Background* paper prepared for the
Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006

* Literacy for Life

Literacy for special target groups: indigenous peoples

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This paper provides an outline on significant elements of the profile, background characteristics and circumstances of indigenous peoples. Furthermore it explores reasons for their exclusion from opportunities to access and acquire literacy, drawing on diverse experiences and circumstances in different local, national and regional contexts. A closer look will be taken at the mechanisms that reproduce this exclusion from literacy and education.

1. Significant elements of the profile of indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples today are a diverse group and no one definition can cover them all. Yet they are distinguished around the world by their different cultural world-view consisting of both a custodial and non-material attitude to land and natural resources (Rao, N. / Robinson-Pant, A., 2003:1). The term ‘indigenous peoples’ is used differently in diverse contexts and has often been disputed, particularly in countries or regions where the majority of the populations have been long settled in their territory or were colonized by outside cultures.

Who are ‘indigenous peoples’?

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs agreed upon the following definition: “Indigenous peoples are the disadvantaged descendants of those peoples that inhabited a territory prior to colonisation or formation of the present state. The term indigenous is defined by characteristics that relate to the identity of a particular people in a particular area, and that distinguish them culturally from other people or peoples.” Usually the terms ‘indigenous peoples’ and ‘tribal peoples’ are used together to describe social groups that share similar characteristics, namely a social and cultural identity that is distinct from the dominant groups in society. United Nations human rights bodies, ILO, the World Bank and international law apply four criteria to distinguish indigenous peoples:

(a) indigenous peoples usually live within or maintain an attachment to geographically distinct ancestral territories;
(b) they tend to maintain distinct social, economic, and political institutions within their territories;
(c) they typically aspire to remain distinct culturally, geographically and institutionally rather than assimilate fully into national society; and
(d) they self-identify as indigenous or tribal (UNDP, 2005:2).

 Despite common characteristics, there does not exist any single accepted definition of indigenous peoples that captures their diversity. Self-identification as indigenous or tribal is usually regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining an indigenous status, which is being claimed by many “politically marginalized, territorially based ethnic groups...who are culturally distinct from the majority populations of the states where they live”.

Statistical shortcoming on indigenous peoples

Usually statistical data is not provided in a disaggregated way in order to identify indigenous populations and their specific circumstances. While there are very few exceptions, population censuses normally “invisibilize” (render invisible) the ethnic condition of populations. However averages can be misleading, such as the examples of Bulgaria and Serbia-Montenegro.
illustrate enormous intra-country discrepancies between mainstream and Roma populations. In Latin America indigenous peoples have protested against being subsumed under the category of ‘peasants’ or ‘rural populations’ since this practice is not honouring their specific circumstances. At the global level, indigenous organizations repeatedly pointed out to international and UN bodies that data collection and desegregation is a critical tool for advocacy and policy development in order to address indigenous concerns.

Where do the indigenous peoples live?

Indigenous peoples number over 300 million, and represent between 4,000-5,000 languages and cultures in more than 70 countries around the world. Together they account for 5% of the world’s population. Though their populations are small, these cultures account for 60% of the world’s languages and collectively represent over half the intellectual legacy of mankind. 190 million (or more than half) of the indigenous or tribal people live in Asia. In countries such as India, with about 400 tribal groups and with 90 million people, they make up close to 8% of the population of the country (UNESCO Institute for Education, 1999:4). Latin America’s 50 million indigenous people make up 11% of the region’s population. Indigenous people are not always the minority in their countries. In Bolivia and Guatemala they make up more than half the population (UNDP, 2004a:29).

