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International Literacy Day 2025

Promoting literacy in the digital era



FACTSHEET

In 2025, **International Literacy Day (ILD)** will explore the theme “**Promoting literacy in the digital era.**” In today’s rapidly evolving digital landscape, the importance of literacy¹ is more critical than ever. Beyond traditional literacy associated with paper-based reading and writing, it now serves as a foundation for digital skills, safe and critical engagement with digital texts and tools, and an inclusive digital transition. Digitalization is also changing the ways in which literacy policies, programmes and practices are designed, implemented and monitored.

ILD 2025 will explore both the opportunities and challenges for ensuring an inclusive digital transition through and for literacy. It will showcase effective solutions that promote literacy as a human right and a cornerstone for sustainable, just and peaceful societies.



YOUTH AND ADULT LITERACY

Globally, steady progress has been made since world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on education and lifelong learning.

Between 2015 and 2024, literacy rates² among adults (population aged 15+) rose slightly from 86% to 88%. The top two regions with the fastest progress are **Central and Southern Asia**, where the **adult literacy rate increased from 72% to 77%**, and **sub-Saharan Africa**, with an increase from 65% to 69%.

The global **youth (population aged 15 to 24) literacy rate reached 93% in 2024**, higher than for adults, reflecting the expansion of basic education from which the younger generations are benefiting.



But progress remains inadequate and uneven.

In 2024, **739 million adults still lacked basic literacy skills.**

Nearly 77% lived in sub-Saharan Africa (225 million) and Central and Southern Asia (347 million) – a share that has grown by 2 percentage points since 2015.

The adult literacy rates of the **15 countries with the lowest rates** among those with the latest data available for the 2015-2024 census decade were **29% to 60%**³.

According to the latest data from the 2015–2024 census decade, more than half of the world’s illiterate adults – **441 million people** – **are concentrated in just 10 countries**, many of which have large populations⁴.

Persistent gaps continue to limit opportunities and reinforce social and economic inequalities, especially for women, older adults and marginalized people.

In 2024, women made up to nearly **two-thirds of the 739 million illiterate adults (466 million).**

Among **108 million forcibly displaced people**, literacy and digital divides are severe - **only 30% of youth in crisis-affected countries are literate**⁵.

In some sub-Saharan African countries, **only 31% of elderly women are literate, compared to 55% for elderly men, and near-universal (99%) male literacy rate in parts of Europe and North American countries.**

Notes

1. The word literacy in this document is used to include reading, writing, and numeracy skills, based on these definitions of literacy (UNESCO, 2015) and numeracy (OECD, 2019) except when it is used for specific statistical purposes.

2. The source of data used in the fact sheet, unless otherwise specified, is the UIS education database, September 2025

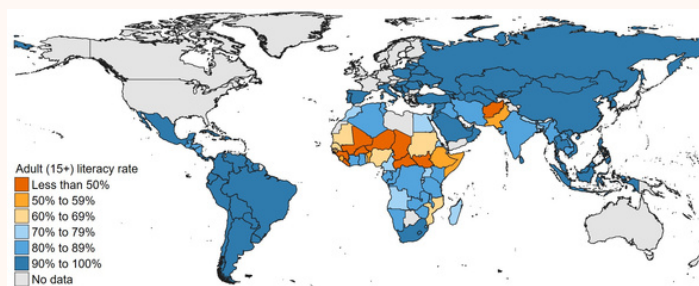
3. The 15 countries are: Afghanistan (37%), Benin (58%), Burkina Faso (37%), Central African Republic (38%), Chad (28%), Ethiopia (51.8%), Guinea (48%), Guinea Bissau (56%), Liberia (48%), Mali (44%), Niger (38%), Pakistan (58%), Sierra Leone (60%), Somalia (54%), South Sudan (35%).

