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Contents

1	At a glance	2
2	Introduction	2
3	From MDGs to SDGs	3
3.1	The Millennium Development Goals	3
3.2	The Sustainable Development Goals: from post-2015 Agenda to a new global policy framework	4
4	Adult education in the SDG framework	5
4.1	Non-formal adult education and learning	5
4.2	Adult education within the wider sphere of education and development	5
4.3	Adult education in the SDGs	6
4.3.1	The SDGs in the European framework	7
4.4	The contribution of adult education to the SDGs	8
4.4.1	Skills, knowledge and competences to achieve the SDGs	10
4.4.2	Global citizenship education as a transversal goal: adult education for empowerment	10
5	What are the challenges for non-formal adult education?	11
5.1	Lack of public funding and privatisation and commercialisation of education	11
5.2	Marginalisation of non-formal adult education	11
5.3	International competition and standardisation in education	11
5.4	Measurability of participation and success in adult education	11
5.5	Neglect of literacy in the SDGs	12
6	How can we go from theory to concrete action?	13
6.1	Social inclusion through community-based adult education	13
6.2	Promoting sustainable food production and economic growth	13
6.3	Building risk disaster resilience	14
6.4	Health education to empower women	14
7	Where do we want to go from here?	14
8	Bibliography	15

KEYWORDS

Adult education, Sustainable Development Goals, European policies, Good Practices, Recommendations

1 At a glance

Adult education, especially non-formal adult education, contributes to the individual as well as collective development of societies in many ways. Firstly, adult education provides knowledge, skills and competences that can be used both in professional and private life. Secondly, it promotes transversal and generic skills, i.e. social skills, communication skills, analytical skills etc., sometimes also called “life skills”. Newer concepts of civic education or global citizenship education within adult education (among many other similar concepts) draw on the idea of education as a tool for empowerment. Adult education can trigger sustainable development on various levels – the social, economic, and even ecological level.

The Education for All (EFA) Conference in 1990 recognised this transformative power of adult education by including it in the EFA goals. However, the Millennium Development Goals that became effective in 2000, focused only on primary education. In the recently approved Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adult education plays a comparatively important role: Goal 4 speaks about “[ensuring] inclusive and equitable quality education and [promoting] lifelong learning opportunities for all”, thus mentioning lifelong learning and implicitly learning opportunities for adults. The SDGs, in contrast to previous development goals, target all countries world-wide and not only countries of the Global South. According to Article 208 of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union and its Member States have to comply with the commitments made by signing this new set of development objectives.

Even though adult education is at least mentioned implicitly in the SDGs, non-formal adult education faces many challenges. The increasing privatisation and commercialisation of adult education makes it more difficult for the public sector to sustain funding and provide good quality of education. Furthermore, an emerging “global governance of education” and a stronger focus on measuring educational attainments have led to a stronger international competition and standardisation in all education sectors. Quantitative data is more and more used to measure the success or failure of policies and programmes. Literacy is fundamental to empowerment and participation in society; however, it has been ignored persistently in development goals and is also not among the priorities of the SDGs.

2 Introduction

Why, as the European Association for the Education of Adults, should we bother about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? At first glance, there is no obvious reason to link non-formal adult education and learning with sustainability and the Global Goals or Post-2030 Agenda, particularly within the context of advocacy work at the level of the European Union. While adult education promotes learning and training in order to acquire and update skills, knowledge and competences, the SDGs are a global framework to tackle common challenges for development¹.

However, when approaching the idea of non-formal adult education, the close connection and interlinkage of the two policy fields become visible: non-formal adult education has other purposes besides providing skills, knowledge and competences. Social inclusion, the promotion of active citizenship, health and personal well-being are among the most prevalent objectives. Non-formal adult education also aims to enlarge the choices that people make in their personal and professional lives. The role of adult education in SDGs is twofold: it is a precondition for the achievement of the SDGs as well as a goal in itself.

Adult learning contributes to the achievement of all SDGs by building the foundations of change in the social, political, economic, ecological and cultural spheres. Promoting sustainable agriculture, to take SDG 2 as an example, requires targeted educational measures on the sides of the producers as well as

¹ Development, in the context of this paper, refers to the evolution and lasting change of political and economic systems with regard to their impact on social, cultural and ecological systems.

the consumers to acquire a better understanding of ecosystems and their improvement or protection through farming methods and consumption behaviour. SDG 3 on Ensuring healthy lives could not be achieved without health literacy programmes, particularly when it comes to the prevention of disease. Moreover, promoting mental health and well-being are a key objective of non-formal adult education by providing a safe space for the exploration of interests and talents as well as including participants in a group and making them feel valued.

