

Adult learning and education in the Asia-Pacific Region

A summary

I. The state of adult learning and education in Asia and the Pacific

This is a summary of the regional synthesis report for the Asia-Pacific Region which was presented and considered at the Asia-Pacific Regional Conference, 6-8 October in 2008, Seoul, Republic of Korea. The theme chosen for the Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting was “Building equitable and sustainable societies in Asia and the Pacific: the challenge to adult learning.” This synthesis was prepared on the basis of national reports and other relevant materials on the state of adult learning and education in the Asia-Pacific. The purpose of the report was to review status and trends in adult learning and education in the region, identify the key issues for the future, and suggest recommendations and benchmarks for CONFINTEA VI.

The Asia-Pacific Region of UNESCO consists of 48 member countries. This synthesis relates to the region with the exception of the Russian Federation and Turkey.

Adult education serves diverse learning objectives and needs, has a wide-ranging clientele, and is carried out in many delivery modes. It can be complementary and supplementary, compensatory, or a substitute for the formal system directed to children and youth. However, the purposes of adult education, and by implication of lifelong learning, and its clientele, its modes of delivery and its management are also its own and cannot be served or replaced by the general formal education system.

A convergence of vision. A broad vision of adult education and learning has been evolving through developments in national programmes and international expressions of consensus reaching a convergence that places adult education firmly within the framework of lifelong learning, eloquently expressed in the Hamburg declaration in 1997. This vision has been re-affirmed in other forums since then. The evolving and convergent concepts continue to be further shaped and refined in practice in the countries.

Development since the 1990s. A review of progress towards achieving EFA goals undertaken by the EFA Global Monitoring Team shows that the emphasis in educational development efforts has clearly been on the expansion of opportunities for children and adolescents in primary and secondary education. The next priority has been adult literacy, with quantitative targets set globally and at national level. The lowest ranking in priority was meeting the learning needs of young people and adults, focusing on life skills and lifelong learning opportunities.

A wide array of diverse non-formal education and skill training programmes has in fact been available in the sub-regions of Asia, but they vary greatly in scope and coverage. Most programmes are on a relatively small scale, except for literacy programmes in several countries. The diversity in learning objectives, target learners and mode of delivery explains to a degree the absence of global or national quantitative targets in adult education and the difficulty of providing a good overview of the prevalence and functioning of these programmes.

The key challenges in adult learning and education in both developing and developed countries in the Asia-Pacific Region are in respect of expanding access with equity, improving quality, enhancing relevance, and promoting its development to build a truly lifelong learning for all people and thus creating a learning society.

Policy framework, programme strategy and participation. In terms of policy framework, programme strategy and participation, empirical observation of the status and trends in the Region leads to a taxonomy of situations as follows: (a) low basic education countries; (b) advanced basic education countries; (c) China and India, a category by themselves in terms of their size and weight in any overall assessment, (d) foreshadowing the future, represented by the Republic of Korea, for the developing Asia-Pacific countries; and (e) the developed Asia-Pacific.

(a) The cases of Bangladesh, Mongolia and Pakistan have been cited as representing the category of low basic education countries. Many of the countries in this category still have to ensure access to basic education opportunities for large proportions of their people, children and adults, including groups especially disadvantaged in multiple ways. They are beginning to give attention to developing systematic approaches, guided by a policy framework. The policies, with varying degrees of comprehensiveness, attempt to set priorities within a realistic time-frame.

(b) Several countries in the Region, particularly in East and South East Asia, have advanced in expanding the reach of basic education, including extended compulsory education up to the middle level of secondary education. They have begun to diversify the scope and range of adult learning and non-formal and continuing education. Countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have had more than three decades of experience in developing and expanding national non-formal education programmes, largely in the public sector. They are now in a position to consolidate and deepen the gains they have made and place adult learning and non-formal education firmly within a progressively comprehensive framework of lifelong learning.

