Avoiding pitfalls in the next International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA): Lessons on financing adult education from Belém

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Abstract
Civil society organisations were well organised in the sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) held in Belém in 2009, and influential in framing a powerful agenda for transforming adult education. Despite some successes, however, there were also frustrations in the drafting of the Belém Framework for Action (BFA). Drawing on this experience, the author of this article argues that there are important lessons to be learned, particularly in relation to the financing of adult education. Not least in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change adding to economic challenges, he reasons, these lessons will be crucial for the outcome of CONFINTEA VII, which is to be held in Morocco in June 2022. After a review of the processes, power dynamics and struggles involved in Belém, the author outlines how pivotal issues around financing can be effectively framed and advanced in the upcoming conference.

Keywords financing · lifelong learning · right to adult education · austerity · power dynamics · Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)

Résumé
Éviter les pièges lors de la prochaine Conférence internationale sur l’éducation des adultes (CONFINTEA) : les enseignements de Belém sur le financement de l’éducation des adultes – Les organisations de la société civile étaient bien organisées lors de la sixième Conférence internationale sur l’éducation des adultes (CONFINTEA VI) en 2009, et elle avaient influé sur la définition d’un agenda puissant pour transformer l’éducation des adultes. Malgré quelques réussites, la préparation du Cadre d’action de Belém avait aussi suscité des frustrations. Fort de cette expérience, l’auteur du présent article affirme que nous devons tirer d’importantes...
leçons de cela, notamment en ce qui concerne le financement de l’éducation des adultes. Au vu des crises telles que la pandémie de COVID-19 et du changement climatique qui s’ajoutent aux défis économiques, il déduit en particulier que ces enseignements seront cruciaux pour le résultat de la CONFINTEA VII qui se tiendra au Maroc en juin 2022. Après avoir examiné les processus, la dynamique de puissance et les luttes liées à Belém, l’auteur esquisse comment encadrer et faire progresser efficacement des questions cruciales de financement lors de la prochaine conférence.

**Introduction**

If we want to make a collective breakthrough in the financing of adult education, we should all go back to school, enrolling in economic literacy for adult learners. Or rather, we should all engage in developing a critical awareness of our social reality; a process Paulo Freire termed *conscientisation* (Freire 1972). We should harness resources such as the *Reflection-Action Toolkit on Tax* (ActionAid 2018a), which has been used in villages from Malawi to Pakistan (Archer 2020) to raise critical awareness about how public services are presently financed and how they could be more sustainably financed in the future.

Sadly, economic literacy is as much a challenge in global spaces as it is in remote villages. When Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher first ushered in neoliberal economic policies, these were recognised as ideological interventions, but over the past forty years many people have been persuaded that there are no alternatives. Inflation must be held down, governments should shrink or get out of the way, services should be privatised and markets should be deregulated. Most high-income countries have internalised such policies as if they were absolute truths, and these policies are coercively enforced on most lower-income countries through powerful institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The consequence in most cases is austerity, with states constantly struggling to adequately finance basic education, leaving “luxuries” such as adult education chronically underfunded. Of course, as anyone facilitating a Freirean conscientisation process knows, there are complex power dynamics involved in every community and every learning space – and this is acutely true when it comes to global decision-making forums on education.

