

Adult Literacy in the G8, Broader Middle East and North Africa

Literacy is critical for attempts to increase employment levels and economic productivity. This is especially so in the BMENA region where UN estimates put the number of illiterate adults in the order of 100 million. High levels of literacy not only increase the options open to people in a changing world; they also help enable people to create their own small businesses. Training programs and measures to improve the efficiency of the public and private sectors are based on the assumption that the individuals concerned are fully literate. Literacy also leads to higher levels of family health, personal initiative and ability to participate in society on a democratic basis, all crucial ingredients to the growth of a modern economy. In contrast, high levels of illiteracy lead to poverty, alienation and insecurity.

If we look at the literacy levels of BMENA, the figures are alarming. About 65 million adult Arabs are illiterate, two thirds of them are women. Although the rates of illiteracy vary among the BMENA countries, it is essential to identify the reasons preventing its eradication. The following table shows the percentage of illiterate people in some BMENA countries:

Country	Number of illiterate adults	Proportion of Illiterate Adults			
		Age 15+		Age 15-24	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Pakistan	48,597,000	35.9	64.6	32.3	46.9
Sudan	7,557,000	28.9	48.2	15.4	28.6
Afghanistan	9,048,000	56.9	87.4	49.2	81.6
Egypt	17,000,000	17.0	40.6	9.9	21.1
Morocco	10,100,000	34.3	60.4	19.2	39.5
Algeria	6,300,000	20.4	29.9	5.9	13.9
Yemen	4,974,000	26.9	65.3	9.3	14.1
Iraq	3,706,000	15.9	35.8	11.1	19.5
Saudi Arabia	2,800,000	12.5	23.7	3.0	5.3
Syria	1,900,000	13.2	26.4	5.4	9.8
Tunisia	1,900,000	16.6	35.7	3.6	7.8

The situation is made worse in that more than 5 million children of primary school age in the region are not in school. A recent study by the UNESCO office in Beirut shows that the concept of "compulsory education" has not yet been introduced in most BMENA countries. Where the concept has been adopted, there are no clear regulations to make it effective. This suggests that most BMENA countries need stronger legal frameworks to stop the growth in illiteracy.

Many BMENA have taken strong action on the illiteracy issue and some of the efforts have seen partial success. School drop-out rates have been reduced and the gap narrowed between boys and girls. Some countries have conducted illiteracy eradication projects targeting adults.

Yet, this work has brought about only some concrete positive results. Among the common factors is a lack of social awareness about the importance of literacy. This is mainly caused by inadequate media messages. Inadequate funding for illiteracy eradication programs is another common factor. In addition, some old traditions tend to hinder girls and women education. There are factors that might be unique to each country in the region as far as local circumstances are concerned, for example illiteracy among expatriate workers, high drop-out rates from illiteracy classes, armed

conflicts in some parts of Sudan, and in some cases the education system's failure to admit all school-age children.

The Goal for literacy agreed in the Dakar Declaration of Education for All (EFA) and reiterated for the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) was a reduction of illiteracy around the world by 50% by 2015. At Sea Island, G8 and BMENA leaders agreed to strengthen efforts to reduce illiteracy and increase access to education, especially for girls and women. They committed to increasing by 2015 the number of literate people in BMENA by 20 million.

Algiers Framework for Action

The G8 BMENA workshop on literacy held in Algiers in May 2005 established a framework for action towards achieving the Millennium Goal. It acknowledged that illiteracy is a structural problem in several countries, resulting from the lack of universal access to primary education both historically and at present, alongside poor quality provision and student drop out. However, efforts to tackle these root causes are insufficient in themselves. Given the scale of illiteracy in the BMENA region, there is a crucial need for parallel upgrading of adult education programmes targeting illiteracy. There is also a need for enhanced data collection, analysis and reporting. Since the overwhelming majority of non-literate adults are women, these should be the main focus of actions to reduce adult illiteracy. This needs a major change in national and donor priorities. Whilst there is substantial donor and host country financing to promote overall education reform, there is limited support for adult and non-formal literacy programmes targeting out-of-school girls and women.

