	...	88.4	1.01	99.7	0.99	...	87	...	18	117.5	...	73.9	1.53	7.1	...
Niue	2	5-16	...	...	147.8	1.23	...	0.94	...	...	100	15	93.8	0.98	...	...	...	...
Palau	20	6-17	...	...	65.5	1.12	96.1	0.93	...	...	...	...	88.8	1.00	39.3	2.05	10.7	...
Papua New Guinea	5 586	6-14	57.3	0.80	58.2	0.93	73.0	0.90	50.6	39	100	35	25.5	0.79	...	...	2.4	0.660
Samoa	176	5-14	98.7	0.99	54.2	1.24	97.5	0.97	93.8	54	91	27	75.9	1.10	6.5	0.90	4.8	0.965
Solomon Islands	463	...	...	...	20.5	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	61.5	...	...	...	3.4	...
Timor-Leste	739	7-15	...	...	11.2	...	...	...	...	30	...	51	34.6	...	12.0	1.58	...	...
Tokelau	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Tonga	103	6-14	98.9	1.00	29.4	1.21	99.9	0.97	...	70	100	22	102.8	1.15	3.6	1.40	5.0	...
Tuvalu	10	7-14	...	...	82.4	1.16	...	1.13	...	84	...	25	84.4	0.93	...	...	...	...
Vanuatu ⁴	207	6-12	74	...	75.6	1.03	94.1	1.00	72.1	58	100	29	27.8	1.08	4.0	...	11.2	...
East Asia and the Pacific	2 059 455	...	91.4	0.92	56.2	1.07	92.1	0.99	...	66	...	25	71.0	0.98	16.4	0.80	4.8	...
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	...
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	...

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. Data on survival rate to Grade 5 are for 2002/2003.

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

4. Data on survival rate to Grade 5 are for 1999/2000.

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