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11-2020

## Fighting Illiteracy During The Covid-19 Pandemic: Adaptation Of Libraries In Morocco

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Bouaamri, Asmaa and Hadju Barát, Ágnes, "Fighting Illiteracy During The Covid-19 Pandemic: Adaptation Of Libraries In Morocco" (2020). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 4810.  
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/4810>

# **Fighting illiteracy during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Adaptation of libraries in Morocco**

## **Abstract**

During the Coronavirus Pandemic, the situation of libraries and the services they are offering have changed. The shifting from the physical world to the digital environment was disturbing for many developed libraries around the world. However, this switch created many complications specifically for developing countries that are suffering not only from the lack of infrastructures and materials, but also with high illiteracy rate. This article discusses the situation of literacy and the role of libraries and librarians in Morocco, shedding lights on the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and actions done to overcome these circumstances.

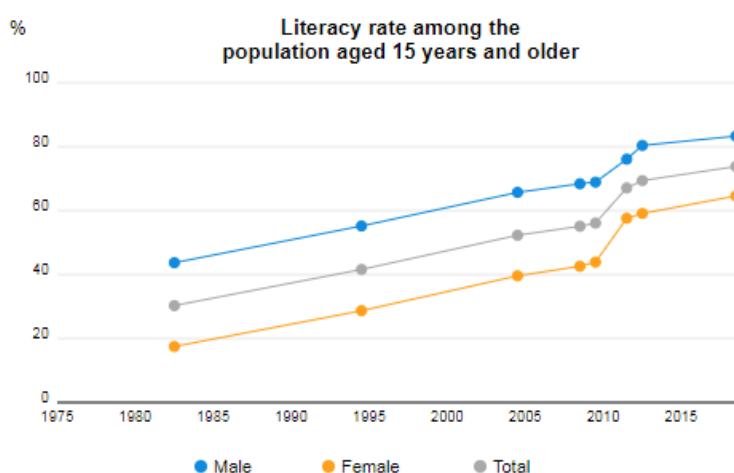
## **Keywords**

Covid-19, North Africa, Morocco, Libraries, Literacy and Illiteracy

While the world of technologies is getting advanced each second and updating data and information in different sectors, developing countries are still struggling with basic information and how to adapt it to society. In the field of library and information science, the situation is not different. As technologies get updated each moment and libraries have to keep up with that to ensure that information is appropriately offered to their users.

As a country in development, Morocco is in real struggle especially in the lights of the pandemic period of coronavirus. As you may know, Morocco is a country situated in the Northwest of Northern Africa, which is part of the Arabic Maghreb that includes Algeria and Tunisia as well.

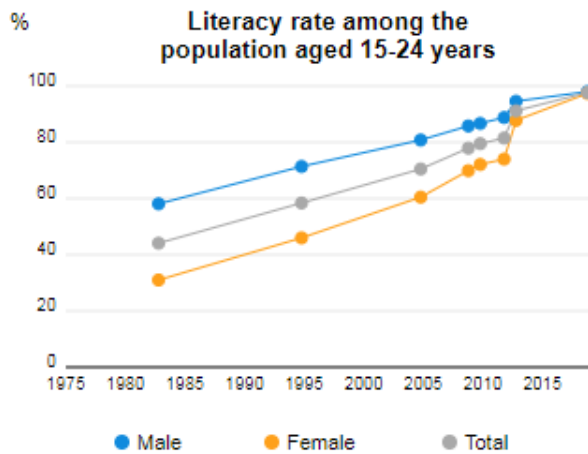
In the last decade, Morocco has done great efforts to fight against illiteracy, which were conducted by the National Agency for the Fight against Illiteracy (ANLCA)<sup>1</sup> which is a public entity under the guardianship of the prime minister of Morocco who currently is Saad Dine El Otmani. Literacy rate has gone higher between 2010 and 2015, as indicated below in the statistics conducted by the UIS (UNESCO Institute for Statistics)<sup>2</sup>:



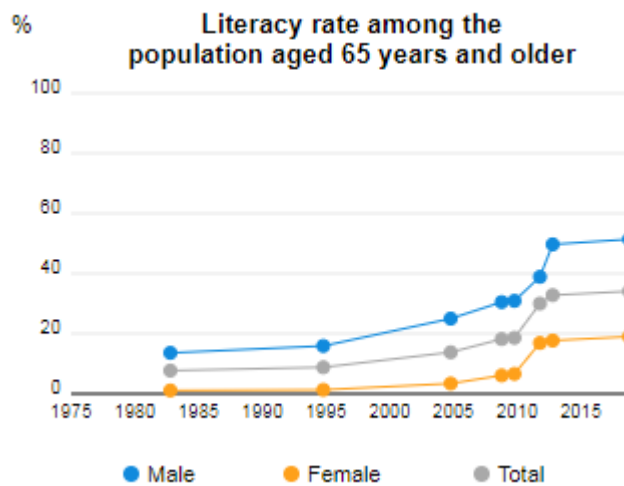
**Figure 1:** Literacy rate among the population aged 15 years and older between 1980 and 2018. Retrieved from the UIS/UNESCO page

