

vhs

DVV International

Adult  
Education  
and  
Development

85  
2018

# Role and Impact of Adult Education

With financial support from the



Federal Ministry  
for Economic Cooperation  
and Development

© 2018

**DVV International**

Institut für Internationale Zusammenarbeit  
des Deutschen Volkshochschul-Verbandes e.V.  
Obere Wilhelmstr. 32 / 53225 Bonn / Germany  
Phone: +49 228 97569 0 / Fax: +49 228 97569 55  
E-mail: [info@dvv-international.de](mailto:info@dvv-international.de)  
Internet: [www.dvv-international.de/adult-education-and-development](http://www.dvv-international.de/adult-education-and-development)  
Facebook: [facebook.com/AdEdDevjournal](https://www.facebook.com/AdEdDevjournal)



85  
2018

DVV International is the Institute for International Cooperation of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e. V. (DVV), the German Adult Education Association. As the leading professional organisation in the field of adult education and development cooperation, DVV International provides worldwide support for the establishment and development of sustainable structures for youth and adult education.

The authors are responsible for the content of their articles. Signed contributions do not necessarily reflect the opinion of DVV International.

Reproduction of any material in this issue is permitted provided the source is acknowledged and a copy of the reprint is sent to DVV International at the address listed above.

Publisher: DVV International, Christoph Jost  
Published in cooperation with ICAE

Editor-in-Chief: Johann Larjanko  
Managing editor: Ruth Sarrazin

Editorial Board:  
Carole Avande Houndjo (Pamoja West Africa)  
Shermaine Barrett (ICAE)  
Sonja Belete (DVV International Eastern Africa)  
Roberto Catelli Jr. (CEAAL)  
Esther Hirsch (DVV International)  
Per Paludan Hansen (EAEA)  
Timothy D. Ireland (Federal University of Paraiba)  
Steffi Robak (University of Hanover)  
Medha Soni (ASPBAE)  
Rabab Tamish (Bethlehem University)

Consultancy Board:  
Sturla Bjerkaker (Norway)  
Nélida Céspedes Rossel (Peru)  
Uwe Gartenschlaeger (Laos)  
Heribert Hinzen (Germany)

Design: Stetzer Kommunikationsdesign, Munich  
Repro and print: inpuncto:asmuth druck + medien gmbh, Bonn/Cologne

ISSN: 0342-7633

This publication was printed climate-neutrally on FSC-certified paper.

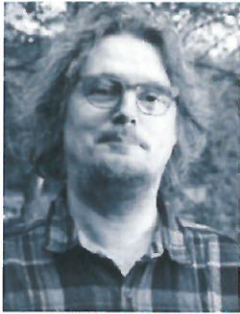


Picture credits: p. 12: Maria Zaitzewsky Rundgren; p. 14: Håkan Elofsson;  
p. 34, 37: Women & Society Association; p. 46, 47: Elisabeth Gerger;  
p. 51: Linda Graham; p. 57, 59: Mikko Takkunen; p. 60–69: Steve Camargo

Illustrations p. 6, 10, 18, 32, 41, 70, 74, 93: Shira Bentley

# Editorial

## Seriously useless learning



Johanni Larjanko  
Editor-in-Chief

Most people do not know about adult education. Learning takes place in school, happens when you are a kid and is about learning how to read and write. Yes, we have places on earth where schools do not exist. There are many who will never see the inside of a classroom. Yes, literacy and numeracy are fundamental to being able to function in most societies today. We need them to manage life in the world. This is true for children, and for adults. The lack of even the most basic skills training keeps many in a vicious cycle of poverty and despair. The world has acknowledged that. There are now international agreements in place to fix this. I am talking about the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals. So we have targets, specific numbers, agreed dates. This is not a new thing. We have had the same in the past. The results are mixed but fall well short of the agreed targets. Our solution has been to redesign our agreements and try again. Today the world agrees that by securing an education for all we will help people out of this vicious cycle. And who can argue with that? Unfortunately this usually ends with an extensive focus on primary education.

