EDITORIAL

Adult education and learning: endorsing its contribution to the 2030 Agenda

At the outset of the world economic crisis in 2009 the representatives of 144 UNESCO Member States met at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) held in Brazil, and adopted the Belem Framework for Action (BFA) to guide them ‘in harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future for all’ (art. 6). Moreover, they called upon UNESCO and its satellite structures to review and update the Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education adopted by the UNESCO General Assembly in 1976. This was finally replaced by the Recommendation on adult learning and education embraced by the UNESCO General Assembly in 2015.

The 2015 Recommendation provides a broad definition of what adult learning and education encompasses, and states that its aim

… is to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights and take control of their destinies. It promotes personal and professional development, thereby supporting more active engagement by adults with their societies, communities and environments. It fosters sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent work prospects for individuals. It is therefore a crucial tool in alleviating poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to sustainable learning societies. (art. 8)

Arguably, the stated aim of adult learning and education speaks back to several of the sustainable development goals and their underlining principles, as discussed in our last editorial (Webb, Holford, Milana, & Waller, 2017). Hence it came with no surprise that the mid-term review of CONFINTEA VI held in October 2017 in Suwon (South Korea) debated what should be countries’ priorities, when considering the contribution that adult learning and education can make to the 2030 Agenda. Contrary to CONFINTEAs, which are high-level meetings (i.e. inter-governmental meetings), this mid-term review is a lower level meeting (i.e. expert committee) according to UNESCO’s categorisation. Yet, it gathered more than 400 delagates from over 100 countries, spanning from directors and senior decision-makers responsible for adult learning and education within ministries of education or other government institutions, practitioners and experts from civil society, academia and the private sector, representatives of international and regional organisations and agencies, and specialists in the field of adult learning and education at national, regional and international levels.

Having taken stock of progress made in the field since 2009, they debated each of the five areas of action identified in the BFA and reaffirmed in the 2015 Recommendation (i.e. policy, governance, financing, participation, inclusion and equity, quality). Discussions focused on different fields of learning (i.e. basic skills, vocational skills, active citizenship, health, well-being and environmental sustainability), with particular attention being given to the role of adult education and learning in conflict and post-conflict situations. From these deliberations, in the outcome document: The power of adult learning and education – a vision towards 2030, the adoptees confirmed the ‘structural, enabling and pivotal role’ of adult learning and education

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in promoting the implementation of the entire 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development… and in particular SDG 4’ (preamble).

Yet, the striking elements that were reiterated time and again during the conference included the underfunding of adult learning and education, and its feeble support by the public purse, but also a substantial absence or insufficient articulation of adult learning and education in how the 2030 Agenda conceive SDG 4 and the Framework for Action for its implementation (UNESCO et al., 2015).

Indicators of this inattention to adult learning and education may be observed in the choice of terminology used in the Framework for Action. The term ‘lifelong learning’ appears 36 times, while ‘adult learning’ is mentioned seven times in connection to the acquisition of functional literacy, numeracy proficiency levels and life skills (Ibid., p. 8) among illiterate adults (Ibid., p. 34), as well as in liaison with Technical and Vocational Education and Training and tertiary education for improving and adapting adults’ skills (ibid., p. 41, 42) in non-formal learning spaces and environments (Ibid., p. 62). In one instance, where the Framework recognises the distinctive need to fund opportunities for adult learning, education and training, this focus is subsumed within arguments for funding opportunities for other age groups in a lifelong learning perspective:

It is equally necessary and urgent to boost financing for youth and adult literacy programmes, as well as adult learning, education and training opportunities, in a lifelong learning perspective. (Ibid., p. 69)

By contrast, when we exclude the reference in the above quotation, the term ‘adult education’ (i.e. the process or practices of teaching and learning with adults) never appears after this one example (sigh!). Adults are only referred to as categories of people who need to attain certain skills in the description of a statistical indicator (number 17) that should contribute to monitoring progress under target 4.4:

By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship. (Ibid., p. 20)

In short, due to the focus on outcomes (i.e. adults with skills in a lifelong learning perspective), there is little or no attention given in the Framework for Action to how and where these adults might learn or become more educated, and how adult learning and education might be funded.

