



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Sustainable  
Development  
Goals

# Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030

## Target 4.6

By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy



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Target 4.6 aims at ensuring that all young people and adults acquire relevant and recognized proficiency levels in **FUNCTIONAL** literacy and numeracy skills; skills that are equivalent to a successful completion of basic education. Literacy and numeracy skills, that is reading, writing and calculating, are vital skills for individuals to further their learning and to develop throughout their lives independently. Literacy and numeracy require a closer dissection, since they vary individually and largely depend upon whether or not a population has been equipped with vital lifelong learning skills.

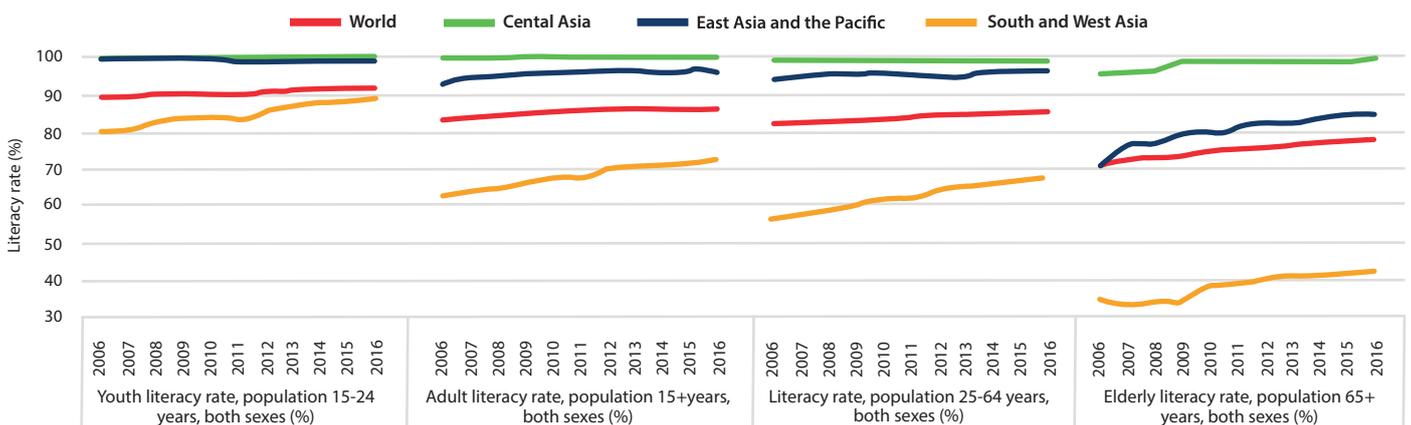
The target is underpinned by the concept of literacy as a continuum of proficiency, which develop from basic to more advanced levels. Shifting from the dichotomous notion of 'literate' versus 'illiterate' to the notion of literacy as a continuum has considerable implications on national system building, including policies, monitoring, practices and programmes.

Given the integrated and indivisible nature of the SDGs, efforts to achieve this specific target also require consideration of its interlinkages with other SDG 4 targets as well as non-education SDGs.

## Situation Analysis

### 60 per cent of the world's illiterate adults live in Asia-Pacific

Fig. 1: Literacy rates among youth (aged 15-24), adults (aged 15+), the population aged 25-64 and elderly (aged 65+), 2006 to 2016



Over the last decade, the world as a whole as well as the sub-regions in Asia-Pacific have made overall progress in improving literacy rates among their populations especially for youth population. According to the UIS data, Central Asia is the only sub-region, which, in 2016, recorded 100% literacy rate for both the youth (ages 15-24 years) and the adult (ages 15 and older) population. East Asia and the Pacific has recorded almost 99% youth literacy and 96% adult literacy rate. However, there are more than 15% of its elderly population, who still cannot read and write simple sentences.

Compared to other sub regions, South and West Asia has been lagging behind in terms of progress in literacy. This sub-region has recorded 87% of youth literacy in 2016, which is 7-percentage points up from 2006. For the adult population, the rate has been recorded at 72% in 2016, which is 10-percentage

point increase from 2006. Though the sub-region has made significant progress in literacy situation, the sub-region still needs to put more effort in improving the literacy situation, especially for the 25 years and above population, as more than 30% of 25-64 years and around 59% of its elderly population still lack basic literacy skills.