The Framework for Action agreed in Algiers emphasized the need for local ownership of efforts to reduce illiteracy, alongside improved donor coordination, stronger G8-BMENA partnership and a results-based approach. Other key issues are the governance of illiteracy programmes and their governmental context, capacity building and the engagement of civil society. G8-BMENA efforts should adopt an integrated and holistic approach dealing with both causes and effects through both formal and non-formal approaches. Efforts should be evidence-based with research and assessment. They should build on existing initiatives, programmes and experiences. Capacity enhancement should include curriculum reform, teacher training and provision for the maintenance of literacy skills. Efforts should in particular be made to establish partnerships and other forms of collaboration between sectors and between NGOs and Government.

Cairo Plan of Action

The 2006 Cairo Workshop took forward the Algiers Framework by examining various ongoing approaches to illiteracy eradication in G8 and BMENA countries, particularly demand-led, community-based approaches. Discussions on these initiatives led to agreement on key priorities and modalities for tackling illiteracy in the region.

The following priorities were identified as:

- Full national commitment, political, social and financial;
- Emphasis on women and marginalised groups;
- Improved planning, monitoring and evaluation: improved accuracy of qualitative information and qualitative data on literacy for planning, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation;

- Demand led, community based approach: social marketing and motivating learners, training of trainers focusing on knowledge, skills and attitudes of literacy facilitators and animators at community level, drawing on ongoing good practice such as Community Learning Centres;
- Capacity-building for management of illiteracy-eradication programmes;
- Curriculum and learning materials, particularly for decentralized systems;
- Resources for vocational and life-skills training as basic elements in literacy programs;
- Using ICT, especially for remote areas;
- Post-literacy support for incorporating learners and illiterates into social, economic activities to ensure sustainability;
- Enhancing integration between basic education and literacy and the respective Ministries; supporting NGOs.

The agreed modalities for action were:

- Enhancing coordination: establishing a regional resource facility capitalizing on existing systems; establishing a planning sub-group; ensuring coordination between bilateral, multilateral and civil-society activity;
- Sharing best practice through workshops and the exchange of materials, models and methodologies, including linked web-sites and a literacy hub;
- Enhancing available resources: raising the national funding priority for literacy within the wider development agenda; putting literacy on the table in negotiations for European Neighbourhood support in the MENA sub-region; mobilising BMENA local and regional resources; encouraging private sector support

Yemen Monitoring Workshop on Approaches and Partnerships

The February 2007 meeting in Yemen noted positive progress on a number of aspects of the implementation framework agreed in Cairo. However, there was still low prioritisation on literacy in some countries and by some donors. Where government has taken ownership, progress has been made. There is a need to reiterate at the G8/BMENA Education Ministerial that although improvements in formal education are key to reducing illiteracy, complementary emphasis on adult and youth literacy is needed if numbers of illiterate youths are to be reduced. There is also a need for more working group activity and information-sharing between the annual meetings.

Outstanding Questions for the 2007 Ministerial

1. Why do we still have more than a million children out school in BMENA countries? Why do most BMENA countries not have legal frameworks requiring all primary age children to attend school?
2. How can we increase the exchange of knowledge on illiteracy eradication between countries, identifying and utilizing experiences from within the MENA region?
3. How can we use ICT more effectively to improve the quality of adult education programmes, for example for instructor training, ICT-based programmes and the exchange of ideas?
4. What action should we take towards post-literacy challenges, for example older women in rural areas and lack of reading materials?

5. How do we increase emphasis on demand-driven approaches: national and local needs assessments; learner-centered approaches, local management; class rooms centered on learners' needs?
6. How can we identify and develop leadership, and create a sense of ownership?
7. How can we increase the coordination of overall education reform programmes to improve quality and reduce drop-out with reforms of adult education programmes?
8. How do we cope with the economic challenges of special programmes for poorer areas and the scaling up of successful prototypes?
9. How can we increase accountability and transparency, for example identifying responsibilities for evaluation and assessment and building capacity in these areas?
10. How can financial resources be increased, for example from the private sector, civil society and volunteers?