Rethinking literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the International Conference on Adult Education

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Abstract
Despite general agreement that a 21st-century learning society must also be a literate society, there is still a long way to go to achieve a broad consensus on how to achieve this within an explicit lifelong learning vision. The Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII – June 2022) is an excellent opportunity to rethink literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in order to fully tap its transformative potential in the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By using a theoretical framework of lifelong literacy, this article analyses the main challenges associated with applying the lifelong learning principle to literacy, in particular in the context of aligning CONFINTEA’s review and improvement of adult learning and education (ALE) strategies with SDG processes. The authors demonstrate that a limited understanding of literacy as part of lifelong learning still prevails, and that literacy promotion suffers from ambiguity and dissonances. They also provide analyses of literacy policies, strategies and programmes that have been successful in adopting a lifelong learning approach, drawing out some important lessons on how this can be achieved. In particular, the authors argue, more attention needs to be paid to the demand side of a literate environment and to motivation, enabling continuity of learning by making literacy part of people’s broader learning purposes. To contribute to the ongoing discussion on reframing literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the potential development of a new “framework for action” during CONFINTEA VII, this article offers three fundamental considerations that should inform policy and strategic planning with regard to conceptual orientation, programmatic responses and institutional connections.

Keywords literacy · lifelong learning · lifelong literacy · adult learning and education (ALE) · Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) · International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA)
Résumé
Repenser l’alphabétisation sous l’angle de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie dans l’optique des Objectifs de développement durable et de la Conférence internationale sur l’éducation des adultes – Bien que l’on s’entende globalement sur le fait qu’une société apprenante du 21\textsuperscript{e} siècle doit aussi être une société alphabète, il reste encore beaucoup de chemin à parcourir pour atteindre un large consensus sur la façon d’y parvenir dans l’optique d’une vision explicite de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie. La septième Conférence internationale sur l’apprentissage des adultes (CONFINTEA VII, en juin 2022) offrira une excellente occasion de repenser l’alphabétisation du point de vue de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie afin de tirer pleinement profit de son potentiel transformateur pour atteindre les Objectifs de développement durable des Nations Unies (ODD). Se basant sur un cadre théorique de l’alphabétisation tout au long de la vie, cet article analyse les principaux défis qui se présentent lorsque l’on applique le principe de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie à l’alphabétisation, en particulier lorsque l’on aligne le bilan de la CONFINTEA et l’amélioration des stratégies d’apprentissage et d’éducation des adultes (AEA) sur les processus des ODD. Les auteurs démontrent que la notion limitée d’alphabétisation comme faisant partie de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie continue de prévaloir et que l’ambiguïté et les divergences pèsent sur la promotion de l’alphabétisation. Ils nous livrent aussi des analyses des politiques, stratégies et programmes d’alphabétisation qui ont réussi à adopter une approche de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie en exploitant un certain nombre de leçons importantes qui nous enseignent comment y parvenir. Les auteurs affirment en particulier qu’il faut accorder davantage d’attention à la demande d’un environnement alphabète et à la motivation, ce qui offre une continuité de l’apprentissage en faisant de l’alphabétisation une partie des objectifs éducatifs plus larges des personnes. Pour contribuer au débat en cours sur la redéfinition de l’alphabétisation sous l’angle de l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie dans le contexte du Programme de développement durable à l’horizon 2030 de l’ONU et au développement potentiel d’un nouveau « cadre d’action » durant la CONFINTEA VII, le présent article envisage trois réflexions fondamentales visant à orienter la planification politique et stratégique en tenant compte de l’orientation conceptuelle, des réponses programmatiques et des liens institutionnels.

Setting the scene
There is general consensus that the United Nations’ ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be achieved without learning. Consequently, the lifelong learning paradigm has made its way into the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), which is dedicated to education. Its overarching aim, “Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all” (WEF 2016, p. 15) is associated with seven outcome Targets (4.1–4.7) and three “means of implementation” (4.a–4.c) (ibid., pp. 35–55). Progress is measured using 43 global and thematic indicators (UIS 2018). The pursuit of this goal requires the development of education
systems which are characterised by holistic design and high levels of permeability for learners of all ages to flexibly pursue their lifelong learning pathways.

However, continuous, independent and lifelong learning is not possible without mastering other key competencies – in particular, literacy. Autonomous learning largely depends on access to text-based knowledge, information and communication, as well as the ability to critically process such material. Those without a minimum level of literacy proficiency are potentially excluded from sources of information, services and a range of opportunities in their lives. The accelerating pace of change, with patterns of living becoming more complex and less predictable, has underlined that a 21st-century learning society must also be a literate society. There is plenty of evidence that literacy and numeracy are instrumental in the achievement of several SDGs, and thus in decreasing human vulnerability and increasing sustainability (e.g. UNESCO 2014, 2017a; UIL 2016a; UIS and GEMR 2017). Literacy contributes to transforming lives (e.g. Freire 1970; Giroux 1997), and the benefits go beyond individuals (UNESCO 2015) and generations (Reder 2020). In Amartya Sen’s terminology, literacy is a “capability” through which people are able to “lead the kind of life they have reason to value” (Sen 1999, p. 109).

Since the 2015 adoption of the Incheon Declaration for Education 2030, which “sets out a new vision for education for the next fifteen years” (WEF 2016, p. 5), the application of the lifelong learning principle to SDG Target 4.6, namely to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (ibid., p. 46), has come up against considerable challenges (Hanemann 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated the prevailing “global learning crisis” with hundreds of millions of people who are not “on track” with their learning (Giannini et al. 2021), has not helped to constructively address such challenges. On the contrary, the push towards rapid “recovery” of education through prioritisation of children’s school-based learning, while simultaneously promoting “ways to use digital technology to accelerate the development of foundational literacy and numeracy skills” (UNESCO et al. 2021), has reinforced a narrow focus in the rebuilding of national education systems. This raises the concern that the expanded vision of youth and adult literacy which is made explicit in the explanatory text of SDG Target 4.6 – that literacy is “at the core of basic education and an indispensable foundation for independent learning” (WEF 2016, p. 46) – continues to be ignored, and neglected as a human right, on both international and national policy agendas.

The Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII – June 2022) is an excellent opportunity to examine ways in which literacy can be better addressed from a lifelong learning perspective. This also involves reflecting on how CONFINTEA’s review and improvement of ALE strategies on the one hand

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1 The acquisition, maintenance and continuous further development of literacy is a core task of basic education and therefore part of the right to education as recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948). Its foundational or essential character makes it a right which facilitates the attainment of other human rights.
and the pursuit of SDG 4 targets on the other can be brought closer together to create synergies that strengthen approaches to literacy and non-formal basic education. Specifically, this article discusses the following questions:

(1) What are the main challenges with regard to the application of the lifelong learning principle to literacy, in particular, in the context of CONFINTEA and the pursuit of the SDGs?

(2) Which literacy policies, strategies and programmes have managed to successfully adopt a lifelong learning approach, and what lessons can be drawn from those experiences?

(3) How can the pursuit of the SDGs and CONFINTEA’s review and improvement of ALE strategies contribute to advancing promising approaches to leave no one behind?

After unpacking the meaning of literacy from a lifelong learning perspective by proposing a theoretical framework for the further analysis of current trends, we aim to deepen understanding of existing challenges which have emerged in the application of lifelong learning approaches to literacy. Subsequently, we examine promising examples of policies, strategies and programmes that work towards “literate families, ‘literate communities’ and ‘literate societies’” (UIL 2017a, p. 1). We conclude our article with final sections that draw out lessons from policy and practice, and reflect on how aligning CONFINTEA’s review and improvement of ALE strategies with the pursuit of the SDGs can contribute to reinforcing a lifelong learning approach to literacy and non-formal basic education.

In seeking to unpack how literacy and lifelong learning are linked, both concepts first need to be clarified.

**The concept of lifelong learning**

While the lifelong learning paradigm is not new (Faure et al. 1972; Delors et al. 1996), and there is still no common understanding of its exact nature, we can observe a proliferation of approaches. Most of these are built on two foundational models: the human capital model and the humanistic model (Regmi 2015). Based on emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values, UNESCO has broadly defined lifelong learning as the “integration of learning and living, covering learning activities for people of all ages”, in all life contexts (e.g. home, school, workplace, community), through formal, non-formal and informal modalities, “which together meet a wide range of learning needs and demands” (UIL 2014, p. 2).

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2 According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), basic education “comprises primary education (first stage of basic education) and lower secondary education (second stage). It also covers a wide variety of non-formal and informal public and private activities intended to meet the basic learning needs of people of all ages” (UIS n.d.).
The concept of literacy

The issue of the increasing multidimensionality, multimodality, plurality and complexity of literacy, in the interface of oral, written and technology-supported communication has been described in many scholarly articles, reports and position papers (e.g. Barton et al. 2000; Benavot 2015; Hanemann 2015a; Lind 2008; Mills and Unsworth 2017; Oxenham 2008; Reder 2020; Street 2003, 2005; Torres 2006; UNESCO 2004, 2005, 2017b; UIL 2013a, 2017a). Literacy usually refers to a range of situated social practices comprising reading, writing and using numbers as mediated by written materials. This involves paying particular attention to how people use literacy in their (everyday) lives (Bartlett 2008; Reder et al. 2020; Street 2003). By emphasising the centrality of the practical uses of literacy, it is best described as a competence:

the (cap)ability of putting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively into action when dealing with (handwritten, printed or digital) text in the context of ever-changing demands (UIL 2017a, p. 2).

Correspondingly, numeracy implies the (cap)ability to use mathematics competently in a particular situation.3

A continuum of proficiency levels

The notion of literacy as a learning continuum of different proficiency levels postulates that there is no definite line between a “literate” and “non-literate” person. These designations refer to the two opposite ends of a continuum of proficiency levels which no longer allow for the simple dichotomy of “literate” versus “illiterate” which is often still reflected in statistical reports on “(il)literacy rates”. While required proficiency levels and how people apply their reading and writing skills depend on specific contexts and needs, the minimum literacy threshold to be reached by all citizens of a country needs to be established at the policy level. At the global level, SDG Target 4.6 establishes a minimum level of literacy proficiency “equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education” by 2030 (WEF 2016, p. 46).

To fully exploit the potential of literacy to contribute to “transforming our world” – the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015) – it is mandatory to bring related learning opportunities closer to people’s lives through integrated, multisectoral approaches that shift the focus from supply to demand (Easton 2014). Attaining such a transformative effect on the achievement of the SDGs implies working towards literate families, communities and societies made up of independent, confident and effective lifelong learners (UIL 2017a).

3 While acknowledging that literacy and numeracy involve different processes, in this article our use of the term literacy on its own refers to literacy in the broader sense, including numeracy.
Changing literacy environments

As literacy is primarily about communication, it is closely intertwined with language (e.g. Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester 2010; Olson et al. 1985; Robinson 2015; UNESCO 2003) and, increasingly, with multimodal uses of digital media and environments (e.g. Cope and Kalantzis 2015; Kalantzis et al. 2016). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, accompanied by a boost in the digitalisation of learning environments, proficiency in information-processing skills is even more closely linked to confident use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). In general, we can observe a shift towards teaching and learning the reading and writing of (spoken and written) language and numeracy as part of a broader set of capabilities, skills or key competencies. Yet, as literacy can no longer be perceived and treated as a stand-alone skill, it is problematic to name any basic skill “literacy”. Metaphorical uses of the term “literacy” in English (but not in other languages) – such as computer literacy, media literacy, health literacy, financial literacy, environmental literacy and future literacy, among many other examples – involve the risk of confusion (Hanemann 2015a, Lind 2008; UIL 2013a, 2017a) and should therefore be avoided.

