

Report of the first meeting on CONFINTEA VI Benchmarks on Adult Education and Learning

A. Background

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) has a mandate to further lifelong learning, with a focus on adult learning, non-formal education and adult literacy. As the UNESCO Institute responsible for adult education, UIL coordinated CONFINTEA V in Hamburg in 1997 and is now preparing for CONFINTEA VI, which will take place in Brazil in May 2009.

At the CONFINTEA V Mid-term Review, held in Thailand in 2003, although it was noted that there have been numerous innovative policy and legislative changes and an increase in participation in adult education and training in many countries, the participants called on adult education actors and partners to “propel, monitor collectively and account for the endorsement and implementation” of the commitments made at CONFINTEA V. While the Hamburg Declaration and the Agenda for the Future were the key outcomes of the 1997 Conference, they did not provide guidelines for monitoring and evaluation of the commitments made. There were no concrete goals that the countries could use to design their strategies and to measure their progress in adult education and learning. It is in this context that UIL called the meeting to prepare benchmarks that could be used for CONFINTEA VI.

As an introduction to the meeting and to set the tone for the benchmarking process, the following goals of the CONFINTEA VI were presented:

- 1) to push forward the recognition of adult education and learning as an important element of and factor conducive to lifelong learning, of which literacy is the foundation;
- 2) to highlight the crucial role of adult education and learning for the realization of current international education and development agendas (EFA, UNLD, LIFE, DESD, and MDGs), and
- 3) to renew political momentum and commitment and to develop the tools for implementation in order to move from rhetoric to action.

B. Objectives

The first meeting on CONFINTEA VI Benchmarks on Adult Education and Learning gathered together experts from all world regions to share and discuss their experiences in assessing adult education and learning concepts, policies and especially concrete activities, so that they could be used to develop indicators and benchmarks.

The objectives of the meeting were:

- To discuss and come to a shared understanding of possible indicators and benchmarks in the context of adult education and learning.
- To review relevant documents on adult education and learning such as the *Nairobi Recommendations on Adult Education* (1976), the CONFINTEA V *Agenda for the Future* (1997) as well as other related international, regional or national documents, and to identify relevant areas which could be benchmarked.
- To develop a set of draft indicators and benchmarks for producing national reports in preparation for CONFINTEA VI.

- To develop an action plan for a broad international discussion, elaboration and refinement of benchmarks and their implementation.

C. Discussion

1. Conceptual issues concerning benchmarks

As an introduction, there was a brief presentation on the conceptual understanding of benchmarks. It was pointed out that it is important to make a distinction between targets and benchmarks: targets can be viewed in isolation while benchmarks are more normative that is to say that they set criteria for what is desirable. It is also important to distinguish between:

- “simple” statistics (e.g. number of adults attending adult education);
- indicators (e.g. the percentage of adults attending adult education out of the total adult population); and
- benchmarks (e.g. the desired percentage of adults attending adult education from the total adult population).

The uneven quality of available data is a challenge to benchmarking. Nevertheless, it was pointed out that there is a need to have both qualitative and quantitative information for benchmarks.

2. Experiences in benchmarking: some key issues

As different participants presented their experiences, the following issues were raised:

- a. Benchmarking is **political process** and political will needs to fuel the process of developing benchmarks, which cannot take place in a vacuum. The process needs to take into account the existing benchmarks and similar processes. It must also involve government, civil society and the academic world. Moreover, as part of the process there needs to be a sustainable follow-up to make sure that it is implemented at national, regional and international level.
- b. The **importance of valid data** cannot be underestimated even if all countries are not at the same level regarding their ability to produce such data. Therefore capacity building is needed at all levels. However, even data of uneven quality can often help to identify the trends in adult education and learning on which benchmarks will be based.
- c. Not all countries are at a comparable level with regard to the **implementation of adult education and learning**. Hence benchmarks need to be specific and focused but at the same time broad enough to take into consideration the different regional and national contexts.
- d. The **relevance** of benchmarks was also raised. On one hand, they could be used as guideposts that will help improve the provision of adult education and learning. On the other hand, it could be counter-productive if the benchmarks are impossible for many countries to reach. It is important to make a distinction between benchmarks in relation to the objectives of CONFINTEA VI and benchmarks in relation to the objectives of adult education and learning in general.

3. Lessons and Challenges: Implications for CONFINTEA VI

In general the consensus was that developing and applying benchmarks and indicators would be a step to the right direction. It was agreed that, in establishing benchmarks, the following aspects are important.

- a. As a political process
 - At international and national level benchmarks have proven to be an important catalyst.
 - At national level they are a tool for civil society to advocate for achieving concrete goals.
 - More funding for adult education could be obtained in the perspective of using a concrete list of justified benchmarks and respective implementation plans.
 - It is necessary to have a clear objective in setting the benchmarks and to communicate this objective to all partners in order to avoid misunderstanding.
 - While it has to be recognized that benchmarks are not binding, they may help to communicate effectively the policy of governments.
- b. Importance of data
 - There needs to be enough data and evidence-based research to support the benchmarks.
 - Such evidence should be based on both qualitative and quantitative approaches and data.
 - "Simple" data can also function as a catalyst for development, as is shown by the importance attached to the PISA-results in OECD countries.
 - As regards sources of data, they could be culled from various national statistical sources such as census, reports and similar surveys.
- c. Implementation of adult education and learning
 - The situation of adult education and learning is diverse across different regions and countries; therefore a good example of an international benchmark, which is applicable in every single country, is the EFA goal 4 which is to increase adult literacy by 50% by 2015
 - The process should not create an atmosphere where the whole focus is on assessment and evaluation rather than on the programme itself. Developing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is important as a tool to improve programming but should not take resources away from programme implementation.

