



United Nations  
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# International Literacy Day

Background paper on 'Youth and adult literacy in the time of COVID-19:  
impacts and revelations'

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#LiteracyDay



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## Background paper on 'Youth and adult literacy in the time of COVID-19: impacts and revelations'

### 1. Introduction

Specially prepared on the occasion of International Literacy Day 2020, this background paper illustrates the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth and adult literacy, based on the limited information that is currently available. It provides five regional snapshots and identifies preliminary lessons learned thus far, while aiming to inspire continued reflection and subsequent action. It also makes the case for the ongoing importance of advancing youth and adult literacy, a priority that was already neglected even before the pandemic but which deserves all our attention. ILD 2020 thus seeks to trigger reimaginings of literacy teaching and learning in the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, with a particular focus on the role of educators.

### 2. Youth and adult literacy in the time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on economies and societies. It has magnified pre-existing global challenges such as poverty and inequality, while highlighting certain kinds of environmental degradation, such as air pollution which was suddenly greatly reduced during the lockdowns. In education, school closings have occurred on a ruinous scale, even as educators scramble to maintain educational momentum. At the peak of the crisis, 94 percent of the world's student population - 1.6 billion students - were forced out of school. At least one out of three schoolchildren (463 million) was unable to access remote learning (UNICEF, 2020). It is estimated that the resulting learning losses and disruption have acutely affected 617 million children and adolescents, who were already not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics.<sup>1</sup> This year, an estimated 24 million learners from pre-primary to tertiary education may not return to their studies, including 5.9 million students in South and West Asia, and another 5.3 million students in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>2</sup> ***If current trends continue, the younger generations' lack of learning opportunities will have a significant negative impact on their future ability to thrive in life and work, for which literacy skills are indispensable.***

In addition, ***the crisis has had profound – and is still having - negative impacts on youth and adult literacy***, posing novel challenges to education systems. Many of the 773 million non-literate youth and adults, two thirds of whom are women, have been the hardest hit. Their insufficient reading and writing abilities have exposed them to greater risk of missing life-saving information and losing their livelihoods, while their poor literacy skills and life circumstances also limit their access to distance learning offered by digital and other technologies.

1 <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs46-more-than-half-children-not-learning-en-2017.pdf>

2 [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg\\_policy\\_brief\\_covid-19\\_and\\_education\\_august\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf)

**Literacy educators have been at the frontline of minimising learning disruption.** A number of literacy educators, whether employed by ministries or literacy facilitators on short-term contracts in the non-formal sector, have demonstrated their dedication, creativity, mutual support, and commitment to maintain continuity of learning, often in challenging conditions. Thus, the crisis has revealed both the centrality of literacy educators in meaningful teaching and learning, and also their fragility as one of the least supported groups of educators. More than ever, it is important to support the professionalisation of these educators, and build a continuum of professional development so that they can be motivated, adequately trained and remunerated, and their status and decent working conditions can be guaranteed.

Also exposed by the COVID-19 crisis is **the lower priority accorded by national governments and development partners to some education sub-sectors, including adult literacy and education.** In initial national education response plans and global initiatives, youth and adult literacy has often been absent. More than 90 percent of 49 adult literacy programmes that responded to UNESCO's quick survey reported their partial or total suspension.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, adult literacy educators have faced a range of challenges, including salary reduction or termination, and inadequate infrastructure for addressing the requirements of distance learning. A shift of literacy provision to distance teaching and learning has also highlighted the unpreparedness of ICT infrastructure, education systems, programmes, including educators and administrators, to implement alternative modes of teaching and learning.

**The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis threaten to persist well beyond this year.** Underfunding of education has long been a global problem, but in the face of the COVID-19 crisis it is particularly dire. Sixty percent of governments worldwide allocate less than four percent of their budgets to adult learning and education, of which literacy is a part (UIL, 2019). Given these circumstances, it is projected that the COVID-19 crisis will impede literacy education on a global level for years to come, with lasting effects on progress towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, especially Target SDG 4.6 on youth and adult literacy.

### 3. Global responses for ensuring literacy teaching and learning for youth and adults

These unprecedented situations across the world have nonetheless caused national governments and development partners to take immediate action to ensure the continuity of learning and uphold everyone's right to education, of which literacy is an integral part. For instance, UNESCO has launched a *Global Education Coalition*, which is providing coordinated support to over 60 countries, in collaboration with 130 partners.<sup>4</sup> The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has facilitated dialogue and information exchange through a series of webinars of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, which involves 173 members around the world.<sup>5</sup> These efforts include promoting policy dialogue, providing technical support, preparing notes on important issues, and monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 crisis since the spring of 2020. With few exceptions, however, the global responses have mostly focused on learning needs of children and young people. One result is **an**

3 This survey on impact of the COVID-19 crisis on youth and adult literacy programmes was conducted by UNESCO in August 2020. (unpublished as of 31 August 2020))

4 <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/globalcoalition>

5 <https://uil.unesco.org/covid-19-response>

**acute lack of data and information on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth and adult literacy.** Against this backdrop, the following section attempts to fill this information gap by providing brief regional snapshots of how the crisis has impacted adult literacy, based on some rapid surveys, research, and information from sources like institutional blogs.