Further, confounding literacy with learning and/or language can have far-reaching detrimental implications for policy, financing and practice. Consequently, the more complex the evolving concept of literacy becomes, the more urgent the need to agree on and use terminology that is clear and intelligible to everybody.

The concept of lifelong literacy

With the intent to unpack the meaning of an expanded vision of lifelong literacy and to examine current trends, we refer to an analytical framework suggested elsewhere (Hanemann 2015a). It discerns three closely interrelated analytical dimensions: literacy as a lifelong learning process, literacy as a life-wide learning process, and literacy as part of a set of holistic, sector-wide and cross-sector reforms towards lifelong learning systems.

(1) Literacy as a lifelong learning process emphasises the need to see the development, updating or maintenance of one’s literacy competencies as a continuous learning process, which occurs before, during and after school education, in and out of school, and through formal, non-formal and informal learning. This requires systems that allow flexible progression for learners through different proficiency levels and the provision of alternative pathways, thereby encouraging continuity of learning.

(2) Literacy as a life-wide learning process implies making use of the multiple existing resources which serve as literacy-stimulating learning environments and providing occasions to practise the skills – at home, at work, in the community, through media, on the internet, in libraries and in many other public and private spaces. Strengthening the demand side of a “literate environment” entails linking literacy to economic, social and cultural activities that people want or need to develop in their daily lives.
(3) Addressing literacy as part of a set of holistic, sector-wide and cross-sector reforms towards lifelong learning systems requires simultaneously working on complementary fronts and across different age groups, while strengthening preventive approaches (“leaving no one behind”). It further requires the development of flexible institutionalised learning systems that support learning at all stages of life and in a wide range of life situations (Hanemann 2015a).

Recurrent and new challenges in approaching literacy from a lifelong learning perspective

Previous analysis has concluded that there is still a long way to go to achieve a broad consensus on how to address literacy within a truly lifelong learning vision – in theory, policy and practice (Hanemann 2015a; 2019). The starting point for this examination of recurrent, existing and emerging challenges is a brief review of the recent history of the positioning of adult literacy (a) within the United Nations’ ambitious 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in particular in SDG 4, and (b) in CONFINTEA resolutions and outcome documents.

The position of adult literacy within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The Education 2030 Framework for Action for the implementation of SDG 4 (WEF 2016) was preceded by the Education for All (EFA) agenda (UNESCO 1990; WEF 2000), which aimed to reach its objectives by 2015. It had six goals, one of which (EFA Goal 4) was dedicated to adult literacy:

Achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for all adults (WEF 2000, p. 15).

However, EFA Goal 4 was not achieved by 2015 and was identified as one of the most neglected among the six EFA goals (UNESCO 2015).

Although the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD 2003–2012) and UNESCO’s Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE 2006–2015) advanced thinking about a broader concept of literacy, global commitment remained weak. In the same vein, most large-scale national literacy campaigns failed to achieve their overly ambitious targets, mainly because the complexity and magnitude of the task were underestimated. The continuity of learning processes beyond elementary literacy, and the integration of short-duration campaigns into national lifelong learning systems, were also identified as major challenges (Hanemann 2015b; UIL 2016a). Furthermore, the lack of political will, coordination and capacity appear to have prevented attempts to introduce the “mother tongue” as a medium of instruction in adult literacy.

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4 “Overall, not even the target of universal primary education was reached, let alone the more ambitious EFA goals, and the most disadvantaged continue to be the last to benefit” (UNESCO 2015, p. xv).
from making a visible impact (Robinson 2015). Lastly, despite apparently favourable
conditions that could increase the demand for literacy among individuals in countries
of the Global South, programmes have not been sufficiently linked to opportunities
of literate environments or made part of integrated development strategies (Easton
2015; UNESCO 2015).

Compared to EFA Goal 4, SDG literacy Target 4.6 reflects a lower level of ambition:
instead of literacy for “all adults”, the wording of the target only refers to “all
youth and a substantial proportion of adults” (WEF 2016, p. 46; emphasis added).
While a lifelong learning approach would require addressing the literacy challenge
across all sub-sectors (preschool, primary and secondary school, higher education,
and youth and adult education) and across all age groups (children, young people and
adults), there is no visible connection and interaction of the literacy target with the
other targets of SDG 4. Instead, adult literacy is presented as a stand-alone interven-
tion rather than as an integral element of a sector-wide approach.

In addition, the wording of the SDG Target 4.6 itself conveys the impression that
elementary literacy skills are sufficient, rather than being explicitly identified as part
of basic education. The importance of the continuity of learning and the need to
achieve a minimum proficiency level of (compulsory) basic education only emerges
from the explanatory text for SDG Target 4.6, which also states that literacy is “at
the core of basic education” (WEF 2016, p. 46). Moreover, the lifelong learning prin-
ciple, which guides SDG 4, is also only discernible in the explanatory text.

While adult literacy seems to be trapped in a downward spiral characterised by
low ambition, low (financial) commitment and low achievement, efforts to raise its
profile by addressing literacy from a lifelong learning perspective have started to gain
some traction.

The position of adult literacy in CONFINTEA VI

UNESCO’s Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI),
held in December 2009, marked an important attempt to flag adult literacy as a priori-
ity area of adult learning and education (ALE). The Belém Framework for Action
(BFA), given “the particular challenges faced by literacy” (UIL 2010, p. 6), dedicates
a special section to adult literacy. It clearly frames literacy within a lifelong learning
perspective by perceiving it as an “indispensable foundation” that enables people “to
engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum” (ibid.).