<sup>1</sup> ANLCA: “Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l'Analphabétisme”, in English “the National Agency for the Fight against Illiteracy”, and which was created in November 2013 for the purpose of fighting against illiteracy in Morocco. Website: <https://www.anlca.ma/fr/agence/#presentation> (Consulted on 21/09/2020)

<sup>2</sup> UIS: UNESCO INSTITUTE FOR STATISTICS, see link : <http://uis.unesco.org/country/MA> ( last time consulted on 28/10/2020)



**Figure 2:** Literacy rate among the population aged 15-24 years and older between 1980 and 2018. Retrieved from the UIS/UNESCO page



**Figure 3:** Literacy rate among the population aged 65 years and older between 1980 and 2018. Retrieved from the UIS/UNESCO page

In 2018, from the same source the rate indicators show that the rate among the younger generation from 15 years old and older is 73.8% noting that 83.3% are male gender and 64.6% among the female gender. For the population between 15 and 24 years old the rate is 97.7% with 98% of male gender and 97.4 among the female gender. As for the last category that included the population aged 65 years and older

the rate in 2018 indicated only 34.1% with 51.4% among the male gender and 19% among the female gender.

These numbers might be very promising to decrease the rate of illiteracy, knowing that the literacy we are presenting here is very basic as to enable people to read mainly in the Arabic language, understand simple phrases, to be able to write and compose simple sentences and to manage basic calculations. However, the cadence of development is still slow and limited in this way as the rate of illiteracy is very high compared with other countries, and also if compared with the speed of growth in the systems of education in other countries. The lack of interest in reading inside Morocco has a great impact on the younger generations as well, specifically in rural regions, where the necessity to provide the family with the fundamental needs of life deprive parents, elders and children of getting an education.

Not to mention that also the cultural spheres inside the country do not help in pushing forward the wheels of education nor of literacy. Since women, in rural regions (mainly) and also in urban ones (less in bigger cities), are still expected to be submissive, follow traditional ways of getting married, having kids and taking care of the household. This is not problematic as in some developed countries, but education is a priority and remains intact; they prioritize the education of their children, even though the society and traditional cultures still expect women to keep the old habits (such as getting married, having kids if arriving at a certain age).

These traditional societal obligations that the individuals may feel, can be acceptable, to a certain degree, if the individuals are conscious about those acts, and following and practicing them reasonably, but when they are done just in order to fit in,

regardless of the consequences, and when imposed to the population because of the lack of education and knowledge of their impacts, then it becomes a serious issue. People are not aware that these acts are basics for almost all animals. Instead, they consider them as the reasons for life to provide food and procreate.

This is a problem again to mention which is related to the economical status of the Moroccan families, and which affects more the population in rural places. In the South of Morocco, the number of illiteracy is higher, because of life's conditions, especially in this dry period where the country is suffering from dryness and lack of substances.

The government with cooperation with ANLCA association has done great moves to try to inculcate reading into students' daily lives by making a mobile library/ a library-caravan that visited a number of schools in the region of Ben Guerir (seventy kilometers north of Marrakech) which is located in central Morocco. This is a great initiative but still very modest as the results can be minimal, additionally, the financial support does not allow the campaigns to be sustainable and long-lasting. It can only be done during a precise small period of time, which is not enough to eradicate illiteracy inside the country, especially that Morocco has high hopes to eliminate illiteracy, or at least reduce it to 5% by 2024. However, faced with the reality and the slow cadence of the progress, a modification was done by ANLCA in 2015 with new work plans (2015-2021) that are more realistic by setting 10% as the goal for 2026.

### **There is a library in the region**

From the perspective of an illiterate person, the presence of a library is useless, because they cannot make use of it. It is true that the initiatives of setting a mobile

library are somehow an introduction for kids to the world of libraries and in a way of making them intrigued by reading and books. However, this can be a poor move to fight against illiteracy, especially now with the current pandemic situation of the coronavirus, the situation is getting more challenging, as no changes can be done and even the minimum of efforts against illiteracy in favour of users education is paused. The wheel has stopped moving to wait for a new world system to push an evolution again.

