

A new tool for assessing and monitoring literacy

The Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme, an initiative being designed by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in cooperation with international agencies and technical experts, will develop and conduct a survey to measure a range of literacy levels in developing countries. Such a survey is clearly needed. Most current data on adult literacy are too unreliable to serve the needs of national and international users of literacy data. One reason for the lack of reliability is that the data are generally based on self-declarations of literacy or on proxy indicators such as education levels.

Measuring literacy is not just a matter of saying who can read and who cannot. Many different levels of literacy skills are needed, from writing one's name to understanding instructions on a medicine bottle to learning from books. With literacy at the top of the development agenda, good data are needed to help design and target appropriate actions, whether at the national or local level.

How the programme will be conducted

The Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme will use assessments to measure people's literacy. It will build on recent advances in assessment method-

ology, developing them so as to ensure that the entire range of literacy levels can be assessed, from the most basic reading and writing to the highest-level skills.

The programme aims to develop a methodology that meets national needs. It will start as a survey of adults in a small number of developing countries. Once the methodology has been refined, the programme will encourage its use as the standard survey for gathering literacy data worldwide. But the programme will face many challenges, such as ensuring that test questions are compatible with local linguistic and sociocultural circumstances, maintaining international comparability and ensuring the transfer of knowledge.

What outcomes are expected

The programme will show how literacy is distributed throughout a population by providing estimates of literacy rates by age group, gender, education level and other variables. It will also provide a methodology for literacy assessment. And it will ensure that expertise is shared and that national representatives are trained so that countries can adapt the survey to their own purposes. For more information on the programme, see <http://www.uis.unesco.org/>.

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2003e.