**The struggle in Belém**

Every twelve years since 1949, the global community on adult education gathers for the International Conference on Adult Education – CONFINTEA (UIL 2022). The last meeting in the series, CONFINTEA VI, was held in 2009 in Belém, Brazil (UIL 2010), where the most difficult discussions and complex power dynamics concerned the financing of adult education. Taking place just over a year after the global financial crisis and just weeks before a major United Nations (UN) climate conference in Copenhagen, it was a huge gathering of over 2,000 people, with delegations from 162 countries arriving in the Amazonian city.
In the build-up to CONFINTEA VI, there was an impressive mobilisation of civil society, with regional consultations and e-mail discussions involving hundreds of people over several months that fed into a three-day International Civil Society Forum (FISC) meeting on the eve of the main conference. Over 500 civil society representatives, including myself,1 gathered day and night to develop a set of consensus positions called From Rhetoric to Coherent Action (FISC 2010). This communiqué reminded governments that while basic adult education was “already a justiciable right”, this status of now needed to be extended to all adult education (ibid., p. 67). Another recommendation advocated for the recognition of literacy as a continuum (ranging from low to high levels of competency), moving away from data collection and statistics based on the simplistic binary of literacy/illiteracy. FISC also called for governments to develop “fully-costed” plans for adult education, backed by legislation (ibid., p. 68). Crucially, it called for “binding minimum targets for spending on adult education”, with “at least 6% of national education budgets being spent on youth and adult education” and “at least 6% of aid to education being spent on the education of adults and young people” (ibid., p. 69; emphases in original). Global donors were challenged to support all six Education for All (EFA) goals set in Dakar in 2000 (WEF 2000) and not just EFA Goal 2 concerning universal primary education. The FISC communiqué also called for an end to “the restrictive macro-economic conditions imposed […] and coercive policy advice given” by the IMF that had undermined investment in EFA, arguing for “significant increases in long-term investment in education as a key part of the solution to the financial crisis” (FISC 2010, p. 70).

After finalising these consensus positions during the three-day pre-conference forum, the challenge was then for civil society to advance them through coordinated action in the main CONFINTEA VI conference. The communiqué was translated into French, Spanish and Portuguese, and the lobbying of national delegations began. We held civil society caucus meetings early every morning to plan our strategy and reviewed meetings each evening to assess progress. In addition, the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) stall acted as a focal point for discussions and planning at other times. We mapped out support, delegation by delegation, and managed to get the communiqué read out in the opening plenary by Maria Khan from the Asia and South Pacific Alliance for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE). Speaker after speaker supported key points from our civil society consensus positions.

Ultimately, though, we knew that the enduring legacy of CONFINTEA VI would be the Belém Framework for Action (UIL 2010) and it was the draft of this document that we needed to change. An early draft, which had been shared in advance, was woolly and I was one of many who condemned it as a “Framework for Inaction”. Significant changes would be needed to make it serve as a meaningful reference point for action over the next 12 years. ICAE nominated (and FISC affirmed) Maria Khan and myself to join the official Drafting Committee that was mandated to finalise the

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1 At the time I was Head of International Education with ActionAid International and a board member of the Global Campaign for Education. I made active contributions to the e-discussions in advance of the meeting and was later nominated by FISC as one of two civil society representatives to join the official Drafting Committee for the Belém Framework for Action.
Belém Framework for Action. We thus participated in the long process of negotiation with the other representatives from the governments of Argentina, Armenia, Benin, Brazil, Canada, Estonia, Ethiopia, Germany, India, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, Libya, Norway, Oman and South Africa.

The Committee Chair and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) allowed some observers into the room – but in line with protocol none of them spoke apart from one, the head of the United States (US) delegation who had no truck with protocol and ended up speaking more than almost anyone else. This was where the real power dynamics started to tell.

From the start it became clear that civil society consensus positions needed active buy-in from other constituency representatives to sway decisions, so we shifted strategy and asked out civil society colleagues from different countries to seek active sign-on to the consensus positions from the heads of their government delegations. It was a mad scurry of activity, but by the deadline for amendments to the Framework for Action we had 22 governments who fully endorsed all our consensus positions (Argentina, Bangladesh, Barbados, Brazil, Chad, Chile, Cuba, Fiji, the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Honduras, Indonesia, Jamaica, Malawi, Nepal, Panama, Peru, Samoa, Sri Lanka and Togo) and a further 14 governments who endorsed significant parts of our civil society communiqué, including proposals concerning financing.

This should have made all the difference – and would have done had the officially mandated Drafting Committee followed the normal procedures for such a process. But the Committee did not look at a single amendment until 9 p.m. on the last day and we were told that the absolute deadline for finalising the document in English was 10 p.m. local time – as it had to be translated in Paris overnight into six other languages (the five other UN languages as well as Portuguese). This “absolute” deadline proved not to be absolute at all – and indeed the negotiations went on into the early morning and nothing was actually sent for translation until 4 a.m. (8 a.m. Paris time) – but the threat of this deadline curtailed meaningful discussions. UNESCO was reluctant to accept any changes and informed us that the Framework for Action had already been subjected to discussions in regional pre-meetings and as such was already effectively approved by Ministers in each region. It could only be tweaked now.