4. The 10 countries are: Afghanistan (14 million), Bangladesh (25 million), Brazil (11 million), China (38 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (11 million), Egypt (19 million), Ethiopia (30 million), India (191 million), Nigeria (43 million), Pakistan (59 million).

5. UNHCR, 2024 and IOM, 2024

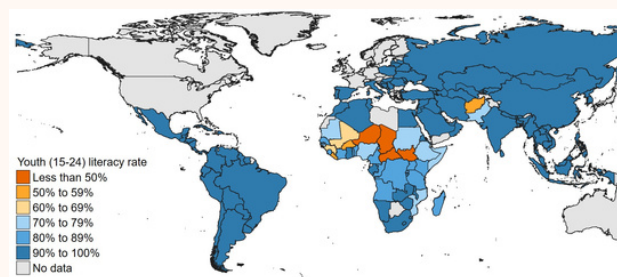


Figure 1: Adult (15 and over) literacy rate in 2024



Source: UIS education database, September 2025

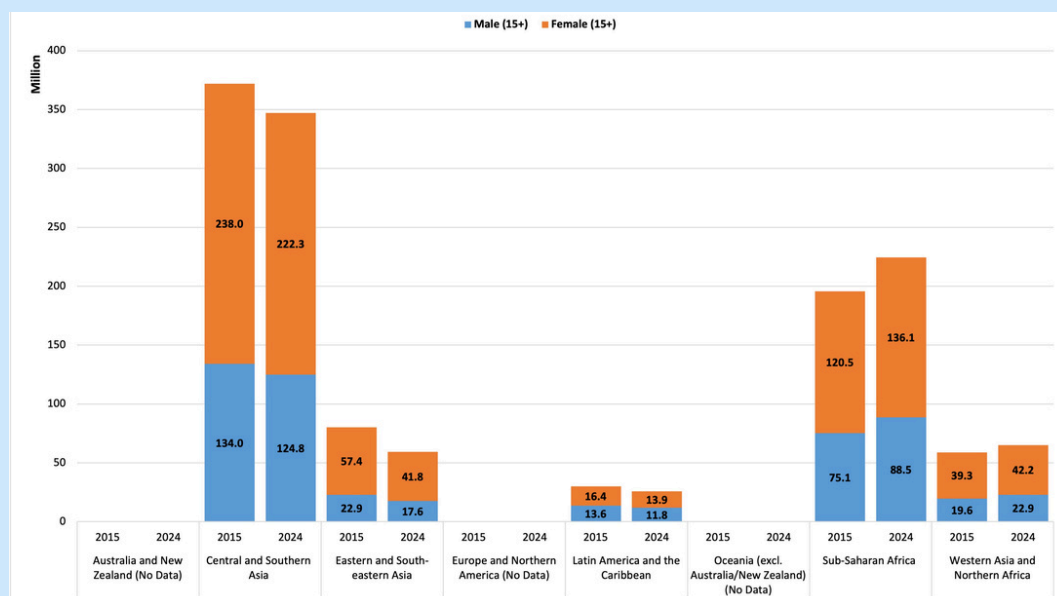
Figure 2: Youth (15-24) literacy rate in 2024



