

Editorial

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In this special issue of *Convergence* to commemorate the 50th anniversary of ICAE, we look back and look forward. We look back over the 50 years since the ICAE was founded in 1973 and, at the same time, with the experience and wisdom accrued over this half century, we look forward to the next half century.

Discussions concerning the need to create an organization representing civil society were held on the side-lines of the CONFINTEA III, in Tokyo, in 1972. Fifty years later, the ICAE played an important role both in the mobilization for CONFINTEA VII held in Marrakech (Morocco) in 2022 and in the elaboration of the declaration adopted at the conclusion of the Conference – The Marrakech Framework of Action. The last number of *Convergence* (Vol. XL [3-4], 2007) before its suspension was published as a special issue in 2009 with the intention of helping “participants in the conferences (regional preparatory conferences for CONFINTEA VI) to make a more substantial contribution to the debate” (*Convergence*, 2007, p.9). More recently, *Convergence* arose like the phoenix from the ashes in 2022 under the guidance of Peter Mayo, the UNESCO Chair in Global Adult Education at the University of Malta, so it is symbolically important to commemorate the ICAE’s half century with another special issue of the journal.

Just as the CONFINTEA V, held in Hamburg in 1997, was preceded by the publication of the Delors Report, *Learning: the treasure within*, so CONFINTEA VII was preceded by the publication of the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our Future together: a new social contract for education*, to the background of the ongoing discussions on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2030 Agenda for Education. This complex (and at times confusing) profusion of agendas and proposals was further increased by the launching of the Transforming Education agenda by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in September 2022. Of all these initiatives the only one to make specific reference to Adult Learning and Education is the Futures of Education Report. This constitutes a stark reminder that despite all ICAE’s efforts and the continuing cycle of CONFINTEAs, adult education remains a marginal agenda for a large number of countries and a low priority for many others.

The last four years have been particularly challenging for ICAE and Adult Learning and Education beginning with the COVID pandemic whose long-lasting effects are still

to be fully documented and analysed and accompanied by what the Declaration of the Civil Society Forum in 2022 described as “a complex spectrum of human created crises including (...) negative impact of digitalization, artificial intelligence and other new technologies, the nuclear threat, the weakening of democracy and the use of violence in place of negotiation and dialogue” (ICAE, 2022). And all this to the constant backdrop of the deepening climate crisis whose gravity threatens our very existence. According to the Global Tipping Points Report, five important thresholds already risk being crossed and three more may be reached in the 2030s if the world heats 1.5C above pre-industrial temperatures. According to this same report triggering these planetary shifts will not cause temperatures to spiral out of control in the coming centuries but will unleash dangerous and sweeping damage to people and nature that cannot be undone (The Guardian, 06/12/2023).

At its General Assembly in Bali (Indonesia) in December, ICAE reaffirmed its commitment to four core principles which have guided and will continue to guide its work. Education is understood as a fundamental human right, as a common good and collective endeavour, as participatory, inclusive, emancipatory and democratic in nature and as lifelong, life-wide, learner centred and gender focused. This was also clearly stated in the Declaration of the Civil Society Forum held in Marrakech on 14th June 2022:

Adult Learning and Education (ALE) is a fundamental human right of all young people, adults and older adults. It is more than about enabling us to respond to crises: it is about laying the foundation for a common understanding of life in harmony with other people and forms of life in our common habitat, the planet earth. This involves understanding and then tackling systemic issues, including poverty, structural inequalities, global problems and power issues, on a permanent basis. (...) Hence the need, in the words of the UNESCO Futures of Education report, for A New Social Contract for Education. In this context, a new ALE needs to create and embrace long-term, sustainable solutions based upon the transformative power of adult learning and education rather than insist on its adaptive and responsive role. Peace is a precondition for planetary harmony which should be nurtured in the minds of women and men. The return on investments in education, literacy, critical thinking, learning to live together is much deeper, wider and longer lasting than that of investments in military hardware. ALE has a huge capacity to contribute to our personal and collective emancipation in both the life and work contexts, to gender equality and wider inclusion.

The challenge which was put to the contributors of this special issue was to bring together a series of articles which both stand alone and at the same time contribute to understand the development of Adult Education from the initial years of ICAE to the present and to look at future perspectives bearing in mind two of ICAE’s recent battle cries – *Because the Future cannot wait* and *Towards a Learning Planet*, with a focus on the theme of **Adult Learning and Education – past, present and future**. As editors we set ourselves the impossible task of attempting to achieve a balance between theory and

practice, the regional perspective, gender and generations. Each article represents one of the seven ICAE regions: North America, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, Africa, the Arab Region and Asia Pacific.

We open with Budd Hall's letter to the ICAE, "Thank you for fifty years of Hope", written on his 80th Birthday. As Hall states this is a more personal story of his own involvement in the Council beginning in 1970 and concluding in 1990 with his last World Assembly as Secretary-General, held in Bangkok, Thailand, and organised by Rajesh Tandon, President of the Asia and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) and Kasama Varavan, the Director-General of the Division of Non-Formal Education of the Government of Thailand. He concludes by declaring that his years with the ICAE were perhaps the most nourishing of his lifetime.

