The Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) – History, development and regional overview

UNESCO has organised the CONFINTEA series of international meetings, which take place every 12 to 13 years, since the late 1940s (Denmark in 1949, Canada 1960, Japan 1972, France 1985 and Germany 1997).

The Hamburg conference, CONFINTEA V, marked a turning point in the global recognition of and commitment to adult learning and non-formal education. It called attention to adult learning and non-formal education as indispensable elements of lifelong learning. Adopting two landmark documents at the end of the Conference (the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning and the Agenda for the Future), the delegates emphasized that adult and lifelong learning were key tools in addressing the global challenges of the 21st century in relation to democracy, peace and human rights, respect for diversity and conflict resolution, economic and ecological sustainability and workforce development.

This holistic understanding of adult learning and non-formal education established by CONFINTEA V is the ground upon which CONFINTEA VI will build. It will strengthen the recognition of adult learning and non-formal education within the perspective of life-wide and lifelong learning. The comprehensive agenda will be inclusive of the diversity and range of existing adult and non-formal learning forms, modes, places and themes. However, the overarching goal of CONFINTEA VI will be the harmonisation of adult learning and non-formal education with other international education and development agendas (Education for All/EFA, the United Nations Literacy Decade/UNLD, the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment/LIFE, the Millennium Development Goals/MDGs) and the integration of adult learning and non-formal education within national sector-wide strategies. The Belém conference will also assess how commitments made in 1997 have been implemented and produce the tools to ensure that previous and current commitments on adult learning and non-formal education are put in place, in order to move from theory to action. The outcome document of CONFINTEA VI will be the “Belém Framework for Action”, a policy document calling for increased attention and action for adult education in today’s world.

CONFINTEA VI is being hosted by the Government of Brazil, and organized in cooperation with the Brazilian Ministry of Education. For the first time in its history, CONFINTEA is taking place in the Southern hemisphere. 154 of 193 UNESCO Member States will be taking part in CONFINTEA VI. A fair proportion of the delegations from Member States will be headed by their respective Ministers or Vice-Ministers of Education.

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1 from the French “CONFérence INTernationale sur l’Éducation des Adultes.”
Education, 78 of whom have confirmed their attendance to date. With a response rate of 96% and 37 Ministers in attendance, the Member States in the Africa region lead the field in terms of participation.

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), has been coordinating the preparatory process leading to CONFINTEA VI, in close cooperation with UNESCO Headquarters, UNESCO Regional Bureaux, the UNESCO Brasilia office. UIL is supported by the CONFINTEA VI Consultative Group, an international advisory group of experts in adult and non-formal education.

In the run-up to CONFINTEA VI, 154 Member States produced national reports, giving insights into the state of adult learning and education in their countries. From this rich source, synthesis reports for each region were distilled which fed into five regional preparatory conferences. CONFINTEA VI will see the launch of the first Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), based on the national reports.

**Five regional preparatory conferences** have been held in the run-up to CONFINTEA VI. These were designed to focus attention on region-specific contexts and challenges, and to highlight key issues for CONFINTEA VI. Each conference adopted a policy document, with recommendations and proposed strategies, which will be presented in Belém.
Regional overview:

Latin America and the Caribbean:

**Key developments in adult education:** The Ibero-American Plan for Literacy and Basic Education for Youth and Adults (PIA - 2007-2015) promoted by the Organization of Ibero-American States which was adopted by 20 governments of the region and Spain in November 2007 and operationalized into national plans including financial and technical assistance; Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Panama and Venezuela have conducted major literacy campaigns (2003-2008) and achieved to raise their literacy rates considerably; also Mexico and Brazil have implemented major literacy and adult education programmes. Some countries such as Mexico have developed special programmes that address bilingual and intercultural contexts of indigenous populations. The Cuban support to many governments in the Region with their “yo si puedo” Programme has brought literacy onto national agendas again. Many countries are offering youth and adult learning programmes which are equivalent to Primary and Secondary Education.

The **CONFINTEA VI preparatory conference for Latin America and the Caribbean** was held from 10 to 13 September in Mexico City, hosted by the Government of Mexico. The final conference document calls for a broad and encompassing educational vision and provision of learning throughout life, with literacy as the point of departure. It acknowledges the advances made in the region in youth and adult learning and education, in particular with regard to legislation, diversity of provision and improved infrastructure and cooperation. Yet, the document also critically highlights the persisting lack of implementation of policies, the limitations in reaching out to marginalized groups of the population, and the chronic under-funding of youth and adult learning and education. Based on this analysis, the recommendations address the need for more recognition, integration and coordination mechanisms, resources, dissemination of knowledge, systematic evaluation of adult learning and education as well as efforts for more inclusion and participation.

Asia and the Pacific:

**Key developments in adult education:** Community Learning Centres as a grass roots approach building on community ownership and linking literacy learning with income generating activities; China has made the biggest progress in raising adult literacy levels; Rural Distance Education has been one of the approaches in China to successfully promote adult learning; the Indian National Literacy Mission has also successfully reached out to rural populations and has now launched – with an increased budget allocation - a new National Mission for Female Literacy (Saakshar Bharat); use of ICT for literacy and learning (cell phones, computers, TV, Same Language Subtitling of movies); equivalency programmes have provided youth and adults a second chance to obtain recognized certificates (Philippines, Indonesia); lifelong learning has been integrated in national policies and legislations in a few countries (Korea, Thailand, Japan).