Source: UIS education database, September 2025

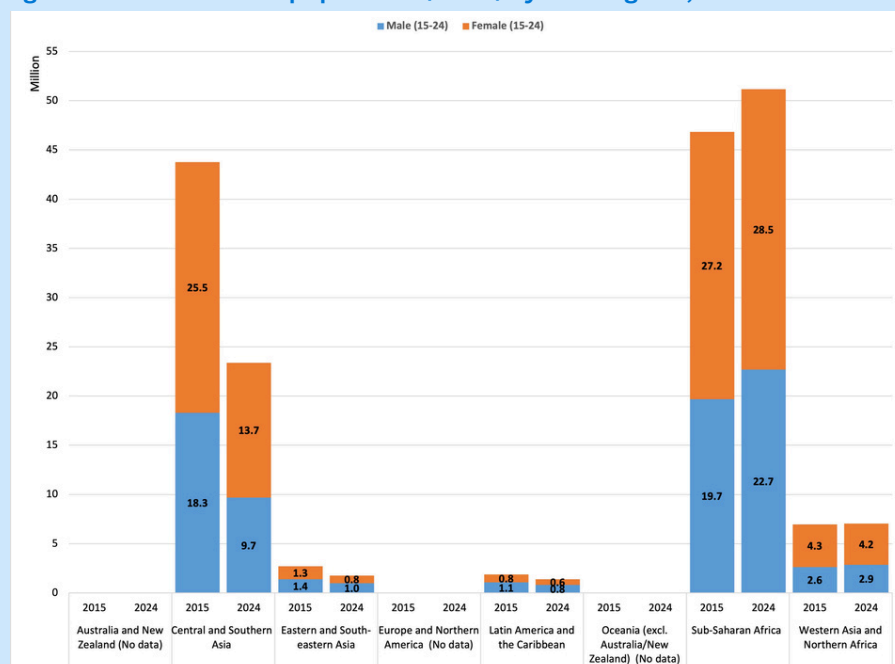
Note: The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Figure 3: Adult illiterate population (15+) by SDG regions, 2015 and 2024



Source: UIS education database, September 2025

Figure 4: Youth illiterate population (15-24) by SDG regions, 2015 and 2024



Source: UIS education database, September 2025



The state of literacy is more complex when it considers other factors, such as evolving understanding of literacy, demographic trends, language and data collection. More efforts are needed to improve literacy monitoring.

How we define literacy matters.

The conventional statistics, such as youth and adult literacy rate (SDG indicator 4.6.1)⁶ and number of illiterate youth and adults provide a relatively comprehensive picture but have their limitations. Focusing on basic literacy - reading and writing - they are calculated based on self- or household-declaration of whether persons are 'literate' or 'illiterate'. These statistics do not include the numeracy and specific literacy skills required in digital societies.

Monitoring skills proficiency is still challenging and costly. But when skills are directly measured, even in **31 developed countries⁷ participated in the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Skills (PIAAC), 18% of adults are reported to lack the most basic levels of proficiency in literacy, numeracy and adaptive problem solving⁸**. In these countries, adult literacy has actually stagnated or declined since 2012 with some exceptions.

Literacy and numeracy are basic cognitive skills and essential components of broader knowledge, skills, and competencies such as digital and financial literacy. In the SDG monitoring framework, however, SDG target 4.3 on 'equal access to technical, vocational, tertiary and adult education' and SDG target 4.4 on 'increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship skills for work' are artificially separated. More coordination between monitoring of these targets is needed in light of the evolving concept of literacy, which embraces several skills domains, including numeracy and some digital skills.

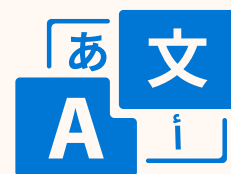
When demographic trends are counted, in two regions, in which youth and adult literacy rates increased between 2015 and 2024, illiterate youth and adults increased.

In sub-Saharan Africa, in which the literacy rate increased from 65% to 69%, illiterate adults increased from 196 million to 225 million. In Western Asia and Northern Africa, in which the literacy rate increased 82% to 84%, illiterate adults increased from 59 million to 65 million.

The global number of illiterate adults declined from **754 million in 2023 to 739 million in 2024**. This decrease reflects both revised population estimates from the UN Population Division's 2024 World Population Prospects⁹ (WPP) and updated national literacy statistics. Notably, India's literacy rate, given its large population, was updated upward from 77% in 2023 to 81% in 2024, contributing significantly to the global reduction. The 2024 UN Population Division revision of WPP also affected a number of out-of-school children, adolescents and youth.

Often, languages are not counted in literacy provision and statistics.