At the same time, adult education and lifelong learning are not only a transversal goal and method to achieving the SDGs, but also a specific goal: SDG 4 says that inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities need to be ensured for all. The targets 4.4 and 4.6 of the SDGs define the role of adult education in Goal 4 more in detail: they mention adults as one of the target groups of actions in education, and they integrate lifelong learning by speaking about “all learners”.

3 From MDGs to SDGs

3.1 The Millennium Development Goals

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the outcome of the Millennium Summit in September 2000, at this point in history the largest ever gathering of policy-makers from around the globe to call an end to poverty and promote development in countries outside the so-called First World. Eight goals - the MDGs - should pave the way towards an approximation of all parts of the world in terms of social, ecological and economic development. The goals themselves were built on a number of preceding reports, declarations and strategies, such as the first annual World Development Report, published by the World Bank in 1990, and the first Human Development Report, published by the United Nations, also in 1990. Events and summits, notably the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also called the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, were another marking point for the establishment of a set of universal development goals (Hulme 2009).

Millennium Development Goals	
1.	Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2.	Achieve universal primary education
3.	Promote Gender equality and empower women
4.	Reduce child mortality
5.	Improve maternal health
6.	Combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases
7.	Ensure environmental sustainability
8.	Develop a global partnership for development

All member states of the United Nations committed to help achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and to increase their official development assistance to the developing countries, with the aim of reaching a minimum net amount of 0.7 percent of their gross national product. While progress was made particularly in low-income countries and areas such as primary school education and gender parity in education (McArthur/Rasmussen 2017), it became clear even before 2015 that the goals would not be reached. In order to pursue a global strategy for development, the UN Member States initiated a process for the Post-2015 Agenda. This ultimately led to the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.

3.2 The Sustainable Development Goals: from post-2015 Agenda to a new global policy framework

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute in many ways a breach with previous policies and strategies for development. In contrast to the MDGs, they are conceived as a global agenda, thus the “target” of development are not only low income countries or middle income countries, but all countries worldwide. The SDGs express this paradigm shift in their motto “Leave no one behind”. They integrate and merge three separate UN framework “streams” – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the outcome of the third UN Conference on Financing for Development in Addis (the Addis Ababa Action Agenda) and the sustainable development policies under the framework of Rio+20 (UN Conference on Sustainable Development). The SDGs are a 15-year plan of action that focuses on achieving economic, social, and environmental development. Aimed at 2030, the Sustainable Development Goals have a tri-domain focus on people-planet-prosperity. In total, there are 17 Sustainable Goals, with multiple targets each (United Nations 2015a).

Sustainable Development Goals
1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

New stakeholders such as the BRICS ² states, civil society organisations, think tanks and the private sector were involved in the negotiation process, with a view to improve the goals and targets, and, at the same time, to put in a place a more robust accountability framework. Indeed, the lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms was, as acknowledged by the UN Secretary-General in 2010, one of the biggest obstacles for achieving the MDGs. However, even though civil society and other stakeholders were involved in the negotiation process, the space to hold their governments

² A group of five major emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

accountable for the implementation of the SDGs remained quite limited, with the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) as the main tool (Donald/Way 2016).

The United Nations underscore the holistic nature of the concept of sustainability within the SDGs. This can only be effectively applied if these priorities are divided strategically within different dimensions - economic, social, and environmental. While the emphasis lies on universality of sustainability, this idea can only be realised with a cross-pillar integration between the three dimensions. In other words, though sustainability is a broad and comprehensive issue, mainstreaming some of the key dimensions could channel maximum efficacy. Non-formal adult learning could be one such effective channel to achieve these goals.

4 Adult education in the SDG framework

4.1 Non-formal adult education and learning

Non-formal adult education can be defined as all systematic communication of skill, knowledge, and attitude provided outside the limits of the formal school (Colletta et al 1996). It can also be described by the presence of a learning system that can be accessible to a wider audience, which need not require learners to invest as many personal resources as in a formal set up. Non-formal education is a continuous and dynamic process that does not necessarily stop after one passes the traditional years of learning.

