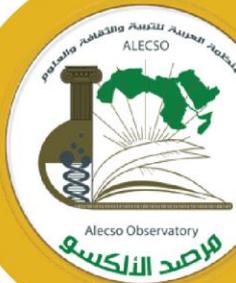


March
2023



**ILLITERACY
IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES :
CURRENT STATUS AND FUTURE
ESTIMATES BY 2030**



Illiteracy in the Arab countries : Current Status and Future Estimates by 2030

Preparation
Dr. Tariq bin Youssef

Scientific supervision
Prof. Dr. Muhammad Al-Jumni

design
M. Hamdi Al-Ayari

The graphic consists of a grey triangle pointing right, a yellow diamond, and a smaller grey diamond overlapping the yellow one. The word "Introduction" is written in a grey sans-serif font to the right of the yellow diamond.

Introduction

Current data and indicators reveal that the number of illiterates in the 15-and-over age group in the Arab countries reached nearly 70 million in 2020, i.e. 9.1% of the world's total illiterate population (763 million). Females represented about 62% of the total illiterates in the Arab region, almost the same percentage recorded globally.

It should be recalled, in this context, that the COVID-19 crisis that swept across the world in late 2019 significantly disrupted the learning process of children, youth and adults in an unprecedented way, affecting the continuity of formal and non-formal education. The consequence has been more inequality in access to education among groups within the same society, a significant rise in school dropouts, and a potential further increase in the number of illiterates in the future.

It has now become necessary to undertake evaluation of current education plans and programs, to deepen reflection about ways of addressing literacy challenges, and to alert to the dangers involved in the absolute increase in the number of illiterates in the Arab world.

Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development aims to “*ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*”. Target 4.6. seeks to “*ensure that, by 2030, all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy*”. What we notice, however, is that the number of illiterates has increased in an unprecedented manner since 2015, the first year in the 15-year plan to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

The present Statistical Bulletin released by the ALECSO Observatory analyzes the current state of illiteracy in the Arab region, in comparison with the situation at the global level. It also makes projections for 2030 in light of the evolution of the number of illiterates in the Arab countries over the past years.



1 – CURRENT STATUS

In light of the Goals and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is clear that the requirements for literacy promotion are ever-increasing in a rapidly changing world where the acquisition and use of knowledge are of vital importance for achieving socio-economic development, with a crucial role played by modern means of communication. Accordingly, it is necessary for all members of society to learn how to build knowledge and develop their abilities to search for, evaluate and use information as effectively as possible.

Illiteracy, in its global sense, is difficult to measure, as it encompasses various types, including alphabetical, cultural and digital illiteracy. The data available in this regard relate only to alphabetical illiteracy, with statistics sometimes lacking accuracy and reliability. This raises questions about the true size of the problem, even in what concerns illiteracy in its most basic form.

It should be noted, in this regard, that the number of illiterates is usually determined based on population surveys carried out by the statistical authorities in each country. And since these surveys are conducted on a periodic basis, with the data resulting from them being issued every two years or more, depending on the programs of the statistical authorities in each country, it would then be difficult to determine the number of illiterates in a specific year in all Arab countries.

Moreover, the number of illiterates in each country is usually determined among those belonging to the 15-and-over age group. Accordingly, data on illiteracy are released generally for this age group, with more specific data on young people (15-24 years) and on the elderly (65 years and over).

In the Arab countries, data on illiteracy released by statistical authorities relate mostly to the 15-and-over age group. In some cases, data are issued for the 10-and-over age group. To be able to properly monitor the evolution of illiteracy across the Arab world, it is important that the 15-and-over age group be adopted uniformly by all Arab States.