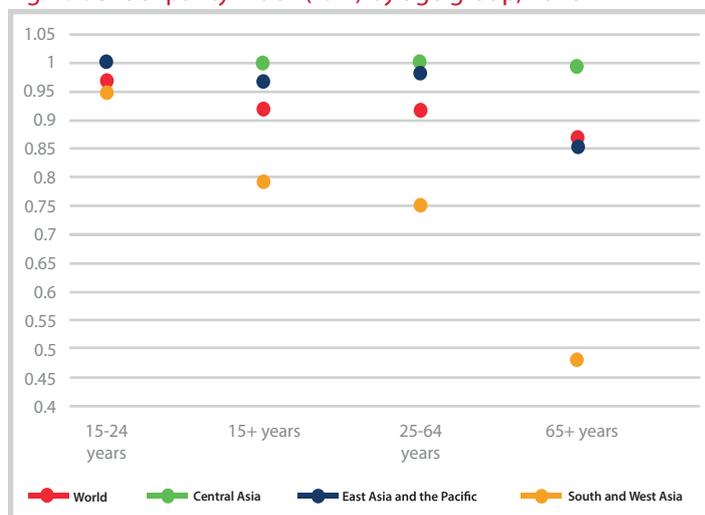
Despite the overall regional progress, predominantly among youth, **Asia and the Pacific is still a home to more than 42% (43 million) of the world's illiterate youths and almost 60% (446 millions) of the world's illiterate adults (see UIS Data Centre)**. This calls for the region to devise specific strategies if it plans to achieve an improvement in literacy situation by 2030.

### **Almost two thirds of the Asia-Pacific's illiterate adults are women**

Gender disparity in literacy can be seen in all the sub-regions except for Central Asia. Gender disparity is more prevalent among the countries and regions where literacy rates are low.<sup>1</sup> Among the 446 million illiterate adults in the Asia-Pacific region, close to two thirds are women (61%), which reminds us of the persisting gender disparities in literacy. The low levels of literacy among women acts as one of the barriers for them to fully participate in decision making processes, participate in developmental activities and build their own future.

Gender parity has been achieved for the youth population in Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and the world average follows suit, too. However, South and West Asia have yet the greatest gender disparity among its youth. Another issue is that a far greater gender gap remains among South and West Asia's working-age adults and elderly population. In addition, an increase in the gender gap can be observed with the increase of age.

Fig. 2: Gender parity index ( GPI) by age group, 2016



<sup>1</sup> De, Jaydip. (2015). Gender Disparity in Literacy: A Macro Level Spatio-Temporal Account of India. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science. 20. 52-59. 10.9790/0837-201065259.

## High literacy skills are least prevalent among the poorest and minority ethnic populations

The progress of East Asia and Pacific literacy rates is promising. However, disparities can still be identified among various social groups, as in rural-urban, rich-poor and ethnic populations. People living in the rural areas, from economically

underprivileged families and from minority ethno-linguistic groups have not most likely mastered basic literacy skills compared with their counterparts from rich, urban, non-minority ethnic or linguistic populations.

Fig. 3: Literacy Rate disaggregated by sex, location, ethnicity, age and economic groups in Lao PDR



Source: Lao Social Indicator Survey (II) 2017-19

As Figure 3 demonstrates the literacy distribution among the population of Lao PDR points to disparities among and within the socio-economic groups distinguished by location, ethnicity, age, wealth, and, respectively, gender. The rural population in particular fares worse than the urban population, which is augmented by the fact that rural women (52%) have a lower literacy rate than rural men (72%) as well as their urban female counterparts (85%). The literacy distribution among different ethnic groups also reveals that ethnic belonging and mother tongue language negatively impacts the acquisition of necessary literacy skills in national languages. Again, the situation is augmented for women within each ethnic minority