Within the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, the Commission called for a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning where quality education and training, equity, and social cohesion become a widespread reality. National coordinators in each Member State of the European Union follow up on the implementation process of the agenda. Europe 2020 views education as a key priority area and calls for at least 15% of its adults engaging in lifelong learning by 2020. The current president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, emphasised the need for an increased support for development of skills and strengthening of lifelong learning within the European Union.

Data about participation rates in adult education is lacking in many European countries as non-formal and informal learning is captured differently depending on the national statistics organisations and their way of measuring (Aitchison/Alidou 2009). Where there is data available, it is often limited to certain age groups, such as the working population, or it focuses mainly on work-related education and training. There are two sets of adult learning statistics available at the European level: the labour force survey (LFS), and the adult education survey (AES). According to them, currently only 11% of EU working age citizens participate in lifelong learning (Eurostat 2017).

4.2 Adult education within the wider sphere of education and development

How can the adult education sector carve its own space within the wider sphere of education and development? Adult education does not necessarily serve as a means-to-an-end. It is multidimensional – it covers many sectors; be it social, political, economic, or ecological. In the face of the diverse challenges that EU is facing currently, non-formal education could serve as an aid to the issues of our changing society. Thus, such lifelong learning should be seen as a guiding principle within the EU. It promotes tolerance and argues in favour of universal basic human rights.

Adult education builds its foundations on the values of intersectionality and can aid humanitarian development, in spaces that are repeatedly subjugated by discrimination and prolonged conflict. As it allows for skill and knowledge building, it also increases rational thought process and transferability of above facets, thus making its target group diverse. Within non-formal adult education, dialogue and

mutual respect are seen as the basis of outreach. Adult education also helps learners become more aware about their society through citizenship education.

Non-formal adult education not only helps learners to question existing systemic structures, but also appreciate and take advantage of the benefits that the current system offers them. From a long-term perspective, non-formal adult education is a method of inculcating the need for cooperation and presence of co-existence into our societies.

4.3 Adult education in the SDGs

For the goals on education, the Education for All (EFA) Conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, was pointing the way ahead. The goals and targets approved at this conference included basic and adult education as well as adult literacy. Ten years later, the MDGs included primary education in Goal 2 and gender equality in primary and secondary education in Goal 3 but left out higher and adult education completely. The Fast Track Initiative (FTI) – that was renamed Global Partnership for Education (GPE) a little later – aimed to accelerate the implementation of Goal 2. GPE, along with its members Education International (EI) and Global Campaign for Education (GCE), is one of the most influential stakeholders and dominates the discourse on the role of education in development.

The focus on primary education is reflected in the hitherto existing results of the EFA initiative: primary education is perceived as the most successful goal with 93 percent of children worldwide attending primary school. However, drop-out quotas are very high in some regions and the way of measuring is problematic as only the first day of attending school is counted. For youth and adult skills, measuring of success is difficult as there is few quantitative data. Moreover, big regional and social inequalities are visible. In youth and adult literacy, very little progress is visible. There are different explanations to why the EFA goals were not reached; lack of quality in education as well as the narrow focus on primary education are two of them.

Even though adult education is not mentioned explicitly in the SDGs, civil society in adult education considers the negotiations as a success: contrary to initial fears, education was made a separate goal. Goal 4 of the SDGs calls for the “[ensuring of] inclusive and equitable quality education and [promotion of] lifelong learning opportunities for all” – this is where adult education implicitly comes into the picture of the wider framework. Contextualisation of adult education within the SDG sphere is crucial so that decision makers can see the importance and benefits of Lifelong Learning (Hinzen/Schmitt 2016). At the same time, because of the dynamic nature of the SDGs, it is important to make sure that non-formal adult education is not left behind in the broader discourse of education.

The targets 4.4 and 4.6 of the SDGs define the role of adult education in Goal 4 more in detail: they mention adults as one of the target groups of actions in education, and they integrate lifelong learning by speaking about “all learners”. That adult education did not get a separate target may be due to the fact that adult education encompasses a much larger field and concept of education and learning than (formal) primary or tertiary education.

Target 4.7 specifies, inter alia, the role of education in development and global citizenship: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.”

