




Australian aid: Approaches to literacy



WITH 95 PER CENT OF THE WORLD'S ILLITERATE PEOPLE LIVING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, ILLITERACY IS A MAJOR OBSTACLE TO ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT. LITERACY IS AN IMPORTANT WEAPON IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY. THE ABILITY TO READ AND WRITE OPENS NEW HORIZONS FOR PEOPLE, THEIR FAMILIES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES. COMBATING ILLITERACY IS ONE WAY AUSTRALIA IS HELPING PEOPLE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES PARTICIPATE MORE FULLY IN SOCIETY AND ACCESS THE BENEFITS OF DEVELOPMENT.

THE FACTS

Throughout the world 860 million people, or one in five people aged 15 years or over, are illiterate. Seventy per cent of these people live in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. East Asia and the Pacific contain an illiterate population of almost 200 million people. Current indications are that progress in improving literacy rates is slow and that by 2015 there will still be 800 million illiterate adults in the world.

In 2000, over 100 million school-age children were not in school; 57 per cent of them were girls and 94 per cent were in developing countries. The Millennium Development Goals have set a difficult target – by 2015 all children everywhere should be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that literacy increases the productivity and earning potential of a population, and therefore can directly reduce poverty.

A World Bank study found that in Thailand, for example, farmers with four years of schooling were more likely to use new fertilisers and other inputs than those with lower levels of schooling. This difference is attributed to the fact that better educated farmers absorb new information better and are more innovative.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that literate people are more aware of health and nutrition issues and that literate women tend to have fewer and healthier children. It is also possible that literacy in one generation leads to greater literacy and reduced poverty in the next.

Low levels of adult literacy are largely a result of historical – and continuing – weaknesses in national education systems. Many countries have failed to provide schooling to all their children, and the quality of the education provided can be so poor that a significant proportion of children who complete their schooling still cannot read or write.

Poor and marginalised groups, including women and girls, ethnic minorities and remote rural communities, have tended to suffer most from these weaknesses in education, making it more difficult for them to escape poverty.

AUSTRALIA'S INTERNATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY

Australia's development assistance program focuses on Asia and the Pacific – a region with wide variations in literacy rates. Because education and training are fundamental to the development process, Australia aims to assist developing countries to meet the educational needs of their people.

Our approaches to education and literacy are guided by individual country circumstances and country-led strategies.

Australia provides support to improve literacy through:

- > partner countries' school systems, and
- > adult literacy programs.

Examples of approaches adopted in AusAID-funded activities that have been successful or innovative in developing countries follow. These are preceded by best practice principles drawn from international literature and Australia's own experience in implementing literacy-related activities.

SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Investment in mass education, particularly at the primary school level and especially for girls, produces the most sustainable development impacts.

It is estimated that in **Indonesia** at least 15 per cent of school-age children are enrolled in schools within the religious education system.

In 2002 this equated to about 5.7 million children enrolled in Islamic day schools (madrasah), which teach the national curriculum, and a further 2.7 million enrolled in Islamic boarding schools. Typically a madrasah pupil is a child of poor parents who live in a rural or remote area and are disadvantaged by the quality of their education. Fifty-one per cent of madrasah junior high school pupils are female.

The sheer number of poor children attending Islamic schools in Indonesia makes it imperative that support is provided for both the state and the Islamic education systems. Australia's Learning Assistance Program for Islamic Schools (LAPIS) provides support for Islamic schools to teach the national curriculum and complements our support for the state education sector.

In **Samoa** two of the main issues in education relate to the quality of educational outcomes and the quality of service delivery. Recent monitoring of literacy results by the Government of Samoa shows a decline in English literacy standards for those currently in or recently leaving the school system.

Australian support for the development of a new long-term education strategy should address some of the issues relating to the quality of educational outcomes. The strategy will concentrate efforts in developing a framework for a core primary curriculum with common goals for primary education. It will also include clear guidelines for assessing learning outcomes such as literacy and numeracy skills.

In **Pakistan** female literacy rates in rural communities are as low as 2.4 per cent. For many girls, social and physical access to education remains a major problem. There are fewer schools for girls, fewer teachers to teach in girls schools, and sociocultural barriers that prevent the enrolment of girls.



ABOVE: Thanks to a revolution in schooling practices through the IDEAL project, funded by the Australian Government since 1998, children – especially girls – are staying at school longer, and having a better chance in life.