But this was a serious misrepresentation. The draft Framework for Action brought to the conference had actually been produced after the Regional Preparatory Conferences and was highly selective in what it included from those different meetings, excluding significant statements on financing that different regions had asserted. When the draft Framework was circulated to governments in advance of Belém, UNESCO’s conference team received only two responses with proposed amendments (as confirmed during the meeting by the Drafting Committee Chair), which was deemed to show that other governments approved. But in the actual Belém conference, heads of delegations eventually proposed over two hundred amendments before the deadline – demonstrating that governments saw the conference itself as the right place to raise, discuss and resolve the thorny issues and agree the final framework. Effectively UNESCO wanted to ignore these amendments, but after intervention from the host country of Brazil, the Drafting Committee committed to working overnight to try to process them.
The financing of adult education was the most controversial issue (Archer 2010). One of the FISC consensus positions was that after UNESCO Member States had agreed in the outcome document of CONFINTA IV, the _Hamburg Declaration_ (UIE 1997), that an “equitable share” of the education budget should be earmarked for adult education (ibid., p. 4), it seemed reasonable 12 years later to make some effort to define what that equitable share should be. In our civil society communiqué (FISC 2010), we proposed “at least 6% of national education budgets” to be spent on youth and adult education and argued that this should be a “binding minimum target” (ibid., p. 69; emphasis in original) – though we were fully ready to accept this just as an indicative benchmark of good practice.

A review of the Regional Preparatory Conference outcome documents and Regional Synthesis reports showed support for this, with the Africa pre-meeting calling for the intensification of efforts to establish benchmarks for spending levels (Aitchison and Alidou 2009, p. 16), and the Ministers in Asia explicitly acknowledging the 6% target (Ahmed 2009, p. 39). Latin America called for 3% of education budgets and a “fair share” of inter-sectoral resources, which would add up to a similar sum (Kaushik 2009, p. 9). European governments called for “robust public investment” (UIL 2008, p. 3), and the Arab States acknowledged that funding was too low and that “adequate financial resources” needed to be mobilised (Yousif 2009, p. 15). Despite this significant convergence, there was no reference in the draft Framework for Action to targets or indicative benchmarks for spending on adult education. We raised this repeatedly and with strong support from most around the drafting committee table and in the wider conference, and only two people actively opposed – the delegate from the government of Canada and the observer from the US who was given unprecedented space to speak. Based on those two interventions, key financing commitments were excluded from the final draft.

It is in such moments that the power dynamic becomes clear. To ensure continued membership of the United States and Canada (and their payment of membership fees), UNESCO needed to keep the US (still under the influence of George W. Bush’s era, even though Barack Obama had recently become President) and Canada (under Stephen Harper’s regime) happy – even if almost every other government representative in Belém wanted a stronger financing commitment. The US in particular used the argument that only their own Congress could make financing commitments – as if other countries present were not also subject to their national parliaments or governments making final decisions over budget allocations. This missed the point of setting a powerful collective benchmark that would prompt and guide governments, not coerce them.

The same two governments blocked assertive language on making the right to all adult education a justiciable, legally enforceable right. However, civil society did win some battles, and we concluded in our post-conference review (FISC 2009) that 48% of the civil society consensus positions were accepted in the final Belém Framework for Action; thus, our work had not been in vain. Reflecting this, we issued a positive statement from the final civil society caucus meeting, welcoming the progressive elements, but lamenting the failure to address financing issues. We concluded our final civil society statement with the diplomatically phrased words:
it is clear that future conferences must ensure that processes for handling amendments and finalising documents need to be significantly improved and made more transparent (FISC 2009).

Put more simply and bluntly, an apparently democratic UN process was undermined by two bullying governments who were happy to sign up to warm rhetoric on adult education but feared any serious discussion about financing it.

