



Krystyna Kacprowska¹✉

¹Szkoła Główna Handlowa, Poland

EDUCATION LEVELS AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION ON A GLOBAL SCALE

Abstract. The aim of this article is to analyze the level of education, as well as access to education at the global level. Due to the unequal access to learning, illiteracy is one of the factors of social exclusion in many countries. The ability to tackle this problem is particularly difficult in less developed or at war countries, as access to education is limited due to persistent conflicts. Education, apart from the development of the individual and entire societies, is a chance to make people aware of the need to take actions aimed at promoting justice, equality and respect for human rights. The article presents the hypothesis that education is a factor necessary for the proper functioning of society and the desire to increase the level of education. The study uses the results of studies that address the issues of the most common problems resulting from the lack of education, as well as obstacles to acquiring knowledge, gender inequality, armed conflicts, and humanitarian disasters. The presented results were used to analyze the level of education and access to education on a global scale.

Keywords: access to education, the phenomenon of illiteracy, education level, development of society, human rights, education for peace

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, the OECD initiated an international comparative study. Some European countries, alarmed by the results of the study, conducted their own studies (Przybylska, 2017). There are still 263 million children missing out on education worldwide, according to UNESCO's latest February 2018 report on access to education. This means that as many as one in five children does not attend school. In June 2020, Global Economic Prospects produced a report outlining a thesis that the pandemic has the potential to drive between 71 and 100 million people into extreme poverty. In a 2019 report,

UNICEF alerted that there has been an increase in attacks on schools and threats of violence against students and teachers have forced more than 1.9 million children in West and Central Africa out of the education system (UNICEF, 2019). The paper uses information on illiteracy levels in Afghanistan as well as in the US to compare illiteracy in least, medium and more developed countries. The purpose of the study is to present the inequality of access to education at the global level and to simultaneously compare least, medium and highly developed countries.

✉PhD candidate Krystyna Kacprowska, Szkoła Główna Handlowa w Warszawie, Szkoła Doktorska, Rakowiecka 24, 02-517 Warszawa, e-mail: kk101835@doktorant.sgh.waw.pl

LITERATURE REVIEW

Until the late 1960s, illiteracy was treated in developed countries as a phenomenon mainly associated with the poor and backward South. There was a widespread and deep-rooted belief in the minds of European societies that the problem had been solved once and for all. Opinions about illiteracy in large segments of society in welfare states have been received both by governments and societies themselves with incredulity. At most, illiteracy was sometimes thought to affect some migrants who started new lives in rich countries based on knowledge and education. When the scale of the illiteracy problem in highly developed Western countries began to be taken into account, it caused shock, surprise and disbelief (Przybylska, 2017). In general, an adult is considered functionally illiterate if his or her competence in written language falls short of what is needed to cope with certain social demands, to participate in society and to realize individual opportunities for personal fulfilment. In 2010, the Committee of the Regions of the European Union published a document entitled “Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on combating functional illiteracy — an ambitious European strategy for preventing exclusion and promoting personal fulfilment”, in which it supported, among other things, “the inclusion of combating illiteracy among the cross-cutting objectives of the revised post-2010 Lisbon Strategy and the inclusion of combating illiteracy among the Community’s strategic guidelines”. The document emphasized that illiteracy is a problem that affects all age groups, but especially people over the age of 45. Moreover, the problem occurs in both urban and rural areas, does not only affect people excluded from the labour market (it is worth noting that half of the illiterates are working) and is not a phenomenon linked to migration (only three-quarters of illiterates, after five years of living in a new country, speak the language of the host country) (Przybylska, 2017).

As the least developed region, Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest illiteracy rate in the world. By 2018, 28 million boys and more than 32 million girls did not have the opportunity to complete elementary school. In Afghanistan, the situation for women deteriorated significantly during the 1996–2001 Taliban rule. There was a decline in girls’ school enrollment from 32 percent to 6.4 percent in 2001. For this reason, thousands of young girls with little chance of acquiring any skills were forced into early marriage. Considering the historical background,

it can be deduced that the situation in Afghanistan has been difficult for a long time in terms of free access to education. In 2003, an amendment was introduced to the Afghan constitution guaranteeing women the right to education, and two years later they were allowed to participate in politics, but the patriarchy remains strong (Asadullah, 2019).

