



Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, 1990-2005

Goal 2. Achieve universal education

The second Millennium Development Goal calls for achieving universal primary education. Progress is assessed against the target of ensuring that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary school.

[How the indicators are calculated](#)

Target 3: Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling

Progress in enrolment, but sub-Saharan Africa lags behind

Data for the school year 2001/02 show that progress in enrolment has been made in most regions. But sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia, Oceania and Western Asia are still short of meeting the target. Substantial efforts will be required to achieve the goal, particularly in the least developed countries, where approximately two out of five children are not enrolled in school. In these countries, girls are especially disadvantaged when it comes to education.

The analysis in this report draws from regional estimates focusing on three selected school years over the course of 11 years – 1990/01, 1998/99, 2001/02 – with 1990/91 used as a benchmark to assess progress. When the developing regions are considered as a whole, with 82 per cent they approach the world average of 84 per cent enrolment. However, this figure masks wide disparities from region to region. Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, has only 62 per cent of children enrolled in primary school. In other regions – namely Latin America and Caribbean, Eastern Asia and Northern Africa – well above 90 per cent of children are enrolled (see Table 1). Asian countries in the CIS also have rates well above 90 per cent, while European countries in the CIS lag behind with a rate of 88 per cent.

Primary education indicators

Progress towards universal primary education is monitored by primary school enrolment, "survival" rates to grade 5 and youth literacy rates. The primary net enrolment ratio is the number of enrollees of primary school age per 100 children of primary school age. It shows the extent of participation in primary school and provides an indication of the educational system's coverage and efficiency. The survival rate to grade 5 shows the percentage of children starting grade 1 who eventually reach grade 5 and indicates the capacity of educational systems to retain children in school. The survival rate to grade 5 is of particular interest since four years of primary schooling are commonly considered a prerequisite to sustainable literacy. The youth literacy rate helps assess the effectiveness of a country's basic education system.

**Table 1. Net enrolment ratio in primary education, 1990/01-2001/02
(enrollees of primary school age per 100 children of primary school age)**

	1990/91	1998/99	2001/02
Developed regions	96.2	96.4	95.7
Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia	84.7	86.9	94.4
Commonwealth of Independent States, Europe	91.1	-	88.3
Developing regions	79.5	82.7	82.2
Northern Africa	81.7	88.1	91.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	53.9	57.1	62.2
Latin America and the Caribbean	86.3	94.4	95.7
Eastern Asia	97.2	-	94.9
Southern Asia	72.7	-	79.3
South-Eastern Asia	92.4	89.6	90.9
Western Asia	81.0	80.2	82.9
Oceania	74.2	77.0	76.0
Least developed countries	53.0	59.8	62.0
Landlocked developing countries	54.1	60.3	64.9
Small island developing states	66.1	83.1	82.9

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, "World and regional trends", Millennium Indicators Database, <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> (accessed June 2005); based on data provided by UNESCO.

Over the period 1990/91-2001/02, almost all regions saw improvements in primary enrolment. The exceptions were Eastern Asia and the European countries of the CIS, which started out with enrolment ratios of 90 per cent or higher. The greatest strides were made by Latin America and the Caribbean and Northern Africa, both of which achieved a nearly ten-percentage point increase in enrolment since 1990/91. Although enrolment has grown nearly as fast in sub-Saharan Africa, the region still lags far behind the rest of the world. It is clear that accelerated progress is needed in sub-Saharan Africa if the goal is to be achieved. The same holds true for Southern Asia, which, in spite of improvements, still falls short of meeting the MDG target.

Progress is possible, however, even in the poorest countries. Net primary school enrolment ratios increased by over 50 per cent in countries including Chad, Guinea and Malawi (see Chart 2). Other countries, including Côte d'Ivoire, Morocco and Togo, saw an increase in primary school enrolment of more than 20 percentage points between 1990/91 and 2000/01. In these countries, improvements were attributed mainly to an increase in girls' enrolment.

Chart 1. Countries where less than 70 per cent of children of primary school age are enrolled in school

Net enrolment ratio in primary education, both sexes, 2001/02	
Djibouti	34.0
Niger	34.2
Burkina Faso	35.0
Eritrea	42.5
Ethiopia	46.2
Burundi	53.4
United Republic of Tanzania	54.4
Senegal	57.9
Chad	58.3
Saudi Arabia	58.9
Mozambique	59.7
Ghana	60.2
Guinea	61.5
Côte d'Ivoire	62.6
Zambia	66.0
Mauritania	66.7
Madagascar	68.6
Kenya	69.9

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Indicators Database, <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> (accessed June 2005); based on data provided by UNESCO.

