



Latin America and the Caribbean¹

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, nearly 40 million adults in Latin America and the Caribbean 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, political⁴ and cultural opportunities. Yet, while on average about 90% of the total adult population in Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole can read and write with understanding, the literacy rates are well below this regional average in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti and Nicaragua, 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 about five percentage points since 1990, and many countries, including Honduras and Nicaragua, have made often-considerable progress. However, for some, progress is not sufficient for them to achieve the EFA adult literacy target of reducing current levels of illiteracy by 50% by 2015.

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, including Nicaragua, 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 like immunization or to seek medical help for themselves and their children.

4. In El Salvador, newly literate women in rural areas more readily claim a voice in community meetings.

Literacy and equity

Women's literacy is of crucial importance in addressing wider issues of gender inequality. Yet, while on average there are almost no gender disparities in adult literacy in Latin America and the Caribbean (GPI of 0.98), in some countries (Bolivia, Guatemala and Peru), there

5. In Nicaragua, results from the 2001 Demographic and Health Survey showed that directly assessed literacy rates were lower than indirectly assessed rates in all education groups.

are fewer than 90 literate women for every 100 literate men. Some of the countries showing significant gender disparities in literacy are also among those with the lowest overall literacy rates (e.g. Guatemala).

Illiteracy rates are highest in countries with the greatest **poverty**. The link between poverty and illiteracy is also observed at the household level. In Bolivia and the Dominican Republic, the literacy gap between the poorest and wealthiest households is about thirty 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: for example, 75% rural vs 96% urban in Bolivia. 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. For example, the national literacy rate in Ecuador was 91% (2001 census figures), but only 72% for indigenous groups.

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 Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole is to some extent the reflection of the overall high level of participation in education compared to other developing regions.

Pre-primary education is well established in many countries, with the gross enrolment ratio (GER) above 60% in about half the countries with data available in 2002. The region as a whole is close to universal primary education: the average net enrolment ratio (NER) is 96%. Many countries have already achieved this goal, and some are making good progress and have high chances to achieve it by 2015 (Bolivia, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Venezuela).

Participation at higher levels of education is also high compared to most developing regions. The average GER in Latin America and the Caribbean at the **secondary** level was 88% in 2002, whereas, in about half of the countries with data available, GER at the **tertiary** level was above 20%, with participation levels higher than 40% in Argentina, Bermuda, Chile, Panama and Venezuela.

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 Guatemala and Nicaragua – 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 about 10 years of education on average, compared to 13 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 0.93 in Guatemala, making it very difficult for this country 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 more than half the countries in the region, of a cohort of pupils who enrol in primary education, less than 80% reach the last grade. The survival rate varies from 45% in the Turks and Caicos Islands to 99% in Chile. 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 about 60% of Grade 8 students did not reach the low benchmark in Mathematics in the participating country from the region (Chile). 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 two-third of the student population of the corresponding age in Mexico, and three-quarters in Brazil.

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 about 40:1 in the Dominican Republic); and low level of teacher qualification and training: among the few countries with data available in 2002, less than 70% of primary-school teachers had received any training in Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada and Guyana, for example, although in some of the remaining countries all teachers

were trained (e.g. in Aruba, Bermuda, Cuba, Guatemala, the Netherlands Antilles and Suriname). 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 Latin American and the Caribbean 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.

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. Many countries have, in the past, organized mass campaigns to promote literacy;⁶ and projects on a

much smaller scale have targeted often excluded segments of the adult population.⁷ 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,⁸ as does the use of new technologies such as television, computers and the Internet to both promote literacy and provide learning opportunities.⁹ 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 Latin America and the Caribbean spend less than 5%

6. Brazil conducted several large-scale campaigns during the twentieth century, along with the sustained expansion of the public education system. Shorter campaigns also deserve mention; often initiated by newly installed regimes in countries with a principal majority language, these have sometimes resulted in significant reductions of illiteracy.

Cuba's 1961 campaign, fuelled by social justice concerns, made more than 700,000 people literate in the space of one year; literacy rates increased from 76% to 96%.

In Ecuador, a national literacy campaign was planned and organized within eight months and conducted in four to five months in 1988–89. Around 70,000 literacy teachers were trained, partly face-to-face (aided by videos demonstrating teaching methodology) and partly by distance training. Over 25,000 literacy circles were established in homes and workplaces. Of some 300,000 learners, 200,000 completed the courses, 85% of whom wrote the final test with satisfactory results. The campaign provided important lessons regarding mobilization, pedagogy and the engagement of young students in literacy work.

In Nicaragua, literacy rates increased from 50% to 77% over the course of one campaign (1979–80). Many short campaigns have also involved follow-up initiatives to provide adults with continuing learning opportunities.

