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IS THE IDEAL OF UNIVERSAL ADULT LITERACY IN THE WORLD BY THE YEAR 2030 STATISTICALLY ATTAINABLE?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to determine how attainable the ideal of universal adult literacy is for the year 2030, projecting from current statistics and trends. After centuries and even millennia of slow growth, by the middle of the twentieth century the majority of the world's adults were literate. From then on adult literacy levels rose sharp and feverish efforts were launched to eradicate adult illiteracy. Globally adult literacy levels are rising. However, projecting present trends into the future results in the prediction that by 2030 the global adult literacy level will still be 10 percent short of the level of universal adult literacy. Painting a bleaker picture is absolute number of adult illiterates globally. The problem can largely be pinned down to a few countries, and it is on these countries into which scholars and literacy efforts should zoom in.

Keywords: Adult literacy, Adult illiteracy, Africa, INCHEON.

JEL Classification: I20.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of literacy as a fundamental human right and as a necessary prerequisite for social and economic development is acknowledged without restriction (Cárceles, 1990: 4). Even though it may not be enough to function optimally or satisfactory in the technological age of today, it is a basic minimum education standard that is indispensable. For these reasons there was an enthusiastic world drive in the previous century, spearheaded by UNESCO, to attain universal adult literacy by the year 2000. As the year 2000 came and past without the ideal being realized, it has been formulated once again as an ideal for the year 2030 in the Incheon Declaration, the current global education blueprint.

The aim of this research is to determine how attainable the ideal of universal adult literacy is for the year 2030, projecting from current statistics and trends. The article commences with an exploration of the concept literacy and its importance, followed by a mapping of the quest for universal adult literacy. The current

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state and trends in the quest for adult literacy is then surveyed, before a conclusion is drawn and recommendations are ventured.

2. LITERACY: EXPLORATION OF CONCEPT AND OF IMPORTANCE

Defining the concept literacy is problematic (cf. UNESCO, 2006). Bhola (1994) states it that the apparent and lexical definition, defining literacy as someone who can read and write (Merriam-Webster, 2016) or simply as being liberated from illiteracy (Treccani, 2016), elicits more questions than answers. Such a definition has two major difficulties. Firstly it postulates an unreal literacy dichotomy, while in reality there exists a continuum from total illiterate to fully or highly literate, with many shades of grey or semi-literate in-between (Cipolla, 1969: 11; Wagner, 1992: 74). Flowing from this first objection is the second, namely that it contains no objective criterion as to at which point a person can be classified as literate (Wolhuter, 2002: 125). Literacy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways (UNESCO, 2006: 147). People's notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences (*ibidem*). Street (1984) did trailblazing work in demonstrating the notion that conceptions of literacy are socially constructed and mediated by history, culture, and the dynamics of power and class

This article will be based on UNESCO data, and with the above provisos, the UNESCO definition of literacy will be used. UNESCO defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. If the definition of literacy is problematic, so is the measurement thereof. Census data is commonly used, and UNESCO uses a combination of census data and sampling (UNESCO, 2016). It should be borne in mind that many parts of the Global South, with weak and ineffectual state systems (cf. Fukuyama, 2004) and particularly in conflict ridden areas, census data need to be treated with great circumspection.

When literacy and the quest for universal adult literacy rose to prominence since the mid-twentieth century, the scholarly discourse identified both individual advantages which literacy will bring to the literate person, and societal benefits. These societal benefits were originally couched very much in the modernization theory which was then very much in the vogue. Later it was written in the conflict and emancipatory paradigm narratives with their emphasis on power structures in society. Protagonists of these paradigms see literacy as a force combating such structures. Literacy has been regarded as the key to the development of a person regarding a large number of facets, such as intellectual independence (Resnick, 1983: 168; Graf, 1987: 181; Goody, 1977: 160, 162; Blakemore and Cooksey, 1980: 181); participation in public (political and social) activities (Cárceles, 1990: 4; Copperman, 1978: 22) and economic empowerment (Graf, 1987: 181). On societal level literacy is marked as a catalyst and quantum leap in development across a broad line. The belief has been

there that literacy will convert a pre-literate society which had been characterized by the transmittance of myths, into one driven by critical and logical thought and a cumulative intellectual tradition (Graff, 1979: *passim*, 1981: *passim*, Arnove and Graff, 1987: 2; Barzun, 1970: 90-91; Stone, 1969: 77-79; Goody and Watt, 1977: 456-473). Further to that literacy has been identified as a critical factor in the accomplishment of an egalitarian society (Leiner, 1987: 187) and the emancipation of women (Arnove, 1987: 286), in the entrenchment and stabilisation of a democratic political dispensation (Resnick, 1983: 150) and in industrialisation and economic modernisation processes (Blakemore and Cooksey, 1980: 185).