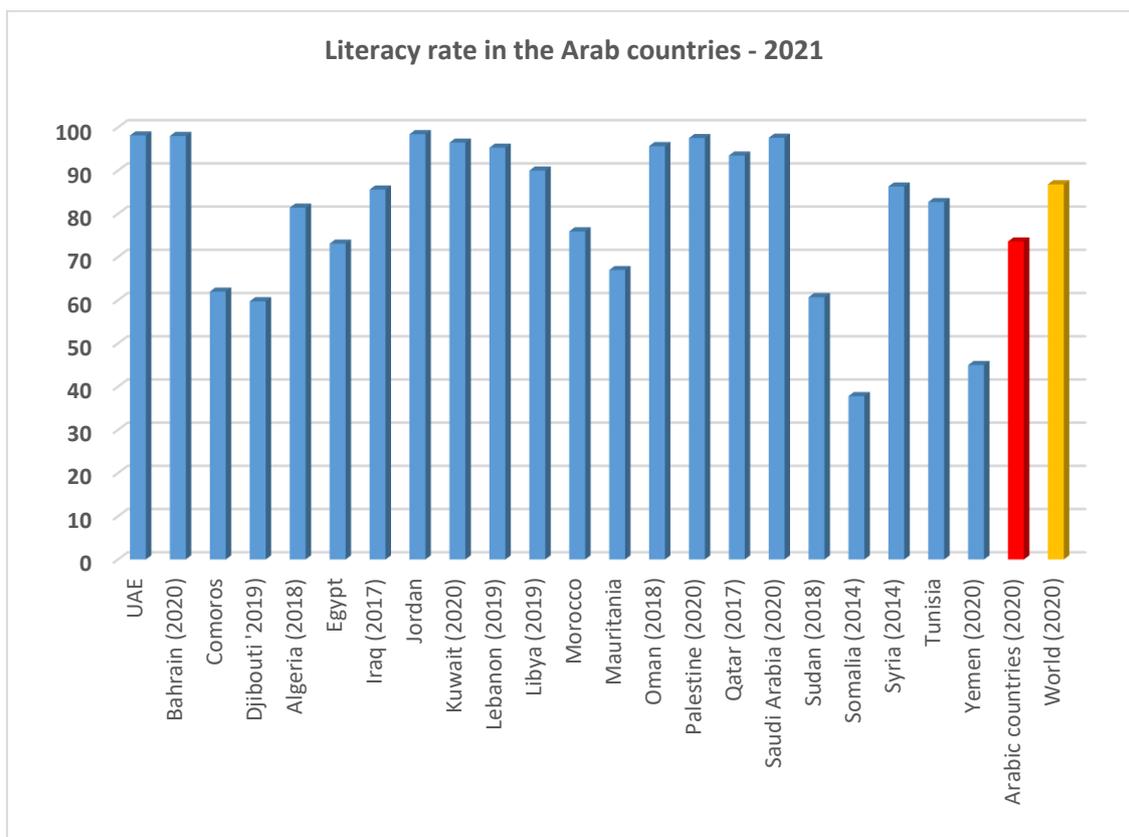
1.1 – Literacy rates in the Arab countries:

“Literacy rate” is the percentage of the population of a given age group that are able to read and write. A person is considered literate when he is able to read, write and comprehend a short simple statement on everyday life. Literacy also encompasses numeracy, the ability to make simple arithmetic calculations.

“Illiteracy rate” is the percentage of the population of a given age group that cannot read and write.

Figure 1 below shows that literacy rates have significantly increased in several Arab countries, exceeding 90% in nine Arab States, while low rates have been recorded in Yemen and Somalia. The Arab average is below the global average by about 13 points. Still, despite the increasing literacy rate in the Arab countries, the number of illiterates is on the rise, especially in crisis countries.

Figure 1



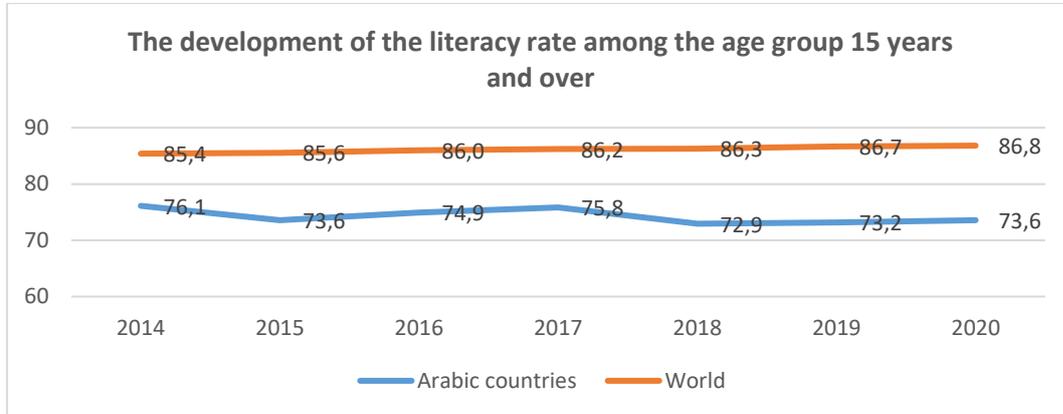
Source UIS

1.2 – Average literacy rate in the Arab countries compared to the global average:

