

## **High ambitions, but inadequate and declining resources: From CONFINTEA V to CONFINTEA VII**

**Alan Tuckett**

### **Introduction**

What can we do to narrow the yawning gap between the declarations and promises made by governments to strengthen opportunities for adult learning and lifelong learning and the modest, and often declining provision made on the ground? What, too, to recapture the energy and optimism that infused the global conferences of the 1990s? In that decade there was a succession of major United Nations conferences beginning with the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and including the Human Rights event in Vienna in 1993, the Population conference in Cairo in 1994, and the world conferences on Women in Beijing, and on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995. Each ended with declarations and commitments by governments to dozens if not hundreds of actions. As the decade went on, the voice of practitioners and policy advocates were steadily more strongly included in these complex events (UN 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, UNOHCR 1993).

Whilst the fifth UNESCO World Conference on Adult Education, CONFINTEA V, held in Hamburg in 1997, was not a full (Level 1) UN conference in the same way, it was imbued with the same spirit. It attracted among its participants heads of states, government ministers and officials and a wide representation of civil society organisations, as well as adult education practitioners. It marked a high water mark in international policy making for the education of adults. Its *Hamburg Declaration and Agenda for the future* (UNESCO 1997), made clear 'adult education...is a key component of development strategies that seek to ensure the long-term well-being of nations' (Desjardins 2013,81). For the first time civil society organisations like the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) and representatives of universities, and trades unions were invited to make presentations on the floor of the conference, and their contribution was powerfully represented in the *Hamburg Declaration*. This was 'a significant and remarkably utopian document' declaring adult education as

key to the twenty first century, and calling for active citizenship and participation for all adults, with the goal ultimately of 'the creation of a learning society committed to social justice and general well-being', capturing its themes in 27 preparatory statements, and ten thematic booklets (Nesbit, Welton 2013,2-3).

Prospects for adult learning and education looked rosy in the late 1990s. As well as the CONFINTEA event, both the OECD and UNESCO published policy papers endorsing the development of lifelong learning (Delors, 1997, OECD 1996). A sequence of European Presidency conferences contributed to the adoption of the European Union's Lisbon Memorandum in 2000, committing the EU to the development of lifelong and life-wide learning with budgets to match (Council of Ministers European Union 2000). In addition, at the Dakar UNESCO Education For All (EFA) conference, also in 2000, among the six overall targets agreed was the restatement of a commitment to halve the numbers of adults without adult literacy, and a wider commitment to education for work and life for young people and adults (UNESCO 2000, Almanaz-Khan 2000, Wagner 2011).

Despite this, the twenty-five years since CONFINTEA V have been hard for adult learning and education (ALE). Time after time international conferences have underlined its importance as a key component in development; targets have been set, yet the financial resources needed to achieve them have not been found either by the governments who signed up to the targets, nor by international or multilateral development partners, nor by employers (Archer 2005,2006). Despite the best efforts of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), of successive Education Monitoring Reports from UNESCO, of OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), and of the European Union, data on participation and achievement in ALE is sketchy, especially in respect of marginalised and under-represented groups, and without robust data on measurable outcomes funders have been reluctant to commit resources (UNESCO 2006,2012,2015, OECD 2013, Eurostat 2015).

One product of the 1990s conferences was the recognition by member states that even the most committed could not possibly follow through on all the discrete commitments made at the global conferences, and an agreement emerged to focus international development resourcing on a small number of major goals. The resultant Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) identified eight measurable targets, to be achieved by 2015, with the EFA commitment to universal primary schooling as the only education target (UN 2000). Funders and governments prioritised support for the MDGs, at the expense of the other

EFA targets, with the result that by 2015 there had been a drop from 780 million to just 745 million in the number without literacy (UNESCO 2015, Archer 2006). As for wider adult education no systematic data was available, and as Aaron Benavot, former head of the Global Monitoring Report observed, what is not measured becomes invisible (Benavot 2018).

The shift in resourcing was not the only reason for the shift in priorities. The growing dominance of neo-liberal policies led by the World Bank and by OECD, saw a shift away from support for programmes that recognised that adult learning was a complex component in development and that the process through which learners gained confidence and agency was central (Rubenson 2009, 2015). Gone, too, the recognition that education for adults is a human right, and a pre-condition for the exercise of other human rights. Rather governments adopted an increasingly narrow focus on readily measured outcome based project funding – with audit systems increasingly shaping what was taught and valued. This shift involved not just government but multilateral development agencies as well. The 2003 mid-term review of CONFINTEA in Bangkok demonstrated the shift quite dramatically, with civil society participants exceeding government representatives, and the only evidence based report on global development being provided by ICAE (ICAE 2003). John Daniel, then Assistant Director for Education at UNESCO, told that event that adult educators had a reputation for being ‘boring, sanctimonious, backward looking and parentalist’ (Daniel,2003,3).