Rethinking Literacy, the 2nd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education
(GRALE 2; UIL 2013a), revealed increased conceptual acceptance of literacy as a
continuum of learning and of the need to achieve proficiency levels beyond elemen-
tary literacy. However, the translation of this understanding into specific policies
seemed to come up against considerable challenges, with no common understanding
of how to approach literacy as a continuum and a lifelong learning process (Han-
emann 2015a).

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5 Even though all Education 2030 targets – except SDG Targets 4.1 and 4.2 – also address youth and
adults, these groups are not very visible in current policy, planning and strategy documents.
UNESCO’s 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE) (UNESCO and UIL 2016) supports the Education 2030 Framework for Action. It is therefore the most up-to-date global policy tool for ALE decision-makers. While literacy and basic skills are defined as one of the three key components of ALE, and well conceptualised from a lifelong learning perspective, adult literacy is no longer highlighted as a specific area of action, nor is it reflected in the following 3rd and 4th GRALEs (UIL 2016a and 2019a). Despite this reduced visibility, 86 per cent of Member States responding to the GRALE 3 survey stated that literacy and basic skills were a top priority for their ALE programmes (UIL 2016a).

Reflecting the status quo emerging from regional reports, the outcome Statement of the 2017 CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review expresses “particular concern” about “the slow increase in rates of youth and adult literacy” (UIL 2018a, p. 6). The final report (UIL 2019b) refers to “the special case of literacy policies” and notes that “many ALE activists wish that rapid progress could make basic literacy interventions redundant” (ibid., p. 46). Such desire not only reveals a certain literacy fatigue – as expressed in the perceived need for a paradigm shift “by moving from basic literacy to lifelong learning” (see UIL 2017b, p. 12) – but also a limited understanding of literacy as a lifelong learning process.

**Impediments to progress in adult literacy**

Progress towards SDG Target 4.6 has been assessed by UNESCO’s annual Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Reports since 2016 (UNESCO 2016, 2017c, 2018, 2020, 2021), all of which have a strong focus on data analysis. Significantly, the 2016 report states that

the SDG agenda shifts attention from a concept of literacy in which someone is literate or not to a more nuanced concept of how proficient they are in literacy skills along a continuum (UNESCO 2016, p. 274).

However, only the 2020 report discontinues information about “literacy rates” and presents instead the “share of adults who achieved minimum literacy proficiency” for countries where such nuanced and test-based data were available (UNESCO 2020, p. 264). Measures of adult competencies, through the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), support the idea that learning takes place over the life course and not only during childhood or within schools, and that rich and dynamic literate environments make a difference throughout life (see Reder et al. 2020). This means that – depending on the intensity of practical uses – achieved proficiency levels can also be lost over time, can become insufficient or may need to be complemented by new aspects. Thus, literacy development is also closely interrelated with self-motivated lifelong learning.

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6 The other two “key domains of learning and skills” are “continuing education and vocational skills” and “liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills” (UNESCO and UIL 2016, p. 3).
It is surprising that adults’ motivation for literacy learning and the need to strengthen the demand side of literacy (Easton 2015) have not been brought more into the focus of the CONFINTEA- and SDG-related monitoring reports. In addition to being significantly under-researched in the field of literacy, the question of motivation also raises concerns that individual “dispositional barriers” (UIL 2019a, p. 156) may not be the reason for a lack of motivation. The quality and relevance of literacy provision, including the language in which it is taught and learned, are fundamental factors and must be examined in that regard. An inclusive approach to multilingual and multicultural contexts motivates learners to develop their literacy competencies in the language(s) of their choice, which may be their first language, and also offers opportunities to learn the language(s) of wider communication (Robinson 2015). Progress in literacy learning requires not just (sustained) demand for literacy and the educational offerings that convey it (motivation plus necessary resources to take part) but, simultaneously, the multiplication of opportunities for the use, improvement and retention of literacy competencies, in a broad range of (natural) spaces, events and activities – “characteristics of what in recent years has come to be called a literate environment” (ibid., see also Easton 2014; Robinson-Pant 2010).

In a nutshell, there is still no common understanding of how to approach literacy as a lifelong learning process. The coexistence of different conceptual understandings of and measurement approaches to literacy has further complicated this situation. Further, we can observe dissonance with regard to a range of factors, including vision development and target-setting in “poor” (Global South) or “rich” (Global North) countries, human capital or humanistic orientation, minimalist targets of basic literacy skills for specific groups or recognised basic education qualifications for all, supply- or demand-driven provision, and highly standardised approaches or flexible structures that are adaptable to diverse needs and contexts, among others. Related policy decisions are shaped by a range of context- and time-bound factors, but also by a particular understanding of literacy as part of lifelong learning (or not).

Such “dissonance” not only creates challenges for planning, implementing and monitoring progress of SDG Target 4.6 – it has also fostered a paradox. While the Global North had seemingly solved its literacy issue, literacy has in fact once again turned into a policy priority in this part of the world. In the Global South, which continues to face major literacy challenges, literacy has been relegated to a marginal role or even disappeared from national policy agendas. This state of affairs has resulted from a narrow priority focus on primary (and secondary) education for children (and adolescents) in the Global South and, in some contexts, on vocational skills training and higher education for youth. The claim made by the most vulnerable groups to their right to lifelong learning opportunities is even more likely to be ignored.

Promising examples of policies, strategies and programmes that work towards literate families, communities and societies

It is clear from the above discussion that the links between literacy and lifelong learning depend on clarifying the conceptual meaning of each of these terms and, crucially, on making explicit the foundations on which the application of the lifelong
learning approach to literacy is built. Based on the analytical framework described above – literacy as a lifelong learning process, literacy as a life-wide learning process and literacy as part of lifelong learning systems (Hanemann 2015a) – we now turn to the question of how some literacy-related policies, strategies and programmes have adopted a lifelong learning perspective.