(c) China and India, with 40 per cent of the world's population and 50 per cent of the world's illiteracy between them, dominate the adult education and literacy scene not only in Asia, but throughout the world. Despite progress recorded since the mid-20th century, the struggle to eliminate illiteracy remains the key feature of adult education efforts in both countries. Geographical, ecological, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity and differences in economic development within each country have affected how literacy and adult education have progressed. It is, for the same reason, difficult to give a meaningful picture of the situation in these countries with aggregate data.

China, having adopted the spread of literacy as a key strategy in its revolutionary struggle for social and political change even before the liberation in 1949, has advanced further in broadening the literacy effort into a lifelong system of adult and continuing education. India has struggled in its own way and has begun to transform adult education programmes, thus far dominated by literacy, into multi-faceted learning opportunities for youth and adults.

(d) The Republic of Korea has crossed recently the threshold between the developing and the developed countries. With its comprehensive lifelong education legislation and its mandatory national lifelong education promotion plan every five years, the experience of the Republic of Korea may be regarded as the precursor of where other developing countries of the region may expect to be in the future. They may find the premises and approaches underlying the course followed by the Republic of Korea instructive, although each country has to adopt the strategies most suited to its unique conditions.

(e) The developed countries in the Asia-Pacific Region – Australia, Japan and New Zealand – have achieved universal primary education and have succeeded in making secondary education close to universal. They now find it necessary to give priority to vocational and technical upgrading of the workforce at post-secondary level and to broadening the scope of continuing education at tertiary level. Parallels of Australia's measures, described in the report, can be found in the other developed countries in the region.

Markers of inequality. There are many markers of disparity and inequality which must be overcome to make each country inclusive and responsive to the needs of the people, in both low and advanced basic education countries – and even in developed countries. These include disparities and discrimination related to gender, age, geography, socio-economic status, and disparities linked with ethnicity, language, religion, and other socio-cultural factors. Among the excluded in most countries are those with disabilities and special needs, nomadic and migrant groups, and indigenous peoples.

On the whole, participation in adult learning eludes many of the poor, women, old-age groups, ethnic minority and indigenous groups and socially-excluded groups because of structural, political, economic and social barriers. Adult education in the Asia-Pacific Region needs to adopt flexible structures that can adapt to the changing needs of these groups. Furthermore, any adult learning activity must be an integral part of a comprehensive framework of lifelong learning opportunities that place individuals on a learning cycle and help meet their occupational, professional and personal needs.

Elements of quality with equity. Overall, the quality of any education programme depends on the curriculum, teaching-learning strategies, monitoring and assessment mechanisms and processes and, finally, learning achievement and outcome. It is difficult to assess the quality of adult education programmes when there is a lack of proper documentation or systematic approach to adult education itself. Many learning needs and objectives for youth and adults are not given sufficient attention in the programmes on offer and they are not accessible equitably in the Asia-Pacific countries.

In the field of adult learning, dependent thus far to a large extent on voluntary service and voluntarist ethics, greater attention must be paid to human resource policies and practices. The complexity of the field does not lend itself to a standard solution or a single mechanism for teacher development and professional support. It calls for creative approaches – drawing on formal education personnel development arrangements, where appropriate, as in equivalency courses, and developing specialised provision, utilising existing institutions and creating new ones as necessary.

The professionalisation of key education personnel (policy-makers, adult education managers and trainers and adult educators themselves) remains a neglected area. In the absence of a lifelong learning framework, most low-income countries in Asia are unable to develop effective human resource policies and practices and apply these in their programmes. The middle- to high-income countries with established and well-run education systems have relatively greater resources and capacity to invest in the professionalisation of adult education.

Equivalency frameworks are essential, and have to be developed and applied when formal credentials are expected to be given on completion of a course. Several countries have accumulated experience in this area which others can emulate. In many of the low-income countries, while governments recognise the need to develop monitoring mechanisms such as evaluation portfolios, technical and resource capacities have constrained progress in this respect.

Determining global, national and contextually-specific development challenges, and how these would figure in ALE/lifelong learning, is clearly a major issue for a national system of adult education and for individual programmes. The political priority given to ALE/lifelong learning is justified by the extent to which it helps in meeting critical development challenges.

