

## **Concept Note on the Sub-Theme 1**

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Common Core Skills for Lifelong Learning  
and Sustainable Development in Africa



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# Concept Note on the Sub-Theme 1

## Common core skills for lifelong learning and sustainable development in Africa

### 1. Introduction

#### *Purpose of the concept note*

This concept note is intended to offer an initial exploration of principle dimensions and issues of this sub-theme. It focuses on the nature of core skills and competencies within the African context and outlines a range of issues and challenges in this area that to a greater or lesser degree are faced by policy-makers and practitioners. Since countries may already have tackled several of these issues, the list serves mainly as a menu that may inform new priorities. The note follows a systemic approach to education reform. This may stimulate different stakeholders to reflect more systematically on their own experiences and to successfully engage in debates, consultations and analytical work to be undertaken in preparation for the 2012 Triennale.

#### *How the note will be used*

This note will serve as an initial framework that will guide further analytical work, the results of which will over time feed into expanding this document. At a later stage in the preparatory process outputs of consultations and studies will be reflected, leading to a coherent synthesis to be presented at the Triennale. With the incorporation of the outcomes of the Triennale debates the ultimate document will serve as a reference for countries, offering guidance for continued education development.

#### *Summary outline*

This note sets the foundations for the other sub-themes, while at the same time it completes them. Essentially, the note defines the main concepts related to this sub-theme focusing on the meaning, scope and significance of what has been termed the 'common core skills'. A particular emphasis is put on the change of paradigm in order to raise awareness of the need to reconsider the common core skills in the context of reviewing the role and contribution of education and training towards sustainable development. Furthermore the note offers issues across the education terrain that may need to be addressed in order for education to interact successfully with its wider environment.

### 2. Background and context

#### *Continuing ADEA's work on reflection and action*

Building on the theme and outcomes of the ADEA Biennale held in Maputo the 2012 Triennale aims to assist towards educational transformation by focussing on the core challenge of how to promote critical knowledge, skills and competencies for sustainable development in Africa in the framework of life long learning.

While Maputo has shown that countries have been making enormous progress to improve access, equity, progression and completion in education and training, it has also revealed the continued weaknesses in systems that negatively affect the quality and outcomes of learning. A major concern is the low levels of critical skills and competences among very large numbers of young people leaving the education system at different levels and entering the world of work.

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### ***Challenges to education systems***

The key question is: how to build an effective response within education and training systems to enable relevant and appropriate learning outcomes to be acquired in the most effective manner? The Maputo Biennale has made a significant contribution by recognizing the need to move towards diversified and flexible as well as integrated systems that can better respond to the learning needs of all.

The coming Triennale will focus on the policies and programmes to move in this direction and on the quality and effectiveness of forms of learning in relation to the needs of sustainable development. The biggest challenge for education systems will be to effectively serve the needs of all individual learners in a manner that takes also into account the wider needs of communities and the nation at large.

### ***Towards sustainable development in Africa***

At no level is agenda of reviewing the learning of skills and competencies as urgent as at the level of basic education. This concerns both the initial learning of children in ECD and primary education, and the basic learning of out-of-school youth and adults. Here we can speak of a common core of basic learning, consisting of basic knowledge, skills, and competencies, as well as appropriate attitudes and dispositions – to be acquired through any recognised learning pathway: formal, non-formal or informal; institution-based or work-based; face-to-face or by distance; secular or faith-based; or through any combination of these forms (see definitions under section 3).

This common core needs to be the foundation for all people, young and old, enabling them to contribute to the promotion of sustainable development: in terms of preservation of the environment, the careful use of natural resources, the construction of inclusive societies and the fostering of peace and solidarity. Its links with basic human rights and inclusiveness were already endorsed by the World Declaration on Education for All proclaimed at Jomtien (1990) and reiterated in Dakar (2000). Moreover, they have been enshrined in the national constitution of many countries.

The challenge to address the acquisition of common core skills for sustainable development is the continuation of the challenge set by the Jomtien conference which defined the ‘basic learning needs’ as: “*essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning*”(WCEFA, 1990:11).

In the interest of sustainable development the common core needs to be continuously reinforced and built upon through lifelong learning, thus enabling young people and adults to continue developing themselves and to adapt their skills and competences to the changing needs for ongoing socio-economic, cultural and political participation. Such continuous learning has an added value because of the need to build capacity in the ever-expanding in formal sector.