**Literacy as a lifelong learning process**

Incorporation of the concept of lifelong learning in the design and provision of literacy programmes is not new; indeed, literacy learning opportunities should be open for anyone who wishes to master or improve his or her competencies, irrespective of age and proficiency levels. Many literacy programmes focus on improving the basic competencies, including literacy, of those in the age range considered to be the most economically productive, often defined as adults up to 60 or 64 years of age. However, learning continues into the “third age” of life and can be transformational when structured in appropriate ways.

Addressing older adults (aged 60+) who had moved from rural areas to an urban environment, and who had never had the opportunity to acquire literacy and numeracy competencies, the “Basic Literacy Class for Older Persons” programme (UIL 2020) run by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Ageing Nepal aimed to empower older learners to function well in an unfamiliar environment. Thus, the initial curriculum focusing on basic skills was modified according to the learners’ own views of the skills they needed, resulting in increased self-respect and confidence, a stronger role in supporting grandchildren, and new social networks.

**Family literacy and learning** has emerged in past decades as one of the innovative strategies that work across generations and between institutions, overcoming barriers between home, school and community, and breaking the intergenerational cycle of low educational levels (UIL 2017c). The focus of family literacy and learning is on both children’s and adults’ learning. Established in 2011 to “examine the most efficient ways to improve reading skills in Europe” (EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy 2012, p. 9), the European High Level Group of Experts on Literacy identified family literacy and intergenerational approaches as promising examples in their final report (ibid.). The many different types of family literacy and learning programmes which have been set up in recent years reflect a vision of effective learning families, with every member being a lifelong learner (Hanemann 2015c).

The potential of intergenerational approaches to create a culture of reading and learning among disadvantaged (often migrant) families can be illustrated through the “Bookstart” programme (United Kingdom), the family literacy programmes “Reach Out and Read” (United States) and “Tell Me a Story” (Switzerland), the “VoorleesExpress” programme (the Netherlands), the “eBooks and Family Literacy Programme” (Ethiopia), and the “My Grandparents’ Stories, My Pictures” project run by Rural Education and Development (READ) Nepal, among others (Hanemann and Krolak 2017).

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7 Each of the projects/programmes mentioned in this paragraph are featured in the Effective Literacy and Numeracy Practices Database (LitBase) compiled by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning.
Family learning recognises the vital role that adults play in their children’s education. For example, a World Education programme in Mali, *Appui à l'amélioration de la qualité et de l'égalité de l'éducation (AQEE)* (UIL 2013b), took a deliberate intergenerational approach in literacy for adults, both women and men, as a complementary means of improving the quality of education for their children. While adults, for their part, continue their learning, the children are encouraged to lay a solid basis for their lifelong learning, inspired by the example which their parents set (Elfert 2008; Robinson 2020).

The Kitengesa Community Library Family Literacy Project in Uganda (Parry et al. 2014) took a somewhat different approach. There was no literacy instruction as such; rather, the women took part in creating and translating children’s books in their own language, Luganda, which they then read with their children. It was a collective effort to create a more dynamic literate environment in the home.

The *Lifelong Learning Strategy for the City of Vancouver* (Talbot and Associates 2006), which addressed learning needs from infancy to later life, included an organising framework with an explicit focus on literacy in each of the different life phases of a person. While acknowledging “the complexities involved in creating a culture of lifelong learning”, the framework emphasised the need to prioritise the enhancement of literacy and numeracy as a learning activity throughout a person’s life (ibid., p. 9).

These examples illustrate that literacy learning across the lifespan and the generations can strengthen a culture of learning in family, community and society, foster confidence in accessing, developing and using written communication, and provide motivation to engage in further lifelong learning opportunities.

**Literacy as a life-wide learning process**

Linking literacy acquisition with its use in the wider environment is a first step in maximising the impact of literacy provision, with a clear understanding of the connections between written communication and the development of other relevant skills – a life-wide perspective (Oxenham et al. 2002; Robinson 2018). This can best be achieved by adopting a demand-driven approach based on input from potential learners and their communities. This involves discovering how learners wish to use literacy, what new skills for life and livelihood they wish to acquire, and what reading and writing tasks are associated with the skills identified. Even though a life-wide approach is most likely to make literacy acquisition meaningful to learners, surveys based on these questions are rarely undertaken, resulting in unclear objectives and potentially low motivation on the part of learners to take part in literacy learning (Robinson 2021).

In Morocco, the 2014 literacy strategy stated that “developing human capital” from an economic perspective was the overriding goal (ANLCA 2014; RdM 1999), but the more recent iteration of the strategy for 2017–2021 also embraces the needs

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The current weblink to the database is [https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/effective-practices-database-litbase](https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/effective-practices-database-litbase) [accessed 24 March 2022]. This weblink may change later in 2022, since the Institute is at present in the process of migrating content to its new website.

8 “Support for the Quality and Equity of Education.”
Rethinking literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in the context of individual learners, while retaining the connection with development, particularly at the local level (ANLCA 2017). With the policy debate in a state of flux, programme initiatives feature a more strongly articulated life-wide learning approach. The Agence Nationale de Lutte Contre l’Analphabétisme (ANLCA)\(^9\) has cooperated with other Moroccan ministerial departments (i.e. the Ministry of Ocean Fisheries, the Ministry of Trades and Crafts, Prison Administration) to support the achievement of literacy goals among certain professional groups (such as fishermen and artisans) and among prisoners (EU 2017).

The “Parkari Community Development Programme” (PCDP) of south-eastern Pakistan demonstrates the SDG principle of “reaching the furthest behind” in its work with a minority group, including a high proportion of women and girls (UIL 2016b). The aim of the literacy and adult learning programme is to improve people’s status, livelihoods and literacy levels, based on the socioeconomic conditions of the target groups. The PCDP developed a set of interlinked initiatives to empower women, including rights awareness, group formation, health care, savings schemes and literacy learning. The acquisition of new skills has been accompanied by an increase in self-confidence and, as a consequence, in social status. The PCDP experience shows that developing skills of all kinds is an iterative process – one skill builds on another, leading to new opportunities, further learning … and the cycle starts again (Robinson 2017).

