

# **Cross Cultural Learning at a Crossroad: Making a Difference in Intercultural Adult Education in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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**Abstract:** Approaches in achieving and implementing a shared vision for adult education concept applicable to Sub-Saharan African contexts are almost nonexistent when it concerns strategies conceived within the global context. This situation has limited the understanding of complex efforts on building sustainable development oriented educational mechanisms that will lead to more effective and adequate contextual results in African states south of the Sahara.

## **Introduction**

While concepts of Adult Education more than ever before are being holographic for human progress at all levels of the economy through the application of cross-cultural development concepts, this is hardly the case with African countries south of the Sahara. Adult education is still being looked upon by countries south of the Sahara as a western concept of life parallel to their everyday experience requiring that local values and concepts must be injected in mainstream Adult Education as an entry point for community centered alternative path of Adult Education within the globalized setting.

This constitutes an ideological barrier and underscores the pertinence of the social context of adult learning within the sub Saharan cultural surrounding and the development challenges that must be addressed in the domain of Adult Education

Building on the works of Denzin (2008), Gboku (2007), and others, this article examines Adult Education and social development in a global economy geared towards the consideration of a wide range of economic policies and mechanisms that would lead to more effective and adequate results oriented objectives for African counties south of the Sahara.

By applying a cross-cultural development analysis frame, the paper is contributing to a better understanding of the fundamental changes in the nature and goals of Sub-Saharan transformative learning model which seeks to reduce a dominant conceptual paradigm that annihilates African cultural values and principles as fundamental parameters on which Adult Education and community development principles should be conceived and executed. This study thus explores the sub-Saharan African context of adult education, its basis as an oral community, analyzes paradigms that unravel its sociocultural specificities, and assert the need for an African context-oriented adult education scheme that underpins the socio-cultural dimension of transformative learning as basics for an integrated participatory meaningful Adult Education program for African states south of the Sahara.

## **Adult Education within the Sub Saharan African Context**

Based on the present state of Adult Education in sub Saharan Africa, it is worth mentioning that there is no regional policy that clearly articulates a socio-cultural integrated Adult Education policy. This is a direct interpretation of the social concept that Adult Education

is the affair of the northern nations that hold the solutions to their underdevelopment debacle.

This study emphasises on the point that, in an era of increasing globalization, a comprehensive inclusive global economic society would have significant potentials to contribute to achieving universal collective development goals, if inadequacies in developing nations' organizational and technological knowhow are adjusted to create avenues for participating in decision making processes and ensuring that meaningful and context-bound economic values are sustained within the global economy context that integrates cultural diversity in adult education and development strategies.

Adult Education is usually considered as any form of learning undertaken by, or provided for mature men and women outside the formal schooling system. The main targets are specifically defined as youth (girls and boys over 15 years of age) as well as women and men, generally poor or socially disadvantaged. Although literacy continues to be at its heart, Adult Education also includes *numeracy*, problem-solving and life skills, as well as other knowledge. The notion of Adult Education is often used interchangeably with other notions such as literacy, adult basic education, lifelong learning, continuing education, adult non-formal education, etc. For the purpose of this study, Adult Education is understood as a transmission process of general, technical or vocational knowledge, as well as skills, values and attitudes, which takes place out of the formal education system with a view to remedying early education inadequacies of mature people, or equipping them with the knowledge and cultural elements required for their self-fulfilment, and active participation in the social, economic, and political life of their societies.

### **Adult Education and the Global Concept of Development**

The concept of development is complex as it has several connotations. However, Quynh Lê and Thao Lê (2011) have identified three main meanings in which development is generally used, namely: (i) as a vision, description, or measure of the state of being of a desirable society; (ii) as an historical process of social change in which societies are transformed over long periods; and (iii) as consisting of deliberate efforts aimed at improvement on the part of various agencies, including governments, all kinds of organizations and social movements. For the purpose of this study, development will be referred to as a process of economic, social, political, and cultural change engineered in a given society by the efforts of all stakeholders, both internal and external - including the local communities, the Government, the private sector, the civil society organizations, the NGOs and the technical and financial development partners – with a view to improving the conditions of life of the population in a sustainable way. Implicit in this definition is the assumption that development requires, inter alia, the formation of human capital and social capital, some of the main factors of production required for a broad-based economic growth that provides the ground for sustainable poverty reduction

### **Compounding Issues on Practical Adult Education Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa**

After establishing the positive relationships between Adult Education and development, as shown by various studies, it is important to examine the extent to which this mode of education has actually being solicited to foster social, economic, and political progress in Sub-Saharan African countries. To be more specific, we will attempt an assessment of the contribution of adult education in promoting economic growth, reducing poverty, consolidating democracy, and harnessing the opportunities provided by globalization in Africa, as apparent from national development strategies and development assistance programs of international cooperation agencies.

