

ADEA Working Group on Non Formal Education

The Dynamics of Non-Formal Education

Volume I

Report on the Pre-Biennial Symposium and Exhibition

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FOREWORD

Formal education systems, as epitomised by the school, represent a fairly recent type of social organism in the history of human creation. Yet the modern school has come to dominate all aspects of our social existence. Schooling has become a critical rite of passage, which now takes up an increasing proportion of our life and formative years as we progress from primary to secondary and then on to tertiary levels of the education system. It is perhaps the most important single determinant of the future earnings of individuals; it is vital for the economy and human resource development in every country and is also a major contributor to the norms and values established and transmitted in every society. For such reasons, education has become a critical political issue, often subject to considerable controversy and social bargaining.

In this context, many African countries are severely disadvantaged by the fact that a high percentage of their population does not have access to education in the formal school system. There are currently over 130 million children out of school world wide, with a high percentage being from Africa. In fact, sub-Saharan Africa is the only region in which numbers of children out of school are rising. It is estimated that by 2015 more than three-quarters of the children out of school in the world will be from this region. Even with those children who do have access to school, many drop out before gaining much meaningful or lasting learning experiences. African children constitute a high proportion of the global total of 150 million children who drop out of school prematurely. It is estimated that only 3% of children proceed beyond secondary school in Africa. In addition to this, a high percentage of the adult population in Africa did not have access to basic education in their childhood and are therefore functionally illiterate.

Because of the scale of problems faced by the formal education system, it is now evident that many countries in Africa will have to explore and make better use of alternative ways of providing access to learning opportunities as a means of progressing towards delivering basic education for all. In this regard non-formal education has always been a major tool in meeting the needs of adults who missed out on normal schooling, as well as to provide learning opportunities for children and youths who cannot gain access to the formal school system. Unfortunately this has meant that despite achievements in non-formal education, it was viewed for a long time as simply an inferior alternative to the formal system. As such NFE has suffered from an image problem and has been neglected by most governments as something for NGOs and communities to deal with. In most African countries NFE provides the only source of learning opportunity for adults and the substantial numbers of children and youths who are out of school. Yet most governments do not even have a defined and dedicated budgetary provision to support non-formal education. Moreover there is often no provision to include NFE learners in the national statistics on education.

More recently, a new set of rationale has been emerging as justification for exploring alternative ways of providing access to learning opportunities. It is no longer a case of providing stop-gap measures or a poor imitation of the formal school system. There has been a growing crisis of schooling in Africa that has helped to intensify the search for viable alternatives to formal education. Firstly, the general quality of education has been steadily eroding over the years, due to a crisis of staffing, facilities and resources facing a rapidly expanding school system. Secondly, the phenomenal expansion of knowledge in an

information and communication era has meant that schools find it increasingly difficult to cope with all the learning requirements of the population. As such, an increasing amount of new learning has tended to take place out of school than within the confines of prescribed school curricula. Thirdly, it has become clear that despite the advantages offered by the formal school system, there is nothing sacrosanct about its structure, organisation and form of operation. Schools operate on fixed time periods, at specific locations and to a structured sequence of learning experiences prescribed for designated age cohorts. These supposedly have to do with packaging of resources and efficient delivery of learning, but such factors are in no way indispensable to the process of learning. At the same time, they stifle the kind of flexibility in location, timing and programming that would make learning relevant to the diverse needs and circumstances of different population groups. It is in this vein that alternative approaches to basic education have become increasingly critical as a means of providing learning opportunities that are relevant, effective and efficient for the majority of the population.

The growth of the ADEA Working Group on Non-Formal Education (WG-NFE) has followed a path very similar to these changes in the broad field of alternative forms of basic education. At its inception the WG-NFE concentrated on responding to local priorities (mainly in adult literacy activities), for West African countries with serious problems of functional illiteracy. This progressed to a more dynamic approach in terms of using literacy for community empowerment as well as for promoting local development through greater engagement with indigenous knowledge systems. From this stage, the WG-NFE began to explore the links between formal and non-formal education as applied to all age groups. Work in eastern and southern Africa gave rise to an increasing concern with providing learning opportunities for vulnerable groups such as "street children", HIV/AIDS orphans, nomadic populations, etc. Beyond this sort of provision for the vulnerable, the WG-NFE also began to explore ways in which non-formal approaches and characteristics can help to overcome some of the many weaknesses in the formal school system. As these various explorations proceeded, it became clear that there was much more to non-formal education than adult literacy programmes. In fact, NFE increasingly came to be perceived as a highly dynamic and flexible range of options that often defy classification and yet offered advantages for dealing with all sorts of educational problems.

It is against this background that the ADEA WG-NFE organised a workshop on the dynamics of non-formal education during the ADEA biennale in Johannesburg in 1999. The workshop marks an important watershed in the life of the Working Group. It is a stage at which conceptualisation has advanced in remarkable ways, to open up new and exciting possibilities for strengthening NFE and changing its image, as well as for building bridges between NFE and the formal sector. The papers and discussion at this workshop indicate that progress is being made in the task of moving NFE from the margins and backwaters of education into the mainstream. Importantly also, the signs are that NFE will not be the only beneficiary of this evolution. It is clear that the formal school stands to benefit greatly as we bridge the divide between formal and non-formal education to produce a more holistic education system.

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