

Adult education and the challenge of exclusion



One of the big problems facing the world today, captured in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's call to 'leave no one behind', is the large and growing number of people excluded from participating in the economy and society. The fourth *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4)* shows that raising participation in adult learning and education (ALE) is pivotal for achieving not only Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on education, but also the other goals of the 2030 Agenda, spanning issues from climate change to poverty reduction. This places an onus on countries to review ALE policies and progress in the light of evidence on participation, and to invest in sustainable provision that is accessible to all learners, throughout their lives and in all the different contexts in which adults learn.

Participation matters

GRALE 3 (2016) demonstrated the profound positive impact participation in ALE can have on the health, well-being, economy and social life of individuals and communities. Participation in formal, non-formal and informal learning leads to higher levels of equality and inclusion, and has important social and civic benefits, as well as economic ones. Improving educational opportunities for women is both a prerequisite and a driver for successful development. It can also help realize the potential of marginalized groups, such as migrants and refugees. Investing in the education of disadvantaged communities can support economic development and make societies more tolerant and cohesive. This points to a further important benefit of ALE participation: it promotes citizenship and deepens learners' engagement in civil society, enabling them to contribute to addressing fundamental challenges such as rising inequality, poverty, climate change and the rise of populist politics.

GRALE 4 (2019) captures the power of ALE to contribute not only to the achievement of SDG 4 but also to the wider 2030 Agenda and its overarching aim to 'leave no one behind'.

Where are we now?

● Participation in ALE is uneven

While participation in ALE has increased overall since 2015, *GRALE 4* shows that rates vary considerably and that progress has been uneven, both between and within regions, with many vulnerable groups excluded and seemingly off the radar of policy-makers.

● Reliable data are hard to find

Furthermore, we simply do not know enough about participation, particularly in low-income countries and among marginalized and excluded groups. While there are exceptions, reliable data on ALE participation remain hard to find. This hinders efforts to improve participation

rates, and to understand who is not participating and why—both essential undertakings in achieving SDG 4 and advancing towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Defining adult learning and education

“Adult learning and education is a core component of lifelong learning. It comprises all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work. It denotes the entire body of learning processes, formal, non-formal and informal, whereby those regarded as adults by the society in which they live, develop and enrich their capabilities for living and working, both in their own interests and those of their communities, organizations and societies. Adult learning and education involves sustained activities and processes of acquiring, recognizing, exchanging, and adapting capabilities. Given that the boundaries of youth and adulthood are shifting in most cultures, in this text the term ‘adult’ denotes all those who engage in adult learning and education, even if they have not reached the legal age of maturity.”

Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (2015)

● Progress in policy and governance is encouraging, but insufficient

Two-thirds of the 159 countries taking part in the *GRALE 4* monitoring survey reported progress in ALE policy since 2015. However, nearly 30% of countries reported no change in ALE policy since 2015 and 3% reported regression. Three-quarters reported improvements in governance. Progress in governance was most notable in low-income countries.

● ALE is underfunded

According to the BFA, ‘significant financial investment’ is imperative to any viable ALE system. *GRALE 4* confirms that ambitions for ALE are not yet matched by investment. ALE remains underfunded, with countries failing to implement the increase in ALE financing they anticipated in *GRALE 3*. The lack of funding is preventing the implementation of new policies and efficient governance practices, and it is hitting the poorest and most marginalized the most. More investment is required, targeting those hardest to reach in particular.

● Quality is improving but not enough

Where progress in the quality of provision has been made, it is uneven. *GRALE 4* shows that while countries report significant progress in the quality of literacy and basic skills and continuing training and professional development, progress in citizenship education is negligible. The survey also found very low participation in ALE for active citizenship, despite its important role in promoting and protecting freedom, equality, democracy, human rights, tolerance and solidarity. It is important that ALE for active citizenship is given more policy attention and increased investment.

● Deep inequalities in participation persist

GRALE 4 highlights the increased participation of women in ALE as one of the success stories of past decades—in some countries, women now make up the majority of adult learners. However, in some parts of the world, particularly in poor rural areas, women have no access to education. Many lack basic literacy skills and have little opportunity to engage in programmes for professional development. This constitutes a concern for their participation in the labour market. Migrants and refugees, older adults, adults with disabilities, those living in rural areas, and adults with low prior educational attainment are among the groups facing the greatest barriers to participation in ALE.

A call to action

GRALE 4 calls on Member States to put adult learning and education at the centre of their efforts to achieve sustainable economies and societies and to recognize its key role in developing integrated, holistic solutions to the problems we face, whether technological, demographic, economic or environmental. Participation rates, it argues, are too low and, where progress is being made, it is insufficient. ALE remains underfunded. Where interventions do make a positive impact on participation, in too many cases they are not widely shared or properly understood. At a very basic level, we simply do not know enough about who is participating and who is not, particularly in poorer countries and among disadvantaged and marginalized groups. Turning this situation around, and realizing the potential contribution of adult learning and education to SDG 4 and the wider 2030 Agenda, will require a major act of political will, backed by smart, cross-sectoral policies and increased investment. At this moment in time, nothing less will do.

