

CONFINTEA VI, the sixth world adult education conference, had notably less senior representation from governments and the United Nations than its predecessor, but, despite evidence North and South that adult education is more marginal now than in the 1990s, there were glimmers of hope, and certainly much to work on in the period ahead, writes **ALAN TUCKETT**

It depends on how you look at it

Was CONFINTEA VI, the sixth UNESCO international conference on adult education, which took place in Belem, Brazil, in December, a success or failure? And do such inter-governmental events make any difference to learning opportunities for adults, North or South?

For me, the answer to the first question depends on what you compare the event with. From the perspective of the fifth UNESCO conference in Hamburg in 1997, surely the high-water mark of international policymaking for adult education, this winter's event was deeply disappointing. Whilst Hamburg had shown for the first time the benefits of allowing non-government organisations (NGOs) to participate fully, alongside governments, Belem had NGOs aplenty but far fewer governments than last time (particularly from the industrial world), and less senior representation.

In Brazil, the programme promised a video address from President Lula, but no such presentation was made. Lula was, I gather, anxious that, with domestic elections imminent, Brazil's record in adult literacy would be attacked in the local press. Despite record numbers learning to read and write in his term in office, the overall numbers lacking literacy skills had risen, along with the rapid population increase. As a result, there was no scrutiny of the literacy record in Brazil in the press. Alas, there was no coverage of any sort in the national Brazilian papers, let alone in the wider world.

In Hamburg, all the other major United Nations (UN) agencies took an active part, and they actively backed the visionary inter-government Agenda for Action adopted there, in recognising the role adult learning plays in health promotion, in crime reduction, in economic development, and its centrality to the struggle to secure gender justice. In Belem, by contrast, the UN agencies were missing. Adult education had shrunk back to its heartland in literacy for development, with little enough to challenge the countries of the north to new agendas.

However, compared with the mid-term review conference in Bangkok in 2003, Belem was a triumph. In Bangkok, the

number of government delegates was modest, and far outweighed by civil society representatives. The then Associate Director for Education in UNESCO told us adult educators were 'boring, backward-looking, sanctimonious and parentalist'. No-one played the incisive role Lord Tony Young performed in Brazil in chairing the conference to a purposeful conclusion.

Whilst Bangkok showed only too clearly the gap between promises and practice, as

country after country was shown to have failed to implement the agreements signed up to in Germany, the practical and modest measures agreed in Belem have, perhaps, more hope of being acted on. Certainly, the agreement to recognise that literacy is a continuum and to abandon the black-and-white distinction between literate and illiterate was welcome. So, too, was the place given on the conference platform and in a highly successful workshop to learners'

'From rhetoric to action'

CONFINTEA VI, the sixth international conference on adult education, closed on 4 December with a call for governments to 'take forward, with a sense of urgency and at an accelerated pace, the agenda of adult learning and education' and to 'redouble efforts' to meet adult literacy goals.

'Now is the time for action, because the cost of not acting is too high,' said the Belem Framework for Action, adopted after extensive negotiation at the end of the conference.

More than 1,500 participants from over 150 United Nations member states attended the conference over four days in Belem, Brazil. Ministers, university rectors, and representatives from regional and multilateral organisations, civil society and the private sector, as well as adult learners from all over the world, debated a wide range of issues, including policies and governance for adult education, literacy as a key competence, assuring quality, participation and inclusion, and financing mechanisms.

The Belem Framework for Action stresses that 'adult learning and education have a critical role in responding to contemporary cultural, economic, political and social challenges,' and underlines the need to place adult learning and education in a broader context of sustainable development. It acknowledges that effective policy, governance, financing, participation, inclusion, equity and quality are all necessary conditions for adults and young people to be able to exercise their right to education.

The framework calls for a 'redoubling of efforts to reduce illiteracy by 50 per cent from 2000 levels by 2015', together with increased investment and expertise, provision of relevant curricula and quality assurance mechanisms, and a reduction in the gender gap.

The document notes that adult learning and education remain chronically underfunded and undervalued and says that greater political recognition following CONFINTEA V has not paved the way for effective political action in terms of policy prioritisation, integration and allocation of adequate resources, either nationally or internationally. It also draws attention to a lack of professional training opportunities for adult teachers, as well as insufficient monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms.

The framework emphasises the need for strengthened international cooperation in areas ranging from the recognition of qualifications to the education of migrants. It commits countries to 'accelerating progress' towards achieving the CONFINTEA V recommendation to seek investment of at least six per cent of GNP in education, and to working towards increased investment in adult learning and education.

voices. We were pleased that the conference accepted a proposal to make educational responses to migration a key focus of the adult education work of UNESCO in the years ahead, but disappointed that demographic change and learning in the workplace got so little attention.

A high point of CONFINTEA VI was the effective co-operation and advocacy work of civil society organisations from all over the world – which was the result of careful preparation, and a rich preparatory event in the days preceding the main event. Looked at from the gloom of Bangkok, then, Belem could only be a source of hope and encouragement.

But do UN jamborees make a difference? The frustrations of passionate delegates whose hopes have not been realised have been clearly in the public eye after the climate summit in Copenhagen. The optimism generated by the decade of UN events that culminated in the Millennium Development Goals and the UN *Education for All* goals have dissipated for adult educators, as the World Bank's passion for universal primary schooling has squeezed adult learning opportunities off the agenda. But where else do you go to share thinking on the way ahead, with governments in active partnership with civil society?

Adult Learners' Week

Twelve years ago, Kim Howells MP, then lifelong learning minister, addressed CONFINTEA V, bubbling with characteristic enthusiasm, and proposed to the conference that UNESCO adopt Adult Learners' Week, already well-established in Britain, as a UNESCO initiative each year. Securing that agreement took every waking moment of the conference, the dogged re-presentation of the proposal, as in draft after draft of the final proposals, it had mysteriously dropped out. In the end it took a plea from the South African delegation, like the UK newly returned to the UNESCO fold, and a little enlightened agenda-fixing by the conference organiser, President of the International Council for Adult Education Paul Belanger, before it stumbled over the line as a new commitment. Yet the Week now happens in some 50 countries and is firmly a part of the international agenda.

The other initiative proposed there from the floor of the conference, the idea that we should make a commitment to find 'an hour a day for learning', which was proposed by the International Council for Adult Education, went through more smoothly, and was accepted by acclaim, only to disappear without trace after the event – with the honourable exception of Switzerland, where the slogan was the centrepiece of its 1999 Lernfestival, or Adult Learners' Week.

As Chou en Lai famously observed about the French Revolution, it is much too early to tell if Belem will have made a difference. But it is certain that unless we continue to make the case for adult learning whenever and wherever we can, things are unlikely to get better all by themselves.

Alan Tuckett is NIACE's Chief Executive

Everybody seems to agree on the value and necessity of adult learning and education – so why has so little progress been made since the first world adult education conference in 1949, asks **STURLA BJERKAKER**

Returning home from CONFINTEA VI, I found myself reflecting on why it is so difficult to respond to the challenges facing adult education when it seems so obvious to all that it is both important and necessary. At Belem we struggled with many of the same questions we have been debating for the past 60 years, asking ourselves, yet again, why the position of adult learning and education remains weak in so many countries.

A few weeks before, Lucie Cizkova, of Denmark's International People's College, reminded us that the first world adult education conference, held at her college in 1949, had found that '[t]he aim of adult education is to make life happier, more active, and simpler'. Adult education, it said, 'should have the following aims: to lessen the tensions between nations and races, to fight against social atomization and to give new life to democracy'. Sixty years later, the Belem Framework for Action, rather less ambitiously, recognised that adult learning and education 'represent a significant component of the lifelong learning process' and 'cover a broad range of content – general issues, vocational matters, family literacy and family education, citizenship and many other areas besides'.

Statements at Belem from ministers, senators and civil society emphasised the importance of adult learning for development and personal growth. Time after time, I have heard such statements. I have even given some myself. They are underpinned by what seems the almost universal recognition of the importance and wider value of adult learning and education. So, why has progress been so slow? Why, 60 years on from the first world conference, are we still formally asserting the value of our work – and why, so often, does it go unacknowledged in the making of education policy?

The recognition of adult learning and education is, among other things, a question of status and position in education policy. The term 'lifelong learning' was first used at the 1972 world conference in Tokyo, and, for a time, it was synonymous with adult learning. Gradually, however, it has come to be understood as a philosophy of learning 'from cradle to grave'. Today, we see lifelong learning as an organising principle of all forms of education. This change in usage has meant that adult education is no longer as visible in policy terms as it once was. We have to fight for our position within the 'all-encompassing' framework of lifelong learning. We also

have to fight for recognition of the whole field. In many countries, literacy and basic skills are the overwhelming priorities. However, even in these countries, adult learning and education go well beyond literacy. Literacy is the foundation, of course, and should be given first priority, but adult learning and education are about so much more, and the strategies we adopt should reflect that. Too often at Belem, the wider role of adult education went unacknowledged.

North and South, it is clear that, in most cases, adult learning does not form part of an integrated education policy. Adult learning is fragmented; it belongs to too many ministries. It also involves a large number of different providers and stakeholders. There is a strong link, not least in Nordic countries, between forms of civic engagement, the social movements associated with them, and adult education. Consequently, many civil society groups have an important stake in adult education. But, paradoxically, this strong historical alliance is one of the reasons for the weak recognition of the field. This involvement is not 'formal' enough; it's 'nice', but it's not 'real' education. Political statements in favour of the sort of provision with which civil society has historically been associated – and there were many such statements at Belem – are not worth the paper they are written on without accompanying recognition and recourse.

It was clear to all at Belem that the *Education for All* literacy goals will not be met without the strong involvement of civil society organisations. Nice speeches in favour of civil society are no longer enough. Civil society must be actively engaged in the making of policy and the monitoring of programmes, and in holding governments accountable for what they commit to. The key message from Belem was that all partners and stakeholders need to be on board, including NGOs, schools, employers, as well as several other ministries, and they should be involved in developing strategies for adult learning at a national level, though the state has overall responsibility. It's vital that we bring together all interested sectors and stakeholders and use them all. We have to create new movements for the advancement of adult learning and education, but we must also take care of the existing ones!

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