Nepal is another country that has a problem with unequal access to education. Nepalese society is multi-ethnic, and the caste system is still one of the fundamental categories that determine social relations. Despite the fact that the constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of origin, in people’s minds divisions still exist. The lower down in the caste structure a child’s parents are, the less likely they are to be able to attend school. In large families, sons have the priority of learning, because, as social norms dictate, they will become responsible for the care of their parents in the future. If parents are unable to pay for the education of all their children, the economic dependence within the household argues in favour of educating a son rather than a daughter (Jha and Jhingran, 2005). Many schools do not have enough teachers, so not all year groups have regular classes. Often classes must be combined, or a one-year break is instituted. Lack of sufficient classrooms, chairs tables or electric lighting hamper effective learning. Also, as a rule, classes are conducted outdoors. In addition, the lack of separate toilets for girls and boys causes girls to miss days at school during menstruation (UNICEF, 2009). The Kathmandu Valley is the only urbanized area in Nepal. More than 80% of the country is covered by mountains with an average altitude of about 6000 m above sea level and the urban population is only 18%. Apart from a few cities, Nepalis mostly live in sparsely populated villages and settlements located high in the mountains. The lack of road infrastructure, the presence of large rivers, passes and other environmental barriers mean that children who are forced to walk several hours to school simply drop out (UNICEF, 2009). Children have to leave home very early for their first lesson. A long mountain hike, without breakfast, makes children very tired and hungry when they get to school. Their concentration level is drastically reduced. Moreover, the Nepalese diet is not varied. The traditional meal – dal bhat, consisting of white rice and boiled vegetables, is served in the same unchanging form every day. It lacks micronutrients, vitamins and adequate calories for the developing body. The child’s nutrition and the efficiency

of the immune system affect the regularity of school attendance. Children from poor families are sick more often and miss more school days. Lack of funds to pay for visits to doctors and the purchase of medicines means that potentially easily treatable diseases become a major problem, contributing to long-term absenteeism. And if a child contracts malaria, dengue fever, typhoid fever, a serious chronic disease or becomes disabled, they are permanently excluded from the education system. There is a lack of documents not only declaring but also guaranteeing equal access to education, and state institutions implement the right to education within the state in a slow, piecemeal and often unfair manner (Szansa dla Nepalu, 2021). Children start school at different ages. The main reason is parents' lack of knowledge about their child's age. Nepal has government programs to encourage women to give birth at health centres, under the care of midwives (National Safe Motherhood and Newborn Health Long Term Plan 2006–2017, 2006).

UNICEF, in a report entitled "Education at Risk in West and Central Africa" warns that deliberate attacks on schools, students and teachers are being practised across the region, taking away children's right to learn and leaving the youngest children and their families in fear for their lives and futures. Insecurity in the north-west and southwest Cameroon has caused more than 4,400 schools to close. Also in Burkina Faso, 2,000 schools were closed due to violence, and in Mali, more than 900 educational facilities were closed. UNICEF works with governments and local communities to support them in providing education to children. UNICEF also makes educational materials available to teachers working in dangerous places and provides psychological support for children who have experienced violence. Children living in conflict areas in West and Central Africa represent $\frac{1}{4}$ of the world's children who need humanitarian assistance, including educational support. Unfortunately, there is still a 72% shortfall in funding for essential assistance for these children. UNICEF and its partner organisations are calling on governments, armed forces, parties to the conflict and the international community to act to stop attacks on schools, students, teachers and staff in educational institutions in West and Central Africa.

UNICEF's report indicates that:

1. Countries must protect the education system;
2. Teaching must aim to build peace and support girls' education;

3. Country authorities need to invest in teachers;
4. All children, including refugee children, migrant children and deported children, must have the opportunity to continue their education;
5. Parents and communities must ensure that children, especially girls, have access to quality education;
6. Governments donating to children's aid should commit to multi-year funding for education projects in humanitarian crises (UNICEF, 2019).

