

Roundtable on literacy as a key competence for Lifelong Learning

At CONFINTEA VI, five roundtables were held on the key themes of the conference:

1. Policies and governance of adult education
2. Financing of adult education
3. Literacy as a key competence for lifelong learning
4. Assuring quality and assessing learning outcomes
5. The way forward

The format of the roundtables involved a chair person, a moderator and several panellists. Key questions were printed in the programme for all participants to see. Panellists were then asked to comment on particular aspects of the questions, in 'Any Questions' style. After the panellists had presented, delegations were invited to comment on or ask questions about the theme; in the interests of time management, these had been pre-presented.

The literacy roundtable posed the following questions:

1. How has the understanding of adult literacy as a key competence evolved?
2. What efforts have been made so far to integrate literacy into a lifelong learning perspective?
3. How can literacy be embedded in national development strategies?
4. What balance can be achieved between social and economic rationales for literacy?
5. What national strategies have been undertaken to ensure that literacy interventions reach highly disadvantaged and excluded populations?
6. What can government, civil society, the private sector and the international community do to accelerate and increase efforts to raise levels of literacy?
7. How can CONFINTEA VI and existing frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals, Education For All, UN Literacy Decade and Literacy

Initiative For Empowerment, be used to boost national and international efforts?

These questions were further divided and shared between the four panellists.

The panellists represented different perspectives from around the world:

- Africa: Mr Enver Surty, Deputy Minister of Basic Education, South Africa.
- Arab Region: Mr Rafaat Radwan, First Under-Secretary of Ministry of Education and Director of the National Adult Education Authority, Egypt.
- Asia and Pacific: Mr Sarwar Hussaini, Deputy Minister for Literacy, Ministry of Education, Afghanistan.
- Ms Rosalie Kama-Niamayoua, Minister Primary and Secondary Education, Congo Brazzaville (representing Francophone countries)
- Latin America and the Caribbean: Mr Andre Luiz de Figuerdo Lazaro, Vice Minister of Education, Brazil.
- Civil Society: Ms E Janine Eldred, International Director of the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education and chair of the Literacy Working Group, UK.

The panel was moderated by Mrs Ase Kleveland, Norway. On the day before the panel, we all met and discussed how the process would work, the ordering of the questions and the appropriateness of the sub questions, so that all participants were familiar with what would take place. This was very helpful.

Many of the issues, experiences and challenges expressed from around the world, in the very tightly managed three minute responses, seem to be shared across a conceptual continuum of adult literacy and lifelong learning. At the extremes, areas of conflict have haemorrhaged a massive loss of skill and knowledge so adult literacy must be linked to filling the gaps. A Francophone Countries' meeting earlier in 2009 identified that literacy must be a part of a wider understanding of adult learning and not reduced to a limited concept of reading and writing. The colleague from Brazil spoke of concerns for young people of whom 10% are illiterate and amongst some of the most vulnerable in society. Several colleagues spoke about concerns for women's access and roles as well, as partnerships with the private sector and civil society organisations.

I was asked about what had contributed to bring literacy, language and numeracy up the UK policy agenda as well as how civil society organisations can help to contribute to literacy development.

The following notes capture what I said in these two presentations:

What has contributed to bring literacy higher up the policy agenda in the UK and other European countries?

In 2001, the UK government announced a huge literacy, language and numeracy strategy called 'Skills for Life'. This covered England only but similar priorities were also created by the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Four key factors contributed to this strategic development:

1. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALs) revealed that the UK was well down the international league table.
2. There was a new labour government in power, under the leadership of Tony Blair.
3. The new government commissioned a review of literacy called 'A Fresh Start', which was published in 1999.
4. The review revealed that 1 in 5 adults had some difficulties using literacy and/ or numeracy.

Concerns were raised in the UK about these revelations and the impact of such levels of skills on individuals, society and the economy. The data also challenged understanding of exclusion.

At a similar time, concerns were being expressed across Europe, about the impact of the analysis of the International survey data. Even Sweden, the country at the top of the IALs table questioned how it could be that adults were unable to read, write and use mathematics to the standards required for 21st century and resolved to make relevant provision available. Not many people across Europe, it was revealed, were completely illiterate, but they were operating at levels which did not meet the demands for daily living and working.

Since 2001, the Skills for Life Strategy has invested over £3.5billion (approximately US\$5+ billion) in literacy, language and numeracy. (By language we mean English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL.) The government continues to see these skills as a high priority and supports developments with the necessary funding.

Previously there had been over 30 years of development in this field, largely as a result of voluntary activity, the work of civil society organisations and a gradual realisation of the volume of need. Few materials and resources had been available; teachers received little training and the quality of experience of learning was extremely varied. The Skills for Life Strategy introduced 4 key pillars of development:

- a) Raising demand for learning with campaigns and publicity on TV, radio and in the press, at a local and national level;
- b) Raising the quality of provision through the setting of standards for both teachers and learners as well as the associated curricula;
- c) Producing resources and materials by working closely with teachers and learners to find the best approaches;
- d) Recognising achievement.

