



ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION (ALE) – BECAUSE THE FUTURE CANNOT WAIT

***-Contribution of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) to the
UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative-***

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INTRODUCTION

Change is the constant in all aspects of our lives, our society, our economy and our planet. Adult Learning and Education (ALE) supports and enables people to understand change, to cope with change, to respond to change and to transform ourselves and our world. ALE orientates learners to navigate across our complex world, it enables learners to make informed decisions and it motivates learners to act together to contribute to an alternative and feasible vision for the future. ALE is more than teaching and learning, it is as much about guiding people to understand, engage and contribute to creating the pathway for the better world, including millions of people who are currently left far behind.

We are writing this at a time when the whole world is experiencing a global pandemic, amplifying the existing inequalities which are now impossible to ignore. Exposing, understanding their roots and responding to these inequalities, that have manifested themselves differently in different contexts, have been central to the purpose and mission of ALE. The current political, economic and social structures should embrace changes that promote education as a global public good and make education of high quality available and accessible for all if we expect a world that will be able to face unprecedented challenges. There is a growing recognition that ALE is an integral element of Lifelong Learning and Education however we are concerned that education, in general, continues to be interpreted narrowly to focus only on formal education and on the early years of human development.

We strongly argue for a future of education built upon inclusive and equitable quality learning opportunities and outcomes, across the lifespan. The lifespan includes adult learning in all its many and creative manifestations, in work and life, formal, non-formal and informal. This paper therefore examines how ALE is essential if our world is to be a better place. We affirm our position by demonstrating its positive and strong contribution to building cohesive societies which have regard for the resource limitations of our planet, regard for peace, democracy and inclusivity while recognising the advancement in technology. Governance in the ALE sector does not escape our attention and we call for the ALE policy, financing, professionalization as the main determinant of quality of education and learning, and more research in different subsector of ALE.

While education of children and young people remains crucial, from the perspective of lifelong learning, the power to decide and create change, in our homes, in our communities, in our countries and in our planet, rests on the ability of adults to learn and work alongside our children and youth. The planet cannot wait, the people cannot wait. The future cannot wait for younger generations to shape it, we are doing it now, with and for them. The more of us able to access quality education and lifelong learning opportunities now, the greater the chances that we will have active and critically engaged citizens with knowledge, skills and values that will contribute to a just and sustainable future.

This is why we advocate for free basic education for all, ensuring that a diverse range of learning opportunities are available and accessible to everyone, whenever and wherever, they are required. All learning can be – must be – transformative, if our societies and our planet are to survive and thrive.

1. ALE facing the future challenges

ALE envisioning a habitable and sustainable planet

ALE advocates for and contributes to education as a human right and is also instrumental in helping adults and older people to meet the challenges of the dynamic changes in our local and global environments, in political, social, economic and cultural fields and to untangle and solve problems faced across the different stages of our roles in life and work.

The main challenges confronting our planet are - climate emergency, loss of biodiversity, inequitable access to resources, waste pollution, and rapid urbanisation. The current environmental issues and the policy resistance to adequately respond to the impending crisis, indicates that even in the near future these problems threaten to expand beyond manageable limits. ALE has demonstrated its ability to contribute to helping people understand, cope and adapt to these environmental challenges, as well as to encourage the exploration of alternatives to reduce our impact on our planet. However, ALE needs to continue to challenge the notion of resilience that does not recognise and address the underlying factors that perpetuate the vulnerability of the very people who were meant to benefit from development. Therefore, ALE needs to re-conceptualise and advocate for resilience that involves learning that is truly transformative, rather than merely be reactive or adaptive to the impacts of the climate crisis in our everyday life.

This transformative learning involves learning to live responsibly with nature - to mitigate the harm to the planet, people and the societies, and to prevent further harm and deterioration. With new knowledge continuing to advance rapidly, this should never be at the expense of valuable knowledge and skills proven over centuries. Learning to become good ancestors through committing to 'intergenerational solidarity' is a commitment to a progressive, yet sustainable and equitable future. The rights of indigenous peoples and the preservation of their biological, cultural and linguistic diversity, also within education, is an essential component of this commitment.