### ***The basic education context***

Basic learning that is critical for personal development and for local/national sustainable development begins at a very early stage, before many children reach the required school entry age. Right from childhood young people develop awareness about themselves and the nature of the world around them. In the process they develop elementary cognitive and social skills. They learn how to interact and communicate with their environment, give meaning to what they experience and secure benefits for their own growth. They also develop a sense of interest, curiosity, initiative, responsibility – all of which are of importance in their later development.

There is abundant international evidence that the essential ‘psychological capital’ of young people, in terms of their basic cognitive and non-cognitive dispositions has already been formed through early socialisation before they enter school (Nash & Harker, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 2006).

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The significance of structured basic education lies in its ability to build upon early acquired competences and to develop these further, with appropriate remedial work if necessary, to a desired level of learning outcomes at the end of the basic school.

In addition to school, there is a wide variety of learning contexts. These can range from pre-school and home-based early education to non-formal programs and as part of informal apprenticeship arrangements. In most countries children learn some or more core skills, competencies and attitudes not only in schools but also in one and/or the other learning context. This means that in principle the remit of an integrated curriculum framework for this basic learning is very wide as it will have to take different contexts, different ages and different types of ‘educators’ into account.

### **3. Key concepts related to ‘common core skills for lifelong learning’**

#### ***Overall concepts***

In this sub-theme the focus will be on how to promote learning outcomes relevant for people’s lives, for work and for further learning, while also enabling them to contribute to sustainable development. A central concern will be with the acquisition of ‘skills and competencies’. The use of the term ‘competencies’ in connection with skills is relevant. While skills tend to be more associated with ‘knowing how to do something’, the concept of ‘competencies’ draws attention to the actual combination of skills and action. Often, even for children, just having the skills as knowledge is not sufficient; many basic skills also need to be practiced, if a child is to develop certain common behaviours relevant for participation in the social environment. In this paper, while the term ‘skills’ is used pre-dominantly, it should be understood that most of them will only have value if they can be immediately applied, whether within the school environment or in the wider life situation of children, youth and adults.

The acquisition of basic learning needs to be both lifelong and life-wide. Lifelong learning refers to the continuous building of skills and knowledge during the lives of people through a wide variety of learning opportunities that may be available. Life-wide refers to inclusivity, in that access to learning at different levels should be made available to all. In many countries both dimensions are still highly deficient. To illustrate: the weighted average for net primary enrolment in Sub-Saharan Africa, while steadily increasing, stood at 73 percent by 2007 (varying between 31 and 98 percent); the weighted average for adult literacy has reached 62 percent (varying between 32 and 91 percent) (Global Monitoring Report, 2010, p. 418/9)

The ‘life-wide’ dimension is particularly relevant for efforts to bring and keep disadvantaged young people into basic education, where necessary through enhancement of non-formal or other alternative learning programs. The latter may be needed for young people who have to work because of poverty, for over-age boys and girls, those affected by HIV and AIDS, and for others who for various reasons have dropped out or cannot enter full-time regular education.

#### ***The scope of common core skills***

Core skills can and have been defined in many different ways, and ultimately countries are themselves responsible for what types and in what combination can best work within the socio-political and development context of a country concerned. At the same time it should be acknowledged that each country has become part of a globalised world and is thus compelled to enable all learners to act meaningfully and constructively in this environment. Core skills will also vary in relation to the background and dispositions of the learners, for example in terms of culture, geographical environment, family background, health conditions.

A distinction can be made between skills as abilities and propensities to act in various terrains, and knowledge(s). The latter refers to essential knowledge that all citizens need to have in order to function effectively in society, such as basic science and technology and the wider socio-

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economic context. Moreover, often various values and attitudes are considered as part of a common core.

The emphasis on sustainable development offers important suggestions for basic knowledge and associated attitudes and behaviours to be part of a common core. Relevant areas include: entrepreneurship, environmental consciousness and protection, the preservation and care for natural resources, the value of indigenous knowledge and traditions, and the importance to acknowledge and celebrate people's differences in terms of gender, culture or beliefs.

