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Proxies and perplexities: What is the current state of adult (il)literacy in South Africa?

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed analysis of the data from a range of official sources that have been used to enumerate the number of people who can be described as totally or functionally illiterate and estimates whether illiteracy in South Africa can be reduced in the foreseeable future.

The study examines the use of years of schooling (conventionally now set at Grade 7) as the proxy indicator of a person being functionally literate by the main sources, the General Population Censuses of 1996, 2001, and 2011 and the annual General Household Surveys and shows that these sources give somewhat contradictory and discordant estimates of the rate at which there is gradual decline of illiteracy in South Africa. Other indicators based on self reporting, also used in the Census and General Housing Surveys, show that a large number of adult South Africans have difficulty in reading, writing and calculating with numbers. The study also shows that the data presented by these surveys about participation in literacy and adult basic education and training classes is inaccurate. Note is made that currently South Africa does not make use of any means of direct testing of adult literacy.

The article concludes with an exploration on whether South Africa is able to reach the goal of halving illiteracy by 2015. The target of such a reduction is necessarily based on what the baseline number of illiterates is as well as decision on whether full function literacy must be obtained or a merely a basic level of alphabetisation. Through a detailed estimation of the results of the *Kha Ri Gude* adult literacy campaign since 2008 a finding is made that the halving of illiteracy will be made, but only at the most basic level, and that attaining full functional literacy for all South Africans remains a major task.

What is the current state of adult (il)literacy in South Africa?

The answers to this question:

- require an examination of a variety of data (much of it somewhat suspect)
- imply judgements about the successes and failures of the provision of adult education in the twenty years since South Africa became a democratic state
- provide the baseline data for the planning of the final eradication of illiteracy
- inform prognostications about how long that process will take.

This article, which tries, inadequately, to answer the question, is broken down into two parts, the first looks at the data on illiteracy and the second at the whether the efforts to significantly reduce illiteracy have succeeded (or will succeed) in the near future.

The data on adult (il)literacy levels

The data on literacy levels in South Africa is derived from three types of data:

- proxy measures of literacy based on education (schooling) levels (recorded through census and other surveys)
- self-reports of literacy competency (usually collected through surveys)
- direct measures of literacy skills (usually done through smaller surveys or studies).

Estimating literacy using proxy indicators

Conventionally and until recently, UNESCO has recorded national statistics on illiteracy using proxy measures such as census data on education levels. Such proxy measures usually recorded “No schooling” as meaning totally

illiterate and "Below a certain grade level" as indicating functional illiteracy. In 1995 Harley *et al.* argued that in South Africa an adult with less than grade 7 was likely to be functionally illiterate (Harley *et al.*, 1996, pp. 23-25), a position accepted by Statistics South Africa in its General Housing Survey reports (see Statistics South Africa, 2014, p. 24) and by the Department of Basic Education (see Department of Basic Education, 2014, p. 38).

The estimates based on census data

Table 1 summarises figures for the literacy and basic education levels of adult South Africans aged 15 and over, using data from the 1996, 2001 and 2011 General Population Censuses. (The age of 15 is chosen as the lower age limit because this is UNESCO usage in recording adult literacy levels.)

Table 1

Literacy and basic education levels of South Africans aged 15 and over			
Level of education	General Population Census		
	1996	2001	2011
Full general education (grade 9 and more)	13.1 million (50%)	15.8 million (52%)	24.3 million (68%)
Less than full general education (less than grade 9)	13.2 million (50%)	14.6 million (48%)	11.5 million (32%)
None to less than grade 7	8.5 million (32%)	9.6 million (32%)	6.9 million (19%)
No schooling	4.2 million (16%)	4.7 million (16%)	2.7 million (8%)

These figures show that by 2001 there had been no decrease since 1995/1996 in the percentage of functionally illiterate adults (less than grade 7) and they had actually increased in raw numbers. Some 32% of the adult population of about 30½ million could therefore be regarded as functionally illiterate and the functional literacy rate (taking grade 7 education as the criterion of functional literacy) amongst the adult population had accordingly remained at 68% since 1996. There had been a very slight drop in the in the proportion of no

schooling illiterates but their raw number had increased. All provinces, except the Northern Cape had increasing numbers of adults with no schooling.

These estimates assume the accuracy of the 2001 census figures, which also correspond to similar estimates in October Household Surveys from the late 1990s. The estimates informed the planning of the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign (Aitchison, 2006). The corollary of these statistics is that the state system of adult basic education and training and its parallels in the business sector and non-governmental organisations had by 2001 failed to reduce the number or percentage of functionally illiterate people in South Africa. At best ABET provision was keeping the percentage of functional illiterates the same, though their raw numbers continued to grow.

However, the situation shown in the 2011 census suggests a startling reversal of the growth in raw numbers of the poorly educated and a rapid decline in the percentage of those with less than grade 9 and grade 7. In addition, a new set of proxy based estimates now also challenge the 1996 and 2001 census based figures (and also, though to a lesser extent, the 2011 census data itself).