Figure 2 shows that the average literacy rate in the Arab countries has significantly dropped during the period 2014-2020. It decreased between 2014 and 2015 from 76.1% to 73.6%, then it rose in 2016-2017, before going down again to 72.9% in 2018. It then increased in 2019 and 2020 by 0.3 points and 0.4 points respectively. It can be noted that the level of the indicator in 2020 is equal to that recorded in

2015, while the global average has slightly but steadily increased during the period 2014-2020.

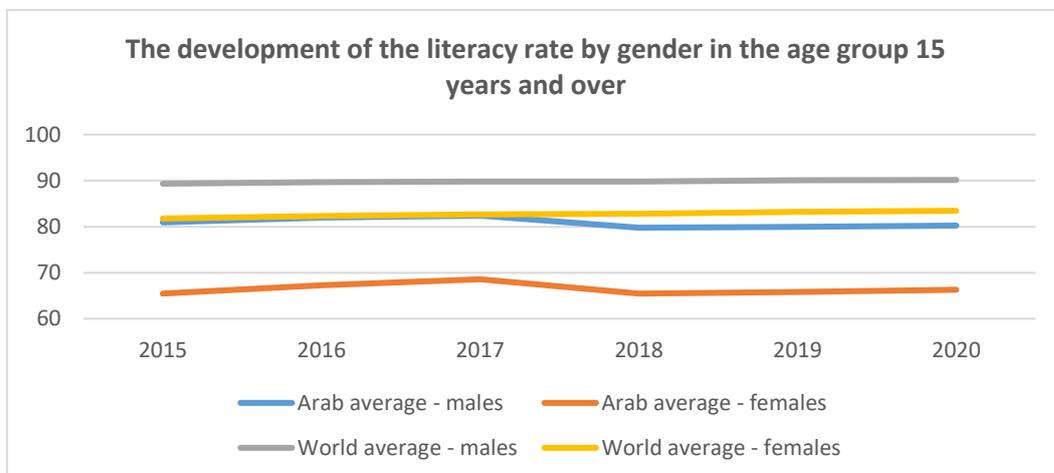
Figure 2



Source UIS

During the period 2015-2020, the evolution of the average Arab and global literacy rate (disaggregated by sex) followed the same trend of the general indicator, with an increase in the indicator for males, compared to that for females, in both the Arab and global averages. What calls for attention is the large gap between the sexes in the Arab average, which exceeds 15 points, compared to nearly 7 points in the global average. This gap is due to several complex and overlapping factors: cultural (traditions and customs, conservative patriarchal family culture ...), social (family disintegration, early marriage, divorce...), and economic (local economic pattern, poverty, unemployment, living conditions, educational level of parents, and the surrounding environment in general).