The **CONFINTEA VI preparatory conference for Asia and the Pacific** was held in Seoul, the Republic of Korea, from 6 to 8 October 2008, hosted by the Government of the Republic of Korea and organized in cooperation with the National Institute of Lifelong
Education (NILE). The outcome document reaffirms that adult learning is a core part of lifelong learning and contributes enormously to the creativity, innovation and new ideas necessary for building equitable and sustainable societies. It is central to advancing individual and community well-being, social justice, gender equality, improving productivity and propelling economic growth. Recommendations call for a renewed commitment to adult learning and education in the framework of lifelong learning in the region, confirming primary responsibility of governments in providing policy frameworks and mobilizing resources.

Africa:

**Key developments in adult education:** Several countries have developed adult education policies and legislations, within wider development strategies, and towards the establishment of National Qualification Frameworks, such as South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Kenya. Kenya has conducted a national adult literacy survey which will inform further strategies. Some countries have created new literacy and language departments and increased budgetary allocations for literacy and adult learning (Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Benin). In 2008 the South African Ministry of Education has started a major “Mass Literacy Programme” (Kha Ri Gude) in the 11 national languages and Braille aiming at reaching 4.7 million adults. In many countries national education policies and strategies have been reviewed with the aim to better bridge formal and formal learning careers (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Tanzania, Uganda). Many countries developed learning programmes that particularly target women and link to micro-credit and income generating activities.

The **CONFINTÉA VI Regional Conference for the African Region** was hosted by the Government of the Republic of Kenya from 5 to 7 November 2008 in Nairobi. In the outcome document, participants agreed that the potential of Africa resides in its human, cultural and linguistic as well as its ecological diversity and natural resources, despite a variety of serious challenges, such as poverty and the lack of capacity-building and unequal socio-political and economic systems. In order to fulfill the right to education for adults and youth, legislation, policies, funding and implementation need to address challenges facing countries in the region. The use of African languages is highlighted as critical for the realization of an integrated, peaceful, prosperous Africa. Measures to be set up include comprehensive national youth and adult learning and education policy, and action plans, as well as frameworks for the validation of learning outcomes. Increased cooperation of governments, communities, civil society organizations, the private sector and development partners is also underlined as crucial.

Pan-European region:

**Key developments in adult education:** The European Commission has developed several guiding policy documents on lifelong learning, starting with the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* (2000), Adoption of European Council’s Resolution on Lifelong Learning (27 June 2002), European Commission’s Communication *It is never too late to learn* (October 2006), Adoption of European Council’s Conclusions on Adult Learning (22 May 2008), etc. which reflects the effort to develop a regional vision with LLL as the guiding principle: A European Qualifications Framework is currently under discussion. Literacy has been “discovered” to be a addressed seriously in several Western European countries (UK, Ireland, France, Germany, etc.) being the most outstanding example the Skills for Life Programme in the UK (investment of 3 billion of £ 2000-2007).
In the USA, almost 50 per cent of adults aged 16+ participated in some form of adult learning in 2001. A bold new vision, Learn Canada 2020, was announced in April 2008 by Canada's Council of Ministers of Education, to address the education needs and aspirations of all Canadians by providing quality lifelong learning opportunities.

The Pan-European Preparatory Conference for CONFINTEA VI was hosted by the Government of Hungary from December 3 to 5, 2008 in Budapest. The discussions focussed on two aspects: the growing importance of adult learning and education in face of the current crisis and the crucial role of adult learning and education in empowering society, building capacities among the most vulnerable sectors and helping forge social cohesion. Issues of participation, governance and quality were underscored and the changing nature of policies mapped out. The importance of the driving and decisive force of a supranational body such as the European Union was stressed. The final Conference Outcome Document comprises recommendations on policy frameworks and various forms of governance and financing supporting equitable access to adult education. The document stresses the importance of literacy, numeracy and key competences and includes recommendations to UNESCO to develop a set of indicators to measure participation and progress development and to support the recognition of learning outcomes from non-formal settings.

Arab Region:

Key developments in adult education: Some progress towards increasing adult literacy rates; integration of national literacy policies into broader development perspectives (Morocco); strengthening of partnerships with NGOs; establishment of national advisory board for adult education (Egypt); piloting of LAMP in Morocco, use of ICT in programme delivery (Sudan, Palestine, Egypt) and the design of model learning environments (Saudi Arabia and Oman); learning village model; family literacy as an innovative approach in Palestine and Bahrain; piloting with community learning centres in Morocco, Egypt and Lebanon.

The CONFINTEA VI Regional Conference for the Arab States was hosted by the Government of Tunisia from 5 to 7 January 2009 in Tunis. In the outcome document, participants affirmed that education was a fundamental right guaranteed by international laws and declarations, and that it was vital for the enjoyment of other rights. The Arab nations agreed on the need for a unified concept of adult education, the inclusion of adult education in the national education and lifelong learning plans, as well as the establishment of a close connection between formal and non-formal education. Equitable access to adult learning and literacy for girls and women was a key issue ensuring the translation into action of the right to education for all groups of society and across multiple contexts. A strong appeal for partnerships on various levels was made to foster cooperation between different providers of adult education; and between civil society and the private sector, with the goal of creating a more attractive learning environment. As a way forward, there was a strong consensus on creating an Arab fund to finance literacy and adult education projects under the umbrella of regional cooperation, and on countries adopting a forward-looking policy for the use of information and communication technologies in adult education.
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