The above overly positive depiction of literacy in the scholarly literature as from the 1960s, has also been challenged by a set of rival presentations that arose, since the 1970s. These include cultural rationalism (the series of studies in Graff and Arnove, 1987), critical theory (Block, 1994), and Monaghan (1980: 493-521) and critical ethnography (Marshall, 1990, 1993). The common factor in this, what Winchester (1990: 24-39) calls the “revised picture of literacy”, is that it takes issue with the older standard picture’s deterministic linking of literacy with modernization, democracy and intellectual tradition. Street (1993: 7) refers to this contrasting view as the “ideological model of literacy”: literacy is inseparably connected to the cultural and power structures of a society. As many publications, starting from Graff (1979, 1981), suggest, correlations between mass schooling and socio-economic mobility are not natural or automatic at all, but they depend from a very complex network of social practices and cultural beliefs.

The above critical voices on the type of literacy in scholarship and in programmes do, however not deny the necessity of literacy. Protagonists of the standard image likewise do not allege that literacy is enough. In keeping with the times of a more complex society and technological development, other concepts to supplement basic literacy has developed, such as technological literacy and functional literacy (Ozenç and Dogan, 2014). A functional literate person can be defined a person maintaining in his/her life a level of literacy high enough for personal, social, civic and economic life and roles, and will surely include a certain minimum of mathematical skills and technological prowess.

Finally while it may not be enough for living in the twenty-first century world, the significance and value of basic literacy should not be underestimated. In his book *Empire of Illusions: The end of literacy and the triumph of spectacle*, Chris Hedges (2010) cautions how a modern society where people rely on social and visual media can quickly and easily cut them off from reality, dupe people in a false certainty and false consciousness, and result in a general intellectual dumbing and lack of independent and critical thinking.

3. THE QUEST FOR UNIVERSAL ADULT LITERACY

The history of the spread of literacy to all people is a long, and the development has not always been in one direction, i.e. always an increase in literacy over

time. Writing was innovated by the Sumerians, around 3200 BC (Waddell, 1930). According to the best available evidence schools appeared for the first time in Egypt and Mesopotamia by about 3000 BC, for the training of scribes, shortly after the invention of writing (Bowen, 1982: 8). Archaeological excavations produced a large number of school clay tablets, dating from around 2500 BC (i.e. also in the middle of the third millennium BC). The earliest probable school classroom excavated dates from about 2000 BC. This classroom was located in a palace at Mari, nearby the Euphrates river: in two rooms many rows of desks made by raw bricks were discovered, each of them apt to host from one to four pupils (Roaf, 1995). During the third millennium BC education was the prerogative of priests, and of scribes of the priests and scribes of the palace. Evidence from a number of sources indicates that students generally hailed from the most influential social classes (Bowen, 1982: 12). Literacy was limited to the bureaucracy, and to the religious and commercial elite (Goody and Watt, 1977: 462).

Besides schools in the Mediterranean Civilizations (discussed in the previous paragraph), schools also came into being in China. The origin of schools in Ancient China is not sure – whether they evolved indigenously, or came from Central Asia with the Sumerians as source (Power, 1970: 18). For 2000 years educational development in China was slow. Education was, however, encouraged by the enormous civil service in China – posts of power and prestige in this colossal civil service were reserved for the well-schooled. To attend school was a rare privilege in Ancient China (Power, 1970: 22).