Countries with the largest number of ethnic groups include Papua Guinea, Indonesia, Nigeria, India and Cameroon. The regional distribution of the world languages is a good indicator for a rough geographic location of the indigenous and tribal populations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe &amp; Middle East</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Americas</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pacific</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Skutnabb-Kangas, T. 2000:33/34

In many cases one indigenous group inhabits a territory that is spanning across several countries, such as the Samis (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia), the San (Namibia, Botswana, South Africa), or the Aymara (Bolivia, Chile, Peru). Most of the indigenous peoples live in remote and difficult to access areas in the world. Sometimes they are confined to special areas defined as reservations or tribal areas. Very often they inhabit land which is rich in minerals and natural resources. Indigenous and tribal groups are usually concentrated in certain areas of the countries where they live, such as in the hills or mountain areas, in inaccessible forest and jungle areas or in special reserves and settlements. The phenomenon of internal and external migration also has to be taken into account when localizing indigenous populations. An urban indigenous presence has to be highlighted in many countries, such as in the case of the capital of Mexico where at present 10% of the total indigenous population is concentrated. In the case of the Mexican city Monterrey more than 50 indigenous languages are spoken (López, L.E./ Hanemann, U., 2005).

Seasonal work on plantations converts entire indigenous families into temporary internal migrants according to the agricultural calendar during the year. For example, this is the case in Guatemala. The Government of Guatemala calculates that at the end of the nineties about 1.2 million of its citizens had left the country as permanent migrants to live – as documented, undocumented or with a temporary permit – in the USA. The 2002 census indicates that the Departments with major international migration are those where indigenous populations constitute the majority. Therefore it can be assumed that half of the migrants in the USA are indigenous (PNUD, 1999:135/136). Aboriginal people in Canada, for example, are more mobile than other Canadians. Census data shows a slow but steady decline of Aboriginal people who lived on the 641 Indian reserves to less than one-third, and a growth in the number of Abo-
Original people residing in Canada’s cities (Page, J., 2004:6/7). Increased mobility of indigenous peoples from rural to urban areas or even abroad creates new challenges for planning and implementing programs in education, literacy and other social services.

Language

Language is often a key element of indigenous people’s cultural identity. The UNDP states that there is no more powerful means of “encouraging” individuals to assimilate to a dominant culture than having the economic, social and political returns stacked against their mother tongue. In Australia alone some 500 languages have been lost since the arrival of Europeans. Even today the indigenous people in countries like Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico or Peru are much more likely to prosper speaking Spanish. Of the estimated 10,000 languages that have existed over time, only about 6,000 are spoken today. Due to the ongoing pressures of assimilation the number of languages is projected to drop by 50-90% over the next 100 years (UNDP, 2004a:29, 33). Today linguistic and cultural diversity seems to be disappearing relatively much faster than biological diversity. This trend threatens core elements of indigenous identities.

The well-known linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas notes that some of the direct main agents for this “linguistic and cultural genocide” are formal education and mass media. She sees in the fulfilment of the basic linguistic human rights to indigenous people one way of promoting conflict prevention and self-determination, of preventing linguistic genocide, and of maintaining linguistic diversity and indigenous knowledge. According to her the most important right, the right to mother tongue medium education, is inadequately protected in existing international instruments and standards (Skutnabb-Kangas, T., 2001:203-211). To systematically relegate indigenous languages to performing simple bridging functions (to the dominant language) is a step towards killing those languages and with them an important medium in constructing indigenous identities. An encouraging example of linguistic revitalization is the case of young Maoris in New Zealand. Learning the Maori language has become a powerful political tool for action, strengthening identity and bringing validation to a cultural way of life which was previously ignored. Learning about one’s own culture is often the starting point for many Maoris on their “educational journey” (Te Waka Pu Whenua Trust/ Kaumatua of Tauamarunui, 2003:3).

2. Background characteristics and circumstances of indigenous peoples

All over the world indigenous peoples suffer multiple forms of exclusion that stem from both historical factors such as colonization, as well as present day political, economic and social discrimination. This has resulted in higher levels of poverty, illiteracy and lower life expectancy among indigenous groups. Today many indigenous peoples are still excluded from society and are often deprived of their rights as equal citizens of the state. They are also often faced with assimilation and integration and forced into the mainstream dominant culture. In some countries they could make significant progress, such as the Sami in Norway, the Inuit in Greenland, the Aboriginals in Canada, or the Maori in New Zealand. Yet much still remains to be done. In many countries indigenous people face serious difficulties such as the constant threat of territorial invasion and murder, the plundering, polluting and poisoning of their resources, cultural, political and legal discrimination, as well as a lack of recognition for their own institutions.

