

# SPEECH

by

Prof. Dr. Rita Süßmuth

President of the German Adult Education Association

to the

European Regional Conference

“Lifelong Learning in Europe: Moving towards EFA Goals and  
CONFINTEA V Agenda”

6–9 November 2002, Sofia, Bulgaria

Mr Minister Gerdjikov,

My Lord Mayor,

Dr Ouane,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank you most warmly for the opportunity to address you as President of the German Adult Education Association on the occasion of this conference – particularly because I remember with pleasure my role as President of the CONFINTEA International Conference that was held in Hamburg in 1997.

## INTRODUCTION:

I am especially glad to take this opportunity as the matters to be addressed at the conference on “Lifelong Learning in Europe: Moving towards EFA Goals and CONFINTEA V Agenda” seem to me to be more topical than ever.

In view of the forthcoming eastward expansion of the European Union, it would seem not just appropriate but necessary to to examine to what extent the principles and decisions of the international plans for education mentioned in the title of this conference have actually found their way into educational policy and practice in Europe.

Given the accelerating pace of the worldwide exchange of information and knowledge, and against the background of increasing economic and social globalization, Lifelong Learning will be a key factor in the further peaceful development and social justice of this continent and indeed of the world community. From the ever faster expansion in “world knowledge” it is becoming increasingly clear that good basic, vocational and higher education are not enough to give people all the knowledge that they will need throughout their lives if they are to keep up with the latest developments in their fields of work. This is particularly true in the light of growing divergence in social institutions in response to new

influences, which calls for the learning of new skills and encourages an independent approach to decision-making in complex contexts and circumstances of life.

This means that it is important to ask “what?”, “how?” and “when?” people should learn. In addition to good basic education it is becoming increasingly important to give people the constant opportunity of further and continuing education.

For this purpose, “personality development”, “vocational continuing education” and “democracy-building” form an inseparable unit: the ability to form independent judgments and decisions is becoming a crucial requirement both for active participation in social processes and for lasting employment and security of income.

If we want to ensure democracy, social justice and peace in Europe for the long term, the open access to education and continuing education for all sections of the population that is implicit in the concept of “Education for All” must become key objectives in the further development of our education systems. But despite the fact that many countries in Europe possess potentially powerful education systems, it is evident that there is still a long way to go before the items on the CONFINTEA Agenda are fully implemented everywhere:

- 1) Participation in democracy,
- 2) High-quality education,
- 3) Literacy and basic education,
- 4) Equality between men and women, and
- 5) Employment promotion

Allow me to pick out one topic: despite undeniable progress, equality between men and women has certainly not been achieved everywhere. In many parts of Europe, women are still at a disadvantage in terms of access to high-quality education, and to leading positions in political, social and occupational life.

However, we should remember that women became dangerous when they learnt to read! – or to put it another way, if we want meet the challenges facing us, we shall not get anywhere if we dispense with the creativity and imagination of women because of gender discrimination.

In the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning and the Action Plan based on it, the European Union has the wherewithal to create a coherent policy for continuing education, but the discussions that have taken place on these have revealed the huge differences between regions in theoretical approaches to the concept of “Lifelong Learning”, and in its practical implementation.

Furthermore, the results of the PISA study conducted throughout Europe, not least in Germany, clearly show that there is an urgent need to act if we wish to meet the challenges of the future.

Besides teaching basic and specialist knowledge, education needs above all to devote more attention to applied and learner-oriented learning which places responsibility for the outcomes of learning more firmly in the hands of the people who will actually use it later. The decision must also be taken to give the same recognition to non-formal and informal education as to formal education in order to attract sections of the population that have so far eschewed education into continuing education provision.

Considerable efforts need to be made therefore to ally the ideals of “Lifelong Learning” and “Education for All” more closely with the realities of educational action.

#### THE PARTICULAR PLACE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE CONCEPT OF “LIFELONG LEARNING”

Anyone who alludes today in any discussion of education policy to the growing importance of continuing education is sure of general agreement. But however much the concept of “the Information and Knowledge Society”, which is set to be a feature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, dominates conference debates and symposia, we have to admit that the institutions that will be needed to put it into practice are being weakened at the same time. One of the primary tasks of any State is to educate its citizens. Much greater attention must be given to public responsibility for “Lifelong Learning”. “Public-private partnerships” to fund educational activities may very well be possible and necessary, but they should not lead to the State’s being allowed to escape its responsibility.