RESEARCH MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses the method of the analysis of literature related to the problem under discussion. The developed materials include data from reports developed by the OECD, UNESCO and UNICEF. The results of the analysis are presented in a descriptive and graphical form. They allowed comparing access to education in highly developed, medium developed and least developed countries.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The lowest percentage of students is found in sub-Saharan African countries, where more than half of children do not receive even basic education. Globally, the problem of lack of education occurs primarily in the poorest countries. Poverty often occurs in conjunction with religious fundamentalism. This is inextricably linked to unequal access to learning. Gender discrimination primarily affects girls. What is more, in countries at war or in permanent conflict, access to education is restricted or blocked altogether. Wars thus have a direct impact on the level of education of societies. It is worth emphasizing here that the relationship between war and education works bilaterally. The United Nations assigns education an important role in the process of building peace in the world because one of its tasks is to raise awareness of the need to take action in promoting justice, equality and human rights. This branch of education is called education for peace (Librus, 2018).

Countries that have been effective in combating illiteracy include India. As recently as the mid-1980s, more than 50 per cent of India's population was illiterate. Today, more than two-thirds can read and write well. According to a UNESCO spokeswoman, these people owe this to intensive government efforts (UNESCO, 2010).

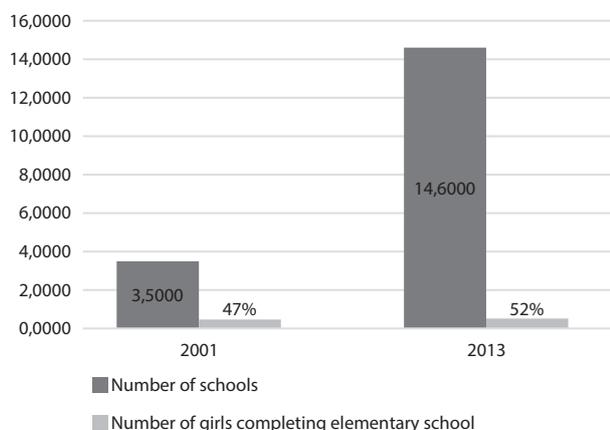


Fig. 1. Educational opportunities for women in Afghanistan
Source: own study based on Asadullah (2019).

Research on Afghanistan by experts from BRAC International organisation shows that there has been a significant increase in enrollment in primary and secondary schools. Between 2001 and 2013, the number of schools increased from about 3,500 to 14,600, and the number of girls completing elementary school increased from 47 per cent to 52 per cent. (Figure 1). By 2015, the female-to-male ratio in primary and secondary schools had increased by 69 per cent and 56 per cent, respectively. However, these ratios are still low compared to international standards. The share of girls enrolled in school dropped from 39 per cent in first grade to 35 per cent in ninth grade (the end of junior high school, or the end of first-level secondary education), and the sudden drop occurs in the final period of primary schooling, or sixth grade. According to Afghan authorities, this situation is due to the lack of schools for girls, the lack of qualified female teachers, and the lack of money for existing institutions. Low enrollment is also linked to poor quality education. Even those girls who do attend schools are not getting the knowledge they need. Problems include, for example, reading skills. Our findings are consistent with an earlier national survey that found only 43 per cent of third-graders could read with comprehension. These findings could have implications across the spectrum of challenges to Afghanistan's education system. Approximately 3.7 million children – mostly girls – are currently out of school in the country. Similar problems also affect Bangladesh and India, but, nevertheless, in these countries, more progress has been made in enrolling girls in school. At the same time in Afghanistan,

female education is still not a priority, and not just due to opposition from religious conservatives (Asadullah, 2019). The most recent data collected during the 2009 PISA literacy surveys (NCES: Highlights..., 2011, p. 7) indicate that on an overall scale of reading and information interpretation skills, U.S. adolescents scored an average of 500 points, with an average of 493 points for all OECD countries. This means that of the 65 participating countries: 9 of them had a score higher than the United States, 39 had a lower score, and 16 had a similar score.