The estimates based on post-2001 General household Surveys

Subsequent to the General Population Census of 2001, a number of annual general household surveys[1] present a suite of results of proxy-based estimates which generally suggest a lower and declining number[2] of both total illiteracy (No schooling) and functional illiteracy (Less than Grade 7 amongst those

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1 General Household Surveys are conducted annually by Statistics South Africa and collect data from a sample of private households and residents in worker hostels in the whole country. The aim of the survey is to provide government departments and organisations with information on the progress of development in South Africa for monitoring and policy purposes. The survey covers six broad areas, namely education, health and social development, housing, household access to services and facilities, food security, and agriculture (Statistics South Africa, 2015, p. 10). A Community Survey, by comparison, is a mini census, undertaken in 2007 in South Africa, because of the large ten year gap between the 2001 census and the 2011 census.

2 They also suggest lower overall population figures for South Africa than extrapolations of the 2001 census data would predict.

with only some primary education) as seen in Table 2 based on Figure 9 from the ***General Household Survey 2013*** (Statistics South Africa, 2014, p. 23):[3]

Table 2

Literacy and basic education levels of South Africans aged 20 and over General Household Surveys 2002 to 2013			
Date of survey	No schooling	Some primary	Both
2002	10.6%	17.0%	27.6%
2003	9.9%	15.8%	25.7%
2004	9.6%	15.5%	25.1%
2005	9.4%	15.0%	24.4%
2006	9.5%	14.3%	23.8%
2007	8.6%	14.3%	22.9%
2008	8.7%	13.9%	22.6%
2009	7.2%	12.3%	19.5%
2010	6.8%	12.1%	18.9%
2011	6.4%	11.5%	17.9%
2012	5.8%	10.9%	16.7%
2013	5.6%	10.7%	16.3%

The General Household Survey report starts with an estimate of the No schooling group as having been 10.6% (3 016 000 people) in 2002 (indicating considerable divergence from the Census 2001 estimate of 17.9% for those aged 20 and over with No schooling) dropping to 5.6% (1 788 000 people) in 2013, both a percentage decline and a real number decline.

The decline in numbers each year (except for 2006 and 2008 when there were small increases in the No schooling percentages) is erratic, ranging from 1% to

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3 It needs to be noted that every year these figures are retrospectively revised downwards (presumably by reweighting). The original ***General Household Survey*** figures in the report on each year from 2002 to 2013 have these No schooling figures: 11.8%, 11.2%, 10.8%, 10.4%, 10.5%, 9.3%, 8.7%, 7.4%, 7.0%, 6.6%, 5.8%, 5.6%. Only 2012 and 2013 remain unaltered.

13%. Given that the explanation for the decline would presumably focus mainly on the fact that older people with no education would gradually be dying out and younger people who had benefited from the more general availability of schooling would be coming in, the erratic nature of the declines suggests some kind of error, whether of sampling or weighting (and retrospective reweighting – as it is clear that with each successive annual household survey the previous survey figures are retrospectively revised downwards (as shown in the example of the 2009 survey in the Table 3 below)).

The 2013 general household survey claims a decline in total illiteracy (No schooling) and functional illiteracy (schooling of less than Grade 7) among adults aged 20 years and older from 27.3% in 2002 to 16.2% in 2013.

Table 3

Percentage of adults (aged 20+) with less than Grade 7 education			
Year	GHS of the year	GHS 2009	GHS 2013
2002	28.9	27.9	27.3
2003	27.4	26.2	25.5
2004	26.5		25
2005	25.6	24.8	24.2
2006	25.1		23.7
2007	23.7	23.2	22.7
2008	22.4		22.4
2009	19.7	19.7	19.3
2010	19.2		18.8
2011	18.1		17.7
2012	16.5		16.5
2013	16.2		16.2

Table 3 shows that the General Housing Surveys from 2002 to 2013 indicated a decline every year in the percentage of undereducated adults. The General Housing Survey of 2013 show how Statistics South Africa has also retrospectively re-weighted the figures for most years.

The Department of Basic Education has made use of these General Household Survey reports and has issued reports based on their own analysis and calculations of the education statistics in the General Household Surveys from 2009 to 2013 (Department of Education, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) as well as a summary one on the 2002 to 2008 surveys (Department of Basic Education, 2010).

Their latest summary (Department of Basic Education, 2014, p. 40) of literacy progress using the Grade 7 and higher proxy measure of functional literacy is shown in Table 4:

Table 4

Percentage of adults aged 20 and above who have completed Grade 7 and higher, 2009 - 2012				
Group	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
African	75.0	76.0	78.9	79.1
Coloured	83.9	85.5	72.3	86.4
Indian/Asian	95.5	92.1	92.6	92.0
White	99.8	98.8	98.0	97.5
All	**79.4**	**80.0**	**80.7**	**82.2**

[It might be noted that it is impossible for any country or population group in the world to actually have a 99.8% Grade 7 schooling achievement – because there is a percentage (usually at least 3% to 5%) of **every** population which is largely uneducable because of major physical or mental handicap. Current estimates suggest that as many as half a million disabled South African children may not be in school (Human Rights Watch, 2015, pp. 74-75).]

The Department of Basic Education's ***General Housing Survey (GHS) 2012 Report – Focus on schooling*** (Department of Basic Education, 2014, p. 40) states:

> Overall the percentage of adults who are literate across all population groups has increased from 79% in 2009 to approximately 82% in 2012. This may be attributed to the introduction of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) now known as Adult Education and Training (AET), the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign and other initiatives introduced to improve the literacy rates of adults by Government.

