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SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF MACEDONIAN ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

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Abstract

In the period of globalization adult learning needs to respect the unity of human beings as citizens, individuals and workers. Social relations, personal development, cultural and human values are important too, because the internationalization of work is leading to greater integration of labor markets across national boundaries and this has strong implications for economic, social and cultural identities. Globalization and the dramatic innovations in technology are affecting the lives of individuals as well as societies. While global competition, communication networks, rapid investment flows and technological innovations have brought success to some enterprises, inequalities have widened and poverty persists in vast segments of society.

Many people would think that the notions of adult learning have nothing in common. In fact, most people - including many education specialists - think of literacy as a short, remedial, non-formal educational provision for poor youth and adults who did not go to school when they were children.

This paper is not the result of research; it should be seen as a policy document which makes statements and suggestions based on the resources instead. Although it is not possible to cover all aspects, this paper will address some of these contextual issues. I will in particular focus on the role of the Macedonian State and how adult learning and education has been used as an "instrument" to respond to the political/economic pressures for change during recent years.

Key words: adult learning, socio-economic context of adult learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Macedonian approaches to adult learning and education must be understood within the

specific social, political and economic context within which they have evolved.

Adult learning has been neglected over the past two decades within national and

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international agendas. The Education for All goals [1,2] prioritized children and primary education. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (2000-2015) does not even include literacy within MDG education goals.

Recommendations against investing in adult learning and in adult education in general, promoted by the World Bank since the late 1980s vis a vis developing country, were based on two grounds:

(a) Scarce resources and need to prioritize children's education and primary school, and

(b) Low cost-effectiveness of adult learning programmes¹. But, neither of these arguments is valid:

Because adult learning are intimately related and thus cannot be viewed as an option, and

Because the low cost-effectiveness argument was not based on sound evidence and knowledge of the field, and has been acknowledged and rectified in recent years by the World Bank² [3,4,5].

2. DEFINITIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING

Definitions of adult learning vary, but generally adult learning can be defined as all forms of learning undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training. Most education and training systems are still focused on the education and learning of

young people and limited progress has been made in changing systems to mirror the need for learning through the lifespan.

Adult learning has not always gained the recognition it deserves in terms of visibility, policy prioritization and resources, notwithstanding the political emphasis placed on lifelong learning in recent years.

Adult learning can help ensure immigration, which has the potential to be a partial counterbalance to an ageing population and to meet skills and labor shortages in certain sectors, can take place in a way that is beneficial to both migrants and the host country. Adult learning has a key role to play in responding to social exclusions.

Adult education and learning can be described through five more or less inter-relate strands of education, training and learning. The first strand of adult education provides basic initial education up to the level of upper secondary school. The second strand consists of adult education at university and higher education level. Post secondary vocational education covers those forms of education, which in practice presuppose completion of upper secondary education and are directed towards a specific vocational area or aim at satisfying specific labor market needs. Labor market training should be looked upon as a separate strand of adult education and training.

Public and private benefits include greater employability, increased productivity and

¹Both arguments can be found in World Bank's 1995 education policy document, *Priorities and Strategies for Education*. The low cost-effectiveness argument was based on one single study (Abadzi 1994) commissioned by the WB, and the data used referred to the findings of the Experimental World Literacy Programme implemented in the late 60s (between 1967 and 1972) in 11 countries (see Lind and Johnston 1990).

²Now, on the contrary, some WB-supported studies (see for example Carr-Hill 2001, conducted in Uganda) conclude that adult (out-of-school) education may be more cost-effective than primary (school) education. This is a tricky argument that may lead to see adult and non-formal education as a substitute for children's schooling.

better-quality employment, reduced expenditure in areas such as unemployment benefits, welfare payments and early-retirement pensions, but also increased social returns in terms of improved civic participation, better health, lower incidence of criminality, and greater individual well-being and fulfillment.

At the present time adult learning is a continuous and recurrent learning process. With adult learning becoming increasingly integrated into the productive process, it is now being regarded as an important commodity itself and one capable of making a profit. Public or private institutions may therefore alter the nature of adult learning because of profit motive. Education policy-maker will therefore have a very important function to keep at least some of the adult education activities for the personal and collective development of people in general.

The goal is not eradicating adult learning, but rather ensuring adult learning for all - ensuring literate families, literate communities and literate societies. Achieving this goal implies working simultaneously on four complementary fronts:

a) Ensuring learning and education for all adults, not only through specific programmes for adults but also as part of family and community education efforts, and through all possible means;

b) Promoting a literate environment and a literate culture at local and national level, stimulating not only reading but also writing, and engaging all institutions, forms and technologies related to literacy (e.g. libraries,

schools, newspapers, radio, TV, digital technologies, etc.); and

c) Dealing with poverty in a structural manner, not only through ad-hoc focalized interventions but mainly through sound and fair economic and social policies. There is no way to achieve quality education for all and literacy for all without eliminating poverty, ensuring equity and promoting national human and economic development³.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF ADULT LEARNERS

Selective exposition, selective distortion and selective retention amplify with age. Therefore, in the adult, learning is acquired more and more through experience. Adults also prefer ready made formulas that are the pattern that their brain recognizes. Adults need to integrate new learning experiences within the whole of their current knowledge structure. They will be better able to learn if the facilitator links the ideas, concepts to their own experience.

