CONFINTEA VII Regional Preparatory

Conference for the Arab States

Priorities, challenges and recommendations

Report of the CONFINTEA VII Regional Preparatory Meetings

17 March and 24 March 2021

1.
Introduction

The region is facing increasing challenges in the field of literacy and adult education due to the political instability that affects some of the countries, resulting in waves of migration. International and regional organizations are providing continuous support to countries of the region to help them build responsive policies and systems of good governance in the field of education in general, and in the fields of adult learning and education as well as lifelong learning in particular.

In preparation for the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII), UNESCO's Regional Office for Education in the Arab States – Beirut, in cooperation with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), organized two online regional preparatory meetings for the Arab States to identify the key adult learning and education (ALE) issues affecting the region and to allow ALE stakeholders in the Arab States to propose regional recommendations for CONFINTEA VII.

The first meeting was held on 17 March 2021 and was devoted to contributions from regional civil society representatives. The second meeting was held on 24 March 2021 and was dedicated to both government official representatives and civil society organizations (CSOs). (Appendix A includes a list of the speakers in the two meetings.)

This report is a summary of the outcomes of the discussions that took place in the two meetings and the papers presented by the speakers.

2.
Background, context and regional characteristics

The Arab countries are characterized by both commonalities and differences that may not be seen in any other region, as they are inhabited by peoples with different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds but a common language. Classical Arabic is understood by most people and dominates written communication.

Over the past decade, the Arab region has undergone dramatic changes in all aspects of life, mainly due to political events and conflicts that have turned into civil war in some countries. The region has suffered significantly from a refugee and displaced persons crisis, caused by the unrest and civil wars in some of the countries. More than 40 per cent of the world's refugees and displaced people live in the region, with millions of Syrian, Iraqi, Yemeni and Libyan refugees and displaced persons needing security, food, shelter, basic services including education, and employment.

Many Arab countries face structural challenges, in particular demographic growth. In 2020 the Arab countries were home to an estimated 439 million inhabitants, representing 5 per cent of the world's population (UNDP, 2020). In addition to population growth, the region faces challenges such as low quality of learning outcomes among graduates, high youth unemployment and the inability of economic growth to create jobs that meet the region's needs. Moreover, when it comes to gender disparity in economic participation, the region has the lowest rate of female labour market participation in the world – 18.2 per cent compared to the global average of 47.5 per cent – (ILO, 2019). High rates of rural-urban migration and inadequate medical care are among the other adversities.

3.
Current situation of ALE in the region

With the ongoing political, social and economic changes taking place in the region, adult education and lifelong learning become one of the driving forces for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. There is evidence that adult education can lead to positive change in political, social and economic domains, as well as in health, which in turn lead to more sustainable societies.

The young and adults who make up the workforce need high-quality educational opportunities to become active and involved in their communities. Most of the Arab countries have adopted national programmes for training youth as part of their strategies to face the unemployment problem. However, high illiteracy rates mean that basic literacy is still the main concern of adult education. Policies, legislation and existing organizations focus on literacy and basic skills while continuing training and professional development and citizenship education remain low priorities.

International reports reveal that despite general progress in basic education, literacy, equity and gender equality, Arab countries remain at risk of not achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Education. There are still differences among countries in the region on enrolment, investment in education and the gender parity index, due to economic conditions and political transitions.

The trends can be said to be alarming – the number of adults with low literacy levels in many Arab countries is projected to increase due to social, economic and political challenges.

The Arab States, inspired by the five main principles of the Belém Framework, adopted a regional statement known as the Sharm el-Sheikh Statement in 2015 to promote context-related adult education priorities. The Statement highlights the need to promote equitable and inclusive access to education and learning opportunities for young and old (men and women), in particular for marginalized and disadvantaged groups. It also stressed the importance of building collaboration mechanisms with all governmental and non-governmental actors.

In addition to the Sharm el-Sheikh Statement, the Riyadh Declaration (2015–2024) highlights the importance of developing more human rights policies, concepts and practices in education, and promoting the principles of citizenship education to empower young and older people.