Some major common development challenges in the region stand out. These include, broadly, the following:

- (a) fighting poverty, with the highest concentration in the world of people in extreme poverty in South Asia, and the majority of the world's two billion living on US\$2 dollars or less daily being in Asia;
- (b) promoting sustainable development – the lives and livelihood of large numbers of people in the island nations and coastal areas of several countries are under threat, and other aspects of the fragile environment are seriously affecting people in all countries; and
- (c) building participatory democracy and the democratic polity, as people in all countries aspire to build a secure future for themselves and for future generations with peace, harmony, justice and dignity.

There are other important concerns in each society, which must be addressed in ALE/lifelong learning educational activities. Without being prescriptive and without attempting to decide what each country (and, to a degree, each community and the learners themselves) should decide, it will be greatly beneficial to share experiences between countries and learn about how the complex dynamics are worked out in different situations.

Establishing the relevance of educational activities for societal and individual priorities is not one well-defined task, or a one-shot exercise, nor can it be the job of one central agency. There are issues of determining objectives and priorities in different programmes, designing curricula and materials, and assessing outcome and impact of a multitude of activities. This is where a national oversight body for policy and strategy in ALE/lifelong learning can provide necessary guidance. The respective units for curriculum, materials development, teacher training, assessment and management have to play their role collectively and in each programme.

Flexibility and adaptability with diverse objectives, learner groups and delivery modes will demand considerable technical expertise. Countries which have advanced further, especially in East and South-East Asia, can serve as useful models for other countries.

Financial resources. In low-income countries in the Asia-Pacific Region where economic resources are constrained, allocations are meagre for adult education. It is often not incorporated into resource and budget planning as an important and integral component of the entire education system. Hence, funding for adult education is insubstantial even when the need is overwhelming.

A sector-wide approach to funding adult education activities is necessary to mobilise resources and to ensure a quality-driven approach to service delivery. A literacy programme that abides by essential quality benchmarks for such programmes is likely to cost between US\$50 and US\$100 per learner per year for at least three years (two years' initial learning followed by ensuring further learning opportunities available for all). Other adult education and skill development programmes may cost more, depending on purpose and duration.

It would be fair to say that neither national governments nor international donors have lived up to their commitments to support and promote adult education and lifelong learning in respect of providing adequate financial resources. Given the dependence of low-income and post-conflict countries on external financing, this source for adult education funding must be scaled-up massively to meet EFA goals, including those for literacy, life skills and lifelong learning.

Governance and organisational mechanisms. Good governance for quality adult education is predicated upon flexible and relatively autonomous structures at local level that adapt to learners' needs, encourage participatory practices, and promote accountability and transparency in its processes. These practices can help to ensure that programmes are inclusive, responsive and open to public scrutiny.

While Ministries may devolve administrative responsibilities, the locus of power still rests with the central authorities in many countries in terms of financial control, design and planning of programmes, and in terms of defining programme content, structure and learning outcomes. When devolution or delegation of administrative and financial powers goes further, the community can enjoy an increased sense of ownership and control over the management and co-ordination of activities. Programmes are then more likely to be sustainable and effective as they will tend to be more relevant to the lives of people in the community. Multi-purpose community learning centres (CLCs) can represent a concrete form of decentralisation. Where the local government institution is well developed, it can be involved in planning activities, management and resource mobilisation.

Participatory practices and partnership-building. The delivery of adult education programmes in many countries in the Asia Pacific Region happens through collaboration between public, private and NGO service providers as well as communities. Accountability and transparency principles and objectives have to go deeper than the present emphasis on compliance with financial rules and reporting requirements. The aim should be greater accountability to beneficiaries, local communities and key stakeholders. Advocacy for and mobilising larger resources for adult learning and education will be easier when principles and

practices of transparency and accountability are followed and shown to be followed in programmes.