Figure 3



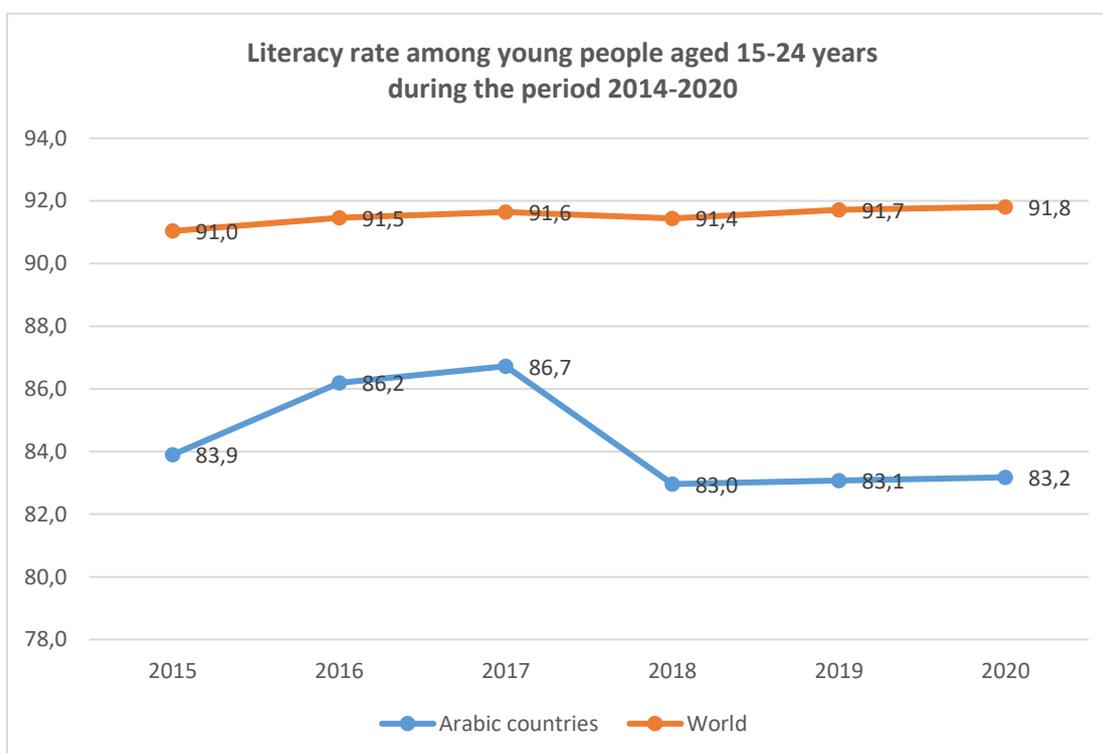
Source UIS

Literacy rate among young people aged 15-24 years :

Figure 4 shows that the global average increased, though only slightly, during the period 2014-2020, compared to a significant decrease in the Arab average, due perhaps to the security and war situation in some Arab countries that has negatively affected youth literacy rates.

It is worth recalling, in this context, that the theme chosen for the 2021 International Literacy Day, celebrated on September 8 of each year, was “*Literacy for a human-centered recovery : Narrowing the digital divide*”. Given the literacy rate recorded among Arab youth, the digital divide seems to be difficult to narrow in the near future.

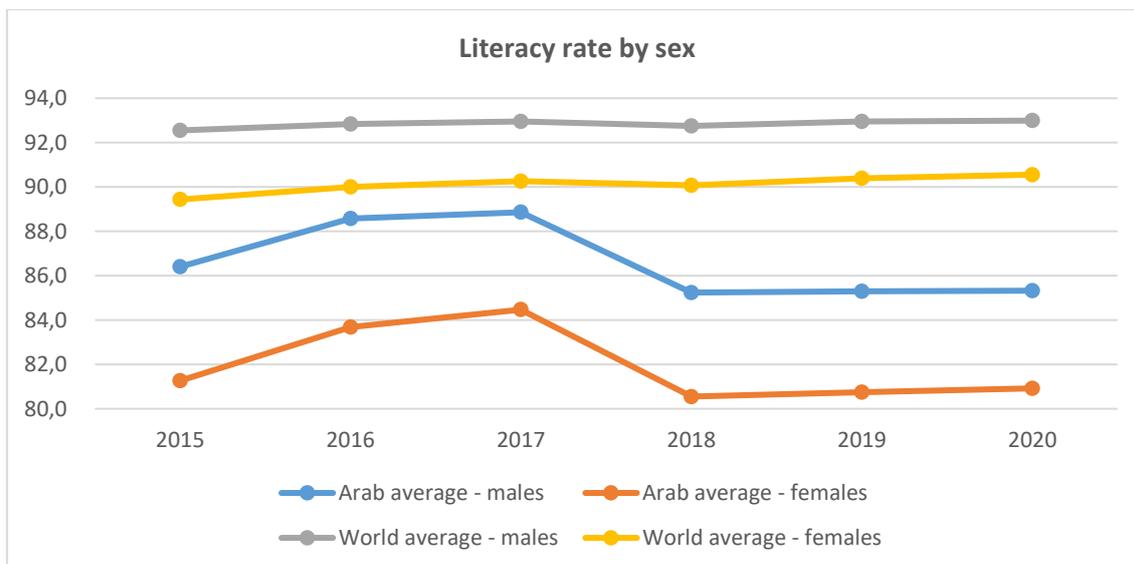
Figure 4



Source UIS

As for the literacy rate by sex, it can be seen from Figure 5 that the gap between the Arab and global averages was close to 10 points for females in 2020, compared to 7.6 points for males. The gap has widened for both males and females, as in 2015 it was about 8.2 points for females and 6.1 points for males. This shows that literacy among Arab youth, be they male or female, has decreased, while the world average has increased, albeit modestly.

