

Reflections on CONFINTEA and the global agendas for education and development post-2015

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The complex and prolonged debate concerning the future agendas for education and development and the nature and shape of the world in which we want to live post-2015 is over, now waiting for the implementation process to begin. New goals and targets for education and sustainable development have been agreed, and their respective indicators and metrics are being formulated.

Approved in September 2015 at the United Nations Summit for Sustainable Development, in New York, the 17 goals and 169 targets contained in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are an expansion of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), agreed in 2001. In the field of education, a series of meetings, consultations and forums led to the World Education Forum held in Incheon, South Korea, in May 2015, which adopted the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration. The implementation process of this 2030 agenda was operationalized with the adoption of the Education 2030 Framework for Action, in November 2015, at the General Conference of UNESCO. In terms of education, the common denominator between those two regulatory global frameworks for development and education is expressed in SDG 4 dedicated to education, which promises to: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". In the specific field of adult education, there are highlights for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)¹ and for the apparently eternal challenge of literacy. However, in general, adult education as an educational practice that deals with the education and training of young people and adults in formal and non-formal terms is side-lined.

In this article, I intend to investigate the relationship between the post-2015 agenda for education and development and the guidelines established for literacy and adult education during the CONFINTEA process together with other global agendas

¹ UNESCO defines TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) as "those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and sciences related to the acquisition of skills, attitudes, understanding and practical knowledge related to occupations in different sectors of the economic live".

prior to the SDG and Education 2030. With the perspective of a Midterm Review Meeting, to be held at the beginning of 2017, between CONFINTEA VI and the next Conference, I also intend to question to what degree the CONFINTEA process is still relevant for the global agenda for education by confronting the guidelines of the Belem Framework for Action with the central concerns of the SDG and the Education 2030 agenda.

Since the turn of the century, the international development and education policy has been directed and inspired by two principal initiatives: the Education for All (EFA) strategy – which was renewed in 2000 in Dakar², although it dates, originally, from 1990 in Jomtien³ – and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed at the Millennium Summit held in New York in 2000, with the purpose of overcoming extreme poverty worldwide⁴. Both initiatives have been monitored by a series of international reports based on established indicators – the Education for All Global Monitoring Report, in the first case, and the Millennium Development Goals Report, in the second. In the case of the former, recognition that goals would not be achieved resulted in the creation of further initiatives.

The UN Literacy Decade (UNLD, 2003-2012)⁵ was announced as a strategy to strengthen the urgent need to reduce drastically the unacceptably high illiteracy rates prevalent in many countries, which was later reinforced by the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment – (LIFE, 2006-2015)⁶. The Global Education First Initiative (2012) was also announced with a view to renewing and reinvigorating existing global commitments to education. In the case of the latter, the poverty agenda was also

² The Dakar Framework for Action, adopted at the World Education Forum (2000), agreed commitments including that of achieving a 50% improvement in the levels of adult literacy by 2015 and of improving the quality of education.

³ Final Report of the World Conference on Education for All: Meeting Basic Learning Needs, Jomtien, Thailand, 5-9 March 1990, Inter-Agency Commission (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank).

⁴ The United Nations Millennium Declaration was agreed in September 2000 during a Summit held in New York at which nations committed to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and set out a series of time-bound targets – with a deadline of 2015 – that have become known as the Millennium Development Goals.

⁵ The Decade's slogan, "Literacy as Freedom", acknowledges literacy as a human right to be actively promoted and defended. The UNLD presented a renewed vision of literacy embracing the learning needs of children, youth and adults alike, in all settings and contexts.

⁶ LIFE constituted a strategic global framework for the implementation of the UNLD, in order to meet the Education for All (EFA) goals, with particular focus on adult literacy and out-of-school children. It targets the 35 countries that have a literacy rate of less than 50% or a population with more than 10 million adults who cannot read and write.

periodically reinforced by a series of global summits, the last of which was held in 2010, concluding with the adoption of the Global Plan of Action – Keeping the Promise: United to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Both initiatives – EFA and MDG – established 2015 as the deadline to achieve their respective goals.

In the specific field of adult learning and education, the Belem Framework for Action, approved at the end of the sixth International Conference on Adult Education, held in Belem do Pará (Brazil) in 2009, did not include new goals, but opted to reinforce the existing goals of MDG and EFA. The Belem Framework for Action comprised a set of recommendations and commitments with validity until the next CONFINTEA.