This statement has a puzzling set of claims about the causes of the reduction in illiteracy (and ignores the most obvious one, the deaths of older illiterates). Firstly, the number of ABET learners had remained more or less static since the mid-1990s and the output of learners with a full ABET grade 9 equivalence was derisory (only 8 221 in the six years from 2001 to 2006). So-called AET is not the same as ABET as it includes both ABET (grade 1 to 9 equivalence) and adult Further Education and Training (grade 10 to 12 equivalence). Further, the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign, whatever it achievements in reducing total illiteracy, has little impact on functional literacy statistics as its output level is grade 3 equivalence only.[4]

Anomalies in the post-census 2001 surveys

The anomalies in the post-census 2001 surveys are a cause for perplexity.

Take the following example in Table 5 of a comparison between the ***Community Survey 2007*** and the ***General Housing Survey 2007*** with the ***Census 2001*** figure. The variations in the differences in the separate provincial declines in the number of illiterates are inexplicable (and they certainly cannot be explained away by assuming either **systematic** sampling, weighting or coding errors in the whole datasets for Census 2001, or the two 2007 surveys, or a selective genocide of illiterate adults over the age of 50).

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[4] As the Department of Basic Education (2014, p. 38) notes: "an adult who has completed Grade 7 and above is regarded as literate. The completion of primary education is used as a proxy for measuring literacy; that is, it is assumed that the person is capable of reading, writing and doing some basic numeracy. This calculation is in line with the UNESCO Institute of Statistics calculations."

Table 5

Decline in number of unschooled persons between 2001 and 2007					
	Census 2001	Community Survey 2007	Decline as %	General Household Survey 2007	Decline as %
KwaZulu-Natal	1 539 299	645 471	58%	617 000	60%
Limpopo	858 681	511 714	40%	480 000	44%
Eastern Cape	778 204	366 590	53%	399 000	49%
Gauteng	515 747	277 285	46%	238 000	54%
Mpumalanga	468 747	307 740	34%	296 000	37%
North West	437 791	260 381	41%	230 000	47%
Free State	257 140	132 110	49%	126 000	51%
Western Cape	167 619	94 724	43%	84 000	50%
Northern Cape	91 304	76 358	16%	71 000	22%
South Africa	5 114 532	2 672 373	48%	2 541 000	50%

To be noted are the large declines in provinces with the highest illiteracy levels (KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape) and the tiny decline in the Northern Cape.

Even more alarming are some other results in the ***General Household Survey 2009*** (Statistics South Africa, 2010). For example, as shown in Table 6, it reports (p. 9) that there were only 18,000 person attending literacy classes at a time when the *Kha Ri Gude* adult literacy campaign had 613 643 learners registered that year (and of whom some 545 666 submitted their final

assessment portfolio at the end of the six month programme) (South African Qualifications Authority, 2010, 2013).[5]

Table 6

Comparison between *Kha Ri Gude* registrations in 2009 and the General Household Survey 2009 tally of people in literacy classes			
Province	*Kha Ri Gude*	GHS 2009	GHS as % of *Kha Ri Gude*
Eastern Cape	142 671	6 000	4.2%
KwaZulu-Natal	133 486	2 000	1.5%
Limpopo	103 828	4 000	3.9%
Gauteng	75 678	1 000	1.3%
Mpumalanga	55 971	< 1000	<1.3%
Free State	50 984	4 000	7.8%
North West	32 193	1 000	3.1%
Western Cape	11 173	1 000	9.0%
Northern Cape	7 654	< 1000	<13.1%
	613 643	**18 000**	**2.9%**

Even if one assumes that some literacy learners have been recorded as being in Adult Basic Education and Training Classes (the survey records 120 000

5 The *Kha Ri Gude* adult literacy campaign was launched in April 2008 after a two year process of investigation and development. Some 357,195 learners were enrolled in 2008, 613 643 in 2009, 609 199 in 2010, 660 924 in 2011, 676 323 in 2012, and 562 926 in 2013. The South African Qualifications Authority has conducted an annual verification exercise involving a moderation of a sample of Learner Assessment Portfolios that are submitted from every learner and conveyed to the head office for moderation and verification. By the end of 2012 some 2 305 492 learners had passed this assessment and been recorded on the National Learner Record Database. The Auditor-General also conducted a verification exercise in 2014. Even allowing for some margin of error in the statistics it is incontestable that huge numbers of people participated in *Kha Ri Gude* classes.

attendees), this is still far short of the number of *Kha Ri Gude* registrations.[6] It is a catastrophic miscount.

So, on questions of accurate sampling, the General Household Survey of 2009 hardly inspires confidence.

Table 7 shows the situation with the 2012 General Household Survey (Statistics South Africa, 2013, p. 9) and exposes an equally dire miscounting problem:

Table 7

Comparison between *Kha Ri Gude* registrations in 2012 and the General Household Survey tally of people (aged 5+) in literacy classes

Province	*Kha Ri Gude*	GHS 2012	GHS as % of *Kha Ri Gude*
Eastern Cape	161 155	Less than 5 726	Less than 3.6%
KwaZulu-Natal	148 687	Less than 1 688	Less than 3.9%
Limpopo	109 035	Less than 1 002	Less than 0.9%
Gauteng	88 821	Less than 1 543	Less than 1.7%
Mpumalanga	56 907	Less than 659	Less than 1.2%
Free State	52 892	Less than 397	Less than 0.8%
North West	35 917	Less than 1 018	Less than 2.8%
Western Cape	15 315	Less than 3 684	Less than 24%
Northern Cape	7 589	Less than 162	Less than 2.1%
	676 323	**15 692**	**2.3%**

6 The General Household Survey seems to have been somewhat confused (as many people are) on the distinction between literacy classes and ABET classes. Buy even such confusion does not explain the overall miscount.

