

Summary Report on the Electronic Discussion Forum
on
**“Challenging Non-formal Education in Africa;
Where do we go from Here; What Role for an ADEA Working Group?”**
(October 2004 – March 2005)
by
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Introduction

The ADEA Working Group on Non-formal Education ran an electronic discussion forum on non-formal education between October 2004 and March 2005. It arose from a felt need for a wider international consensus on the significance of NFE for basic education and development, and on the priorities that should guide the WG work in this area. It was hoped that the recognition of diversity of beneficiary groups and their needs, and of approaches and purposes of NFE, could be balanced with the promotion of a holistic view of basic education and development for children, youth and adults, and of a closer collaboration among the great variety of organisations working with NFE.

Equally, it was considered important that the WG has a mandate that enables it to respond to the needs and priorities expressed by countries as well as to provide effective guidance through the sharing of its extensive knowledge and experience base.

The objectives of the Forum were as follows:

- (a) To provide opportunity for a wide variety of persons and organisations, involved professionally with NFE, particularly those in Africa, to voice their views, concerns and hopes regarding the programmes they are involved with, their national context, and NFE in general, and to comment on the work of the WGNFE.*
- (b) To identify the range and diversity of current perspectives on NFE, regarding its nature, purposes, characteristics, expectations, problems and issues, especially within the wider context of EFA.*
- (c) To establish the extent of common understanding, across different actor groups, of the nature, issues and needs concerning NFE, of its significance in society, and its future direction in relation to basic education in general.*
- (d) To identify key roles and priorities, as well as preferred modalities to be adopted by the WG for its support to stakeholder organisations and contribution to basic educational development in Africa.*
- (e) To provide an opportunity for building up an archive of good practices, interesting experiences, and relevant information about other initiatives – in relation to NFE’s contribution to good quality basic education for all.*

By the end of the electronic discussion the Forum had 128 registered participants. Out of these a total of 77 persons were Africans or Africa-based persons, 39 were non-Africans (largely European or North-American) and of 12 persons their origin or

location was not known. The African participants came from a total of 23 African countries, spread across the entire Sub-Saharan Africa.

Further analysis showed that the 60 contributions were in all submitted by a total of 24 contributors. It thus appeared that most persons who did contribute, did so more than once. In fact there were 2 contributors who made submissions in regard of each Issue in each Session. Altogether 11 persons made more than one contribution. Out of the 24 contributors there were 16 Africans (2/3). Most of the African contributors fit the qualification of 'national expert on NFE', even though most of them appear to have direct linkages with NGOs. Four contributors were distinctly government (including one Cabinet Minister). Out of the non-African contributors 2 were agencies, and others were experts in their own country or can be considered international experts on NFE. Altogether there were an equal number of male and female contributors.

This summary report will address the main outcomes of the Forum in relation to the above objectives.

2. The range and diversity of perspectives on NFE

The substantive discussions in the Forum were divided into four sessions, each one with a distinct focus. The first three drew attention to NFE perspectives and experiences in general, leading up to the fourth session addressing the mandate and strategies for the ADEA WGNFE.

The foci of the four sessions were as follows:

- (1) Current trends, characteristics and purposes of NFE
- (2) Educational, socio-cultural and economic context of NFE
- (3) The preferred direction in which NFE should develop
- (4) The mandate and strategies for the ADEA Working Group on Non-formal Education.

In this section contributions to the first three sessions will be summarised. Those to session 4 will be addressed in section 4.

Given the limited participation in the Forum the views expressed cannot be regarded as representative for 'the international perspectives, nor of specific constituencies. However, they provide a range of pertinent commentaries that may well be widespread and symptomatic for the dilemmas faced by educationists across Africa and beyond. Most importantly, they appear to come from persons who are in close touch with the realities of NFE around the continent. They thus deserve to be heard.

1. SESSION 1 – About characteristics and purpose of NFE, its contribution to basic education in general, and how it relates to formal education

The predominant perspective on the nature of NFE is that it is something quite different from 'formal education' (FE), that this is a good – though not necessarily unproblematic – form of education, and that the two are also much intertwined. Moreover NFE is associated with non-government actors.

In dwelling on the characteristics of NFE the definition as put forward by Philip Coombs more than 30 years ago still prevails. NFE consists of organised non-school education and learning opportunities provided or supported mainly by NGOs, donors and individuals. It is provided outside the mainstream formal education system even while it is regarded as an integral part of basic education.

There is also little dispute over NFE's existence in the shadow of FE, so much that its very existence is regarded as conditioned by the latter. Foremost there is reference to the 'functions' of NFE vis-à-vis FE, as the former is seen as complementary, remedial, rehabilitative, and an instrument to help curb some of the deficiencies of the latter.