Chart 2. Countries where primary school enrolment increased by over 50 per cent between 1990 and 2002

Net enrolment ratio in primary education, both sexes, 1990/1991-2001/02		
	1990/1991	2001/2002
Eritrea	16	43
Guinea	25	61
Ethiopia	23	46
Mauritania	35	67
Kuwait	49	85
Dominican Republic	58	97
Malawi	50	81
Chad	36	58
Morocco	57	88
Gambia	48	73

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Indicators Database, <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> (accessed June 2005); based on data provided by UNESCO.

AIDS has exacerbated the education crisis in Africa

The education crisis in sub-Saharan Africa has been compounded by the terrible toll of AIDS, which has decimated teaching staffs and forced children to leave school. An estimated \$1 billion per year is the net additional cost of offsetting the impact of the epidemic (that is, to make up for the loss and absenteeism of teachers and for incentives to keep orphans and vulnerable children in school).¹ In Kenya, Uganda, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe, the epidemic is expected to significantly contribute to future shortages of primary teachers. Without long-term planning, it will be extremely difficult for these countries to meet their school enrolment targets. For example, if Namibia continues to train teachers at its current rate of 1,000 per year and maintains a desired pupil-to-teacher ratio of one teacher for every 34 primary school students, the teacher shortfall will increase from 1,000 in 2001 to more than 7,000 by 2010.²

When educational resources are scarce, girls suffer most

Where resources are limited and the school system is less than efficient, girls typically lose out. Girls may be at particular disadvantage in settings where, for cultural reasons, the value of boys' education is perceived as higher than that of girls'. Parents may also fear sending their girls to schools that are far from home for security reasons. Furthermore, family demands on girls to help with household work can place further obstacles in the way of gender equity in education. Gender-based discrimination in access to education is most evident in Southern and Western Asia, where boys' enrolment in 2001/02 was, respectively, 12 and 10 percentage points higher than that of girls'. A large gender gap also exists in sub-Saharan Africa, where boys' enrolment is 7 percentage points higher than that of girls', and in Oceania, where boys' enrolment is 6 percentage points higher (see Table 2).

Table 2. Gender gap in primary enrolment, 1990/01-2001/02

	Net enrolment ratio			
	1990/91		2001/02	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Developed regions	96.2	96.1	95.9	95.5
Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia	84.2	85.1	93.4	95.4
Commonwealth of Independent States, Europe	90.9	91.3	88.6	88.0
Developing regions	73.2	85.5	79.5	85.5
Northern Africa	74.4	88.6	89.9	93.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	49.8	58.0	58.5	65.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	85.8	86.9	95.9	95.6
Eastern Asia	95.3	99.1	95.2	94.6
Southern Asia	57.8	86.6	73.0	85.3
South-Eastern Asia	90.4	94.3	90.2	91.6
Western Asia	74.0	87.8	77.7	87.9
Oceania	70.2	77.9	73.2	78.7
Least developed countries	47.3	58.7	58.3	65.6
Landlocked developing countries	49.6	58.5	60.5	69.2
Small island developing states	70.1	62.3	80.8	84.9

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, "World and regional trends", Millennium Indicators Database, <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> (accessed June 2005); based on data provided by UNESCO.

Girls' enrolment increased much faster than boys' in the 1990s in Northern Africa and Southern Asia, resulting in both a narrower gender gap and higher overall enrolment. Over the period 1990 to 2001, some progress towards equality in access to primary education occurred in nearly all regions.

Data on survival and completion are less conclusive

Children may have access to education, but that does not guarantee that they will stay in school or complete their primary education. In fact, many children who enroll drop out before they acquire the skills they need to function as literate individuals. Completion of primary school implies the necessary level of competence to allow a child to progress to the next level of education or to be self-taught. However, data indicate that high enrolment ratios are not always accompanied by high completion rates. Many countries are able to ensure that students start grade 1, but fail to retain them in the school system.

Two indicators are used to track progress in the efficiency of the system to retain children in school: the survival rate to grade 5 and the primary completion rate, which is calculated through the gross intake rate at the last grade of primary school (see [How the indicators are calculated](#) at the end of this section).

