LITERACY MEASURES IN HOUSEHOLD SURVEYS; HOW THEY COULD BE IMPROVED

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• Suggest that efforts to improve the quality of information on literacy and numeracy should cover measures commonly used in household surveys and population census
• Give an idea of the problems with data from these sources, and
• Indicate possible areas of improvement regarding the collection of literacy data through respondent reports and short ‘tests’
Currently, literacy data comes primarily from data collected in population censuses, labour force surveys or omnibus household surveys.

Measures used (either singly or in combination):
- respondent reports (self-reports or third-party reports),
- very simple ‘tests’ and
- educational attainment.
Problems

• Respondent reports
  – Lack of comparability (wide range of different question formulations used)
  – Threats to validity: lack of knowledge, social desirability, respondent’s understanding of ‘reading’

• Simple ‘tests’
  – Lack of validity as a measure of reading comprehension
  – Low reliability (single item test)
  – Administered to a subset of the target population
• Educational attainment
  – Cannot assume that all adults above an educational attainment threshold such as completed primary or lower secondary education can read in low income countries.
Respondent reports

• Wide variation in the content of questions regarding literacy
  – Broad dimensions – reading and/or writing
  – Extent of specification in terms of:
    (1) specific types of documents, texts or elements of text;
    (2) languages,
    (3) performance criteria, and
    (4) context.
Examples

- Is [NAME] literate?
- Can [NAME] read?
- Can [NAME] read AND write?
- Can [NAME] read OR write?
- How do you rate your reading skills?
- How do you rate your writing skills?
Now I would like you to read this sentence to me.

SENTENCES ON SHOW CARD
• The child is reading a book.
• The rains came late this year.
• Parents must care for their children.
• Farming is hard work.

IF RESPONDENT CANNOT READ WHOLE SENTENCE, PROBE: Can you read any part of the sentence to me?
The response categories are:
1. CANNOT READ AT ALL
2. ABLE TO READ ONLY PART OF THE SENTENCE
3. ABLE TO READ WHOLE SENTENCE
4. NO CARD WITH REQUIRED LANGUAGE
5. BLIND/VISUALLY IMPAIRED
Proportion of respondents passing the STEP core by highest level of education
Some recommendations for the improvement of the collection of literacy data through simple measures

- Develop a well-defined and shared concept of ‘literacy’ and the threshold that is being measured (can read with understanding)
- Where possible collect information on literacy through valid and reliable tests
- Develop a simple test designed to measure the comprehension threshold
- Harmonise the collection of information on literacy through respondent reports
- Review the educational attainment thresholds applying to questions regarding literacy proficiency and the administration of simple direct measures of literacy
- Develop international guidelines regarding the collection of information regarding literacy in household surveys
International guidelines

• Little up-to-date guidance regarding the collection of data on literacy
  – Last comprehensive document produced in 1988
www.oecd.org/site/piaac
All national and international publications
The complete micro-level database

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Thank you