What then is different about NFE? Here it can be observed that adult education specialists seemed most clear about the positive features of NFE, notably its organisational flexibility in terms of enrolment, programme duration and curriculum management, its use of empowering techniques, and the treatment of learners as 'active shapers of learning experiences' which do not take the learners for granted. The notion of accountability of learning provisions vis-à-vis learners returned several times during the sessions.

It was noted that the identity of NFE might reside in its approach to the demand rather than in the nature of supply. Thus NFE is obliged to develop small programmes '*a la carte*', each with their own logic and responses to specific needs. This can be done by various means, ranging from a culture of listening to the interest of the clients, or it is done through 'mediation', i.e. noting the views of those who are in close touch with the clients, or it is done through studies following participatory approaches.

The pedagogical dimensions of NFE seemed of particular concern to those speaking from an adult education perspective and less so to those commenting from a children/youth perspective. The latter tended to emphasise issues related to organisational flexibility and input mobilisation. By contrast, the adult educators commented on approaches to learning, on the importance of the concept of 'active pedagogical practices' and of 'empowerment', the contextualisation of learning, issues around learning materials, and the problem of pedagogical monitoring.

In situations of countries dealing with post-conflict challenges NFE has become a major vehicle for addressing a wide diversity of educational needs of those struggling with the consequences of conflict. The needs include those of ex-combatants, internally displaced persons (IDPs), child soldiers, and others with severe traumas. NFE offers the flexibility to combine skills development with basic cognitive skills, de-traumatisation, peace and civic education, health (including HIV/Aids) and environmental education, conflict management and resolution. NFE in such situations becomes part of a wider effort including rehabilitation, reintegration and resettlement.

With regard to the interests of children and young persons NFE has the advantage of not delaying gratification for the learner, as the same (formal school) cycle could be completed in less than half the official time, and that thus the learning outcomes would be more immediately applicable. This has major advantages for young people who also need to work and for those who are over-aged.

The notion that NFE is a very suitable mechanism to ‘fill a gap’ where children or young people cannot enter the formal school or only stay for some years without completing the conventional cycle, has become quite acceptable as a consideration in the overall planning of access and participation for EFA. Significant is that such programmes appear to follow the adage of being ‘alternative but different’, i.e. emphasising relevance for personal and local development over and above the need to re-enter the primary school or to ensure equivalency at the end of the cycle.

The contributions list at least three types of NFE being complementary to FE: NFE as satellites or feeder schools, NFE as fast-track options, and NFE as post-school centres absorbing youngsters who leave school prematurely. Thus they reiterate an ongoing debate about NFE in Africa and elsewhere, concerning the actual linkages between NFE and FE. Should NFE stay far from FE because of its different identity and its priorities related to relevance and preparation for ‘development’, or should it become more closely linked with the formal system, to the extent of helping to reform significant aspects of formal education and, moreover, enable the non-schooled or dropouts to realise the same education rights as their counterparts who were not prevented by poverty or marginalisation from entering the mainstream system?

The Forum showed that such dilemmas as regards perceptions, policies and practices still persist. Clearly, some form of integration is on the agenda, but it is far from clear what this will mean in practice. While in some countries community schools ‘sub-systems’ or Koranic schools are now recognised by government, in others pathways across different sub-systems are being discussed. Other developments show that formal systems are becoming more non-formal. To put such efforts into perspective, there is a need for a more explicit recognition of both the political and the institutional frameworks within which NFE work is taking place.

2. *Session 2 – About the existence of two types of organised learning, the importance of NFE for development and its impact on people’s lives, and the present interest in NFE on the sides of government, civil society, and others*

In this session it was the first issue (on the existence of two types of education), which generated the more lively debate. This debate demonstrated that there is recognition of the diversity of (organised) forms of education, which reaches beyond the conventional dichotomy between formal and non-formal education.

The discussion was inspired by an observations that in the case of non-formal education “*one needs to be clear as to what meaning we give to ‘non-formal education’*”. This is illustrated by the differences between NFE for children, for youth and for adults. It was suggested that adult education may have suffered by being associated with the ‘inferior’ notion of non-formal education. Session 1 showed that positive characteristics of NFE were particularly derived from the adult education experience, with an emphasis on the pedagogical concerns. The adult education experience appears to have a positive influence on the NFE debates, even if there is little that NFE may have done for adult education.

There were other divisions of education raised by contributors. One new interpretation of the three-way division of education by Coombs was reported about South Africa. Here two criteria are used: whether an initiative is planned and organised, and

whether it is credited. In this light formal education is organised and credited, informal education not organised and not credited, leaving NFE in between as being organised and not credited.

