
The mythical correlation between literacy and paper consumption

The present scenario, where most countries have become mere markets for an increasingly reduced group of powerful corporations that share them between themselves while keeping up a network of commercial links --for which they want to have more and more elbow room--, has also been built up with language and the introduction of concepts that are imposed as truths.

Thus, regarding paper and its imposition as a product of growing consumption, the language has been used to create a misleading correlation between paper consumption and literacy, implying that more paper is required (and therefore more plantations to feed more pulp mills) to supply increasingly literate populations with reading and writing material.

The fallacy of such a simplification is demonstrated by the simple comparison of literacy rates and the per capita annual consumption of paper and cardboard, using the FAO and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as information sources (figures for year 2000). On the following list, we have selected a few countries with high literacy rates in order to analyze the subject, but the sources mentioned at the end of the article show that the situation is the same in practically all the countries of the world.

Country	Literacy rate	Per capita consumption
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Finland	99%	430.02
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USA	99%	330.80
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Sweden	99%	279.68
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Canada	99%	263.30
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Japan	99%	250.40
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France	99%	191.75
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Chile	95.8%	52.82
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South Africa	85.3%	40.54
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Brazil	85.2%	37.97
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Thailand	95.5%	30.81
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Indonesia	86.9%	20.86
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Kenya	82.4%	4.91
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Vietnam	93.4%	4.23
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It clearly follows from the above that Northern countries with identical literacy rates (99%) have very different consumptions of paper and cardboard from one another, whereas Southern countries with high levels of literate population consume less, or even much less, than the former. This situation does not correlate with unsatisfied paper needs, but with a wasteful consumption - particularly in the North - that has nothing to do with the satisfaction of human needs.

In short, the argument that a growing literate population requires a growing amount of paper is just one of many deceptions made up to justify the profits of the pulp and paper sector. There is no "hunger" for paper: there is an immense wastage.

Article based on information from: World Resources Institute, Paper and paperboard consumption

per capita, FAO data 2000, <http://earthtrends.wri.org/text/ENG/variables/573.htm> ; UNDP, Human Development Index, Adult literacy rate, 2000,
http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2002/en/indicator/indicator.cfm?File=indic_277_1_1.html