In Afghanistan, literacy acquisition has conventionally been considered a prior condition for enabling youth and adults to learn technical and vocational skills. On the basis of this experience, the subsequent phase of literacy development in the country proposed embedding literacy learning with the learning of other skills, rather than continuing with two separate programmes (UNESCO 2012, p. 20). However, in a context as poor and insecure as Afghanistan, the provision of vocational skills training and income-generating opportunities to participants who successfully complete the literacy training component of the “Enhancement of Literacy in Afghanistan” (ELA) programme has faced multiple challenges (UIL 2016c).

Linking literacy to other services – such as government extension programmes, family support services or income-generation activities – has proved to be more conducive to engaging adults in literacy and learning. The Community Learning Centre (CLC) model, which has been promoted mainly in the Asia-Pacific region but also expanded to the global level, has tried to put such a life-wide learning approach into practice, particularly in rural areas (UIL 2017c). However, despite the proven success of embedded, integrated and multidisciplinary approaches to literacy, poor government funding has hindered the scaling up of these programmes to benefit more people (UNESCO Bangkok 2016).

While a major focus of adult literacy and basic education has been on imparting knowledge and skills related to livelihood, health and human rights, there are some examples of programmes that have integrated traditional and indigenous knowledge, language and skills. The “Wānanga\(^10\) Embedded Literacy” programme in New Zea-

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\(^9\) National agency for the struggle against illiteracy.

\(^10\) A wānanga can be a forum, an educational seminar or an institution “that caters for Māori learning needs” (Moorfield, n.d.). It is a firmly established institution in Māori tradition, with a strong learning
land (UIL 2016d), and the “Patani Malay–Thai Bilingual/Multilingual Education” (PMT-MLE) programme in Thailand’s Deep South (UIL 2016e), are such examples.

The Kha Ri Gude [Let Us Learn] literacy campaign in South Africa, which reached nearly 4.5 million adults between 2008 and 2016 (Hanemann and McKay 2019, p. 365), was conceptualised within a lifelong learning framework. Its literacy curriculum focused on “learning for development”, contributing to various SDGs. To ensure inclusion, the campaign gave equal attention to all 11 official South African languages, so that all learners could benefit from the pedagogical and cognitive advantages of mother tongue-based learning (ibid.). Learners’ feedback on the impact of the campaign on their everyday lives provided evidence that it was catalytic for social activism, and that it

- increased political participation and participation in community activities, promoted values of ubuntu and inclusion, developed respect for cultural diversity, and facilitated a range of capabilities such as maintaining good health, raising healthy children and educating them (McKay 2018, p. 419).

In addition, it also developed “an increased appetite for lifelong learning among both the adult literacy learners and their children” (ibid.; see also McKay 2015, 2020).

The A Ganar Alliance,11 implemented by Partners of the Americas in 16 Latin American countries, uses a sports-based methodology (teamwork, communication, discipline, respect, a focus on results and continual self-improvement) to encourage young people to (re-)engage in learning. The curriculum combines sports-based and vocational training with supervised internships, as well as providing follow-on support to equip youth with basic reading, writing, mathematics and technical skills, self-confidence and practical experience (Partners of the Americas n.d.).

These examples illustrate that integrated and embedded approaches to literacy teaching and learning can better respond to the multiple needs and interests of youth and adult learners than stand-alone approaches. Adopting a life-wide learning perspective in the design of literacy provision involves a close understanding of the nature of target group needs in their own context, as well as embracing a holistic approach that combines literacy learning with the acquisition of other meaningful skills for life and livelihood. Besides being conducive to SDG 4, this perspective is also instrumental in contributing to the achievement of many of the other 16 SDGs, such as those related to poverty (SDG 1), food security (SDG 2), health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality and women’s empowerment (SDG 5), economic growth and work (SDG 8) and peace (SDG 16).

**Literacy as part of lifelong learning systems**

Adult literacy and basic education programmes need to be firmly embedded in national (or sub-national) lifelong learning systems. Building such systems requires the provision of flexible learning pathways, a strong interrelation between formal

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11 The Spanish verb ganar means “to gain, to earn, to win”.
and non-formal education, mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, and inter- and cross-sectoral collaboration. Such holistically designed systems with different pathways are ideally structured into building blocks that meet a diversity of learning needs and can be followed in flexible ways.

In most countries of Latin America, literacy provision is part of adult basic education programmes. In Brazil, for example, *Educação de Jovens e Adultos* (EJA)\(^{12}\) is seen as complementary to school education and offers educational opportunities to those who have no access or cannot follow up on their primary and secondary education at the typical age. Similarly, the *Modelos Educativos Flexibles* (MEFs),\(^ {13}\) which start with literacy and culminate in the secondary education certificate, provide alternative learning opportunities in Colombia.

The Mexican *Modelo Educación para la Vida y el Trabajo* (MEVyT)\(^ {14}\) (UIL 2016f) also offers basic education for youth and adult learners. However, it is designed as a modular system that is highly flexible, allowing learners to determine their own learning process by deciding how they want to learn (i.e. individually or in groups, with or without guidance from facilitators, at home or in community learning spaces) and by selecting modules according to their prior abilities and needs. This education model leads to accredited learning levels: initial, intermediate and advanced (equivalent to a Grade 9\(^ {15}\) qualification). Complemented by the *MEVyT Indígena Bilingüe* (MIB)\(^ {16}\) programme offered in 49 indigenous languages (UIL 2015; CONEVyT n.d.-a), MEVyT is part of a broader governmental learning system that includes adult education, work-related training, home economics and health education, among other areas of interest (CONEVyT n.d.-b).