An eloquent example is offered by the learning of languages: everyone thinks it is a good thing, since the ability to acquire and speak languages is one of the essential requirements for the success of European integration – but when the question of funding arises, resistance increases. Shortage of money and tight national budgets cannot be the only explanation of this phenomenon.

Rather, there is a worrying tendency to subject education and continuing education to cost-benefit analysis. Organizers of education and participants alike increasingly measure the significance of learning in terms of the acquisition of vocational qualifications, and the achievement of personal career goals. Less importance, on the other hand, is accorded to holistic approaches to education aimed at developing the personality within the social context. Regrettably, national education systems are being restructured along these lines, frequently because of

pressure to make savings. I have noticed myself that only a small proportion of young people and young adults still see any point in taking part in education or continuing education that is not concerned with money and success.

It is easy to see what this may mean for a European Union that is preparing to take in ten new states in 2004, with nearly 100 million inhabitants who are rooted in a variety of social and cultural traditions and have only been able to acquire the first principles of democratic ways of thinking and acting.

In my view, this will be one of the principal tasks for the further development and implementation of the concept of "Lifelong Learning". What will matter is to see how far it is possible to make plain the key role played by adult education in the development of the personality as a two-way process involving the individual and his or her contexts. Since adult education bases learning on the learner's life experiences and is therefore close to life and practice, it can teach the essence of democratically organized problem-solving and decision-making. If people are in this way given tools to develop judgmental ability that draw on their own experience of life, they will also develop a greater understanding of their own role and importance in social contexts. Slogans such as "globalization", "speeding-up" and "change", which provoke anxiety, will lose their terrors because they can be brought within the frame of reference of personal experience.

To the extent that Europe is becoming more varied as a result of the influx of new ethnic groups and cultures, the teaching of universal human values is increasingly important. While the inherited understanding of citizenship draws on national traditions, religion and culture, it also contains a hidden latent rejection of the Other. There is no need to point to the potential dangers of this for European unification.

In my opinion, we should now no longer be looking backwards and asking "What is my starting point in the world?" but should be debating the question "What sort of world are we learning for?"

We need therefore to be open towards the new if we are successfully to create Europe out of our common living space by learning from one another. A suitable starting point for reflection is the "Civil Society", which places the citizen at the heart of social and national coexistence.

Adult education is always to some extent a catching-up process. And adults are now faced with the difficult task of relearning: new discoveries have to be integrated into existing knowledge, prejudices and stereotypes have to be reconciled with new awarenesses, and contacts have to be made with people with whom one would previously have thought one had little in common. It is this learning based on reflection

that is one of the peculiarities of adult education. Adults are able to transform learning and behavioural changes into practical action much more swiftly than children and young people

While there is a responsibility to create the motivation for “Lifelong Learning” during childhood and youth, so that “learning to learn” becomes a key goal of basic education, adult and continuing education have the task of maintaining and enhancing this motivation. It is therefore far more important today than in a world that largely reproduced itself.

This also shows clearly why modern approaches to vocational continuing education focus less on teaching specialist knowledge than on learning the skills and abilities that will enable people to set their own learning objectives and to organize their own acquisition of knowledge.

In the context of “Lifelong Learning”, adult education is hence important because it can build bridges. A very new trend in this connection is the rediscovery of the capacity of older people for learning and development. Their experiential knowledge is increasingly valued even in commercial circles, as is clear from the growing numbers of retired people who are being brought back into working life.

Equally new is a development which no longer regards universities merely as places of learning for young students but also as “Universities of the Third Age”.

Education systems which fail to make use of this experiential potential of adult education by bringing together people of differing backgrounds, social status, gender and age, deprive further social development of a large measure of creativity and imagination.

## CREATIVITY IN SHAPING EUROPE

It is as difficult to say what Europe is as to describe its geographical boundaries. While the border may be relatively easy to define in the west, where Portugal meets the Atlantic, it is appreciably harder in the east. The answer to the question whether Europe stops at the Urals or only at the Pacific depends less on the views of Western and Central Europeans than on how people to the east of these geographical markers feel about life and what their values are.

There are therefore good reasons to regard Europe above all as an “idea” which allows of many different interpretations. It will be formed through education and interchange, before it takes shape as a “European area” and becomes a concept.