The formulation of Goal 4 and its targets 4.4 and 4.6 to 4.7 is very open concerning the content and actions that should be implemented. On the one hand, this can be an opportunity for organisations that do not find their aims in the goals explicitly, as they can interpret it in their interest. On the other hand, the openness of the phrasing is a big challenge: what does that mean to accountability? Can

countries be held accountable for not implementing the goals if there are no concrete measures and instruments proposed? The Communication from the European Commission “A decent Life for all: from vision to collective action” (2014) states that “Civil society, local authorities and the private sector should play a key role in advancing action and accountability.” Target 4.7 brings a large number of different policy areas together, so that a consensus even among civil society organisations seems difficult to achieve.

Moreover, the phrasing of the targets does not give any indications of the percentages or numbers of adults that should acquire certain skills and knowledge. Target 4.4 demands to “substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship”, and target 4.6 says that “a substantial proportion of adults” should “achieve literacy and numeracy” by 2030. The term “substantial” leaves it open to the implementing organisations and bodies to decide themselves which numbers or percentages this “substantial” may entail. This is particularly worrying in target 4.6: recent studies as PIAAC, conducted by the OECD, have shown that illiteracy rates worldwide are alarming, including in Europe. In order to tackle this issue, concrete actions are necessary. However, as long as the scope of the target audience is not clarified, the future financial and technical support of literacy programmes for adults is not clear either.

Lastly, the targets do not include any benchmarks in terms of financing. This, in turn, influences the potential to implement measures and actions as the implementing organisations and bodies need secured funding or need to know how much of their budget has to be allocated to the specific targets. Financing for Development, including financing of the SDGs, is part of a larger on-going debate around the globe that includes local, regional and national governments as well as international organisations and bodies, but also civil society.

4.3.1 The SDGs in the European framework

According to Article 208 of the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union and its Member States have to comply with the commitments made by signing this new set of development objectives. In the European framework, the SDGs are in accordance with several targets in EU policies, especially the benchmarks of the Europe 2020 strategy (see in the table below) and the Strategic Framework for Education and Training 2020 (ET 2020). However, only target 4.2 on participation in early childhood education clearly corresponds to the respective ET 2020 benchmark (cf. Pisano 2015).

As discussed earlier, targets 4.4 and 4.6 – those that mention adult learning – only speak about “substantial” increases of adult learners and do not provide any benchmarks for the increase of numbers of adults benefitting from certain measures and actions. The ET 2020 benchmarks do not distinguish between literacy and numeracy skills or relevant skills needed for employment but bring adult learning together in one benchmark: “at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning”. In contrast to that, target 4.7 of the SDGs seems to be far more concrete and ambitious than the ET 2020 benchmark, as it speaks about “all learners” that should acquire relevant skills and knowledge about sustainable development and global citizenship.

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	ET 2020 benchmarks
4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	<i>the rate of early leavers from education and training aged 18-24 should be below 10%</i>
4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-	at least 95% of children (from 4 to compulsory school age) should participate in early childhood education

primary education so that they are ready for primary education	
4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university	<i>at least 40% of people aged 30-34 should have completed some form of higher education</i>
4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship	<i>at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning; the share of employed graduates (aged 20-34 with at least upper secondary education attainment and having left education 1-3 years ago) should be at least 82%</i>
4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations	
4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy	<i>fewer than 15% of 15-year-olds should be under-skilled in reading, mathematics and science</i>
4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development	<i>at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning</i>
4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all	
4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries	<i>at least 20% of higher education graduates and 6% of 18-34 year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad</i>
4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States	

4.4 The contribution of adult education to the SDGs

Adult education contributes to the individual as well as collective development of societies in many ways. Non-formal and informal adult learning play a significant role for social inclusion, active citizenship as well as personal development and well-being, even though they are often not fully recognised as legitimate forms of education in that the ways and results of learning may be less tangible than in formal education and learning.

Firstly, adult education provides knowledge, competences and skills such as language skills, creative skills, etc. These can be used for both professional and private advancement and, in many cases, enable people to access the formal education system. Secondly, it promotes transversal skills, i.e. social skills, communication skills, analytical and cognitive skills etc., sometimes also called “life skills”. All of these skills are vital for participating in the labour market and creating new jobs, engaging in democratic processes and becoming an active citizen. Furthermore, taking part in adult education has also very positive effects on the individual in terms of better health in the old age, better general well-being and inclusion in the community and society (Manninen et al 2014).