The growth of literacy was slow. While most of the citizens of classic Athens was literate (Cipolla, 1969: 38-41) and literacy was widespread in the Roman Empire, after the fall of the empire it decreased in the territories which had formed part of the Roman Empire. A turning point occurred in North-West Europe during the eleventh-twelfth centuries, with the rise of towns and cities, and a class of trades and craftsmen. The development of literacy was given further momentum with the invention of printing in the fifteenth century (Stone, 1969: 77-78), the reformation in the sixteenth century (Cipolla, 1969: 51), the industrial revolution since the second half of the eighteenth century (*ibidem*: 71) and the establishment of systems of universal, compulsory primary schools in the countries of North-West Europe during the nineteenth century. For example, adult literacy rates in 1630 in Amsterdam were 57 percent and 32 percent for respectively males and females (Van der Woude, 1980: 262). In 1729 the corresponding figures were 76 percent and 51 percent (*ibidem*). The institution of state systems of primary education, the attendance of which was compulsory, together with industrialization, resulted in the United States of America progressing to mass literacy in the late nineteenth century (Stevens, 1990: 523-544). During the first half of the twentieth century mass adult literacy spread to the Mediterranean countries of Western Europe as well, such as Spain (De Gabriel, 1998: 29-62; Frago, 1990: 573-599), and the territories in the erstwhile Union of the Socialist Soviet Republics (Mironov, 1991: 229-252). The rest of the world trailed. For the aggregate global adult population, the literacy rate in 1900 was but 20 percent (Mortimer, 2014: 268), by 1930 it

reached 40 percent and by 1955 for the first time in history 50 percent of the global adult population was literate (Trewartha, 1969: 133).

While the growth of adult literacy was painstakingly slow till the 50 percent mark was reached in 1955, in the second half of the twentieth century the goal of universal adult literacy was feverishly pursued. UNESCO, the Creed of Human Rights and the growing belief in education as panacea for all societal ills each played a significant part in this change. UNESCO was formed after the Second World War, as the educational, scientific and cultural arm of the United Nations, the brief of the latter was to ensure world peace. UNESCO was founded on the idea that as all wars start in the minds of people, the most effective way to combat and to prevent war was to educate people. The Goal of Universal Adult Literacy by the Year 2000 became an inspiring rallying point and concrete goal of UNESCO. UNESCO launched many initiatives in this regard, including, in the late 1960s, The Experimental World Literacy Program, which ran in 12 countries: Algeria, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guinea, India, Iran, Madagascar, Mali, Sudan, Syria, Tanzania and Venezuela.

The atrocities during and before the Second World War also gave rise to the Creed of Human Rights. The Creed of Human Rights contends that every human being is, by virtue of being a member of the human race, is entitled to certain inalienable rights, beyond the wishes and whims of even any majority. While Literacy is not generally explicitly expressed as a Human Right, basic education (of which literacy can be regarded as the first step) is regularly acknowledged as a Human Rights, for example in the core document of Human Rights, The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The decades after the Second World War also saw a growing belief in education as the remedy for any societal problem, e.g. education was seen as the main instrument of modernization of the newly independent but grossly undeveloped countries of the Global South. Human Capital Theory contended that education is the main determinant of economic growth, education was seen as a way to effect social mobility, to promote world peace, to foster intercultural tolerance, to stamp out drug abuse etc.

The initiatives of UNESCO during the second half of the twentieth century were supplemented by efforts of international aid agencies and by national governments to stamp out adult illiteracy. Bhola (1990: 100) distinguished between three literacy approaches used by governments: the project approach, the program approach and the campaign approach. The literacy project approach is the most conservative of the three. Literacy projects are of small scale – for example the integrated literacy project in Mali since the 1960s (see: Turritin, 1989). The literacy program is nationwide but under bureaucratic control. An example of an adult literacy program is the Botswana National Literacy Program launched by the Ministry of Non-Formal education in 1980. The third type is the campaign approach, which is of big scale and which involves high political fervor and popular mobilization. Examples are the Somali urban literacy campaign (1973) and the Somali rural literacy campaign (1974). The most comprehensive adult literacy campaign in

Africa was that of Tanzania in the 1970s (see: Nyerere, 1985: 45-52). According to Arnove (1982: 433) in the history of literacy campaigns in the world, three stand out as the most remarkable: Cuba in 1961, Nicaragua in 1980 and Tanzania in the 1970s.