Therefore, the plans are on hold and will be, unfortunately, pushed for a longer duration. While the world is moving ahead in technology and the ways of teaching, in Morocco, it will remain behind, specifically with illiteracy campaigns. People lack the motivation to study as they are having difficulties in their daily lives such as providing food and sustenance to their families, with no support from the government in this matter. The prices are getting higher; many sectors have stopped taking incomes, such as tourism and transportations (that are the main source of income in Morocco after Agriculture).

The pandemic situation does not only negatively and hugely impact the economical life in Morocco but also the ability and confidence of people in themselves, as the majority of the younger generation have lost their jobs. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic is immense and will hold the development of the country for many years now, specifically in rural regions. This also concerns the libraries, as they all have been shut down by the government and few of them kept their services available to their users with many restrictions but only in the urban places, rural places are not even close to that option.

The problem in the functioning of the libraries in Morocco is that they separate their institutions from the current situation. What should we expect in a culture where people do not read to use a library and its services? It is an issue of lack of research in the subject of the promotion of reading. Reading should not begin or stop in the creation of libraries, but instead, it should enhance the work of libraries to encourage people to read and to help them in fighting illiteracy.

One of our research done in the South of Morocco in a region called Taznakht small town, which is located in Ouarzazate Province, Drâa-Tafilalet region, southern Morocco, showed the presence of a local library, that is a big edifice, filled with schooling books for kids but empty from users. This situation should capture our attention to the presence of a bigger problem that is the illiteracy. Arranging to have big buildings with nice and beautiful decoration does not mean that it will eradicate the main issue, rather it would be intimidating, especially in such places, where people lead a very modest lifestyle, these edifices might be considered by the illiterate people as if they were only dedicated for the elite and literate people, which is the complete opposite of the main goal.

Creating a library does not mean that it will be used, and if used, it does not mean as well that it will be used properly or fully. This is why the job of a librarian is not only to be able to find a book on a shelf or information on a database, but to get to know the user and the environment before and after the creation of a library. Implementing a building full of books and technologies does not indicate the literacy rate of its users. This is why it is important to combine social science research from the ethnological and anthropological studies before constructing a library. Also, the



librarian should be aware of the importance of having an ethnographic knowledge and applying its methods once in the field to detect the needs of the users because the needs change constantly and quickly. An example might be a person, who just learned to read and write, that is asking now to be literate when it comes to using the OPAC<sup>3</sup> and the new technologies to find information. It is an evolutionary process that any librarian should get adapted to, not only being an invisible guardian of books. The role of the librarian does not consist in hiding behind the shelves, but more likely to be visible and interactive within the surroundings and to be able to gain the trust of the prospective-users.

It is very important in today's life to do anthropological research about the cultural environment that we are interested in implementing a library or a literacy program, especially in rural places, where life is paced in slow movements. Promoting aesthetic reading is one of the hardest things in literacy programs even in urban areas.

To have a cultural revolution and an uprising of the level of reading and intellectual individuals, we should have an educational revolution. A revolution that oblige individuals to change their perceptions of their lives by learning firstly to read and write at basic levels. This can be hardly done because all educational historical revolutions were preceded by political revolutions naming the Soviet Union, Vietnam and China (Bhola, 1984). This does not mean that we should definitely have a political revolution to have a cultural and educational one, but a change in the ideologies must be done to achieve the sustainable development goals.

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<sup>3</sup> OPAC: Online Public Access Catalogue  
*Asmaa Bouaamri. October, 2020*

Education programs should not be only in favor of the elite in the country but it should be implemented for the masses in all Moroccan territory. As “Literacy is thus an absolute condition; for the vanguard of the revolution—the cadres and the activists—but equally for the masses if they are to be brought into the political process, to achieve a new 'socialization' and to work in the new scientifically based economy.” (Bhola, 1984, p. 76).

As an initiative steps, that could help in mass education are the ethnographic research that can help understand the needs of the population. It may seem sophisticated and superficial, but from the other historical experiences, it can be very helpful and accommodating to the people that have different backgrounds and habits. Even if we may think that the population share the same culture and traditions from an outsider perspective, when looking closer and with an observer eye, we can recognize the differences and the needs that differ from one group to another or from one place to another, as assuming that a “general” rule or program can fit to everyone is wrongly thought and can lead to no development at all.