The recent Special Rapporteur report on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people in the Philippines documents, for example, serious human rights
violations regarding the human rights implications for indigenous communities from economic activities such as large-scale logging, open-pit mining, multi-purpose dams, agribusiness plantations and other development projects. Communities resist development projects that destroy their traditional economy, community structures and cultural values, a process described as “development aggression” (United Nations/ Economic and Social Council/ Commission on Human Rights/ Indigenous Issues 2003b:2). In the case of Guatemala, whose national identity is based to a large extent on the living cultures of its indigenous peoples, the Special Rapporteur states that indigenous people are far from being full and equal partners with the rest of the population and have been subjected to political exclusion, cultural discrimination and economic marginalization from society (United Nations/ Economic and Social Council/ Commission on Human Rights/ Indigenous Issues 2003a:2).

Being indigenous often means being poor. Recent national sample survey data from India (1999-2000) reveals that headcount ratios for poverty amongst scheduled tribes are 46% against an average incidence of 27% for the entire rural population. Across the Latin American region, indigenous peoples are poorer and less represented politically than the non-indigenous population. In Mexico 81% of indigenous peoples are calculated to have incomes below the poverty line, compared with 18% for the general population (UNDP, 2004a:6). The same is true for indigenous peoples in other countries:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of indigenous poor compared to non-indigenous poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
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<tr>
<td>64%</td>
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</table>

Source: UNDP, 2004a:67

Indigenous people can expect a shorter life. The gap in life expectancy in four selected developing countries and three industrial countries between indigenous and non-indigenous people was (1997-2000):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gap in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous people (in years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap/ years:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNDP, 2004a:29 and 36

In spite of this gap, the demographic growth seems to be higher among indigenous populations than in the mainstream society. In Canada, for example, the Aboriginal population is growing faster (around 11%) than the rest of the Canadian population (3.4%). Consequently, the Aboriginal population is considerably younger than the Canadian non-Aboriginal population (Page, J., 2004:5).

Lack of access to basic services such as education has led to lower literacy levels among many indigenous populations. Nepal’s Dalit population has only a 10% adult literacy rate compared to 40% for the rest of the population. In Namibia the San population has an adult literacy rate of approximately 20% compared to the Afrikaans population who has an adult literacy rate of about 95% (UNDP, 2004a:36). In the 1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey conducted in Canada, 17% of the aboriginals aged 15 to 49 reported no formal schooling or less than grade 9 as their highest level of education, this was true for only 6% of the same age group of the total Canadian population. This gap was even larger in the group aged 50 to 64: 53% of aboriginals compared to 26% for the total population (Ningwakwe/ Rainbow Woman (Priscilla George), NN:3).
According to the 2001 census in Australia 3% of indigenous people aged 15 years or older had never attended school, compared with only 1% of non-indigenous people. 17% of indigenous people and 38% of non-indigenous people reported having completed year 12 or equivalent\textsuperscript{15}. The results of the 1996 Adult Literacy Survey in New Zealand indicated that 66.4% of Maoris were below the minimum level required to meet the “complex demands of everyday life and work” in prose, 72.2% in document and 72.3% in quantitative literacy (numeracy). In contrast the figures for non-Maori were 41.6%, 47% and 45.6% respectively\textsuperscript{16}. Vietnam has a national illiteracy rate of only 13% but an illiteracy rate of up to 96% for some indigenous groups such as the Lo los. The illiteracy rate in indigenous communities also varies between the different ethnic groups. For example, in the province of Yunnan in China the Lahu people have an illiteracy rate of 72% against the national rate of 39% for indigenous people (UNESCO-PROAP, 2000:40). In Bangladesh the national literacy rate was 40% in 1991 (50% males; 30% females) against 18.4% for indigenous peoples (Rao, N./ Robinson-Pant, A., 2003:13).