II. Prospects and challenges: Turning the vision into reality

In 1997 CONFINTEA V proclaimed a commitment to a new vision for adult learning. As the synthesis of the reports on the effort of countries in the Asia-Pacific Region shows, the decade since then has been a story of remarkable progress in many cases, as well as struggle and difficulties in almost all developing countries of the Region.

Above all, however, there are high expectations about the role of adult education and lifelong learning and the contribution they can make to fulfilling national aspirations. In the decade ahead, with commitments renewed and lessons learned from the past decade's experience, it is possible to do a better job of turning the vision of adult education and lifelong learning into reality.

Drawing on the expectations and perspectives expressed by the Asia-Pacific countries and the analysis and synthesis of their reports, the following eight points are proposed as the key elements for a strategy to raise the profile of adult education and learning in national education systems and, thereby, to create and expand lifelong learning opportunities for all according to their needs and aspirations.

1. Re-commitment to the vision of ALE/lifelong learning and creating a learning society and a learning community – *Being guided by the vision of diverse and widespread adult learning and education (ALE) as the core of the lifelong learning (LLL) approach, governments, people and international partners must re-commit themselves to build a rich network of learning opportunities for all throughout life, according to their needs and aspirations.*

A wide spectrum of learning objectives and learners have to be served by formal, non-formal and continuing education programmes and through an enriched informal learning environment, all of which are components of lifelong learning. All citizens benefit from and contribute to a learning society, and communities become learning-friendly.

A sector-wide approach for adult education, encompassing literacy, non-formal education and continuing education, is needed to promote the LLL with ALE as its core. An operational form with plans, programmes and resources should be flexible to accommodate multiple programme components, implementation mechanisms and financing methods, rather than a rigid administrative modality. A high-level oversight body in the form of an adult and lifelong learning council or commission at the national level can champion ALE and LLL.

2. A multi-pronged approach to promote “critical literacy” and combat poverty – *Due attention has to be given to functional literacy and promoting critical consciousness as the foundation for lifelong learning, empowering people to help themselves.*

Poverty is not just a matter of income. Fighting poverty effectively through adult learning includes improvement in health and nutrition, protection from disease, and knowledge and practice of family planning. It should also include priority to children's education, the status of women in the family and community and their participation in economic activities outside the home, sustainable development options, information and knowledge of government services and people's claim to these.

Networks of multi-purpose community learning centres with community ownership, as seen in many countries in the region, are effective when they become the base for offering relevant training and knowledge dissemination and for link-up with ancillary support. These, brought together into national or regional networks for technical support, can be the vehicle for education and learning opportunities which have an impact on poverty, and can also be the building blocks for lifelong learning.

3. A culture of quality – *Inculcating a culture of quality in ALE/lifelong learning, setting and enforcing quality standards, providing for technical support and necessary resources in teaching and management personnel development, curriculum and learning materials, assessment of learning, and management and monitoring with attention to process and results demand priority and adequate resources.*

The key components of a culture of quality in ALE/lifelong learning are a multi-faceted approach which includes the development and application of quality standards, creative solutions for human resource policy and practice, curriculum and learning materials development and availability, assessment of learning outcomes with professional capacity and institutional mechanisms in place for formative and summative evaluation in programmes, and making use of the ICT potential. The “digital divide” between the rich and the poor and between urban and rural areas is a major concern as ICT rapidly advances. ALE/lifelong learning, given its legitimate scope and mandate, can play a significant role in bridging the divide, if its own strategies are adapted and resources are mobilised for this purpose.

4. Linking ALE/lifelong learning to critical development challenges – *Relevance of ALE/lifelong learning in meeting critical challenges of development and modernization of countries must be established and enhanced.*

Determining global, national and contextually-specific development challenges, and how these figure in ALE/lifelong learning, call for sharing experiences and participatory decision-making. Some major common development challenges in the region stand out: (a) fighting poverty, (b) promoting sustainable development, and (c) building participatory democracy and the democratic polity. There are other important concerns in each society, which must be addressed in the ALE/lifelong learning agenda. Establishing and enhancing the relevance of ALE/lifelong learning to critical development challenges and concerns should be a collaborative task of the national oversight body and the management and professional staff of diverse programmes.