4.
Achievements and challenges

Achievements

Over the past five decades, the Arab region has made significant progress in literacy due to the significant increase in school enrolment rates, political commitment and financial support to enhance access to education.

According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), the region's literacy rate increased from 65.29 per cent to 75.14 per cent between 2000 and 2019, and the youth literacy rate increased from 82.06 per cent to 86.16 per cent (UIS, 2020). Despite this progress, literacy rates among adults and youth are still below the global averages of 86.48 per cent and 91.73 per cent, respectively.

With regard to developments in ALE in the Arab States, the results of the GRALE 5 survey have shown progress in policies in most of the Arab countries. Concerning participation, most of the countries indicated increases, particularly in participation in literacy programmes.

Challenges

Despite the statements of increased participation in adult education programmes, inequality in participation and insufficient provision of programmes to marginalized, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups remain. States must do more to address this imbalance and ensure that these groups are taken into account in policy-making.

Although there are some encouraging signs of progress in policies and governance for adult education, it is not enough and more needs to be done, as some countries in the Arab region are still lagging behind.

Funding for education in general and ALE in particular is not sufficient. Countries in the Arab States have not fulfilled their commitments to increase spending and introduce new ALE financing mechanisms, both of which are necessary if they are to realize their potential (UIL, 2019).

Efforts to improve the quality of adult education are unevenly spread across the three domains of ALE: literacy and basic skills; continuing training and professional development; and citizenship education.

The countries suffering from armed conflicts in the region are experiencing challenges of a special nature, requiring non-traditional solutions. The most important of these challenges are:

1. severe financial and administrative corruption and significant cuts in the funds allocated to education;

2. the collapse of the educational system and the destruction of schools and educational institutions;

3. lack of available and reliable data and information on education and ALE;

4. displacement, migration, transition to informal tented settlements and lack of an appropriate educational environment;

5. lack of governance, including multi-stakeholder partnership, inter-sectoral coordination and decentralization; and

6. the prevalence of unregulated religious education and its increasing role in fuelling differences and attracting young people to military action.

5.
Changes in ALE due to Covid-19

The closure of schools due to the Covid-19 pandemic has affected more than 100 million students in the region (UNESCO, 2020). Many Arab countries have opted for alternative solutions to overcome the crisis by offering students distance learning, ranging from high-tech options such as online courses to lower-tech alternatives such as educational programming on radio and television.

Attention has focused on formal education as the main concern of government and citizens, while issues relating to ALE have continued to be left behind during the pandemic. ALE plays a pivotal role in promoting health literacy and enabling citizens to receive and act on vital information during emergencies such as the pandemic (Lopes and McKay, 2020). However, with the closure of government institutions responsible for adult education and the imposition of social distancing measures, ALE activities were almost completely suspended for some time, until responsible organizations began to take the initiative to address the effects of the pandemic. According to a study conducted by the UNESCO Regional Office for Arab States (2020), the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic can be summed up as follows:

• ALE activities in Arab countries have been disrupted because of precautions and measures adopted during the pandemic;

• the importance of distance learning and its ability to form a reasonable means of continuing ALE activities have been revealed, with special attention given to digital divides, particularly in the rural and most needy regions; and

• a key challenge is the poor preparation of teachers and staff in using technology in adult learning and education.

6.
Key priorities for adult learning and education in the region

During the two meetings, the speakers listed several key topics and priorities, which can be viewed across several axes, as follows.

Concept of ALE

- Rethink teaching and learning of life skills, considering political circumstances, challenges and economic development.

- Emphasize the concept of broader social action, which takes adult education beyond an educational issue to a participatory community issue.

- Shift from the concept of literacy to the broader and more comprehensive concept of adult education and lifelong learning with its three components: literacy and basic education; vocational and technical training for employment; and citizenship education for peaceful co-existence and sustainable development.

- Integrate wide deployment of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in ALE.