7. Peru adopted a system of literacy education that began in vernacular Quechua and switched to Spanish in certain regions.

8. In Brazil, certain training courses lead to participants' certification as specialist teachers in the field of adult and youth education.

9. Cuba's 'Yo, sí puedo' programme uses radio and video to enrich literacy teaching and has been implemented in several Latin American countries as well as New Zealand.

of their national income (GNP) on education, below the 6% recommended. Few countries reach or exceed this benchmark (Barbados, Bolivia, Cuba, Guyana, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines). 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. This generally positive trend was, however, offset by declines in some countries. Decreases in spending shares were particularly significant in Brazil, Ecuador, and Saint Kitts and Nevis.

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 Latin America and the Caribbean 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:* Aruba, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Suriname.

UPE prospects

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

- *High chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (7):* Bolivia, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Venezuela.
- *Low chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (5):* Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago.
- *At risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (4):* the British Virgin Islands, the Netherlands Antilles, Paraguay, Uruguay.

Adult literacy goal

- *Literacy rate above 97%:* Argentina, Barbados, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay.

Adult literacy prospects

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

- *High chance of achieving the goal in 2015 (5):* Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, Paraguay, Venezuela.
- *At risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (9):* Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Panama, Peru, Saint Lucia, Suriname.
- *At serious risk of not achieving the goal in 2015 (4):* Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua.

Gender goal (parity in primary and secondary education)

- *Goal already achieved:* Anguilla, Bahamas, Barbados, Chile, Ecuador, Jamaica.

Gender parity prospects

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

- *Likely to achieve parity in 2005 (2):* Bolivia, Guyana.
- *Likely to miss parity in 2005 but achieve it in 2015 (3):* Argentina*, Belize*, Cuba.
- *At risk of not achieving parity even in 2015 (19):* Aruba*, the British Virgin Islands*, Brazil*, Colombia*, Costa Rica*, the Dominican Republic*, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico*, the Netherlands Antilles*, Nicaragua*, Panama*, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Lucia*, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*, Suriname*, Trinidad and Tobago*, Venezuela*.