The educational disadvantage of indigenous groups has to be seen in a context where illiteracy is one component of many compounding factors within a vicious circle of poverty, poor health, high unemployment, drug abuse and crime. In Canada unemployment rates among Aboriginals are approximately double of that of the non-Aboriginal population. (Ningwakwe/ Rainbow Woman (Priscilla George), NN:7). Many factors have contributed to the erosion of culture in indigenous communities including in the case of the Canadian Aborignals the Indian Act. Along with its attendant “reserve” system and residential schools, several generations of children have been systematically removed from their families/communities and punished for speaking their Aboriginal language (ibid.:10).

In Asia indigenous minorities also suffer from economic hardship, poverty, a low-income level and a shortage of food. Farming and hunting are the two main activities. Poor health contributes to high infant mortality rates. Indigenous populations suffer many diseases and Malaria is the most common and often fatal disease. All indigenous communities have poor access to the nearest town or cities and often they are not accessible by road. A lack of radio and TV programmes in local indigenous languages contributes to the poor access to information (UNESCO-PROAP, 2000:39/40).

Indigenous youth, who represent the future of indigenous peoples, are particularly threatened by economic dependency, unemployment and ignorance of indigenous rights. In the case of Africa, indigenous youth are often targets of violence, discrimination, child military recruitment and abduction by hostile groups. The majority of the Maori population in New Zealand is now under 25 years of age, have low literacy levels compared to the mainstream population and experience high unemployment (Te Waka Pu Whenua Trust/ Kaumatua of Taumarunui, 2003:1).

Indigenous women tend to experience triple discrimination (poor, female, and indigenous) in their societies. Although today’s indigenous woman is not easily categorized. She can be found in a variety of circumstances – in her natural place in the rural, independent indigenous community, in poverty on the reservation, in the big-city high-rise or the slum, or trailblazing in an intergovernmental meeting. Unfortunately, most indigenous women today remain at risk, whether colonized long ago or subject to today’s forces of globalization. But wherever you find her, she is essential to the survival of her family, her community and her culture\textsuperscript{17}.

Indigenous women in the developing world face many common threats such as poverty, little or no access to health care and education; armed conflicts; pollution; large-scale mining and
logging, invasions of illegal miners, unsympathetic governments, loss of their lands, and human trafficking to name just a few. Everywhere they are paid less, are given the lowest jobs, and are often subject to discrimination, humiliation and sexual abuse. As tribal areas become accessible to outsiders and commercially oriented activities, atrocities on women are on the increase. Loss of access and control of resources in tribal areas tend to push women out of productive activities. This also adversely affects their status in their family and community as their participation in the economy decreases (D’Souza, N.G., 2003:24; UNESCO-PROMEM, 2005).

Although there is a general lack of disaggregated data, there is some evidence that the widespread gender gap in literacy rates is even larger when it comes to indigenous peoples. In Cambodia, for example, the illiteracy rate in some indigenous communities of the Ratanakiri and Mondulkiri provinces are up to 80% for men and 98% for women. Also in Vietnam the highest literacy rates are found among indigenous girls and women (UNESCO-PROAP, 2000:40, 50). In Rajasthan, India, the literacy rate for indigenous males was 39.1% (1991) compared to only 7.5% of indigenous females. (Rao, N./ Robinson-Pant, A., 2003:13). Even in the case of Latin America, where the gender parity index shows that most of these countries do not have serious inequality problems (some 56% of illiterates in the region are women), those countries that show a marked relative difference in favour of males (Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay and Peru) have indigenous populations. The most extreme situations are found in Bolivia and Peru, countries that have large indigenous populations where female illiteracy rates are nearly triple those for men (UNESCO/ OREALC, 2004:40).