**Post-Belém: the struggle for SDG 4**

Looking back, adult education suffered significantly when the six EFA goals (which included a goal on adult education) agreed at the World Education Forum in Dakar (WEF 2000) were rapidly undermined by the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by the UN General Assembly later on in the same year (UN 2000). Two of the MDGs had a focus on education – universalising access to primary education (MDG 2) and achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education (MDG 3) – but neither goal had any explicit connection to adult literacy. Efforts were made to argue that adult learning and women’s literacy were the invisible glue which would be key to achieving all the MDGs, but these carried little weight. Bilateral and multilateral donors were obsessed with the need for focus and channelled their resources towards the MDGs, actively undermining financing and support for other goals that did not make the cut. Adult literacy and adult education, which had been a significant priority on the radar of many (particularly post-independence) governments from the 1960s onwards were downgraded. The World Bank has argued since the early 1990s that adult literacy programmes are wasteful, having an effectiveness rate of just 12.5% (see updated version, Abadzi 2013), but this was based on inherently limited evidence and questionable formulas (see Archer and Fry 2005, p. 6). The drive for a “focus” on the MDGs then accelerated the move away from investments in adult education. Indeed, this was one reason why civil society advocates were fighting so hard for financing to be taken seriously in Belém in 2009.

Soon after the Belém conference, global attention started to turn towards what would happen in 2015 when the MDGs were due to be achieved. It was clear that the goals’ targets would not be met and there was talk even as early as 2010 of wanting to revisit the Belém Framework, strengthening its links to an agenda for sustainable development. As these discussions advanced, fears emerged in 2012 that education might not even make it onto the new set of priority global goals.

The World Bank, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) started to argue that the only way to keep education on the global agenda at the “top table” would be to agree one simple global goal for education, which would need to be compelling and new (Wulff 2020). They argued that the education community had been focused too narrowly on access and that attention needed to move towards “learning outcomes” – with data showing the scandalous truth that many children were in school but not even learning basic skills (UIS and Brookings 2013). The argument was put forward that the education community should get behind a single goal focused on achieving literacy and
numeracy outcomes in the early years of primary education. The Brookings Center for Universal Education in Washington, DC and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics received support to set up the Learning Metrics Task Force in 2012 (Brookings 2022; UIS and Brookings 2013) to figure out how best to measure this key goal on learning outcomes.

While all this early discussion of the post-2015 agenda ignored adult education, it was also based on a flawed analysis. It had never been the case that the education community focused only on access. Indeed, the EFA goals laid out in Jomtien (UNESCO 1990) and reaffirmed in Dakar in 2000 (WEF 2000) had included crucial goals on the quality of education (EFA Goal VI) and of course included adults (EFA Goals III and IV). It was the elite group of global actors convened in the UN Millennium Assembly who had ignored this broader agenda and narrowed the focus to access.

So civil society campaigners, galvanised by the Global Campaign for Education (GCE), which was founded in 1999 to promote and defend education as a basic human right, began to fight back, arguing that the post-2015 education goal should be wider, more inclusive, addressing all levels of education – and that the financing of that agenda should be taken more seriously (GCE 2015). The fight was taken to every space, including into the Learning Metrics Task Force, which had aspired to agree a narrow goal and ended up having to recognise a much broader swathe of learning outcomes that should be valued, including non-cognitive, social and emotional development. Particular efforts were made to argue that we should no longer have a collectively agreed education agenda that others could pick and choose from, thereby narrowing the agenda. This is well documented elsewhere (see Grading Goal Four, Wulff 2020), but in essence what started as a resistance against powerful global actors won the day. The agenda agreed in Korea in the Incheon Framework for Action (WEF 2016) was bold and inclusive, with seven core goals that spanned a broad education agenda (like EFA had), and this same agenda was taken fully on board globally as SDG 4. With its seven outcome targets (4.1–4.7) and three means of implementation (4.a–4.c) (WEF 2016, pp. 35–55), the overarching goal even gave hope for a reinvigoration of the role of adult learning, framed as it was to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (ibid., p. 20).