It was clear at the end of the Bangkok event that to change priorities at a global level would involve sustained advocacy at national, UNESCO and UN levels. To support this activity ICAE, and its regional member the Asian South Pacific Association for Adult and Basic Education were active in both the Education for All processes at UNESCO and in the monitoring of the MDGs and the evolution of UN policy in New York, as well as briefing national and regional members, notably in the preparatory regional meetings leading to CONFINTEA VI in 2009 in Belem (Tuckett 2015).

Meanwhile, in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the World Social Forum was established. It represented a different process, grounded in the experience of activists seeking effective social change across the full range of social activities, and frustrated by the politics of the formal international organisations. Once again ICAE played an active role in the Forum, which met annually, at first in Brazil, then Mumbai, Nairobi, and then generated local and regional forums. For adult educators it was clear its work was imbued with the principles of Latin American popular education. From 2004 ICAE also mounted an annual

International Academy for Lifelong Learning Advocacy to strengthen civil society advocacy skills at national, regional and global levels.

Immediately prior to the Belem CONFINTEA VI conference ICAE co-ordinated FISC, the international civil society forum, which drew on the experiences of the World Social Forum, involving some 1200 participants including many indigenous groups. Its energies and optimism – fuelled by the experiences of local organisations from all over the world, was in striking contrast to the main event. FISC's closing statement offered a sharp critique of the state of provision in 2009, and offered a stark challenge to CONFINTEA VI:

There needs to be a recognition of the enormous scale of the violation of the fundamental human and social **right to education** of adults and young people. As such CONFINTEA VI should declare a state of crisis, requiring urgent action (FISC. 2010 75).

It highlighted the need for legislation to secure the right to education for adults and young people throughout the world, for transparency of governance, adequate costings for the EFA targets to be achieved, and for recognition of the rights of marginalised groups. It sought an end to simplistic data collection based on a dichotomy that labelled adults as simply literate or illiterate. What was most striking about the event, and in stark contrast to the formal CONFINTEA VI that followed it was that practitioners were awash with innovative and creative practices focused on education for social justice.

As in Bangkok, at the formal CONFINTEA VI there was a decline in the seniority of national representatives, few ministers, and the modest goals adopted in its Agenda for Action were scarcely the response the civil society forum had hoped for. There were, of course some achievements – an international learners' charter was presented to the conference, and the importance of learner voices recognised in the conclusions (UIL 2009a). The needs of migrants were also accepted as a priority for future work. Neither alas, featured in the forward work of UNESCO's Institute of Lifelong Learning. The financial crash of 2008, combined with the World Bank and OECD's pursuit of neo-liberal strategies, meant there were in the second decade of the twenty first century fewer opportunities for adult learning, and those that did exist were ever more narrowly focused on learning with a direct and short-term link to existing labour markets. In 2008 the European Union adopted a target of 15 percent adult participation in learning by 2020, up from the 9.5 percent at the beginning of the decade, yet by 2019 the figure was under 11 percent – and that total included a significant recalculation upwards of French statistics. The three yearly Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE ),

prepared by UNESCO UIL, (a real gain from Belem), show a similar story – with the significant exception of East Asia, where countries like Singapore and Korea have seen soaring participation backed by strong legislation (UIL 2009, 2013, 2016, 2019).

Much of the advocacy work of these years was focused first on the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro in 2012, where the dynamic activity of civil society to make the case, in the words of a Latin American manifesto for ‘The education we need for the world we want’ led to just two mentions in the multi-hundred page conclusions of the UN conference, on the role of education for young people and adults in contributing to sustainable development (UN 2012, Education Working Group 2012).

At the same time, as it became clear that the EFA target would fail to be achieved, and that the 2015 date for the end of the MDG process loomed, advocacy work at an international level turned to the role of learning throughout life in the new UN agenda to be agreed for the subsequent period. To look at the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) might suggest that this advocacy was surprisingly effective. Goal 4 reads: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all", and several of the underpinning targets are of relevance to the education of young people and adults. In addition, the Sustainable Development Report recognised the critical role education plays in the achievement of almost all the other SDGs. Education, and particularly education for adults, was recognised both as a thing in itself and a catalyst for the achievement of other social and development priorities (UN 2015).

Yet as in the MDG period, the grand commitment to ‘no one left behind’ did not stretch to securing funding for adult learning and education. The Global Partnership for Education, an alliance of the multilateral UN agencies, governments and development partners allocated all its funding to the formal school years and some pre-school funding. For adult education, ICAE was advised to look to charitable donations.