So the general question arises: "If the General Household Survey can get this data so wrong, how can one trust any of these post-census 2001 surveys' illiteracy statistics?"

The problems with the two suites of proxy estimates

Estimating South Africa's illiteracy levels using proxy measures is complicated by what are now clearly two suites of statistics – the earlier Census and pre-2000 Household Surveys and the new set of Community and Household surveys. These latter surveys have come up with figures that suggest three options:

- the Census figures were wrong
- there has been a dramatic decline in illiteracy
- the recent survey figures themselves are inaccurate.

Thus, for example, the 2007 Community Survey, found that the people with No schooling (the comparable cohort of people enumerated in the Census 2001 would now be aged 20 and over) totalled only 2,672,373 (an enormous difference of 2,048,253 from the census figure of 4,720,626). The October Household Survey of 2008 estimated that the Number of people adults aged 20 with No schooling was now about 2,451,856. This would suggest that the number of No schooling=Total illiterates would be about 9% rather than the 16% of the 2001 Census.

If these new surveys, using proxy measures, are accurate, then the literacy problem is nearly halved.

This may be considered good news, though the raw number of illiterate people is still a huge challenge, even if one now assumes that the actual number of functional illiterates may be less than the Census 2001 estimate of 9.6 million, possibly about 8.25 million (25% of adults) (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2010, p. 21, p. 14).

However, the continuing ambiguity of the statistics affirms the need for a well conducted literacy survey such as those run in Kenya and Botswana (which both showed the actual literacy levels to be lower than previously estimated) using direct measuring of literacy skills.

Self-report measures of literacy

Some recent South African community and household surveys have made use of self-report measures of literacy, though one should note the caveat of Gustaffson *et al.* (2009, pp. 3) that literacy data from a number of countries indicates that self-reported literacy rates tend to be higher than rates based on proxy measures and may lead to over-estimates of adult literacy.

The General Household Survey of 2008

The General Household Survey of 2008 asked respondents whether they and their household members could read and write and found that 10.5% of adults aged 15 or over could not read or write, slightly more than the same survey's proxy measure estimate of total illiteracy at about 8%.[7]