This does not mean that we should ignore other experiences nor does it mean to put aside a mass programming but on the contrary, policy-makers should definitely put into work a unified mass literacy program for the illiterate masses, but with adaptation to the cultural and traditional settings, to allow the integration of all individuals and to attract and simplify it to the inhabitants of distinct regions and groups.

In all educational revolutions, we recognize a certain kind of unification, which brought together the people to practice a collective activity or experience. This meant a lot to the people in different cultures such as the Chinese (the beginning of

communist China) or in the times of Soviet-Union. It is the idea of bringing together the people to fight illiteracy that made it easier for the people, as it was seen as a great thing to do “together”. In Morocco, still we do not have this unification as people do not realize the importance of having an education, especially in rural regions. The policy-makers should put more efforts into that and look into it very closely, to try to bring together the people to fight the educational handicaps. It is not about having 10% of the people with good education, but 99% of them should have a decent education, which can gradually ascend to another level depending on the curiosity and the demand of the population. This is why it is important to include all cultural institutions together with the school, libraries, bookshops, language institutions and so on..., jointly to fight illiteracy. By doing so, we shall make it clearer to the population that any individual handicap is a collective one, and each person and institution should be responsabilized in this sense.

The roles of libraries and librarians are adaptable, as we can understand, to the cultural and societal settings. Training librarians in this sense and making them realize their importance in making changes inside the societal spheres is crucial to the development of the nation. The role of libraries should not be limited to the beautiful and the huge buildings implemented in deserted areas, +to impress the locals and visitors, but instead to take part in the learning campaigns set by the government.

In these times of the Coronavirus pandemic, it is important to make people realize the importance of literacy and to make teaching of literacy improve hygiene and nutrition, to make them conscious about the basic day to day things. Libraries and literacy Associations in Morocco are still stepping back when it comes to educational

decisions taken by the government, while their work should complete and enhance the knowledge for the people. During these hard times, where people lack any kind of financial and health securities, an action in the purpose of the development of the consciousness of the people should be launched. The population still needs a presential learning and education that can be done in small groups within libraries or schools, with the necessary hygiene and cautions taken. Creating a new setting for the situation and enhancing the needs of the population should be the responsibility of libraries and librarians in a horizontal collaboration with the government, the minister of education and other educational and language institutions.

Nevertheless, it is worth to mention that one of the UNDP<sup>4</sup>'s initiative can be recognized as a good move to help in the education of the children in rural regions, which is a campaign launched against Covid-19, that included a program named "Bringing school to children"<sup>5</sup>, and which benefited 700 children (girls and boys) in rural regions, by giving them tablets preloaded with educational materials and internet connectivity. This can be seen as a good start to enhance and encourage the kids for a certain period of time, but it does not mean that it would be a sustainable action because it does not insure the good usage of the devices by the kids. Moreover, human nature and based on everyday experience, people get excited when receiving a new gift for a limited period of time that can be an hour, a day, a week or even a month, but after that boredom gets in the way. How to ensure that these kids won't get bored after a certain time of using these devices? How to ensure that these devices are used in good ways? If the parents are illiterate, how can we ensure the parental control

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<sup>4</sup> UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

<sup>5</sup> See UNDP link : <https://reliefweb.int/report/morocco/bringing-school-children-morocco> (consulted on the 25/10/2020)

regarding the new technologies? How to ensure the sustainability of the internet connection, since the rural regions lack the necessary infrastructures and technologies but also the connectivity accesses?

These are some of the queries that we should ask ourselves, when substituting a presential (face-to-face) learning by a remote one, especially among kids, who need motivation and building good habits among them. Most of the kids living in rural regions have illiterate parents, who cannot help them in their assignments and homework. How can we make sure that the lessons are understood? Or furthermore, how can we shape their educational patterns remotely if they are living in a different world that does not care about writing and reading?

Additionally, we may have to think about the adult learners as well. Aren't the new world systems leaving them behind? Let us put the world to rights, an adult person who is a mother or a father of six kids in rural region, living in difficult conditions with a lack of the basic necessities of life such as electricity, water, warmth, and who has during the Coronavirus, no income at all because everything was shut down and maybe tourism was the only source of life for them, which has stopped completely, and without any support from the government or other institutions, this person would care less about her education or the education of her children, as the main concern will be to provide the family with the substances needed for the basic living. It is also worth to mention, that many regions and areas suffer from dryness period, meaning no self-support is possible. The question that pops-up is how to ensure that these people are not left behind? With the speed of technological assets that is shifting the

physicality of the world to a virtual universe. Did the changing systems consider these people who are still in the phase of surviving with the fundamentals?

