

# The Global Challenge of Illiteracy

**United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)**



Empowering Future Generations: Cultivating Global Literacy  
and Enlightenment



**Forum:** United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

**Issue:** The Global Challenge of Illiteracy

**Student Officer:** Aisha de Groot

**Position:** President

## Introduction

The global challenge of illiteracy is a major issue that affects millions of people around the world. Despite progress in education over the years, a large number of individuals, especially in developing countries, still do not have basic reading and writing skills. According to UNESCO, about 770 million adults lack literacy skills, with two-thirds of them being women. This problem is not only about learning to read and write; it is deeply connected to poverty, gender inequality, and lack of access to education. Illiteracy holds back progress in communities, limits job opportunities, and creates a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break.

Children are often the most vulnerable when it comes to illiteracy. More than half of the world's children are not achieving minimum reading or math skills, even if they attend school. This highlights not only a problem with access to education but also its quality. Many schools lack trained teachers, proper learning materials, and safe environments, making it hard for children to learn effectively. In regions like sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the situation is worse due to poverty, conflict, and cultural barriers. Girls in these areas are often denied education because of early marriages, gender roles, or safety concerns, which increases the gender gap in literacy.

Literacy is not just a personal skill; it is key to the development of societies. People who can read and write have better chances of improving their lives and the lives of their families. Literate parents are more likely to send their children to school, and literate individuals can access important information about health, job opportunities, and government services. This helps improve living conditions and reduces inequality. Literacy also empowers women, giving them a voice in their communities and promoting gender equality.

UNICEF plays a critical role in addressing this challenge. It works to provide access to quality education for children, especially those in the most disadvantaged areas. Through programs that focus on teacher training, building schools, and promoting gender equality, UNICEF aims to make sure that every child can receive a quality education. However, more needs to be done. Governments must invest more in education systems and address barriers that prevent children and adults from learning. International cooperation and partnerships are also essential to achieving global literacy goals.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) highlight the importance of inclusive and quality education for all. Ending illiteracy is essential to achieving other goals such as eradicating poverty, improving health, and promoting equality. As delegates in this UNICEF



committee, we must work together to find solutions to this global challenge. We must focus on creating strategies that help improve literacy rates, ensure equal access to education, and support vulnerable groups, especially women and children.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Illiteracy

Illiteracy is the inability to read, write, or understand basic text. It prevents individuals from performing everyday tasks, such as reading road signs, completing forms, or following written instructions. Illiteracy is often caused by poverty, lack of access to education, and gender inequality. It is more prevalent in rural and low-income areas, with women and marginalised communities being most affected. Illiteracy limits economic opportunities, reduces quality of life, and contributes to cycles of poverty within societies.

### Literacy

Literacy is the ability to read, write, and understand written information at a level that enables individuals to engage fully in daily life. UNESCO defines it as the foundation of lifelong learning and personal empowerment. Literacy includes both understanding and using information for communication, learning, and decision-making. It plays a crucial role in improving employment opportunities, reducing inequality, and fostering development. Without literacy, individuals struggle to access information, healthcare, and other services that improve their quality of life.

### Functional Literacy

Functional literacy goes beyond basic reading and writing. It is the ability to apply literacy skills in practical, real-life situations. For example, it includes understanding medical instructions, managing personal finances, and comprehending workplace guidelines. Functional literacy equips individuals to participate fully in society and the economy. Adults who lack these skills may find it challenging to perform everyday tasks, access employment, or support their children's education, which continues the cycle of disadvantage.

### Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)

SDG 4 is one of the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and focuses on achieving inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all by 2030. It aims to ensure lifelong learning opportunities and improve literacy worldwide, especially in disadvantaged communities. SDG 4 prioritises equal access to education, closing gender gaps, and enhancing the quality of teaching. Achieving this goal is essential for reducing poverty, empowering women, and building sustainable, peaceful societies.



## UNICEF

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) works globally to promote and protect children’s rights, including their right to education. UNICEF supports programmes to provide access to quality education, particularly in developing and conflict-affected regions. Its work includes building schools, training teachers, and promoting equal opportunities for girls and boys. UNICEF plays a vital role in reducing illiteracy by addressing barriers to education and advocating for policies that prioritise children’s learning and development.

## Gender Inequality in Education

Gender inequality in education refers to unequal access to schooling and literacy based on gender. Girls, particularly in developing regions, often face barriers such as cultural norms, early marriage, poverty, or safety concerns, which prevent them from attending school. This results in higher illiteracy rates among women and limits their opportunities for employment, healthcare, and decision-making. Promoting gender equality in education ensures both boys and girls can access learning, leading to economic growth and societal progress.