5. Affirmative action to address inequality – *A policy of affirmative action must be adopted to identify and serve the disadvantaged and marginalised sections of the population with strategies that address their specific needs.*

Addressing inequality has to be an overarching principle in ALE/lifelong learning. High priority has to be given to overcoming gender injustice and disparity. Patriarchal values and culture continue to dominate, causing many forms of overt and subtle gender injustice and discrimination. Reaching out to disadvantaged and neglected groups has to be a central mission of ALE/lifelong learning. Specialised and more directly targeted projects are required to serve groups disadvantaged in multiple ways, such as ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous peoples, slum dwellers, the ultra-poor, and people with disabilities and special needs.

6. Governance and management fit for purpose – *The governance and management of ALE/lifelong learning should be based on government-civil society partnership and decentralised enough to make it responsive to local conditions and accountable to the learners and the community.*

Partnerships of all actors within a common framework of policy and strategy should be a guiding principle. Governments need to direct their energy to performing their regulatory, facilitative and public interest roles. Decentralisation has to be made to work. It is a process that has to be promoted in the context of each country's historical, political and bureaucratic culture. There has to be trial, experimentation and systematic building of capacities of personnel at different levels for decentralisation to work effectively. Where the local government system has advanced further, it offers an anchor for institutionalising decentralisation of planning and management.

Most countries recognise the need for change in the traditional mores and ALE/lifelong learning itself can be a means for promoting this change. Problems of corruption, dishonesty and mismanagement, present everywhere to a degree, are serious in some situations. Principles of transparency and accountability and their practice are particularly important in these situations.

7. Resources and their effective use – *A major increase must be assured in resources for ALE/lifelong learning, with mobilisation from all sources and better use of resources.*

There is an urgent need to rethink the levels of resources required and how these are to be used. A major part of any new resources will have to be devoted to incentives for teaching personnel, and their training and supervision. Performance standards and assessment of results of their work have to be established to justify the incentives. A target should be set to raise the share of ALE/lifelong learning to 3 to 5 per cent of the education budget by 2015 according to national circumstances. Other sources, including the private sector, communities and external assistance also should be pursued rigorously.

At least \$2.5 billion dollars a year of external assistance should be made available to low-income countries globally up to 2015, to meet the EFA and MDG adult literacy goals, as

estimated by UNESCO. An appropriate share should go to the Asian low-income countries. Meeting these promises, in turn, may allow and encourage citizens of the developing Asian countries to better hold their own governments accountable for effective use of all resources, whether from aid or domestic revenues.

8. Regional and international cooperation. *Lessons from experience should be captured and shared through cooperation among countries, organisations and institutions; existing international cooperation mechanisms should be strengthened; and the rich countries should fulfil their pledge of cooperation.*

A unique opportunity exists for learning from diverse experience and stages of development among countries in the region. A systematic effort needs to be made through bi-lateral and multilateral channels and the channels of UNESCO and other international agencies as well as NGOs for learning from the rich pool of experience in Asian countries.

The work of civil society organisations such as ASPBAE and ACCU, as well as exchanges among national NGOs and academic and research institutions in Asian countries, should be encouraged and supported. UIL, in collaboration with institutions in the region, can be a facilitator in this respect.

A small proportion of the promised external resources would be well spent on promoting purposefully designed cooperation and exchange on ALE/lifelong learning within the region and sub-regions for mutual capacity-building among these countries.

A unique challenge and opportunity lies for the governments and the people of the Asia-Pacific Region. Some are better poised to make the best of the opportunity, whereas others are less ready to face the challenge. A resurgence of education and learning for all – children, youth and adults – and throughout life is happening. The poor and the disadvantaged must not be left out of this resurgence and the emerging Asian Century. Let all have a stake in it and claim their due by expanding their own capabilities through education and learning.