According to UNESCO data, in 2011, 41% of adults (over 15 years of age) were illiterate, while among young people (15–24 years of age) illiterates accounted for 30%. Moreover, in as many as ten countries, adult illiteracy exceeded 50% of the population. These included: Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Guinea had the highest illiteracy rate at 75%, Equatorial Guinea the lowest, at 6%, and South Africa at 8% (UNESCO, 2013). The main barrier to education for children in sub-Saharan Africa, however, is the sociocultural barrier. Cultural differences, the continent's multilingualism, and poverty are factors that largely determine the low enrollment rates in the region. Sub-Saharan Africa has the world's lowest GNI per capita at \$1,351. South Asia, which is the world's second-poorest region, has \$1,462. In contrast, in terms of GDP, Sub-Saharan Africa, its forty-seven countries except for South Africa, generate \$1,288,216, which is only 1.8% of the world's GDP (Lendzion, 2015, p. 238). According to data from the June Global Economic Prospects report, the pandemic has the potential to drive from 71 to 100 million people to extreme poverty, reducing access to education for nearly 1.6 billion people (Policy Brief, 2020). The outlook is poor, especially in the developing countries of the Global South. Today, more than ever, we need responsible development cooperation, i. e. cooperation of developing countries with developed ones and international organisations to reduce development disparities and achieve common goals. Its priority should be investing in education, the lack of which has a close causal relationship with poverty (Krawczyk, 2020). The World Bank reports that low-income countries have higher out-of-school rates than middle- and upper-income countries. Families living in poverty must choose between sending their child to school and meeting their other basic needs. When the Kenyan government stopped charging for primary education in 2003, the number of school children increased

by nearly 2 million. At the same time, dropout rates declined (fewer families living on the edge of poverty were forced to spend additional resources on their children's education) (Fleshman, 2010). An international comparative study initiated by the OECD has shown that a large proportion of Europeans are "illiterate", although the vast majority of them have completed at least elementary school, have been socialized in a literate society and culture, have had contact with writing (in the family, at school, in everyday life) and know the importance of the written language very well. A modern illiterate person knows single letters but cannot form complete sentences from them. Sometimes he or she can read a sentence but cannot understand its content. A study in France (2004–2005) identified 3.1 million people in the adult working-age population (about 40 million) who were classified as functionally illiterate (9% of the working-age population). Only individuals who attended school in France were included in the study. 59% of functional illiterates are male, thus 11% of the male population in France cannot read and write compared to 8% among females (Przybylska, 2017). The vast majority of French functional illiterates (74%) mastered French as their only language during childhood in their home environment. A 2011 study in England found that 14.9% (over 5 million) of English speakers are functionally illiterate. Studies in Germany have shown that total illiterates (complete lack of literacy) account for 4.5% of the German population in the age group 18 to 64. Functional illiteracy affects 10% of people in this age category. The total population of total illiterates and functional illiterates includes 7.5 million citizens. In addition, more than 25% of the adult population (13.3 million) has difficulty with writing and reading. Overall, almost 40% of the adult population in Germany is qualified as illiterate, functionally illiterate, and insufficiently literate (Przybylska, 2017).

Wealthy countries are also dealing with the problem of illiteracy. In the United Kingdom, for example, 15 percent of the population cannot read and write even at the level of an 11-year-old child. Fourteen percent of adults in this country are unable to understand newspaper articles or simple instruction manuals. As far as Germany is concerned, it is even assumed that the illiteracy rate is increasing. However, there is no precise data on this.

Compared to other countries, the U.S. scores comparably favourably in specific areas of reading literacy as represented by specific scales, ie., information retrieval, integration and interpretation, reflection and

evaluation. Another measure of literacy competence used in the PISA survey was the level of literacy proficiency, defined by the position of scores within one of seven distinctive ranges. Of U.S. students, 28% scored at the fourth-grade level or higher, indicating the ability to perform tasks of high difficulty and the ability to critically evaluate information, while nearly 19% of students scored below the second-grade level, indicating low literacy. Among the subjects, there was also a group of people whose scores were below the first-grade, lowest literacy level and therefore in the range indicating illiteracy. In the case of the United States, 0.6% of respondents achieved the lowest level of literacy and this percentage was similar to that of other OECD countries (Figure 2). Overall, therefore, based on the above facts, it can be concluded that compared to other countries, the illiteracy situation in the United States does not seem particularly unfavourable. Meanwhile, a report published in 2005 on the 2003 U.S. National Comprehensive Examination Survey (NCES, b.d.) found that 30 million, an estimated 14% of the American population at 16 years of age and older lacks basic simple reading skills, and 63 million (29% of all adults) have basic reading skills, a situation that has not changed significantly since 1992, when similar surveys were conducted. Thus, 93 million American adults were at inadequate or at most basic literacy levels. Among those not achieving a basic literacy score, more than half (55%) were high school dropouts. There was also a relatively high percentage (44%) who were unable to communicate in English before entering