Communities and societies develop as those that are part of them develop individually and collectively. Adult education creates social change through enhancing employment prospects, improving health levels and financial literacy of those from deprived backgrounds as well as offering them opportunities to acquire the tools needed to run their own lives. Lifelong learning is key for achieving social change and reducing poverty levels around the world. It has the capacity to positively affect many dimensions of poverty, peace, reconciliation as well as conflict prevention.

Keeping the above-mentioned concept of adult education in mind, is it then possible to “use” adult education in order to induce and direct development? An instrumentalisation of adult education should surely be met with a high degree of caution. Two aims of (adult) education are central in this context: firstly, the aim of transmitting knowledge, competences and skills, and secondly, the aim of empowerment, i.e. the promotion of self-determined, bottom-up development of communities and individuals through active citizenship and social inclusion.

Education as a means to achieve certain aims is nothing new and not limited to the development context. However, “[formal] education can [...] not be thought of outside of the socio-cultural and political-economic power relations. Against this background, the double character [of education] needs to be spelled out: education as a means to individual and societal emancipation on the one hand, and education as a means to reproducing existing societal structures on the other hand.” (Langthaler/Lichtblau 2006: 7, translation of the author) The contents taught and methodologies applied in all forms of education depend on the specific environments and more often than not are used to follow goals set by those that wish to pass on knowledge and skills, such as governments, employers, educational organisations, and, ultimately, everybody that educates others.

The aim of (formal) education to reproduce existing societal structures was described by Paulo Freire as the “banking concept of knowledge”. This concept is characterised by strong hierarchies between teachers and learners that aims at keeping the existing societal power relations, which makes empowerment impossible. However, those “subjected” to learning in any form are not completely passive and immobile.

With education, we acquire the knowledge and analytical skills to recognise power structures and relations of oppression and to question them, subsequently drawing up alternatives and understanding own possibilities for action, and therefore [becoming] conscious about oneself as a political subject [...]. Thereby, education forms the basis of functioning democracy: ‘[...] a democracy that doesn’t only work, but is working in the sense of the word, needs politically mature people. A realised democracy can only be thought of as a society of politically mature people.’ (Adorno/Becker 1970: 112) (Langthaler/Lichtblau 2006: 7)

Non-formal adult education takes up this approach to adult education that was illustrated by Paulo Freire in his critical pedagogy. It puts learners in the centre of all learning processes and makes them agents of their own education.

4.4.1 Skills, knowledge and competences to achieve the SDGs

The SDGs tackle a large number of global challenges that were identified by the member states of the United Nations, alongside civil society and other stakeholders. Not only since their establishment and approval, however, has adult education contributed to their achievement. Non-formal adult education transmits the knowledge that is required to gain a better understanding of the issues at hand, and it transfers the skills and competences needed to take action and to work on a solution. Therefore, adult education is as much a method and tool as a goal in itself.

Each of the SDGs has at least one target that implies education, learning or training, taking into account that learning activities are pivotal for achieving the goals. The “Manifesto for Adult Learning in the 21st century”, published by the European Association for the Education of Adults (2015b), lists a number of areas in which adult education organisations and providers have been particularly active in the past few years. These correspond to the SDGs and include, among others, skills to lead a healthier life, knowledge about equitable and sustainable consumption, the promotion of gender equality, awareness about environmentally friendly transport and energy efficiency, as well as the promotion of sustainable, inclusive economic growth. Curricula in adult education can either have the promotion of these skills and competences as a primary target, i.e. focus for instance on sustainable consumption explicitly, or they can incorporate them as secondary targets, for example through educating about a healthier lifestyle in a cooking course.

4.4.2 Global citizenship education as a transversal goal: adult education for empowerment

Target 4.7 of the SDGs is dedicated to the promotion of active citizenship, democracy and participation. Global citizenship education (GCE) and education for sustainable development (ESD) - to name just a few approaches mentioned in the target – draw on the idea of education as a tool for empowerment. AONTAS, the Irish umbrella association for adult education, states that “*adult learning is transformative at an individual level but also collective at a societal level*” (2018), triggering development at the social, economic and ecological level. Adult education programmes using non-formal methodologies promote human rights, gender equality and cultural diversity as an inherent part of adult learning.