Figure 5



Source UIS

1.3 – Evolution of the number of illiterates in the Arab countries and in the world

Table 1

The evolution of the number of illiterates in the age group 15 years and over during the period 2016-2020

the year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
The number of illiterate people in the world	768 920 758	766 127 627	773 131 724	762 135 016	763 205 252
The number of illiterates in the Arab countries	60 643 844	59 434 238	68 656 431	69 285 140	69 469 732
illiterates in the Arab The percentage of countries from the global population	7,89%	7,76%	8,88%	9,09%	9,10%

Source: Estimates of the UIS

The number of illiterates in the 15-and-over age group in the Arab countries reached about 69.5 million in 2020, which represented 9.1% of the global total.

As shown by Table 1, the percentage of illiterates in the Arab countries out of the global total has been constantly on the rise in recent years. It can also be noted that the number of illiterates in the Arab region has increased at a faster pace than that

recorded worldwide. Special programs should, therefore, be put in place in the Arab countries to tackle this problem.

The number of illiterate youth (15-24 years) amounted in 2020 to nearly 9.5 million (Table 2), i.e. 9.57% of the total illiterates in the world in the same age group. Action should, therefore, be taken to bring down this high number, by ensuring compulsory basic education and curbing school dropouts, especially in primary education.

It should be recalled, in this context, that the number of children and youth out of school in the Arab countries is significantly high, amounting to about 5 million in primary education, 3.5 million in lower secondary education, and 7.5 million in upper secondary education. Accordingly, the total number of children and youth outside the educational system reached nearly 16 million in 2020.

Table 2

The evolution of the number of illiterates in the age group 15-24 years during the period 2016-2020

the year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
The number of illiterate people in the world	101 976 986	99 850 465	102 348 472	99 542 113	98 748 431
The number of illiterates in the Arab countries	7 391 702	6 967 717	9 667 524	9 549 127	9 452 070
illiterates in the Arab countries The percentage of from the global population	7,25%	6,98%	9,45%	9,59%	9,57%

Source: Estimates of the UIS

It is to be pointed out, in this regard, that the Arab League’s proclamation of 2015-2024 as the decade for the eradication of illiteracy in all parts of the Arab world did not meet with the desired response, especially on the part of the Arab countries suffering from this scourge. This initiative is designed to:

- Free the illiterate population in the Arab world from illiteracy by 2024;
- Promote literacy by establishing compulsory education, ensuring that all school-age children are schooled, and countering the problems of school failure and dropout;
- Expand and improve literacy programs for the poorest and neediest groups to enable them to engage in the knowledge society;
- Narrow the gender gap in adult education;
- Dry up the sources of illiteracy and prevent relapse to it.

In this regard, ALECSO can play a significant role in providing technical support to Arab countries with high illiteracy rates and growing illiterate populations.



2 – ESTIMATES OF THE NUMBER OF ILLITERATES IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES BY 2030

Below are projections of the number of illiterates in the 15-and-over age group and more particularly among youth aged 15-24 years, based on relevant data provided by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics for the years 2010-2020, which the Institute collects periodically from Member States.

Estimates have also been made of the number of illiterates in Somalia, Djibouti and Libya, due to the lack of relevant data for these countries.

The Observatory has also used recent data for 2021 issued by statistical authorities in some Arab countries.

Projections are based on the following hypotheses:

- The current educational situation in all Arab countries remains unchanged (for better or for worse);
- No ambitious program is put in place for the implementation of Target 6 of SDG4;
- The current tragic situation in some Arab countries, such as Syria, Yemen, Somalia and Sudan, is settled. Estimates could be higher if this situation persists.

