



Improving Adult Literacy Without Improving The Literacy of Adults? A Cross-National Cohort Analysis

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Summary. — There is a potential disconnect between adult literacy initiatives on the one hand and the indicators typically employed to operationalize their targets and measure their progress on the other. Specifically, the policy discourse is typically framed in terms of illiterate adults becoming literate, while changes in the main indicator, the overall adult literacy rate, may instead be driven by literate youth becoming adults. The aim of this study is to quantify the relative contribution of these two factors (adult literacy acquisition and cohort replacement) in order to understand the extent to which the latter needs to be taken into account in assessing the progress achieved toward the Education for All (EFA) literacy target. Using DHS data on the education and measured (rather than self-reported) literacy status of women aged 20–49 for 30 countries to examine changes in literacy along cohort lines (while bounding the possible distortion due to migration and differential mortality), I demonstrate how much of the increase in the overall adult literacy rate is due to literate youth becoming adults, rather than illiterate adults becoming literate. The results show that in most countries, observed gains in overall adult literacy greatly overstate the degree to which adults have gained literacy at adult ages. Some countries do exhibit changes in literacy along cohort lines that cannot be easily attributed to selective migration or mortality and may indicate “true” gains or losses in individual literacy. The finding that the cohort effect is of large magnitude in practice has significant implications for research on and design of literacy policies: relying on an indicator that conflates two distinct goals, namely of increasing the share of literate adults and of helping illiterate adults become literate, results in misleading policy conclusions. This affects both the retrospective assessment of policy success and failure (and its causes), and the prospective assessment of the challenges in meeting “one size fits all” literacy goals faced by countries with very different population dynamics. This insight is particularly timely given the opportunity presented by the beginning of the new Sustainable Development agenda to reconsider the monitoring of improvements in adult literacy around the globe.
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Key words — adult literacy, MDGs, cohort analysis, DHS

1. INTRODUCTION

Literacy programing is premised on the notion that illiterate adults can become literate. This notion is clearly articulated in the vast literature on adult literacy education. Robinson (2005, p. 436) places adult literacy “in the broader context of adult learning”, and notes that “the very diversity of adult literacy provision requires approaches which differ markedly from those implied in the provision of schooling” (p. 442). “Adult learners” are recognized as a priority group (Hamilton & Pitt, 2011, p. 597), as is the understanding that literacy programs for adults are among the modes of realizing the Education for All (EFA) goals (Dyer, 2000, p. 241). This understanding is likewise made explicit in international policy documents. Examples include both the EFA framework itself (Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments, 2000), the “Expanded Commentary” (p. 16), and the regional framework for Africa, for example. There, it is stated explicitly that the goal is to “[r]educ[e] illiteracy rates by at least 50%, by consolidating adult literacy and continuing education as part of lifelong learning” (emphasis added) (p. 31).

Both the goal, and the monitoring of progress toward it, are commonly expressed in terms of the *Adult Literacy Rate* (ALR). This indicator is straightforward to define as the share among the adult population that is literate. Unfortunately, the utility of the ALR for assessing the success of literacy campaigns is hampered by the fact that this indicator is based on a different adult population at different points in time. As a result, even if not one adult changes his or her literacy status, the adult literacy rate may increase or decline, purely through composition effects. Put succinctly, “the overall illiteracy rates

for the population aged 15 years and over tend to decrease over time as younger cohorts with lower rates are added, while the older ones with higher rates disappear as their members die off” (Cárceles, 1990, p. 5). In other words, adult literacy rates for a given population can improve over time (as the real number of literate adults increases), even in situations where not a single illiterate adult was made literate. For some purposes, notably the demand for literacy programing, it may not actually matter whether illiterate adults were replaced by literate adults rather than changed their status, and the ALR as such is a perfectly serviceable indicator. Findings that a larger stock of literate adults is beneficial for economic development (Bhargava, 2008) or child health (Schell, Reilly, Rosling, Peterson, & Ekström, 2007) are not conditional on whether this is due to “new literate adults” versus “newly literate adults”. Even then, the gains are gained sooner as returns to adult education, and only with a considerable time lag as returns to child education. Moreover, the difference clearly matters with respect to measuring social progress as articulated in international development frameworks such as the MDGs and now the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), because this involves improving the lives of existing illiterates.

Differential mortality and migration may further change the composition of the adult population in ways that affect the

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ALR. This would be the case if literates and illiterates are subject to different risks of dying in a given time period, or to different rates of migration. Neither of these are implausible, and indeed such differentials can be observed both in industrialized societies (Bostock & Steptoe, 2012) and developing countries (Grosse & Auffrey, 1989) and assumed health benefits at least are one of the rationales for investing in adult literacy in the first place.