Shermaine Barrett's article, **The changing landscape of adult learning and education in Jamaica: Fifty years and beyond**, traces the country's adult learning and education journey outlining some of the initiatives - literacy programmes, skills training, the high school diploma equivalency programme and the establishment of the national qualification framework - developed in Jamaica as the country sought to transform its economic system from an agrarian dependent to an industrialized system based on education as a crucial investment and an engine for growth. It examines the changes in the Jamaican context that informed these initiatives over the last 50 years.

Writing from the European perspective, Cecilia Palm explores the evolution of adult education in Sweden over the past fifty years, using it as a representative case study of Nordic countries, in her article **Fifty years of adult education in Sweden**. Starting in the 1970s when only 10% of the active population had completed eleven years of primary education, the article compares the situation at that time with the current context in the 2020s, with a shift towards formal, publicly funded education, with an emphasis on universities and vocational education. Palm points to the challenges which remain, such as unequal educational access and integrating immigrants and concludes that despite the progress achieved, there continues to exist a need for a comprehensive adult education strategy to address current needs and future uncertainties, emphasizing the societal value beyond employability.

In her article entitled **Critical pedagogy and radical democracy in times of hate**, Giovanna Modé reflects on the unique importance of a civil society global network with the mission of defending the right to adult and youth education in a world immersed in multiple and systemic crises. Her argument is that in a context in which democracies and education are under attack, we should radicalize our principles, particularly by fostering popular education and critical pedagogy, of particular importance in Latin American debates, as part of the strategy for recovering the capacity for dialogue as well as the intersectoral connection with other human rights movements.

As Shirley Walters points out in her reflection on **Climate justice education: A priority for Africa**, the vast continent of Africa is home to over a billion people in 55 countries, with very different economies, resources, ecosystems and cultures. All the countries,

except Ethiopia and Liberia, share the common historical fate of having been subject to colonization. Her argument is that climate change and colonialism are inextricably linked and that it is impossible to address the effects of climate change without addressing the legacies of colonialism. Hence, she suggests, climate colonialism is a key concept within climate justice education, as is the related concept 'cognitive justice'. For this reason, climate justice education must be considered a priority for Africa.

The unfolding landscape of the emerging new global order poses new challenges for adult education in the Arab Region, which include the role of educators, the impact of artificial intelligence and other technologies, the continuing impact of extreme poverty and the role played by the creativity of women in the transition from the old to the emerging new order. Zahi Azar, in his article **Re-questioning education and the role of adult education: an overview from the Arab region**, makes the point that adult learning and education is no longer considered as a priority for decision-makers and policy makers in many Arab countries due, in part, to the fragility of partnership and networking between governments, civil society and the private sector. He concludes his article by acknowledging the historical significance of women's role in ALE and their potential to drive transformation and qualitative change based on their participation.

Our final contribution, **Where to next in the Asia Pacific and beyond: ASPBAE's journey with ICAE and Partners in informing and following-up on CONFINTEA V11 Marrakech Framework for Action**, comes from the Asia Pacific region, in which Helen Dabu emphasises the CSOs' ability to mobilise and urgently respond to those largely unmapped processes given the need to adapt to specific conditions generated by the pandemic in which the majority of the inter-governmental processes leading to the face-to-face main conference in Marrakech were conducted virtually. Dabu underlines the nature of the article as a lesson-learning piece, based on a documentation of the process with a view to serve as a reference for the next CONFINTEA cycle in 12 years, and equally to guide the frontline advocates for adult learning and education (ALE) on the strategic areas to monitor in the follow up to the MFA commitments to fully harness the transformational power of ALE.

To conclude we include a text celebrating the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of Europe's prominent and innovative critical pedagogues and social activists, the Italian priest and educator, don Lorenzo Milani, most widely known for his school project in the village of Barbiana. We also remember the lives and contributions to the field of education of three recently departed educators: Chris Duke, with his huge contribution to the work of ASPBAE and ICAE, the Valencian educator Sebas Parra Nuño and the academic Ronald G. Sultana from the University of Malta with his important contribution to social research.

In times of climate change, our book review is dedicated to Elizabeth Lange's **Transformative Sustainability Education: Reimagining Our Future**. As Shirley Walters comments, the book speaks to educators, addressing the central challenge of

how to midwife the big new story of Relationality. In it we are being called to reclaim education and reimagine our future towards relationality. In that sense, we are a transitional generation that stands in the liminal zone between two epochs, from what has been to what is to come.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ICAE, it would seem appropriate to conclude with the invocation with which the Declaration of the Civil Society Forum concluded “As members of ICAE, we remain committed and united for ALE as a fundamental human right and a precondition for social and ecological justice, well-being, change and transformation, because the future cannot wait”. Viva ICAE!