ALE towards a just and equitable world

The climate and environmental crises combined with structural injustices result in deep inequalities that cause social and economic exclusion of millions of people worldwide. Inequitable access to resources, deforestation of large areas, agricultural intensification where big companies destroy the sustainable way of living for numerous groups of population – these factors cause massive poverty and hunger. The global Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic, which continues at time of writing, has magnified global/local inequalities, but these are not new. Current ways of dealing with these problems are not effective. Without addressing debt crises, global tax-dodging, illicit financial flows, unfair trade and corruption at all level, as main causes of existing inequalities, the income gaps will increase in spite of the fact that the size of the global economy has almost quintupled over the past 30 years.

ALE plays multiple roles – to help people find their way through the range of problems, to increase their competencies and their agency, and to enable them to take more responsibility for their own future. Furthermore, ALE helps adults to understand and critique current

paradigms, dominant social structures and global power relationships and to inspire change and take innovative actions towards more distributive justice. Developing the capacity for critical thinking or what Paulo Freire referred to as a critical consciousness or *conscientizacao* is essential if we are to understand the often-complex interconnections and ‘root causes’ of problems and generate creative educational strategies to address them.

ALE contributes to co-creating a vision of a society that values justice, solidarity and socio-ecological well-being. Concepts based on a socio-ecological well-being vision of the world exist across cultures, for example, *buen vivir (good living)*, or simply a call for ‘happiness’ in some countries. It is not limited to comfort, wealth and ownership, but rooted in furthering personal growth and fulfilment, relationships of friendship and love and a sense of community. It guides us into rethinking the values that have grown to dominate our world such as competitiveness, growth, liberalisation, and identifying future-oriented actions for the global and local pursuit of ecological and social sustainability.

These alternative visions call for a new kind of active citizenship, new forms of community organizing, alternative forms of sustainable living and new sites and forms of learning. There are many innovative grassroots movements that have learned to become more agile and effective by showing creativity and solidarity and as a result have augmented relief efforts by governments in addressing the symptoms of these complex problems. This is an example of ALE, in the form of social movement learning, which has expanded including through creative use of digital platforms and social media. Many of these new movements and community-based civic actions tackle burning issues that will remain the issues of the future— climate change, migrants’ crisis, criticism of armed interventions, freedom of speech worldwide, women’s rights around the globe, etc. These alternative visions and movements inspire the co-creation of new learning environments, such as learning cities (and rebelling cities) and public spaces as the new sites for ALE.

As crises of various kinds are anticipated to be an everyday part of the near-term future, lessons need to be learned in order to create community-based networks as socio-economic and environmental ballasts. ALE and adult educators have much to contribute towards these ends.

ALE enabling peace and democracy

The 21st century did not make a peaceful entry on the planet. The number of wars and armed conflicts continue to plague the world, shamefully destroying human lives and material, cultural and natural treasures. Extremism of various kinds including, hate and intolerance, violations of human rights, forced and unwilling migrations are massive phenomena. The world is marked by advances of authoritarianism and populism, with the breakdown of democratic institutions and processes, and weakening of political institutions, often hidden behind popular economic and political agendas.

The urgency of dealing with these problems is evident, and education and learning offer the long-term solutions. Since achieving peace starts in the minds of men and women, ALE can change the mindset of people. Parallel with addressing huge social and economic problems that are also causing the conflicts and violence, ALE can tackle stereotypes and prejudices and broaden the horizons of knowledge about “The Other.” ALE embraces empathy and solidarity

while empowering people to challenge the power relationships, structural inequalities and financial interests behind the problems. Moreover, civic and political literacy, critical thinking and civil courage are necessary tools to understand these problems and to undertake actions to make change. These values and approaches were always part of ALE, but in the future these same values and approaches will be even more important.

The increase of digital media and social networks did not fully fulfil the expectations of the democratisation of access to information and learning – the phenomena of *infodemia*, fake news, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories – they all show that ‘hardware’ is not the best solution for the problems, but education and learning that helps adults to find orientation in the emerging world, increasingly connected, decreasingly structured, marked by hidden power and interest games and prone to abuse of various kinds.

ALE striving for inclusivity and gender equality

A future where all people can live in dignity and in a ‘decent home’, is only imaginable with the eradication of all kinds of discrimination. Only approaches that are genuinely inclusive, encompassing the diversity of groups (people of different age, race, ethnicity, religion, caste, HIV status, disability, gender, sexual orientation, poverty, migration and refugee status, area of work, and geographic location...) can claim to be future-oriented. ALE can help raise awareness towards inclusivity and develop mechanisms to make it a reality through ensuring the availability and accessibility of a broad range of flexible and high-quality education and learning (formal, non-formal and informal) opportunities for all these groups.