Looking back in the history of adult education, this is not a new trend:

Many adult education organisations were established as the result of emancipatory movements (workers, women, or religious organisations, etc.), and adult education still provides the knowledge and know-how as well as the space to develop democracy and citizenship. Additionally, adult education can strengthen and regenerate civil society. Increasing radicalisation in Europe has shown that democratic attitudes, tolerance and respect need to be reinforced. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue can play a big role in this. But adult education can also bring more democracy and participation to the national and regional levels, and enable transparency and the development of a lively civil society as well as contribute to critical thinking and empowerment. (EAEA 2015b)

However, in a collection of research papers entitled ‘Beyond Us versus Them: Citizenship Education with Hard to Reach learners in Europe’, Networking European Citizenship Education (NECE), a pan-European network established by the Federal Agency for Civic Education Germany and its European partners, states that “political issues such as emancipation, power negotiation and democratic reform should receive more attention from citizenship educators concerned with social marginalisation and hard to reach groups in their societies” (Kakos et al 2016). To ensure that adult education can use its emancipatory power, continuous training of adult educators is therefore key.

The European Commission proposed a Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning in January 2018, which stresses the importance of sustainable development within the framework of civic competences.

5 What are the challenges for non-formal adult education?

5.1 Lack of public funding and privatisation and commercialisation of education

The adult education sector is increasingly affected by cuts in government budgets, leaving adult education programmes and providers ill-funded. At the same time, privatisation and commercialisation of education, have become more important in the past few years. Private (profit-oriented) education providers make programmes less accessible as they often require high fees for course enrollment, therefore excluding those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In the European context, experience shows that private service providers in adult education tend to offer education services of lower quality than public services, often employing low-paid trainers or teachers and cutting on costs wherever they can, also not offering in-service training, etc.

5.2 Marginalisation of non-formal adult education

As a result of the economic crisis, most policy-making in adult education shifted its focus to Vocational Education and Training (VET). The argument for VET is often made in reference to the large numbers of the unemployed in many European countries on the one hand, and the many vacancies for specialised jobs on the other hand. Upskilling and reskilling for employability is a priority not only of the European institutions, but also governments at national level. Non-formal adult education has stepped to the background, despite recent studies such as the BELL study that have shown that learning in its many forms can lead to individual and societal well-being and prosperity. The direct correlation between cause and result is not as evident for non-formal adult education as for the VET sector, which means that short-term policy planning prefers to invest in VET.

5.3 International competition and standardisation in education

King and Palmer (2014) speak about the emergence of a “global governance of education” *“as a result of a power shift away from national structures of decision making to multilateral organisations”* (Langthaler 2015: 10). This goes hand in hand with different methods of influencing policy making, e.g. agenda setting and collection of best practices. Statistics on educational attainment such as PISA and PIAAC have led to a stronger international competition and standardisation in education. This goes against the character of non-formal adult education that is often organised bottom-up by communities or groups of individuals. Furthermore, educational outcomes in adult education need to be assessed on an individual level as participants in adult learning come with very different backgrounds and educational experience as well as expectations concerning their learning achievements.

5.4 Measurability of participation and success in adult education

In recent years, it has become increasingly important for organisations in adult education and development to be able to present quantitative data for their fields. At the donor level, these data mainly serve to “prove” the success (or failure) of measures and policies in order to decide on (further) financial and/or technical support. Furthermore, the measurability of tools and policies can be the deciding factor of whether or not an issue is included in a set of indicators, as happened with the issue of literacy in the Human Development Index (HDI). Measurability seems to have become a new paradigm that has a large influence on projects and policies.

However, especially in the field of adult education, quantitative data does not always capture the whole picture of human, social, economic or ecological development that adult education provokes. Research in adult education is therefore often based on qualitative data, gathered by in-depth interviews, observations or ethnographies with a narrative or biographic approach. Qualitative data can take long-term developments into account that rather look at the “how” and “why” correlations between cause and result than at the “how much” correlations.

Political actors and decision-makers need to be convinced of the benefits of adult education, and one way to do that is to prove the benefits empirically. This can be achieved if formal and non-formal education sectors team up and cooperate with each other. Research carried out within the formal education set-up on the various trends and necessities of adult education could go a long way and help the EU develop strategies to tackle the challenges that it faces. Moreover, it could provide better insight into the needs of those not included in adult learning yet in order to build efficient and effective outreach methods.