Concerted efforts were made to discuss how SDG 4 would be financed, but there was consistent pushback that no references would be made to the financing of individual SDGs, as the challenge was to finance the whole agenda and a separate “Financing for Development” process would be tasked with figuring that out. In fact, in the key meeting on financing, the “Third International Conference on Financing for Development” held in Addis Ababa in 2015 (UN 2015), little progress was made. Key propositions supported by civil society, for example the establishment of a representative UN body empowered to set and enforce global tax rules, were not accepted. Instead, “innovative financing” (subtext for unproven funding sources) and the private sector were given undue influence over the financing of the SDG agenda as a whole. However, the fight to discuss specific financing of SDG 4 on education continued,
and though no specific finance goal was included in the final *Incheon Framework for Action* (WEF 2016), a section on finance ibid., pp. 66–70) was finally added that laid out a progressive agenda. This included:

- Establishing a high-level Commission on the Financing of Global Education Opportunities (which became the Education Commission).
- Prioritising domestic funding, with countries allocating at least 4–6% of gross domestic product (GDP) to education; and/or allocating at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to education. It was clarified that the least developed countries would need to reach or exceed the upper end of these benchmarks.
- Widening the tax base (in particular, by ending harmful tax incentives) and preventing tax evasion.
- Reducing the decline in aid and improving aid effectiveness/multi-stakeholder partnerships like GPE.
- Improving South-South cooperation on financing (ibid.).

Perhaps most promisingly, the section on finance specifically stated that it is … necessary and urgent to boost financing for youth and adult literacy programmes, as well as adult learning, education and training opportunities, in a lifelong learning perspective (para 107 of the Incheon Framework for Action – WEF 2016, pp. 69–70).

This financing section is the first in any major international education space which includes specific reference to action on tax. It ought to have served as a foundation for the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity’s *Learning Generation* report (Education Commission 2016) led by Gordon Brown, and two major research reports were submitted to the Commission: one on Domestic Tax and Education (Archer 2016) and one on Global Taxation (Cobham and Klees 2016). Demonstrating that 97% of education funding depended on domestic revenues, the Commission certainly succeeded in making the case that domestic financing was the critical priority – but it failed to focus enough on the obvious connection that the vast majority of that revenue depends on how much tax governments collect (as elaborated below).

Moreover, as has happened so many times before, the Commission subsequently spent most of its time focusing on the 3% of revenue that needs to come in aid or loans, obsessing over a new International Financing Facility for Education (IFFEd) which has generated much opposition for focusing on loans and empowering multi-lateral development banks instead of national governments (GCE 2019). The “international community” always seems more comfortable dwelling on those things it can influence and where it can show its “benevolence” through its aid and loans. It is much less comfortable discussing what blocks developing countries from increasing their own domestic revenues (which might require action on sensitive issues such as unfair global tax rules, illicit financial flows, distorted global trade or colonial legacies). Nevertheless, the seeds of a strategic financing agenda that could transform adult education have been sown and our challenge now is to cultivate these.
Strategic financing issues for the future – the 4 S Framework

With very few exceptions (perhaps Sweden and, until recently, Switzerland), adult education has not been a major priority for bilateral or multilateral donors over the past 30 years. As such, the more the discourse on education financing focuses on international aid and loans, the more adult learning will be overlooked. But the vast majority of spending on education is raised domestically – so why do aid donors have so much leverage? In part this is to do with the nature of education budgets.

The largest single item on every education budget is teachers’ salaries – making up 73% of basic education spending in low and middle income countries (Education Commission 2016, p. 70) – and in 32 countries teacher salaries for primary and secondary education actually exceed national government expenditure on education (Education Commission 2019, p. 130) and governments will not recruit teachers based on short-term unpredictable aid, so that major expense is covered almost invariably from domestic tax revenues. This leaves relatively little domestic funding available for other investments, leading governments to turn more to donors for supporting other aspects of the education budget. This gives donors a disproportionate say over the direction of education reform and means that donors have little interest in the recurrent costs that they cannot fund, such as teachers’ salaries. Donors, whose money comes from domestic taxpayers in their own country, also need to tell a simple story back home to make the case for aid – and this again leads them to focus on children and not adults.