In 1990, delegates from 155 countries, as well as representatives from some 150 governmental and non-governmental organizations, agreed at the World Conference on Education for All in Jomtien, Thailand (5-9 March 1990) to make primary education accessible to all children and to massively reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade. The so called Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO, 1990) gave further momentum to UNESCO's goal of eradicating adult illiteracy by the year 2000. The year 2000 came, and in spite of remarkable progress in the growth of adult literacy rates and numbers in the decades preceding 2000, the goal was by far not realized (details of progress and the shortfall appear in the next Section of this paper).

The World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal, April 2000) was the first and most important event in education at the dawn of the new century. By adopting the Dakar Framework for Action, the 1100 participants of the Forum reaffirmed their commitment to achieving Education for All by the year 2015 and entrusted UNESCO with the overall responsibility of co-ordinating all international players and sustaining the global momentum. The Framework also spelled out the continual reduction of adult literacy as a goal for 2015 (UNESCO, 2000). Another high powered global initiative, this by the United Nations, was the Millennium Development Goals of 2000. Eight goals were formulated for the year 2015. While literacy was not directly one of the goals, universal primary education was included as one of the goals (United Nations, 2015-1).

Similar to 2000, 2015 came and despite remarkable progress, universal adult literacy had remained an elusive ideal (details will be provided in the next Section of this paper). Then UNESCO together with the World Bank, and a few other international bodies organised the World Education Forum 2015 in Incheon, Republic of Korea, from 19-22 May 2015, hosted by the Republic of Korea. Over 1600 participants from 160 countries, including 120 Ministers, heads and members of delegations, heads of agencies and officials of multilateral and bilateral organizations, and representatives of civil society, the teaching profession, youth and the private sector, adopted the *Incheon Declaration for Education 2030: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong education for all* which sets out a new vision for education for the next fifteen years (UNESCO, 2015). In this document, signatories commit themselves to foundational and functional literacy for all by 2030 (UNESCO, 2015: 7, 9). The United Nations has also, in 2015, upon assessing and reflecting on the Millennium Development Goals, drawn up a new agenda for the next fifteen years. Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, broken up into 169 targets, were formulated. One of these is about literacy, though this statement of intent is more modest in its goals: By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (United Nations, 2015-2: 17).

The question is now, how attainable is this ideal. From the current state and trends of adult literacy levels globally, this article will attempt an answer to this question.

4. CURRENT STATE AND TRENDS OF LITERACY WORLDWIDE

As was stated above, in 1955 aggregate adult literary levels in the world reached the 50 percent mark. By 1970 it reached the 67.1 percent mark (Cárceles, 1990: 8). Subsequent progress (up to latest available figures) is presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

TABLE 1. – *The Growth of Adult Literacy Rates in the World (percentages)*

<i>Year</i> <i>Region</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2010</i>
World	67.1	71.4	75.1	76.96	81.30
North America	98.6	98.6	98.6	-	96.09
Europe	95.5	97.2	98.1	98.91	99.25
Latin America and Caribbean	72.7	79.8	85.4	90.70	93.27
Oceania	88.5	90.3	91.9	Oceania: Developing Countries: 67.44	Oceania: Developing Countries: 71.33
Asia	56.2	62.6	68.1	79.42	84.32
Africa	28.9	40.0	52.6	57.79	62.97

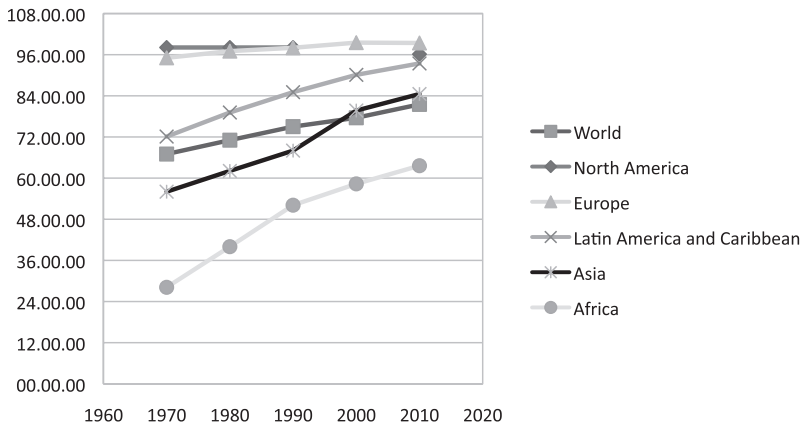
Sources of Data: UNESCO, 2016; and UNESCO data as cited by Cárceles, 1990.