Hence, “Europe” is firstly a mental construct, the form and appearance of which will be influenced and may be redefined by every generation and

every individual who feels an allegiance to that idea. In order to make “Europe” a practical proposition, it therefore needs an “ideal”, which assumes that it is known what is wanted.

This gives European adult education the great opportunity to play an active part in influencing the way in which the European idea develops. Adult education institutions are particularly well suited to fleshing out the idea of a united Europe in line with the goals described in “Education for All” and the CONFINTEA Agenda. Political participation is needed in a world of financial deals: capital is there for people, not the other way about.

Europe cannot be understood merely as a “common market” or an area for the free movement of people and goods. Political education must form an integral part of social policy, and must be given back to the people, who have all the rights and obligations of adult citizens.

This must be a major task of adult education, and adult education institutions, being “community learning centres” have the credentials to carry it out. As places of learning that is intercultural and observes gender equality, they are in close contact with people at the local level. Through their educational activities they can provide first-hand experience of the “Civil Society” as a way for different ethnic groups and cultures in society to live together in peace.

Let me just mention at this point that the first steps have been taken in this direction: since the summer of this year, the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Centre (IIZ/DVV) has been conducting three large-scale projects relating to European unification with numerous partners from various countries. The programme “Future of Europe”, for example, aims through a wide variety of educational activities to bring home to people the various dimensions of Europe and to arouse curiosity about the countries that will shortly become Member States of the European Union. The project “Network Intercultural Learning in Europe (NILE)” sets out to mould a range of Intercultural Learning initiatives into a structured concept so that support can be given to its integration as a permanent feature of “Lifelong Learning”. And lastly, the Institute is coordinating a project entitled “Our Muslim Neighbours in Europe”, which, in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, is designed to foster dialogue between Christian and Muslim religions and culture.

As is evident from many years of international cooperation, adult education is indeed peculiarly well placed, because of its concern with real individuals, to build bridges of understanding between people of different socio-cultural backgrounds through education and dialogue. Its local connections also provide an atmosphere of trust so that encounters

can escape the political and economic causes of friction found at national level. Adult education and intercultural learning thus make an important contribution to stability and confidence-building in international contexts.

However, further institutionalization is needed. International adult education associations are in their infancy. They generally function without any financial basis, and most efforts at international cooperation are funded as short-term projects.

We must therefore do all we can to persuade politicians and society to make the requisite funds available to safeguard the further development of existing initiatives. It cannot right in my view to place the people employed in international cooperation projects under the constant threat of withdrawal of funding and to cause them to worry about their continued employment. International cooperation needs longer periods in which to build up confidence if it is to be effective. The experiences gained by those involved are too worthwhile in many respects for us to have to keep building them up again and again simply in order to hold staff costs to a minimum.

Let me mention one last point in this context. In view of the difficult processes of transformation which the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have had to undergo since the collapse of the socialist system, the exchange of experience and “best practice” has acquired particular importance. We cannot afford, nor is it our intention, to set up new borders to the east through the expansion of the European Union following the fall of the “Iron Curtain”. It is indeed in our vital interest to do the opposite, to attach those States that will not join the European Union, or will not join yet, through ties of cooperation that are as close as possible. Only through partnership and dialogue can the modernization of economic and social institutions that is needed there be achieved, and social justice and peace in Europe guaranteed as a whole. Given the speed with which developments are occurring worldwide, modernization which is simply aimed at catching up will hardly encompass the intended results, especially if it remains at the national level. New approaches are therefore needed, and these must be developed here as well as there, using people’s creative abilities and imagination.

The German experience shows, however, that the establishment of the Volkshochschulen (adult community education centres) was given a significant boost at times of upheaval. The establishment of adult education was closely linked to industrialization and the social question in Germany before the First World War. The Volkshochschule movement received considerable support during the Weimar Republic, when adult education was enshrined in the Constitution. In the Federal Republic,

adult education was once again given legal protection in the 1970s. This shows that even in so-called developed societies, the adult education sector has developed in sudden leaps over a lengthy period.

I therefore hope that this conference will embrace the objective of high-quality lifelong education for all – referred to in the EFA Goals and the CONFINTEA Agenda mentioned in the title – and will lead to active measures that will help to support and accelerate the establishment and development of adult education institutions in the countries of Eastern Europe so that we can find positive answers to the challenges that Europe and the world face in the future.

I wish the conference every success in this task, and thank you for your attention.