The thing is, you need to educate the parents too. Adult education has a proven track record of improving peoples' lives. It actually helps empower them. However, many in our field try to argue for an increase in funding and a raise in status for adult education using socio-economic arguments. If and when adult education is actually discussed, words like entrepreneurial competences and employability are popular. Adult education helps you get a job, and thereby improves your situation, the argument goes. It "fosters social cohesion" and builds "social capital". And who can argue with that?

Let me be provocative and throw a spanner in the works here. If we, as adult educators, try to emulate the econo-speak of the corporate world, we will always lose. Why? Because learning is about more. Learning is not a commodity on a market. We are not numbers. And learning is not about transferring a predefined set of desired skills or behaviours. We learn because we are human. We learn because that is in our fabric. The greatest gift we can give others is the spark of curiosity and questions, not the answers. Learning is fragile. It is a journey where we do not know the final destination. To embrace this approach to lifelong learning is to accept uncertainty. It is to recognise that we are not in control. Developing a country is not copying the blueprint from someone else. Adult education has many important roles to play, and the impact is unquestionable. It is just not always the roles and impact we usually mention.

A good adult educator is one that listens more than dictates. A good adult education system encourages taking risks, accepts failures and allows seriously useless learning, knowing full well that it is in the unexpected where we may reap the biggest reward of all. Independent, resourceful and happy people.

# Content

- 1 Editorial
- 4 The invisible friend: adult education and the Sustainable Development Goals  
**Aaron Benavot**

## *Playing a role*

- 16 How adult education can save your life  
**Henrique Lopes**
- 22 Why adult education matters in Latin America, and how its limited priority affects its impact  
**Carmen Campero Cuenca**
- 28 How to develop resilient people in stronger communities  
**Carolyn Johnstone**

## *Achieving results*

- 38 Better impact through programme planning?  
**Sonja Belete, Steffi Robak**
- 44 Empowering women in Senegal with numbers  
**Elisabeth Gerger**
- 50 Impact beyond the tests: adult education that makes a real difference  
**Chanell Butler-Morello**
- 56 Lasting changes through literacy training in Sierra Leone  
**Outi Perähuhta**

## *Figuring it out*

- 72 The challenges regarding data production  
**César Guadalupe**
- 80 Made to measure: using INAF to check literacy levels  
**Roberto Catelli Jr.**
- 84 How to study the impact of adult education: The EduMAP example  
**Francesca Endrizzi, Beate Schmidt-Behlau**
- 90 Measuring the impact of adult education policies  
**Shermaine Barrett**
  
- 96 Online extras
- 97 *Get involved!*: AED online; Call for submissions; Inclusion and diversity – Variations on the theme of life. The virtual seminar 2018 (**Timothy D. Ireland**); Virtual seminar 2019; Subscription; Questionnaire
- 105 Artists in this issue

# The invisible friend: adult education and the Sustainable Development Goals



Aaron Benavot  
University at Albany – State University of New York  
USA

**Abstract** – *We live longer, in an increasingly global world. Our workplaces develop, and we are affected by climate change. We need adult education to cope with these changes. At the same time, the sector is languishing all over the world. This article focuses on the ways in which adult education and lifelong learning are present in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It highlights several contradictions in the new Agenda, and calls for innovative engagement and advocacy.*

Relative to other areas in education, progress in adult literacy, adult basic education and other opportunities for lifelong learning has languished in recent years and in much of the world. Whether due to lower prioritisation in Ministries of Education, minimal donor support, weak data-reporting mechanisms, or the absence of sustained private investment, the momentum behind expanding access to Adult Learning and Education (ALE) has slowed.

By contrast, global trends accentuate the value of, and the need to invest in, ALE. To name a few: Adults are living longer, and they are generating more demand for learning throughout life in diverse settings and formats. New technologies, growing automation, and shifting locations of production are influencing the skills needed by, and career trajectories of, workers in evolving labour markets. National populations are growing more diverse, partly due to intensified migration, thus highlighting the need for new approaches to promote social integration and solidarity. Adults are expected to become more resilient to the effects of climate change, extreme weather and natural disasters. Growing numbers of refugees and displaced people increase the need for adult education in emergencies, as well as for opportunities for (re)training and skill acquisition. Given these trends, international interest in ALE should be booming.

