



LITERACY MEASURES IN HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS; HOW THEY COULD BE IMPROVED

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Purpose

- Suggest that efforts to improve the quality of information on literacy and numeracy should cover measures commonly used in household surveys and population census
- Give an idea of the problems with data from these sources, and
- Indicate possible areas of improvement regarding the collection of literacy data through respondent reports and short ‘tests’



Background

- Currently, literacy data comes primarily from data collected in population censuses, labour force surveys or omnibus household surveys.
- Measures used (either singly or in combination):
 - respondent reports (self-reports or third-party reports),
 - very simple ‘tests’ and
 - educational attainment.



Problems

- Respondent reports
 - Lack of comparability (wide range of different question formulations used)
 - Threats to validity: lack of knowledge, social desirability, respondent's understanding of 'reading'
- Simple 'tests'
 - Lack of validity as a measure of reading comprehension
 - Low reliability (single item test)
 - Administered to a subset of the target population



Problems (continued)

- Educational attainment
 - Cannot assume that all adults above an educational attainment threshold such as completed primary or lower secondary education can read in low income countries.



Respondent reports

- Wide variation in the content of questions regarding literacy
 - Broad dimensions – reading and/or writing
 - Extent of specification in terms of:
 - (1) specific types of documents, texts or elements of text;
 - (2) languages,
 - (3) performance criteria, and
 - (4) context.



Examples

- Is [NAME] *literate*?
- Can [NAME] *read*?
- Can [NAME] *read*? AND Can [NAME] *write*? (two separate questions)
- Can [NAME] *read* AND *write*?
- Can [NAME] *read* OR *write*?
- How do you rate your *reading* skills?
- How do you rate your *writing* skills?



Single sentence reading test (MICS, DHS)

Now I would like you to read this sentence to me.

SENTENCES ON SHOW CARD

- The child is reading a book.
- The rains came late this year.
- Parents must care for their children.
- Farming is hard work.

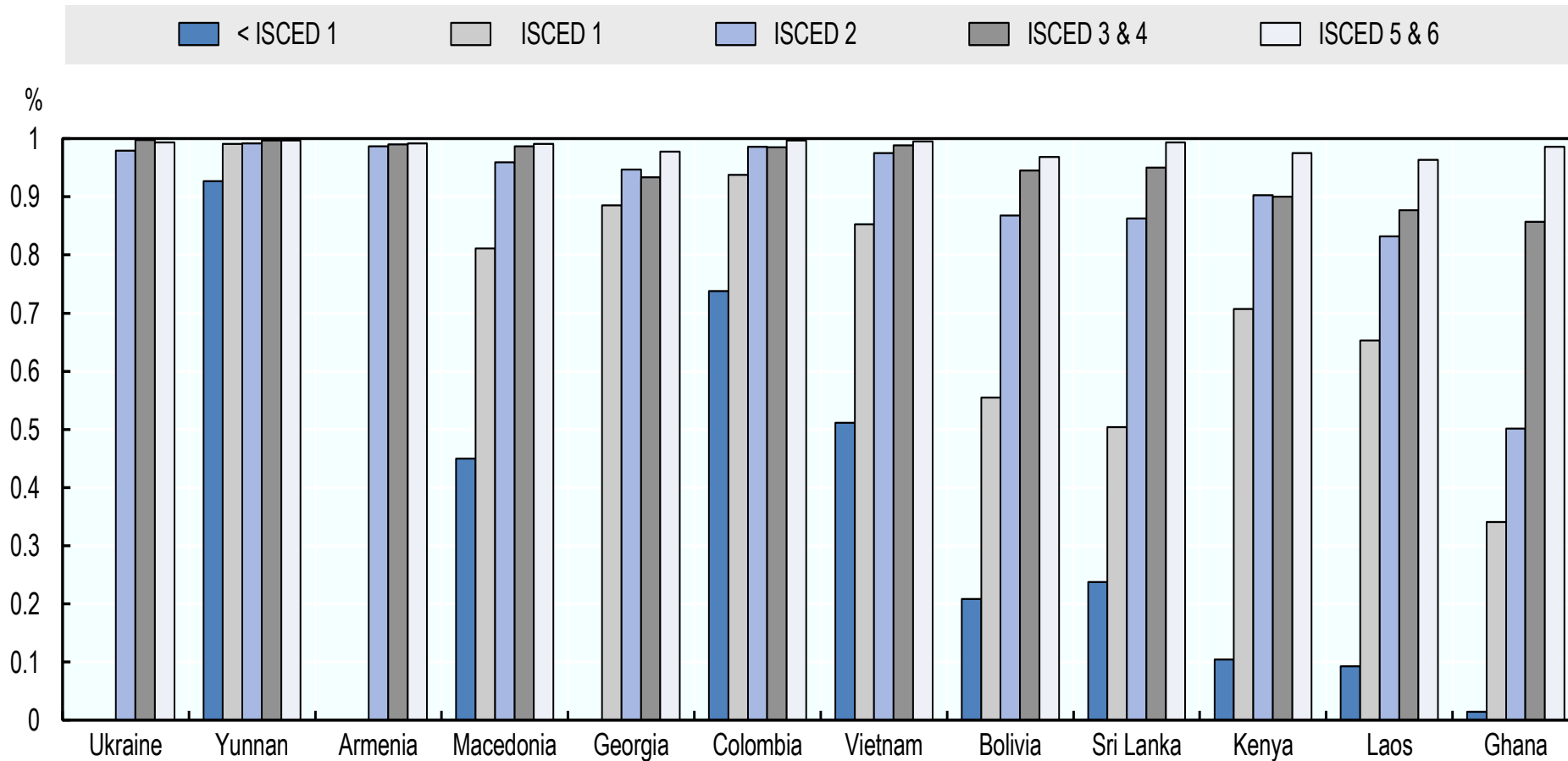
IF RESPONDENT CANNOT READ WHOLE SENTENCE, PROBE: Can you read any part of the sentence to me?

The response categories are:

1. CANNOT READ AT ALL
2. ABLE TO READ ONLY PART OF THE SENTENCE
3. ABLE TO READ WHOLE SENTENCE
4. NO CARD WITH REQUIRED LANGUAGE
5. BLIND/VISUALLY IMPAIRED



Proportion of respondents passing the STEP core by highest level of education





Some recommendations for the improvement of the collection of literacy data through simple measures

- Develop a well-defined and shared concept of ‘literacy’ and the threshold that is being measured (can read with understanding)
- Where possible collect information on literacy through valid and reliable tests
- Develop a simple test designed to measure the comprehension threshold
- Harmonise the collection of information on literacy through respondent reports
- Review the educational attainment thresholds applying to questions regarding literacy proficiency and the administration of simple direct measures of literacy
- Develop international guidelines regarding the collection of information regarding literacy in household surveys



International guidelines

- Little up-to-date guidance regarding the collection of data on literacy
 - Last comprehensive document produced in 1988



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Thank you