The Belem Framework for Action represented, to a considerable extent, an explicit recognition that the ambitious agenda established in the Hamburg Declaration (1997) was still largely work in progress and that the formulation of new agendas made little sense whilst the EFA and MDG agendas, with their respective goals, remained incomplete and unreached by an expressive number of countries. Despite the centrality of sustainability in the post-2015 debate, the future model or paradigm of development continues in dispute, as does the role of lifelong learning in this process. Lifelong learning continues to maintain an important place in educational discourse and a far less evident presence in educational policy and practice.

In subscribing to the goals established by Dakar, by the Millennium Development Initiative, by the UN Literacy Decade and others, the Belem Framework for Action, which embodied the consensus possible at CONFINTEA VI, tended to reinforce the negative interpretation of the role of adult education for the international education and development agendas. Although Elfert (2013) contends that UNESCO and UIL continue to represent the humanist "first generation of lifelong learning" in opposition to the competing economic and utilitarian approach to education put forward by other international organizations – notably the OECD, the European Union and the World Bank —, it would appear that in practice the neoliberal approach has maintained the upper hand. As a result, the adult education agenda has become reactive and defensive rather than proactive and progressive, as discussions concerning the international development and education agendas post-2015 took shape. Finnegan (2008) suggests that:

The apparent lack of alternatives serve to suffocate dissention and narrow the social imaginary, it undermines non-marketing forms of public participation (GIROUX, 2004; O'HALLORAN, 2004). This reductive version of citizenship constitutes an essential part of "learning to be neoliberal" – a process by which society learns to accept inequality; conceptions of public good are replaced by a narrow definition of private interest; and any social dialogue on the issue of possible alternatives is completely rejected (FINNEGAN, 2008).

The first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), launched during the Belem Conference, attempts to draw up a balance sheet of adult education, worldwide, using primary data from the national reports and secondary data from other reports and sources. On the one hand, it points to the traditional and manifest diversity of activities developed in the field of adult education. It identifies, however, a growing polarization between visions and practices of adult education in industrialized countries and in the southern and emerging economies. In the former, an instrumental interpretation of adult education predominates in which emphasis is given to professional training and qualification, with a view to ensuring economic competitiveness. As Finnegan (2008) points out:

[...] many recommendations for policies regarding lifelong learning have emerged within a specific array of priorities shaped by the market-State and neoliberal European Union (BORG; MAYO, 2005; MAGALAHES; STORR, 2003; TETT, 2002) in that 'education (is understood) as a key strategy for achieving economic policies (ALEXIADOU, 2005, p. 102) and in which lifelong learning is conceptualized mainly in terms of keeping a flexible and competitive economy in the modern 'knowledge society' (FINNEGAN, 2008).

In the southern countries and emerging economies, activities tend to centre on compensatory and second chance schooling for youth and adults, with an emphasis on literacy. Hamburg's vision of lifelong learning is frequently present in educational discourse, but largely absent in practice, although in industrialized countries it achieves a more tangible presence. The report also recognizes that low levels of participation and unequal access to learning opportunities constitute key challenges for adult education nowadays. It concludes that while "there have been improvements [...] these have been patchy and piecemeal. Many governments have yet to formulate a clear and shared definition of what constitutes adult education and how it should be measured". Four years later, the second GRALE (2013) concluded that, based on information provided by national reports, "not much has changed since CONFINTEA VI in 2009"

(UNESCO-UIL, 2013, p. 153). Whilst noting that EFA and MDG goals are not particularly visible in the national reports, GRALE suggests that "One important lesson for the post-2015 development agenda is to ensure that adult learning within lifelong learning is accorded much greater priority [...]" (UNESCO-UIL, 2013, p. 153). In its conclusions, the report states that, once again, the development of human resources at the service of the labour market dominates the thematic priorities and measures of implementation. When commenting the level of funding, it reveals that the reality of the sector of adult education continues being one of under investment.

The conclusions of the two GRALES paint a disconcerting picture of little progress for adult education, and, in addition, with quite divergent priorities between the global North and South, throughout the long period that followed the euphoria of Hamburg in 1997. Added to low priority afforded to adult learning and education by a substantial number of Governments, the sector was deeply affected by the series of global crises. In the international debate on the post-2015 agenda, the inclusion of issues considered priorities for the sector – such as education as a right, the perspective of lifelong learning and education for all, as well as discussions on the future of development – have had to be defended resolutely.