Despite the clarion call of CONFINTEA V, and its reinforcement both at Belem and at CONFINTEA VII in Marrakech, governments are not yet convinced of the key catalytic role adult learning can play in the achievement of the full range of the Sustainable Development Goals, yet it is apparent that to achieve a reduction in deaths in childbirth, or in securing effective implementation of clean water strategies, adults need to be engaged and active learners. Similarly, addressing climate change needs not only action by states and by corporates, but also change in the choices individuals and communities make. Again, it

will not happen without adult learning. It is a view underlined in the thinking about future work emerging from the International Labour Office and the World Economic Forum. Yet, whilst this catalytic role may be obvious to adult educators, it is not so clear to many other social actors (ILO 2019, WEF 2017). Activists seeking to clean up the oceans use learning strategies focused on adults as part of their work, but seldom engage with the structured formal or non-formal adult education sector. In part this is because the language used in different sectors to describe the process of securing change – in policy and practice- and the role of learning in in that process are often distinct from the language adult educators use.

Like so many activists in different social policy debates one major challenge we face is to see ourselves not at the centre of a web, but as others may see us, not coming as missionaries to share our ways of knowing, but in order to listen, and discover common experience. And the marginality of adult education in overarching national and international policy debates makes that hard – because what we do have to contribute may not be visible to our potential partners. It is not an easy task in policy contexts where funding and policy streams reinforce silo mentalities. But the evidence of the World Social Forum, and of community based popular education offer clues as to effective alliance building, as does the work of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal (Freire 1975, Boal 1984). They remind us of the importance of imagining better futures and designing strategies for achieving them. They remind us, too, of the value of celebrating how such change has been achieved in different places and at different times. They remind us of the potency of stories grounded in the experiences, and told in the voices, of people whose lives have been transformed by engaging critically with learning.

Of course, we need, in addition, data on who misses out, and what can be done to include them, and practical options for change. But faced with the gap between aspiration and practice, and the huge challenges facing our work, we need flair, confidence, and to make our case in ways that build alliances and capture attention in our advocacy work. However, surely, after the experience of the last twenty-five years it would be a mistake to rely too much on success in impacting on global policy or on its implementation by national governments. The same skills in advocacy are surely needed more locally to support the creativity of communities' learning initiatives. The resurgence of learning cities, towns and villages suggests that crossing policy silos, and building alliances are easier to achieve, and the results more robust at a regional and sub-regional level, where there are never quite enough resources to go round, but where a range of actors can effectively work together.

It is of course useful to remind policy makers of the unfulfilled promises they have made, and to make clear that far from 'no one left behind', inequality and injustice are rampant and increasing, and that adult learning is a key tool of empowerment. But growing the evidence on the ground that adult learning that engages with communities' needs can be transformative and exhilarating is perhaps the most effective advocacy strategy of all – and at the same time an antidote to rhetoric unmatched by action.

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### **Abstract**

The paper analyses reasons for the gap between the inspiring aspirations articulated at CONFINTEA V (5<sup>th</sup> world conference on adult education) and other world conferences during and after the 1990s with the reality of inadequate policy and declining finances for adult learning and education (ALE) over the 25 years leading to CONFINTEA VII in 2022. It explores the role of civil society advocacy on international policy over the period, and it concludes that hopes for improvement in ALE may lie best with sub-national and regional alliances for lifelong, life-wide learning.

### **Key words**

Adult learning and education, International policy, advocacy, civil society, targets, financing

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## **Des ambitions élevées, mais des ressources insuffisantes et en diminution : de CONFINTEA V à CONFINTEA VII**

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## Résumé

Cet article analyse les raisons de l'écart entre les aspirations enthousiasmantes formulées lors de la CONFINTEA V (5<sup>ème</sup> conférence mondiale sur l'éducation des adultes) et d'autres conférences mondiales pendant et après les années 1990, et la réalité d'une politique inadéquate et de finances en déclin pour l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes (ALE) au cours des 25 années précédant la CONFINTEA VII en 2022. Il explore le rôle du plaidoyer de la société civile sur la politique internationale au cours de cette période et conclut que les espoirs d'amélioration de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes résident peut-être dans les alliances infranationales et régionales en faveur de l'éducation tout au long de la vie.

## Mots clés

éducation des adultes, politique internationale, plaidoyer, société civile, objectifs, financement

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## Grandes ambiciones, pero recursos inadecuados y decrecientes: De CONFINTEA V a CONFINTEA VII

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## Resumen

Este documento analiza las razones del lapso existente entre las aspiraciones inspiradoras articuladas en CONFINTEA V (5ª Conferencia Mundial sobre Educación de Adultos) y otras conferencias mundiales de la misma índole celebradas durante y después de la década de 1990 partiendo de la realidad de políticas inadecuadas y la disminución de los presupuestos para el aprendizaje y la educación de adultos (AEA) durante los 25 años previos a CONFINTEA VII en 2022. Estudia el papel de la incidencia de la sociedad civil en la política internacional durante este período, y concluye que las esperanzas de mejora en AEA pueden estar mejor situadas en alianzas subnacionales y regionales de aprendizaje y formación permanente.

## Palabras clave

Aprendizaje y educación de adultos, política internacional, promoción, sociedad civil, objetivos, financiación