5.5 Neglect of literacy in the SDGs

In a background paper for the Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report from 2006, Stromquist states that *“literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, active and passive participation in local and global social community”* (Stromquist 2005: 14). Higher literacy levels are a facilitator – if not a precondition – for development. Literacy encompasses the right to education, and more importantly, the right to learn in one’s own language. Not all languages have a writing system and some countries, especially in the Global South, have speakers of many different languages. This means that the alphabetisation of many people is taking place in the official language of their countries and not in their own languages, a factor that needs to be acknowledged in the discussion on literacy.

The Human Development Index (HDI), according to the UN, *“is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and have a decent standard of living.”* Until 2009, it included the “Education Index” that consisted of two indicators, the first being adult literacy that weights two thirds in the calculations, and the second being the combined gross enrolment rate at all levels of education with a one-third weight in the calculations.

However, in 2010, literacy was taken off the Human Development Index (HDI) as a consequence of a recommendation made by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and academics from Oxford and Harvard as well as several representatives from international agencies. The argument was that the indicator gave imprecise information as it only measured literacy with questions that could be answered by “yes” and “no”. Literacy and illiteracy are a continuum, though. Illiteracy can mean that people can read and write, but do not understand the full meaning of a text they have read, or are only able to write a meaningful text themselves.

New education indicators as the average years of schooling should instead capture the degree of literacy in any given country. It was assumed that literacy was a skill acquired at primary school level or after a certain number of years in the education system. As the participation rates in primary education were very high in many countries already and the average years of schooling were growing worldwide, the conclusion was drawn that literacy was achieved in most countries. However, new studies as PIAAC, mainly for the European context, have shown that many people have problems with reading and writing, even after attending school at primary and secondary level.

Even so, literacy is not among the priorities of the SDGs. This poses a challenge for the implementation of literacy programmes as well as the work of civil society organisations and other bodies active in

literacy, e.g. the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). Even though the strength of the SDGs remains to be seen, they will determine future financial flows to educational programmes.

6 How can we go from theory to concrete action?

For all SDGs, there are probably countless examples of good practice from adult education. The following chapter presents a few selected good practices.

6.1 Social inclusion through community-based adult education

Goal 10 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls for all-round social inclusion with equal opportunities for all. With adult education as a channel, the EU can expect communities that collaborate among and within each other in a way that is beneficial to all. Community-based adult education can be a medium through which migrants and locals can come together in an open environment that is free from hierarchy and any kind of biases.



La Verneda School for Adults in Barcelona is a community school that is intercultural and egalitarian in nature. It is open to migrants and refugees, provides validation of their prior skills and competences, and runs on the principle of open and free education for all. This school has now become a focal point of contact between locals and migrants with a cooperative space for both groups to learn from each other. Not only are local citizens interested in volunteering at the school, but some high-skilled migrants are also willing to share their expertise as the school provides them an outlet to teach as well.

In Ireland, in **Warrenmount Community Education Centre** in Dublin, statistics from 2017 reveal that of the 478 learners engaged in the learning programmes, 54 different nationalities from across all age ranges are in attendance. In particular, their Failte Isteach programme is very much about cultural diversity, where Irish senior citizens volunteer to teach migrants Basic English classes but also engage in intercultural learning. Community education is a microcosm of cultural diversity. (AONTAS 2018)

6.2 Promoting sustainable food production and economic growth

It is important to have a broader view of education's impact on the development of society. A holistic approach can allow us to shift from a tunnel vision perspective of traditional educational years to something more well-rounded and lifelong. The focus, then, should not just be on how education can be a lucrative investment, but also on how it can pave way for an equitable and sustainable society in the future.

Jesaia Loweiko from the **Swedish organisation 'Studiefrämjandet'** supervises study circles dedicated to sustainable living. Through these circles, he calls for the possibility of a 'transition movement' by building a resilient society where sustainable food production becomes a central element of our society. He believes in global goals-local solutions; the idea that if people come together at a communal level, major change can be observed on a wider global level (ELM Magazine, June 2017).

Adult education thereby helps community living while promoting a more sustainable lifestyle. New learning programmes integrate vocational education and training with education for sustainability:

the thematic focus is on areas of health literacy, digital literacy, and active citizenship, while providing vocational tools to learners.

Likewise, formal and non-formal support can be provided as a combined package. **Finnish OKKA Foundation's** Erkkka Laininen wants to see a shift in society's need from economic growth to growth that is more sustainable. Their belief is that it is important to put the needs of the planet before our daily consumerist needs. Economic growth as we know it today puts a constant strain on the resources of the planet. By granting sustainable development certificates and trainings to Finnish educational institutions, OKKA keeps them on sustainability check in a productive manner (ibid).

