# Adult Education and Lifelong Learning in the Caribbean and Latin America

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**Abstract**: In this paper, we explore the concept of adult education and lifelong learning in the Latin America and Caribbean region and situate it within the context of the CONFINTEA V, Agenda for Adult Education which was more recently reaffirmed by CONFINTEA VI. The first section provides a contextual discussion of how adult education and lifelong learning are conceptualized in the region while the second discusses the region's response to the agenda for adult education. The third segment highlights some of the associated challenges and concludes with implications for adult educators.

During the latter part of the 20th century, many developing countries have emerged from positions of massive foreign political domination to independence and self-governance. Other significant changes are the globalization of economic systems, the rapid development of technology, the changing demographic composition of the population, and the emergence of information-based and knowledge-based economies. (Alfred & Nafukho, 2010). Such changes and the demand for global competitiveness call for better, relevant, and well-founded education systems that would respond to the need for lifelong learning and adult education (*Education for All, 2007)*.

At the national level, governments view education as an important factor in both individual and societal development. With growing concerns about how they will position themselves globally, countries are facing increasing demands to meet a number of often conflicting goals driven by the needs of individuals, businesses, and society at large. For adult education today, the tension lies around its purpose, particularly in an era of internationalization and globalization. According to Kubow and Fossum (2007), the debates about the purpose of adult education take on such issues as:

- Economic concerns for equipping adults with appropriate workplace competencies and skills that would allow nations to compete in the global markets
- Civic concerns for an education agenda that would prepare adults to participate more fully in public life, thus challenging hegemonic and imperialistic ideals
- Individual concerns for self-development through lifelong education

Alfred and Nafukho (2010) posit that, "While these debates on the role and purpose of adult education has gone on for decades, the answers that emerge are often multiple and ambiguous, attesting to the discursive and overlapping nature of these issues" (p. 93). Moreover, responses to these issues are contextual and vary with perspectives, philosophies, practices, and worldviews and guided by the historical, economic, social, cultural, linguistic and educational goals of a nation. Responding to the debate, McClure (2007) wrote, "the impact of adult education throughout the world comes as no surprise to those individuals who are involved in the

profession, because the mission of adult education is to help adults, as individuals and groups, achieve their goals and aspirations" (2006, p. xi). This call for adult education as an imperative for individuals and groups to achieve their lifelong goals and aspirations has strong relevance to the Latin America and Caribbean region where in 2007, 34.1% of the population was living in poverty and 12.6% in extreme poverty (Torres, 2009).

Noting these global issues, UNESCO's Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) held in 1997 called for world regions to make education available for all by 2015 and to use adult education as the platform from which to plan for human development within a global context. Two landmark documents emerged from the conference that would guide the direction of adult education globally: The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning and the Agenda for the Future. The framework for the future of adult education highlights some of the issues and concerns facing members of today's societies and highlights the roles that adult education can play in helping individuals address these challenges. Among the challenges include poverty, health disparities, gender inequities, and economic inequalities (UNESCO, 1997).

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the concept of adult education and lifelong learning in the Latin America and Caribbean region within the context of the CONFINTEA V agenda for adult education. The paper addresses the following questions: (a) How is adult education and lifelong learning conceptualized in the Latin American and Caribbean region? (b) How has the region responded to the agenda for adult education? (c) What challenges exist and what are the future possibilities?

## Latin America and Caribbean Sub-Regions: History and Context

Latin America and the Caribbean is a vastly heterogeneous region made up of 41 countries (19 in Latin America and 22 in the Caribbean). The area is divided into two sub-regions—Latin America and the Caribbean—each of which is also internally heterogeneous. Spanish and Portuguese are the two main official languages in Latin America and English and French in the Caribbean, but it has been reported that about 600 languages are spoken in the region (Torres, 2009). Multilingual and multicultural contexts complicate planning and delivery of adult education as programs are developed and delivered in the official languages in the region. Traditionally, adult education activities encompassed areas relating to literacy education, community education and development, and university adult education (Gordon, 1985).

Historically, the Latin America and Caribbean region has used innovative approaches to adult and non- formal education for the purposes of nation building (La Belle, 1986), as an agent of liberation (Freire, 1970), and for human resource development, skills development, and democratization (Lowe, Grant, Williams, 1971). In recent times, the importance of the function of adult education continues to expand, given increasing global competition, economic pressures and globalization.

In much of the English-speaking Caribbean, adult education is formally organized within the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development with adult education officers appointed to oversee programs and activities. The islands are supported by The Caribbean Council for Adult Education (CARCAE) – a regional body that was established by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) governments in 1984 to help promote and facilitate the development

and provision of adult education (Ellis, Ramsey, & Small, 2000; Jules, 1999). Working closely with governmental and non-governmental organizations, CARCARE strived to increase awareness about the importance of adult education and helped broadened the concept of adult learning from one of literacy acquisition to that of lifelong learning. To that end, the government of St. Lucia, in its (2000) national human resource development manifesto made adult learning and human development key components of that initiative. As a result, the adult education program which formerly focused on literacy and numeracy was renamed in 2001 to the *National Enrichment and Learning Program* (Jules, 1999). Lifelong learning was at the core of that strategy and the strengthening of non-formal learning was made a strategic imperative. The goal was to make education more readily available to all.