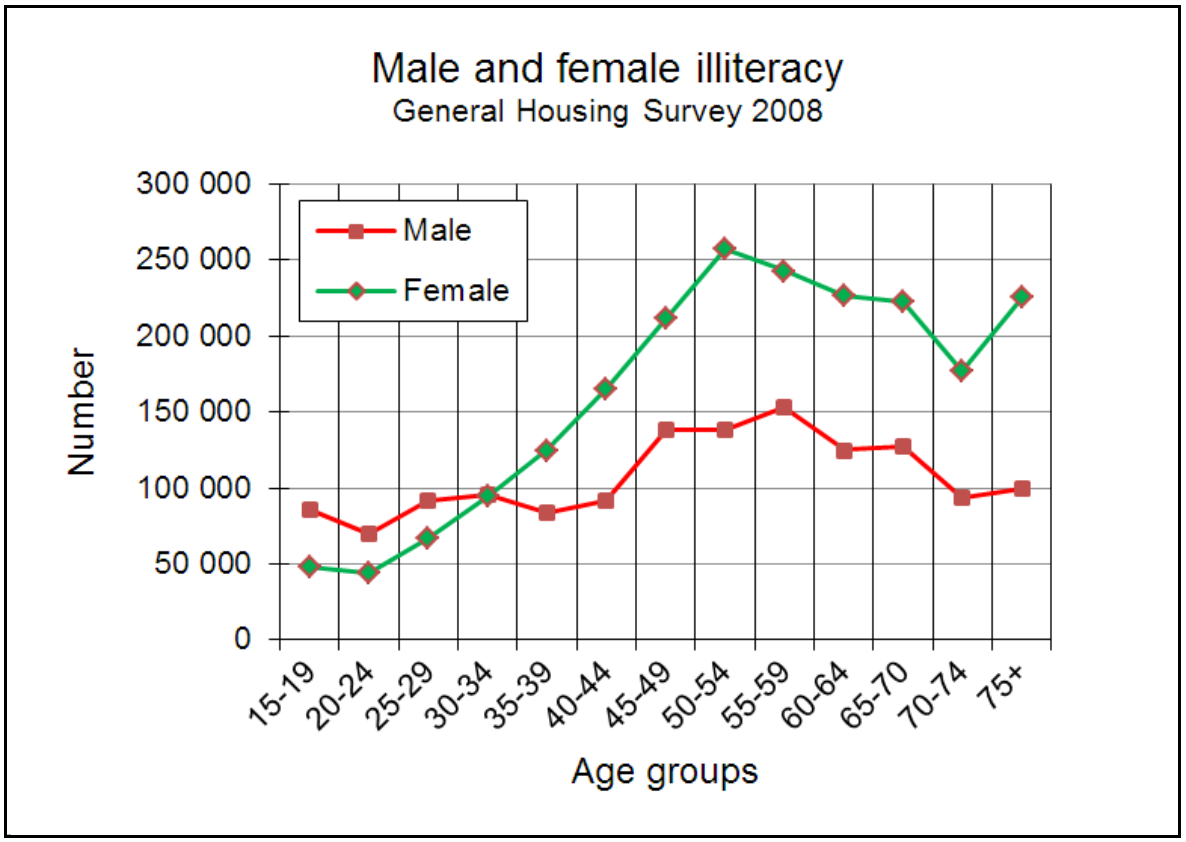
Table 8

Cannot read or write. General Household Survey 2008				
Age group	Male	Female	Both	As %
15-19	86000	48000	133 000	3.8%
20-24	70000	44000	114 000	3.3%
25-29	92000	67000	158 000	4.5%
30-34	96000	95000	191 000	5.5%
35-39	84000	125000	209 000	6.0%
40-44	92000	165000	256 000	7.3%
45-49	138000	212000	350 000	10.0%
50-54	138000	257000	396 000	11.3%
55-59	153000	243000	396 000	11.3%
60-64	125000	227000	353 000	10.0%
65-70	127000	223000	349 000	10.0%
70-74	94000	177000	270 000	7.7%
75+	100000	226000	326 000	9.3%
Totals	**1 394 000**	**2 108 000**	**3 501 000**	**100.0%**

[7] One needs to note the caution by Posel (2011, p. 43-44) that respondents my over-estimate their literacy competence when faced with Yes/No options.

Of interest is that the raw number of illiterates peaks amongst people in their fifties and that adult illiteracy will, in the future, become predominantly a **male** problem, both trends evident from the Figure 1.

Figure 1



These findings are replicated in the General Household Surveys in subsequent years.

The General Household Surveys from 2009 to 2013

The General Household Surveys from 2009 to 2013 asked respondents a more nuanced set of questions about whether those aged 15 or more and with less than Grade 7 education could write their own name, read, fill in a form, write a letter, calculate the change they should receive, and read road signs on a scale of No difficulty/ Some difficulty/ A lot of difficulty/ Unable to do (Statistics South Africa, 2011, 2012, 2013).

Table 9

Literacy and numeracy skills of adults aged 15 + with no or less than Grade 7 level of education [General Housing Surveys 2009 to 2013]							
			2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Reading	Reading	No difficulty	50%	52%	52%	51%	50%
		Some difficulty	14%	11%	10%	10%	10%
		A lot of difficulty	10%	9%	9%	9%	10%
		Unable to do	27%	28%	29%	30%	30%
	Reading road signs	No difficulty	49%	48%	51%	54%	58%
		Some difficulty	15%	13%	12%	12%	11%
		A lot of difficulty	9%	11%	9%	9%	8%
		Unable to do	27%	28%	28%	26%	25%
Writing	Writing name	No difficulty	72%	71%	70%	70%	70%
		Some difficulty	5%	4%	5%	4%	4%
		A lot of difficulty	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
		Unable to do	19%	20%	21%	21%	22%
	Filling in a form	No difficulty	32%	28%	32%	29%	29%
		Some difficulty	16%	15%	13%	14%	13%
		A lot of difficulty	14%	16%	15%	15%	14%
		Unable to do	38%	41%	40%	42%	44%
	Writing a letter	No difficulty	47%	47%	47%	48%	47%
		Some difficulty	13%	10%	11%	10%	9%
		A lot of difficulty	10%	10%	10%	10%	9%
		Unable to do	30%	32%	33%	32%	34%
Numeracy	Calculating change should receive	No difficulty	67%	71%	73%	74%	76%
		Some difficulty	11%	9%	8%	8%	7%
		A lot of difficulty	6%	6%	5%	5%	4%
		Unable to do	16%	14%	13%	13%	12%

Alarmingly these figures suggest a possibly worsening illiteracy problem amongst people with less than a grade 7 level of education – in 2008 some 27% were unable to read at all, in 2013 it was 30%; in 2008 some 38% could not fill in a form, in 2013 it was 44%.[8] This may correlate with the known prevalence of functional illiteracy amongst children at school and people who have been through primary school (Smith-Greenaway, 2015).

Statistics South Africa developed two possible indices of subjective literacy based on these questions in the 2009 to 2011 surveys. The first index took the No difficulty and Some difficulty answers to the questions on whether respondents could read (a newspaper or book) and write a letter. The second index added the question on filling in a form (Roux, 2012).[9]

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8 However one needs to note the caveat from Gustafsson (2012) who states:

> ... Very importantly, the way people judge their own level of literacy in these kinds of questions where you tell a fieldworker what you can do (as opposed to show what you can do, for instance in a test) seems to be unstable over time. I say this because people with the same level of education, in terms of highest grade attained, provide changing judgements of their level of literacy. Specifically, it seems South Africans have become more demanding of themselves, so over time they become less and less inclined to say they are literate, when controlling for grade. Past standardised tests have indicated that literacy levels by grade have remained more or less unchanged, so people with the same level of education are not becoming less literate in reality, it seems. I suspect that greater social demands to be literate are making people more aware of their own limitations.
>
> What does this mean for interpreting the data? Firstly, one needs to be extra careful when making comparisons over time. No change could in fact mean there's an improvement, but people are not acknowledging this because they are becoming stricter on themselves. Secondly, I think we should present literacy statistics by level of schooling attained to make it easier to identify the anomalies I'm referring to.