A number of country reports submitted in the context of *GRALE 4* (UIL 2019a) point to ongoing reforms involving the revision of national curricula on adult literacy and extending these to cover subsequent levels of non-formal basic education. Others offer special “equivalency programmes” to meet the demand for recognised certificates and qualifications. Examples are Jamaica (development of the High School Diploma Equivalency Programme; JFLL n.d.) and Timor Leste (its National Equivalency Education Programme, delivered non-formally through CLCs, is “equivalent” to 9 years of formal Basic Education; Yorozu 2017, pp. 30–32).

However, while equivalency programmes are enjoying undiminished popularity, in particular in the Asia-Pacific region, they mainly target out-of-school children, adolescents and youth (Choo and Shah 2020). Often, they are run in parallel to formal education instead of being genuinely embedded in the national education system, and certificates do not necessarily qualify learners for further studies at higher levels. Even though these equivalency programmes were designed as a temporary alternative to make up for the failure of the general education system, the rationales for

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\(^{12}\) Youth and adult education.

\(^{13}\) Flexible education models.

\(^{14}\) Education model for life and work.

\(^{15}\) In Mexico, Grade 9 refers to the final level of lower secondary education (which comprises Grades 7–9).

\(^{16}\) Indigenous bilingual MEVyT [Education model for life and work].
fully integrating them into national lifelong learning systems as a government-led response to the needs of out-of-school populations have intensified.

Integrating literacy into lifelong learning systems also means establishing reliable (test-based) ways of assessing the literacy needs of the adult population and the learning outcomes of literacy provision. However, “to date, only a handful of countries conduct national adult literacy assessments” (UIS 2019, p. 4), although the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML) has developed a framework for reporting on SDG Indicator 4.6.1, which measures the

[p]roportion of population in a given age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional (a) literacy and (b) numeracy skills, by sex (UIS 2018, p. 42).

At present, there are only two internationally administered assessments, the OECD’s PIAAC\(^{17}\) and the World Bank’s Skills Towards Employability and Productivity (STEP) programme,\(^{18}\) which both face limitations and challenges (UIS 2019). Moreover, the dichotomous estimate of “literacy/illiteracy rates” is still widespread. Application of the lifelong learning approach to literacy, measured on a *continuum* of competency levels – a prerequisite for creating an internationally comparable database to report on SDG Indicator 4.6.1 (ibid.) – seems to be a long-term task reaching beyond the SDG 2030 horizon.

A growing number of countries worldwide are developing and implementing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs),\(^{19}\) as they see them as valuable instruments to enhance the transparency and relevance of qualifications, to support reforms and to widen access to learning opportunities and pathways (Cedefop et al. 2017; Cedefop 2021). While many countries at the global level have developed qualifications frameworks only for their higher education or technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sub-systems, and literacy and numeracy are often mentioned as a “learning domain” or included in level descriptors as “foundation skills”, there are hardly any examples where literacy and basic (non-formal) education have been made explicit in NQFs (such as in Afghanistan’s framework), and only a few NQFs refer to pathways from non-formal to formal education (e.g. Bangladesh, The Gambia, Mauritius, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand) (UIL 2017a, b) Although the new generation of NQFs has become more “loose” and less regulatory to better adapt to diversity and ongoing changes, there are challenges with measuring their impact. In particular, with regard to adult literacy and basic education, their benefits have yet to be identified on a global scale (ibid.).

\(^{17}\) PIAAC measures the proficiency of adults (aged 16 to 65) in key information-processing skills: literacy, numeracy and problem-solving. For more information, visit https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/ [accessed 1 March 2022].

\(^{18}\) The STEP programme was designed to better understand the interplay between work-relevant skills and employability, targeting low- and middle-income countries. For more information, see https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/step/about [accessed 1 March 2022] and also UIS (2019).

\(^{19}\) NQFs classify qualifications by describing the achievements required to attain each level, thereby making them easier to understand and compare.
The development of holistic learning systems with flexible pathways needs to be complemented by mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning (UIL 2012, 2018b). RVA practices are more established in the areas of TVET and higher education, while related developments in ALE are slow. In GRALE 4, the lowest level of progress in ALE policy was reported in the RVA of non-formal and informal learning, with 66 per cent of countries reporting progress (UIL 2019a, p. 21).

Flexible learning pathways and the acquisition of recognised certificates and qualifications are certainly contributing to motivating potential learners to (re-)engage in literacy and ALE programmes. However, not all countries have succeeded in making their emerging lifelong learning systems inclusive by building connections with the lowest education levels and considering the diversity of learning needs.

Lessons from policy and practice

The promising examples of policies, strategies and programmes analysed above that work towards literate families, communities and societies reflect a lifelong and intergenerational learning approach, as they refer to all age groups, including pre-school-aged children and older adults. They highlight the importance of involving all members of a family or community, creating rich and motivational literate environments, combining preventive and remedial measures, and offering support to families in disadvantaged communities in particular. They further demonstrate important characteristics of lifelong learning such as relevance, as they make immediate connections between literacy learning or improvement and meaningful purposes in the lives of adult learners and their children, thus “nurturing a culture of reading and learning in families” (Hanemann 2015c, p. 8) and providing a strong motivation to (re-)engage in learning or to go on learning as an adult. By engaging learners with the situations and structures within which written communication is necessary and useful for them, they also foster inter-institutional collaboration.

The examples further reflect that literacy learning is a life-wide process which takes place across a range of life spheres and benefits from many resources (e.g. at home, in the community, at work, in libraries, on the internet) which complement and enhance literacy learning opportunities. Embedding literacy in TVET and other practical, digital “life skills” training, or integrating it with relevant content such as health, livelihoods, citizenship or parenting, is most likely to strengthen the demand side of a literate environment, as well as create requirements and opportunities for the use of literacy competencies to make them sustainable. This also quickens the appetite for further learning to achieve higher levels of education and qualifications.

