

To mark International Literacy Day on 8 September 2015, this fact sheet presents the latest available literacy data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). Globally, the number of people unable to read and write a simple sentence continues to fall, but trends vary considerably across regions and countries. To further explore the latest data, see the [UNESCO eAtlas of Literacy](#), which features interactive maps and charts that can be shared and downloaded at <http://on.unesco.org/literacy-map>

By 2015, the international community pledged to reduce adult illiteracy rates by 50% compared to 2000 levels as part of the Education for All (EFA) goals. While the number of illiterate people has fallen over the past 15 years, UIS data show that 757 million adults – two-thirds of whom are women – still lack basic reading and writing skills (see **Table 1**). UIS projections also show that most countries failed to reach the EFA literacy goal, underscoring the need for the new literacy target, which is even more ambitious in its current framing within the Sustainable Development Goals.

TABLE 1. WHAT ARE THE LATEST LITERACY FIGURES?

Global literacy rates and illiterate population for adults and youth, 2013

Indicator	Adults (15 years and older)	Youth (15-24 years)
Literacy rate, total	85%	91%
Literacy rate, male	89%	93%
Literacy rate, female	81%	89%
Illiterate population, total	757 million	115 million
Illiterate population, female share	63%	59%

Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2015

The latest data show that the global adult literacy rate was 85% and the youth literacy rate was 91% in 2013. This represents an increase compared to estimates for the reference year 2012, when the adult and youth literacy rates were 84% and 89%, respectively. The number of illiterate adults was estimated to be 781 million in 2012, which was 24 million more than in 2013.

The reduction in the adult illiterate population to 757 million is mainly due to more recent data for three countries. In India, the adult literacy rate was reported to be 69% in 2011; as a consequence, the adult illiterate population is estimated to be 22.6 million lower than the previous UIS estimate, which was based on household survey data from 2006. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, new data for 2012 led to a revised UIS estimate of the adult illiterate population that is 3.0 million below the previous estimate. In the United Republic of Tanzania, the adult illiterate population is now estimated to be 2.4 million lower than reported previously, due to new literacy data for 2012.

On the other hand, the number of illiterate adults is estimated to have increased in several countries, including Pakistan (1.6 million more), Senegal (1.0 million more) and Uganda (0.9 million more). The increase in these and other countries can be explained by a combination of factors, namely: more recent data indicate lower literacy rates and the population has grown faster than the literacy rate.

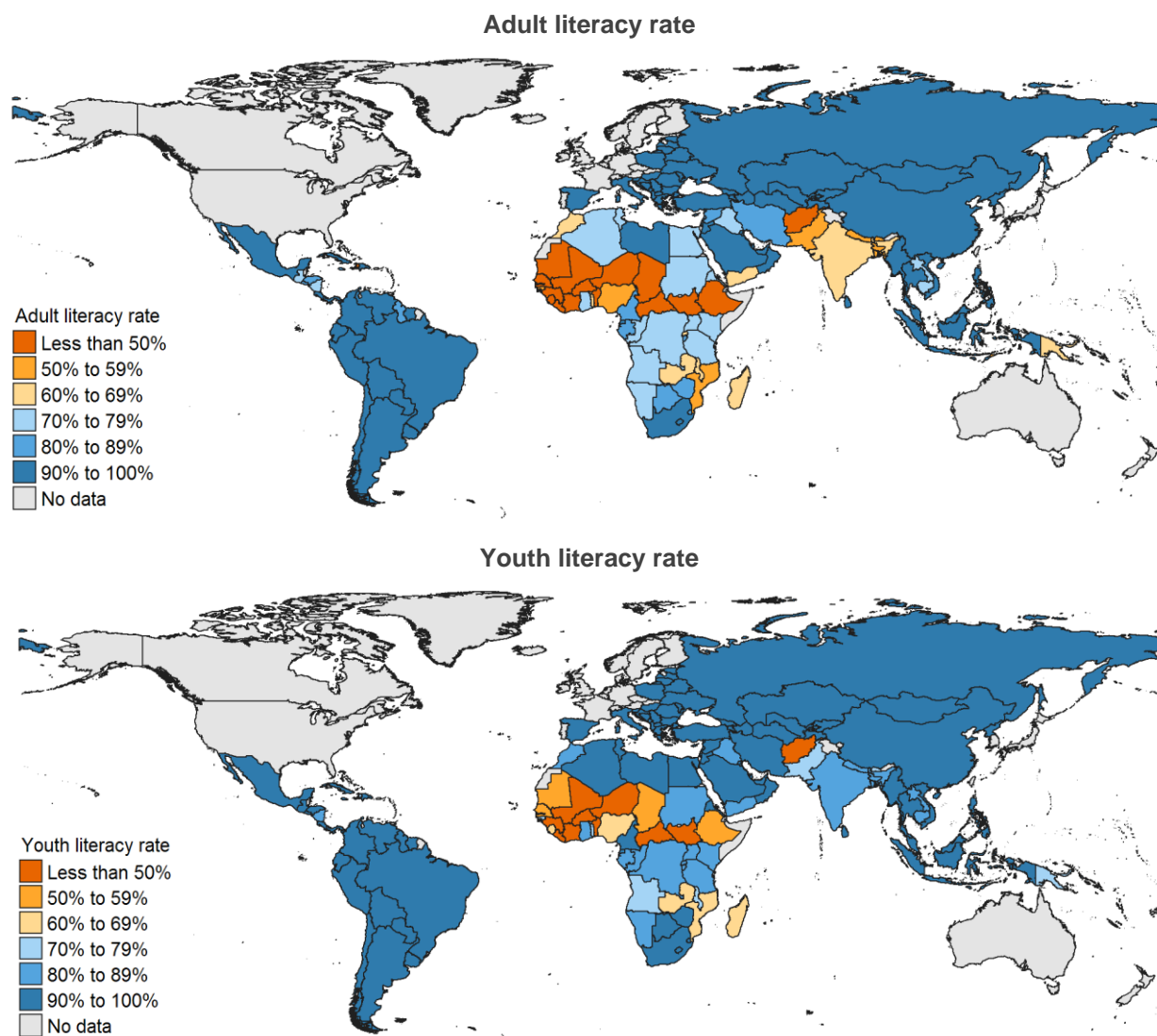
Regions with the largest illiterate populations and countries with the lowest literacy rates