Gender inequality continues to persist as one of the unresolved problems that all societies face, in particular inequality of women in all areas, including education. Women are more than ‘a vulnerable group’ and represent more than half of the world’s population. It is economic, social and cultural inequalities, gender stereotypes, gender-based discrimination and violence which are symptoms of deep-seated problems in the societal structures that need addressing. This requires raising people’s awareness and identifying roles they can play in addressing these inequalities through education, especially through ALE.

Central to these strategies for transformation is the involvement of the majority of women in the world, who carry the greatest load in terms of family, community, health, food security, physical environment, and who receive little recognition for their enormous contributions. The economic crises, the pandemic and other dramatic changes have disastrous impacts on most vulnerable populations – as they don’t just intensify poverty and contribute to unemployment, but they also worsen the availability and accessibility of key social services. When women are heavily affected by these dramatic changes and their resulting consequences, children and families are inadvertently affected too. Therefore, if conditions and positions of women improve so they experience social, economic, environmental and gender justice, the quality of life for most of the population will be vastly improved. This is consistent with the visionary intentions of the UN’s Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

A precondition for the achievement of this vision is lifelong learning and education for all, which includes ALE, which is inclusive and equitable and integrates equality as the principle that

empowers, and at the same time provides relevant knowledge and skills, including the skills to use and master new technologies.

ALE shaping the future of work and digital world

Offering vocational and income generating knowledge and skills has been and will be a big part of the mission of ALE – it is about livelihood, about enabling people a decent life by securing existence and work in both formal and informal economies.

Since the world of work is transforming constantly, ALE is integral to the changing world of work as new skills, attitudes and capabilities are required. It has a central role to play in adaptations of people to keep pace with the changes, in acquiring knowledge and developing competencies that would help them not only to find and keep the job within this dynamic development, but also to actively participate in the creation of their professional future and in shaping the world of work.

The rapid development of new technologies, especially Information and Communications Technology (ICT), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and increased digitalisation pose new challenges and opportunities. While their benefits have become apparent not just in work settings but also in our daily lives, their long-term consequences are difficult to predict. It is foreseen that digitalisation and AI will change minimum job requirements resulting in increased uncertainty in the labour market. On one hand, AI offers the opportunity to reduce the number of low-skilled, manual jobs, as these tasks are automated, and in some industries digitalisation increases the chances for fresh graduates to get into the job market, since communication technology has been able to overcome national boundaries and help make jobs accessible to people around the globe.

But on the other hand, there are numerous risks that these developments in the world of work that technology and ICT bring. There are fears, based on the existing tendencies that technology might replace workers, without opening new jobs; demand longer working hours; more demanding working conditions, and result in the growing number of unemployed who will struggle to survive in the urban and rural slums of the world. Working in the digital space might also mean less possibilities for social organising of workers, and thus less chances for campaigning and negotiating for labour rights, social protection, anti-discrimination and other rights required for decent work and decent pay.

However, alternatives are emerging: a combination of policy innovations, more flexible workplace arrangements which have been made visible by the COVID-19 pandemic, self-employment opportunities, and new forms of organizing amongst precarious workers, are challenging the idea that bad jobs are inevitable. While this transformation of work has often been perceived as a driver for adults to keep learning, it is important to recognise that these new forms of work are as much the outcome of learning to learn, to understand, to adapt and to respond to change.

But ALE doesn't only help people with the requirements of work and employment - it provides new opportunities for individuals and helps to imagine and develop new ways of understanding 'work'. These are critical to reimagining ways the political economy can function towards greater equity and socio-economic justice.

ALE can play an important role in contributing to our digital futures. Since digitalization and artificial intelligence continue to become a part of all dimensions of our lives, this reality demands that ALE practitioners and learners are aware of the risks. The digital divide can widen gaps in the same way that it can engage with the opportunities, such as the potential for the technology to reach out and connect families across generations, bridge learners and teachers across distances and time. One example is how small island developing states with limited resources can learn and share knowledge with colleagues across their islands and across the world. ALE will need to ride this wave of advancing technological development, by effectively understanding and utilising the technology to create digital tools and platforms for learning and engagement. ALE will need to actively shape this digital surge, by raising awareness of the underpinning power imbalances in the ownership of these digital environments and the risks in curtailing the utilisation of these digital tools to promote learning as a common good. Additionally to the digital gap (which tends to be very significant in some regions and certain age groups), including both infrastructure and skills needed to use ICT for learning, there is also a risk of neglecting areas of learning that require more than use of digital tools – such as critical thinking, peace, civic and intercultural education, art and recreation. Social and emotional aspects of learning also play an important role, especially among older adults or low-literate people and marginalized groups. ALE can apply various models, combining digital and face-to-face solutions, finding the best approach to satisfy the needs of diverse groups and sectors.

