



# 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.

## Can It Happen by 2015?

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.

**Health and Well-Being:** This has a huge impact on education. Good health and nutrition make access to primary school easier and also increase a child's chances of staying in school. Right

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## Can It Happen by 2015? (continued)

now, diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS, and also social problems such as armed conflict, pose serious challenges to educational systems in many countries.

**Aid and Funding:** Although local governments, as well as the international community, are investing more in literacy today, current annual spending of US\$3.4 billion falls far short of the annual US\$11 billion that is required to get every kid through primary school. And too many schools still charge fees in poor countries where people cannot afford to send their children to school.

**Better Policy:** Relatively few governments have coherent, long-term national literacy policies that address governance, human and financial resources, and the promotion of an environment that encourages individuals to become literate and sustain their skills. Governments also need to provide opportunities for disabled people to integrate in mainstream society, and second-chance programs for youth and adults who lack formal schooling.

**Gender Disparity:** While girls' school enrolments have increased worldwide, they are still less than the number of boys in school. In many countries, girls are not encouraged, and in some cases even prevented from getting an education. Worldwide, two-thirds of the kids who don't go to school are girls. It is necessary for society's development as a whole, that girls receive the same education as boys.

**Access to Quality Education:** Another challenge to achieving universal literacy is the disparity that exists in schooling from country to country. In some countries the quality of education is poor. So, even though children may be enrolled in school, they are actually learning very little. A recent World Bank ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)) article, "Finding Quality Education in Peru," discusses the efforts to overcome this problem in Peru.

## Literacy and Development

Education is one of the most powerful ways to reduce poverty and inequality, and to pave the way for sustained economic growth. Studies demonstrate that illiteracy corresponds to regions with greater poverty.

According to UNESCO:

- Per capita income in countries with a literacy rate less than 55% averages about \$600
- Per capita income in countries with a literacy rate above 96% is \$12,600

## LEARN MORE

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

### East African Center for the Empowerment of Women and Children (EAC)

[www.eastafricancenter.org](http://www.eastafricancenter.org)  
This site works on increasing literacy for women and children, improving health status, and eradicating poverty.

### Global Campaign for Education

[www.campaignforeducation.org](http://www.campaignforeducation.org)  
This site promotes education as a basic human right.

### ImagineAsia

[www.imagine-asia.org](http://www.imagine-asia.org)  
ImagineAsia helps children in rural Asian communities by addressing fundamental education and health care needs.

### International Literacy Day

[www.un.org/depts/dhl/literacy](http://www.un.org/depts/dhl/literacy)  
You will find acts about literacy, as well the different UN agencies working on literacy initiatives.

### Literacy.org

[www.literacy.org/education/](http://www.literacy.org/education/)  
Literacy.org is a gateway to electronic resources and tools for the national and international youth and adult literacy communities

### UNESCO

[www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)  
UNESCO's education and literacy portal contains the latest news and statistics about literacy.

### Your Development in Literacy

[www.yourdil.org](http://www.yourdil.org)  
Yourdil.org fights illiteracy in South Asia.