As characteristics of adult's learners I can notice:

a) Adults self-concept moves from being a dependent personality toward on of being a self-directing person.

Adult's learners:

- tend to be voluntary learners
- believe the decision to return to education is an important one
- believe that education will be beneficial

b) Adults accumulate a growing reservoir

³This fourth strategy is essential. Literacy for all and education for all require trans-sectoral policies. Education policies must be intertwined with economic and social policies. See: Torres, Rosa María, "Justicia económica y justicia social 12 tesis para el cambio educativo", Movimiento Internacional Fe y Alegría/Entreculturas, Madrid, 2005.

of experience that becomes a foundation and a resource in their learning

c) Adults' readiness to learn becomes increasingly oriented to the development tasks of their social roles.

d) Adults' time perspective changes, they need to see the immediate application of the knowledge not a future use or application of the knowledge

e) Adults' reason to learn changes from external motivators to internal motivators. They move from learning about a subject to learning how to learn and solve problems.

4. LEARNING IS ESSENTIAL FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FOR IMPROVING PEOPLE'S QUALITY OF LIFE

"Human development is about much more than the rise or fall of national incomes. It is about creating an environment in which people can develop their full potential and lead productive, creative lives in accord with their needs and interests. People are the real wealth of nations. Development is thus about expanding the choices people have to lead lives that they value. And it is thus much more than economic growth, which is only a means - if a very important one - of enlarging people's choices. Fundamental to enlarging these choices is building human capabilities - the range of things that people can do or be in life. The most basic capabilities for human development are to lead long and healthy lives, to be knowledgeable, to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living, and to be able to participate in the life of the community. Without these, many

choices are simply not available, and many opportunities in life remain inaccessible". [7,8]

In recent years, learning has been framed in the economic logic that dominates the world and the education field in particular. Internationally, current dominant trends link adult literacy to "livelihoods" [9], to "poverty alleviation" amongst the extremely poor, and as a preventive strategy to "prevent children's failure in school."

However, attributing literacy per se the capacity to change people's lives, by impacting significantly on their income, employment, or poverty, is not realistic. Today, basic literacy does not make a difference between getting and not getting a job, much less getting a good job. Unemployment is high and on the rise worldwide, especially in the South. Millions of high school graduates and professionals are unemployed, and millions migrate to the North in search of better life conditions. According to ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), the possibility to break the cycle of poverty implies today in this region at least twelve years of schooling⁴.

And yet, literacy improves the quality of life of people in many and most profound ways, not necessarily economic in nature. As has been traditionally acknowledged, literacy is related to human dignity, self-esteem, liberty, identity, autonomy, critical thinking, knowledge, creativity, participation, empowerment, social awareness and social transformation, all of them important human satisfactions, beyond material conditions.

Adult learners often refer to reading and

⁴See ECLAC/CEPAL 2000 <http://www.eclac.cl>

writing as "a companion", "a weapon to fight loneliness", "a means to travel without travelling". Substituting the fingerprint with the writing of one's own name is the most important act of dignity for an illiterate person, affected by shame and low self-esteem.

Measuring the personal, family and social impact of learning in terms of improving people's quality of life, implies going beyond narrow economic frameworks and indicators, identifying and creating new, more integral and qualitative indicators.

5. ISSUES IN UNDERSTANDING ADULT LEARNING

Despite the plethora of journals, books and research conferences devoted to adult learning across the world, we are very far from a universal understanding of adult learning. Even though warnings are frequently issued that at best only a multitude of context and domain specific theories are likely to result, the energy expended on developing a general theory of adult learning shows no sign of abating. Judged by epistemological, communicative and critically analytic criteria, theory development in adult learning is weak and is hindered by the persistence of myths that are etched deeply into adult educators' minds. These myths (which, taken together, comprise something of an academic orthodoxy in adult education) hold that adult learning is inherently joyful, that adults are innately self-directed learners, that good educational practice always meets the needs articulated by learners themselves and that there is a uniquely adult learning process as well as a uniquely adult form of practice.

6. THE ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

The Republic of Macedonia has been going through a difficult period of economic transition. This process has resulted in low participation in the labour market, high unemployment rates and increasing levels of poverty. Despite significant progress in macroeconomic stabilization and the process of privatization, which is almost complete, job creation has been limited. As a result, many people end up working in the informal sector.

The Republic of Macedonia needs to continue its effort to improve the quality of its education and training system. At present the education system is undergoing substantial reforms, while facing the challenge of decentralization. Adult learning and education should be fully developed in line with the specific strategy elaborated.

The new educational policy in the Republic of Macedonia has posed several important aims for establishing sound foundations for development. The established aims forward the education towards:

- Improving the efficiency;
- Building standards in the compulsory, secondary and higher education;
- Improving the conditions for education of young people from 12 to 19 years;
- Creating conditions for education of the adults.