2. The concept of ALE for the Future

The notion that Adult Learning and Education is essentially a compensatory measure is still relatively common, especially in the developing world. Even when it is not seen as a compensatory measure, it is understood as a lesser process compared to schooling, which means access to basic, primary, secondary and higher education. Given the numerous challenges, it becomes increasingly more urgent to implement the concept of lifelong learning and education, not as some utopian model, but as a concrete survival strategy for the human race. After centuries generating and accumulating knowledge, humankind has apparently forgotten to question its actions and limits, with the arrogance that has disastrous consequences for the physical and mental health of people, for the existence of the communities and for the natural environment.

ALE as part of this process of lifelong learning and education is called upon to reconnect us with the deep sense and joy of living of which learning is a fundamental part. Whilst work and, increasingly, decent creative work, will remain an essential part of life, ALE will be concerned also with our collective needs for learning in order to live healthier, fuller and more emotionally, spiritually and intellectually satisfying lives. This will include understanding our roles as first, caretakers of the planet, our natural resources and other forms of life, and secondly, as members of both local and global community. Through community belonging we develop a new sense of togetherness and connection with other human beings, overcoming the concepts of atomized individuals, and transcending the situation where real social needs are 'corrupted' by the expansion of commodity 'needs'.

Thus, ALE is not merely about an individual striving for achievement and success, but has the elements of struggling for the common values, which are created through rationality and

participation in the world that is constantly emerging through joint engagement. This can only be achieved when we understand the andragogical character of life – what we learn from life and what life teaches us – as a holistic concept. Active, holistic and embodied learning should find its place in the ALE policy because it is happening in the practice, overshadowed by the Cartesian paradigm of learning and its fundamental divide between mind and matter, and a focus on material and cognitive aspects.

ALE is part of a broad educational process of organized and less organized learning, whereby in certain moments, the learning process itself is studied, and we explore how to learn and what to learn. Whilst the concept of education as a human right is universally accepted, the same cannot be said for knowledge. Knowledge is essentially a collective and common good, as is education. No matter how much one person learns, it does not diminish the stock of learning available for other people to access. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise the existence of not just one, but multiple forms of knowing. Epistemological arrogance has sustained those models of development that have already provoked several crises. In order to avoid this happening again in the future, an epistemological shift is needed, that involves advancing a more integrative and holistic approach to ALE.

Although ALE is crucial in supporting people to cope with different difficulties in their lives, ALE must be more than instrumental and reactive. Thriving as people and societies involves accessing learning opportunities in the three modalities of education and learning - formal, non-formal and informal, all of which need support. State support for ALE is often targeted at what are perceived as immediate instrumental needs – which might be reasonably justified during, for example, a pandemic and environmental climate crisis – but requires a longer-term thinking and reconceptualising. The significance of the four pillars of learning as identified in the Delors report has not decreased, and ALE should be based on them: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be.

3. ALE as integral to Lifelong Learning and Education

Lifelong learning and education continue to be an aspirational focus in many countries. With the Fourth Industrial Revolution, described as the merging of the physical, biological and digital worlds knocking at our door, it is very important that ALE and LLL assumes a major focus in the emerging development agenda globally. Of course, the scant regard of LLL is well known, including availability of sufficient finances, and the dominant place given front-loaded education systems education. It is also recognised that much of LLL has been focused on vocational education. It is not enough to have a labour force whose education and learning stops at the age of around 20, but also active citizens and lifelong learners. This needs a systematic approach, relevant education policy that affirms the right to learn and provide sufficient support.

ALE recognises and values the fluidity between informal, non-formal, and formal learning that occurs in all dimensions of an individual's life, and growing use of modern technologies, especially ICT, will increase this plurality of learning sites and forms. Policy development should therefore recognise all these forms, sites and contexts of learning. Therefore, from the perspective of LLL, meaningful learning should not be construed as happening in schools alone

or relegated to this period of the life-course. Hence, the maintenance of learning as a dominant aspect of the life-course and as an individual and communal development goal must be embraced.