## 4. Regional snapshots

Adult literacy has been a priority in national and regional policies as manifested in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (2016-2025) of the African Union (2016). Already registering the lowest regional literacy rate at 66 percent compared to a global average of 86 percent prior to the COVID-19 crisis, Africa accounts for one third of the world's non-literate adult population and has been slow to promote youth and adult literacy. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed both the relatively low attention given to adult literacy in initial responses and the unpreparedness of national education systems and infrastructure. Many adult literacy programmes have been suspended, while others continue. The government of Chad, for instance, has developed a COVID-19 response plan, which includes adult and non-formal education. In Senegal, the Ministry of National Education has developed a response plan for distance learning, first for children and young people, deploying online resource platforms, radio, and television (Diawara and Sall, 2020). It has further established, in its Education sub-Committee, the Basic Education for Youth and Adults Group. The crisis has also highlighted the need to develop distance learning strategies for children and beyond (ADEA, 2020), while recognising that the level of maturity and diversity of the education system and ICT varies greatly within the region. Access to distance learning is higher in countries such as Kenya and South Africa, and lower in many francophone countries where, interestingly, adult literacy rates are sometimes higher<sup>6</sup> (Asim et al, 2020). This indicates the need to develop innovative non- or low-technology solutions to ensure that opportunities for continuous learning are made available in an equitable manner.

These experiences also show why educators require more professional training in distance education, and the importance of strategic partnerships (e.g. with ICT companies) to ensure connectivity, data protection, and affordability, at the same time that infrastructure and digital platforms – including non- or low-technology solutions – are strengthened. Lessons have also been learned from the evaluation of the health literacy component of a large-scale adult literacy campaign in South Africa, where it was determined that the mastery of basic literacy and numeracy skills 'enable people to receive and act on vital information during a pandemic or disaster'. These findings have led to calls for better integration of adult literacy and education into every national emergency strategy (Lopes and McKay, 2020).

### The Arab region

In the days before the COVID-19 crisis, the Arab world was characterised by multiple social and political changes, conflict, increased migration, displacement,<sup>7</sup> and persistent gender inequality (UIL, 2017a). Progress in adult literacy has been steady, as indicated by adult literacy rates for different age groups: 89.1 percent for young people (15-24 years); 80.2 percent for adults (25-64 years) and 54.0 percent for elderly people (65+) (UIS, 2020). The pandemic has further marginalised

<sup>6</sup> Internet access is below 5 percent of the population in Burundi, the Central African Republic (CAR), and Eritrea; mobile phone access is just 36 percent in CAR; access to radio is 35 percent in Mozambique; and access to television, is less than 10 percent in Burundi, CAR, Chad, and Madagascar

<sup>7</sup> About 32 percent of the global population of the refugees and 38 percent of the global population of internally displaced people by conflict reside in the Arab region, while the region accounts for 5 percent of the global population (UNESCO, 2019).

adult literacy and education in the region. According to a rapid survey of literacy stakeholders in government institutions, NGOs, academic and research agencies (UNESCO Beirut, 2020),<sup>8</sup> a negative impact on the continuity of literacy provision and educators' work is reported across the 15 countries which responded to the survey. A majority of countries responding (88 percent) have indicated that adult literacy and education are part of their long-term national recovery plans and resilience building efforts. Many associated the current challenges regarding continuity of adult education with issues existing prior to the Covid-19 crisis, including poor motivation of learners, most of whom are from low socio-economic backgrounds; weak technological infrastructure; and unsatisfactory working conditions of educators. While the survey revealed that 65 percent of educators have permanent contracts with a monthly salary, the average salary reported was mostly less than USD 25 per month (76 percent). The suspension of literacy programmes has greatly affected literacy educators, the majority of whom (80 percent) are 20-45 years old. More than two thirds of respondents reported that educators have been subjected to either a reduction in salary (39 percent) or total salary cuts (28 percent), while only 18 percent of respondents reported that they seem to feel no impact from the pandemic. Clearly, unless special measures are taken, many of these educators are likely to leave teaching and seek other sources of livelihood.