The emphasis and composition of the common core will also change during a person's life. With a solid base and opportunities to practice the skills, there should be continued re-enforcement and adaptation throughout the education system so as to ensure sustainability of learning achievements. In further education and vocational training other more technical or professional skills will be acquired, the understanding and practice of which will directly benefit from effective mastery of core skills. Similarly, adults in general will continue to learn and acquire more knowledge and skills effectively if these can rest on a solid base. Not least this is important so that parents can effectively participate in the education of their children.

The coming Triennale, building upon a holistic approach to educational development, needs to articulate more forcefully the requirement for younger and older workers to have continued access to upgrading of skills or to acquiring new skills. Access is essential to enable countries to adapt to rapid developments in a globalised economy and in the socio-cultural environment. At the same time all adults require access to informal opportunities to update their general knowledge to maintain their effective participation in socio-political affairs.

It is common for core skills to include several types: (1) communication, language and literacy skills, (2) basic cognitive skills, (3) personal development and life skills; (4) social and citizenship skills; (5) basic work-related skills. They will be discussed below.

### ***Communication, language and literacy skills***

Communication, oral and in writing, as a basic skill is vital for interacting with other people and the environment, as a way of expressing ideas, views, emotions, interests and ambitions - and thus of projecting identity, understanding and intentions. Communication is closely associated with literacy skills and language proficiency.

In many countries of Africa command of language and its effective usage in communication has become a major issue as a result of political preferences for the usage of a metropolitan language as the language of instruction at most, if not all, levels of learning. The value of basic learning in the mother-tongue has been widely recognized. The constraints of using a second, foreign language as the language of instruction are most severe at the level of basic education when foundation knowledge and cognitive skills have to be acquired in a language that is not the mother-tongue, or when the mother-tongue is only used as a transition to continued learning in a poorly mastered (often international) second language (Alexander, 2005).

### ***Basic cognitive skills***

Cognitive skills are any mental skills that are used in the process of acquiring and processing knowledge. They include the ability to pay attention, to ask questions, to reason, to comprehend and to use information, and to analyse information and experiences. The latter are also referred to as 'thinking skills' and are often divided between lower order thinking skills (memorising and comprehension) and higher order thinking skills (analysis, creatively applying knowledge and evaluation of information). The latter category is also referred to as 'critical thinking' which is acquired through both formal and informal training. Cognitive skills also include perception and using intuition.

Cognitive skills are at the heart of learning and purposive action, and they largely determine success at school. Their development begins well before school age and tends to be much influenced by cognitive stimulation of parents and the immediate environment of the child. The criticism levelled

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against formal schooling in Africa is that it doesn't provide enough room for teaching critical thinking. The implication is that teacher training and curricula need to be revised to integrate critical thinking from ECD to higher school.

### ***Personal development and life skills***

These refer to a wide range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable young people to deal with major challenges in their socio-economic, political and cultural environment. The challenges relate to poverty, HIV and AIDS, conflict, violence, use of drugs, environmental destruction and different types of discrimination associated with gender, ethnicity and race.

Life skills education is essential for young people in many African countries as these challenges are still very wide-spread and make youngsters vulnerable to being exploited and abused, and being locked into other life-threatening situations. Thus life skills education includes health education, HIV and AIDS prevention, human rights education, violence prevention and peace building. It also includes the promotion of moral and social values and attitudes that are commensurate with active citizenship and productive employment. A central focus is on awareness building as a basis for making personal decisions regarding behaviour and life choices. Also important are developing assertiveness, empathy, motivation skills, coping and self-management skills, collaboration with others, the management of anger, dealing with abuse and trauma, and positive thinking (UNICEF, 2004).

### ***Social and citizenship skills***

Social skills are those dealing with how to handle relations with other people and how to participate in society. They stimulate the affective and motivational elements of relying on oneself as well as cooperating with others; persevering, accepting criticism and having the ability to choose one's courses of action constructively and to act sensitively and democratically. Successful social interaction depends on dispositions of empathy and sympathy, and a sense of citizenship. Social skills are directly associated with social values and attitudes, for example towards people with whom life activities are shared and towards others who are different.

### ***Basic work-related skills and competencies***

Basic work-skills and work-related education refers to developing basic knowledge about the world of work, learning about one's own talents, aptitudes and interests, and developing basic dispositions that are essential for successful job-search, engaging in self-employment and for effective functioning in the work place. Relevant dispositions include self-awareness, self-management, problem solving skills, creativity, ability to take initiative and responsibility (being 'entrepreneurial'), negotiating skills and ability to work with others for a joint purpose.