The world aggregate adult literacy level grew constantly from 1970, to reach 71.4 percent in 1980, 75.1 percent in 1990, 76.96 percent in 2000 and 81.30 percent in 2010. While there has been a constant and steady growth throughout the past sixty-years, still a little less than one fifth of the world's adults are illiterate. Moreover if the growth during the decade 2000 – 2010 is projected into the future, the world aggregate adult literacy level by 2030 will be short of 90 percent, while universal adult literacy will only be attained by 2060.

Turning to adult literacy levels in the various world regions, both Europe and North America are in the upper 90 percent levels. Interesting is the difference between these two regions; somewhere between 1990 and 2010 Europe has overtaken North America, and while Europe is now slowly edging towards the 100 percent level mark, adult literacy levels in North America has declined marginally in the recent past. In Latin America adult literacy levels have been on steep incline, rising from 72.7 percent in 1970 to 93.27 percent in 2010. However, the curve has been

leveled off in recent years. Asia is likewise on a steep curve, adult literacy levels have increased from a paltry 56.2 percent in 1970; overtaking the world aggregate figure a few years ago and increased to 84.32 percent in 2010; moreover, it seems not have lost momentum yet. While Africa can boast the steepest rise (adult literacy levels increased from 28.9 percent in 1970 to 62.97 percent in 2010), the rate of increase has also markedly slowed down, moreover a projection of the growth rate for the 2000-2010 period into the future indicates that universal adult literacy will even by the end of the present century not be attained. Remarkably in only two countries in the world adult literacy levels are, according to latest available figures, decreasing, namely Burundi (from 86.95 percent in 2008 to 85.62 percent in 2015) and Turkey (from 95.26 percent in 2013 to 95.01 percent in 2015).

FIGURE 1. – *Progress in Adult Literacy Rates (percentages)*



It should be remembered that the above average rates mask gender differences. The gender differential increases in inverse relation to the general level of literacy, as can be read from Table 2.

TABLE 2. – *Gender Differential in Adult Literacy Levels in Various World Parts*

Region	Adult Literacy Levels (%) (2014)	
	Males	Females
North America	96.71	95.89
Europe	99.43	99.07
Latin America	93.49	93.24
Oceania (developing countries)	73.13	69.19
Asia	89.19	79.63
Africa	71.77	55.59

Source of statistics: UNESCO, 2016.

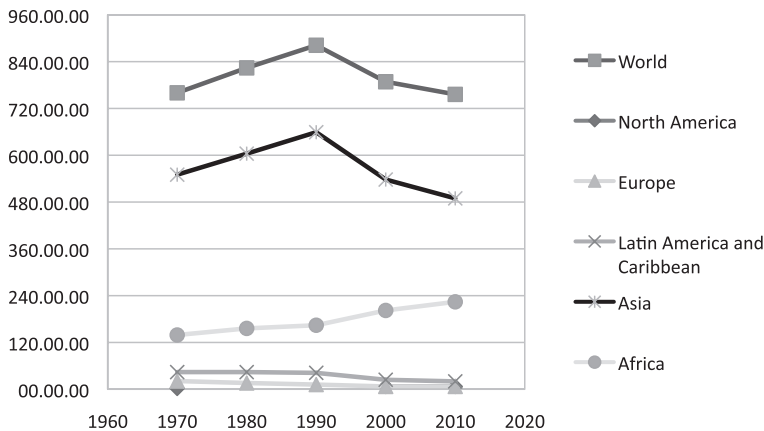
Shifting the focus to absolute number of adult illiterates, on world aggregate level these peaked around 1990, whence it began to decline, as a result of the interplay between demographic dynamics, education expansion and adult literacy programmes. However this observation needs to be qualified by four points. Firstly there are still, as of 2010, 756.03 million illiterate adults in the world. Secondly, the rate of decrease seems to be leveling off. Thirdly, even at present rates, universal adult literacy will by a far not be achieved by 2030 or by the end of the present century either. Fourthly the world aggregate figures mask considerable regional and national variations.