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

Latin America and the Caribbean: 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)
Latin America																		
Argentina	37 981	5-15	97.2	1.00	60.5	1.01	...	1.00	92.2	86	67	17	99.7	1.06	59.8	1.49	4.3	0.968
Bolivia	8 645	6-13	86.5	0.87	47.3	1.02	95.1	0.99	84.4	62	74	24	86.4	0.97	39.4	...	6.5	0.904
Brazil	176 257	7-14	88.4	1.00	57.2	1.00	97.3	0.95	...	90	92	25	110.0	1.10	20.6	1.32	4.4	0.905
Chile ²	15 613	6-14	95.7	1.00	45.8	0.99	84.8	0.97	99.2	77	92	34	91.2	1.01	45.4	0.94	4.3	0.952
Colombia	43 526	5-15	94.2	1.01	37.1	1.01	87.4	0.99	69.4	77	...	27	70.8	1.11	24.3	1.09	5.4	0.876
Costa Rica	4 094	6-15	95.8	1.00	60.9	1.02	90.4	0.98	91.6	80	88	23	66.5	1.08	19.4	1.16	5.2	0.938
Cuba	11 271	6-14	99.8	1.00	114.6	0.99	93.5	0.96	97.9	78	100	11	92.6	0.98	33.7	1.34	8.7	0.976
Dominican Republic	8 616	5-13	87.7	0.99	34.3	1.01	96.4	1.02	69.1	82	<i>58</i>	39	58.7	1.23	34.5	1.67	2.4	0.865
Ecuador	12 810	5-14	91.0	0.97	74.4	1.03	99.5	1.00	74.4	69	70	24	59.2	1.02	...	...	1.7	0.908
El Salvador	6 415	4-15	79.7	0.94	48.6	1.06	90.4	0.95	68.9	...	...	...	59.0	1.01	17.4	1.21	2.9	0.842
Guatemala	12 036	7-15	69.1	0.84	55.2	<i>1.01</i>	87.3	0.93	65.2	...	<i>100</i>	30	42.7	0.93	9.3	0.78	...	0.782
Honduras ³	6 781	6-13	80.0	1.01	<i>21.4</i>	<i>1.05</i>	<i>87.4</i>	<i>1.02</i>	...	...	...	<i>34</i>	...	...	<i>15.2</i>	<i>1.31</i>	...	...
Mexico	101 965	6-15	90.3	0.96	80.7	1.02	99.4	0.99	93.0	...	...	27	79.0	1.09	22.4	0.97	5.4	0.946
Nicaragua ³	5 335	6-16	76.7	1.00	27.7	1.03	85.5	0.99	64.8	82	74	35	60.7	1.17	18.3	1.10	3.2	0.817
Panama	3 064	6-11	91.9	0.99	55.8	1.01	99.6	0.97	89.8	76	75	24	70.6	1.07	43.2	1.69	4.6	0.944
Paraguay	5 740	6-14	91.6	0.97	30.0	1.01	89.3	0.96	69.7	72	...	27	64.9	1.02	27.0	1.39	4.4	0.870
Peru	26 767	6-16	87.7	0.88	57.9	1.02	99.7	1.00	83.6	67	78	25	89.7	0.93	31.9	1.07	3.1	0.911
Uruguay	3 391	6-15	97.7	1.01	63.4	1.02	90.4	0.98	92.9	...	...	21	105.6	1.13	37.4	1.95	2.6	0.941
Venezuela	25 226	6-15	93.0	0.99	52.7	1.01	90.8	0.98	84.2	...	...	...	69.9	1.15	40.2	1.08	...	0.911
The Caribbean																		
Anguilla	12	5-17	...	...	<i>116.1</i>	<i>0.97</i>	95.2	1.01	...	91	62	16	108.3	1.00	...	...	...	...
Antigua and Barbuda	73	5-16	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4.0	...
Aruba	98	6-16	...	...	100.2	0.99	99.0	0.94	95.0	92	100	18	103.1	1.07	30.3	1.42	...	...
Bahamas	310	5-16	...	...	30.4	0.99	86.4	1.01	75.2	93	<i>95</i>	17	91.3	1.03	...	...	...	0.921
Barbados	269	4-16	99.7	1.00	88.5	1.00	100.0	0.99	98.8	77	78	16	105.8	1.02	38.1	2.47	7.9	0.994
Belize ⁴	251	5-14	76.9	1.01	28.8	1.07	99.2	0.98	81.5	69	41	21	77.8	1.05	2.0	1.91	5.7	0.888
Bermuda	81	5-16	...	...	54.6	...	<i>100.0</i>	...	96.3	<i>88</i>	<i>100</i>	9	<i>86.1</i>	...	<i>62.4</i>	...	...	...
British Virgin Islands	21	5-16	...	...	86.4	0.95	93.7	0.94	...	89	79	14	94.7	1.16	...	...	...	...
Cayman Islands	39	5-16	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	<i>81</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>15</i>	...	...	...	...	...	...
Dominica	78	5-16	...	...	51.0	0.88	81.3	0.93	83.7	84	60	19	113.9	1.12	...	...	...	...
Grenada	80	5-16	...	...	85.8	0.99	84.2	0.98	79.0	78	68	19	148.7	0.96	...	...	5.7	...
Guyana ^{3, 4}	764	6-15	...	...	120.2	1.00	99.2	0.98	77.2	85	53	26	94.7	1.06	6.1	1.58	9.1	0.930
Haiti	8 218	6-11	51.9	0.93	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Jamaica	2 627	6-11	87.6	1.09	85.7	1.05	94.6	0.99	89.7	90	80	30	84.1	1.02	17.5	2.36	5.3	0.923
Montserrat	3	5-14	...	...	82.9	...	...	...	...	92	<i>91</i>	19	103.4	...	...	...	...	...
Netherlands Antilles	219	6-15	96.7	1.00	86.2	0.99	88.4	1.00	88.5	86	<i>100</i>	20	71.0	1.11	<i>14.0</i>	<i>1.48</i>	...	0.927
Saint Kitts and Nevis	42	5-16	...	...	163.5	0.90	100.0	1.06	78.4	85	56	17	105.9	1.31	...	...	3.7	...
Saint Lucia	148	5-16	90.1	1.01	64.1	1.14	99.4	1.00	96.6	85	77	22	86.8	1.25	...	...	8.2	0.950
Saint Vincent/Grenad.	119	5-15	...	...	...	...	90.0	0.97	88.0	73	73	18	69.2	1.11	...	...	10.5	...
Suriname	432	6-11	88.0	0.91	94.2	0.98	97.0	0.98	...	85	<i>100</i>	19	73.8	1.34	<i>12.2</i>	<i>1.69</i>	...	...
Trinidad and Tobago	1 298	5-12	98.5	0.99	66.4	1.03	90.6	0.97	71.2	75	83	19	82.4	1.08	8.9	1.59	4.6	0.904
Turks and Caicos Islands	20	4-16	...	...	125.0	1.00	73.5	0.95	45.9	87	80	15	94.0	0.99	0.7	0.44	...	...
Latin America/Caribbean	530 734	...	89.7	0.98	60.9	1.02	96.4	0.98	83.9	82	78	21	88.2	1.08	23.4	1.03	4.6	...
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 is 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.