Further evidence for this lack of priority for adult education is to be found in recent data collected for the 2015 Global Monitoring Report (GMR) that demonstrates that many countries, including Brazil, will not achieve Goal 4 of EFT: only 17 out of 73 countries will reach the goal (UNESCO, 2015, p.29). On the one hand, as is easily perceivable, literacy continues to be a challenge for an expressive number of countries, especially the most populous, which make up the E-9⁷. On the other, there exists an apparent lack of interest in literacy, which can be attributed to several motives. Amongst these, we can include the lack of political will on the part of national governments. Confronted by the multiple challenges, which the majority of developing countries faces, literacy has lost priority. In many cases, investments in education give priority to children's education – one of the criticisms launched against the EFA

⁷ The E-9 group was created in New Delhi, India, in 1993 by the nine developing countries with the largest populations in the world. They contain two thirds of the adult illiterates and more than a half of the out-of-school children in the world. The group proposed to cooperate in order to seek ways of achieving the EFA goals. The 'E' in the title of the group refers to education and the 9 to the number of countries included in the block. The following countries make up the E-9: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan.

initiative during the first decade after Jomtien. In less developed countries, the lack of resources again tends to prioritize children's education and marginalize adult literacy. Linked to this motive, we mention the reduction in external aid dedicated to literacy. In some of the poorest countries, literacy programmes depend in their totality on external aid from developed countries to exist. In addition to these motives, we point to the negative impact of the multiple international crises, which have elevated costs and reduced income. With the financial crises starting in 2008, the rich countries, for example, tended to give priority to investments in their own educational systems. Lastly, the inefficiency of many literacy programmes has also served as a negative incentive for not investing additional resources in this field. In such cases, the relevance of the contents of the programmes for the life of participants is questioned.

This growing lack of priority for literacy achieves greater materiality when we note that the absolute number of illiterates in the world – around 781 million (16% of the world population), two thirds of whom are women - has remained more or less stable since 2000 and this, in spite of the measures taken by the international agencies. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD 2003-2012) was designed to give a new impulse to literacy work internationally in addition to presenting a renewed vision of literacy covering the learning needs of children, young people and adults, in all places and contexts. The spirit of UNLD was reinforced by the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment – LIFE (2006-2015) whose focus was the 35 countries with literacy rates below 50% of the population or with a population of 10 million or more people who were unable to read and write. LIFE was planned as a global support strategy for the UNLD and EPT goals.

The third measure refers to the recommendations and commitments agreed in the Belem Framework for Action during CONFINTEA VI. These established Adult literacy as the first commitment defined in the following terms:

Literacy is an indispensable foundation that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum. The right to literacy is an inherent part of the right to education. It is a prerequisite for the development of personal, social, economic and political empowerment. Literacy is an essential means of building people's capabilities to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society.

Given the persistence and scale of the literacy challenge, and the concomitant waste of human resources and potential, it is imperative that we redouble efforts to reduce illiteracy by 50 per cent from 2000 levels by 2015 (EFA Goal 4 and other international commitments), with the ultimate goal of preventing and breaking the cycle of low literacy and creating a fully literate world. (UNESCO, 2010, p. 7-8).

UNESCO has monitored the performance of member states in accomplishing the recommendations of the Belem Framework by means of the GRALEs. The second GRALE, published in 2013, with the title **Rethinking Literacy**, affirms, after analysing international data, that:

Progress towards achievement of EFA Goal 4 has been slow. Low prioritization from policy-makers and, consequently, inadequate resource allocation have resulted in limitations in the delivery of literacy learning opportunities for adults (UNESCO, 2014, p. 22).

It foresees that of the 40 countries with adult literacy rates below 90% in 1998-2001, only three will achieve the goal of reducing the illiteracy rate in 50% (UNESCO, 2014, p.20).

This same lack of importance attributed to literacy is also reflected in its exclusion as one of the indicators, which make up the Human Development Index after 2009. Up until that year, the HDI had been composed by three indicators: life expectancy at birth, income index (GNI per capita), and combined gross enrolment rate. After this date, the literacy indicator was replaced by an education index related to mean years and expected years of schooling. According to Stromquist:

The decision to abandon adult literacy as an indicator erases a key and persistent problem women face in developing countries, disregards the reality of Africa—a critical world region, and ignores the situation of growing numbers of children and adults in post-conflict and refugee situations. In my view, the abandonment of literacy as an indicator will generate even greater disregard by governments for this important knowledge dimension. (STROMQUIST, p. 19, 2015).

The removal or downgrading of the literacy index symbolises a dire reduction in its visibility as a fundamental element of human development.

It is our contention that CONFINTEAS V and VI present two core messages: a vision of lifelong learning for all as the basic tenet for the organization of educational policy and the concept of development as a human right firmly anchored in human

beings and not reduced to a commodity determined by the all-powerful market. A third core message has been incorporated into the international agenda with the decision by the Rio + 20 Conference, in 2012, to establish a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which build on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to converge with the post-2015 development agenda. Whilst the concept of sustainable development is not recent⁸ nor the recognition of the central role of education in contributing to the creation of sustainable communities and environments, the proposal to attempt to establish universal goals is.