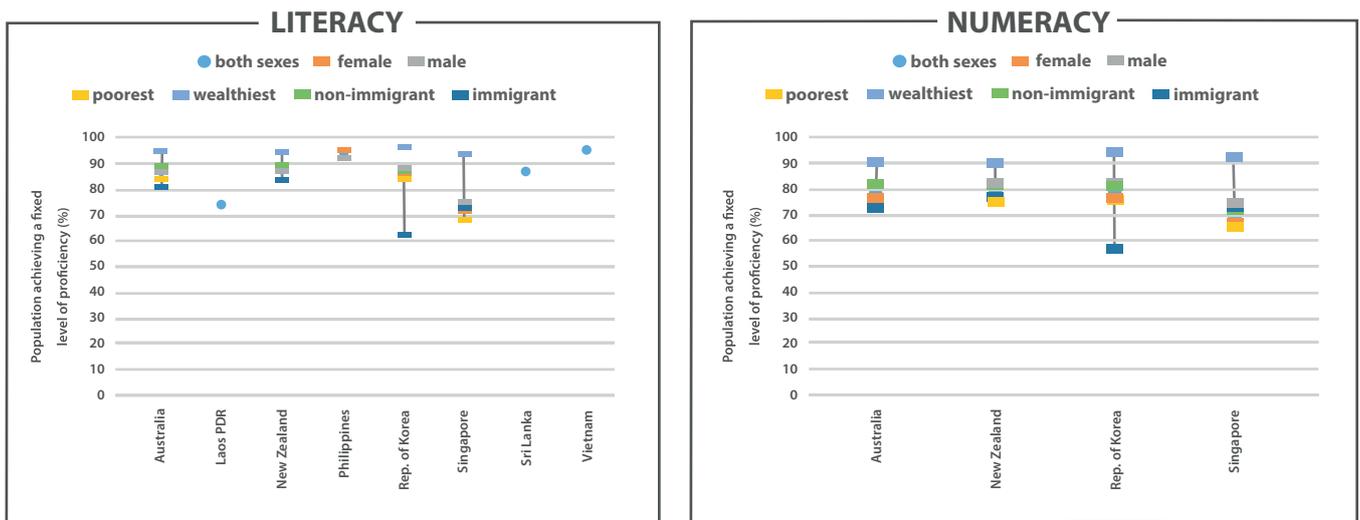
group, with the literacy rates ranged between 35% to 47%. Quite notably, the lowest wealth quintile has also the lowest literacy rates, while the richest quintile for both women and men shows near universal literacy. Only among the richest are almost all women and men (93% and 97%) considered literate in Lao PDR. As the regional averages indicated, literacy rates fall from age group to age group that is 15 to 19 years old Lao men and women show the highest literacy rates (87% and 81%) among the population, while one in every two female (51%) is literate among the middle-aged population of 35 to 49 years.

## Data on proficiency in functional literacy skills is crucial – but notoriously absent

To date, most literacy data (as well as numeracy) rely on individual's self-reported reading and writing capacities, often over- or underrating the individual's actual literacy skills. The reliability of such declarations can be affected by a variety of factors, including what the person understands as being able to read and write. The new indicators for SDG4 requires an assessment of the functional literacy and numeracy skills for effective participation in one's community and to enable one to further improve reading, writing and calculation skills.

Developing and implementing direct assessment of literacy skills can help collect more reliable and meaningful data on functional literacy skills of adult population. Experiences show that the literacy rate achieved from such methods is generally lower than the literacy rate data generated from self-reporting as in most cases the self-reported skill is exaggerates one's literacy abilities.

Fig. 4: Proportion of population achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional literacy and numeracy skills, 2015 or latest



When reviewing the statistical information on reading and numeracy skills from primary and secondary education, it may come as no surprise that we find similar pattern among the tested adult population between 16 and 65 years of age. The population of high economic status (Figure 4) most often shows functional proficiency in both numeracy and literacy. Especially in Singapore, the economically advantaged population notably stands out, compared to other factors,

indicating that a high income translates to literacy proficiencies and vice versa. In contrast, having an immigrant background features negatively in the Republic of Korea where immigrants' functional literacy rate is only 62% and their functional numeracy proficiency is 58%. Being a migrant is also a factor in Australia, where the gap between the immigrant and non-immigrant population in literacy and numeracy is 8% in disfavour of the immigrant population.

**A mini-LAMP to monitor indicator 4.6.1:** To plan and implement literacy programmes under restraints of operational, technical and financial burdens, the UIS developed the enhanced Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (mini-LAMP). The mini-LAMP is uniquely designed to focus on the lower levels of literacy and numeracy skills of youth and adult populations. The mini-LAMP has been envisioned as a module for existing household surveys so as to help countries produce relevant data for policy development and reporting on indicator 4.6.1. It can also be administered as a stand-alone assessment, and is composed of a skills-related background questionnaire, a set of cognitive low-skill items that provide more discrimination in the lower regions of the scale continuum of proficiency, and a set of administrative documents and guidelines. Countries administer the mini-LAMP directly, which means they can adapt the tools based on their priorities and needs. The assessment results can be placed on a scale that includes higher levels of literacy and numeracy, enhancing the value for reporting on overall literacy and numeracy rates. Find out more: UIS, 2018: Mini-LAMP for Monitoring Progress towards SDG 4.6.1. Available at: <https://uis.unesco.org>

## Major Challenges

National policies on data collection and monitoring of literacy are still based on the conventional **dichotomous notion of literacy**. This leads to underestimation of the issue of literacy among population and fails to cater to the real needs of learners. This situation limits the relevance and accuracy of data to serve as evidence to inform policies and programmes.