Within these contrasting forces, the new development Agenda, known as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>, highlights the multifaceted roles and impacts of adult education on sustainable development. References to

ALE and lifelong learning are found in many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – sometimes explicitly, several times implicitly. Consequently, in my view, a huge window of opportunity has opened up for ALE advocacy.

### Lifelong learning in the Post-2015 development agenda

As negotiations over the Post-2015 development agenda ensued, support for a stand-alone goal on education, while initially uncertain, proved to be substantial. The background brief submitted to the 4th session of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG) in June 2013 referred to education as “a fundamental human right and the bedrock of sustainable development”, and gave examples of its impact on a range of social, economic and political outcomes<sup>2</sup> (Wulff 2018).

Public support for education's inclusion in the emergent agenda was also widespread. In 2013, the UN conducted a series of “global conversations”. The one on education engaged nearly 2 million people in 88 countries. The UN also launched the MY World survey, asking people which global policy priorities mattered most to them and their families. By December 2014, more than 7 million people had responded and overwhelmingly chose “a good education” and “better healthcare” as top priorities (UN 2014).

Once the broad international support for education was established, the next question became what kinds of “education” would the international community agree to in its education goal? Support for quality primary education was strong, but the priority of other levels and types of education was unclear. Some saw consensus only possible around a slightly enlarged goal of universal completion of basic education, to which learning targets would be added. Others sought agreement in broadening the nature and scope of global education priorities (Wulff 2018).

The end result came as a surprise to many. The final formulation of the education Goal and 10 targets (SDG4) represented an unprecedented vision of education and lifelong learning (Wulff 2018). SDG4 draws on, but goes significantly beyond, all previous international commitments to and targets in education. It prioritises early childhood, universal completion of primary and secondary education, and equal access to post-secondary education. It focuses on relevant learning outcomes, including foundational skills and others for rapidly-shifting labour markets. It promotes access for marginalised populations, and it highlights values and behaviour that foster gender equality, global citizenship and environmental protection.

The strength of the proposed goal derived, in part, from the many ties that education was perceived (or known) to have with other SDGs. The new development agenda – designed to be universal, indivisible and interlinked – encouraged integrated policies and intersectoral planning (Persaud 2017). Given this vision, a broad impactful Goal on education was a snug fit.

After years of intense negotiation, 193 UN member states adopted the Sustainable Development Agenda, with its 17

SDGs and 169 targets, on 25 September 2015. In addition to the expanded vision of education articulated in SDG4, the other 16 SDGs included numerous direct and indirect references to education, including ALE (ISCU and ISSC 2015). As John Oxenham noted: “Each of the 17 Goals has a set of targets, and each set has at least one target that deals with or implies learning, training, educating or at the very least raising awareness for one or more groups of adults. Goals 3 [health], 5 [women], 8 [economy], 9 [infrastructure], 12 [consumption] and 13 [climate] especially include targets that imply substantial learning for ranges of adults – and organised, programmatic learning at that” (Rogers 2016: 10).

The impact of education on many SDGs is also apparent in two other ways (UNESCO 2016: 368ff). First, by disaggregating SDG indicators by education levels, the potentially salient ties between education (or more educated adults) and various development outcomes becomes overt, often confirming longstanding research. Second, progress in the 2030 Agenda depends on utilising education to build capacity in countries. Improvements in health and sanitation services, agricultural productivity, climate change mitigation and crime reduction are contingent on training professionals and educated workers who can implement policies, lead information campaigns, and communicate with targeted communities.

### So near, and yet so far

If adult learning and education is so strongly present in the SDGs, all is well, right? Well, not quite, as the following contradictions show.

#### *Contradiction one*

Although SDG4 formally recognises lifelong learning, still policy and political realities remain focused on the transformative power of schooling children and youth, and promoting foundational skills.

Never before has the notion of “lifelong learning opportunities for all” been articulated as an international development priority. Lifelong learning comprises all learning activities, from the cradle to retirement and beyond, undertaken with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social and employment-related perspectives (UIL 2015). Lifelong learning involves multiple and flexible learning pathways, entry and re-entry points at different ages, and strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures (see Figure 1).