Given this situation, two aspects are here worth attention. First, the relation between adult learning and education, and how to secure the latter remains under the oversight of governments and international organisations in the implementation of the SDGs. Second, the relation between what SDGs pursue and the type of indicators that can best inform the monitoring of their implementation at national and international levels.

Arguably, the relation between adult learning and education has been made the object of academic debates. For the most part, educationalists have been critical towards the general tendency to replace education for learning in policy debates and deliberations. Gert Biesta, for instance, has exposed how the language of learning

… has facilitated a redescription of the language of education in terms of an economic transaction, that is a transaction in which (1) the learner is the (potential) consumer, the one who has certain 'needs', in which (2) the teacher, the educator or the educational institution is seen as the provider (…) and (3) education itself becomes a commodity – a ‘thing’ to be provided or delivered. (Biesta, 2006, p. 19, 20)

At the same time, alternative voices have disarticulated the relation between learning and education in adulthood. For example, Palle Rasmussen notes that the issue at stake should rather be ‘seeing institutional education as one element (and a vital element) in processes of learning that also include other elements’ (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 94). Thus, he is in favour of recognising the importance of (adult) learning as not in opposition of (adult) education, but as the indispensable link that connects individual processes to the complexity of contemporary social life.

Despite this debate, the UNESCO, among international organisations, is perhaps the only organisation today to consider adult learning and education as inseparable.
Albeit recommendations are the softest of all legal instruments in the hands of international organisations, and the 2015 *Recommendation on adult learning and education* is no exception, they encourage compliance with certain social norms and sets of desirable levels of performance. Thus, as a normative instrument, this Recommendation has the potential to contribute to and stimulate the political debate around adult learning and education in all countries, regardless of their income or development levels.

Likewise, the monitoring of international commitments on adult learning and education through the production of the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* by the UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning is not the result of systematic research, given it builds on data and information self-reported by governments or on their behalf. But as an advocacy tool, it can be used by researchers and adult educators to raise attention to the contribution of adult learning and education to the targets of the 2030 Agenda’s on quality education (SDG 4), health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and climate action (SDG 13). Moreover, it can stimulate the undertaking of more in-depth studies and analyses on the state of play of adult learning and education within and across countries.

As far as the relation between SDGs targets and indicators is concerned, as Radhika Gorur notes:

A renewed focus on measuring learning and on accountability under the Sustainable Development Goals agenda and the Education 2030 plan is ramping up the establishment of global metrics, bringing more and more national, regional and international assessments into being … Understanding ILSAs [International Large-Scale Assessments] as neither merely technical, nor just ‘politics’, but as a sociotechnical regulatory mechanism draws our attention to the political cultures coproduced with them, and to the ways in which they participate in societies to promote certain policy problems and solutions, whilst obscuring others. (Gorur, 2017, p. 354)

Accordingly, she develops a refined argument that, drawing on concepts from science and technology studies and on the history and sociology of numbers, invites explorations of the relation between science/technology, numbers/culture and politics/power.

In our field, although from a different theoretical perspective, authors like Pepka Boyadjieva and Petya Ilieva-Trichkova have been arguing for bringing back complexity in the measuring of ‘equity’ of access in adult education and learning opportunities. They have proposed two indicators: an index of inclusion and an index of fairness to analyse participation in adult education drawing on theories of social justice. Applied to analyse data from the Adult Education Survey (2007 and 2011) these indicators show, for instance, some improvement in the fairness aspect of social justice in 25 European countries, due to a mix of a decrease in the overrepresentation of adults with high education and underrepresentation of adults with low education. But they show also that adults with low education remain substantially excluded from adult education and learning opportunities (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2017). Along the same line of thinking, the authors have further argued for the heuristic potential of the capability approach in conceptualising lifelong learning. Drawing again on the data from the Adult Education Survey (2007), they demonstrate how the index of fairness in participation in adult education can help in exploring the meanings of adult education and the obstacles to adults’ participation in education (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018).

In conclusion, endorsing the contribution that adult education and learning can make to the 2030 Agenda should not reduce education to learning (or vice versa), but recognise they are inseparable elements that connect individuals to their complex social lives. Similarly, this argument calls for researchers and educators to avoid reducing the debate around indicators to a merely technical or ideological issue, while inviting researchers and educators to bring into realisation Raymond Williams’s popular statement that: ‘To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing’ (Williams, 1989, p. 118).
References


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