After the launching of the MDG and EFA agendas at the beginning of the millennium, governments tended to give priority to the MDG goals in detriment to the EFA goals. Adult education was notably absent from the MDG agenda. At the same time, those governments, which did invest in education for all, tended to prioritise education for all children and again marginalise education directed at the adult population. In the period in which these two agendas have been orienting the policy decisions of national governments, the tendency was for adult learning and education in the perspective of lifelong learning to be seriously under-funded and under resourced. The CONFINTEA process is witness to this lack of priority as evidenced in the two GRALE reports. The GMRs also provide further evidence to substantiate this understanding.

This process, which was partially concluded at the end of 2015, has shown that the international community learned from the previous experience with the MDG and EFA goals. The key lesson was that the global agenda for education needed to work within the broad framework of international development and not in parallel, as occurred with the EFA and MDG goals. There was a clear political will to articulate the new agendas in a more organic way. However, proof for this will come as the implementation process of the goals is set in motion. At present, the SDG indicators are in process of negotiation. The agenda of the Declaration agreed in Incheon, in May 2015, was previously agreed during the EFA Global Meeting held in Muscat, Oman, in May 2014. The agreement included three specific goals for youth and adult education.

⁸ It was first formalized by the Brundtland Report "Our Common Heritage" in 1987. A World Conference on Sustainable Development was organized by the UN in Johannesburg (South Africa) in 2002 and the UN established the International Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014).

In the same way that Muscat created the basis for the agreements reached in Incheon, the Declaration signed in Incheon represented the commitment of the educational community to the 2030 Agendas for Education and Sustainable Development, recognizing the important role of education as a main driver for development. The Education 2030 Framework for Action, which constitutes a guide to implement the 2030 Education agenda, was discussed during the WEF and the essential elements were agreed in the Incheon Declaration. The Framework for Action, finally approved in Paris at the UNESCO General Conference in November 2015, details how to translate into action the commitments made in South Korea, in different spheres – national, regional and global.

On one hand, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the central role of education by establishing a specific goal (SDG 4) for education – "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". In the best transversal spirit, it includes targets for education within many other SDG, such as health, growth and employment, sustainable consumption and production and climate change. On the other hand, from the perspective of youth and adult education, there is an emphasis on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and literacy, but with certain limits in the second case. While the Framework for Action preaches the importance of universalizing youth and adult literacy by 2030, the SDG 4 is much more cautious and proposes, in item 4.6: "By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy" (UN, 2016). In general, the Framework for Action exhales a more humanistic air, with great emphasis on human rights and the importance of lifelong learning. In a section about the promotion of lifelong learning, it proposes the following:

All age groups, including adults, should have opportunities to learn and to continue learning. Beginning at birth, lifelong learning for all, in all settings and at all levels of education, should be embedded in education systems through institutional strategies and policies, adequately resourced programmes, and robust partnerships at the local, regional, national and international levels. This requires the provision of multiple and flexible learning pathways and entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge,

skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education. Lifelong learning also includes equitable and increased access to quality technical and vocational education and training and to higher education and research, with due attention to relevant quality assurance (UNESCO, 2015).

In contrast, implicit in the SDG is a focus on the relationship between education, training and the world of work/labour market and little room for non-formal education processes and more emancipatory values. The issue of how the Sustainable Development Agenda will be funded remains largely undetermined. The results of the 3rd Conference on Financing for Development held in Addis Ababa, in July 2015, were not encouraging concluding with the understanding that a large part of the funding will have to be sought in the private sector.

In conclusion, we are left with the impression that the CONFINTEA agenda had little influence on the decisions taken in Incheon and New York, although the spirit of CONFINTEA is more perceptible in the Framework for Action. No mention of the CONFINTEA process was included in the Incheon and New York declarations. The agenda inherited from Hamburg, in Belem, established a working programme that has yet to be completed and, now, will somehow have to be accommodated within the 2030 agendas. The implementation and monitoring of the commitments will provide more evidence on how to analyse more effectively the way in which the Member-States incorporate the goals in their national policies. Maybe what is at stake is not if the paradigms of human progress based on market orientation are superior to the traditional liberal paradigms, but a confrontation between two essentially conflicting ideologies – neoliberalism and that which includes human well-being, sustainability and planetary coexistence as essential targets for the development process. This confrontation is not so much about the future architecture of development and education, but rather about the basic values of human life in community.

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