And yet, despite this recognition of lifelong learning, progress in formal education, up to and including tertiary education, remains at SDG4's core. Increasing access to pre-primary education, ensuring universal completion of primary and secondary education leading to relevant learning, and making technical, vocational and higher education available and affordable, garner the most attention. The means to do so – improving facilities, creating effective learning environments, increasing the supply of qualified teachers – are also prioritised.

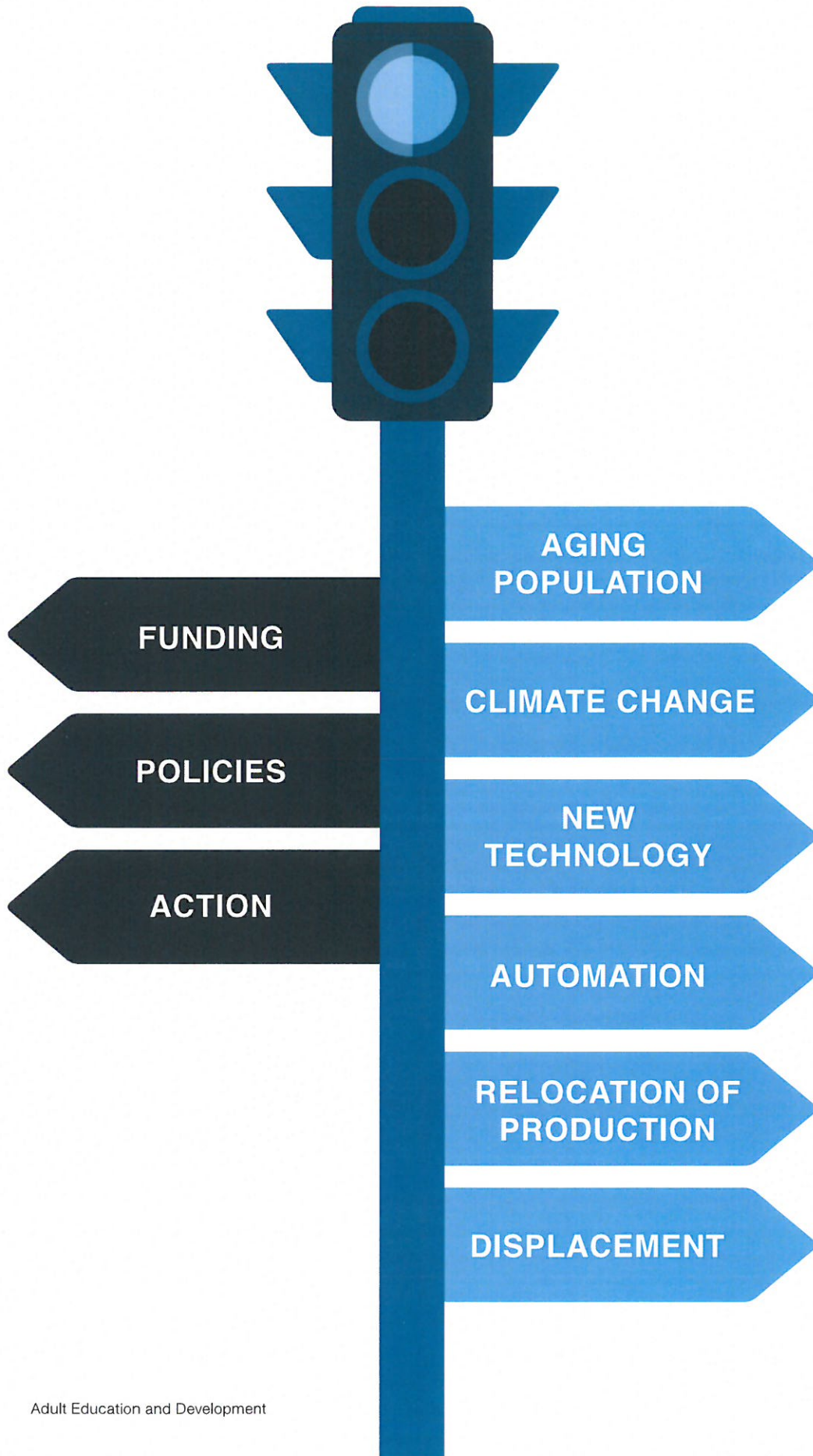
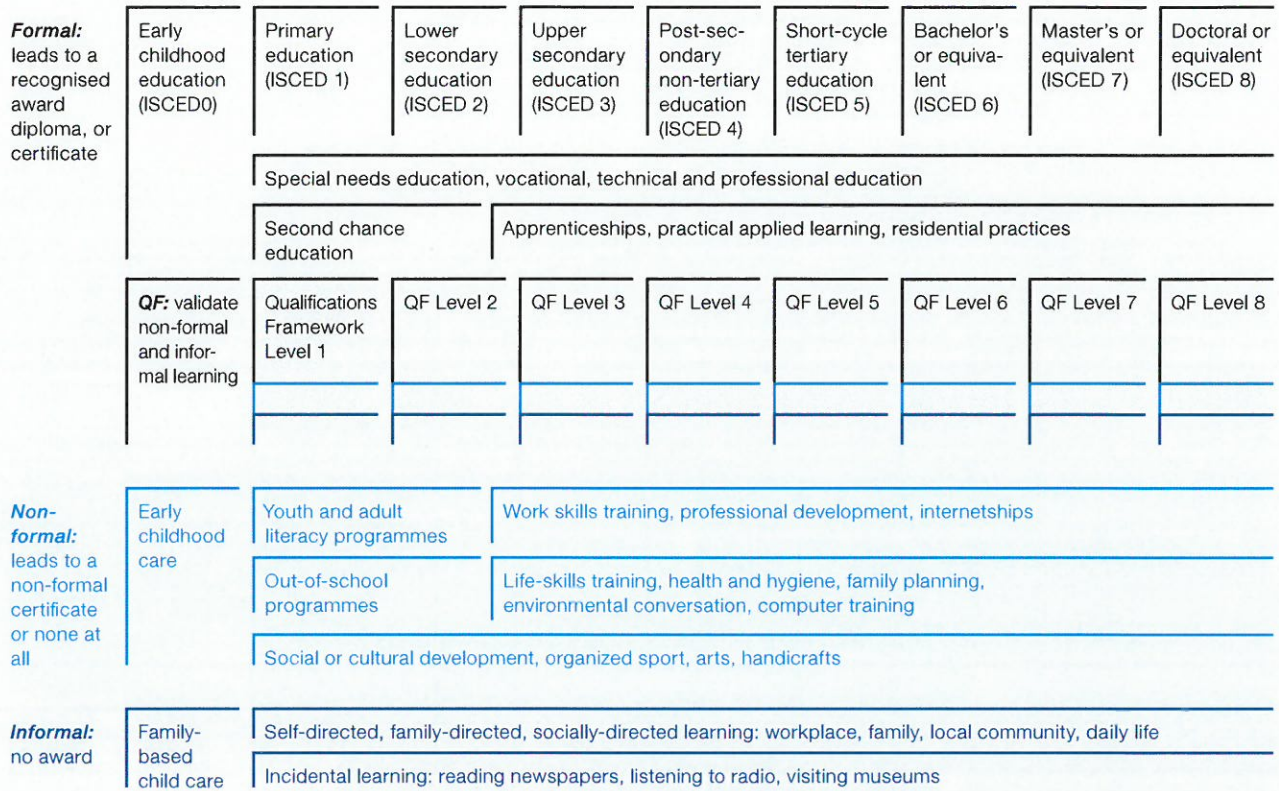