One of the primary lessons that stakeholders have drawn from the COVID-19 crisis is the need for greater planned investment in technological infrastructure and in building capacities, so as to enable better management of future crises and technologies. Such skills are especially valuable in situations of conflict or environmental disaster. Other suggestions arising from the surveys include: development of relevant educational TV programmes for youth and adults, improving capacities of educators to manage distance learning, digitisation of existing assessments and certificates, and raising awareness about the importance of literacy and the status of educators through the media. Another key message is the importance of using blended approaches to teaching and learning, which combine face-to-face sessions with remote learning, so that the curriculum and learning process can evolve in specific social and community contexts of learners.

## Asia and the Pacific

The Asia and the Pacific region's pre-COVID-19 outlook was characterized by vibrant economies and rapid demographic change, as well as growing diversity accompanied by increasing socio-economic inequalities across countries. The adult literacy rates reflect these regional traits with the highest literacy rates located in Central Asia (99.9 percent), East Asia (96.7 percent), and Southeast Asia (94.0 percent), and the lowest rate in South Asia (73.6 percent) in 2019 (UIS, 2020). In total, nearly 60 percent of the world's non-literate adult population live in this region, two thirds of whom are women. Non-literate adults have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Like other world regions, initial national education response plans have prioritised children and adolescents while neglecting literacy efforts for adults, except for a few select countries, notably Afghanistan. The Afghan government has included youth and adult literacy provisions in its comprehensive alternative education response plan. They have provided options including distance learning through TV and radio programmes, small group learning of up to five learners in open-air classes, independent and family learning through print reading materials, and self-study packages for literacy facilitators. Cambodia (2020) is another country that has provided online and distance learning for literacy programmes, such as the one aimed at over 323,000 primary grade students, lower secondary students, out-of-school youth and factory workers in 25 provinces during the

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<sup>8</sup> This survey was conducted by UNESCO Beirut during August 2020.

COVID-19 pandemic (Cambodia Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport). As these examples show, countries in this region have deployed a wide range of technological solutions and innovations (e.g. television, radio, mobile phones, computers), depending on each country's infrastructure and capacity. This underscores the need for further development of technological innovation and infrastructure, as well as digital skills and capacities to manage distance learning within the region, and in particular for underperforming countries.

## Europe and North America

Reflecting its advanced economic state, the Europe and North America region is characterised by mature education systems and ICT infrastructure. Despite remarkably high literacy rates across countries, vulnerabilities do exist. One in five adults (19.8 percent) in OECD countries reported low reading skills (level 1 or below on the 6-level scale) (OECD, 2019). These problems are now compounded by the COVID-19 crisis, as many adult learners do not have access to online learning resources, or the digital skills to autonomously use them. Consequently, adults with no or low literacy skills have become even more vulnerable during this critical time (EPALE, 2020a).

In Europe and North America, initial responses and new initiatives taken to continue adult literacy provision during the pandemic have demonstrated the relative strength and the mature state of education systems and infrastructure in many parts of the region. In Europe, EPALE<sup>9</sup> has developed a strategy to help the professional adult education community in managing distance learning through a range of initiatives, including sharing online resources and facilitating discussion and information exchange (EPALE, 2020b). In Germany, the Deutsche Volkshochschul-Verband (DVV) has continued its support of adult learning centres, consisting of online tutoring for migrants and refugees to facilitate their integration and language development. The programme has resulted in a dramatic increase in enrolment, with 150,000 new learners as of April 2020 (Park, 2020). In Ireland, the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) has offered various options for distance learning to support adult learners during this crisis, and the Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board has continued to provide a family learning programme through live online classes for parents with low literacy skills, which has proven to be effective. In Canada, ABC Life Literacy Canada (2020) has been offering online resources for developing financial literacy skills of adult learners, as a response to the projected economic impact of COVID-19 on families and communities in the country. In the United States, Proliteracy (2020), a membership-based organization of adult literacy and basic education agencies, organized several webinars, accessible online tools and platforms, seminars for literacy educators and online courses for literacy managers.

These examples of initial responses to the COVID-19 crisis demonstrate higher levels of digital technology use for distance learning than other regions. However, despite their advanced economies and literacy rates, countries in Europe and North America are not free from disparities in access to learning opportunities. Some areas and population groups lack the connectivity needed to benefit from online education and resources, which is often overlooked. A survey conducted in Canada by the Community Literacy of Ontario and Laubach Literacy Ontario among community-based literacy and basic skills agencies in the Ontario province found that many adult learners lack devices, access to Internet, and adequate digital skills (Laubach Literacy Ontario, 2020). The Ontario literacy agencies have been working to close this technology gap by lending equipment, connecting with stakeholders for solutions, and providing direct ongoing support to learners via

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<sup>9</sup> A European, multilingual, open membership community of adult learning professionals supported by the European Commission. <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/about>

telephone. The critical importance of human contact for effective teaching and learning is also illuminated by the survey.