This dynamic could and should change, but it depends on aid-receiving governments being more assertive about the direction of reforms, recognising that the bulk of their country’s education budget is already financed by their own resources and that the only sustainable way to make significant increases in education spending is through domestic resource mobilisation. If aid-receiving governments were more responsive to their own people for charting education reforms, adult education could rise up the agenda once again.

A useful approach to looking at domestic financing of education is found in the “4 S” Framework (GCE 2016, p. 17) – the 4 Ss represent the share, size, sensitivity and scrutiny of education budgets.

Share

Most attention tends to be placed on the share of the budget governments spend on education, arguing for 20% as a benchmark of good practice (ibid., p. 17). This is indeed important, but continuing to ask for an ever greater share for education ultimately sets one against other public services – health, water, transport, energy, childcare and social protection, etc. Moreover, a 20% slice of a small pie is a small amount, and the bigger strategic challenge is to increase the size of the pie overall, which can actively benefit all public services, with education a particular beneficiary as it is often the largest slice. This can be done in three main ways: action on tax, on debt, and on austerity. It is action on these that could transform the overall financing available to governments, potentially even doubling overall spending on education. When spending levels rise that far, making new investments in adult education and
lifelong learning becomes a real possibility—as long as the agenda is not being dominated by donor interests.

**Size**

The first way to increase the overall size of the budget is through action to expand tax-to-GDP ratios (ActionAid 2020a), ideally in progressive ways so that new taxes are levied on those who are most able to pay (the wealthiest elite and biggest multinational companies). The average low-income country has a tax-to-GDP ratio of about 16% (Archer 2016, p. 9), but the IMF estimates that most countries could increase this by five percentage points in the medium term (3 to 5 years) (Gaspar et al. 2019, pp. 5, 16). Just doing this would be enough to double spending on education and health in most low-income countries. There are many different ways to achieve this through progressive taxation (see for example the 11 policy briefs compiled in ActionAid 2018b) on different progressive reforms including property, wealth and capital gains taxes, progressive personal income, corporate and value-added tax (VAT) reforms, trade and excise taxes, carbon and digital taxes).

Action can also be taken to address aggressive tax avoidance and illicit financing flows, which depend on strengthening tax administration. There is much that any national government can do on its own, but there is also a need to set global rules in a fair way, challenging the legitimacy of the club of rich nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who is the current setter of global rules. The case for a representative and empowered UN tax body is becoming ever more compelling (Bou Mansour 2021), and there is a clear appetite for action on corporate tax, with even the intergovernmental Group of Seven (G7, comprising Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US) agreeing in June 2021 to set a global corporate minimum tax rate at 15% (TJN 2021). The design of this plan is flawed, as it will increase taxes in G7 countries but do nothing for developing countries (unless action is taken on country-by-country reporting and agreeing a formula for apportioning global profits equitably), and the rate is set too low (25% was widely demanded). However, it is a sign that the tide of history is turning finally against tax havens and that bold tax reforms are on the global agenda again. This is why there is such a compelling case for us all to go through adult education processes on economic literacy, so we can add to the growing swell of informed voices demanding change.

A second pivotal issue affecting the size of the overall budget is debt. In 2020, over 50% of lower-income countries were spending more on debt servicing than they were on education or health (ActionAid 2020a, p. 41). Indeed, in 2020 countries spending over 12% of the national budgets on debt servicing cut public spending in the previous three years (ibid., p. 36). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the new debt crisis, which has now been recognised globally. In April 2020, the intergovernmental Group of Twenty (G20, comprising Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union) set up a new Debt Service Suspension Initiative (Fresnillo 2020), but this is far too short-term, fails to reach all the countries in need and fails
to include all the creditors (e.g. private banks and China). Taking bolder action on
debt suspension or even debt cancellation/bold debt renegotiation could significantly
affect the resources available to governments to invest in public services as part of
the COVID-19 recovery. Giving the most marginalised young adults a second chance
to learn after their education was disrupted by the pandemic could be a particular
priority for investment.