Further divisions between types were also raised, even though there were no elaborations as regards characteristics, significance, experiences, etc. Thus there was reference to the 'traditional African education system' and to the 'Koranic schools', sometimes called 'Franco-Arab schools'. Another perspective offered a continuum between formal education and informal education, with NFE in the middle.

Other contributions, rather than commenting on the notion of plurality in education, emphasised the linkages and coherence among the types. These noted that FE and NFE were naturally dependent parts of a whole, a recognition that was increasingly producing bridges between the two, common policy frameworks, and sharing of central government services. This is often inspired by an underlying interest in human rights, democratisation and constitutionality.

There was some consensus that in recent years the interest in NFE from the side of governments has been increasing. New initiatives on the side of government were reported to be: more explicit attention to NFE in policy documents, the initiation of new NFE programmes; the establishment of NFE Inspectorates, an NFE Stakeholders' Forum or an advisory National Council on Adult and Non-formal Education; and the improvement of collaboration with civil society.

Nevertheless, while this was noted with satisfaction, there were also comments that public resource allocations, while improving, still remained rather meagre, and that there was no doubt that the major attention of governments was still devoted to formal education.

3. *Session 3 – About the changing social and economic conditions in Africa and their impact, educational reform and the changing relationship between formal and non-formal, and the roles and responsibilities of the partners in basic education.*

This session on the preferred direction for the development of NFE attracted relatively few contributions. Nevertheless, several of the messages posted picked up themes that had been initiated in earlier sessions, notably NFE in the context of emergencies and conflict, as well as poverty and HIV/Aids.

A major trend is that NFE programmes for youth and adults try to respond to worsening social and economic conditions around the continent. These conditions are characterised by poverty, bad governance, political and civil conflicts, 'peacelessness', HIV/Aids and environmental degradation. In this context there is also a shift in how programmes are constructed, as traditional adult education projects are now integrated into broader socio-economic response programmes such as livelihood development, civic and peace education, health and environmental education.

From countries that are not affected by conflict, there are messages about NFE responses to poverty, to social and gender disparities, and to the scourge of HIV/Aids. Here NFE has a special mandate as it can effectively respond to very specific demands from diverse learner clienteles. This brings along a different relationship

between formal and non-formal education, both of which need become more closely aligned at the local level. While each has an important role to play in poverty alleviation and promoting development, only NFE has the capacity to adapt to demand and to shape innovations from the communities or NGOs.

All the above has consequences for the roles and responsibilities of different partners involved with NFE. As referred to above, policy changes tend to give more attention to NFE allowing spaces for non-government parties such as civil society and the private sector to become involved in policy formulation and in strategising for implementation. This puts heavy demands on the latter for developing the necessary insights, competencies and capacities. In addition, it brings major challenges for different partners to collaborate at national and at local level.

3. The extent of common understanding of NFE

The third objective of the Forum referred to the extent of common understanding, across different actor groups, of the nature, issues, and needs concerning NFE. The common understandings that could be identified in the course of the debates are the following:

- (a) *Non-formal education is something very different from formal education*
- (b) *NFE is not one model, but it comes in many different shapes and sizes*
- (c) *NFE, as a set of educational experiences, is vital for communities and societies*
- (d) *There are established ways in which NFE can complement FE*
- (e) *NFE is increasingly becoming an explicit component of broader programmes of action in the social-economic field*
- (f) *NFE is very closely associated with communities and local civil society*
- (g) *Government involvement is necessary but is also problematic*
- (h) *In NFE there is a strong need for systematic monitoring and (by extension) for ongoing action- and policy-oriented research*

4. Roles, priorities and modalities for the WGNFE

Here the outcomes of session 4 are presented. This concerns the identification of key roles and priorities, as well as preferred modalities to be adopted by the ADEA Working Group on Non-formal Education.

In this session we find that in spite of the exhortations very few substantive contributions were made. Nevertheless, the contributions made, have given food for thought. The section is divided into three parts: internal collaboration, collaboration across African countries, and the supportive roles of the WGNFE.

Internal collaboration

During the Forum the primary need for collaboration among stakeholders at national level was emphasised many times. Even though the precise modalities were often not elaborated, there is a widespread conviction that such collaboration is essential,

especially where it allows each party to act in accordance with its own mandate and responsibilities. In this context the roles of communities, national governments and local authorities have been highlighted.

It is significant that several countries had established formal mechanisms for collaboration across stakeholders. The purposes of such collaboration were: policy formulation, consultation, and/or coordination of implementation.

In the last session some contributions underscored the importance of communities and local authorities once more. Space for local contributions has been shown to be important for bringing new ideas and perspectives, even to the extent that once introduced in NFE (such as community schools) they can influence the formal schools. The manner in which institutional space for innovation is used depends on how local authorities and civil society can work with communities.

