



Despite improvements in global literacy rates over the past two decades, over 774 million adults (over 15 years) are still unable to read or write. Two-thirds of them are women.

The highest rates of persistent illiteracy are in sub-Saharan Africa, South and West Asia. And in much of the world, girls in particular face huge inequities in access to schooling, as the story of Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai shows.

It is shocking to consider that according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), children born to illiterate mothers are 50% less likely to survive past five years-old. In Latin America, children of mothers who have had some secondary schooling remain in school for two to three years longer.

On current trends, there will still be 743 million adults who are illiterate in 2015. And two-thirds will still be women. This comes at a purported cost of US\$1.14 trillion to the global economy each year.

## What might living in a more literate world look like?

Based on our understanding of the effects of greater literacy, our hypothetical, more literate world would look quite different.

The number one thing to notice is the shift towards greater economic prosperity. There would be lower unemployment rates, higher salaries and greater career flexibility. These would work together to create an innovative, self-directed and highly motivated workforce that is adaptable and highly-skilled. Higher levels of professional development and continuing learning would also result.

At the moment, illiterate people earn, on average, between 30%-42% less than their literate counterparts around the world and are more likely to depend on welfare or unemployment payments to make ends meet.

Increasing literacy rates leads to increased productivity and efficiency for small businesses, along with reduced rates of employee absenteeism.

Health outcomes would also improve as a result of full literacy and economic prosperity, with better food and diet awareness, family planning and preventative lifestyle choices.

For example, poor health literacy is linked to higher death rates from heart disease. Those who are unable to properly read and understand preventative and treatment medications and instructions are at significant risk of failing to care for themselves properly. Similarly, low literacy levels impact on diabetes prevention and care. And literate women are three times more likely than illiterate ones to know that a person in seemingly good health can be infected with HIV.

The huge disparities between high and low socioeconomic health outcomes would be largely removed by improving literacy rates. Child mortality rates would decline and life expectancies would increase.

Participation in the political process would also be boosted significantly, along with a better informed citizenry. Communities would thrive as community participation and investment grows. Tolerance and compassion would increase.

We also know there are strong links between literacy and crime. For example, prisoners who are still illiterate upon release are more likely to re-offend. In our more literate world, violence and crime would decrease.

Large-scale issues, such as famine, war and climate change, would also be able to be more effectively tackled by a much larger group of committed people around the world. The levels of ignorance, misinformation and political spin would be countered by an informed and critical global population.

The focus would shift to social equality, environmental sustainability and energy renewal, population dynamics and water conservation. Women and girls would be given equal opportunities, while indigenous, migrant and refugee populations would be afforded more equitable social and economic outcomes.

## A world away

Unfortunately, this world is still far away and there is no simple cure for illiteracy.

Foreign aid and international organisations certainly play a crucial part, and Australia has and will continue to help make progress (although there will soon be budgetary set backs).

More is being done to improve literacy levels at home. There are many projects and initiatives currently underway, including: the Tasmanian Adult Literacy Action Plan; the federal government's Adult Migrant English Program, Skills for Education and Employment, LiteracyNet; and many more.

On a global level, UNESCO is leading the way through policy, research, advocacy and close networking with governments and NGOs around the world. But there are many other organisations that work in various ways to address illiteracy, including World Literacy Foundation, the Global Literacy Foundation, the Global Literacy Project, and LitWorld.

But if we are going to come even close to meeting the 2015 Millennium Development Goals aim of "meeting the basic learning needs of youth and adults through the functional literacy approach and reducing adult illiteracy rates by 50%", we still have a lot of work to do.

As UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said:

*Literacy is much more than an educational priority – it is the ultimate investment in the future and the first step towards all the new forms of literacy required in the twenty-first century.*

While we might not live in a fully literate world, through efforts overseas and at home, we may one day come close.