The examples illustrate that literacy, as part of holistically designed and enabling lifelong learning systems, involves offering multiple learning pathways with flexible entry and re-entry points at all ages and educational levels. The continuity of literacy development to achieve basic education as a minimum qualification level should be made possible for all citizens. RVA mechanisms for non-formal and informal learning outcomes should be made part of these lifelong learning systems, and they should be complemented by guidance and counselling services.
From the perspectives of learning across the lifespan, learning across life domains (life-wide) and the systems to support such learning, two key lessons emerge:

(1) The demand side of a literate environment deserves much more attention to encourage the productive use of literacy and increase the motivation of young people and adults to participate in literacy courses. By integrating literacy with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values pertaining to other areas, and building on indigenous knowledge systems, learning can become more meaningful, motivational and a “natural” part of peoples’ everyday lives, particularly for disadvantaged learner groups. The long-term use and continuing improvement of literacy competence depends on how valuable written communication is and where it fits into people’s lives (Street 2001).

(2) Literacy acquisition is neither an end in itself nor a stand-alone process; rather, it is part of broader learning purposes, enabling continuity of learning. Written communication, on paper and on screen, is an integral element of continuing to learn throughout life and, as literacy competence grows, so too does the opportunity to access and benefit from further learning.

Rethinking literacy in the context of CONFINTEA VII and the SDGs

There is a long history of persistent challenges thwarting the application of a lifelong learning approach to literacy provision, and the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has not helped in addressing them effectively. Frequently, related national policies and strategies do not explicitly refer to the SDGs or connect with the international adult education frameworks (BFA and RALE) in place, even though these could provide a stronger conceptual underpinning to integrate adult literacy and education into national lifelong learning systems. This article also demonstrates how the positioning of literacy promotion within the international SDG and CONFINTEA agendas suffers from ambiguity and dissonances, despite the headline status of the lifelong learning paradigm.

CONFINTEA VII aims to adopt a new “framework for action” which will guide ALE development in realising the 2030 agenda and beyond. This is a unique opportunity to reframe literacy within an expanded and forward-looking vision. In rethinking literacy in the context of implementing the SDGs, and pooling expertise during the 2022 CONFINTEA VII meeting, as well as factoring in the analyses and lessons presented in this article, we suggest three fundamental considerations which should inform policy and strategic planning with regard to conceptual orientation, programmatic responses and institutional connections.

Conceptual orientation

Literacy as written communication is not a stand-alone phenomenon. It serves the purposes of communication through the creation and use of written text – on screen, paper or other modalities – within and beyond the immediate context of the learner/user. Limiting literacy learning to sterile classroom exercises, disconnected from
Rethinking literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in the context of learners’ communication purposes and practices in everyday life, will not work, nor will it ensure continuity in the use and further development of acquired proficiency levels. The discourse on literacy needs to reflect a positive and holistic approach to lifelong learning; instead of striving for the “eradication of illiteracy” as a policy goal, policymakers should encourage citizens to engage in the improvement of their literacy and numeracy competencies as well as to learn new ones.

It is no exaggeration to say that the use of written communication in today’s world is part of all kinds of learning at all stages of life and of full participation in all the dimensions of life – social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual. As a concept, literacy is complex and multidimensional, contextualised and open-ended, diverse and bound to purpose, individual and collective. Literacy cannot be reduced to a mere skill or simply a tool; it is woven into the fabric of peoples’ lives. The forthcoming CONFINTEA VII gathering of ALE stakeholders is an opportunity to clearly state the nature, value and complexity of literacy as situated social practice; it is also a chance to creatively deal with its ambiguity and dissonances.

**Programmatic responses**

This conceptual orientation has implications for the design of programmes to promote literacy learning. Approaching literacy from a lifelong learning perspective, on the one hand, requires an expanded and holistic vision of literacy, and on the other hand, it must lead to specific policy and programme action. It is, therefore, essential to address the identified challenges with the necessary technical and professional expertise, as well as drawing on evidence for what has helped to make progress, i.e. what really works.

Learners’ purposes are diverse, and this is one reason why literacy provision is often in the hands of civil society organisations with roots in particular communities, providing access to literacy through the languages that learners know best, and being sensitive to learners’ motivations for acquiring and using literacy. Such motivations need to be continuously monitored as they are shaped by ongoing learning and life experiences and may change over time. While governments and development agencies often link the value of literacy to economic outcomes, literacy use for social, cultural and other purposes may be equally important. Thus, any specific provision of literacy will have to pay attention to the various and evolving motivations of learners and create opportunities to ensure the use of literacy and numeracy competencies in the home, community and wider society, thereby fostering a sustainable demand for all kinds of learning. Thus, CONFINTEA VII offers an opportunity to resolutely shift the focus from supply to demand, putting learners’ perspectives at the heart of efforts to give literacy its maximum potential in enriching their lives.

**Institutional connections**

The provision of adult literacy specifically and ALE more generally often lies outside the institutional context of an education system, unconnected to further learning opportunities in other parts of the system. Furthermore, NQFs and RVA mechanisms do not always include adult literacy and (non-formal) basic education. However, such
national systems need to become more inclusive by integrating adult literacy and learning within common frameworks that span formal and non-formal education and reach from basic to advanced competence (or qualifications) levels, and equally value (and accredit) outcomes stemming from formal, non-formal and informal learning. The integration of literacy into sector-wide – and even cross-sectoral – strategies necessitates close inter-institutional coordination and collaboration.

The vision of lifelong literacy requires institutionalised learning systems which are flexible, permeable and supportive of integrated approaches to literacy and basic education at all stages of a person’s life and in a diversity of life situations. Such systems allow learners to access different pathways and pursue further learning according to their needs and desires. As an intergovernmental event, CONFINTEA VII provides a platform to rethink literacy from a lifelong learning perspective in order to fully tap its transformative potential in the achievement of the SDGs.

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