## General Overview

### Introduction

Illiteracy remains a persistent issue worldwide. According to UNESCO, approximately 770 million adults still lack basic literacy skills, with two-thirds being women. This gender disparity highlights deep inequalities in education access. While global literacy rates have improved significantly over the past century, progress has been uneven. Developing regions, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and parts of the Arab states, continue to face the highest levels of illiteracy. These areas are often marked by poverty, conflict, and weak education systems, which hinder access to quality learning.

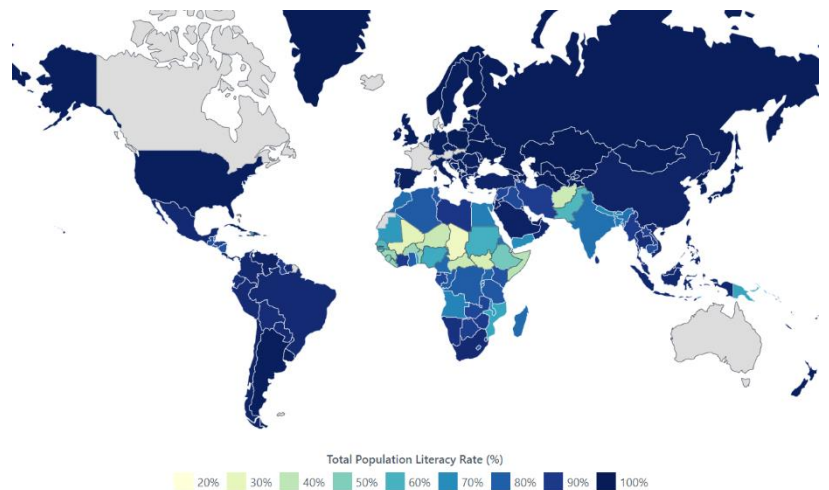


Figure 1: Literacy rates by country, highlighting global disparities



Children are particularly vulnerable. In many cases, even those who attend school fail to acquire minimum literacy skills. A 2017 UNESCO report stated that 617 million children and adolescents worldwide cannot read or perform basic mathematics, even after years of schooling. This statistic highlights a failure in both access to education and its quality.

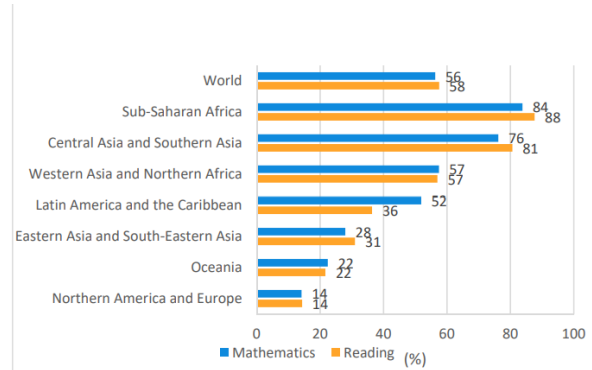


Figure 2: Proportion of children and adolescents not achieving Minimum Proficiency Levels (MPL's) in mathematics and reading by the SDG

## Causes of Illiteracy

Several interconnected factors contribute to illiteracy:

**Poverty:** Families in poverty often prioritise survival over education. The costs of school fees, uniforms, and supplies can be unaffordable, leading children to drop out early or never attend school.

**Gender Inequality:** In many cultures, girls face barriers to education, including child marriage, gender roles, and safety concerns. Women are disproportionately affected by illiteracy, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

**Conflict and Instability:** Wars and natural disasters disrupt education systems, displacing children and preventing access to schools.

**Lack of Resources:** Schools in underdeveloped regions often lack trained teachers, textbooks, and infrastructure, making it difficult for students to learn effectively.

## The impact of Illiteracy

Illiteracy has severe consequences on individuals and societies. At a personal level, it limits access to employment, reduces income potential, and restricts opportunities for social mobility. Illiterate individuals may struggle to understand medical instructions, manage finances, or access government services.

On a broader scale, illiteracy hinders economic development. Countries with high levels of illiteracy experience slower economic growth, as they lack a skilled workforce. Illiteracy also perpetuates poverty, as parents who cannot read are less likely to support their children's education.

Moreover, illiteracy disproportionately impacts women, limiting their ability to make informed decisions about health, family planning, and education. Addressing women's



literacy is critical for achieving gender equality and reducing child mortality and poverty rates.

## Major Parties Involved

### UNICEF

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is a global organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, including their right to education. Established in 1946, UNICEF works in over 190 countries, focusing on children's welfare, healthcare, and education. In the context of illiteracy, UNICEF runs programmes to provide access to quality education, advocate for gender equality in schooling, and support literacy initiatives in disadvantaged communities. UNICEF's efforts are crucial in reducing barriers that prevent children, particularly girls, from accessing education.

### UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is a key player in global efforts to promote literacy and education. Founded in 1945, UNESCO aims to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration in education, science, and culture. UNESCO leads the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), which focuses on improving literacy rates among adults and youth, particularly in countries where education systems face significant challenges. UNESCO also monitors progress towards global literacy goals and provides resources to help nations achieve these targets.