While multilingualism is a norm in many countries, **40% of the world population does not access education in a language they understand¹⁰**. In literacy monitoring, many countries use a single language, while a handful of countries allow respondents to read or write in any language.

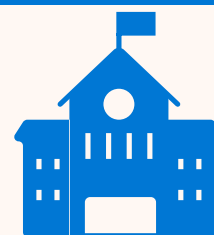


CHILDREN'S LITERACY

More children are going to school and completing education than ever before.

Since 2015, **110 million more children, adolescents and youth have enrolled in school** – the highest number in history.¹¹

40 million more young people are completing secondary school today than 2015. Global completion rates increased from 85% to 88% in primary, from 74% to 79% in lower secondary and from 53% to 59% in upper secondary education. **Girls now outperform boys by 2–3¹² percentage points at all levels.**



Sources

6. The new Global indicator used for monitoring SDG Target 4.6 is: the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short, simple sentence about one's everyday life. This definition emphasizes basic literacy, focusing on two core skills: reading and writing.

7. OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and its Survey of Adults Skills. The PIAAC is an example of direct assessments of skills based on the evolved concept of literacy which embraces several skill domains, including literacy and numeracy, each conceived on a scale of different mastery levels.

8. OECD (2024) Survey of Adult Skills 2023

9. UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2024). [Methodology Report – World Population Prospects 2024](#).

10. UNESCO (2016) If you don't understand, how can you learn?, Global Education Monitoring Report Policy paper 24. Paris: UNESCO.

11. UNESCO (2024) [Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/2025: Leadership in education – Lead for learning](#). Paris: UNESCO.

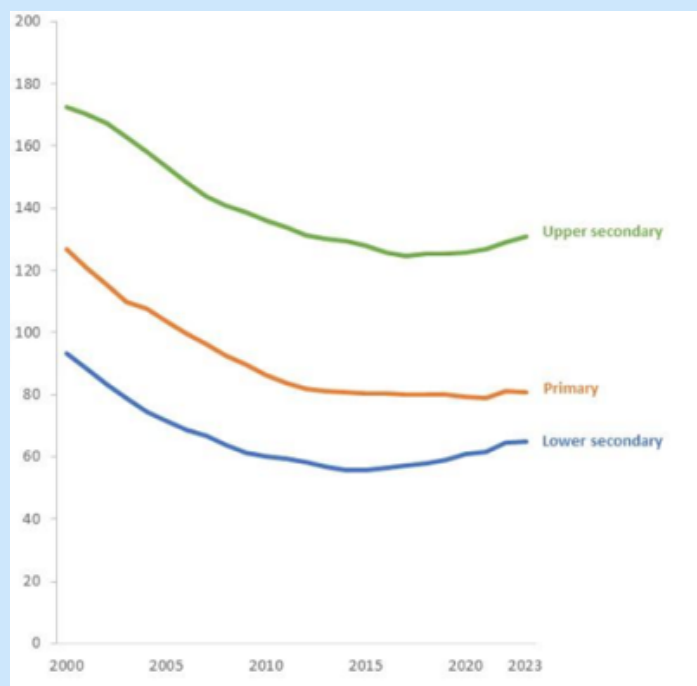
12. Ibid.

But millions are still left behind.

Worldwide, **272 million children, adolescents and young people are still out of school in 2023** - 3% increase since 2015.¹³ More than half of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. One third of school-aged children and youth (36%) in low-income countries are out of school, compared to only 3% in high-income countries.

Adolescents who drop out of school or do not attend school regularly are highly unlikely to achieve minimum proficiency levels according the results of the PISA for Development (PISA-D)¹⁴ study of 15-year-olds in 2017–18 in Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Senegal.