A third key element affecting the size of the total government budget concerns the
macro-economic policies pursued by governments – whether they support so-called
“expansionary” or counter-cyclical policies or whether they revert to austerity. For
most of the past 40 years, governments in lower-income countries have followed the
loan conditions or coercive policy advice of the IMF which has focused on limiting
public spending, except perhaps on infrastructure. Public services have been particu-
larly affected by the consistent advice (to 78% of countries over the past three years;
see ActionAid 2020a, p. 66) to constrain spending on the public sector wage bill.
Teachers, doctors and nurses are the largest groups on this wage bill, so any advice to
cut or freeze the overall bill disproportionately affects health and education. Despite
many generous COVID-19-related emergency loans since early 2020, the IMF has
extracted promises from all governments that they will return to fiscal consolidation
in the short term – which basically meant a return to austerity by the end of 2021
(ActionAid 2020b). This will now profoundly undermine spending on education, and
there is a growing number of voices demanding that the IMF should move away from
using such a blunt and ineffective instrument and indeed sever their attachment to a
cult of austerity (Archer and Saalbrink 2021). Whilst such constraints are in place,
governments struggle to pay existing teachers a decent wage and struggle to address
teacher shortages, let alone recruit a new cadre of adult educators.

There are alternative economic paths to follow – such as those laid out by the
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Confer-
ence on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (ActionAid 2020b) – which place prog-
ress on achievement of the SDGs at the heart of economic and development policy,
rather than as an afterthought. If rapid progress is made in governments having the
courage and space to explore alternative economic models, then adult education
could find itself revalued.

There is added urgency for governments to think differently about economic mea-
ures post-COVID-19, particularly in the light of the climate crisis. Moving away
from simplistic measures of GDP growth and valuing progress towards achieving
SDG targets could be transformative. Indeed, proper investments in lifelong learning
could be particularly important in the context of countries having to radically adapt
in response to the climate crisis. Countries cannot adapt if their people do not – there
need to be new skills, new ways of behaving, new ways of seeing and understand-
ing our fragile planet and environment. We need a new generation of active citizens
of all ages to respond to this existential crisis and adult education will need to be
sustainably financed to deliver on this. We need a vision of societies and economies
that care for both people and the planet, and lifelong learning should be at the heart
of developing that caring society and caring economy.
Sensitivity and scrutiny

Of course increasing the share of the budget for education and the size of the budget overall (through action on tax, debt and austerity) will not be transformative unless we also push for more sensitive budget allocations to ensure that funding is spent wisely – as well as investing in close scrutiny of that spending to ensure funds arrive in practice. These are both areas where adult education and learning can play a key role. Economic literacy and budget analysis skills (ActionAid 2011) are important for people to be able to track whether the right budget amounts arrive in their community and are properly spent.

Budget accountability or social audit groups have often emerged from adult education processes that use Freirean approaches. There are a huge range of different participatory methods, many of them documented and shared by practitioners on the Reflection-Action website,2 that encourage people to hold local public services accountable. They scrutinise spending and slowly build in confidence to engage in budget formulation processes either locally, at district level or nationally. Demanding budget transparency and getting into the “room where it happens” can be key to ensuring that sensitive budget allocations are made.

Some governments of course are already committed to participatory budgeting processes, inspired for example by Porto Alegre in Brazil (LGA 2019), where the newly-formed Brazilian Workers’ Party attempted to create a participatory democracy in place of the outgoing dictatorship in the late 1990s. Many more governments locally or nationally can be compelled to be more inclusive by organised people and movements demanding a say. In most cases where this has happened, the need to invest more in education and in a second chance to learn for marginalised youth and adults is rising up the agenda. Indeed, the importance of adult education is much more recognised by people themselves than it is by donors sitting in remote offices.

Are we there yet?

No. We still have a very long way to go, but some of the foundations are being laid for a shift in framing that could see a new era in which financing adult education becomes a priority. This is most likely when battles are won around domestic financing and the negative influences of the donor community in this area are reduced. It is more likely if we can build much wider constituencies and movements with sufficient economic literacy to question the cult of austerity and the persistent dogma of decades of neoliberalism. We need bolder action that recognises alternative economic policies – the space for these has certainly expanded since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – and this action needs to be accelerated to respond to the climate crisis.

