Community Learning Centres (CLCs) for Adult Learning and Education (ALE): development in and by communities

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Abstract

Institutionalised forms of adult learning and education (ALE) such as community learning centres (CLCs) and related models are found in most parts of the world. These are spaces offering opportunities for literacy and skills training, health and citizenship, general, liberal and vocational education, in line with fuller recognition of the meaning of lifelong learning, and in the context of local communities. Often these institutions form the basis for even more informal and participatory learning, like study circles and community groups. They may share facilities like libraries and museums, clubs and sports centres, which are not within the remit of the Ministry of Education. This article reviews relevant literature and identifies recent studies and experiences with a particular focus on the Asia-Pacific and Africa regions, but also considers insights related to interventions at the global level. Findings point to low levels of participation of adults in general, and more specifically so for vulnerable and excluded groups which can hardly cross respective barriers. The authors’ discussion is guided by the question What conditions are conducive to having more and better ALE for lifelong learning – and which roles can CLCs and other community-based ALE institutions play? This discussion is timely – the authors argue that CLCs need to be given more attention in international commitments such as those made in the context of the International Conferences of Adult Education (CONFINTEA) and the United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). CLCs, they urge, should be part of transformative discourse and recommendations at CONFINTEA VII in 2022.

Keywords
International Conference of Adult Education (CONFINTEA) · Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) · global commitments · community learning centres (CLCs) · transformative learning · professionalisation · institutionalisation · Asia-Pacific · Africa

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Résumé
Les centres d’apprentissage communautaires (CLC) pour l’apprentissage et l’éducation des adultes (AEA) : leur développement dans et par les communautés – Des formes institutionnalisées d’apprentissage et d’éducation des adultes (AEA) telles que les centres d’apprentissage communautaires (CLC) et les modèles qui y sont liés se retrouvent dans presque toutes les régions du monde. Ce sont des espaces d’alphabétisation et d’acquisition de compétences, d’instruction en matière de santé et de citoyenneté, et d’éducation générale, libérale et professionnelle, et ce pleinement en accord avec ce que l’on entend par apprentissage tout au long de la vie et avec le contexte des communautés locales. Souvent, ces établissements constituent la base d’un apprentissage encore plus informel et participatif comme dans les cercles d’études et les groupes communautaires. Ils peuvent se partager des locaux avec des bibliothèques et des musées, des clubs et des centres sportifs qui n’entrent pas dans les attributions du ministère de l’Éducation. Cet article passe en revue la littérature pertinente sur ce thème et recense à ce sujet des études et expériences récentes en s’intéressant particulièrement à l’Asie-Pacifique et à l’Afrique, tout en tenant compte également de connaissances liées à des interventions au niveau mondial. Les résultats révèlent de faibles niveaux de participation des adultes en général, et plus particulièrement des groupes vulnérables et exclus, qui peinent à franchir les obstacles auxquels ils se heurtent respectivement. La question dominante dans le débat des auteurs est la suivante : quelles sont les conditions propices à l’intensification et à l’amélioration de l’apprentissage et de l’éducation des adultes dans l’apprentissage tout au long de la vie – et quels rôles les centres d’apprentissage communautaires et autres établissements communautaires d’apprentissage et d’éducation des adultes peuvent-ils jouer ? Ce débat tombe à point nommé : les auteurs affirment que les centres d’apprentissage communautaires doivent occuper une place plus importante dans les engagements internationaux comme ceux pris dans le cadre des Conférences internationales sur l’éducation des adultes (CONFINTEA) et dans les 17 Objectifs de développement durable des Nations Unies (ODD). Ils préconisent d’intégrer les centres d’apprentissage communautaires dans le discours transformateur et les recommandations de la CONFINTEA VII en 2022.

Introduction
Adult learning and education (ALE) is currently gaining in importance in a policy discourse which looks at the human right for the future of education through the lens of lifelong learning (LLL) (Elfert 2019; UIL 2020; ICAE 2020). This paradigm shift calls for lifelong learning for all, and that includes ALE for all youth and adults. To better understand what this right entails, A review of Entitlement Ecosystems for LLL (Dunbar 2019), prepared for the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), translates this as an entitlement for all adults at work and analyses the situation in sixteen...
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Countries, documentating achievements using a system of four stages. These stages range from the declaration of a commitment to lifelong learning (stage 1), across the declaration of an entitlement to lifelong learning (stage 2), and implementing elements of a lifelong learning entitlement (LLLE) (stage 3) to successful fulfilment of an entitlement to lifelong learning (stage 4) (ibid.).

Extending such entitlement to all those working in the informal economy includes an additional two billion people worldwide, many of whom are “three times more likely to have only primary education (as the highest level of education) or no education as compared to workers in the formal economy” (Palmer 2020, p. 4). Thus, in the face of a reality where educational governance is dominated by the formal sector of education, a structural transformation of current institutions and systems is needed urgently (ibid., p. 49).

If lifelong learning for all is to be achieved, increasing the participation of youth and adults in ALE is highly important. This calls for a closer look not only at all face-to-face and digital opportunities, but also for an analysis of the diversity of institutions and providers of ALE. In this context, our particular interest here is in community learning centres (CLCs) as they have increased in numbers and geographic spread, serving a growing number of people over the past three decades. Indeed, policymakers, as well as the wider “policy community” at all levels, are increasingly using CLC as a generic term to capture a variety of community-based places of adult learning (e.g. Ahmed 2014; Yamamoto 2015; Chaker 2017; Le 2018; Rogers 2019). CLCs have also received attention and become a concern in the global monitoring of education, training and learning. UNESCO’s Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4) suggests throwing the net even wider: “While CLCs have been in the foreground of the discussions on institutional infrastructure, little attention has been given to traditional popular/liberal adult education institutions” (UIL 2019, p. 165). The latest Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM) 2021/2022 on Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses? opens up the relevant section by stating:

Community learning centres (CLCs) are increasingly recognized as playing an important role in providing education opportunities meetings local communities’ needs (UNESCO 2021, p. 265).