The strategy has reached 6 million new learners and continues, with a current priority and emphasis on maths.

Across Europe, literacy, language and numeracy continue to be of enormous concern and we are not only working in partnership projects but also developing networks to share policies, strategies and practice. Adult literacy is a global challenge which we all share and face.

How can civil society support governments to more effectively address the literacy challenge?

I am going to offer 10 good reasons why partnerships between civil society organisations and government, create win-win scenarios for all involved.

1. Governments can gain access to organisations which have great insight into specific constituents or issues. These organisations need not necessarily be only concerned with adult literacy and learning but related to, for example, social justice, health, disability, homelessness or migration. Such organisations can see the benefits and advantages of adult learning for their constituents.
2. Civil Society Organisations can easily reach those people for whom governments want to develop policies. They are not 'hard to reach' for them but are their natural participants.
3. Civil Society Organisations bring specialist staff to any scenario. They are often highly qualified and experienced in specific fields. Governments can draw upon such wonderful resources to inform policy development as well as help build capacity amongst officials, who usually contribute more generic skills and experience.
4. Civil Society organisations can also act as agencies for government, helping others to understand development and direction. They can be trusted intermediaries between providers of services, consumers and the government.
5. Innovation and risk-taking are not unfamiliar to Civil Society Organisations whereas governments must often be more cautious. Governments can work with CSOs to experiment and take risks in order to bring new and different perspectives.
6. Civil Society Organisations can bring creativity and thinking which is 'outside of the box'. They have often had to use these qualities to develop their vision and mission and, indeed, survive, not only with passion but with realism too. Such qualities and attributes can be used by governments in developing and implementing policies.
7. We hear that in international development and adult literacy, it's not just funding that is needed but also ideas, knowledge and skills. Governments can draw upon Civil Society Organisations, many of whom operate internationally, to bring ideas and experiences to the table.

8. One of the most valuable roles of Civil Society Organisations is that of critical friend; working with governments to inform, advocate and persuade, disseminate and help create impact but also challenging, in a civil way, by demonstrating what they believe won't work or is counter-productive.
9. Civil Society Organisations can also help governments in monitoring and offering feedback about whether their policies are working and making an impact upon the people or the issues they are designed to address. CSO networks and contacts can offer easy routes for communication about benefits gained as well as any unintended disadvantages which might arise.
10. Finally, governments can form trusting relationships with Civil Society Organisations based on mutually fulfilling outcomes. These relationships must, of course be supported by some funding. With modest amounts of investment, such partnerships can reap rich rewards for all involved.

After all the questions had been addressed and the responses made, each panellist was asked to present one or two buzz words to capture what actions should be undertaken in order to address the adult literacy, language and numeracy challenge. I suggested, that, given governments had policies in place they should:

Attract more learners;

Train better teachers;

Develop relevant resources.

Other countries' contributions included: ensuring adult literacy is a right; participation should be encouraged and adequate resources provided; interest in learning must be stimulated; people should understand that it's never too late to learn; literacy must be offered in a flexible and adaptable way and embrace life-skills.

Then contributions were invited from the national delegations. Mali reported how literacy learning is helping poverty reduction. Argentina reported how it will have 6% of GDP invested in education by 2010 and how they see literacy as a tool for learning and creating critical minds and spirits. Mauritius told how literacy must be functional for all and support re-skilling and technical and vocational education and training. Colleagues from Nepal indicated how adult literacy learning is helping their inclusion policies and Cuba reported how they had eradicated illiteracy in the 1960s and '70s by using audio-visual resources through the 'Yes I can' and 'Yes I can continue' programmes. Now such programmes have been developed in 28 countries and are reaching over 4 million people. Delegates from Mongolia reported on their master plan for action which covers teacher development, embracing the concept of multiple literacies including life skills and health as well as advocacy. Representatives of Colombia are approaching literacy from a person and family perspective as well as an economic one. They also believe that adult literacy had to link with work on violence and conflict in order for rehabilitation to take place. Colleagues from Ireland reported on their use of the media to stimulate participation including TV, telephone and the internet and citing that 12% of the population watched a recent TV series designed to help people develop their literacy skills. The final contribution from a pan-Africa adult literacy organisation advocated that access to literacy learning was of prime concern and in turn, literacy helped individuals to access systems and services.

At the end of the conference the amended draft Belem Framework for Action included, at paragraph 11, a statement about redoubling efforts to develop literacy and meet the EFA Goal 4. In addition, there were 8 commitments to action in the adult literacy domain.