Policy

- ALE policies should, while adopting a human rights approach for development, address crises and challenges of the educational system in emergency circumstances and achieve stability and continuity. Most of the existing national policies, however, are not sufficiently integrated into general public policies, are often unrealistic and difficult to implement, and are sometimes obsolete, without updates in the light of experience and challenges.

- ALE policies should be part of the overall development policy, and be developed through a dialogue between government and civil society.

- Appropriate legislation should facilitate the adoption of all aspects of distance learning systems, including conducting examinations and assessment in accordance with acceptable standards that ensure accuracy and objectivity.

- Flexible policies should recognize the learning outcomes of adult education and lifelong learning programmes, equate them with formal education certificates, and ensure mutual recognition of these certificates among Arab countries.

Governance

- Effective participation of civil society in the adult education and lifelong learning governance system helps to prevent duplication and brings benefits from experience.

- Regional efforts should be promoted, especially the initiative of the Arab League (the Arab Literacy Decade 2015–2024).

- Efficient networking between international and regional institutions in the region will maximize the impact of efforts.

- The role of civil society organizations is to be emphasized in implementing adult education programmes, as they are closest to the beneficiaries and thus able to meet their demands.

- Participation of the private sector should be increased in setting the requirements of continuing learning and skill development to create jobs.

- Active participation of research and academic centres should be ensured as a key component in literacy policies and programmes.

- Data should be made available in a transparent, clear and periodic manner, and databases should be built that truly reflect the situation to serve as the basis for continuous evaluation, transparency and accountability.

Financing

- Governments should commit to spending on adult education and lifelong learning, and consider them an investment with positive returns on development goals.

- Mechanisms and policies should be adopted that contribute to increased private sector participation, as it is one of the biggest beneficiaries of the outcomes of ALE activities.

- International financial institutions, particularly the World Bank, should return to funding adult education and lifelong learning programmes for their significant development returns.

Quality

- Special attention should be given to overall quality and equity in all aspects of adult education and lifelong learning programmes.

- Programmes are more attractive, the more they meet the needs of learners.

- Programmes should help to acquire new skills, including 21st century skills and global citizenship skills.

- Effective citizenship education programmes should provide links between theory and practice.

- ALE programmes should support the creativity of learners and the multiplicity of learning channels.

- Adequate training and qualification of ALE facilitators, supervisors, and continuous support for evaluation officers and learners to help refine and build their abilities, based on new learning patterns from using ICTs.

- Integrated adult education efforts address reasons for illiteracy, including school drop-out.

- Programmes should always include elements of monitoring and evaluation to ensure their effectiveness.

- Curricula and materials should address the various needs of learners, which require special preparation for future teachers and facilitators of adult education.

- A regional ALE observatory should be developed to maximize cooperation and benefit from experiences.

- More international cooperation and support in the field of adult education is necessary in countries in conflict to help providing high-quality programmes.

Technological development

- Take advantage of technological development and digitization of training content to ensure that benefit is maximized and continued, with the importance of achieving digital justice and bridging the digital divide between rural and urban, poor and rich, male and female.

- Programmes should be renewed, introducing digital literacy, providing open sources of learning, building special networks for adult education and providing guarantees that budgets will not be reduced during crises.

- Benefit from the experiences of the available digital resources as an entry point and continue improving and expanding their application to achieve success.

- Keep abreast of technological developments, studying the benefits and their potential to develop adult education and increase the effectiveness of its programmes.

- Take advantage of the open resources provided by the various institutions, as well as the training programmes that the UNESCO Office in Beirut has begun to make available.

Participation, equity and inclusion

- Respect equity and inclusion in policies and programmes.

- Focus on life skills and employability skills for marginalized groups.

- ocus on achieving the availability of programmes for all and ensure that the requirements of justice and fairness are met.

- The issue of immigrants and refugees should be given special attention, considering the growing conflicts and wars in the region.

- Empower women and girls and prepare them to play a more active role in society.

- Give attention to issues of education and learning for displaced persons and the importance of achieving psychological security.