Figure 6: Out-of-school population (million), by age group



Source: UIS and GEM Report out-of-school estimate model

In total: 272 million (2023)
Upper secondary age: 130 million
Primary school age: 78 million
Lower secondary age: 64 million

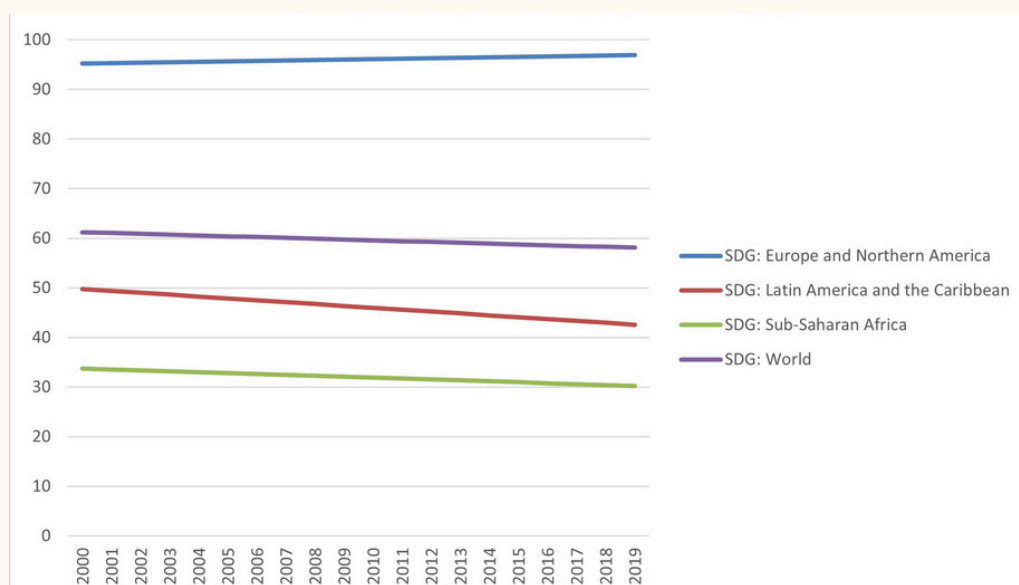
Access isn't enough. Many children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills.

Globally, the **minimum proficiency of primary students stands at just 58% in reading and 44 % in mathematics** in 2019.¹⁵

The proportion of children at the end of primary education achieving a minimum proficiency in reading ranged from **30% in sub-Saharan Africa, 43% in Latin America and the Caribbean and to 97% in Europe and North America** in 2019, while the proportion for **mathematics were 11%, 36% and 77% respectively**.¹⁶

In Africa, only one in five students achieved minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics at the end of primary education.¹⁷

Figure 7: Proportion of students at the end of primary education achieving at least at minimum proficiency level in reading, both sexes (%)



Source: UIS data browser, September 2025 Release



LITERACY IN THE DIGITAL ERA

In a digitalized world, literacy is more essential than ever. It is at the heart of digital learning, enabling everyone to participate fully in today's connected world.

Beyond access to the internet and digital devices, the ability to read, write and use numbers on paper and digital materials is crucial for thinking critically and navigating information-rich society and economy in a safe, effective and responsible manner.

But not everyone is equipped with skills to navigate a digital world

In **OECD countries** around one-third of adults aged 55 to 65 do not possess computer skills¹⁸, and only **1 in 10** is assessed as **having medium-to-good problem-solving skills in a technology-rich environment**.

Many teachers feel unprepared for teaching with technologies. Only half of countries have standards for developing teacher ICT skills.¹⁹

Many people are not literacy skills are not solid enough in the face of disinformation and misinformation

In **OECD countries**, only 9% of 15-year-olds could distinguish 'fact' from 'opinion' in digital texts.²⁰

Digital technologies help expand meaningful literacy provision and access well-trained educators.

Digital technologies can help reach disadvantaged learners, reduce costs and increase engagement when they are used appropriately.

But they still exclude many.

In 2024, however, 93% of the population in high-income countries used the internet, compared with only 27% in low-income countries. In the same year, an estimated 70% of men used the Internet, compared with 65% of women. ITU (2025).