### Education for All: Progress, Accomplishments, and Challenges

The Education for All (EFA) goals included universal primary education, increase in adult literacy, gender parity, and educational equality. As a means of monitoring progress towards goal accomplishment, the EFA Development Index (EDI) was developed. Three countries—Aruba, Barbados, and Cuba—have reached the goal with an EDI between 0.98 and 1.00. Five Countries—Argentina, Bahamas, Chile, Mexico, and Trinidad and Tobago—are close to achieving the goal with an index between 0.95 and 0.97. Eighteen countries—Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Lucia, Uruguay, and Venezuela—were in intermediate position with an index of 0.80 and 0.94, and none was in danger of not meeting the goal by 2015 (EFA, 2008). It is important to note that the countries reported here are the only ones for which complete data were available. Torres (2009) explained that the EFA Development Index measures "quality" as survival to grade 5, and not in terms of effective learning processes and achievement. The data, therefore, can be very misleading if one does not understand that context.

Moreover, two of the goals are not addressed in the index, namely, Goal 1 (early childhood education) and Goal 3 (ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs). Although it is reported that all countries within the region for which data are available have either achieved or are in progress of achieving the EFA goals, the report does not address the extent to which provisions are made for adults to acquire education and training, a major neglect which speaks to the global marginalization of adult education.

## CONFINTEA V (1997) TO CONFINTEA VI (2009): Progress, Accomplishments, and Challenges

The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education marked a turning point in the global recognition of and commitment to adult education and lifelong learning (EFA, 2007). That conference called attention to family literacy as a bridge to formal and non-formal learning and highlighted adult education as the platform from which to plan for human development in a global context. Emerging from that summit was an urgent call for adult education to address issues of democracy, peace and human rights, respect for diversity and conflict resolution, economic and ecological sustainability, and workforce development. Each of the five UNESCO regions was given the charge to work towards the Agenda for Adult Education and the

commitments articulated in the Hamburg Declaration (visit the UNESCO's website at www.unesco.org for the various reports). While the Latin American and Caribbean region has realized some gains much remains to be accomplished due to the magnitude of the tasks at hand. For example in a UNESCO (2003) report, entitled *Regional Framework for Action on Adult and Youth Education in Latin America and the Caribbean*, the authors noted the following concern:

> Meeting the educational needs of 39 million illiterates and 110 million adults and youths with partially completed primary education does not represent a recent challenge, but is the result of a debt that has been growing over many decades. . . What is required—not in addition to but above all, are measures intended to affect profound social changes , to remedy social inequality, to bring about a reduction in extreme poverty as well as extreme wealth (UNESCO-OREAL, 2003, p. 68)

Despite the magnitude of the challenge, the countries plunged ahead with policies, programs, collaborations, and available resources (albeit insufficient in all cases) to transform the education and life conditions of adults and youth. In the Caribbean sub-region, since the COFINTEA V agenda, there has been an increased effort to pull adult education from the margins of the nation's education activities. For example, the government of Belize, where adult education was on the peripheral, now makes education programs available to the adult population throughout the country. Other smaller islands like Anguilla, St. Kitts, and Nevis have appointed Adult Education Officers none existed before. With the recognition that adult education is more than literacy and basic skills acquisition, some governments have changed focus to capture the broad spectra of adult learning activities. Trinidad and Tobago changed the name of the adult education centers from Adult Education Centers to Adult Education Centers for Lifelong Learning (Jules, 1999).

At another level, some countries prepared policy documents that described the framework that would guide the provision of adult education. In St. Lucia, the Ministry of Education developed a comprehensive document entitled, *Adult and Continuing Education in St. Lucia: Addressing Global Transformation and the New Millennium* (Jules 1999). The document outlines the philosophical and conceptual framework that would guide a national agenda for the development and implementation of adult education programs. Similarly, in St. Kitts and Nevis, the policy document entitled, *Learning and Growing: The Long Term Education Plan - 1998-2011* includes a section that outlines adult education goals and strategies as a part of the overall education plan. Moreover, existing programs have been strengthened and broadened to reflect the changing nature of adult education and lifelong learning (Ellis, Ramsay, & Small, 2000).