Figure 1 – Lifelong learning includes education opportunities through all stages of life



Source: UNESCO 2016: 8

Adult education, by contrast, receives minimal attention. Countries are expected to improve adult literacy rates, advance policies that promote the acquisition of relevant skills for decent work, and eliminate gender disparities and other forms of inequality in ALE. But the term "adult education" is not explicitly mentioned in any SDG4 target. The only recognition of adult education is found in the global indicator for target 4.3, which measures the participation rate of adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months. Given that "lifelong learning opportunities" are invoked in the goal itself, one would have expected a serious country commitment to expand ALE. Such is not the case.

*Contradiction two*

While many SDGs (apart from SDG4) make reference to different forms of adult learning, ongoing efforts to define and measure ALE, and disentangle its effects from those of formal education, are in short supply.

In numerous arenas of development policy, evidence of the impact of having more highly educated citizens is extensive, having accumulated over decades.

For instance, countries with higher levels of educational attainment have less poverty, improved health outcomes, greater economic growth and increasing social cohesion (UNESCO 2013, 2014). Evidence of the demographic effects of education (on fertility, mortality, nuptiality and migration) is extensive. Expanding access to education, which influences marriage and family preferences, social norms and cultural practices, accelerates the decline in fertility and the demographic transition.

With the global population reaching 9.7 billion by 2050, it is estimated that crop yields need to increase by 70% to keep up. Agricultural extension programmes and farmer field schools, when designed well, have helped improve crop yields, increase food security and reduce vulnerability to poverty (FAO 2016; Waddington et al. 2014).

Measures of completed schooling are also associated with increased environmental awareness, concern and, sometimes, action. For example, higher levels of schooling increase a person's concern for environmental protection (Lee et al. 2015).<sup>9</sup> Educated citizens with greater concern for the environment are more likely to get involved in activities to protect the environment. Education also gives citizens skills needed to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change.



A survey in ten African countries showed that farmers with more education were more likely to build resilience through adaptation (UNESCO 2016).

As these examples illustrate, there is often ample evidence of the impact of education on aspects of sustainable development. That said, it is difficult to disentangle the development effects of participation in adult education, professional training or other lifelong learning opportunities from those of the quantity and quality of formal education. (The fact that more highly-educated adults are more likely to take advantage of adult education opportunities makes disentangling these two types of evidence even more complex).

Evidence in most literature reviews bearing on the nexus between education and sustainable development usually concentrates on measures of formal education, and not on the impact of adult education participation. Studies of the impact of ALE tend to be limited in scope and uneven in quality. Check, for example, the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (2017), which compiled an extensive body of evidence to assess the impact of ALE on health and well-being, employment and the labour market, as well as social, civic and community life. Social scientific research of ALE in many of these areas simply lacks rigour, or geographical scope, or both.

In short, the inclusion of education as a driver of sustainable development contains many references to ALE, and yet the evidence used to justify its inclusion mainly relies on measures of formal schooling, and less frequently on systematic studies of the outcomes of participation in ALE.

## “There are no standardised ways to define, measure and monitor the outcomes of participation in ALE.”

### *Contradiction three*

SDG4 shifted educational priorities from access and completion to quality and learning, in part due to advances in the measurement of learning in international assessments. No similar quantum leap has taken place in the field of ALE: There are no standardised ways to define, measure and monitor the outcomes of participation in ALE.

One central aspect is the focus on results such as learning outcomes, rather than on access, participation or completion. International policy interest in learning and its measurement has proliferated since 2000. For example, the World Bank added measures of learning in almost all its education projects, and in 2011 published a new strategy document, *Learning for All*. At the same time, country participation in learning assessments – both international (TIMSS, PIRLS, PISA) and regional (SACMEQ, PASEC, TERCE) – increased (Kamens and Benavot 2011). A major comparative assessment of adult literacy was established (PIAAC). By focusing on the global competition for skilled labour and emerging knowledge societies, the media highlighted the

critical role of learning. Research into the impact of cognitive skills (measured by test scores) on economic growth gained visibility (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008, 2012).

With reference to adults, however, learning outcomes in SDG4 are narrowly defined as: literacy and numeracy (target 4.6), skills for employment and decent jobs (4.4), and knowledge and skills for sustainable development (4.7). No other forms of adult learning are recognised or valued. Moreover, global indicators for these targets align only partially to their stated intent. Skills for decent work (4.4) are reduced to adults acquiring ICT skills; knowledge and skills for sustainable development (4.7) are reduced to mainstreaming education in policies, curricula, teacher training and student assessment. These indicators represent problematic proxies of SDG4 targets. Unfortunately, there are few initiatives to improve upon them using innovative measurement strategies. Since we lack relevant global indicators, and there is little incentive to take up the measurement challenges, it is unlikely that we will see any progress on these adult education targets in the future.