It is essential to break the traditional attitudes, notions and beliefs concerning education and rethink and reposition LLL in the 21st century as a conceptual framework of the overall educational system of a country. Since LLL has been recognized as necessary for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), many countries and international development partners, as well as funding organizations around the world promote it with the belief that learning throughout life contributes to all aspects of individual, social and community development. The phenomena of 'false prioritisation' where LLL is embraced and adopted, but the lack of resources is used to justify investing only in the education of children within formal education, mostly schools, is not only an outdated concept, but has negative consequences. Children's educational achievement depends on the education of their parents. The family is a learning unit in various ways, and lack of a supportive home learning environment diminishes the sustainability of achieved educational results of any group. Therefore, creative, flexible, community tailor-made approaches can capture learning needs of combined target groups, combined forms, content and methods of learning and education. LLL policy needs to embrace these practices and provide framework and support for their further development.

The Governance of ALE

Quality ALE can only be achieved on a large scale if and when it has governance mechanisms and support structures as all the other sub-sectors of schooling, vocational or higher education. Within the appropriate, inclusive and effective LLL governance, ALE requires its own regulations towards policy, legislation, and finance to function well in practice, and create and sustain opportunities for the education and learning of adults which cover all spheres of life and work.

What can be learned from examples globally is that becoming defined as the human right and getting the provision through policies, legislation, and finances will be very important if ALE is to support the education system in its attempt to increase quality and participation in learning and create equal opportunities for younger and older adults.

There is a strong need for ALE to be based upon intersectoral policies. At the level of governance, this is complex but the need for an intersectoral body at the national, but also at the regional and global level, a frame which formulates and coordinates policy and financing related to education, qualification, training and learning in all those instances of government which provide such opportunities for young people and adults in their respective fields of action, is evident. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, at a huge cost of human life, the error of continually separating public policies relating to education, health, work and natural environment.

Intersectorality should be recognised as a potential and used as a major stimulus in the promotion of policy and action concerning LLL, especially in relation to policies focusing on wholesome growth and development of the individual in all areas of life, family, community, work, leisure, etc. In this regard, policy development with respect to LLL must look at the ultimate potential of the individual. This must never be short-changed or dismissed.

Accordingly, the pursuit of intersectorality is possible when there is a deliberate effort to develop policies that inscribe LLL into the development agenda, in relation to ongoing development of the individual/human betterment. At the same time, ALE as a delineated policy, research and practice area has to be promoted and supported.

Financing ALE

Education in general faces the challenge of insufficient resources, and ALE is the least supported link in the overall lifelong learning chain. Much research confirms that ALE remains globally underfunded in many countries and receives less overall funding compared to other education areas. Considering the huge current needs, but also the estimated development (number of illiterate adults, the pace of technological changes, rising environmental and climate problems, escalating threats for peace, security and democracy), it doesn't seem realistic to expect solutions to any of these problems without significant increase of investments in adult education. The emerging needs for education for sustainable development, global and active citizenship education, peace, human rights and democracy – these areas are becoming increasingly important and cannot be left to the free market, private funders and foundations.

Although the diversification of funding is part of the solution and different funding models may be used in different sub-sectors of ALE, state funding remains one of the primary funding streams, consistent with the concept of education as a public good, especially when it comes to basic education of adults and literacy, and in ALE for deprived and marginalised groups. The main role of the state is not necessarily in the volume of funding, but more with the tasks of setting the frame, defining the principles and rules, ensuring quality and providing support to priority groups. Government, in partnership with other national stakeholders, remains in charge in terms of framework definition, quality assurance, inclusion and participation and cross-sectoral approach. The scarce resources for ALE are more a matter of distribution than lack of funds. For example, the world spends incomparably more on the military than on ALE. Unjust tax structures in favour of the rich, harmful tax incentives and illicit capital flight deprive state coffers of much needed resources that can be allocated to education, ALE and other social services. Tax justice measures offer the most viable financing solutions to expand public resources from the billions to the trillions that are needed to close financing gaps in education including the deserved allocations to ALE. Therefore, prioritisation of ALE in policy and practice can be accompanied by increased funding.