Prior to the 1990s, adult education programs in the Caribbean primarily focused on basic literacy and numeracy, vocational education, and personal development. Much of the emphasis, therefore, was on skills building for particular employment sectors within the country. Today, in addition to the traditional programs, adult education has taken on new directions in terms of programs to include those that address social development and change. Among the issues that are being addressed include sustainable development, diversity, poverty eradication, parent education, youth development, adult education for the disabled, human rights, lifelong learning and the creation of learning societies and learning organizations, to name a few (Ellis, Ramsay, & Small). While there is general agreement that some progress has been made, there is evidence

that suggest that the remaining problems continue to overshadow progress. In a midterm review UNESCO (2003) report of progress in the region, the following was noted:

> In Latin America and the Caribbean, literacy has recently been reinvigorated in many countries. New national coalitions and institutions have been formed specifically to administer youth and adult education. Cooperation in vocational education has begun in some countries. Progress made in constructing adult education theories in the region has led to a redefinition of the basic learning needs of youth and adults, including conflict resolution, education for peace, citizenship and cultural identity; also involved are the appreciation of cultural patrimony as well s health issues, human rights and interculturalism—not only for indigenous peoples but for the entire population. Nonetheless, there are still 30 million illiterates, 11% of the population 15 years and older. To this figure must be added 110 million young persons and adults who, not having completed primary education, could qualify as functional illiterates. In this region 20% of children do not finish primary education. (UNESCO, 2003, p. )

In her 2009 synthesis report of the status of the region, Torres noted that structural issues serve as barriers to fully advancing the agenda. Moreover, new social and educational problems have emerged and some old ones have worsened, she notes. Absent is the connection between adult education and sustainable development and the areas of environment and citizenship articulated in the global framework receive very little attention in the Latin America and Caribbean region according to Torres. However, there is consensus that some of the progress highlighted in the 2000 and 2003 reports from the region has been sustained and further developed. In the CONFINTEA VI (2008) report, Suriname was the only country that reported no activities or progress in the 10-year period since the 1997 world conference.

## Unresolved Challenges

Quality and equity remain major unresolved issues, related to socioeconomic condition, urban-rural zone of residence, ethnic identity, and gender (Torres, 2009; UNESCO, 2003, 2007). The urban-rural, indigenous-non indigenous, and age (child, youth adult) gaps persist, with priority given to school-age children while youth and adults are marginalized in education programs and funding. The problem is more acute in rural areas with indigenous populations.

Gender equity has been achieved in the majority of countries in terms of school enrollment, retention, completion and adult literacy, except in countries with a high population of indigenous people. In most of the Caribbean and in some of the Latin American countries, girls and women outnumber boys and men at all levels of education; however, they still experience inequity in terms of lower pay, fewer professional opportunities. Moreover, gender discrimination is visible within the field of adult literacy education where women constitute the majority of the learners and facilitators while men dominate the professions in higher education, vocational education, professional training programs, and technology related fields (EFA, 2008).

Latin America and the Caribbean region is noted to have a relatively high literacy rate at 91% with a projection to 93% by 2015 (EFA, 2009). However, when the data is examined more closely some countries are lagging behind. Brazil, one of the largest countries in the region has the highest illiteracy rate at 11% and by 2006, about 50% of the total youth and adult population in the 14-24 age range did not complete the 9-year compulsory education (Torres, 2009). Youth drop out continue to be a problem.

Despite the recognized need to educate out of school youths and adults, adult education remains a low priority in the education budgets of most of the countries. Currently, the percent of the education budget allocated to adult education ranges from single digits to less than one percent. For example, the small island of St. Lucia dedicates a generous 15.59%, Brazil enjoys 7%, Dominican Republic, 2.8% , and Ecuador trailing at 0.4% of the education budget (UNESCO, 2003a). The government of St .Lucia appears to be more generous with the adult education dollars because it is working to strategically position the island to compete with the world economy (Jules, 1999). Also, there is the fear that unless the government contributes to the training and development of its population, it will continue to experience the "brain drain" phenomenon (UNESCO, 2003a). However, education funding in the region, overall, remains static.

## Conclusion

While much progress has been realized in the promotion of adult education and lifelong learning in the region, there is much left to be done to meet the global commitment of "Education for All" by the year 2015. Notable accomplishments throughout many parts of the regions include large scale literacy programs, equivalency or second-chance programs, employment skills development programs, non-formal education programs often linked to community development, to name a few. However, as Alfred & Nafukho (2010) pointed out, the world regions still struggle with the broad issues of poverty, health disparities, education funding, integrating indigenous knowledges, and globalization, among others, thus calling for adult education scholars and practitioners to play a more aggressive role in becoming part of the solution. As Ramdas (1997) noted,

> . . . adult education—in its broadest sense—is uniquely positioned to make an empowering intervention on behalf of the underprivileged in every society, and at the same time, influence macro policy. We need to take an imaginative leap, to move beyond the dialectics of the current discourse which continues to propagate a compartmentalized view of education and learning. I believe that our challenge is to re-interpret adult education as a powerful instrument, to build, in the words of Nelson Mandela, "a new political culture of human rights" (p. 36).

To build this culture of human rights, adult educators must make more purposeful attempts at the internationalization of research, curricula, and pedagogy to bring attention to global issues and to be a partner in finding solutions to these issues. A new agenda for adult education, then, is to embrace education as a lifelong phenomenon with the power to transform human lives across national boundaries. Engaging in the discourse allows opportunities for reaching out across borders to understand and contest the disparities that result from one's marginalized position in the world.

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