High poverty rates and the lack of basic social services force many indigenous people to migrate to poor urban areas or to wander around in search of work. Seasonal, temporary or permanent migration is one of the reasons why indigenous adults (and children) have to interrupt their education. In Guatemala, for example, 74% of the participants of literacy programs suspend their attendance for this reason (PNUD, 1999:129).

Usually national and international movements of indigenous peoples are highly political at all levels. It is difficult to separate education and literacy from the struggles for their rights and self-determination. A more politicised notion of ‘empowerment’ is often predominant in adult education programmes for indigenous groups. In Latin America it was mainly the political mobilization of indigenous organizations themselves that led to educational reforms and inter-cultural bilingual approaches (e.g. Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala). And the other way around, educational processes have substantially contributed in generating an awareness and organizational processes among indigenous people. In some cases civil resistance of indigenous organizations has been decisive in the removal of corrupt governments such as in Ecuador and Bolivia. There is an increasing acceptance that the struggle for women’s rights is no longer a divisive issue in the indigenous movement.

In some countries indigenous organizations are engaged in armed insurgencies or fights for their cultural, political and ethnic rights, such as the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico or the Karen National Union in Burma. Many indigenous peoples live in situations of conflict and war where human rights tend not to be respected. The Report of the Commission engaged in investigating human rights violations during the conflict in Guatemala provides plenty of evidence on how the army automatically equated ‘indigenous’ with terrorists who therefore had to be ‘eliminated’. This cost the lives of thousands of Mayan men, women and children (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999).
War and conflict contexts confront indigenous peoples with extreme hardships. For example, the Batwa pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which are seen by mainstream Congolese as “sub-human”, are massacred by one armed faction or another simply for not having an identity card. Pygmies have been totally excluded from participation in the Congolese society. According to a DRC government representative to the May 2003 Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues of the United Nations, such violence based on discrimination against the Batwa is tantamount to genocide: “Military tools today include rape, live burial and cannibalism, all aimed at extermination so that the perpetrators can have access to minerals and timber” (Nyamu, J., 2003:2).

3. Reasons for the exclusion of indigenous peoples from opportunities to access and acquire literacy and mechanisms that reproduce this exclusion

Indigenous peoples face many barriers in attaining education and literacy compared to the mainstream society. Reasons for this include isolation which has made it difficult for indigenous groups to access the same services as the rest of the society. For example, isolation is an important reason why remote Australian aboriginal communities, such as the Alyawarr and Anmatyerr-speaking people in the Northern Territory, have only recently received access to formal education. Today’s education structures and programs within the region are well below national standards. This has resulted in most of the indigenous adults being illiterate. Very few vernacular texts are in existence and consequently, few people can read in their own language, let alone write in it (Kral, I./ Falk, I., 2004:15).

Mainstream “Western” education structures and contents have little meaning for indigenous communities resulting in higher dropout rates. State education systems often fail to meet the specific needs of indigenous communities with curricula and teaching methodologies “based on a world view that does not always recognize or appreciate indigenous notions of an interdependent universe and the important place in their societies” (Kawagley/ Barnhardt, 1999 cit. UNESCO Institute for Education, 2004:34). The differences between indigenous homes and dominant school cultures are especially profound for communities who still maintain an ethos and social organization associated with hunting and gathering, as do many indigenous groups in the Americas, Asia and Australia, as well as the San of southern Africa. Differences include variations in the quality of the knowledge itself (holistic rather than compartmentalised), teaching and learning methods (interactive and demonstrative rather than instructive) and social values that govern learning attitudes (co-operative rather than competitive). Mainstream education systems generally privilege academic knowledge and devalue traditional wisdom and skills. Furthermore, indigenous peoples have raised serious concerns about the negative impact of modern education on their communities’ ability to survive (ibid.:37).