For many countries in the world, development cooperation will remain an important funding source of ALE. In order to make it more functional in the future, this kind of support should be much more tailor made so to match the needs of the country, should be planned and implemented together with the local partners. Development cooperation and ODA (Official Development Assistance) should work for the people of the country, and not for the donating organisation, foundation or donor government.

4. Content, Priorities and Scope of ALE

The current understanding and practice of ALE provides the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary across the entire spectrum of life-long, life-wide and life-deep learning. We therefore believe that old dichotomies, understood as exclusive categories, such as knowledge and competence; vocational and non-vocational skills; life and work skills, and formal and non-formal education, are no longer helpful in acknowledging and celebrating the more fluid and flexible learning required across the life course.

With these guiding principles in mind, several priority areas for learning can be identified, that will be an irreplaceable part of the curriculum for and of the future of ALE:

Basic, Functional and Digital Literacies will continue to be a foundation of ALE. Illiteracy remains one of the biggest unsolved problems of the world. Unless comprehensively addressed, illiteracy will continue to haunt us in our 'journey to the future'. Therefore, it will remain an important challenge that ALE has to address. It is recognised that literacy(ies) is a continuum and is very much context based. It is not just about writing, reading and numeracy, but includes the growing need for other kinds of literacy (financial, media, civic, digital literacy...) and the capacity to engage critically and productively with society. This opportunity for literacy should be available to all, in particular, those youth and adults who may have missed this initial learning opportunity earlier in life. In the future basic functional literacies will not just include digital literacies but include the ability for learning to learn. Keeping pace with digital development shouldn't prevent us from observing the huge need for basic and functional literacy, since currently almost 800 million adults worldwide cannot read and write a simple sentence. Therefore, the concept of literacy should not be expanded by 'loading' it with content as much as possible – with additional knowledge areas and large number of competencies, which in effect tend to equate functional literacy with the wider concept of lifelong learning competences or with basic education. The functional character of literacy remains crucial - it has to respond to the needs of the adult learners in their life roles and their contexts, to empower and to support the development of critical thinking.

Vocational education and training of adults have always been one of the main tasks of ALE and will remain a key task in the future. The uncertain dynamics of the world of work make schools and traditional education less agile to deal adequately to these challenges. With the changing structure of the economy, mutations in the labour market and in the workplaces, ALE is one of the few ways to help people navigate through what is the longest period of one's life. Furthermore, it is not merely about work, but ALE has the responsibility to develop competencies for decent work and decent payment, which is the main requirement for a decent life. It means that ALE for the work and employment should provide an integrated approach to the development of competencies that combines work related skills, foundational skills and literacy, as well as skills for sustainable development and participatory citizenship. Thus, the traditional divide into vocational and non-vocational training becomes less relevant and the sharp divisions between vocational skills and capacities for living are blurring which brings learning for 'work' and 'livelihoods' closer.

ALE should also focus on the development of generic knowledge and transversal competencies, which will be beneficial for the fast-changing professional environment and include participatory, embodied and arts based methods that enhance possibilities for creativity and thinking 'out of the box' - required for the economy of 21st century. ALE recognizes and supports various forms of job-related ALE and their inclusion in LLL policies (individual incentives, on-the-job learning, different forms of practical instruction, etc.) ALE is flexible and open for the tailor-made programmes of various groups, while recognizing the equivalency of qualifications obtained in a non-formal educational setting, since work in the non-formal economies is still the main way to secure the livelihood for millions of people worldwide.

Popular, Liberal and Community Education addresses the need for learning that makes people more self-confident, self-efficacious and aware of their own capacities and skills, which translates to a greater ability to manage their own lives and health. This includes ALE that motivates learners to engage in the culture and arts, learn topics from general education, acquire a new language, play a musical instrument and enjoy sports. ALE provides opportunities to bring people together and therefore strengthen their social networks, which is crucial for community cohesion. Compassion and the ability to engage with each other across diverse cultures helps to nurture connections not just with people, but with our environments. These are key elements of eco-spiritual relationships that involve respect for ourselves, other people and nature. It also recognises indigenous knowledge and ways of relating to our environment. Additionally, the current pandemic demonstrates the existential need for more health knowledge to combat fake news and conspiracy theories, which have the potential literally to kill people. Critical thinking, as a form of information literacy, provides means to engage critically with online content, and should be part of any educational endeavour with adults. At the other end, ALE offers opportunities not only for cognitive learning but contains important elements of social and emotional learning, thus contributing to mental health. The health and well-being of our societies depends upon the availability of these diverse facets and topics of ALE.