Data on survival rates to grade 5 are not sufficient to calculate regional and global progress towards the MDG target.³ Among the countries with data for 2000/01, levels vary considerably. Survival rates range from 33 per cent in Equatorial Guinea and Madagascar to more than 99 per cent in the Bahrain, Mauritius and the Republic of Korea. Three out of four countries are able to retain over 70 per cent of children to grade 5. Most of the countries with low survival rates are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Out of 46 countries with data on trends, more than half have experienced an improvement in the survival rate over the last decade. This means that a child is more likely to reach grade 5 when entering grade 1 today than 10 years ago. Although the survival rate has increased in these countries, some of them are still at very low levels. The situation is particularly critical in

some African countries (Madagascar and Mozambique, for example), where the data indicate that less than half the children who started grade 1 were still in school by the time they reached grade 5. Most of these countries have suffered internal conflicts over the last decade or the ravages of AIDS.

The second indicator used to monitor progress in completion of primary education is the completion rate, calculated through the gross intake rate at the last grade of primary school (see [How the indicators are calculated](#) for a definition). Data coverage for this indicator is sufficient to produce regional estimates (see Table 3).

Table 3. Primary school completion rate

	Percentage of students enrolled in the final grade of primary school					
	1998/99			2001/02		
	Total	Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls
Developed regions	100.0	100.3	99.6	98.8	-	-
Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia	96.3	97.0	95.6	97.9	98.7	97.0
Commonwealth of Independent States, Europe	93.1	-	-	93.9	94.0	93.8
Developing regions	80.7	84.0	77.2	83.0	85.9	79.8
Latin America and the Caribbean	89.0	86.6	91.5	98.0	97.2	98.9
Northern Africa	85.5	89.0	81.8	85.5	87.1	83.9
Sub-Saharan Africa	49.4	54.4	44.4	52.8	57.0	48.6
Eastern Asia	104.8 ¹	104.2 ¹	105.4 ¹	104.2	104.1	104.2
Southern Asia	71.8	78.9	64.3	75.4	81.5	68.9
South-Eastern Asia	87.9	88.8	87.0	92.7	92.8	92.6
Western Asia	77.2	82.9	71.1	76.3	81.1	71.3
Oceania	62.7	63.4	61.9	63.3	64.5	62.0
Least developed countries	48.5	53.4	43.5	50.1	54.0	46.1
Landlocked developing countries	53.7	59.1	48.1	57.4	63.4	51.3
Small island developing states	73.5	73.2	73.8	78.4	77.8	78.9

¹ Data refer to 1999/2000.

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, "World and regional trends", Millennium Indicators Database, <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> (accessed June 2005); based on data provided by UNESCO.

In the least developed countries, on average, only half the eligible students in the population are enrolled in the last grade of primary school at the appropriate age. The primary school completion rate is particularly low in sub-Saharan Africa – only 53 per cent in 2001/02 – and in Oceania. In Southern and Western Asia, completion rates also remain low, with about three quarters of eligible children enrolled in the final grade of primary school.

As is the case with most regional averages, the completion rate can vary greatly between countries within any given region. In 2001/02, in sub-Saharan Africa it ranged from a low of 21 per cent for Niger to 92 per cent for Botswana.

The gender gap is most pronounced in Southern and Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa

Girls are less likely to complete school in five of the eight developing regions. The gender gap is most pronounced in Southern and Western Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, where enrolment and completion levels for girls and boys tend to be low. Various factors may play a role in influencing girls to drop out. Girls are more sensitive to the safety situation at school and to travelling long distances from home. Girls also drop out more frequently than boys because of early marriage or pregnancy, and because they are needed by the family for work in the home.

Literacy rates are lowest in least developed countries and among young women

Because of low enrolment, poor quality of education or because children repeat grades or drop out, many children and young people remain illiterate. The estimated youth literacy rate for the least developed countries, although increasing faster than any other group of countries, is still extremely low at 64 per cent for the period 2000/04. This means that one out of three young people cannot read or write.

	1990	2000/04
Developed regions	99.7	99.7
Commonwealth of Independent States, Europe	99.8	99.8
Commonwealth of Independent States, Asia	97.7	99.8
Developing regions	80.9	84.9
Northern Africa	66.3	78.5
Sub-Saharan Africa	67.4	74.0
Latin America and the Caribbean	92.7	95.5
Eastern Asia	95.5	98.9
Southern Asia	61.5	72.4
South-Eastern Asia	94.3	95.7
Western Asia	80.1	85.7
Oceania	73.5	81.3
Least developed countries	56.3	64.2
Landlocked developed countries	65.0	71.8
Small island developing states	84.8	86.6

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, "World and regional trends", Millennium Indicators Database, <http://millenniumindicators.un.org> (accessed June 2005); based on data provided by UNESCO.