Only around 400 languages are fully accessible online, representing just a fraction of the world's 7,000 spoken languages.²¹



Globally, only 40% of primary, 50% of lower secondary and 65% of upper secondary schools are connected to the internet.²²

We need to be mindful of potential risks

Beyond common risks, such as data privacy and security, algorithmic biases, mental health implications, particular attention is needed in education about **human connection and negative cognitive effects, including the reduced mental capacity to read and think deeply.**

Sources

13 UIS and GEM Report (2025) The out-of-school population is higher than previously thought – and rising.

14 OECD (2025) PISA for Development & UNESCO (2024) GEM 2024/2025

15. UIS Data browser, September 2025 Release

16. Ibid.

17. UNESCO, Association for the Development of Education in African and African Union (2024) [Spotlight on basic education completion and foundational learning in Africa](#). Paris: UNESCO.

African Union, UNESCO and UNICEF (2025) Transforming learning and skills development in Africa: 2nd continental report.

18. OECD (2019) Working better with age, ageing and employment policies. Paris: OECD

19. UNESCO (2023) GEM Report

20. OECD (2021) PISA In Focus: Are 15-year olds prepared to deal with fake news and misinformation?

21. UNESCO webpage on ['Internet Access: UNESCO and ICANN join forces to improve linguistic diversity online](#) (2025).

22. UIS data browser 2025

23. In relation to cautious approaches, see UNESCO (2023), UNESCO (2023) An ed-tech tragedy? Educational technologies and school closures in the time of COVID-19, Shaheed, F. (2024) Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education: Artificial intelligence in education, submitted to the UN General Assembly (A/79/520), and Selwyn, N. (2016). Is Technology Good for Education?. Cambridge: Polity Press. On negative cognitive effects, see Spitzer, M. (2012) Digital dementia: what we and our children are doing to our minds. Brno: Host, Wolf, M. (2018) Reader, Come Home: The reading brain in a digital world. New York: Harper.

Generative AI spreads rapidly offering opportunities - but education systems are behind in providing policy and regulatory responses for addressing potential risks.

In high-income countries, **over two-thirds of secondary school students are already leveraging generative AI tools** to support their schoolwork.

Globally, **54% of countries have digital skill standards - often defined by non-state, mostly commercial, actors.**²⁴

Nearly 40% of countries now has laws or policies banning mobile phones in schools, a notable rise from **24%** in July 2023.

Upholding the rights-based and human-centered approaches to literacy promotion in digital era

‘Unlocking the potential of Artificial Intelligence also depends on keeping human agency – and human rights – at the heart of this rapidly evolving technology’. Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General.²⁵

FINANCING FOR LITERACY

Funding for adult literacy and basic skills remains limited worldwide. Adequate and sustainable funding is a key to building more literate, inclusive, sustainable and peaceful societies.

Among **102 countries** surveyed by UNESCO, **57% allocated less than 4% of their national education budgets to adult literacy and education**—highlighting persistent underinvestment in this critical area.²⁶

Of the **146 countries** that responded to UNESCO’s survey, **only 39% of countries reported an increase in funding for adult literacy and basic skills** since 2018, while **53% saw no change** and **8% reported a decrease**.

A basic digital transformation of education in the lower-middle income countries would **add 50% to the total financing gap for achieving national SDG 4 targets.**²⁷



Sources

24. UNESCO (2023) GEM Report

25. <https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/pressrels/2025/unissgsm1469.html>

26. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2022) Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education. Hamburg: UIL. Globally, ‘allocation of at least 3% of national education budget to adult literacy’ is often used as a benchmark, as recommended by a paper entitled ‘[Global benchmarks for adult literacy](#)’ commissioned to Action Aid International by the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006: Literacy for Life (UNESCO, 2005).

27. UNESCO (2024) Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: technology in education: a tool on whose terms? Paris: UNESCO