### **Won the battle, but lost the war?**

In debates over the new sustainable development agenda, advocates of adult education had pushed for language highlighting the specific role and value of ALE, but their suggested formulations were often stymied. Rather, they were asked to support the big tent idea of lifelong learning, assuming that adult education would find its rightful niche. Perhaps now in hindsight, as contradictions amass, it is increasingly clear that the shift to “lifelong learning” is doing little to mitigate the many challenges and impending marginalisation facing adult education. Although the international community created an exceptional global education agenda, comprehensive in scope, realities are giving way to prioritisation in planning, resource allocation and funding. More often than not, the provision of clear education pathways for adults remains an ardent dream – despite the urgency to address the effects of climate change, economic and health inequalities, democratic deficits and more.

It is ironic that this process is unfolding when the 2030 Agenda is chock-full of references to ALE, both explicitly and implicitly. And while the international development rationale for adult education is there for all to see, ALE advocates have yet to find ways and means to transcend the conventional boundaries of their field and seize upon the opportunities accompanying the sustainable development agenda. There are indeed many challenges – conceptual, definitional, measurement-related and financial – but they deserve to be addressed compellingly and persuasively by new ideas and approaches. If not, in 2030 we shall lament once again how important ALE is, but how little it is valued in reality.

## Notes

1 / <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>

2 / It was produced by UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP, ILO, ITU, UNV, OHCHR, PSO, UNDP, and IFAD. <https://bit.ly/2Lfcgcu>

3 / <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

## References

**Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (2016):** Farmer Field School Guidance Document: Planning for Quality Programmes. Rome: FAO of the United Nations.

**Hanushek, E. A. and Woessmann, L. (2008):** The role of cognitive skills in economic development. In: *Journal of Economic Literature*, 46 (September), 607-668.

**Hanushek, E. A. and Woessmann, L. (2012):** Do better schools lead to more growth? Cognitive skills, economic outcomes, and causation. In: *Journal of Economic Growth*, 17 (4), 267-321.

**ISCU and ISSC (2015):** Review of Targets for the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective. Paris: International Council for Science and International Social Science Council.

**Kamens, D. and Benavot, A. (2011):** National, regional and international learning assessments: Trends among developing countries, 1960-2009. In: *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 9 (2), 285-300.

**Lee, T. M.; Markowitz, E. M.; Howe, P. D.; Ko, C.-Y. and Leiserowitz, A. A. (2015):** Predictors of public climate change awareness and risk perception around the world. In: *Nature Climate Change*, 5 (11), 1014-1020.

**Persaud, A. (2017):** Integrated planning for education and development. In: *European Journal of Education*, 52 (4), 448-459.

**Rogers, A. (2016):** Adult learning and the Sustainable Development Goals. Revised Background Paper for the 2016 Uppingham Seminar. Sussex: UK.

**UNESCO (2013):** Education Transforms Lives. Paris: UNESCO.

**UNESCO (2014):** EFA Global Monitoring Report 2013/4: Teaching and Learning – Achieving Quality for All. Paris: UNESCO.

**UNESCO (2016):** Education for People and the Planet: Creating sustainable futures for all. Paris: UNESCO.

**UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2015):** Conceptions and realities of lifelong learning. Background paper for the Global Education Monitoring Report 2016. Paris: UNESCO.

**UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016):** Global Report on Adult Learning and Education III (GRALE III). Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.

**United Nations (2014):** We the Peoples: Celebrating 7 Million Voices. New York: United Nations/Overseas Development Institute/Ipsos Mori.

**Waddington, H.; Snilstveit, B.; Garcia Hombrados, J.; Vojtkova, M.; Phillips, D.; Davies, P. and White, H. (2014):** Farmer field schools for improving farming practices and farmer outcomes: a systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews* 2014(6).

**Wulff, A. (2018):** A new education goal in the making: the twists and turns of the negotiations. In: Wulff, A. (ed.): *The history and evolution of a global goal in education (tentative)*. Brussels: Education International.

## About the author

**Aaron Benavot** is a Professor at the School of Education, University at Albany-SUNY. His scholarship examines the changing contours of basic education, approaches to adult literacy and lifelong learning, and education for sustainability. During 2014–2017 Benavot served as Director of the Global Education Monitoring Report, an editorially-independent, evidence-based annual report published by UNESCO that monitors the progress of education targets in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

### Contact

abenavot@albany.edu  
albany.academia.edu/AaronBenavot