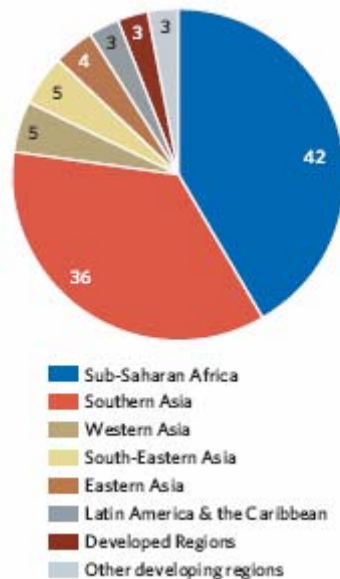
Although Southern Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Northern Africa have experienced the greatest gains in literacy, they still have the lowest literacy rates. Around one quarter of their young people (aged 15 to 24) are illiterate. The majority of countries with a literacy level below 70 per cent are in sub-Saharan Africa. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, less than 25 per cent of young people can read and write.

The ultimate goal is not only to promote basic literacy. It is to help people achieve higher levels of literacy proficiency, which can be pivotal in helping them improve the quality of their lives. The literacy rate discussed and calculated for this analysis, however, does not reflect these qualitative differences (see [How the indicators are calculated](#)).

Mixed outlook for the future

Progress towards universal primary education is mixed. Though five regions are approaching universal enrolment, there are still 115 million children out of school (2001 estimate), the majority of whom are girls.⁴ Eight out of ten of these children live in Southern Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, where rapid population growth is making it difficult to keep up with demand. Other factors contributing to poor progress include low levels of investment in the education sector, inefficient education systems and a rise in schooling costs – for textbooks, uniforms and school fees – borne by families.⁵

Figure 1. Distribution of children out of school by region, 2001 (Percentage)



Tackling these issues will require larger investments in education and broader reforms. Recent studies estimate that putting every child in a good quality primary school would cost between \$7 billion and \$17 billion a year. These very rough estimates probably understate the full cost of the expansion of schools, gains in educational quality and special programs, including subsidies to poor households, which are needed if all children are to complete primary school. These studies also indicate that recurrent costs, not capital investments, represent the bulk of required funds (90 per cent of the total costs of meeting Millennium Development Goal 2 are recurrent costs).⁶

Although the incremental costs needed to meet the goal are large, countries should be able to finance a significant share from domestic resources. But even assuming maximum additional effort by developing countries themselves (such as annual increases of more than 1 per cent, as assumed by UNICEF), a large funding gap is suggested by these numbers. This gap will need to be filled by external financing if progress is to be made. In 2001/02, bilateral and multilateral donors contributed about \$1.2 billion in external assistance for basic education. Estimates of what is needed and what could be absorbed vary, in part because of the wide range (\$7 billion-\$17 billion) of estimates of total costs, including countries' own spending. However, it is reasonable to think that in the next four years, countries could absorb an additional \$5 billion-\$6 billion a year in external funding. The Global Campaign for Education estimates a requirement for external resources of at least \$10 billion a year.⁷

Achieving the goal of universal primary education will require dramatically scaled-up efforts in sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Oceania. In these regions and elsewhere, increased

enrolment needs to be accompanied by efforts to ensure that all children – especially those hardest to reach – remain in school and receive a high-quality education. School enrolment and attendance can be improved by reducing or eliminating school fees, providing school lunches, improving the quality of teaching and bringing schooling closer to home.

The abolition of tuition fees appears to have made a substantial impact in several sub-Saharan African countries. In Kenya, Malawi and the United Republic of Tanzania, abolition of fees for primary education stimulated an enormous demand for schooling. It also created the need to safeguard educational quality through adequate classrooms and supplies and sufficient numbers of teachers to cope with the extra demand.⁸

Notes

¹ UNAIDS, *2004 Report on the global AIDS epidemic*, p. 51 (UNAIDS/04.16E, Geneva, 2004).

² Ibid.

³ Data are only available for approximately 40 per cent of the world's countries and are not consistently available for the same country over time. Only 46 countries have data both at the beginning and at the end of the decade (1990/01 and 2000/01).

⁴ UNICEF, *Progress for children, a report card on gender and primary education*, number 2, April 2005.

⁵ C. Lloyd and P. Hewett, "Primary Schooling in Sub-Saharan Africa. Recent Trends and Current Challenge" (New York, Population Council), pp.19-20.

⁶ Millennium Project Task Force on Education and Gender Equality, "Towards universal primary education: investments, incentives, and institutions".

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UNICEF, *Progress for children, a report card on gender and primary education*, number 2, April 2005.