9 The *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign CEO, McKay (2012b) commenting on these two indices noted that:

> when we designed the questions I had hoped for a more nuanced interpretation. because we used the competences of the Botswana, Kenyan and LAMP surveys as indicators of different levels of competence so that we could see literacy/illiteracy as a continuum. The approximate levels that could be denoted - based on the other surveys (which were direct testing) were:
>
> Level 0: the learner cannot write his/her name
>
> Level 1: the individual can write his/her name, demonstrates some form of emergent literacy and can read shop and road signs or labels on a package.
>
> Level 2: considered a suitable minimum for coping with demands of daily life. Can read a newspaper or book or other extended text.
>
> Level 3: Can do the above and can also produce text in the form of a letter or form. Respondent demonstrates higher-order information processing skills.
>
> Calculating change would say a lot about a degree of numeracy.

In terms of raw numbers, taking the components used in these two indices (reading, writing a letter and filling in a form), those who cannot do these or only with great difficulty are as follows:

Table 10

Functionally illiterates among those aged 15+ with less than Grade 7 [General Housing Surveys 2009 to 2013]						
		2009	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**
Read	Unable to do	1536000	1 530 000	1 582 000	1 498 000	1 542 000
	A lot of difficulty	538000	517 000	491 000	467 000	485 000
	Totals	2 074 000	2 047 000	2 073 000	1 965 000	2 027 000
Write a letter	Unable to do	1 662 000	1 760 000	1 786 000	1 641 000	1 737 000
	A lot of difficulty	577 000	571 000	533 000	510 000	473 000
	Totals	2 239 000	2 331 000	2 319 000	2 151 000	2 210 000
Fill in a form	Unable to do	2 087 000	2 249 000	2 198 000	2 122 000	2 261 000
	A lot of difficulty	800 000	877 000	807 000	747 000	700 000
	Totals	2 887 000	3 126 000	3 005 000	2 869 000	2 961 000

These numbers are more or less consistent with these surveys' estimates of the numbers of number of people with no education or very low levels of education.

Direct measures of literacy

UNESCO's Institute for Statistics is now demanding more direct measures of literacy from member countries (a good African example of such being the Kenya National Literacy Survey of 2007) (Aitchison and Alidou, 2009, p. 26) that will lead to better aligned policies. Gustafsson *et al.* (2010, p. 3) argue that South Africa should periodically test adult literacy levels and would be relatively inexpensive relative to the cost of adult education programmes.

In South Africa the aforementioned 2008 October Household Survey and the General Household Survey 2009 did ask questions about whether household members could read or write (some 3,501,000 adults could not in 2008) and perform certain literacy skills (1,536,000 could not read in 2009) but these were not direct qualitative test-based measures.[10]

However a number of direct measures of reading, writing and calculation skills directed at South African schoolchildren have indicated that, when tested with widely used international instruments, the South African schooling system is underachieving in literacy and numeracy (even when compared with other far poorer countries in the rest of Africa) (see the summary of these studies in the EFA Country Report of 2009 (Department of Basic Education, 2009, pp. 29-32)). Though the testing of reading and mathematical competencies amongst schoolchildren does not directly tell us about adult illiteracy, it does show that "there is a low correspondence between grade level and literacy level" (Posel , 2011, p. 41) and explain why many schoolchildren graduate into functionally illiterate adults.[11] This would suggest that South Africa's rate of functional illiteracy amongst adults will indeed be very high (indeed higher than the General Household Survey estimates since 2009 using proxy measures).

Gustafsson *et al.* (2010, p. 39) note that one interesting measure is how may hours an adult spends reading each week and suggest that less than a hour could be a useful measure of functional illiteracy (and in which case about 25% of South African adults are functionally illiterate).

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10 The *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign had engaged with Statistics South Africa about testing General Housing Survey 2009 respondents through reading a paragraph and writing a paragraph but the cost implications proved difficult and the suggestion to have a separate module during the fieldwork to focus on literacy did not materialise (McKay, 2012a).

11 Gustafsson *et al.* (2010, p.4) estimate that " if the quality of schooling in South Africa were where it should be (at a level befitting a middle income country), GDP would be R550 billion higher than it currently is, or 23% above the current level. .. poor quality schooling at the primary level, which increases adult illiteracy in future decades, is undoubtedly a large, and arguably the largest, inhibitor of South Africa's growth and development."

Reducing illiteracy - have the plans to halve illiteracy by 2015 worked?

In 2000 South Africa committed itself to the revised (Dakar) Education for All goal of a 50% reduction in illiteracy by 2015.[12] Has this commitment been adhered to?

Setting targets

In planning for the growth of a fully literate society one first has to make some further estimates of what reduction in illiteracy is already being made by existing programmes (and of course the death of elderly illiterates) and then, on the basis of the data gained from the various measures of literacy (described above), define the target numbers before planning programmes to achieve these literacy goals.