### World Bank

The World Bank is an international financial institution that provides funding and technical assistance to developing countries for projects related to education, poverty reduction, and infrastructure. The World Bank has funded numerous initiatives aimed at improving literacy rates, including building schools, training teachers, and enhancing education systems. Its involvement in literacy is focused on the broader development goals of poverty reduction and economic growth, as literacy is a critical factor in breaking cycles of poverty.

### Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Governments

Various NGOs play significant roles in tackling illiteracy. Organisations like Room to Read, Save the Children, and ActionAid focus on improving access to education and literacy, especially in rural and conflict-affected regions. These NGOs often work in partnership with governments and international organisations to implement literacy programmes, distribute



educational materials, and provide scholarships to disadvantaged children. NGOs are crucial in addressing gaps in education where governmental efforts may be lacking or delayed.

## Governments

National governments are key actors in addressing illiteracy, as they are responsible for setting educational policies, funding schools, and ensuring that every child has access to basic education. Many countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, face challenges in education due to political instability, poverty, and lack of resources. Governments that prioritise education are essential in the fight against illiteracy, and global partnerships aim to support these efforts, such as through funding from international organisations.

## Timeline of Events

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|------|--|
| 2003 | <b>Launch of the Literacy Decade</b><br>UNESCO launched the United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012) to highlight the importance of literacy for development. This initiative aimed to raise awareness, promote global cooperation, and boost resources for literacy projects worldwide.                                       |
| 2015 | <b>Adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 4</b><br>The UN adopted Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. It aims to improve literacy globally, especially in marginalised communities.                          |
| 2021 | <b>UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report</b><br>UNESCO released a report revealing that over 258 million children and youth were out of school globally, with many of them lacking essential literacy skills. The report called for urgent action to address education inequalities, particularly in low-income countries. |



## Previous attempts to solve the issue

### The United Nations Literacy Decade (2003–2012) Literacy Programmes by NGOs

In 2003, UNESCO launched the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) to address the global literacy crisis. The initiative aimed to focus on adult literacy, especially in developing countries where access to education is limited. It encouraged governments to implement national literacy plans, allocate resources for education, and foster partnerships with international organisations. The UNLD also aimed to raise awareness of the social and economic benefits of literacy, such as reducing poverty and promoting gender equality. Although the Decade has ended, its impact remains, as it set the stage for continued literacy efforts worldwide.

### Literacy Programmes by NGOs

Numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played a vital role in addressing illiteracy, particularly in areas with limited access to education. Room to Read, for example, focuses on building libraries, providing books, and supporting girls' education in countries like Nepal and Tanzania. Similarly, Save the Children implements literacy-focused projects in conflict zones, helping children who have missed out on schooling due to war. NGOs such as these often partner with local governments, schools, and communities to provide educational resources, teacher training, and scholarships to help tackle illiteracy.

### Digital Literacy Initiatives

As technology has advanced, digital literacy has become increasingly important. Programs such as One Laptop per Child and Project Literacy aim to provide low-cost digital devices and access to the internet for students in underserved areas. These initiatives allow children and adults to access educational content, learn new skills, and improve their literacy through online resources. Digital literacy initiatives have proven especially effective in reaching remote areas, where traditional education infrastructure is lacking. These programmes also promote lifelong learning, helping individuals develop the skills necessary to thrive in the modern world.





## Possible solutions

### Global Literacy Fund

A dedicated global fund could be established to support countries with the highest illiteracy rates, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. This fund would provide financial support for teacher training, the development of local educational infrastructure, and the distribution of learning materials, especially for rural and disadvantaged communities. The fund would focus on both youth and adult literacy, ensuring long-term societal benefits. An international coalition of governments, NGOs, and the private sector could collaborate to raise the necessary resources, ensuring that no region is left behind.

### Community-Based Literacy Programs

A more locally tailored solution would be to implement community-based literacy initiatives. These programs could involve community leaders, local educators, and volunteers in delivering literacy education outside traditional school settings. These initiatives would be particularly effective in areas where formal education is difficult to access due to infrastructure challenges or cultural barriers. Mobile literacy units, where trained instructors use vans or buses to bring education to remote areas, could also be an option. This would ensure inclusivity and address the unique needs of each community, promoting greater literacy participation.

### Partnerships for Digital Literacy in Low-Income Countries

To address the growing importance of digital skills, governments and international organisations could foster partnerships to provide affordable technology and internet access to low-income countries. Digital literacy programs could help people learn both basic literacy and technical skills that are essential for the modern workforce. These programs would focus on integrating technology into education, creating digital platforms that provide interactive, easily accessible learning resources. By equipping individuals with both literacy and digital skills, this solution would prepare them for future economic opportunities, especially in countries with rapidly expanding technological sectors.



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