How the indicators are calculated

Primary net enrolment ratios

The primary net enrolment ratio is calculated as the enrolment of the official age group for the primary level of education expressed as a percentage of that age group (that is per 100), using United Nations 2002 population estimates. It shows the extent of participation in primary education of primary age pupils. The extent to which net enrolment ratios fall below 100 provides a measure of the proportion of school-age children that are not enrolled at the primary level of education, which in turn is an indication of the education system's shortcomings in coverage and efficiency. However, it should be noted that the difference from 100 per cent does not necessarily indicate the actual percentage of students out of school, since some of these children might be enrolled at other levels of education.

Survival rates

The survival rate is a relevant way to assess the capacity of educational systems to retain children in school and to allow them to be autonomous and productive individuals in society. The survival rate to grade 5 uses the reconstructed cohort method and it calculates the percentage of a cohort of pupils (or students) enrolled in the first grade of primary level in a given school year that are expected to reach grade 5. It measures the holding power and internal efficiency of an education system. A survival rate approaching 100 per cent indicates a high level of retention and low incidence of dropout. The survival rate to grade 5 of primary education is of particular interest since this is commonly considered as pre-requisite for sustainable literacy. It should be noted that there are significant difficulties in collecting data for this indicator, as two consecutive years of enrolment and repeaters by grade are required.

It should also be noted that this indicator only measures the probability that those entering the primary education cycle will remain in the school system. It does not reflect the size of the out-of-school population, which in many countries represents a significant portion of the

school age population. It therefore needs to be analysed in conjunction with indicators on enrolment.

Gross intake rate at the last grade of primary

This indicator measures the total number of students enrolled in the final grade of primary school minus repeaters, in a given year as a percentage of the total number of children of the official graduation age in the population. Primary education is defined in terms of ISCED rather than the national primary cycle in order to ensure international comparability

The primary completion rate is calculated through the gross intake rate at the last grade of primary: "Total number of new entrants in the last grade of primary education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population of the theoretical entrance age to the last grade". See *Global Education Digest 2004, Comparing Education Statistics Across the World*, page 149 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Montreal).

Youth literacy rates

Literacy is internationally defined as the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short simple statement related to one's daily life. Literacy involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, sometimes extending to basic arithmetic skill and life skills. Literacy reflects the accumulated achievement of primary education and adult literacy programmes in imparting basic literacy skill to the population, thereby enabling people to apply such skills in daily life and to continue learning and communicating using the written word.

The data on literacy used in this report are drawn from the latest literacy estimates and projections released in March 2004 by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). These data apply to the reference period 2000-2004. For this time interval, one single literacy estimate is presented by country: either the national estimates or the UIS estimates for 2002 (July 2002 assessment). For national estimates, the most recent estimates received by the UIS from countries are presented. Most of these estimates are from national surveys/censuses conducted in 2000, 2001 or 2002 except for few countries with data from the period 1995 - 1999. The estimation methodology can be reviewed on the UIS website at:

http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=5024_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC. The population data used as the basis to estimate the numbers of illiterate are the estimates and projections prepared by the United Nations Population Division (2002 revision).

Literacy statistics from the latest population census round (2000) have not yet been released by most countries, although they might be already available at the national level and used within countries. Therefore, some of the estimates presented in the current report may differ from those in national reports and data sets.

Unlike other education data that are mostly collected through annual administrative records or household surveys, literacy data are gathered from population censuses and specific literacy surveys. In general, the question asked regards each individual within a household, and whether the person is able to read and write, and understand a simple statement on his/her daily life. In some countries, specific literacy household surveys have been carried out to measure literacy. When neither the census nor special surveys are available, a person's educational attainment can be used to determine his/her literacy status. A common practice is to consider those with no schooling as illiterate, whilst defining those who have attended grade 5 of primary school as literate. The latest United Nations *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses* clearly advises countries against adopting this proxy measurement based on educational attainment. It recommends rather that literacy tests be administered either as part of national censuses and household surveys, or as part of a post-censal sample enumeration. However, census data are available only every ten years, in general, and surveys may be too expensive for countries with limited resources. Most of the data currently available on literacy are based on reported literacy data

rather than on tested literacy data and in some cases even derived from other proxy information.

Literacy data do not generally distinguish between levels or skills of literacy and its functionality in daily life. UIS is launching a new programme called LAMP (Literacy Assessment Monitoring Programme), which aims at measuring literacy across a spectrum of activities, from basic reading and writing to the higher level skills needed to participate fully in a knowledge economy. The results of this programme will serve as a valuable indication of the state of the literacy for individual countries as well as an international benchmark against which progress will be monitored.