There are prevailing **socio-economic disparities** across countries and populations in the region that require further investigation or urgent attention. In particular, persisting gaps between poor and rich, rural and urban, and between the sexes and generations are alarming. However, the current level of disaggregation of data by sex, age, location, ethnic and linguistic affiliation is insufficient as to accurately identify the segments of population and perhaps, understand why

and how these people are disadvantaged in the acquisition of fundamental skills that allow them to participate more actively in their communities, society, and economy.

There is **limited insight** into functional literacy skill levels among the population of Member States that could be more accurate measures of demonstrable skills. Conventional statistics on the subject collects data through censuses and surveys based on self-reporting or deducing literacy from the numbers of school years attended. Beyond these sources, research to obtain a more nuanced picture, and appropriate tools to assess the proficiency levels and types of functional skills, is imperative and timely, especially when there is a growing need for higher levels of literacy and numeracy in societies and economies.

In some of the countries in the region, the literacy programmes are often too short to allow participants to develop the relevant competencies of functional literacy skills. There is also the issue of high dropouts in such programmes.

There is a lack of provision for **continuous education programmes**, such as vocational or occupational training, that build not only relevant life and technical skills but further improve literacy and numeracy skills as well. The importance and availability of libraries, books, newspapers, magazines and technological devices in the language(s) that people are familiar with, is too often neglected as an essential part of literacy and numeracy efforts to support the use of such skills.

**Political will** is insufficiently translated into action. Budget allocation to adult and youth literacy programmes remains a low priority for many governments. Although the

sub-regional adult literacy rates have increased, as seen above, the current level of efforts across countries will not allow the region to achieve the rate of more than 80% by 2030. A closer look at populations at risk for proper targeting of programmes will allow for more efficient budget allocations and improved instructional approaches.

The challenges with Target 4.6 are intrinsically interrelated. From missing data to inaccurate measuring and unsupportive interventions; the neglect of one of these challenges inevitably incapacitates progress in another.

## Recommendations

**PLACE LITERACY AND NUMERACY AT THE CORE OF LIFELONG LEARNING:** Successful experiences point to the fact that literacy and numeracy must be promoted through life-spanning approaches that connect formal and non-formal education, as well as part of the world of community participation and work. The acquisition of functional skills to improve lifelong learning opportunities will have more benefits for individuals and society. Literacy and numeracy as the foundational skill for all social, cultural and economic activities and engagement, must go beyond the simple application of the skills in education. Locally relevant, learner-centred and contextualized youth and adult literacy and numeracy programmes tied to primary concerns, such as health or income from livelihoods, will boost youth and adult participation and in consequence a nation's human capital.

**POLITICAL WILL MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY ADEQUATE RESOURCES:** There has been a lip service in literacy policies. Efforts to promote literacy must be backed by adequate and predictable public as well as private resources in order to move beyond the pilots to scaling up and creating sustained literacy environments. To ensure sustainable commitments and resources (both human, financial and technical), youth and adult education programs should be included in the Education Strategies and the National Education Sector Plans (NESP). Information and Communication Technologies can form part of needed resources to provide the means of delivery to create flexible and open learning opportunities as well as improve learning and instruction.

### REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR CORE LITERACY AND NUMERACY COMPETENCIES

There is a need for a regional framework for core literacy and numeracy competencies to guide countries to develop national competencies of functional literacy and numeracy skills. Such framework should set minimum standards, including the duration of the literacy programmes, various skills including digital literacy skills, competencies for adult educators, learning resources and assessment system etc.

**CALL FOR EXPANDING DIRECT ASSESSMENT OF LITERACY SKILLS:** Adapting scientifically proven methods as well as embracing new and local expertise, knowledge and resources, and their adaptation in teaching and learning contributes to greater impact on learners. As such, the global indicator for Target 4.6, which is the percentage of the population by sex and age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional literacy and numeracy skills, calls for reinforcement of monitoring efforts, especially expansion of the direct assessments of skills, in light of the shift of the concept of literacy from the dichotomous notion of literacy and numeracy to literacy and numeracy as a set of different proficiency levels in each learning domain.

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### Data sources

UIS Data centre, accessed May 2019 (unless indicated otherwise)