

# Asia tops UNESCO's illiteracy survey

KUALA LUMPUR: Asia now accounts for more than 700 million illiterate men and women, or three-quarters of the world's population of 948 million illiterates.

The number of illiterates in Asia and the Pacific region increased from 638 million in 1970 to almost 700 million in 1990, according to an assessment made by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

This is despite the fact that literacy rate for the region grew from 45.5 per cent in 1970 to 65.2 per cent in 1990. It is expected to reach 71.1 per cent by the end of the century.

A UNESCO analysis classifies two groups of illiterates. An illiterate is a person 15 years or older who cannot read and write a short simple statement about everyday life.

The first group lives in rural areas where literacy is reckoned to be at least 20 percentage points lower than those for urban areas. The second group is composed of women. Statistics show that of every 10 illiterates in the region, six are women.

The rate for women determines quite decisively the overall literacy level. For instance, it has a positive influence on family life, children's education, health and nutrition.

To solve the adult illiteracy problem in the region, UNESCO launched the Asia-Pacific Programme for Education for All (APPEAL) in 1987. Aside from eradication of illiteracy, APPEAL also aims at a universal primary education and provision of continuing education programmes.

In Asia and the Pacific region, only Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the republics of the former Soviet Union have achieved universal literacy.

In recent years, Singapore and South Korea joined the list, largely composed of "industrialized nations."

Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Bhutan

have less than 50 million illiterates in the world.

Population growth, quality of life, health and environmental problems have been identified as some of the urgent issues that require attention in Asia and the Pacific to realize the goal of basic education for 80 per cent of the region's children by the year 2000.

How effectively education leaders and the education community as a whole respond to these major challenges will have a direct effect on the quality of life and future development of the region, a UNESCO report says.

The UNESCO report, titled 'Education for Development: Responding to New Challenges', notes that 3,400 million or almost two-thirds of the world's total population live in Asia and the Pacific region.

The region's annual growth rate is 1.7, although growth rates differ from country to country. The highest rates come from

countries with the largest populations.

"Continued population growth presents major problems for economic growth and for tackling problems such as poverty and the need to improve health services and the adequate provision of food," says the report.

Due to the surging population in the region, primary school-aged population generally of 6 to 11 years old is expected to increase from 409 million to 481 millions by the year 2000.

Although the quality of life differs among societies, the report says, some basic elements are generally accepted. These include a reasonable life expectancy, adequate food and nutrition, basic housing and clothing, adequate income, and meaningful employment, access to health and education services, and ability to participate in community life and cultural pursuits.

The report, however, notes that over the past decade, the economic performance of many developing countries in the region has been impressive.

Average gross national product (GNP) per capita in current dollars for countries in Eastern Asia and the Pacific increased to US\$390 from the previous US\$230 during the same period.

"Overall economic conditions in their region remained strong in 1990 to 1992, despite deterioration in the world economy," the report says.

But despite the impressive economic development, poverty remains a major problem in the region.

"Poverty is often associated with low education standards and lack of relevant employment skills," it says.

Furthermore, diseases continue to take its toll in the region. The dreaded Acquired Immune Deficiency

Syndrome (AIDS) has already reached pandemic proportions and observed within parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

The Geneva-based World Health Organization (WHO) says that more Asians than Africans will be newly infected by the mid-1990s.

"In the absence of a vaccine, education for the prevention of behaviours that lead to infection with HIV/AIDS is essential," the UNESCO report stresses.

According to the report, Asia and the Pacific face such environmental problems as deforestation, air and water pollution, floods and landslides, reduction of biological diversity and particular problems associated with urban life in large cities.

"Environmental education for sustainable development is a high measure in promoting and integrating the philosophy, goals and objectives, concepts and strategies for sustainable development into the teaching-learning process for all types of levels and education," the report said.

PIB/Depthnews Feature Service