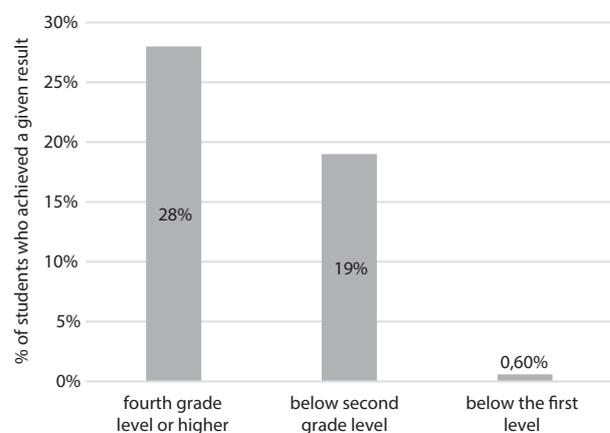


Fig. 2. Literacy levels in the United States
Source: own study based on Pleskot-Makulska (2011), p. 241.

school. Among those at less than basic literacy levels, a significant proportion (39%) were Hispanic and 20% were African American. Another distinct feature was the high incidence of illiteracy and low literacy rates among prisoners, with rates around 60% (NCES: A First Look..., 2006). However, the above facts do not mean that inadequate literacy in the United States is a problem limited only to specific marginal communities or social groups. This is a problem that affects almost 1/3 of the general population. In this context, the economic aspect of this phenomenon also deserves attention. It is estimated that due to the phenomenon of illiteracy, the United States incurs annual losses of about 225 million dollars (Pleskot-Makulska, 2011, p. 241).

SUMMARY

The main objective of this study was to analyse the level of education worldwide and also to study the phenomenon of illiteracy in highly developed, medium developed and underdeveloped countries. Based on the research material collected, it can be concluded that the least developed countries have the highest levels of illiteracy. It is caused by difficult living conditions that prevent access to education. The highest levels of illiteracy are found in countries such as Nepal, as well as in Afghanistan (the illiteracy problem mainly affects women and occurs because of gender discrimination). The lowest levels of illiteracy are present in highly developed countries, such as the United States. It is also worth noting that the African countries with the highest illiteracy rates are also the countries with the highest birth rates, the highest incidence of genital mutilation (because of beliefs and traditions of the local culture) and poverty. One of the main reasons for the high illiteracy rate in Africa is the lack of school materials, especially textbooks. In some countries, one textbook must be shared by up to 30 students, leading to a population of adults who cannot write or read despite attending school for four years. Getting to school is also a problem in underdeveloped countries. In the case of Nepal, 80% of the country is covered by mountains, which means that children attending the classes have to walk a long way to school, are very tired, hungry and thus have no energy to learn. Absence from school is also due to the lack of sufficient resources to treat illnesses in children. Lack of security in the country, attacks on schools, students, and teachers make parents prefer to leave their children at home for

fear of their lives. UNICEF is an organization that fights for educational opportunities for children by providing learning materials, appealing to governments to stop armed activities, and providing psychological support for children. Thus, the level of education and access to education globally depends on the level of economic development of a country. The more developed the country, the greater the opportunities for educational development of the society.