As already indicated, the process of working out how many people in South Africa are illiterate is not an exact science. Numerous caveats and quibbles must be made about the data from proxy and self-reported measures. In addition all countries have a percentage of the population of sub-normal intelligence or severe mental or physical handicap and it is unrealistic to think that any but those countries with very high budgetary commitment to education can address their needs (in passing it is this problem that renders suspicious any country's claim to have a literacy level that rises much above the 95% mark). But the bottom line is that, however one massages these estimates, South Africa definitely has several million illiterate adults who could benefit from literacy and/or adult basic education provision.

Apart from contending with the divergencies between the census 2001 and 2011 and more recent household survey estimates, another, more pedagogical issue intrudes – what intervention genuinely guarantees the lifelong acquisition of literacy skills? Whilst people with no schooling can safely be

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12 The *Dakar Framework for Action* has two of its six goals address the themes of adult learning. These are Goal 3 – ensuring that the learning needs of all young are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programme, and Goal 4 – achieving an improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015 especially for women and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all.

assumed to be illiterate, how many years of schooling is likely to result in the lifelong retention of literacy competency? Harley *et al.* (1996) in their major survey of South African literacy and adult basic education used Grade 7 as the retention indicator (a position that has been accepted by Statistics South Africa), but possibly many of those who dropped out of school before reaching grade 7 may well be functionally literate (Posel, 2011, p. 40; Smith-Greenaway, 2015). The Department of Higher Education used a more ambiguous indicator for functional literacy of "both read and write with understanding a short simple statement on their everyday life" (Auditor General of South Africa, 2014, p. 18).

The major South African intervention to reduce illiteracy amongst adults, the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign, only claimed to reach a grade 3 equivalence (ABET level 1) and the campaign drew attention to the need for follow up via the state system of Public Adult Learning Centres (which did not happen).[13]

This leaves one in something of a quandary. If the grade 7 indicator is used then there is no prospect of South Africa reducing illiteracy by 50% by 2015. However, if the *Kha Ri Gude* outcome of grade 3 equivalence is accepted, the target may well be met, and evidence for this is analysed below.

What is a realistic target?

Realistic targets have to factor in a number of complex variables, that will reduce the number of people to far less than the raw statistics suggests. To start with, how many of the potential candidates are in effect uneducable – because of sub-normal intelligence or severe handicap? Probably about 1.7 million adults. About 2.4 million adults are over the age of 64. Should one invest in people this old? It may not be directly of economic benefit but many of the elderly play a crucial childcare role in South Africa and more literate grandparents may have positive long term effects.

An obvious first target is to make literate the over 2 million unschooled adults even though they are a hard to reach group and many of the truly uneducable

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13 An Auditor-General of South Africa report (2014) notes both a 52% decline in Public Adult Learning Centre enrolments between 2000 and 2013 (p. 11) and a failure to have *Kha Ri Gude* learners progress to ABET level 2 (grade 5 equivalency) "and continue to achieve functional literacy" (p.12).

1.7 million adults are in this group. The other obvious targets are those who dropped out of school after a year or so. It is likely that the bulk of the reachable target will be people who, for whatever reasons, dropped out or were extruded from schooling very early on. (The *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign statistics for 2008 show that unschooled people made up 36% of the learners and the largest group (48%) had only a year of schooling.)

Making a very rough calculation on the basis of there being probably at least 8.25 million functionally illiterate people, one can deduct the 1.7 million uneducable and be left with a overall figure of 6.55 million. Half of this is 3.27 million. That would then be the initial Dakar goal related target. However, that 3.27 million would have to be the actually achieved number. Because of some inevitable drop-out and attrition from intervention programmes this requires a larger expanded target than 3.27 million. Thus, for example, the Ministerial Committee on Literacy report of 2006, which argued for a target of 3.8 million, developed a plan to enrol 4.7 million illiterate adults by the end of 2012 (Ministerial Committee on Literacy, 2006, pp. 17-18).

What progress has there been towards such a target?

Has the current provision of literacy and adult basic education successfully reached over 4 million people?

The Department of Basic Education (2014, p. 40) makes the, already noted, claim:

> Overall the percentage of adults who are literate across all population groups has increased from 79% in 2009 to approximately 82% in 2012. This may be attributed to the introduction of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) now known as Adult Education and Training (AET), the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign and other initiatives introduced to improve the literacy rates of adults by Government.

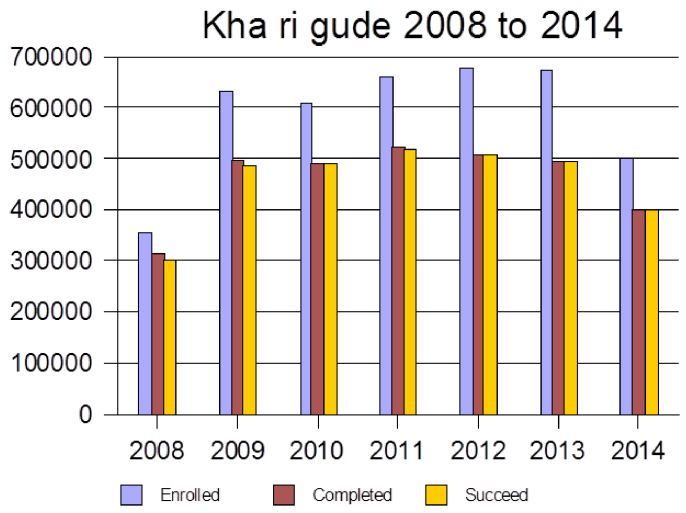
Let us start with the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign as it operated from 2008 to date rather than originally planned model (which aimed to enrol 4.7 million by 2012 with double the funding that was eventually granted to the campaign). A number of technical points need to be made. The majority of *Kha Ri Gude* participants have had no, or virtually no, schooling – *Kha Ri Gude* is targeting the genuinely functionally illiterate. In the first year of operation (2008) participants who completed the programme engaged in a formal externally

validated assessment process (overseen by the South African Qualifications Authority) and of these a negligible number failed. The results from 2009 to 2013 were also externally validated and were equally positive.