Citizenship education and community participation

- Consider ALE programmes as part of building a national and global identity.

- Emphasize the importance of adopting concepts of global citizenship and building shared values to live in peace.

- Link the concept of citizenship to the concept of global citizenship, human rights and gender equality, in ALE curricula and practices.

- Activities should help to build awareness about sustainable development concepts, especially environmental ones.

Media

- Special attention should be given to the role of the media in influencing all the components of the adult education and lifelong learning system, especially governments and learners.

- Pay attention to building the capacity of journalists who are responsible for adult education and lifelong learning issues.

- Communicate with members of parliaments and local governments.

- Maximize the benefits of initiatives such as the Literacy Challenge and UNESCO's international annual awards for the best programmes in the fields of literacy and adult education.

7.
The way forward

With all the challenges that the region is experiencing, there are great opportunities to achieve development goals through the adoption of comprehensive policies, the integration of regional resources and benefiting from successful experiences. In this context, the region needs to focus on the following.

- Building a common vision, unifying and renewing concepts about adult education, and valuing and disseminating successful experiences.

- Adopting integrated ALE policies based on the development and human rights approach, and within the framework of national policies.

- The importance of having non-traditional financing mechanisms by maximizing the integration of efforts at national, regional and international levels, and taking advantage of the region's specificity with regard to the existence of various financing entities and financing mechanisms such as Arab development funds and the zakat mechanism.

- Developing systems and tools for assessment, monitoring and evaluation, and paying attention to building databases and providing all relevant information to the public.

- Supporting the use of ICTs in ALE programmes, and adopting clear policies to make those technologies available for all and eliminate digital disparities.

- Paying attention to quality in all adult education programmes and especially to the training of all providers of ALE programmes.

- Adopting participatory approaches in building programmes based on the needs of learners, taking into account their specificity, cultural backgrounds and social context, and taking into account the values of citizenship.

- Developing interventions and action plans that include the values of sustainable development, the application of citizenship and the rights of women.

- Focusing on development as the entry point for adult education to attract learners.

- Organizing advocacy and supporting campaigns to fund and create policies that support adult education and learning.

- Creating a centre of excellence to collect, analyse and document information, statistics, experiences and initiatives.

- Paying special attention to countries in conflict, and building lifelong models of education and learning by considering the conditions of these countries and their displaced persons.

- Building national and regional frameworks for equivalence that recognize the educational outcomes of ALE programmes.

- The need to move towards more comprehensive policies for lifelong learning.

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Appendix A

1. Meeting of Civil Society Organizations, held on 17 March

This meeting was organized in coordination with

a. The Arab House for Adult Education and Development (AHAED), which brings together the four networks active in the field of literacy and adult education in the region, which includes more than 475 associations. These networks are:

   • Arab Network for Literacy and Adult Education (ANLAE)
   • Arab Network for Popular Education (ANPE)
   • Arab Network for Civic Education (ANHRE)
   • Arab Campaign for Education for All (ACEA)

b. The Institute for International Cooperation of the Association of German Adult Education Centers (IIZ /DVV International), which is active in adult education in the region in general and in North Africa in particular.

The meeting was divided into three sessions, as follows:

   • Opening session.
   • First session: dedicated for speakers.
   • Second session: dedicated for Q&A.

Opening session

   • Remarks by Mr. Amir Piric, Chief Programme Coordinator, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)
   • Remarks by Mr. Hegazi Idris Ibrahim, Programme Specialist for Basic Education and Literacy, UNESCO Beirut Office
   • Remarks by Ms. Elsy Wakil, Secretary-General of the Arab House for Adult Education and Development (AHAED)
   • Brief introduction on global preparation of CONFINTEA VII
      Mr. Werner Mauch, Senior Programme Specialist and Team Leader, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)
      Ms. Samah Shalaby, Assistant Programme Specialist, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)

Session 1:
Sharing of current status, challenges in ALE; priorities and recommendations towards CONFINTEA VII from the CSO perspective