South and West Asia is home to more than one-half of the global illiterate population (51%). In addition, 25% of all illiterate adults live in sub-Saharan Africa, 12% in East Asia and the Pacific, 7% in the Arab States and 4% in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is estimated that less than 1% of the global illiterate population live in the remaining regions combined.

The lowest national literacy rates are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia (see **Figure 1**). Adult literacy rates were below 50% in the following 14 countries: Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone and South Sudan. Youth literacy rates, for the population aged 15 to 24 years, are generally higher than adult literacy rates, reflecting increased access to schooling among younger generations. Nevertheless, youth literacy rates remain low across sub-Saharan Africa and South and West Asia.

FIGURE 1. WHERE ARE LITERACY RATES LOWEST AND HIGHEST IN THE WORLD?

Global maps of adult and youth literacy rates, 2013

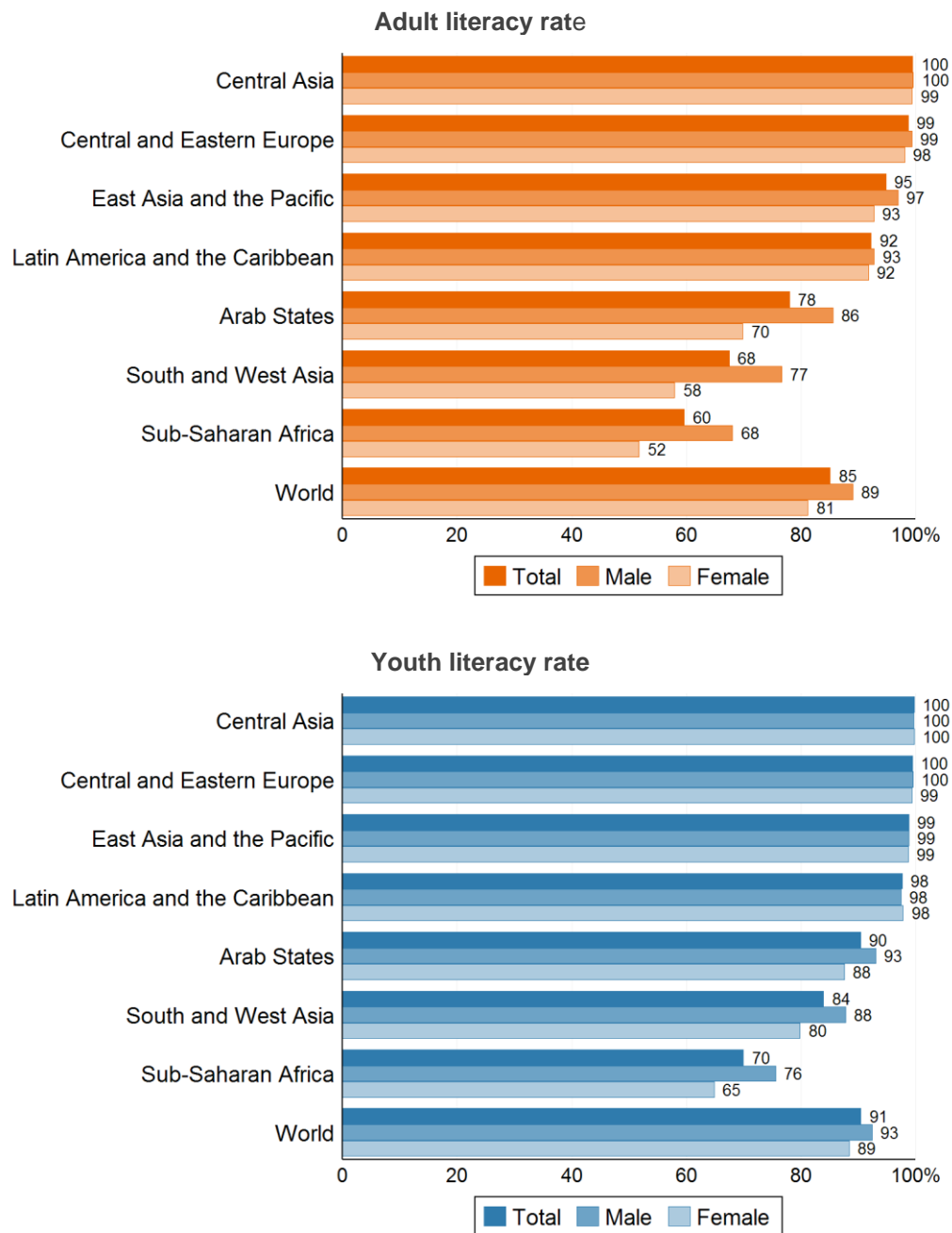


Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2015

In Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean, the average adult and youth literacy rates were greater than 90% (see **Figure 2**). No regional averages are available for North America and Western Europe due to limited data coverage, because most countries in this region no longer collect traditional literacy statistics and instead carry out more detailed assessments of literacy skills. The results of these assessments are not comparable to the literacy data for other countries.

FIGURE 2. HOW DO LITERACY RATES FOR MEN AND WOMEN COMPARE ACROSS REGIONS?

Literacy rate by region and sex, 2013



Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](http://unesco.org), September 2015

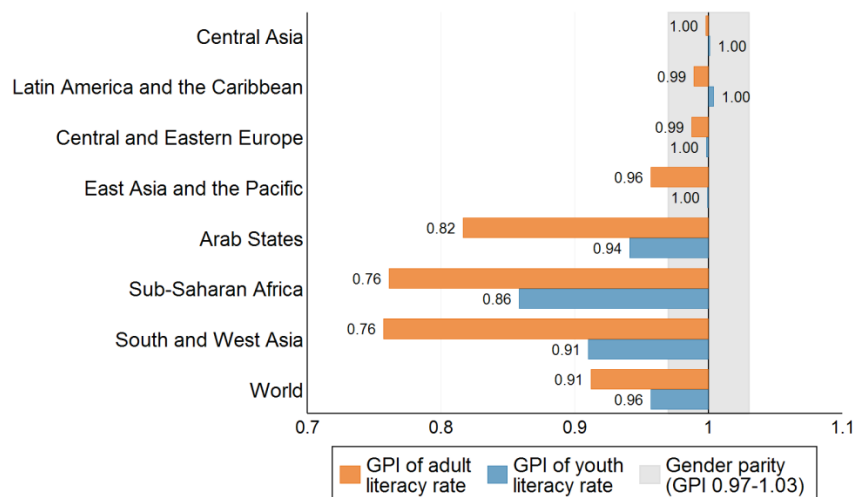
Gender gap persists across generations

For the past two decades, women have accounted for two-thirds of all illiterate adults and the gap is nearly as wide among youth. As shown in Figure 2, gender disparities remain large in several regions but the disparities become even more apparent by examining the gender parity index (GPI), which is calculated by dividing the female by the male literacy rate. A GPI value below 1 means that the female literacy rate is below the male literacy rate, while values between 0.97 and 1.03 are generally interpreted to indicate gender parity. **Figure 3** shows that three regions have maintained gender parity among adults and youth with regard to literacy: Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. A fourth region, East Asia and the Pacific, has achieved gender parity for youth literacy.

Three regions – the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa – are far from gender parity. In South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, GPI values of 0.76 for the adult literacy rate indicate that women aged 15 years and older are 24% less likely to be literate than men in the same age group. At the global level, women aged 15 years and older are 9% less likely to be literate than men, and young women between 15 and 24 years are 4% less likely to be literate.

FIGURE 3. WHICH REGIONS HAVE REACHED GENDER PARITY IN ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY?

Gender parity index (GPI) by region, 2013



Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2015

Progress towards international goals

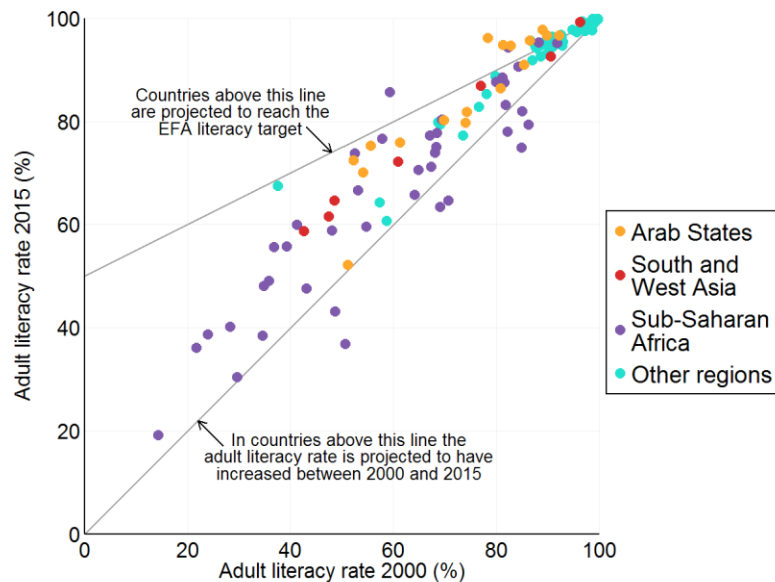
By 2015, the international community pledged to reduce illiteracy rates by 50% compared to 2000 levels as part of the EFA goals and the related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet according to UIS projections, most countries have missed the deadline. **Figure 4** compares adult literacy rates in 2000 with projections for 2015 in 137 countries. Countries from the three regions with the lowest literacy rates in 2013 – the Arab States, South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa (see *Figure 2*) – are identified separately in the graph.

Despite a general rise in literacy rates between 2000 and 2015, only 39 countries will probably reach the EFA target of a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy rates and another 24 countries are within one percentage point of the target. Most countries projected to reach the target are from the Arab States, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, as well as East Asia and the Pacific. However, all of these regions include countries that are likely to miss the target. The data also show that nearly all countries that reached or are within reach of the target had adult literacy rates greater than 80% in 2000. 33 countries with data, nearly all from sub-Saharan Africa, are likely to miss the EFA target by 10 percentage points or more.

In some sub-Saharan African countries, projections indicate a decrease in the proportion of adults with basic literacy skills. This is largely due to improved measurement in recent data (such as the use of a simple reading test) and by the fact that the population grows so fast in some countries that the number of illiterate adults continues to increase despite a steady rise in the literacy rate.

FIGURE 4. HOW MANY COUNTRIES ARE LIKELY TO REACH THE EFA TARGET OF HALVING ADULT ILLITERACY BY 2015?

Adult literacy rate by country and region, 2000 and 2015 (projection)



Note: The graph shows data for 137 countries with literacy rates for 2000 and 2015.

Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2015

Regional literacy trends over the past 25 years

At the regional level, the Arab States and South and West Asia have made the greatest progress in improving adult and youth literacy over the past 25 years (see **Figure 5**). Between 1990 and 2013, the adult literacy rate in the Arab States rose from 55% to 78% and the youth literacy rate from 74% to 90%. Over the same period, the adult literacy rate in South and West Asia increased from 47% to 68% and the youth literacy rate from 60% to 84%. To a lesser extent, progress was also observed in all of the other regions.

Four regions – Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean – are expected to be at or near universal youth literacy by 2015. In the Arab States and South and West Asia, approximately nine out of ten young adults between the ages of 15 and 24 years are projected to be literate.

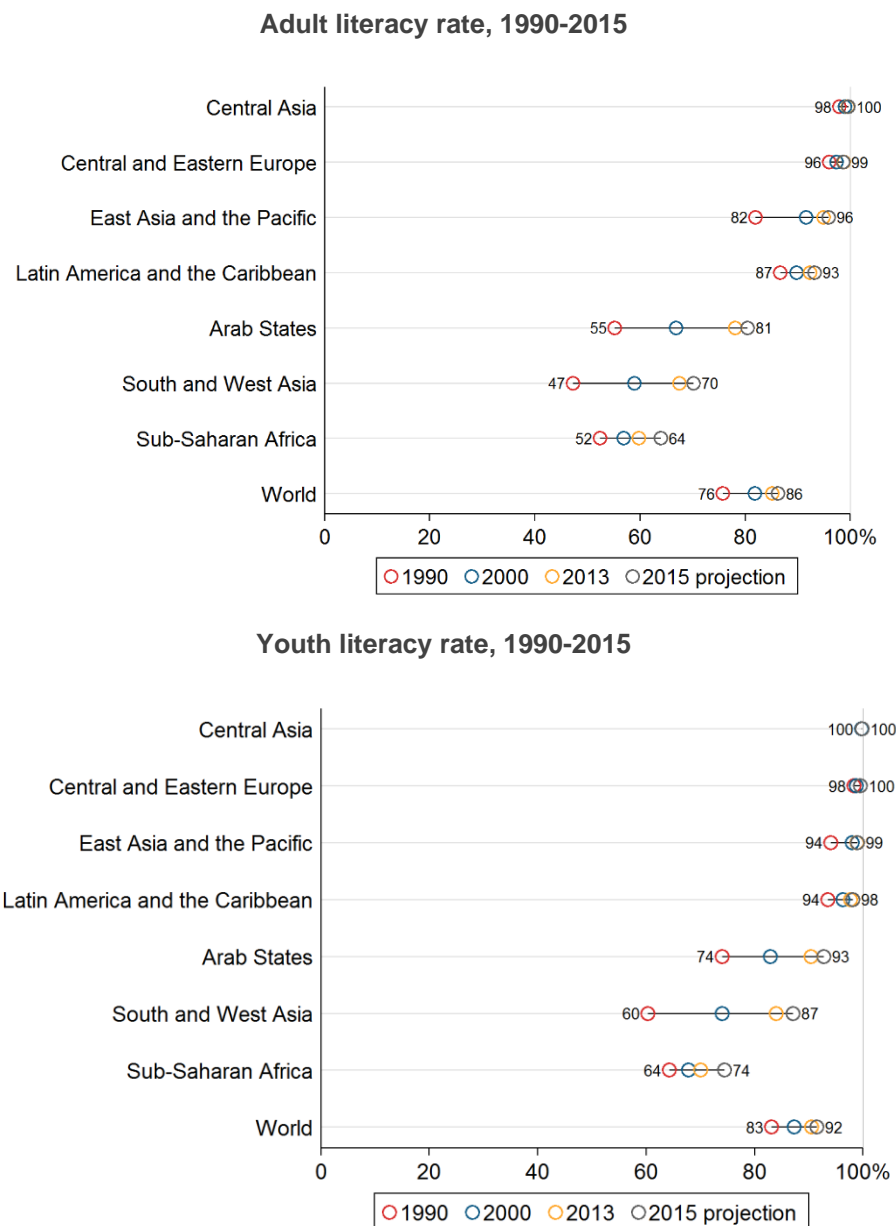
Adult literacy rates continue to rise but are projected to remain below the youth literacy rate in nearly all regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, nearly two-thirds of adults and three-quarters of youth are projected to be able to read and write in 2015. The global adult literacy rate is estimated to reach 86% by 2015 and the youth literacy rate, 92%.

A new literacy goal for 2030

About 757 million adults around the world cannot read or write a simple sentence and women are the first to be denied these basic skills. UIS data confirm the need for renewed and more targeted initiatives to increase adult and youth literacy rates and to achieve the goals that were missed by 2015. For this

reason, the Sustainable Development Goals that will be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 contain a new literacy target: “By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy.”

FIGURE 5. HOW HAVE ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY RATES CHANGED SINCE 1990 AND WHAT ARE THE PROSPECTS FOR 2015?



Note: Regions sorted by the projected literacy rate in 2015. 1990 data refer to the period 1985-1994, 2000 data refer to the period 1995-2004, 2013 data refer to the period 2005-2013.

Source: *UNESCO Institute for Statistics*, September 2015

Please consult the UIS website www.uis.unesco.org to access the UIS Data Centre and subscribe to eAlerts on the Institute's latest publications and data releases.

More data on literacy are available in the [UNESCO eAtlas of Literacy](http://www.uis.unesco.org/data/atlas-literacy/en): <http://www.uis.unesco.org/data/atlas-literacy/en>