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations are synthesized from *GRALE 4*:

1. Increase and widen participation, giving priority to the learning needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, through the following means:

- An inter-sectoral approach to governance to enable countries to realize the wider benefits of adult education to the greatest extent possible, with resources allocated accordingly;
- Appropriate literacy and language courses and mechanisms for the recognition of skills and qualifications;
- Family literacy initiatives, supporting parents to improve their literacy and other skills in order to better help their children and foster a culture of learning;
- Non-financial incentives, such as voucher schemes, paid leave and opportunities for career development;
- Interventions to inform and raise demand, such as stimulating interest through celebrating success stories in festivals and the media;
- Learning lessons from programmes, reforms and policies that have proven successful when it comes to vulnerable and excluded groups.

2. Increase investment in ALE from governments, employers and individuals, targeting those whose needs are greatest, including through the following:

- Increasing public resources for ALE;
- Adjusting financing models so as to better use resources to benefit specific target groups, specifically those hardest to reach;
- Donor countries living up to their aid obligations to developing countries and rebalancing their funding of education, specifically basic education, to support effective learning of adults together with children's education.

3. Develop and improve monitoring of data to support stronger evidence-based policies that promote inclusive participation in ALE for all and assess progress towards the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly by:

- Increasing investment in the collection and monitoring of data;
- Actively sharing best practice and evidence of what works;
- Participating in international surveys and data-gathering exercises, such as *GRALE*.

Monitoring progress: GRALE in context

The **Sixth International Conference on Adult Education** (CONFINTEA VI), held in Belém, Brazil, in 2009, closed with the adoption of the **Belém Framework for Action** (BFA), which recorded the commitments of countries to improving policy, governance, financing, participation, inclusion and equity, and quality in adult learning and education.

UNESCO's **Global Report on Adult Learning and Education**, published every three years, monitors progress against these commitments and is an important reference and advocacy resource, providing critical information for researchers, analysts and policy-makers. The 2019 report is the fourth *GRALE* and the first to focus in depth on participation in ALE.

GRALE 4, also for the first time, monitors the implementation of the **Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education** (RALE), adopted by UNESCO in 2015. RALE sets out principles and goals for ALE. It calls on Member States to seek ways to better serve marginal groups and

'promote equitable learning opportunities for youth and adults'. RALE, furthermore, identifies three key domains of learning and skills that are of importance for ALE: literacy and basic skills; continuing education and professional development (vocational skills); and liberal, popular and community education (active citizenship skills).

The **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**, also agreed in 2015, recognizes that all people, irrespective of sex, age, race, ethnicity, and including people with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations, should have access to education and lifelong learning. It sets out 17 goals, on themes such as poverty, climate change, gender equality and health and well-being, and includes a specific goal on education, enjoining countries to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Countries are encouraged to address the goals in a holistic way, taking into account their interconnected nature.

4. Enhance ALE for democracy and active citizenship, in particular by:

- Recognizing the important role of ALE in strengthening democracy and human rights and in promoting civic engagement, tolerance and social cohesion, as well as in supporting economic development;
- Allocating resources to improve the quality and reach of ALE for active citizenship, to ensure citizens are well placed to cope with challenges such as rising inequality, mass population movements, poverty and climate change.

5. Use digital technologies and mobile devices to open up educational resources and stimulate ALE participation, in particular through:

- Developing and improving access to open educational practices, from massive open online courses (MOOCs) to open educational resources (OERs), particularly for under-represented or disadvantaged groups;
- Seeking the technical and financial support of donors and the international community where national governments lack a cohesive strategy for the wide use of ICTs in ALE.

The fourth *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*, 'Leave no one behind: Participation, equity and inclusion', was published by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in December 2019.



Published in 2020

© UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning undertakes research, capacity-building, networking and publication on lifelong learning with a focus on adult and continuing education, literacy and non-formal basic education. Its publications are a valuable resource for educational researchers, planners, policymakers and practitioners: <http://uil.unesco.org/>

Further reading

- UIL (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning). 2009. *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*. [pdf] Hamburg, UIL. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000186431> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UIL. 2010. *CONFINTEA VI, Belém Framework for Action: Harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future*. [pdf] Hamburg, UIL. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187789> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UIL. 2013. *Second Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Rethinking literacy*. [pdf] Hamburg, UIL. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000222407> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UIL. 2016. *Third Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: The impact of adult learning and education on health and well-being; employment and the labour market; and social, civic and community life*. [pdf] Hamburg, UIL. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/grale-3.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UIL. 2018. *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education: Monitoring survey*. [pdf] Hamburg, UIL. Available at: <http://uil.unesco.org/i/doc/adult-education/grale-4/survey-data/grale-4-survey-print-version.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UN (United Nations). 2015. *Transforming our world. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. [online] New York, UN. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). 2016. *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration. Towards inclusive education and lifelong learning for all*. [pdf] Paris, UNESCO. Available at: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UNESCO. 2016. *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education 2015*. [pdf] Paris, UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245179> [Accessed 20 January 2020].
- UNESCO. 2018. *Global education monitoring report 2019. Migration, displacement and education: Building bridges, not walls*. [pdf] Paris, UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265866/PDF/265866eng.pdf.multi> [Accessed 20 January 2020].