

Module 2 Illiteracy, Poverty, Unemployment and Population Growth

Lecture 6

Magnitude and Causes of illiteracy

Definition of Illiteracy

Illiteracy means when a person cannot read or write. UNESCO defines functional illiteracy as “measured by assessing reading, writing and mathematical skills in the various domains of social life which influence individual identity and insertion into society. From this perspective, literacy involves not only reading and writing but also the acquisition of the skills necessary for effective and productive performance within society” (UNESCO 2011). Of equal relevance is the concept of functional illiteracy, which means an individual may have basic reading, writing and numerical skills but cannot apply them to accomplish tasks that are necessary to make informed choices and participate fully in everyday life. Such tasks may include:

- Reading a medicine label
- Reading a nutritional label on a food product
- Balancing a Cheque book
- Filling out a job application
- Reading and responding to correspondence in the workplace
- Filling out a home loan application
- Reading a bank statement
- Comparing the cost of two items to work out which one offers the best value
- Working out the correct change at a supermarket

Poor literacy also limits a person’s ability to engage in activities that require either critical thinking or a solid base of literacy and numeracy skills. Such activities may include:

- Understanding government policies and voting in elections
- Using a computer to do banking or interact with government agencies
- Calculating the cost and potential return of a financial investment
- Using a computer or smart phone to look up and access up-to-date news and information; communicate with others via email or social networking sites; or

shop online, read product reviews and user feedback, and get the best prices for goods and services

- Completing a higher education degree or training
- Analysing sophisticated media and advertising messages, particularly for get-rich-quick scams
- Assisting children with their homework

Magnitude and Causes of Illiteracy

Around the world, the impact of illiteracy on personal income varies but it is clear earning potential is limited. Illiterate people earn 30%-42% less than their literate counterparts and do not have the literacy skills required to undertake further vocational education or training to improve their earning capacity. One study shows the income of a person with poor literacy stays about the same throughout their working life. However, individuals with good literacy and numeracy skills can expect their incomes to increase at least two to three times what they were earning at the beginning of their careers. Young people who do not complete primary schooling are less likely to obtain jobs good enough to avoid poverty. Following are the main causes of poverty. Let us discuss them one by one.

Poverty

The magnitude of the literacy challenge facing many countries today is further complicated by the strong links between illiteracy and poverty. For example, there is a significant negative correlation between measures of poverty and the adult literacy rate, at both the international level (Figure 7.5) and at the sub national level in countries such as India that is, where poverty rates are higher, literacy rates tend to be lower. Noteworthy exceptions include countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco and Tunisia, which have relatively low poverty and literacy rates. Millions of people cannot attend class because they are poor and they are needed to work to fulfill the needs of their daily life. Hunger and poverty are the concerns of millions of people. They have fewer choices in jobs, education, housing and other things. Poverty and illiteracy form a cycle that is difficult to break.

Social disparities

Gender

Gender disparities are either non-existent or minimal in countries with adult literacy rates at 95% or above. In almost all other countries, men have better reading and writing skills than women. On average, the literacy gaps between adult men and women are largest in South and West Asia (70% vs 46%), the Arab States (73% vs 51%) and sub-Saharan Africa (68% vs 52%). The gap between the female and male literacy rates is considerably greater in countries where the overall adult literacy rate is lower.

Age

In all countries, literacy rates vary across age groups. Typically, individuals aged 15–34 have higher literacy levels than those aged 45 and older, reflecting in large part the expansion of mass schooling throughout the world. In some countries, there are small decreases in literacy rates among younger age groups and then sharp declines among older age groups, especially after the age of 45. In other cases, the decline in literacy rates across age groups is fairly linear. Unsurprisingly, age disparities are smaller in high-literacy countries and larger in low-literacy countries. In countries with comparatively low literacy levels (e.g. Angola, Burundi, the Gambia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Nepal, Pakistan, Rwanda and Zambia), the literacy rate among 25- to 34-year-olds is twice that of those aged 65 and older.

Geographical Disparities

Rural residents have lower literacy levels than urban residents, whether measured from census data (e.g. Wagner, 2000) or from household data. The disparities between urban and rural populations tend to be greater in those poorer countries in which overall literacy rates are comparatively low. In large measure, the influence of urbanization on literacy acquisition and retention reflects differences in access to formal schooling, higher-quality education and non-formal education programmes. Urban residents, in contrast to rural residents, tend also to reside in more literate environment, which are more demanding of literacy skills in written languages, and which offer greater rewards to those who possess them. Regional or provincial differences in literacy are particularly prevalent in countries with large illiterate populations.

Limited Resources

Many poor countries are cutting their public spending on social services such as education as these countries are already burdened by foreign debt.

War

War and civil strike disturb the education. Schools are destroyed and children are often needed in the war effort.

During the 1990s the problem of illiteracy was quite acute in the four States of the Hindi heartland - Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh - which have the derisive adjective of Bimaru. But, the statistics provided by the Census of India 2001 show that the rate of improvement has been faster in each of these States than in India as a whole. In 1991, the gender gap in Rajasthan increased in 24 of the 27 districts but in 2001 it increased only in 13 of the 32 districts. In 19 districts the gap decreased. While the increase is nominal, the decrease is substantial. The highest decrease was recorded in Jhunjhunu, followed by Sikar. Whereas the highest increase was in Jalore, followed by Bhilwara. Interestingly, there is no positive correlation between high literacy and low gender gap. Although the situation that prevailed in 1991 has changed and some of the high-literacy districts now have a lower gender gap, the overall position is not positive. This may be a temporary phase. A stage has been reached where overall literacy cannot increase without a significant increase in female literacy. The emphasis therefore has to shift to women's education.

References

Intermediate school kit on the United Nations.

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UNESCO. (2011). *The hidden crisis: armed conflict and education*. UNESCO Publishing.

Questions

1. What is illiteracy?
2. What is functional illiteracy?
3. Explain the causes of illiteracy.
4. Explain poor illiteracy with examples.