An historical analysis of adult education in Africa countries south of the Sahara in general

and Cameroon in particular reveals that this mode of learning has experienced ups and downs in recent years' development policies and strategies. Adult Education was a highly dynamic sub-sector in the post- independence era when it was quasi exclusively reduced to literacy. Governments and aid agencies resorted to this form of education to enhance reading, writing, and numeracy skills among the vast majority of African masses. The momentum was kept until the 1970s when Adult Education became even more popular, being associated with innovativeness, and seen as having a great developmental import. Adult Education enjoyed its *lettre de noblesse* during that period thanks to the works of Paulo Freire, in Latin America, with his famous book "The Pedagogy of the Oppressed," and other important thinkers and pedagogues in other parts of the world. Promoting essentially consciousness-raising or conscientization, liberation, identity restoration, the voice of the poor, critical thinking, etc., this "adult basic education", as Torres pointed out "helped spread a number of pedagogical principles still considered valid today not only for adult basic education but for education as a whole: respect for the learner, dialogue, participatory approaches, active learning, cooperation and solidarity in the teaching-learning relationship." (Torres, 2003, p. 63)

The popularity of adult education in Africa started eroding in the early 80s, concomitantly with the rise of formal basic education. The education of children, especially the poor ones, was perceived by national governments as more important than the education of their parents. Consequently, a harsh competition, in terms of resources, was engaged between Adult Education and primary education. Torres explains the erosion of the interest in Adult Education by the "overall erosion of the nation/State and of the role of the State/ government, of the development paradigm and, in the education arena, of mass education and public and free schooling" (Idem).

The same bias is observed in the recommendations made in the Report of the Commission for Africa to ensure that educational opportunities are available to all. Indeed, in the five proposals that the Commission made in order to leave no one out, none addresses the concerns of adults. The call of the Commission to the international community to provide an additional \$7–8 billion per year in order to achieve education for all in Africa relates exclusively to formal education. The African Union is one of the rare organizations that has proposed a well-balanced comprehensive education strategy which pays proper attention to the issue of Adult Education. The AU's Education Strategic Framework for Deadline 2015 commits the pan-African organization to take the necessary measures for obtaining full commitment by African governments to the execution of internationally agreed education covenants: Education for All, secondary education, technical and vocational education, higher education, and adult and continuing education, the United Nations Literacy Decade, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development – in the overall context of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (Commission of the African Union, April 2005, p. 5).

The fact that formal schooling is an unquestionable priority in the education sector does not justify Adult Education being left out. To make children compete with their parents in the call for a negation of Adult Education which could be so dangerous as it may create a break between two entities that are mutually dependent. A child's schooling performance is largely determined by the level of education of his or her parents. Therefore, trying to achieve primary education at the expense of adult education defeats its own purpose. This is the real present debacle with Adult Education south of the Sahara. Besides, it is contradictory to declare war against poverty, which affects more adults (the population of age 15 and above) than children, and disproportionately to concentrate all efforts on the education of the latter. The education challenge in the impoverished world regions like Sub-Saharan Africa is not to set priority targets

between youth and adults, but to reconcile the interests of both categories in an integrated educational process that ensures human development for the attainment of the MDGs and the end of poverty. In the same vein, Jeffrey Sachs (2005, p. 258) suggests that “with some planning, villages around the world could be helped to engage in continuing adult education on issues of pressing, life- and-death concern, such as, for example, how AIDS is contracted and spread, how malaria can be controlled, the role of hygiene in food preparation and preservation, the use of fertilizers, and so forth. Such relevant knowledge, if suitably presented, could inform rural societies on a massive scale.

Even if the resurgence of Adult Education in the developmental programs of African countries for the last 25 years is still weak, the phenomenon cannot be disregarded, as it is supposed to be instrumental in improving the socio-economic and political situation facing the continent. Sachs (2010) confirms this view when she explains that “in the case of developing countries, the scenario for revitalization of adult basic education is the continued expansion – rather than the reduction – of poverty, unemployment, marginalization, delinquency, migration and social despair and social revolt” (p. 76).

Consequently, as long as poverty remains a distinctive feature of Sub-Saharan Africa, Adult Education will impose itself as an unavoidable ingredient of development processes. This is why the vast majority of African countries have elaborated Adult Education policies as parts of national development strategies even though non-formal education and literacy programs rarely receive more than 5% of national education budgets. Ethiopia is a good case where the potential of Adult Education is recognized. Thus, the Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP) assigns to Adult Education an important responsibility, in principle, in the process of economic growth and poverty reduction. This is projected through a functional adult literacy program for youth and adults, aimed at enhancing community participation in development. Another action consists of offering basic skills training to youth and adults in Community Skills Training Centres and example that many Sub-Saharan countries have to emulate.

#### **Civil Society Organizations and Adult Education in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Though many civil society organizations are present in the field of Adult Education in almost all African countries, some other Pan African and International organizations are also playing a great role in the domain. They recognize Adult Education as an important tool for economic development and poverty reduction, specifically in promoting health, agriculture and rural development, water management, gender, and in fighting HIV/AIDS. One of such institutions is the African Development Bank (ADB). As stated in its 2012 Education Sector Policy, one of the priority areas of the ADB assistance to education is quality basic education, understood as going beyond formal primary education and the first cycle of secondary education to involve also learning processes in non-formal contexts such as literacy and other programs for youth and adults.