For this reason formal education has no relevance in the view of indigenous elders. As a result education is seen by Alyawarr and Anmatyerr elders, for example, as only for children up to the age of eleven, or until they are initiated into adulthood and begin learning Aboriginal knowledge (Kral, I./ Falk, I., 2004:27/28). In the case of the San, the withdrawal from and rejection education is seen by Willemien le Roux as a self-defence mechanism of San parents and children against abuse and discrimination in schools in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. She believes the mechanisms of stigmatisation, discrimination and separation of San children from their family and home are an emotional abuse. Other forms of abuse include corporal punishment and sexual harassment and abuse. Abuse caused by alien educational structures includes the hostel system, which was established due to lack of funds or infrastructure by governments without calculating the negative cost on human development, resulted in lack of care and boredom for indigenous residents. Negative attitudes of the dominant group
towards the education of the San are one of the main reasons behind the discriminatory and abusive practices at school (Roux, W. le, 2000).

Similar experiences of the Aborigines of Australia, the Sami of Norway and the Inuits of Canada have also led to negative attitudes of indigenous adults towards learning and literacy education. In Canada on-reserve or rural/semi-urban literacy programs are four times more likely to have learners who have been in residential schools. The focus in residential schools was on the assimilation of Aboriginal students into mainstream society, rather than on academics. Many attendees of these residential schools have painful memories of verbal, physical and sexual abuse, “which can be a severe block to learning and attaining/ maintaining a good quality of life”. Their experiences in these schools have turned them off education as a whole. Residential school attendees learned to be incongruent in their social behaviour, so as to avoid abuse. This behaviour, which contributes to confusion and disassociation, became generational as ex-students incorporated it into their parenting styles. The National Anti Poverty Organization states: “Residential schools are gone now, but the legacy lives among many Native people in the form of self-hated, substance abuse and child abuse. The damage cannot be overstated. People lost their pride, their hope, the chance to learn from Elders...Those who grew up in the schools often have frightful memories which may prevent them from getting involved today...” (Cit. in: Ningwakwe/ Rainbow Woman (Priscilla George), NN:5/6).

There also exist personal barriers for indigenous peoples in achieving literacy, which are generally more difficult to overcome. In particular the stigma associated with illiteracy is a major barrier in terms of attracting learners to a literacy program. Some learners perceive literacy programs as a place to go for those who are “not-smart”. Learners also put the need of their families first and so, sometimes, it seems that they are not motivated. Barriers to motivation are closely linked to material barriers. Mental, emotional and spiritual dysfunctions, i.e. physical and mental barriers, are the greatest hindrance to native students in Canada. “A lack of self-esteem, self-confidence and a confused cultural identity impede our students as no physical barriers can. We can teach people to read and write, but without the self-esteem and self-confidence to utilize these skills, they are no better off than they were before”.

An example of social issues affecting indigenous populations is the case of the Canadian Aboriginals. According to an Aboriginal Peoples Survey in 1991, 25% had experienced a suicide, 67% unemployment, 39% family violence, 25% sexual abuse, 48% drug abuse, 61% alcohol abuse and 30% reported having a disability (Ningwakwe/ Rainbow Woman (Priscilla George), ND:9). Also, the consumption of opium in Thailand is a consistent problem, which demotivates the indigenous population to join literacy classes (UNESCO-PROAP, 2000:39).

In Canada a study noted that material barriers for indigenous learners included financial restrictions, lack of childcare, transportation, housing, career skills, life-skills, knowledge of law, of health and of various opportunities for learning, and literacy in terms of self-growth. Poverty and poor health produce significant blocks to learning, which has major implications for aboriginal literacy programs. From the perspective of potential Aboriginal learners, literacy is usually only one of many problems they face, “with poverty, racism and other forms of systemic injustice being the greatest obstacles to a better life”. Though literacy programs are designed to improve life quality by being a possible first step over these barriers, “these barriers themselves can block the way to literacy acquisition” (Ningwakwe/ Rainbow Woman (Priscilla George), NN:8). Apparently it is not easy to break through this vicious circle.