ALE and active global citizenship are urgent and critically important responses to the pressing needs of our world. Human rights, peace and democracy have been one of the main pillars of ALE for a long time. Therefore, ALE must include, more than ever, objectives for developing a sense of social and civic responsibility; a political awareness and readiness to act, and a critical understanding of problems at national and international levels, including topics focusing on global responsibility, human rights and peace, justice and freedom, international understanding and cooperation, solidarity and responsibility.

ALE of the future has the imperative to stress the inadmissibility of recourse to war for purposes of expansion, aggression and domination, or to the use of force and violence for purposes of repression, contributing to international understanding and strengthening of world peace and to the activities in the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism in all their forms and manifestations, and against all forms and varieties of racialism and fascism.

ALE and learning to live sustainably are based on the current practices of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Education for a world based on ecological justice is essential if

we are to even begin to allow ourselves and our children's grandchildren to have any future worth living in. We need to re-think current models that attempt to help people use their natural resources in a sustainable way, live in harmony with the environment and begin to learn our way out of the main global and environmental challenges confronting humankind.

The principles of learning to live sustainably should ideally be embedded in all of ALE.

5. ALE and Civil Society Organizations

Civil society organisations, local community groups and social movements have been and continue to be at the fore, and the major provider of adult learning and community education. While the other providers (government, private sector) contribute to building individual capacities that contribute to a better future, civil society organisations, community organisations and social movements involved in ALE allow us not just to build our individual futures, but imagine, learn and contribute to achieving alternative futures..

When it comes to education, the engagement of civil society, in all its diversity, has been the decisive factor in the creation of Education for All as a global movement, and a main force in supporting millions of young and adult people worldwide in realizing their right to education.

Despite this enormous contribution of civil society, we witness the retrograde tendencies in many countries - shrinking space for civil society, the rise of authoritarian regimes that weakens the democratic processes, leading to a consequent restriction on the space for the voices of all people, especially the most marginalized. There are also fewer opportunities for broad-based dialogue on education and more limited involvement of civil society in government policy and planning processes.

Civil society participation in the new development agenda is supported by a solid architecture to engage in SDG 4 - Education 2030 – many organisations have already engaged with significant results and managed to mobilise further actors and resources, organising at international, national, local and grassroots level. However, future challenges and future education agenda need to recognize:

- innovative potential of civil society, especially in the ability to design and implement innovative educational and learning practices, as well as a depth of experience in working with important often hard to reach sectors of society, including women, indigenous people; unemployed; people with disabilities, providing them not only knowledge and skills, but also contributing to their own empowerment, thus shaping them as active and critically engaged citizens, give visibility to the invisible and supporting those who are mostly in need;
- learning and working to address gender inequality will continue to be of crucial importance for ALE and for civil society, which requires actively engaging with women, as well as individuals of various gender identities;
- the role of civil society as the 'critical friend' and social actor that can influence policy and help to hold government accountable and to monitor the commitments;

- civil society as the actor that carries most of the work for the action oriented learning, helping people in real work and life situations and crises, organising and learning as part of social movements around housing, water, sanitation, GBV, environment etc;
- the urgency of truly transformative approach and not ‘business as usual’ – civil society working in ALE has the important role to challenge the rigid patterns, social structure, architecture of power and traditional relationships that harm individual and social development.

Therefore, policy makers should recognize education as the core of social transformation, and include relevant actors, including civil society as full partner by:

- including it in education policy making, implementation and monitoring;
- being open for both partnership and critical approach by civil society, for the sake of commitment to the common educational goal;
- not only partnering with civil society, but also supporting it (providing spaces and resources), without limiting the independency of its work and decision-making;
- supporting the diversity of the forms of the ways civil society organise itself and works, having in mind a wide diversity of stakeholders that civil society continues to represent;
- being sensitive to the external factors in the social and political environment that exacerbate challenges civil society is exposed to (including both their members and ‘users’), economic and health crises, conflicts, wars, violence, fundamentalism;
- helping civil society engaged in ALE to document the results in their work and to recognise different, innovative approaches and different methodologies;

There is a need for closer cooperation and networking of all actors and with civil society as an equal partner of the state, sharing the burden of an important education agenda, and being an important contributor for further development.