But there are continuing obstacles. The World Bank is remounting a bid for a single unifying target and indicator for education framed around learning poverty

2 The Reflection-Action website “is designed as a social library of participatory tools and processes, and a community of those who use them, primarily NGO practitioners” ([https://www.reflectionaction.org/](https://www.reflectionaction.org/) [accessed 8 March 2022]).
(World Bank 2019). This bid is simply a repackaging of the agenda it pushed in 2013 and which it lost in the framing of SDG 4. The World Bank will not let go and in 2021 has worked with the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) to define smart buys for improving learning in low- and middle-income countries (GEEAP 2020) which they hope will shift donor practice in the coming years. The inevitable, worrying and patronising subtext is that if you do not follow their advice on smart buys, you must be stupid. The smart buys are supposed to be for everyone working in education, but there is a ridiculous pre-selection because the only measure used is whether different interventions accelerate progress on basic literacy and numeracy in the early years of primary school. Adult education does not even get close to being a consideration because of this distorted and self-fulfilling framing. This ignores, for example, the critical importance of household literacy or wider community literacy in determining children’s learning progress in school.

Most recently, there was a desperate effort to overhaul the global architecture for education; a ministerial-level meeting entitled “From recovery to accelerating SDG 4 progress” (UNESCO 2021a), again driven by the World Bank, FCDO and their allies. Despite the wider global discourse being about the need to decolonise aid and development, these elite global actors continue to try to wield their power to shape the architecture in their interests. And it is the same as ever – a narrow focus on learning outcomes that is pushed by a high-level, self-selected group of influential people who can raise the profile of this narrow agenda. But once again, the effort has failed. UNESCO remains in the driving seat and the agenda remains framed around the full SDG 4. Moreover, the financing group mandated to conceptualise the agenda for the coming years has for the first time included strong references to domestic financing – to tax, debt, and austerity – in the outcome document of the ministerial level meeting (UNESCO 2021b).

The war for the sustainable financing of adult education continues. Some battles are lost and some are won, but the key to a sustainable victory is to shift the battleground – to move away from the global architecture where donors’ interests are always ascendant – towards a domestic dialogue in each country about how to radically increase funding for all public services post-COVID-19 and how to re-situate the role of adult education in the life of each nation. International action should be focused less on aid and loans, and much more on creating a fairer global system post-COVID-19. In the process we all need to learn – indeed to unlearn and relearn – to recognise that there are in fact alternatives when we have been told for so long that there are none.

The seventh CONFINTEA gathering of adult education stakeholders in Morocco this year comes at an interesting moment where there may be more scope than ever before for bold commitments on financing adult education. The disruption caused by COVID-19 has opened many people’s eyes to alternative ways of living and working. Senior figures at IMF headquarters are arguing for alternatives to fiscal consolidation (though the IMF’s country practices remain attached for now to the dying cult of austerity). The IMF Board has agreed USD 650 billion in Special Drawing Rights (IMF 2021b).
to increase liquidity in the global economy (though this magically-appearing money will benefit rich countries most unless there is a clear commitment to reallocation to low-income countries). The G7 countries have started to stand up to corporate power and tax havens (though they have a long way to go). Perhaps most crucially, despite frustrations at the climate conference in Glasgow in November 2021 (UN 2022) new and bolder commitments on climate action with massive implications for the fossil fuel industry and for every person on the planet will surely have to be agreed in the coming years.

CONFINTEA VII can build on this momentum, reasserting the importance of the public sector and claiming a more central role for lifelong learning in the transformations so strongly called for in SDG 4. Conference participants can argue for global action on financing that goes far beyond just claiming a share of national education budgets for adult learning – action on tax, debt, austerity, and global trade. Owing to regime changes, the governments in the US and Canada should be significantly less obstructive than their predecessors proved to be in Belém, and the Biden administration might even champion bolder action and financing commitments. The challenge is to capture the zeitgeist – to situate the struggle for sustainably financing adult education alongside the wider struggles for social, economic, political, cultural and environmental justice, with a bold vision for building a feminist, just, green future centred on care.

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