Lack of mother tongue education has contributed to lower literacy levels within indigenous populations compared to the national average and is therefore one of the central issues to be
addressed in order to make education and literacy linguistically appropriate for indigenous people. Particularly in African societies, millions of indigenous children and adults are sidelined by a lack of diversity in schools and adult education provisions, and also a lack of access to education in their mother tongue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Total population (million)</th>
<th>Number of spoken languages</th>
<th>Population with access to education in mother tongue in 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sub-Saharan Africa</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>2,632</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asia &amp; Pacific</td>
<td>1,918</td>
<td>2,815</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asia</td>
<td>1,480</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central &amp; Eastern Europe, CIS</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-income OECD</td>
<td>912</td>
<td>1,299</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America &amp; Caribbean</td>
<td>530</td>
<td>1,086</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A basic characteristic of indigenous cultures is the oral quality of its languages. A lack of recognition of multiple literacies and the different uses of languages by adults runs the risk of adapting indigenous language and literacy practices to those of the non-indigenous people. Sheila Aikman shows in her ethnographic study of the relationship between literacy and development in a bilingual society of the Harakmbut in the Peruvian Amazon that the value of literacies and the languages of literacy in self-development need to be carefully assessed in societies where communication, knowledge, learning and teaching are oral practices (Aikman, S., 2001:103-118). However, orality should not been seen in opposition to literacy. Rather they could complement each other, in the same way that traditional knowledge and outside knowledge do. Luis Enrique López points out that indigenous learners, who are generally oral bilinguals, should acquire bilingual literacy through a “simultaneous or concurrent process” whereby they may “develop their interpretative and productive capacities, as well as their creativity in general, in their two languages” (López, L.E., 2001:220). However, very few literacy programs for indigenous people have considered this so far.

Many literacy and adult education programs do not take into account the subordinate position of indigenous women in their communities and their work situation. Women alone generally cannot take the decision to participate in literacy classes. A study conducted in 2003 in the tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh, India, showed that the reasons for the low participation of women (17%) in literacy training programmes were mainly familial and logistical. It was difficult for women without explicit family support to be away from their homes for relatively long periods of time. Also since women are traditionally less exposed than men travelling to the different districts for the training workshops was a major hurdle (D’Souza, N.G., 2003:14).

On the other hand, an important factor contributing to the high level of education of indigenous women in Greenland (Inuit) and Norway (Sami) is that the indigenous peoples are actively involved in devising and implementing the educational system applicable to their areas. They also both include indigenous language instruction. This has had significant results in strengthening the capacity of indigenous women. In recent times, Greenlandic and Sami women have put a high priority on education, and have even had an advantage over many men, who have long relied on traditional livelihoods (reindeer breeding, hunting and fishing) as the basis of their identity (Roy, Ch.K., 2004:21/22).
In many countries public spending in basic social services systematically discriminates against indigenous peoples. The low provision of services can be a result of lower financial allocations or of distance and isolation (UNDP, 2004a:66). This makes attendance for indigenous populations less attractive and literacy provisions less accessible.

The reasons which are hampering access and acquisition of literacy in indigenous communities are generally consisting of a combination of interrelated factors. An analysis of the obstacles which are “blocking us from achieving our vision of Aboriginal literacy” was provided by a provincial Aboriginal literacy gathering of the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network in Canada in April and May 2002. Among the numerous obstacles collected by the working groups were lack of social support, lack of family support due to fear and shame, financial constraints, limited resources, lack of clear definitions and criteria for literacy funding. Also levels of funding do not meet service expectations, basic needs are not met, racism still exists, planning and training either does not exist or it is abstract and unrealistic. The system of dependency has breed complacency and unrewarded accomplishment have stifled motivation. Also, lack of empowerment, minimal Aboriginal content in curriculum, lack of culturally sensitive materials, lack of cultural understanding and knowledge and insufficient strategies enhancing cultural identity, together with education that is not student-centred and a low number of existing programs and diverse strategies has led to a lost identity which slows desire to learn and lack of respect for elders. There is a need to improve school systems without forgetting traditional (grand)parenting which blocks literacy growth. Other obstacles include not gathering or promoting local story writers which blocks vision of Aboriginal literacy, not promoting fine arts as well as colonial thinking, drugs and alcohol which blocks community communication. Restricted access to information limits future literacy and inadequate human resources affect continuing development of literacy. Unrepresented stakeholders (e.g. elders) also restrict the quality of literacy development, as well as ineffective methods which block successful learning, the non-delivery of treaty promises discouraging initiative and progress, and a “us-them” mentality preventing collaboration and effective networking (Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network, 2002:charts in the appendix).