PHOTO: AusAID

Since 1999 Australia has supported an activity through UNICEF that aims to increase girls' access to high-quality primary education in Balochistan.

This activity focuses on four districts in a region with the lowest level of female education in Pakistan and one of the lowest in the world. The initial phase of the activity was successful in increasing the enrolment of girls by 48,000. The second phase will place a particular emphasis on improving the quality of education to build on increased retention rates and improve learning outcomes. The activity will promote the development of more child-friendly classrooms by reducing class sizes, recruiting additional teachers and providing basic learning materials.

Bangladesh has one of the largest primary education systems in the world with approximately 19.6 million school children aged between 6 and 10 years. Although Bangladesh has achieved high enrolment rates over the past few years, only 68 per cent of enrolled children complete their primary schooling. The issues of primary education revolve around quality, access and equity. Only 28 per cent of all children who complete Grade V attain the minimal levels of competency in reading, writing, numeracy and life skills. In addition, primary schooling is still far from inclusive.

Children with special needs, extremely poor and working children, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and refugees lack access to primary education.

To try to address some of these problems and close the gap between enrolments and completion rates, Australia is contributing to the multi-donor Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) being implemented by the Government of Bangladesh with the assistance of UNICEF. A key achievement of the first phase of the PEDP was achieved through the Intensive District Approach to Education for All (IDEAL) activity. This aimed to improve the quality of education by introducing child-centred learning processes and by promoting the participation of students and teachers in school planning. IDEAL covered more than half of the 39,700 primary schools in Bangladesh. More than 150,000 primary school teachers were trained in interactive teaching methods and 10.3 million children have benefited from IDEAL.

During armed conflicts, education provides a sense of belonging and stability for the whole community.

In **Sri Lanka** Australia has contributed to the program Humanitarian Assistance to Children and Women in Conflict Affected Areas, which is run by UNICEF. The aim of this program is to increase access to quality health and education services, particularly for school drop-outs, and to strengthen and build protective services for children. The program works in the conflict-affected districts in northern and eastern Sri Lanka.

Under this program Australia has supported the construction and rehabilitation of water supply systems and toilet facilities in over 200 schools, delivered catch-up education for 26,000 students whose studies were disrupted by the conflict, repaired the roofs of 135 temporary school rooms and commenced the construction of 10 new school buildings.

Getting children back to school reduces the negative impact of disasters.

Following the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, Australia deployed 15 volunteer teachers to the **Maldives** for an initial six-month period to help open and operate schools from the start of the school year in January 2005. This meant that children, many traumatised by the tsunami, were able to return to a relatively normal school routine.

In **Indonesia** Australia provided basic education supplies for Aceh and North Sumatra. Additional assistance has since been committed to help rebuild the schools in Aceh that were destroyed by the tsunami.

SUPPORT FOR ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

Increasing basic literacy and numeracy can be an important adjunct to activities aimed at increasing the incomes of the poor.

A number of Australia's projects aimed at improving livelihoods have components directed at improving functional literacy. For example, in **Burma** Australia is supporting the CARE Australia project Rakhine Rural Household Livelihood Security. It includes a six-month basic literacy and numeracy course for leaders and management committee members of women's savings mobilisation and income generation groups. This course will enable the women to manage the financial operations of their group. Overall, the activity should directly benefit more than 10,000 households and 80,000 people.

In **Solomon Islands** Australia is supporting an activity that targets the former conflict-prone provinces of Malaita and Guadalcanal. The activity aims to empower communities and promote the development of livelihoods by providing functional literacy and basic numeracy skills, training in small business record keeping, business and marketing skills, as well as health education.

FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

GENERAL INFORMATION ON EDUCATION

www.unesco.org/education/en (the United Nations Literacy Decade)

www.efareport.unesco.org (the UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report, which contains information on education indicators, including literacy, for all countries)

www.developmentgateway.com (education sector links to a number of sites)

www.ginie.org (the Global Information Network in Education)



MORE INFORMATION ABOUT AUSTRALIAN AID

Further information about the Australian Government's overseas aid program is available online at www.aisaid.gov.au

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BACK COVER IMAGE: Conflict has been a way of life for many children in developing countries. In Sri Lanka, new schools are opening and giving children the opportunity for an education. PHOTO: Will Salter

Published September 2005