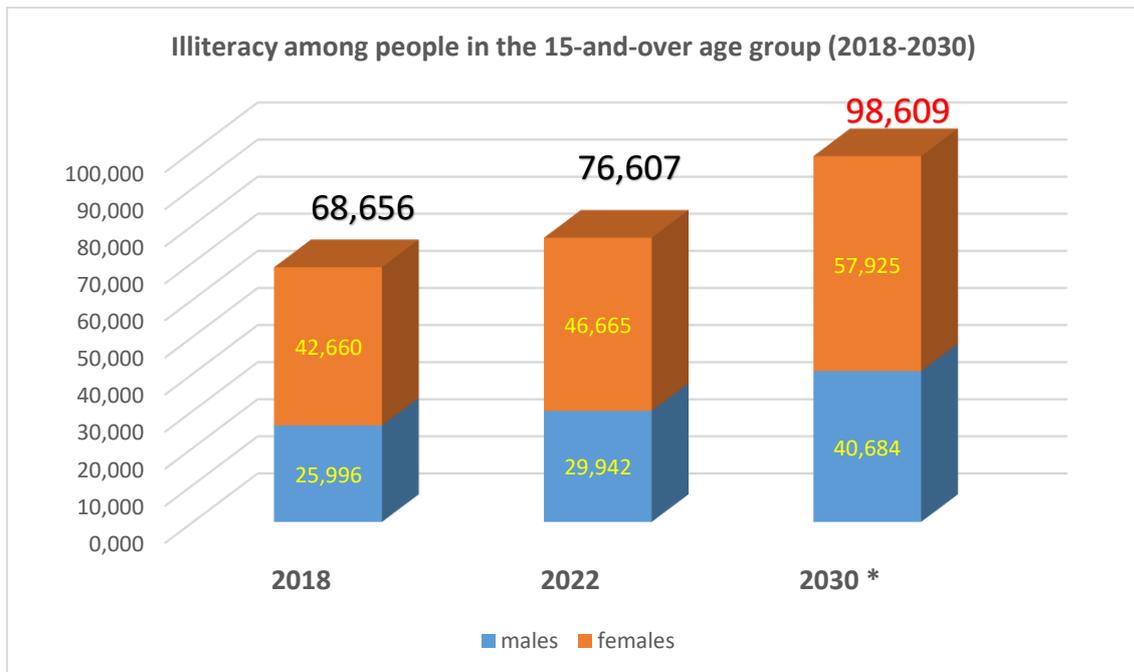
2.1 – Illiteracy among people in the 15-and-over age group (2018-2030):

There was a considerable growth in the number of illiterates in the Arab countries during the period 2018-2022, from 68.656 to 76.607 million. As for the coming period 2022-2030, the ALECSO Observatory expects a significant increase in the illiterate population, as shown in Figure 6 below.

In 2030, the illiterate population in the Arab world is expected to reach nearly **98.6 million** (40.7 million males and 57.9 million females).

The percentage of females out of the total illiterates in the Arab world decreased from 62.1% in 2018 to 61% in 2022, and is expected to go down to 58.7% in 2030. Despite this decrease, the number of female illiterates is expected to increase by 24.1% between 2022 and 2030.

Figure 6



ALECSO Observatory estimates

Population size and illiteracy rate by 2030

The total population of the Arab countries is expected to reach about 534 million in 2030, compared to nearly 456 million in 2021, i.e. an average annual population growth rate of 1.7%.

The 15-and-over population of the Arab countries is expected to be around 358 million in 2030. The illiteracy rate is estimated to reach about 25%, compared to 26.4% in 2022, i.e. an expected decrease by one and a half percentage point in 2030.

2.2 – Youth illiteracy in the Arab world (2018-2030):

The number of illiterate youth (15-24 years) in the Arab world amounted to 9.668 million in 2018. It went down to 9.452 million in 2020 and then to 9.234 million in 2022 (Figure 7). It is a significantly high number, given that youth will constitute the key component of the labor force in the near future, and therefore

need to possess the necessary skills and competencies so that they can contribute to building the future of their societies.