The processes of democratization of the whole society and respect of human rights have created foundations for building democracy in education by respecting the two basic principles:

- Principle of equality (justice, accessibility and respect of rights of all

without difference in sex, age, racial, ethnical or religious background, place of residence and social status, capability and health condition);

- Principle of participation of subjects in education (freedom of expression, choice and adequate participation in the decision-making in the decision-making in the educational practice, as well as acceptance of responsibilities).

The adult education and learning in Republic of Macedonia is regulated by the laws in the area of education and the area of labour and social policy.

In the schools for education of the adults and the 'workers' universities in the country, there are programs for completion of elementary education of adults together with instruction in courses for vocational training which last a few months. The programs and courses for two, three or more years of vocational education and training are represented in the public secondary schools. Besides fulltime students, these programs can be enrolled by other candidates, who have a need to acquire vocational education by taking exams. In fact, there is no difference in the content of the curriculum and programs of study for full-time or part-time students. The programs for completion of the elementary education of adults are composed of core and elective part. They are adjusted to the experience of the physical education, technical education and music), while there are opportunities for vocational training, mostly through courses which last a few months, but not more than a year. Beside the certificate for completed elementary education, the candidates receive certain certificates for their vocational training.

Since the market provides many leisure goods, why should the Macedonian State provide, or indeed, subsidies some forms of

adult learning with no obvious vocational element? The Macedonian argument is that these courses have substantial social externalities. They bring together individuals who share ideas and knowledge, thereby encouraging a sense of community and strengthening the democratic process. Indeed the way that adult learning developed has played an important role in determining the form that many political institutions have taken.

6.1. Major problems and challenges for adult learning in Republic of Macedonia

My analysis has shown that it is necessary to reform the adult learning, which should be based on the following postulates:

- o The adults learning is a basic human right and the basis for fulfillment of all the other personal and social rights;
- o The adults learning, especially informal education has to have equal treatment with full time formal education;
- o The adults learning is a crucial potential force for democratization and development of a civic society;
- o The adults learning, is the basic factors for economic development and provide opportunities for the workforce to be included into the economic trend;
- o The adults learning, is a form of partnership which is realized in cooperation among the state subjects interested for education, professional association and employers.

Having this entire mind, it is necessary to lead a more consistent educational policy in this area (which now in Macedonia is incomplete and insufficiently regulated). This presupposes, above all:

- o Completed legal regulation of adult education;

- o Establishment of a system of adult education by defining the conditions, criteria, and standards for the activity and organization of the institutions for adults education;

- o Development of methodology for creation of certified programs for secondary vocational adult education, which will be provided within the school and other institutions and forms of informal education;

- o Creating a data-base of institutions which provide adult education;

- o Making of short and long-term programs for improvement of the educational structure of the employed in the institutions for adult education

6.2. Priorities in the system development of adult learning on national level policy in Republic of Macedonia

6.2.1. Urgent institutional reforms

1. To establish of the 'whole government's adult learning policy instead of fragmented portfolio bureaucracy of ministries

2. Creating consonance and open bridges between the actors of labor market

3. The urgent development of the competence based training and learning in all areas, levels and forms of learning

4. Investment into the research and development of adult learning

5. Extensive introduction and practice of the Open Method of Co-ordination at local, regional and national level

6. Initiate the wide-ranging concept and practice of learning organization

7. Extension of the culture of learning

8. Supporting innovations through transnational co-operation

9. To ensure a longer working life, there

is a need for up-skilling and increasing adult learning opportunities for older workers.

10. An expansion of learning provision for retired people is needed, as people are reaching retirement in better physical and mental health, and post-retirement life expectancy is extending. Learning should be an integral part of this new phase in their lives.

7. CONCLUSION

Compared to most other countries, Macedonian adult learning, education and training is based on a poor socio-economic basis. I can on the one hand observe a public involvement, in terms of direct and indirect investments in this field. In the same time, I can furthermore observe an involvement by private enterprises, illustrated by the very high level of investment in development and research, which necessarily also involves training. In addition to this, the low dispersion in net wages combined with a high level of taxation means that indirect, individual contributions to learning and education are substantial. This strong consensus on the importance of learning, education and training does not, however, solve all dilemmas faced by a knowledge economy like Macedonian.

Increasing participation in adult learning and making it more equitable is crucial. This will include developing high-quality guidance and information systems, based on a more learner-centered approach, as well as targeted financial incentives to individuals and s The new paradigms and practices of lifelong learning have to be supported and completed by a series of surveys, analyses and research which feeds innovation in the field of lifelong learning.

Better learning and education opportunities for all across:

- Establish the close relations between education (universities) and employers and create conditions for public-private partnership in education;
- Improve the quality of learning and education, promote training measures, retraining and further training by establishing a lifelong learning system with the identification and recognition of competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning to allow work and education mobility in the formal system;
- Introduce a systematic approach to adult learning and coordinate activities at national level, strengthening expert support to the adult education system;
- Use the experience of adult learning in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe;
- Provide a discussion forum for the heads of institutes and departments of adult learning in the region's universities and colleges it has contributed to the tightening of international co-operation and the exchange of ideas;
- Laid the foundations for joint development of European adult education courses.

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