6.3 Building risk disaster resilience

Adult education's effects are far reaching and widespread in a variety of spheres—on a social, political, ecological level, to raise civic sense etc. A prime example of how non-formal adult education can be used as a tool to combat contemporary problems for the benefit of the society would be the **Disaster Risk Resilience** in Serbia. In a large-scale collaborative manner, several actors in the Serbian society used non-formal adult education as a tool in reaction to the disastrous floods that hit the Western Balkans in 2014. Local communities, international organisations, and the national government joined forces to provide training and seminars on how the community could deal with the aftermath of the floods, as well as disaster management for any future calamities of this type (ibid).

6.4 Health education to empower women

The **Comprehensive Abortion Care project (CAC)** in Ghana seeks to reduce unsafe abortion practices among young women between the age of 10 and 24 by advocating and promoting comprehensive abortion care to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity in Ghana by 2020. Then the project started, ten trainers were instructed to sensitise communities on the dangers of unsafe abortions and the availability of CAC services within their communities. In these qualification measures, the trainers were comprehensively trained to promote awareness of CAC. With their newly acquired competences, trainers were able to build up knowledge of teenage pregnancy, and they informed the participants about how to claim their sexual and reproductive health rights in intensive counselling. Not only did this project improve health rates of the female population, but also was it able to empower women by giving them a better knowledge and control about sexuality and reproduction. (EAEA 2015)

7 Where do we want to go from here?

While the Sustainable Development Goals are highly ambitious, a current assessment of the measures taken to ensure their success shows that certain changes are needed. The underfunding of public adult education and privatisation of the sector makes adult education less accessible for a large chunk of Europe's population, not to speak of the rest of the world. Adult education focuses on the intrinsic value of learning and its transformative nature rather than a means to an (employment) end. As the traditional school-to-work formula becomes increasingly inept for today's rapidly changing economic system, it is time to broaden our worldview and pave the way for a lifelong learning perspective instead.

EAEA proposes a European-wide effort to go one step forward, to develop a knowledgeable society that is capable in dealing with the challenges of our time. It is crucial that citizens participate democratically and actively, have the skills and knowledge to live and work healthily and productively and take part in cultural and civic activities from a very young to a very old age. Through the annual theme of 2017, 'The Power and Joy of Learning', EAEA aimed to transmit the ideas of active citizenship,

sustainability, social cohesion, and the importance of life skills, transversal skills, as well as intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

The EU declared it will play a leading role in the implementation of the SDGs and incorporating relevant development strategies. Its Directorate General for Development pledged to adopt several strategies to achieve the education goal; however, there seems to be a lack of adequate link to all sectors of education. Moreover, the EU, while acknowledging that the SDGs are a global, thus also a European agenda, focuses with its External Investment Plan as well as other strategies in development on countries outside of Europe.

Goal 17 of the SDGs focuses on partnerships and cooperation and the idea that these goals will not be fulfilled without fruitful cooperation and cross sectoral and transnational alliances. In light of this goal, EAEA's annual theme for the year 2018, 'Cooperation and Partnerships', will be well-timed to put the focus on establishing and improving partnerships and strengthening cooperation with civil society and other stakeholders in adult education as well as stakeholders beyond the sector.

With numerous actors engaged in policy making, a so-called 'multiscalar polycscape' should be brought into place (Magrath 2014). Though education and training are traditionally managed on a local or sectoral level, a global governance of education and training, incorporating non-governmental actors as well, might be required in order to raise awareness about the role of education for achieving the SDGs (Norrag News, December 2014). A reliable and consistent advocacy chain would allow for increased and effective capacity building, thereby strengthening the EU's democratic accountability.

Some of the existing action plans include the 6 action principles of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) that call for community-based learning for sustainable development: responding, engaging, enabling, embedding, sustaining, and transforming. In light of these action principles, UIL also published a handbook entitled 'Communities in Action – Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development' (2015). It identifies principles and policy mechanisms to advance community-based learning for sustainable development, and informs policymakers and practitioners new to this field of the international vision and goals for sustainable development and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by documenting both policies, their support mechanisms, and best practices from different regions of the world. Not only can community-based adult learning help with awareness raising regarding sustainable living and civic responsibility, but also strengthen adult education in its core by making individuals more aware about their communities, environment, society, and families and increasing engagement.

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