Although ADB included adult education in its education strategy since 1985, its actions on the ground relating to this sub-sector have been somewhat very limited. Up to date, priority has been given to secondary education, including general and vocational education, technical education and teacher training.

One of the main lessons that can be learned from the ADB’s experience in assisting adult education in Sub Saharan Africa is that, its investments in this area have been too thinly spread over many operations instead of being concentrated on a few critical issues. This lack of selectivity, while available resources have been substantial, has not helped ensure the kind of

effectiveness on the ground that is required to decisively face the requirements of human capital development on a large scale. Another shortcoming of the ADB similar to that of many other organizations past experience in Adult Education resides in the fact that its interventions in this sub-sector were undertaken on an ad hoc basis, depending on the requests received from member countries. No coherent approach defined within a strategic framework existed and this is the prevailing paradigm case with almost all the NGOs and National Associations involved in Adult Education in Sub Region. Consequently, it has not always been easy to address the issues at hand systematically. Following the 1980s economic crises with subsequent readjustments and structural readjustment programmes, many social and human capital building organizations were faced with internal institutional capacity problems. Adult Education has since then become a sui generis scientific discipline within the education sector, with its specific subject, methods and approaches (andragogy), distinct from formal schooling aimed at children through pedagogical methods. Many African states have not made the necessary arrangements for training or recruiting the expertise required for processing and managing Adult Education interventions and the consequences are here present: The inability for communities to stand on their own and be masters of their own destiny in the struggles for economic and technological development is a daunting impediment to the progress of Adult education. The foregoing pitfalls need to be resolved if African nations have to achieve any positive development impact through its Adult Education investments.

The idea is to mainstream Adult Education in Sub Saharan Africa's vision and in its strategic plan for poverty reduction within an inclusive holistic perspective whereby support to Adult Education will not only target literacy programs, but will encompass a wide range of adult learning opportunities, including non-formal education, literacy campaigns, functional literacy, sensitization activities, and alternative modes of knowledge transmission processes that aim at ensuring human development with a view to combating poverty.

In this perspective, Adult Education will be considered as a cross-cutting intercultural issue to be integrated in any project and program of any relevant sector, and not be considered as exclusively "*belonging*" to the education sector. In other words, the upcoming strategy will make sure that adult education is involved in all development activities that contribute to the formation of human capital. This strategy will also certainly address the issue of the internal institutional capacity of the countries by foreseeing the building up of a core of experts specializing in adult education. There is therefore an urging need for African countries south of the Sahara to earmark adequate financial resources for adult education investments in the light of the harmonization and alignment principles universally agreed upon.

### **Conclusions**

It has been argued and demonstrated in this paper that Adult Education, referred to broadly as a transmission process of general, technical, or vocational knowledge, as well as skills, values and attitudes meant for mature people, is a powerful tool for development, including poverty reduction and attainment of the MDGs. Yet, this mode of education has not historically received the attention that it deserves in African development efforts. Adult Education has been often recognized, in theory, as necessary to enhance development, especially in this era of globalization, not only because it produces human capital, but also because it enables people to become well-informed citizens, capable of thinking critically and owning their destiny through active participation. Unfortunately, this recognition has not often been translated on the ground into substantial and relevant programs. The low amounts of budgetary resources devoted to Adult Education by African countries reflect the low priority given to this education

sub-system by the donor community, despite its inclusion in the global development initiatives adopted since the 90s. If this trend continues, Africa will be deprived again of a significant part of its human resources so much needed to meet its development challenges. African leaders and interdisciplinary scholars should not be allowed such a state of affairs to perpetrate otherwise the ensuing social, economic and political consequences would be catastrophic for a continent that already represents the most impoverished part of the world. Our hope is that the time has come for Adult Education to be granted top priority in national and global efforts for reducing poverty and meeting the MDGs. This cannot be done by merely proclaiming “*Decades*” or convening international forums on the issue. International institutions must act. They must understand the African plight and support efforts geared towards the building and establishment of an African council for Adult Education Research: “The Sub-Saharan African Adult Education Research Council.”

The effective use of intercultural Adult Education for development and poverty reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa will require that three conditions be met. First, each country will have to define a coherent and comprehensive strategy for the sub-sector. In using a holistic approach, this strategy will provide sound orientations and action plans for preparing adults, as responsible and active national citizens to fight for and cope with the on-going process of globalization that should equally address the needs of the poor, environmental concerns, and the spread of democracy. In addition to putting emphasis on human capital formation, this new strategy will promote gender justice, peace and democracy through reinforcing civil society and enhancing human rights in sub-Saharan Africa. To this vain, African leaders and development scholars must show genuine commitment in the recognition and the actual implementation of adult education policies in their development efforts. This will require appropriate reforms, capacity building efforts and adequate allocation of resources. For this reason, it will be indispensable for the international community to scale up its aid both quantitatively and qualitatively by increasing it and applying the harmonization and alignment principles. Making Adult Education a truly intercultural strategic development tool can effectively contribute to changing Sub Saharan Africa’s dreaded socioeconomic/ technological situation and ending poverty in our lifetime on this continent

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