



story

Why Does Literacy Matter?

Illiteracy is a bane. It cripples your life, limits your choices, ruins your present, and leaves little or no hope for the future.

—Anupreet, Youthink! reader from India

Those of us fortunate enough to be literate often take many of its benefits for granted. Have you ever stopped to imagine a life without reading?

Apart from depriving a person of great literature, the Web, and newspapers, illiteracy makes many everyday matters hugely challenging. Road signs become meaningless. A doctor's prescription would have to be committed to memory. And voting is nearly impossible, as made evident by Congo's 2006 elections.

Literacy—A Basic Human Right

Literacy is not a luxury; it is a right and a responsibility. If our world is to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century we must harness the energy and creativity of all our citizens.

—Former US President Bill Clinton

There is little debate regarding the need for widespread literacy. It is the means by which poor and marginalized people can empower themselves and exercise their civil, political, economic, and legal rights.

This is why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 26 that everyone has the right to a basic education, and that it should be free and available to all people. The Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically says that all children have the right to a good primary education and should have equal access to secondary education. And the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) call for universal primary education by 2015—in fact, many argue that education is the key to achieving all of the eight MDGs.

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Why Should I Care? (continued)

- Around 75 million primary school age children around the world aren't in school. Poor kids often can't go to school because they need to work to help their families survive.
- More than half—55%—of out-of-school children are girls.
- More than 70% of the out-of-school children are in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.
- Of those who go to school, many drop out before they master basic reading, writing and math skills; in half of developing countries about one-fifth of primary school pupils don't reach the last grade of primary school; in sub-Saharan Africa, only 67% of students reach the last grade of primary school.
- Around 776 million adults in the world are illiterate. Women account for 2/3 of all illiterate adults.
- Enrollment in tertiary education (enrolling in a university) in developing countries was less than 20% in 2006, compared to 67% in developed countries.
- North America and Western Europe spend an average of \$5,500 per student each year while countries in Sub-Saharan Africa spend \$167.
- Child malnutrition is a global epidemic that affects one in three children under the age of 5 and undermines their ability to learn.

Around the World

Here are statistics from UNESCO's 2009 Education for All Global Monitoring Report (www.efareport.unesco.org).

- In **Sub-Saharan Africa**, 35 million children were out of school; 19 million were girls.
- In **South Asia**, 18.2 million children were out of school; nearly 11 million were girls.
- In **East Asia and the Pacific**, there were 9.5 million children out of school; 4.6 million were girls.

THINK ABOUT IT

"I go to collect water four times a day, in a 20-litre clay jar. It's hard work! ... I've never been to school as I have to help my mother with her washing work so we can earn enough money ... If I could alter my life, I would really like to go to school and have more clothes."

—Elma Kassa,
13-year old girl
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*World Development Report 2004,
Making Services Work for Poor People*

LEARN MORE

Read "**Engendering Education**," a Youthink! article about girls and education at youthink.worldbank.org/issues/gender/engendering.php.

Take the **Youthink! Literacy Quiz** at youthink.worldbank.org/issues/education/literacy/quiz.php.

Explore these sites to learn more about the issue of Education:

World Bank > Education
www.worldbank.org/education

This site offers access to information about the World Bank and Education and the "Education for Development" strategy. Locate education-related documents, good practice examples, statistics, and project information.

UNESCO

www.unesco.org

This is the site for the United Nations Agency for Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Why Should I Care? (continued)

- In the [Arab States](#), there were 5.7 million children out of school; 3.5 million were girls.
- In [Latin America](#), there were 2 million children out of school; 930,000 were girls.

What Is the International Community Doing?

At the World Education Forum in 2000, world leaders and 180 countries agreed that by 2015 all boys and girls should be enrolled in school and be able to complete primary education

This international commitment to give every boy and girl in developing countries a good, free and compulsory primary school education is called Education for All (EFA).

To help all countries accomplish the EFA goals, donors partnered up with the countries most in need to help them develop good education plans and help all kids complete their schooling.

This global partnership called the Education for All—Fast Track Initiative (FTI) was launched in 2002. Donors provide financial and technical support while countries work to develop sound national education plans.

The Fast Track Initiative includes all major education donors, which is more than 30 bilateral, regional and international agencies and development banks. As of June 2005, these countries are receiving support from FTI: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guyana, Honduras, Madagascar, Mauritania, Moldova, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Vietnam, and Yemen.

The World Bank is the biggest funder of education in the world. The Bank works closely with governments, United Nations, donors, civil society organizations, and other partners to help developing countries enroll all children, especially girls and disadvantaged children, in school and enable them to complete a primary education.

What Can I Do?

First, in whatever way you can, **keep learning**. Go to school, read books, learn a new craft, and talk to people who are different from you. Lifelong learning can enrich your life and the lives of those in your community socially and financially. Education helps you to strengthen your skills, learn your rights, and find your voice.

- *Become a tutor!* Ask a school head or teacher how you can help people with difficulties in school or visit the Youthink! Take Action resource page ([youthink.worldbank.org/getinvolved/resources.php](#)) for a list of websites that offer volunteer opportunities.
- *Donate a Book!* Book Aid ([www.bookaid.org/cms.cgi/site/getinvolved/](#)) offers different ways for you to help "open up the world through books."
- *Build a School!* Join Habitat for Humanity ([www.habitat.org](#)) in the construction of a school.