It is hard to say that nobody will be left behind in the current situation, the UNDP agenda 2030 for sustainable development<sup>6</sup> that was released in 2018, should be reviewed and remade to keep up with the new situations. Because no equality nor equity are made if there is an unbalanced income rate. First, the basics should be fulfilled, considering also a face-to-face education and literacy programs in small groups, because it is primordial to inculcate reading and writing habits into the individuals' life, as technology is defined by the RAE<sup>7</sup> as "The Set of theories and techniques that permit the practical exploitation of scientific knowledge/learning". If these material tools are given without any guidance or basic learning then they could not serve as technologies, if today we give an illiterate in reading and writing a tablet and ask them to use it, maybe they will use it as a plate or as a wall picture to hang it up. The shift in educational system should be done gradually depending on the areas and regions. It has to come to our understanding that we should not impose a new system to everyone at once because the cultures and traditions differ from one region to another from one country to another. Moreover, there is not only one path for evolution or development but many and dissimilar as well.

This is why the role of a librarian and libraries should be adaptable to each environment separately and the role of libraries as well should be complementary to

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<sup>6</sup>UNDP: [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2754713\\_July\\_PM\\_2\\_Leaving\\_no\\_one\\_behind\\_Summary\\_from\\_UN\\_Committee\\_for\\_Development\\_Policy.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2754713_July_PM_2_Leaving_no_one_behind_Summary_from_UN_Committee_for_Development_Policy.pdf) (consulted on the 26/10/2020)

<sup>7</sup>RAE: Real Academia Española. "Conjunto de teorías y de técnicas que permiten el aprovechamiento práctico del conocimiento científico." <https://dle.rae.es/tecnolog%C3%ADa> (consulted on the 26/10/2020)

educational institutions on a paralleled level. As it was demonstrated in previous educational and cultural revolutions “The ideology has to be a people's ideology, offering equality and dignity to the masses. Literacy has to be seen as serving those transcendental goals at the ideological level and more concrete political and economic goals at another level.” (Bhola, 1984, p. 87).

In these hard times, it should come to our understanding the importance of human interactions and connections to sustain durable goals are crucial. The relationship between the librarians and the public is changing, from a direct connection to no connection at all with the users. But this does not erase the necessity of the librarian but it transforms their tasks depending on the environmental settings that includes all the aspects of social life to ensure the preservation of existence of the knowledge and its transference to the next generations.

However, we should not deny the movements and acts done by the government that show the good intentions to keep the rate of literacy higher. This can be recognized by many decisions that were taken in this regard such as the campaign launched by the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco (BNRM)<sup>8</sup> located in the Capital city Rabat, that allows its users to have a free easy access to e-books and e-documents on the library's page. Such initiative is well perceived as it allows the users and subscribers of the library to benefit from the digital materials available in the catalogue of the BNRM. Even though this will only target the users of the library, knowing that the most of its users are researchers and professors, university students and students from all levels located mostly in urban areas. It puts the focus on a

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<sup>8</sup> BNRM: Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc  
*Asmaa Bouaamri. October, 2020*

certain hierarchical level of education, neglecting those in rural environments. The reason behind this is that there is no national network connecting all libraries in the country. Furthermore, there is no digital network through local libraries that allows the access to the national library collections. Not to mention, that many archives and documents that are precious and are valued are still not on digital catalogue or access. Nonetheless, the action to upgrade the literacy and reading rate in Morocco is improving, but a big consideration should be taken to mass literacy, because with the pandemic, changes are imposed on the people, with new rules substituting the physical life with a virtual one. We shall consider an adaptation and modification of these changes for the population deprived from the basic needs of life, as not of all of us have access to information and to the good usage of technologies thrust on us. Actions by local libraries and the national one should be synchronized and a movement to transform the roles of librarians from a passive one to an active mediator and advocator to literacy and promotion for it. Library work should not be limited in the presence of big buildings and fancy materials, but we should enhance the training of the librarians in social sciences to make them adapt to the environment in which they are working, as there can be no one code for adaptation but many. Therefore, an expansion of the training and programs of librarians should take another dimension, which can inspire them to educate the illiterate population in rural regions and motivate them during the hard times. We should also think about adult education in a way that makes it sustainable for them by providing financial support to enable them to balance their lives while studying.



What can also be of benefit to the work of libraries and librarians in all over the country is the creation of a Moroccan Library Association that can work on the improvement of the tasks and the rights of libraries and librarians in the Moroccan territories. This could be of good help also to transfer the information to different parts and institutions and that could also collaborate directly with the illiteracy fighting associations.

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