

Measuring literacy

Literacy is the foundation for social, economic and environmental progress in developing countries. Yet little attention has been paid to measuring literacy, or the underlying factors contributing to the development of reading, writing and numeracy skills in developing countries or obtaining the necessary information to monitor change or to formulate appropriate interventions.

Some developing countries, although a minority, have attempted to follow international guidelines on determining the size of their illiterate population using a census or survey question asking whether an individual is literate. This methodology, referred to as self-declaration, has major limitations. First, it divides the population into two groups—those who are literate and those who are not—and how many are in each group, a vast oversimplification. Second, it underestimates the number of illiterate people because respondents are reluctant to admit their illiteracy. These rates are widely used to indicate the number of illiterate peo-

ple in countries and regions, but they provide no insight into the literacy levels of these populations, what aspects of reading and writing development require improvement or the relative impact of non-formal education and literacy programmes. Needed instead are measures of each individual's skill level in reading, writing and numeracy, and a means of measuring progress. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Institute for Statistics is developing a sample survey methodology to do this through the Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme (see <http://www.uis.unesco.org/>).

The time has come to replace simple literacy rates with literacy profiles of populations to show the wide range of skills and to monitor changes to these profiles at all levels of literacy. The international community can help by asking the right questions, by formulating associated international goals and by supporting national efforts to obtain more detailed information on literacy.