

Adult literacy is a human right

Adult illiteracy is a double violation of the human right to education. Firstly, it is a consequence of the lack of available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable education for adults when they were children. Secondly, the state's failure to provide free, quality and inclusive adult literacy programs represents an ongoing violation of the right to education.

The right to education has been enshrined in a range of international conventions, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD, 1969) and most recently the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2008). It has also been incorporated into various regional treaties, at the African, Inter-American and European level, with direct binding legal effect on States. Beyond this, many countries have made provisions for the right to education in their national laws and constitutions.

As parties to human rights treaties, **states** have an obligation to **respect, protect and fulfill** those rights. For the right to education this translates into 4 obligations to make education available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable. Provision of the right to education should not discriminate; the right to education is the right of each person regardless of gender, physical or mental ability, legal status and **age**.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([CECSR](#)) article 13 states:

13(d) Fundamental education shall be encouraged or intensified as far as possible for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education;

The Committee for the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ([CECSR](#)) in its [General Comment 13](#), has then further elaborated this article with an authoritative interpretation:

*Art.13 §1 "education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized **adults** and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities."*

*Art 13 (2) (d): §24 "It should be emphasized that enjoyment of the right to fundamental education is **not limited by age** or gender; it extends to children, youth and adults, including older persons. Fundamental education, therefore, is an integral component of **adult education** and life-long learning. Because fundamental education is a right of all age groups, curricula and delivery systems must be devised which are suitable for students of **all ages**."*

The right to adult literacy is not only a component of the right to education, but it also a necessary precondition for the full enjoyment of other human rights and for the participation

in society. A life in dignity and freedom from poverty is for most people in the world only possible through the attainment of literacy. Literacy is about the acquisition and use of

reading, writing and numeracy skills, and thereby the development of active citizenship, improved health and livelihoods, and gender equality.

Other norms and standards:

The Dakar 'Education for All' goal of a 50% reduction in adult illiteracy by 2015, which has been endorsed by 185 governments around the world.

Adult Education: The Hamburg Declaration; the Agenda for the Future. 5th International Conference on Adult Education. Hamburg, Germany (1997)

Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education; adopted by the General Conference at its nineteenth session, Nairobi (1976)

Pre-draft Recommendation no. 58 to the Ministries of Education concerning Literacy and Adult Education (1965)

28th International Conference on Public Education; Geneva; IBE/724. (1965)

Déclaration sur l'élimination de l'analphabétisme pendant la décennie des Nations Unies pour le développement (1964)

Recommendations:

- Illiteracy is a violation of the right to education. Adult literacy programs, instead, are a means to respect, protect and fulfill this right. States must take immediate steps in this direction. Thus, fundamental education must be available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to all people, regardless of age, and must be particularly encouraged "for those persons who have not received or completed the whole period of their primary education".
- The Right to Education Project urge states to ratify all human rights conventions, particularly ICESCR and the new Optional Protocol to this Covenant, which opens for ratification on the 24th September 2009 and will be a major step towards making rights enforceable and meaningful. Many states are also lagging behind on CEDAW and CRPD, and they should be encouraged to sign the Hamburg Declaration.
- We expect that CONFINTEA 2009 spells out the right to adult education and thus advocates for literacy as a right for all adults to receive inclusive education, free of charge and of good quality; according to the 4 As: availability, accessibility, acceptability and adaptability.