Moderator: Mr. Raafat Radwan

Group One
(Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) Speakers

   • Ms. Reem Rabah, Vice President, ICAE for the Arab Region
   • Ms. Fotouh Younes, The Arab Network for Civic Education (tbc)
   • Mr. Refaat Sabbah, President of the Arab Campaign for Education For All

Group Two
(Morocco and Tunisia) Speakers

   • Ms. Fatina Bellarbi, President of Moroccan Network for Lifelong Learning
   • Ms. Radia Jerbi, President of National Union for the Tunisian Women

Group Three
(Egypt and Sudan) Speakers

   • Ms. Iqbal al-Samalouty, The Arab Network for Adult Literacy and Education
   • Mr Naji el-Shafe, Secretary General of the Sudanese Coalition for Education for All (SCEFA)

Group Four
(the Gulf countries) Speaker

   • Mr. Abdel Salam al-Joufi, Advisor, Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States (ABEGS)

Group Five
(Countries in Crisis, Syria, Iraq and Yemen) Speaker

   • Ms. Vian al-Sheikh Ali, Head of the Tammuz Organization for Social Development

The speakers presented the views of civil society concerning the current situation of adult education at country and regional levels, the challenges that have an impact on adult education at large and in civil society specifically, and the recommendations they considered necessary to be addressed at the World Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII). This meeting had 123 online participants in addition to being broadcast on YouTube. Participants posted their questions and were requested to send their views to the author by mail for consideration in the final report.

2. Meeting of Representatives of Government Agencies held on 24 March

This meeting was organized in coordination with the National Committees of UNESCO in the Arab countries, and also with the participation of the Arab House for Adult Education and Development (AHAED) and the Institute for International Cooperation of the Association of German Adult Education Centers (IIZ / DVV International).

The meeting was divided into three sessions as follows:

Opening session

- Introductory remarks
  Ms. Costanza Farina, Director of UNESCO's Regional Office for Education in the Arab States – Beirut
  Mr. David Atchoarena, Director, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)
- Speech by His Excellency Mr. Jamal bin-Huwaireb, Board Member, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).
- His Excellency Dr. Reda Hijazi, Director of the Regional Center for Adult Education in Sears Al-Lian and Deputy Minister of Education and Technical and Vocational Training, Egypt.

Introduction: Procedures of the 7th International Conference on Adult Education

- A brief introduction to the global preparation of the Seventh International Conference on Adult Education and a regional overview of the state of adult learning and education
  Mr. Werner Mauch, Senior Programme Specialist and Team Leader, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)
  Ms. Samah Shalaby, Assistant Programme Specialist, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL).

Session 1:
Current situation, challenges and achievements in adult learning and education

Moderator: Mr. Raafat Radwan

- Speech by Mr. Mohammed Ould Omar, Director-General of the Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science
- Mr. Khaled al-Jamai, Regional Director, Fez Meknes, National Agency for the Fight against Illiteracy (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania)
- Mr. Omari Ashour, Head of the Adult Education Authority, Egypt (Egypt, Sudan)
- Ms. Nemat Geagea, Director of the National Adult Education Program, Ministry of Social Affairs, Lebanon (Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine)
- Mr. Yahya al-Mfarah, Head of the Adult Education and Continuing Education Program, Saudi Arabia (GCC Countries)
- Mohammed al-Hajj, Head of Literacy, Yemen (Countries in Crisis Syria and Yemen)

Summary of the 17 March meeting:

- Ms. Elsy Wakil, Secretary-General of the Arab House for Adult Education and Development
- Ms. Donia Benmiloud, North Africa, DVV International (International Institute of the German Adult Education Association)
- Mr. Nazaret Nazaretyan, Regional Director Middle East, DVV International (International Institute of the German Adult Education Association)

Session 2:
Question-and-answer session

The governmental speakers focused on the achievements and the policies implemented to address the Covid-19 crisis, the challenges in the region and the recommendations they considered necessary to be addressed at the International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII).