



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



confintea VI

living and learning for a viable future:
the power of adult learning

sixth international conference on adult education
belém, brazil, 19 – 22 may 2009



UNESCO Regional Bureau
for Education in the Arab States Beirut



CONFINTEA VI Preparatory Conference in the Arab States Tunis, Tunisia, 5 – 7 January 2009

Statement on Investing in Adult Education: Building Learning and Knowledge Societies in the Arab States

Foreword

This conference is being held within the framework of the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations Literacy Decade, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, the Arab Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab World and the Islamic Programme for Literacy and Basic Education for All.

We, the representatives of the 18 Arab nations participating in the Regional Conference of Arab States held from 5–7 January 2009 in Tunis, Republic of Tunisia, in preparation for the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), **affirm that education is a fundamental right guaranteed by international laws and declarations, and that it is vital for the enjoyment of other rights, such as the right to housing, the right to employment and the right to healthcare, amongst others.**

Convinced of the role that adult education can play in human development in view of the speed at which knowledge and information and communication technologies are evolving, as well as the many challenges faced by the region as a result of globalisation, **we also affirm that investment in adult education is the basis for constructing learning and knowledge societies in the Arab States.**

Furthermore, the economic crisis currently sweeping the world calls for serious and profound reflection on education development and the role it can play in overcoming the consequences of this crisis and in anticipating future problems.

Context

The Arab States are populated by 320 million inhabitants across two continents – Asia and Africa – who share the same language, culture and history. In addition to wealthy countries, the region also includes poor countries in which 23% of the population lives in abject poverty, with an income of less than US \$2 a day.

In some of these countries, conflicts, wars and foreign occupation have led to social, political and economic instability and the loss of material and human resources. Situations like this adversely affect efforts to identify national priorities, undermine education infrastructures and systems, cause human damage, and generate a climate of fear and insecurity within the region.

Around 60 million inhabitants of the region, two-thirds of them women, are illiterate.

Over 6 million children aged 6–15, two-thirds of whom are girls, do not attend school. By 2015 this figure could increase by 40% unless appropriate measures are taken.

Despite a substantial increase in the number of girls attending school, women in the region are still under-educated, 50% of them illiterate. They are also disadvantaged in terms of citizenship rights, legal rights, representation in professional and technical positions, and parliamentary and ministerial representation. Freedom of speech and democracy are limited if not entirely non-existent.

The region is also suffering from a digital divide; access to information and communication technologies remains limited, and the region lags behind in terms of knowledge production since investment in research and development barely exceeds 0.5% of GDP, which is below the international average.

Although the region spends a higher proportion of its GDP on education than other regions and developed countries, investment is insufficient to provide a high standard of education, cater to the needs of employers or keep up with the rapid pace of globalisation and technological change. It is therefore imperative to establish better governance across the public sectors in order to encourage adequate investment in adult education and the building of education and knowledge societies.

Key issues and trends

The gap between what has been promised and what has been delivered is at variance with the political will expressed by all of the Arab States. Our findings are as follows:

- The concept of literacy and adult education must be redefined by way of an integrated approach to all forms of adult education and learning, and the reasons why high illiteracy rates prevail among adults, and women in particular, must be identified.
- With the exception of a few countries, legal provisions governing literacy and adult education are still linked to education as a whole. Kuwait is the only country in the region that requires its citizens to become literate.
- Although adult education is seen as a strategic investment, the funding for such programmes provided by governments, the private sector and civil society organisations is still too low, as indicated in the national reports.
- The lack of coordination between the ministries responsible for literacy and adult education, which are generally ministries of education or social affairs, and the other ministries and bodies active in this field, is rendering some efforts superfluous and has diminished outcomes. There is thus an urgent need to boost cooperation between the various stakeholders.
- The overall trend is to decentralise the running of literacy activities, except where there is a shortage of human and material resources.

Furthermore, there is a need to instigate the following measures:

- An Arab fund must be set up to provide financial assistance to poor countries with high illiteracy rates.
- Policies and a working methodology concerning the recognition of non-formal education must be developed.
- Civil society must be given a role in the implementation of literacy and adult education programmes.
- The sharing of experience and good practice should be fostered.
- Support must be given to qualification and training schemes aimed at boosting national capacities with regard to adult education.
- Objective studies must be accessed in order to identify the types of adult education programmes that will address learners' needs and aid economic development in the Arab States.
- Support must be provided for studies and research forming part of efforts to devise policies and strategies in the field of adult and non-formal education.
- A common framework of reference for data and statistics must be developed in order to facilitate accurate and reliable evaluation in the field of literacy and adult education.
- Quality assurance criteria need to be set, and indicators based on reliable statistics must be adopted.
- Information and communication technologies must be used as tools for education and learning.

Developments in the Arab Region

A 6% improvement in the provision of universal primary education (UPE) within the region was achieved between 1999 and 2004. However, the progress made, which varied between countries, was inferior to that made by sub-Saharan Africa and South-West Asia.

Over the same period the literacy rate rose 14 percentage points to 72% and the number of illiterates fell from 64 million to 58 million.

The primary net enrolment ratio (NER) continued to increase, reaching 84% in 2006.

The number of out-of-school children was 5.7 million in 2006 – a decrease of 2 million compared to 1999.

With regard to primary school enrolment, the gap between boys and girls closed from 87 girls for every 100 boys in 1999 to 90 girls for every 100 boys in 2004. In 2006 three countries in the region achieved parity between the numbers of boys and girls enrolled in primary schools.

The Arab States' education development indices (EDI) improved overall in 2003–2004.

In 2006 two countries in the region came close to achieving the four quantitative EFA goals, while a further 11 achieved an intermediate position and another four were still far from achieving them. By comparison with other regions, the Arab States devote a larger proportion of their public spending to education. More than half of those for which statistics are available allocated over 20% of their public expenditure to education in 2006.

The countries in the region also achieved progress on a number of other fronts:

- the use of information and communication technologies in literacy and adult education;
- the coordination of formal and non-formal education;
- an increase in the number of programmes aimed at people with special needs;
- the formation of links between pre-school programmes, formal education and adult education;
- expansion of partnerships between the public sectors and civil society, and promotion of networking between NGOs within the region (e.g. Arab Network for Literacy and Adult Education).

LIFE (Literacy Initiative for Empowerment) has had a direct impact on the six target Arab countries in the region, in terms of both the identification of needs and the implementation of innovative projects in these countries.

The Arab States benefited from capacity-building programmes conducted by regional and international organisations such as UNESCO, ALECSO, ISESCO and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States. Despite the scale of these programmes, they were unable to address all of the region's needs.

Challenges

- Despite the major efforts made by the Arab States to achieve universal primary education, with varying degrees of success, some six million children are still out of school. One-third will never attend school.
- Around one-third of children in school drop out due to poverty, the rural way of life, distance from schools, traditions, parental ignorance and instability.

Action is needed:

- to address the specific educational needs of young people (aged between 15–24) who make up over 20% of the population and the majority of whom have dropped out of school;
- to address the various educational and training needs of educators so that they can deliver continuing education that reflects the speed at which knowledge is evolving;
- to promote the involvement of the private sector as a supplement to public-sector efforts in the field of literacy and adult education;
- to make the necessary arrangements and use appropriate tools to achieve a high standard of education;

- to increase the number and diversity of sources of funding for literacy and adult education programmes;
- to enhance the output of teaching and educational institutions;
- to respond to the variety of adult education programmes and actors involved;
- to bring about greater government involvement and raise public awareness of the importance of literacy and adult education;
- to increase the motivation of beneficiaries of literacy and adult education programmes.

Recommendations

Policies and strategies

1. Call on the Arab States to harmonise their adult education concepts, to view adult education as an integral component of national education and development plans within the framework of lifelong learning, and to build bridges between formal and non-formal education.
2. Call on governments to take the political, strategic, administrative and technical measures needed to guarantee out-of-school children, young girls, women and vulnerable members of society equal access to education, especially literacy and adult education.
3. Confirm commitments to achieving the Dakar EFA goals, especially those concerning literacy and adult education, as well as the goals of the LIFE initiative.
4. Develop and enhance the foundation of and working tools within the field of literacy and adult education, including those structures already in existence.
5. Implement policies and mechanisms to recognise and value all forms of learning within the framework of literacy and adult education, and to adopt systems of validation and accreditation.
6. Call on governments to develop and strengthen the role of educational media in adult education.
7. Call on governments to implement the Plan for the Development of Education in the Arab World adopted at the Arab Summit (Damascus, March 2008), in particular with regard to making basic and adult education compulsory and free.
8. Call on the Arab League and its associated organisations, UNESCO and ISESCO, to intervene as a matter of urgency and propose literacy and adult education projects for occupied countries and countries affected by civil conflicts.

Funding

9. Encourage the Arab States to prioritise literacy and adult education programmes, mobilise adequate resources for their implementation and mobilise a diverse range of national and external additional sources of funding.
10. Create and support an Arab fund to finance adult education projects in Arab countries.
11. Encourage the private sector to play a role in funding literacy and adult education programmes.

Quality

12. Improve adult education programmes so that their output meets quality standards, and promote autonomous lifelong learning.
13. Call on universities and training institutions to establish training programmes for adult educators and create centres specialising in studies and research.
14. Develop laws and systems that will boost the professional and social status of adult educators and implement special training programmes to professionalise the sector.
15. Call on governments to adopt strategies for the use of information and communication technologies in adult education and learning and to draw on these to build knowledge societies.
16. Make a commitment to establishing a universal culture of quality within an education and learning environment inspired by the traditional Arab culture that encourages lifelong learning.

Partnership-building

17. Call on governments to create more effective mechanisms to ensure that partnerships are formed between the various actors involved in adult education and learning.
18. Call on the Arab States to intensify their partnerships with civil society and the private sector with a view to developing capacity-building programmes in the field of literacy and adult education.
19. Increase the involvement of the target populations at all levels of education and learning activities and create an attractive learning environment.
20. Disseminate innovative success stories and encourage the sharing of expertise within the Arab world as well as regional and international cooperation, giving priority to South-South cooperation.

Monitoring and evaluation

21. Incorporate monitoring and follow-up activities into adult education policies and strategies.
22. Call on the Arab States to set up a database for planning, monitoring and evaluation purposes and call for the establishment of policies on literacy and adult education.
23. Create a common framework of reference for the observation, monitoring and evaluation of adult education programmes in line with the international criteria and indicators used for data and surveys in the field of adult education.
24. Call on the Arab States to establish national mechanisms for the monitoring and implementation of the decisions and recommendations from this conference.
25. Call on the Arab States to establish and make available to all a regional mechanism for implementing and monitoring the decisions taken at this conference.
26. Call on regional and international organisations (UNESCO, ISESCO, ALECSO and the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States) to create a common mechanism for the monitoring and implementation of recommendations from adult education conferences as part of efforts to complement work at the national and regional levels, and to call for the Arab States to receive the support that they need to do so.

All figures in this document are taken from UNESCO. 2008. EFA Global Monitoring Report 2009. Overcoming inequality: why governance matters, Paris: UNESCO.