6. ALE is a profession and an academic discipline

In accordance with the requirement of all CONFINTEAs since 1972, UNESCO’s Recommendation on Adult Education (1976, 2015) and following the SDG4 which names *quality* as the main characteristics of education and LLL for all, we stress the need to continue the efforts for the professionalization of ALE, with the full respect for the diversity of contexts. This includes:

- strengthening the institutional structures (like community learning centres, for delivering ALE) and securing the role of ALE staff,
- improving in-service and pre-service education, further education, training, capacity building and employment conditions of adult educators,
- developing appropriate content / curricula and modes of delivery adequate for adult learner, based on research results.

The need for more efforts for the professionalization of ALE in the future is based on the following main premises:

- The quality of education and ALE is not possible without high quality staff, complemented by quality infrastructure and programmes. Only through such quality education and training of staff, will they be able to empower motivate learners of all ages, increase participation, and prepare participants for various tasks and roles-, but also for LLL and independent acquisition and application of knowledge and skills;
- In ALE practice, many people are engaged in various areas and at different levels, but too often they do not have proper educational preparation and relevant knowledge and skills to apply learner-centred pedagogy and methods;
- Dynamic changes of the modern world and the field of education require adult educators with grounded knowledge, transferable competencies and the ability for continuous learning and self-improvement.

Context, institutional settings and structures of ALE provision are very diverse, as well as the function ALE has in different work and life contexts and stages in human life. Therefore, professionalization of ALE has to recognize and effectively respond to this diversity. To achieve this level of professionalization we will need to:

- Define the minimum standards of knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators that will guarantee quality and adaptability of ALE, acknowledging the wide variety of roles involved in the delivery of ALE programs, including, adult educators, teachers, trainers, facilitators, instructors, who work in a range of capacities (full-time, part-time and also as volunteers)
- Establish professional development programs with areas of specialization according to the needs. Significant efforts from the ALE sector itself have given birth to programs such as *Curriculum globALE* and *Curriculum InstitutionALE*, which have been delivered and adapted to a variety of context and languages;
- Recognize the variety of possible providers of education, capacity-building and train-the-trainers (ToT) programmes for adult education staff. In some countries, universities play a key role in preparing future adult educators through both undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs in ALE, with a variety of focus, durations, modes of delivery, and areas of specializations. However, it is important to recognise that other institutions and organizations could be involved, including state-run organisations, professional bodies, community learning centres, civil society organisations, and private companies.
- Enable recognition, validation, and accreditation of prior learning, especially for trainers, facilitators and instructors. Vertical and horizontal professional permeability can be supported by the provision of the generic knowledge of the field, broader competencies, ICT skills and motivation for continuous learning and professional improvement.

Although there is a growing body of research in various fields of ALE, it is still insufficient. There is a need for more and different kinds of research, conducted by different research bodies working together. Diversity being a key character of ALE should also reflect in how research is conducted. Current collection of data and statistics on ALE must be improved, including both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as participatory research. The research functions of the universities should also be available for ALE and LLL with interdisciplinary perspectives

and input, strengthening the potentials of ALE as an academic discipline. Different policy measures should enable better dissemination and utilisation of the research results in contributing to the future of ALE and to our shared future.

CONCLUSION

The world is changing dramatically. It is widely accepted that what is learned in childhood, schools and higher education is no longer sufficient. The need for LLL is agreed to, but not enough attention is given to ALE within the LLL, having in mind that:

- Adulthood is the longest period in anyone's life, and in most society, adults are the largest group, the group that needs to cope with rapid and sometimes dramatic changes but is also the group that makes the crucial decisions that affect today and the future;
- The urgency of the implementation of Agenda 2030, including numerous crises, threats to the planet and to humanity, and fact that millions of people that are already left behind, makes ALE one of the top priorities and the precondition to progress in other fields.

As experience and research show, ALE is fundamental for the individual growth, community development, environmental benefits, economic progress and betterment of the whole society. The future we can envision today will not reduce these requirements. Moreover, the problems our future will inherit from us today will increase the need, not only helping people to cope with the changes throughout their life, but in supporting them to become aware, informed, critical and engaged co-creators of the common future. Huge inequalities that plague the world today require restructuring and new models of development. The future with dignity and justice for all can be achieved and sustained only if education is accessible to all, learning is embodied in various parts of our lives, and responds to the need of people, societies and the planet. Only ALE as a delineated policy, research and practice area can support achieving such goals.

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