4. Recommendations

A clear framework needs to be articulated

Aside from identifying who will be responsible for the benchmarking process, the following essential points should be kept in mind:

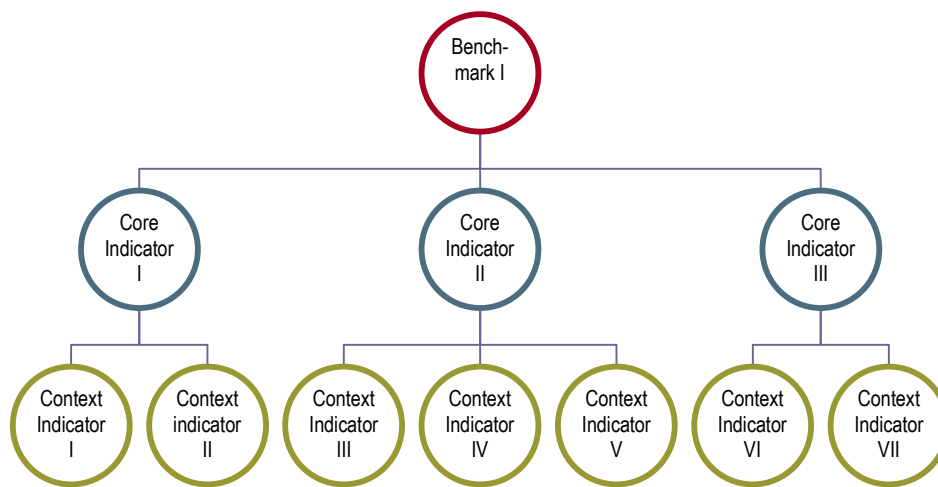
- the heterogeneity of contexts, the unevenness of data available and the varying capacities to carry out the benchmarking process;
- the need to involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders, especially civil society groups, to ensure community ownership of the process and outcomes;
- the need to make the benchmarks compatible with existing initiatives and

- benchmarks, e.g. EFA, MDGs;
- the need to clarify the inter-related objectives of benchmarking, i.e. as policy advocacy, as accountability measure and as capacity building

The benchmarks should:

- be *clearly defined, and concise*;
- be *small in number*;
- be *evidenced based*;
- allow *differentiation and contextualization of benchmarks* in the national context;
- include a combination of *qualitative and quantitative* criteria.

The following model could be considered:



Explanation of the figure:

- Benchmark I represents a chosen benchmark (e.g. 50% improvement in literacy rate).
- Core indicators are ways to measure where the country is in relation to this benchmark (I: general literacy rate; II: school attendance rate; III: adult literacy rate).
- Context indicators are smaller indicators to specify certain areas under the core indicator (I: public spending for education as part of the GNP; II: number of languages spoken in the country; III: number of population under 15 as proportion of total population; IV: percentage of families living on less than \$ 2 per day; V: average teacher salary in proportion to average income; VI: number of books produced in relation to population; number of papers sold in relation to linguistic community)
- This model provides both the target and the gradual steps to reach the target: if country X is not close to reaching the benchmark itself in near future, it can focus on the core indicator or the context indicators to make the environment conducive for eventually reaching the benchmark.

Areas for benchmarking

During the meeting, eight areas of concern were raised: policy, structures, budget and financing, monitoring and evaluation of programmes (including data collection), participation, learning outcomes and their evaluation, literacy, and partnerships. As the aim was to be concise and focused, three were chosen to be the priority areas for development of benchmarks:

- **Participation;**
- **Financing;**
- **learning outcomes.**

Besides analysing these three, it would be important to develop **a strategy** that would go hand in hand with the benchmarks. This strategy would encompass **policies, data collection and monitoring and evaluation.**

D. Next steps and Follow-up

- i. There are clear potentials for synergetic efforts among countries and organizations involved. Some organizations have more technical expertise and others more content expertise. By combining these capacities each will learn from the other. The essential aim is to promote exchange across different regions and continents about monitoring and evaluation, as well as about good practices in adult education and learning. It was suggested that it would be good to take advantage from specific expertise available from within the group while analysing jointly the following issues:
 - o data and statistics;
 - o micro and macro level impact studies: what works in adult education and why?
 - o Conducting a pilot study with selected countries to see what data/statistic/indicators exist, using the exercise for capacity-building element to this and including local universities;
 - o taking stock of available in-depth studies on the three chosen areas (participation, financing and learning outcomes) to support the development of benchmarks and indicators;
- ii. The benchmarking process needs to go hand-in-hand with the national reporting, which is one of the key processes that will provide evidence of the status of adult education and learning for the CONFINTEA VI conference. The reporting format will be developed at UIL, and the request to the member states will be sent through the Director-General of UNESCO. In line with the overall CONFINTEA process, the plan is to focus the reporting on a few key areas – namely the ones chosen for the benchmarks - as well as to support the reporting through appropriate instruments, including selected indicators and benchmarks.

It was noted that countries are faced with many different requests for national reporting and therefore it would be extremely important, from the country perspective, to try to link the CONFINTEA VI country reporting to other on-going initiatives such as the EFA and UNLD mid-term reports. It could be argued, for example, that currently EFA focuses very little on adult literacy and NFE and therefore there is still a need to have an independent process which focuses on these elements (i.e. CONFINTEA reporting). The challenge will be to inspire the countries to devote time and resources to the report as well as to invite them to

provide a comprehensive picture in their reports, using data, both qualitative as well as quantitative, from both governmental and civil society sources.

It is also important to link the work of this group to the work that the CONFINTEA VI Consultative Group is doing. The November meeting for the Consultative Group is a good place to take things further and obtain advice from them on how to proceed.

- iii. UIL will continue coordinating this work and reporting to the group members and to other stakeholders on future developments. UIL will also look into different options for creating an online forum where the discussion can continue.