Collaboration across African countries

In several contributions it was felt that such national agendas could benefit strongly from more intensive collaboration at (sub-) regional level. The WGNFE Lead Agency suggested the relevance of promoting intra-regional collaborations among various actor groups, such as governments, civil society, and research organisations. This may be done through organising fora for debate and through developing common initiatives that can serve both as ‘learnerships’ for the participants and as a means to produce concrete outcomes that can be shared among different parties. Existing professional networks, such as those in educational research, like ROCARE and ERNESA, can also make significant contributions here.

The roles of the WGNFE

The major role envisaged for the WGNFE is to develop and maintain different modalities for ‘plugging into’ the above-mentioned developments at national and regional level. These modalities specifically include mobilisation, facilitation, and providing active knowledge and financial support.

A country contribution stressed two dimensions of the above: the active support for the development of professional networks for the purpose of strengthening the capacities of actors in the field, and the facilitation of ‘*knowledge support*’ that could directly be integrated into the ‘*management of educational policies*’.

The Lead Agency emphasised similar types of support. These include the development of “*knowledge and critical perspectives on the diversity of NFE experiences, and their contribution to the social and economic demand for education*”. This could be utilised as a basis for a more effective maintenance, regulation, financing and other national support to those NFE experiences. Furthermore there was a need for the WGNFE supporting initiatives at different levels aiming at exchanging ideas and experiences, and realising common projects around key issues. The ultimate purpose should be to “*make sure that different parties in ADEA are better informed and can take better initiatives and decisions as regards education policy, within which NFE is integrated*”.

The Lead Agency also put forward several caveats, including the need for priorities to be set by African actors, the need for the WGNFE to ‘keep its ears close to the ground’, so as to understand the dynamics in different countries; the need to ensure easier access to information; and the need to reinforce exchanges at national and sub-regional level.

5. Building an archive of good practices

The last objective of the Forum was to offer the opportunity for building up an archive of good practices in NFE, interesting experiences and relevant information about initiatives, in relation to NFE’s contribution to good quality basic education for all. This objective was, however, not fulfilled, as only one ‘good practice’ was submitted.

The conclusion is that this Forum was not a good opportunity for gathering descriptions of old or new major initiatives in NFE. Thus the WGNFE will need to find other ways of building up such archive for the benefit of the WGNFE members and for NFE educationists across the continent.

6. Conclusions and looking forward

This Forum has been a valuable experience: for the WGNFE as, in spite of the relatively low level of participation, a wide variety of important insights were provided that can help to give direction to the work of the WG; and for the ADEA as a whole in that it offers lessons of what electronic discussions can and cannot contribute to educational debates across the continent.

In terms of substance the Forum confirms that the importance of focussing on non-formal education, its characteristics, its dynamics, its development and its potential. It has shown that many educationists and educators believe that there is something unique across this set of educational experiences that is worth looking at, and that needs protection and promotion, not as a single model, but in all its diversity of forms and responses to people’s needs. Moreover, it has shown that the need for such type of educational responses may be much greater at present than before – in the light of the worsening social and economic situation, and the grave consequences of political conflict and collapse of state structures in countries across the continent. Directly or indirectly, the Forum shows that EFA can only be effectively reached if it takes these conditions into account, together with the many NFE initiatives already developed by communities, NGOs, and increasingly governments.

But the Forum has also highlighted that the work on NFE, as well as FE, needs to be more contextualised, in order to be effective and have a significant impact on people’s lives. This contextualisation is in the first instance related to the wider political, social, economic and cultural environment within which people, institutions and states struggle with developing relevant education of ‘good’ quality for everyone. This includes the manner in which macro-conditions and decision-making impact on what opportunities are available to whom and for what purposes.

Contextualisation is also related to the immediate educational environment of NFE, in terms of the wider array of NFE forms that are being created and the fundamental relations between NFE as an overall category of provisions (however defined) and the formal education system. Both programme development and policy work needs to be more cognisant of its focus and ramifications within the wider environment. Hence, it needs to be more subjected to democratic debate and to the forging of meaningful partnerships.

The Forum confirms that there is a wealth of ideas, experiences and perspectives around Africa that needs to be taken seriously. It also needs to be further mobilised for purposes of educational development. Yet, while this electronic medium produced a valuable sample of such viewpoints, it is too limited in its reach to serve as a modality for ensuring broad-based participation. It is certainly not suitable for generating deeper conversations among educators or producing actual debates. It appears therefore that the WG will need to consider complementary approaches, whereby focused national and sub-regional dialogue among stakeholders in face-to-face settings is complemented by ongoing electronic interactions within stakeholders groups, such as researchers, planners, statisticians, or quality-assurance personnel.