

This fact sheet presents the latest UIS literacy data available as of September 2014.

The data presented in this fact sheet are accessible in the [UNESCO eAtlas of Literacy](http://www.uis.unesco.org/data/atlas-literacy/en), which features a series of interactive maps and charts that can be downloaded. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/data/atlas-literacy/en>

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is the official source of data used to monitor education and literacy targets associated with Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals. The UIS collects data on youth and adult literacy through its annual survey on literacy and educational attainment. Adult literacy rates concern the population aged 15 years and older, while youth literacy rates cover the population between the ages of 15 to 24 years. The data are disseminated through the UIS Data Centre and featured in publications by the UIS and other organizations.

As part of the EFA goals, the international community has pledged to improve adult literacy levels by 50% between 2000 and 2015. While the number of illiterate persons has fallen over the past decade, 781 million adults – 64% of whom are women – still lack basic reading and writing skills (see **Table 1**). In 2012, the global adult literacy rate was 84.3%, compared to 89.4% for youth.

**TABLE 1. WHAT ARE THE DATA ON LITERACY?**

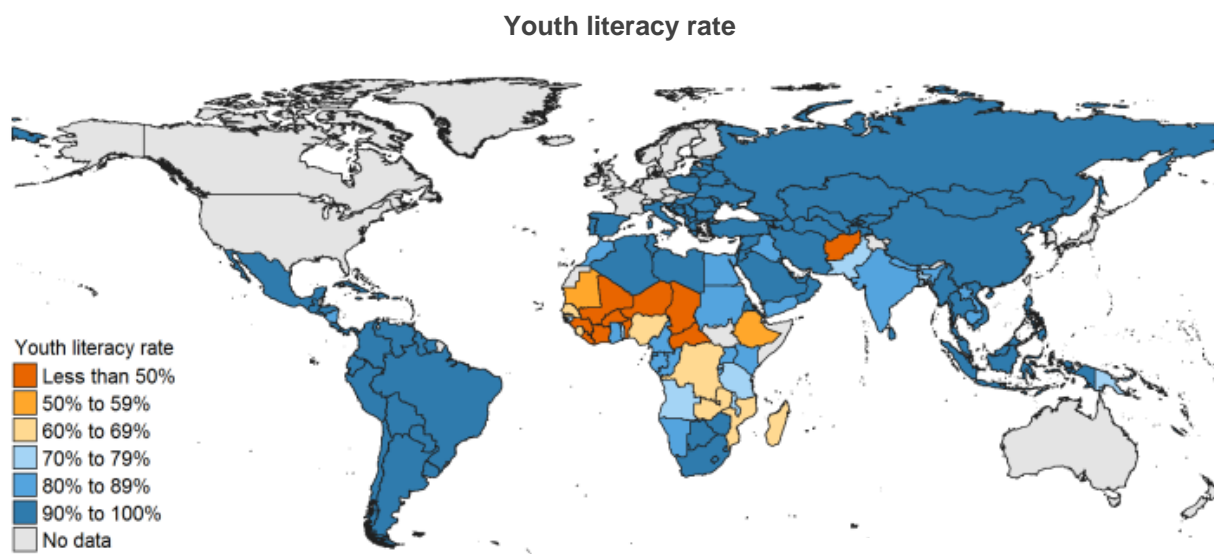
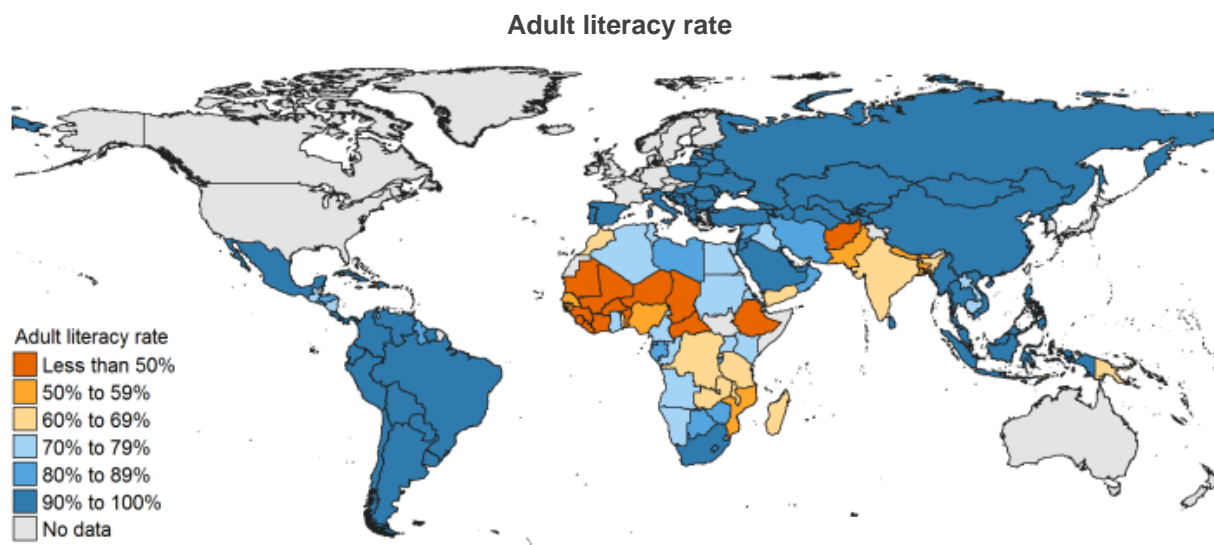
GLOBAL LITERACY RATES AND POPULATION NUMBERS FOR ADULTS AND YOUTH, 2012