TABLE 3. – Total Number of Adult Illiterates (millions)

Year Region	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
World	760.2	824.1	882.1	788.26	756.03
North America	2.2	-	-	6.69	6.70
Europe	21.3	16.2	12.0	6.70	6.70
Latin America and Caribbean	44.4	44.3	42.2	23.78	20.12
Oceania	1.5	1.6	1.5	Oceania: Developing Countries: 1.57	Oceania: Developing Countries: 6.19
Asia	550.9	604.3	659.4	537.44	489.28
Africa	139.7	156.2	164.9	201.64	223.68

Sources of Data: UNESCO, 2016; and UNESCO data as cited by Cárceles, 1990.

FIGURE 2. – Numbers of Illiterate Adults (millions)



In North America and Europe numbers of adult literates are small and seems to have stabilized at just under 7 million in each of these two regions. In Latin America the number of adult illiterates has been reduced from 44.4 million in 1970 to 20.12 million in 2010, though the rate of decrease seems to be losing momentum. Adult illiteracy numbers have grown sharply in the developing countries in Oceania, from 1.57 million in 2000 to 6.19 million in 2010. In Asia the number of illiterate adults has peaked around 1990, whence it commenced to decline though recent trends also point to a decrease in the rate of decrease, and secondly, even if the rate of decrease between 2000 and 2010 is projected into the future, by 2030 universal adult literacy will still be some fifty years away. The biggest sore point on the world map is Africa, where numbers of adult illiterates continue to rise, although the rate of increase during the 2000-2010 decade was marginally less than the previous decade. Between 2000 and 2010 the number of illiterate adults in Africa increased from 201.64 million to 223.68 million.

According to latest available statistics, 31 countries register a positive growth in number of illiterate adults (see Table 4). Three of these countries are in Asia, one in Latin America and 22 in Africa. These 22 countries represent roughly half of all African countries, and are distributed across the continent (i.e. they are not concentrated in a few limited regions), though they tend to be the poorest African countries, and those plagued by socio-political turmoil.

A staggering 58 countries each has more than one million illiterate adults (see Table 4). Topping the list are three Asian countries: India, Bangladesh and China, with respectively 256 million, 43.82 million and 41.57million illiterate adults. Mercifully not one of these three appears on the list of countries with accumulating numbers of illiterate adults (cf. Table 3). Of the 58 countries with one million plus adult illiterates each, 32 are in Africa, 21 in Asia, four in Latin America and one in Oceania.

Twenty countries have more than one million adult illiterates *and* have growing numbers of adult illiterates. These are: Nigeria (41.26 million), Egypt (16.5 million), Pakistan (7.77 million), Niger (7.77 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (7.18 million), Tanzania (5.9 million), Mali (5.23 million), Madagascar (5.00 million), South Sudan (4.84 million), Iraq (4.41 million), Chad (4.24 million), Benin (3.87 million), Angola (3.49 million), Cameroon (3.3.6 million), Malawi (3.27 million), Turkey (2.82 million), Sierra Leone (1.94 million), Central African Republic (1.83 million), Mauritania (1.80 million) and Papua New Guinea (1.71 million). Turkey is the single country in the world with more than a million adult illiterates as well as growing numbers *and* growing levels of adult illiteracy.