Many of these skills are considered to be essential components of good quality education. But they have the advantage that they are also seen as vital ingredients for operating successfully in the labour market and in the world of work in general. By building these learning outcomes into the curriculum and pedagogy of basic education this level of education can provide an effective basis for vocational skills development.

### ***Paradigm shift in basic education***

The effort made to shift paradigm in education, the need for which had been reiterated in the Maputo Biennale, continues to be imperative in the area of basic education as the initial structured form of acquiring skills and competencies for children, youth and adults. The acquisition of common core skills by all can never succeed without corresponding shifts towards adopting a holistic, integrated and inclusive approach to basic education, the move towards a diversified but equitable basic education system and thus the full recognition of alternative pathways for education and training; and

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the emphasis of reform on learning processes and outcomes that are relevant in learners' lives and in the context of sustainable development.

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#### 4. Main issues and challenges for basic education

The inclusive and effective acquisition of common core skills relevant for sustainable development has implications for:

- (a) Gearing education systems as a whole towards successful acquisition of what are nationally defined common core skills; and
- (b) Embedding the process of skills development (life-wide and lifelong), programmatically and institutionally, within the country socio-economic framework for sustainable development.

Below, the main issues and challenges are briefly introduced while bearing in mind that for individual countries some may have a higher priority than others.

##### A. Systemic issues and challenges

Key issues for the Triennale in this area will be:

- 1) Selection of skills. The actual identification and selection of relevant and appropriate sets of skills, competencies, knowledges, values and attitudes: can there be a methodology that facilitates broad-based dialogue and democratic process to decide what skills are required, responding both to demands for personal development and to local and national development needs, taking into account the needs of different age-groups and the diversity of the population? What lessons can be learned from the OECD's process of 'Definition and Selection of (key) Competencies' (DeSeCo).
- 2) Mobilizing people. How can a conducive policy and institutional environment be created that can mobilise expertise within the system and gear people's energy and creativity to jointly reflect and take action to remove bottlenecks within the system, work towards expanding and strengthening diversified education opportunities, and lay out holistic, equitable and effective support mechanisms, both professional and material? How can the necessary political will and leadership be mobilised and maintained? How can stakeholders be best involved?
- 3) Institutional development. As regards institutional development there are many questions concerning the inter-linkages between different types of basic education (the learning pathways). How can passages from one type to another be constructed such that they actually work? How can equivalencies be best assured? What are the core conditions to ensure equity between the pathways and equality of opportunity to access further education or the world of work? How can effective lifelong learning pathways be created in basic education?
- 4) Curriculum framework. In terms of curriculum development the challenge is to develop an overall curriculum framework for basic education that is skills- or competency-based and directly relevant for the life situations of the country's young people, catering for all the diversity that these imply (as was accepted in the Kigali Call for Action, 2007). Countries can reflect on their experiences, including strategies to improve the physical learning environment (learner support materials) and to develop innovative and inclusive pedagogies. A major issue is how the common core skills can link up with vocational skills development in formal and informal settings.
- 5) Assessment. Given the major importance of assessment methods in defining what is actually taught, it is essential to review such methods and arrive at more appropriate systems that provide effective feedback on what skills are being acquired and what levels of achievement learners have reached.
- 6) Teachers and teaching. Attention to how teachers can be assisted to effectively apply these pedagogies will be very important. What competencies do they need? What are the major constraints for teachers to focus on effective acquisition of essential knowledge and skills? What

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needs to be altered in current models of teacher training and teacher development? What can be the contribution of ICT applications to effective teaching and learning?