Adult literacy rate, total	84.3%
Adult literacy rate, male	88.6%
Adult literacy rate, female	80.2%
Adult illiterate population, total	781 million
Adult illiterate population, female share	63.5%
Youth literacy rate, total	89.4%
Youth literacy rate, male	92.1%
Youth literacy rate, female	86.9%
Youth illiterate population, total	126 million
Youth illiterate population, female share	61.1%

Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](http://www.uis.unesco.org), September 2014

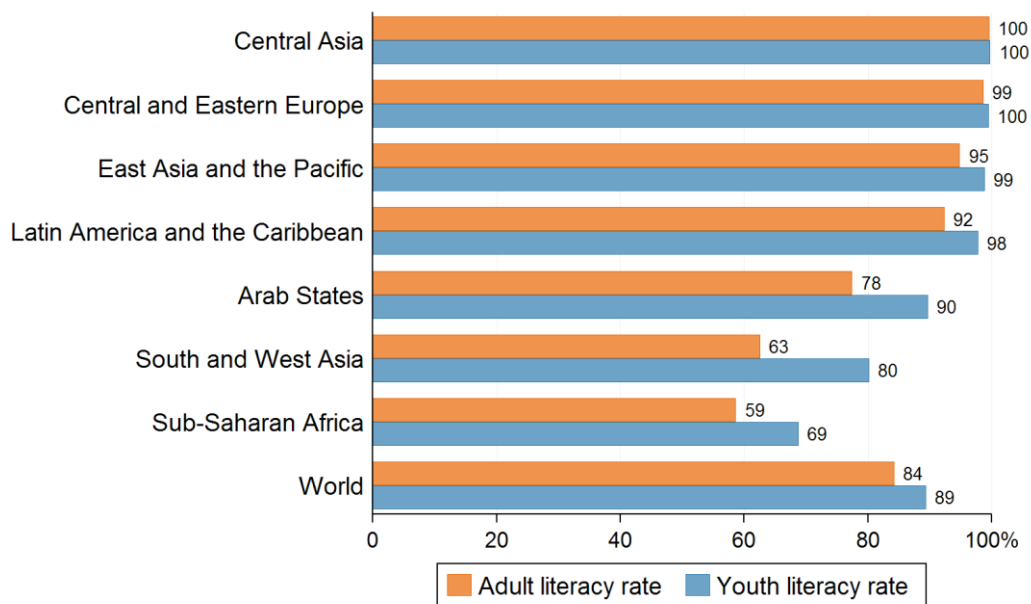
The lowest literacy rates are observed in sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia (see **Figure 1**). Adult literacy rates were below 50% in the following 14 countries: Afghanistan, Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Guinea, Haiti, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Sierra Leone. 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. It is important to note that regional averages can mask disparities at the country level. This is most apparent in sub-Saharan Africa, where the adult literacy rate ranges from 15% in Niger to 95% in Equatorial Guinea.

**FIGURE 1. WHERE ARE LITERACY RATES LOWEST AND HIGHEST IN THE WORLD?**  
 GLOBAL MAPS OF LITERACY RATES FOR ADULTS AND YOUTH, 2012



Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2014

**FIGURE 2. WHAT IS THE GLOBAL DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY?**  
LITERACY RATE BY REGION, 2012



Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2014

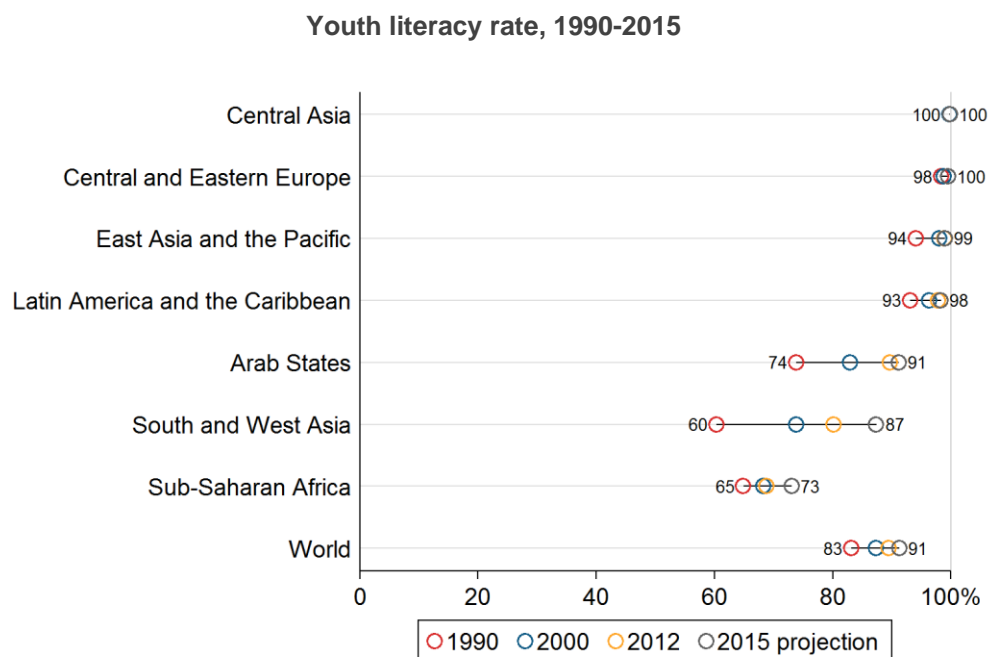
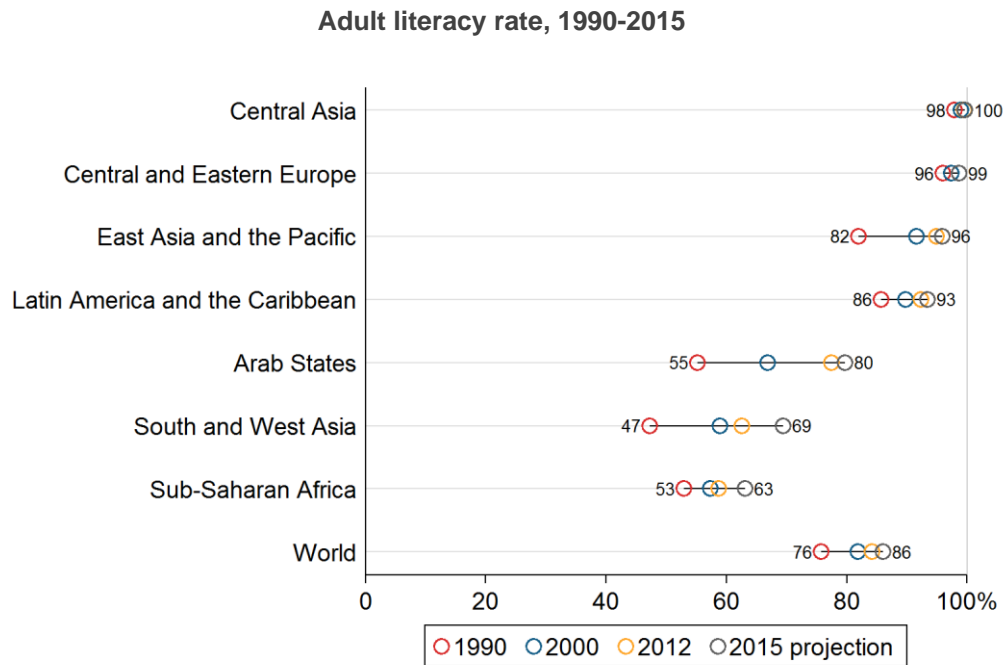
The region of South and West Asia is home to more than one-half of the global illiterate population (53%). In addition, 24% of all illiterate adults live in sub-Saharan Africa, 12% in East Asia and the Pacific, 6.6% in the Arab States and 4.2% in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is estimated that less than 2% of the global illiterate population live in the remaining regions combined.

The Arab States and South and West Asia have made the greatest progress in improving adult and youth literacy over the past two decades (Figure 3). Between 1990 and 2012, 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 63% and the youth literacy rate from 60% to 80%. To a lesser extent, progress was also observed in all of the other regions.

By 2015 – the target year for Education for All and the Millennium Development Goals – two thirds of adults and three-quarters of youth in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to be able to read and write (Figure 3). Central Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, East Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean are expected to be at or near universal youth literacy. 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 are estimated to continue to rise in the coming years but are expected to remain below the youth literacy rate in nearly all regions. The global adult literacy rate is estimated to reach 86% by 2015 and the youth literacy rate 91%.

More detailed analysis of adult and youth literacy rates and trends are available in the report *Adult and Youth Literacy: National, Regional and Global Trends, 1985-2015*, published by the UIS in June 2013.

**FIGURE 3. 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, 2012 data refer to the period 2005-2012.

Source: [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#), September 2014

Please consult the UIS website [www.uis.unesco.org](http://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>