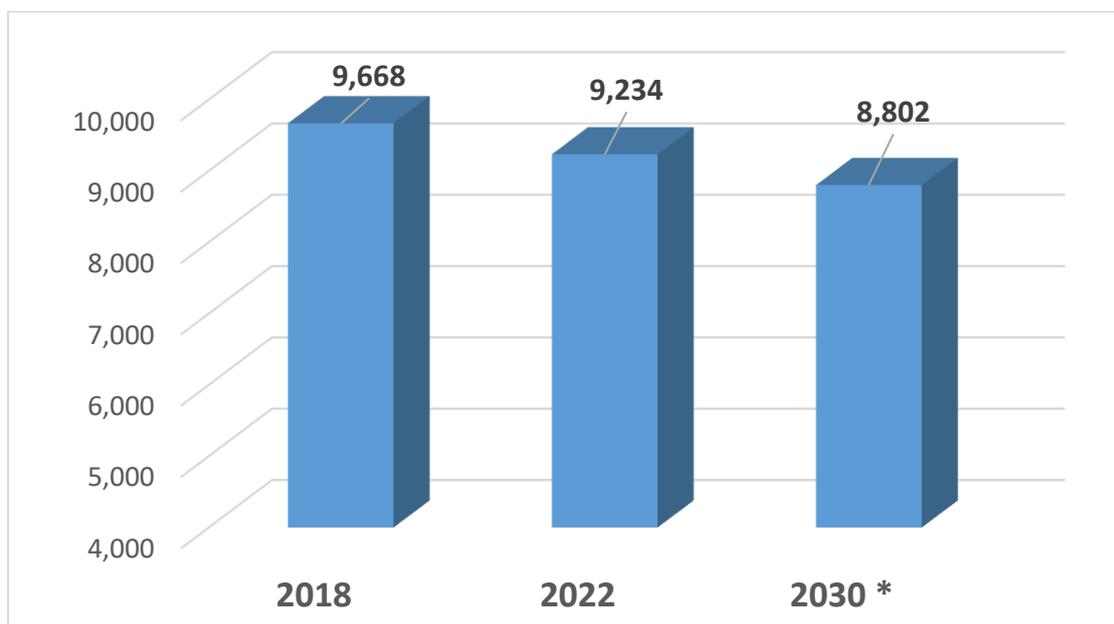
The number of illiterate youth (15-24 years) is expected to decrease to about 8.8 million by 2030, a still high number for the youth segment of the population. Effective programs should, therefore, be put in place in order to reduce the number of illiterates, as part of implementing Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Agenda.

It is worth recalling, in this regard, that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school dropouts was already addressed in the fourth Statistical Bulletin, released in December 2021 under the title : “*The impact of COVID-19 on Education in the Arab Countries and Around the World*”. The Bulletin revealed that the number of children and youth outside the school system increased between 2019 and 2020, compared to a significant decrease in the pre-pandemic period. It remains to be seen what impact the high dropout rates will have on the number of illiterate youth.

The actual numbers may even be higher than the projections made for 2030.

Figure 7

The number of illiterate youth (15-24 years) in the Arab world



ALECSO Observatory estimates

Recommendations

In line with the Goals and Targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and in order to reduce illiteracy in the Arab world, it is necessary to work on:

- Developing Member States' capacities in terms of public policy-making, program implementation, and literacy assessment;
- Expanding the knowledge base and enhancing the monitoring and evaluation processes;
- Strengthening the modalities of implementing literacy programs, including the use of information and communication technologies;
- Supporting the Arab States' literacy efforts in the areas of public policy-making, program implementation, and literacy assessment, by developing a set of literacy projects;
- Ensuring that all school-age children attend primary school;
- Combating school dropouts and supporting Arab States' efforts to that end;
- Providing illiterate people with adequate training in vocational training centers to enhance their future employability.

References:

- UNESCO Strategy for Youth and Adult Literacy (2020-2025) - During the UNESCO General Conference - November 2019
- UNESCO Institute for Statistics database - <http://uis.unesco.org/fr>
- World Bank Database - <https://donnees.banquemondiale.org/>
- The reality of public education in the Arab world and ways to develop it - a research study - ALECSO Organization - 2016
- Women and Illiteracy in the Euro-Mediterranean Region - Recommendations of the Committee on Women's Rights in the Euro-Mediterranean Countries. — 2012.
- The problem of illiteracy in the Arab world and ways to combat it - Mazroua Al-Taher - January 2018.