Indigenous literacy is a complex issue involving the need to heal, to compensate, and to reclaim identity, language, indigenous knowledge, tradition, culture, and self-determination. Over the past decade many indigenous organizations carried out research and made recommendations about empowering indigenous literacy. They usually come to the conclusion that there is an urgent need to develop culturally and linguistically sensitive approaches to adult learning for indigenous populations starting from their needs, and going beyond literacy. They also claim that both the direct involvement of indigenous organizations into the process of designing of literacy provisions and the control of their implementation is necessary.

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Endnotes:

1 Such as aboriginals (Australia), aboriginal peoples (Canada) tribal peoples or scheduled tribes (India), Orang Asli or original people (Malaysia), indigenous cultural communities (Philippines), Maori people (New Zealand), First Nation people (Canada, USA), San or Basarwa or Bushmen (Kalahari Desert, Southern Africa), ethnic minorities (the Balkans), indians or indios (Latin America). The distinction between indigenous and tribal peoples tend to be blurred in Asia and Africa, while in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand there is a greater tendency to use the term ‘indigenous peoples’ (UNESCO Institute for Education, 1999:4).
2 For example, in the Asian and African regions.
3 IWGIA, http://www.iwgia.org/sw155.asp (accessed 02/05)
5 For example, Bolivia, Brazil, Peru and Mexico. Namibia is the only country to have calculated the human development index by linguistic group (UNDP, 2004:36).
7 It is estimated that there is a total of over 6,700 mostly oral languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000:32).
Military conquest, ecological destruction, forced labour and lethal diseases reduced indigenous populations in the Americas and Australia by as much as 95%. National Geographics (2002) Light at the edge of the World: A Journey Through the Realm of vanishing Cultures, www.nationalgeographic.com/events/releases/pr020117.html (assessed 02/05)

Language learning must be additive (not subtractive): a new language, including a majority or dominant language, must not be learned to the detriment of the mother tongue(s).

The militarization of indigenous areas are a consequence of indigenous resistance and protest which are frequently accompanied by human rights abuses committed by military force, such as arbitrary detention, persecution, killings of community representatives, coercion, torture, demolition of houses, destruction of property, rape, and forced recruitment (United Nations/ Economic and Social Council/ Commission on Human Rights/ Indigenous Issues 2003b:2).

In India, more than 40% of displaced persons of all large development projects are tribals (D’Souza, N.G., 2003:1).

In addition to their extremely difficult socio-economic situation, Mayas, Xinca and Garífunas also experience daily racial and ethnic discrimination, which takes the form of attitudes of disdain and rejection towards indigenous people. The even occurs in the media where prejudice against various aspects of their culture are aired. (United Nations/ Economic and Social Council/ Commission on Human Rights/ Indigenous Issues 2003a:2).

The National Dalit Commission defines Dalit as those communities who, by virtue of caste-based discrimination and untouchability, are most backward in the social, economic, educational, political and religious spheres and are deprived of human dignity and social justice (UNDP, 2004a:57).


Since indigenous women have assumed for the most part the role of protectors and transmitters of tradition and language their non-participation in adult education can frustrate attempts to introduce intercultural bilingual education into the formal education system.

According to John Ibbitson the “single greatest threat to Canada’s long-term peace and prosperity will be the emergence in the next generation of a large, impoverished and angry aboriginal underclass” (Ibbitson, J., 2004:1).

In order to address the problem of tribal youth dropouts, an alternative programme was designed to include one-week-long sessions four times a year (D’Souza, N.G., 2003:9).