The graph below shows the enrolments, completions and certifications of success for the campaign for the years 2008 to 2014 (the figures for 2014 are estimates).

Figure 2

Enrol	Succeed
4.1 million	At least 3.2 million



The cumulative totals are 4 111 080 enrolled, 3 326 216 completed, and most of those who completed were certificated as successful – 3 200 000. This is close to the campaign plan's target of 3.8 million.

We also have to take into account the learners who gain basic literacy through other literacy and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET)[14] programmes. So far their impact on reducing illiteracy levels has been pretty insignificant (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2010, p. 15). Table 13 in the EFA Country Report for 2009 records the long standing inability of the Department of Education to disaggregate figures for genuine ABET (up to NQF level 1) and those for students studying for the Senior Certificate (NQF level 4). One cannot therefore use this table to make reliable estimates on the ABET contribution to reaching the 50% reduction in illiteracy. Gustafsson *et al.* (2010, p.15) note a survey finding of about 50,000 per annum in ABET classes. The Independent Examinations Board had an average of about 40 000 examination entries over the years 2007 to 2009 (but these come from individuals writing several course examinations) in industry and SETA sponsored programmes. The General Household Survey of 2009 estimated 120,000 learners in "ABET" classes. Probably one can be generous and estimate 100 000 learners a year in ABET levels 1 to 4 programmes – and also assume, also overgenerously, a 50% success rate. Whatever the limitations of ABET provision, this output would certainly take the overall *Kha Ri Gude* plus ABET class cumulative total past the 3.8 million target. South Africa can make, indeed has made, the 50% reduction in total illiteracy.

This achievement, albeit much of it only to the most basic level of alphabetisation, could never have been done without the *Kha Ri Gude* campaign's first six years of work which were a model of effective service delivery (Aitchison and McKay, 2014) and women will have been the main beneficiaries of the progress made.[15]

A caveat to this success is that basic literacy acquisition can be rapidly undermined by lack of use and further development of reading, numeracy and

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14 The Department of Basic Education (2014, p. 40) statement that Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) is now known as Adult Education and Training (AET) betrays a major conceptual confusion (in both the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training). ABET refers to an adult equivalent of compulsory general school education and in South Africa that is still currently school grades 1 to 9. AET refers to all adult education at any level, both formal and non-formal, and therefore cannot be used as a synonym for formal ABET (or even ABET and Further Education and Training (FET)).

15 Sadly, *Kha Ri Gude* now appears to be facing serious mismanagement problems and the enormous potential it had to continue as a vehicle to deliver post-literacy education and training largely compromised.

associated skills. Unfortunately post literacy provision shows few signs of being geared up adequately. There is little evidence that the national Department of Higher Education and Training has geared up or is capable of further servicing the graduates of the *Kha Ri Gude* campaign (in spite of the Ministerial Committee on Literacy having warned about this back in 2006) (Ministerial Committee on Literacy, 2006, pp. 52-53). The EFA Country Report of 2009 very frankly acknowledged the failure of the ABET system to deliver on scale (only 8 152 learners had exited fully qualified from the system since 2001) and states that "As a mechanism for addressing the learning needs of adults with no or little basic education the apparatus of public adult education governance, provision, curriculum and support has evidently proved unequal to the task." (Department of Basic Education, 2009, pp. 22–23). The current policy development and plans for a new system of community colleges and community learning centres is still too insubstantial to be evaluated as to its potential for making South Africa a more literate society.

Can any conclusions be made?

This article has attempted to analyse the available sources on adult literacy statistics in South Africa and found a fair degree of inconsistency among them. Some discrepancies are to be expected, particularly with reading and writing and their use in the daily functioning of people in a very complex society with high disparities in education and wealth and general living conditions. In addition we have an evolution of what kind of literacy or so-called literacies are needed to function in modern society. However, one can safely say that a more thorough form of direct testing of literacy capabilities is needed for South Africa to have a more reliable set of baselines from which to improve.

Although some of the data sources (particularly the General Housing Surveys) have indicated that illiteracy (using Grade 7 schooling or equivalent as the proxy for functional literacy) is less of a problem, percentage wise, in raw numbers South Africa still has an embarrassingly large number of illiterate people. I would personally estimate that we have a practical target of about 5 million people still to be reached.

It is clear that without the efforts of the *Kha Ri Gude* literacy campaign the number of totally or near totally illiterate people would be about three million people larger. But the follow up to this campaign has been more or less non-

existent. One can safely predict that unless something radical happens to the support and funding of literacy and adult basic education provision for undereducated South Africans, this will take a long time.

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