Defining literacy

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Defining literacy: UNESCO

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.

Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society (UNESCO, 2004; 2017).

Three key features of the UNESCO' definition of literacy

- Literacy is about the uses people make of it as a means of communication and expression, through a variety of media;

- Literacy is plural, being practiced in particular contexts for particular purposes and using specific languages;

- Literacy involves a continuum of learning measured at different proficient levels.

UNESCO-led assessments: LAMP and RAMMA

Defining literacy:
Other international organizations or assessment programmes

International organization	Defining literacy	Note
European Literacy Policy Network: European Declaration of the Right to Literacy	Literacy refers to the ability to read and write at a level whereby individuals can effectively understand and use written communication in all media (print or electronic), including digital literacy.	A multi-layered definition of literacy, from baseline literacy to functional and multiple literacy.
OECD: Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)	Literacy is understanding, evaluating, using and engaging with written text to participate in the society, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential.	It measures adults' proficiency in key information-processing skills - literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments
World Bank: Skills Towards Employability and Productivity (STEP)	Cognitive skills are defined as the "ability to understand complex ideas, to adapt effectively to the environment, to learn from experience, to engage in various forms of reasoning, to overcome obstacles by taking thought"	1. It assess the skills (cognitive, technical, and non-cognitive) of adults in urban areas. 2. The scales of the test are the same as those used in the PIAAC.

Four criteria are used to describe assessment/survey on literacy

- **Definition invokes continuum**

- **Assessment covers full range of skills**

- **Statistical methods confirm psychometric stability**

- **Statistical methods support comparison**

A glance of existing assessments grouped into four:

o **Direct assessments: International v.s. national**

o **Indirect assessment: International v.s. national**

International: Direct assessment on literacy

Features by criteria / Projection Model Data Source	Definition invokes continuum	Assessment covers full range of skill	Statistical methods confirm psychometric stability	Statistical methods support comparison	
PIAAC	Y	Y	Y	Y	38 countries
IALS and ALL	Y	Y	Y	Y	11 countries conducted ALL
STEP	Y	Y	Y	Y	Urban areas in 15 countries
LAMP	Y	Y	Y	Y	4 countries
RAMAA	Y	N	N	N	12 countries

National: Direct Assessment on Literacy

Country	Assessment	Definition invokes continuum	Assessment covers full range of skill	Statistical methods confirm psychometric stability	Statistical methods support comparison	Adaptive
Bangladesh	Education Watch 2016	Y	N	N	N	N
Botswana	National literacy survey	Y	N	N	N	N
Canada	Test of Workplace Essential Skills	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
France	The Information and Everyday Life Survey	Y	N	Y	N	N
Germany	Level One Study (LEO)	Y	N	Y	Y	N
India	National Literacy Mission.	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Kenya	The Kenya National Adult Literacy Survey	Y	Y	Y	N	N
Lao PDR	Lao National Literacy Survey	Y	N	N	N	N
New Zealand	The Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
Papua New Guinea	Education Experience Survey and Literacy Assessment	Y	N	N	N	N
USA	Adult Literacy Supplemental Assessment	Y	Y	Y	Y	N

National: Indirect assessment on literacy

	Survey/census	Defining literacy	Mode	Definition invokes continuum	Assessment covers full range of skill	Statistical methods confirm psychometric stability	Statistical methods support comparison	Example of countries
International household survey programmes	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)	Can read part of the sentence	Literacy test	N	N	N	N	Barbados and other 15 countries
		Can read and write	Self declaration	N	N	N	N	Algeria and other 3 countries
	Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS)	Able to read parts of or a whole sentence*	Self declaration	N	N	N	N	Benin and other 20 countries
National census or survey (selected examples)	Labour Force Survey	Can read and write a simple text in ...(given languages) or any languages	Literacy test	N	N	N	N	Colombia and other 25 countries
		Ability to read and write in any language	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	
	Population Census	Can read, understand and write a short story regarding one's routine life	Literacy test, or self-declaration	N	N	N	N	Azerbaijan 2009
	Living Standard Measurement Survey	Ability to write a personal letter or read a newspaper.	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	Albania 2012
	Continuous Household Survey	Can read and write	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	Uruguay 2015
	Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire	Can read and write in any language	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	Liberia 2010
	Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey	Can read and write a simple message in any language or dialect	Self declaration	N	N	N	N	Philippines 2013
	General House Survey	The literate are those who have no difficulty or some difficulty in reading and writing	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	South Africa 2015
	National Socio-Economic Survey	Can read and write one of the following languages: Latin, Arabic, or other alphabet	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	Indonesia 2016
	The Reading of Population Survey	Can read and write	Self-declaration	N	N	N	N	Thailand 2015

Notes: 1. *For some countries that conducted DHS, respodents were further asked if they "never", "almost never", or "sometimes" have difficulty understanding what they read and if they "never", "almost never", or "sometimes" have difficulty writing. 2. Countries that use educational attainment to estimate the literacy rate are not included in this table.

International: Indirect assessment on the literacy rate: Projection by the UIS

UIS Global Age-Specific Literacy Projections (GALP)

Regression analysis is applied to age-disaggregated literacy data, in combination with demographic data by the UN Population Division (UN Population Division, 2011), to determine the likely evolution of literacy rates based on past trends.

Features by criteria / Projection Model Data Source	Definition invokes continuum	Assessment covers full range of skill	Statistical methods confirm psychometric stability	Statistical methods support comparison	Countries
GALP using national population census or survey	N	N	N	N	Argentina 2014 and other 23 countries
GALP using DHS data	N	N	N	N	Congo 2011 and other 14 countries
GALP using MICS data	N	N	N	N	Angola 2014 and other 13 countries

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