TABLE 4. – *Countries Registering a Growth in the Number of Illiterate Adults*

<i>Recent Increase Statistics (millions of people)</i>					
<i>Country</i>	<i>From</i>	<i>To (2015)</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>From</i>	<i>To (2015)</i>
1. Afghanistan	10.34 (2011)	10.90	16. Madagascar	4.10 (2011)	5.0
2. Angola	3.21 (2013)	3.49	17. Malawi	3.12 (2010)	3.27
3. Benin	3.32 (2006)	3.87	18. Mali	5.04 (2011)	5.23
4. Burkina Faso	5.42 (2007)	6.30	19. Mauritania	1.05 (2007)	1.80
5. Burundi	0.61 (2008)	0.86	20. Niger	7.20 (2012)	7.77
6. Cameroon	3.32 (2010)	3.36	21. Nigeria	41.22 (2008)	41.26
7. Central African Republic	1.62 (2010)	1.83	22. Pakistan	7.20 (2012)	7.77
8. Chad	4.08 (2013)	4.24	23. Papua New Guinea	1.66 (2013)	1.71
9. Congo	0.50 (2011)	0.55	24. Qatar	0.04 (2014)	0.05
10. Cote D'Ivoire	6.81 (2012)	7.18	25. Ruanda	2.03 (2012)	2.14
11. Cuba	0.02 (2012)	0.03	26. Sierra Leone	1.93 (2013)	1.94
12. Democratic Republic of the Congo	8.91 (2012)	7.18	27. South Sudan	3.77 (2008)	4.84
13. Egypt	14.20 (2013)	14.50	28. Sudan	2.30 (2008)	2.33
14. Iraq	4.20 (2013)	4.41	29. Tanzania	5.48 (2012)	5.69
15. Jordan	0.10 (2011)	5.00	30. Turkey	2.69 (2013)	2.82
			31. United Arab Emirates	0.48	0.69

Data extracted from UNESCO Data Centre, UNESCO 2016.

TABLE 5. – *Countries with More than One Million Adult Illiterates (2015 figures)*

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of Adult Illiterates (millions) (2015 figures)</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of Adult Illiterates (millions) (2015 figures)</i>
1. India	256.00	30. Angola	3.49
2. Bangladesh	43.82	31. Cameroon	3.36
3. China	41.57	32. Malawi	3.27
4. Nigeria	41.26	33. Venezuela	4.00
5. Ethiopia	25.50	34. Senegal	3.76
6. Egypt	14.50	35. Yemen	3.05
7. Indonesia	11.25	36. Turkey	2.82
8. Afghanistan	10.90	37. Haiti	2.74
9. Democratic Republic of the Congo	8.97	38. Philippines	2.52
10. Iran	7.94	39. Cambodia	2.47
11. Pakistan	7.77	40. South Africa	2.17
12. Niger	7.77	41. Guatemala	2.03
13. Cote D'Ivoire	7.18	42. Syria	1.98
14. Morocco	6.80	43. Sri Lanka	1.94
15. Mozambique	6.14	44. Colombia	1.93
16. Kenya	6.00	45. Thailand	1.86
17. Algeria	5.76	46. Central African Republic	1.83
18. Tanzania	5.69	47. Mauritania	1.80
19. Sudan	5.68	48. Papua New Guinea	1.72
20. Uganda	5.46	49. Tunisia	1.57
21. Mali	5.23	50. Togo	1.40
22. Mexico	5.10	51. Liberia	1.36
23. Guinea	5.00	52. Zimbabwe	1.25
24. Madagascar	5.00	53. Peru	1.24
25. Iraq	4.41	54. Malaysia	1.23
26. Chad	4.24	55. Sierra Leone	1.94
27. Viet Nam	4.00	56. Sri Lanka	1.19
28. Ghana	3.92	57. Saudi Arabia	1.15
29. Benin	3.87	58. Eritrea	1.01

Data extracted from UNESCO Data Centre, UNESCO, 2016.

5. CONCLUSION

After centuries and even millennia of slow growth, by the middle of the twentieth century the majority of the world's adults were literate. From then on adult literacy levels rose sharp and feverish efforts were launched to eradicate adult illiteracy, the target date was first set at 2000, and when not attained, shifted to 2030. In view of the importance of literacy these efforts are commendable. Globally adult literacy levels are rising, however, some twenty percent of the world's adults are still illiterate, and projecting present trends into the future results in the prediction that by 2030 the global adult literacy level will still be 10 percent short of the level of universal adult literacy. Painting a bleaker picture is absolute number of adult illiterates globally. These have been rising till about 1990, at which point it began to drop, however some 756 million adults worldwide are still illiterate, and from projecting present trends into the future, neither by 2030 or even to the end of the present century will the mark of universal adult literacy have been reached. The problem can largely be pinned down to 20 countries worldwide, each having more than a million adult illiterates *and* experiencing rising numbers of adult illiterates. It is on these countries into which scholars and literacy efforts should zoom in order to ensure the smoothest and fastest transition to universal adult illiteracy in the world.

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