REFERENCES

- Asadullah, M. (2019). Globalny sprawdzian z równego prawa do edukacji. Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://holistic.news/globalny-sprawdzian-z-prawa-do-edukacji/>
- Fleshman, M. (2010). Africa Renewal. Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/january-2010/abolishing-fees-boosts-african-schooling>
- Jha, J., Jhingran, D. (2005). Elementary Education for the Poorest and Other Deprived Groups: The Real Challenge of Universalization. New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research.
- Krawczyk, M. (2020). Zwalczenie ubóstwa przez edukację w krajach rozwijających się Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://www.gov.pl/web/polskapomoc/zwalczenie-ubostwa-przez-edukacje-w-krajach-rozwijajacych-sie>
- Lendzion, K. (2015). Bariery społeczno-kulturowe w dostępie do edukacji dzieci w Afryce Subsaharyjskiej. *Studia Edukacyjne*, 35, 235–249.
- Librus (2018). Marzenia o szkolnej ławce, czyli o dostępie do edukacji na świecie. Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://portal.librus.pl/rodzina/artykuly/marzenia-o-szkolnej-lawce-czyli-o-dostepie-do-edukacji-na-swiecie>
- National Safe Motherhood and Newborn Health Long Term Plan, 2006–2017 (2006). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <http://www.nnfsp.gov.np/PublicationFiles/a7ffaa2a-c332-4739-adc6-70df7e7fbd63.pdf>
- NCES: A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century (2006). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from from: <https://nces.ed.gov/naal/pdf/2006470.pdf>
- NCES: Highlights from PISA 2009 (2011). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011004.pdf>
- NCES: Demographics. Overall. (b.d.). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: https://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp
- Pleskot-Makulska, K. (2011). Alfabetyzacja jako istotny obszar edukacji dorosłych w Stanach Zjednoczonych. *Edukacja Dorosłych*, 2, 237–250.

- Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond (2020). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wpcontent/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf
- Przybylska, E. (2017). Analfabetyzm funkcjonalny dorosłych w krajach bogatego Zachodu. Accessed February 2021, available from: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/pl/blog/analfabetyzm-funkcjonalny-doroslych-w-krajach-bogatego-zachodu>
- Szansa dla Nepalu (2021). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: http://www.szansadlanepalu.pl/projekty/wyzwania-mlodych-nepalczykow/#_ftn5
- UNESCO (2013). Adult and youth literacy Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs26-adult-and-youth-literacy-2013-en_1.pdf
- UNESCO: 760 milionów ludzi nie umie czytać ani pisać (2010). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://www.dw.com/pl/unesco-760-milionow-ludzi-nie-umie-czytac-ani-pisac/a-5984065>
- UNICEF: Child Friendly Schools Manual (2009). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://www.unicef.org/media/66486/file/Child-Friendly-Schools-Manual.pdf>
- UNICEF: Od 2017 r. na skutek konfliktów potroiła się liczba zamkniętych szkół w Afryce Zachodniej i Środkowej (2019). Accessed 11 February 2021, available from: <https://unicef.pl/co-robimy/aktualnosci/dla-mediow/od-2017-r.-na-skutek-konfliktow-potroila-sie-liczba-zamknietych-szkol-w-afryce-zachodniej-i-srodkowej>

POZIOM OŚWIATY ORAZ DOSTĘP DO EDUKACJI W SKALI GLOBALNEJ

Abstrakt. Celem artykułu jest analiza poziomu oświaty, a także dostępu do edukacji na poziomie globalnym. Z powodu nierównego dostępu do zdobywania wiedzy w wielu krajach można zaobserwować zjawisko analfabetyzmu, czyli jednego z czynników wykluczenia społecznego. Możliwość walki z tym problemem wiąże się ze szczególnymi utrudnieniami w krajach mniej rozwiniętych lub będących w stanie wojny, ponieważ z powodu trwałych konfliktów dostęp do nauki jest ograniczony. Edukacja oprócz samego rozwoju jednostki, a także całych społeczeństw to szansa na uświadomienie ludziom konieczności podejmowania działań dążących do propagowania sprawiedliwości, równości i przestrzegania praw człowieka. W artykule przedstawiono hipotezę, że edukacja jest czynnikiem niezbędnym do prawidłowego funkcjonowania społeczeństwa i dążeniem do zwiększania poziomu oświaty. W opracowaniu wykorzystano wyniki badań, które podejmują kwestie najczęstszych problemów wynikających z braku edukacji, a także przeszkody w zdobywaniu wiedzy, nierówności płci, konflikty zbrojne, katastrofy humanitarne. Zaprezentowane wyniki posłużyły do przeprowadzenia analizy poziomu oświaty, a także dostępu do edukacji w skali globalnej.

Słowa kluczowe: dostęp do edukacji, zjawisko analfabetyzmu, poziom oświaty, rozwój społeczeństwa, prawa człowieka, edukacja dla pokoju