As a result, the trajectory of adult literacy can and does differ substantially depending on whether we look at a fixed aged group in cross-section (i.e., the ALR) or at fixed cohorts over age (Figure 1). More on these graphs will be said further below. To preview some of the findings: the cohort perspective tends to display a lack of adult literacy transitions, even when the ALR is increasing continuously. Analysing literacy trends

along cohort lines therefore provides an important complementary perspective, particularly if in addition to investigating its consequences we seek to understand changes in adult literacy and their possible causes. Yet such a perspective is applied surprisingly rarely outside of studies of lifelong learning in industrialized countries (Reder & Bynner, 2008). Indeed, it has yet to be applied quantitatively with respect to assessing the progress that was made toward the 2015 Dakar goal of “achieving a 50% improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults”, despite the fact that the cohort perspective is far from new with respect to global literacy. In fact, over 25 years ago, Cárceles (1990) observed that the literacy rates of matched cohorts are relatively stable over time, implying that “schooling seems to determine

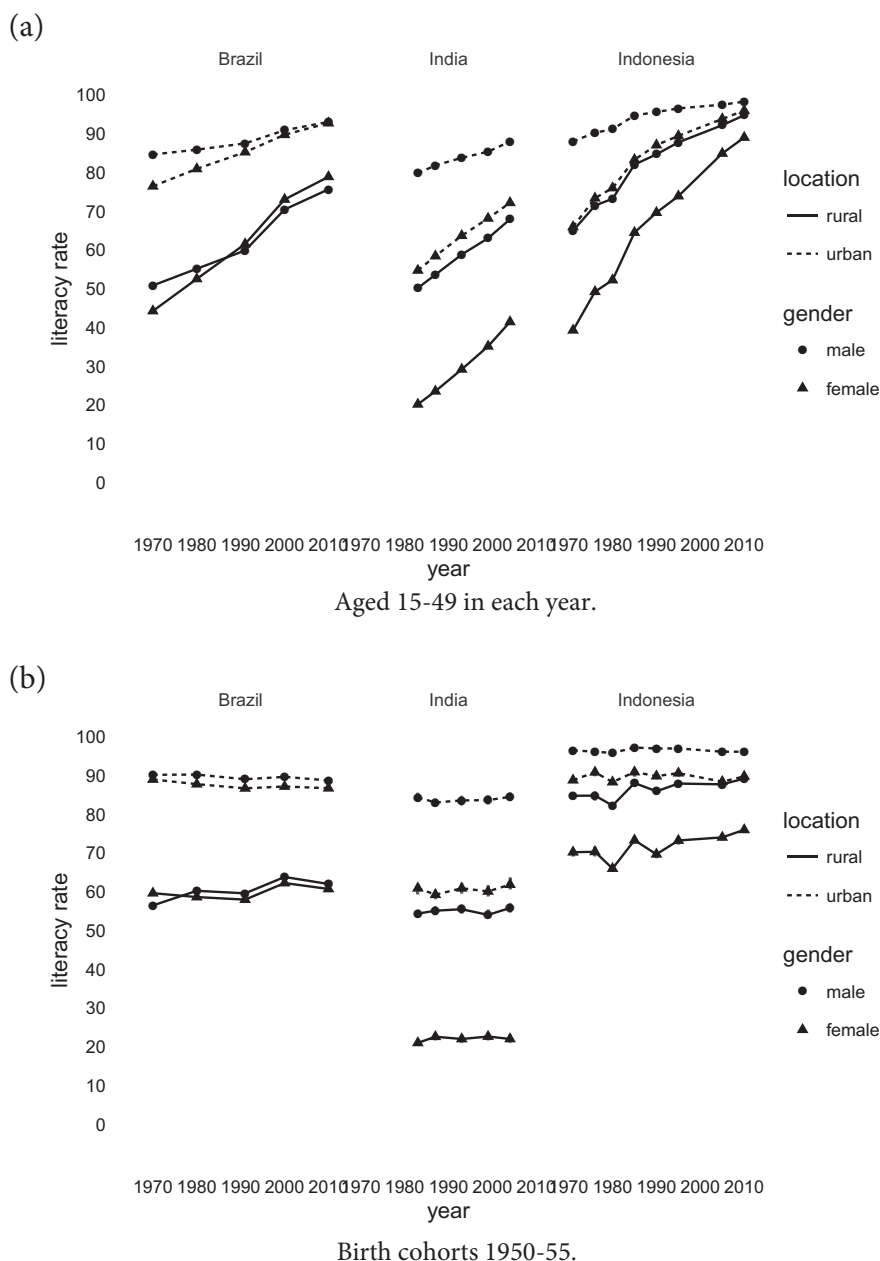


Figure 1. Female literacy rate, from period (1a) and cohort (1a) perspectives. Bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals indicated (but barely visible due to their small magnitude). Data: IPUMS.

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