- 7) Language of instruction. What initiatives have countries undertaken to resolve issues related to the language of instruction at different levels of the system, giving all learners access to proficiency both in the African mother-tongue as well as in an appropriate international language? The Triennale needs contributions on initiatives to change language policies across different levels of the system. Also valuable would be analytical work on the extent to which and how language and curriculum practices may end up reproducing inequalities.
- 8) Capacity development. The Triennale will need to look at diverse strategies and methods used to further develop human and organisational capacity necessary for effective design, coordination, implementation and monitoring skills-related programmes. Here, central attention should be given to the educators at all levels and in all types of education, including types and practices of effective institutional management and professional supervision and support structures.
- 9) Roles of ICT. It is expected that special attention will be given to the roles of ICTs, both in improving access to the common core skills across different age-groups and in enhancing the quality and relevance of learning processes, to the benefit of learners as well as teachers. How can countries make better use of ICT hardware, instructional methods and content development?
- 10) Program effectiveness. The Triennale needs to look at the further development of both internal and external effectiveness of skills development programs, in- and out-of-school and for different age-groups, taking note of equity issues involved. What impact do skills development programmes have on what categories of learners and with what benefits for life chances and labour market entry? How do young people make use of the skills acquired?
- 11) Partnerships. Although the notion of public-private partnerships received much attention in the Maputo meeting, the next one may well need to review the actual scope, quality and outcomes of various types of partnerships in basic education programs. There is a need to evaluate the roles of the state, civil society and the private sector. Since it is essential that governments retain a core responsibility to ensure that all learners have access to equitable and affordable education, they needed to develop the necessary leadership and capacity to be able to exercise that responsibility effectively. Feedback will also be useful as regards progress in governments working with regulatory frameworks within which private partners can make inclusive and meaningful contributions to educational development.

## ***B. Challenges for socio-economic embedding***

Key issues for the Triennale in this area will be:

- 1) Visions and skills. There is a need to investigate the relationship between the choice of common core skills and the visions, plans and strategies related to sustainable development. Visions can be translated into skill areas that are foremost relevant for personal development and the production of effective citizens; they can also be translated into those skill areas that are more directly linked to the macro dimensions of sustainable development.
- 2) Outside participation. Socio-economic embedding also refers to the contributions that can be provided by other people in the actual acquisition of common core skills. Here, the prospective or actual roles of parents, the community at large, local artisans or bigger enterprises in skills formation can be investigated. The parental role is significant as re-enforcement of skills in the personal sphere. Contact with economic actors promotes awareness of work environment and the basic skills required. The common incongruence between what is learned in the home and what is learned in the life/work situation needs to be addressed

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- 3) Equality of opportunity. Special studies are required to understand needs and experiences with promoting inclusivity and equality of opportunity: as regards gender, young people from different cultural environments, learners in rural versus urban environments. What effects do strategies for change have on different beneficiary groups, the quality of their lives and opportunities for advancement and what are the outcomes and impact of skills development programs?
  - 4) Youth in crisis. More understanding is needed of how different education programs work for youth in crisis situations. How can youth disoriented by conflict and its aftermath be brought back into the education system? How can selected types of skills acquisition be incorporated into broader programs of care, employment/work creation and social reconstruction? What is the link with lifelong learning programs, from which also care givers and older relatives can benefit?

## **5. Preparatory processes**

Contributions to the Triennale could focus on what progress has been made as regards addressing the reform of many of these dimensions and what bottlenecks and issues countries have been dealing with. Also preliminary outcomes can be reviewed, either as case-studies in single countries or across a range of countries.

### ***Methodological orientation***

Although much of this reviewing will be through a process of debating case-studies submitted by a variety of partners, including countries themselves, much consultation can be initiated a long time before the Triennale takes place. This can be done through joint review processes of selected countries having similar experiences, or having embarked upon similar innovative work in key focal areas for the Triennale. Those countries, as well as the organisations that have been involved, will be welcome to define what inputs they wish to offer at the forum to share their experiences and conclusions with others.

### ***Inclusion of actors***

The nature and diversity of issues and challenges related to basic education development in line with a skill-oriented focus linked to sustainable development makes it essential that as much as possible all types of partners and stakeholders make contributions to the inputs, debates and outcomes of the Triennale. As regards basic education such stakeholders range from ministries of basic education and of youth/social development and private / civil society partners to management boards, teachers and learners. It is hoped that their complementary perspectives and experiences will enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the outcomes of the Triennale.

## **6. Conclusions**

The Ouagadougou Triennale should be considered as a pathway which all stakeholders can follow together. This means that it's a process which will hopefully lead to capacity building. However, in no way is Ouagadougou to be considered as the final station and an end in itself. On the contrary, given the huge challenges facing the African continent it is vital to keep reflecting about such sensitive and complex issues as presented in this note

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