## The Latin American and Caribbean region

Before the COVID-19 crisis, the Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) region was educationally advanced with a literacy rate of 94.3 percent in 2019. This region, however, is also marked by great social and economic disparities, expressed by unequal income distribution, and deep-rooted ethnic, racial, gender, and linguistic discrimination (ECLAC, 2017; Giorgi, 2018). Such inequalities are also reflected in uneven progress of adult literacy across different countries and social groups. According to a paper by Judith Kalman and Enna Carvajal<sup>10</sup> (2020), commissioned by the UNESCO Santiago office, before the COVID-19 crisis only 33 percent of the countries in the region considered adult education as a priority, which has had a negative impact on training of adult literacy educators and the quality of teaching and learning materials (Céspedes, 2013; Hanemann, 2015; Infante and Letelier, 2013; Renna, 2019). Some other pre-pandemic characteristics of the literacy programmes are school-based teaching traditions, limited resources, underprepared educators, and underfunding. Various ICT platforms were being used to support programme delivery, teaching and learning, and educators' professional development.

Since the COVID-19 crisis, youth and adult literacy provision has deteriorated in the region. Many countries planned to offer online learning, but they have not been consistently successful due to insufficient capacities and infrastructure, and because many potential learners lack digital devices, access to Internet, and digital skills due to the digital divide that existed well before the pandemic (ECLAC, 2020). Even when equipped with radio and television, countries such as Mexico, some regions of Argentina, Panama, Bolivia and Venezuela, have faced difficulties in developing sound pedagogical models and materials for interactive distance learning. Kalman and Carvajal also indicate that existing programmes of literacy teaching have been affected in several ways by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the educators themselves. Many literacy programmes have been suspended throughout most of this region's countries, while some online options have been maintained or expanded. In countries such as Guatemala and Costa Rica, blended learning was adopted by making learning materials available both in digital and print format, and guidelines were developed to help the families of literacy learners. Efforts have also been made to develop online learning programmes for educators, as well as synchronic communications applications. Other countries have reoriented the curriculum to include COVID-19 related topics. In Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Uruguay, adult literacy facilitators have maintained direct contact with their learners through social media, online applications, phone and home visits in order to ensure that classes could continue. During the pandemic, adult literacy facilitators received diverse support, including a small increase in occupational compensation, and substantial professional support (e.g. guidance for long-distance teaching, supply of digital teaching materials, access to online platforms for delivering materials and receiving assignments, and supplementary print materials).

These initial responses have generated several ideas to be taken forward, such as the effective use of synchronic communication tools (e.g. WhatsApp), ensuring the relevance of teaching approaches

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10 The paper is built on literature review, online research of 23 LAC countries (Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Uruguay) and the findings of a quick survey on literacy programmes before and after the pandemic, educators' preparation, and use of technology. Respondents to the survey include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama, and Uruguay

to learners' realities, developing accessible online platforms, enhancing online training for adult literacy facilitators, strengthening collaboration with families, developing blended media teaching and learning formats, and improving print material delivery systems. These new approaches can facilitate more context-oriented, practice-based pedagogical methods to counter challenges derived from the deep-rooted school-centred approaches to teaching and learning.

## 5. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis: ideas for continued reflection and action

These regional snapshots show some trends in challenges and responses to the crisis, while also revealing regional subtleties. Drawing from these preliminary lessons, the following points are proposed as a basis for continued reflection and action aiming to reimagine literacy teaching and learning during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, with a particular focus on literacy educators.

- Youth and adult literacy has been negatively impacted in the initial phase of the COVID-19 crisis. Youth and adult literacy must be integrated into lifelong learning policies, strategies and plans, as well as into COVID-19 response and recovery plans. The potential of inter-sectoral approaches and intergenerational learning that have proven effective in confronting the COVID-19 crisis must be harnessed further.
- There is the urgent need to monitor impact of the crisis on youth and adult literacy to ensure strategic responses of countries and development partners to the crisis.
- Adult literacy educators are central for making literacy teaching and learning meaningful. They have been at the forefront coping with disrupted teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential to promote their professionalisation, and guarantee their rights, status and decent working conditions, while providing continuous professional development opportunities, support and guidance.
- For ensuring the continuity of meaningful adult literacy teaching and learning during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond, we need to build robust education systems and ICT infrastructures, as well as digital skills for managing different modes of teaching and learning, considering learners' needs, aspirations, circumstances and contexts.
- There is the dire need for stepping up our efforts to protect and enhance financing and other resources for youth and adult literacy in the time of the crisis and beyond, as well as the need for better coordinated action of multi-stakeholders for greater impact.

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