In this article, we take a closer look at some of these aspirations and developments through the lens of ALE’s local, national and global dimensions. Our discussion is guided by the question: What conditions are conducive to having more and better ALE for lifelong learning – and which roles can CLCs and other community-based ALE institutions play? We are particularly interested in the conditions that promote and support CLCs to live up to the expectations of participants, providers and stakeholders – and how local, national and global recommendations and initiatives could help to improve conditions, including levels of institutionalisation and professionalisation.

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1 England, Canada, the United States of America, Ethiopia, Morocco, New Zealand, Namibia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Australia, Scotland, Viet Nam, Japan, France and Singapore.
In the following sections we look at how CLCs and other forms of institutionalised community-based ALE emerged. We investigate why this seems to be important both for current policy discourses within countries as well as for the global development agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the fourth of these goals (SDG 4) specifically concerns education, aiming to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (WEF 2016, p. 15), and, moreover, adopting an inclusive stance in ensuring that “no one is left behind” (ibid., p. 7), it has been noted that ALE is in fact still being left behind in the implementation of SDG 4 and its lifelong learning agenda (UIL 2017, 2019). ALE continues to remain on the margins as “the invisible friend” of the SDGs (Benavot 2018), although actually education and learning opportunities for youth and adults have the potential to support most of the other 16 SDGs (Schweighöfer 2019) and should be recognised for playing an important role in transformation and sustainability (Schreiber-Barsch and Mauch 2019).

Literature review

Local places in local communities, including “centres” where people learn together, exist in many corners of the world. Centres where adults gather to learn carry many names and are provided by numerous providers in diverse settings. Some are government-supported and/or otherwise funded institutions for formally planned and accredited education and training. Others are created for other purposes and have been adapted and possibly renamed for different kinds of organised instruction. Some may be more diverse and flexible as locally determined and managed forms of learning, complementing facilities set up for some other purpose such as teaching about health, farming and animal husbandry, workers’ rights, or reaching particular groups of learners such as women or those retired from paid employment. But what constitutes such ALE institutions as CLCs is less clearly known.

Terminology and infrastructure

We begin this literature review by considering the variety of terms used in different countries. They are highly influenced by historical and cultural contexts. Language matters here, since a literal translation of the English term “community learning centres” and its acronym CLCs is found hardly anywhere in Eastern Europe, Latin America or francophone Africa. We also have to take into account that a term may point specifically to an institution while at the same time having some overarching meaning. For the purpose of this article, we use “community learning centre” or “CLC” as more of a generic term where we know of its origin, its original definition and later adaptation. We complement this with the wider term “community-based learning centres” for institutions with longer or shorter traditions. This seems appropriate, as does our use of “adult education” as a generic term complemented with the broader “adult learning and education” or “ALE” to reflect the changing understandings of lifelong learning, which is also life-wide and life-deep.
Terms, traditions and trajectories of ALE institutions vary between and within communities, countries and world regions. So do commonly used names and providers which in a broader perspective of community-based institutions of learning opportunities for adults include *folk high schools* in the Scandinavian countries (Bjerkaker 2021), *Volkshochschulen* in Germany (Lattke and Ioannidou 2021), *adult education centres* in Georgia (Sanadze and Santeladze 2017), but also in Belarus and Ukraine where such centres are attached to the “houses of culture” run by the city council (Lukyanova and Veramejchyk 2017; Smirnov and Andrieiev 2021). In Japan, there are the *kominkan* (Oyasu 2021) and Bangladesh has *people’s centres* (Ahmed 2014). In Mongolia, former non-formal education (NFE) or “enlightenment” centres are now referred to as *lifelong learning centres* (LLCs) (Duke and Hinzen 2016), while in the Republic of Korea the former *community learning centres* (CLCs) have also been renamed *lifelong learning centres* (LLCs), to reflect their designation as local institutions for the Korean national lifelong learning system (Choi and Lee 2021). In Tanzania, there are *folk development colleges* (Rogers 2019); South Africa has *public adult learning centres* (PALCs) (Daniels 2020), and Bolivia has “alternative education centres” (Limachi and Salazar 2017).

In a number of countries, these centres have got together and built national associations or networks which provide opportunities for cooperation and support services. Examples are the Georgian Adult Education Network (GAEN), the National Network of Alternative Education Centres (REDCEA) in Bolivia, the adult education centres of the Afghan National Association for Adult Education (ANAFAE), the National Network of Folk Universities in Poland (Hanemann 2021, pp. 53, 55), and the National Kominkan Association in Japan (Oyasu 2021). In Germany, the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband (DVV) serves as the national umbrella organisation for its regional member associations and the Volkshochschulen as local centres (Hinzen and Meilhammer 2022).

**Europe**

In Europe, the early beginnings of modern ALE and its institutionalisation can be traced back to the Enlightenment era, especially in Scandinavia where the *folk high school* movement of today looks to Frederik Severin Grundtvig as a founding father (Bjerkaker 2021). More vocational training-oriented activities and programmes grew out of needs coming from the agricultural and industrial revolution and often embedded in working-class movements and education. In Great Britain, the campaign and research around the centenary of the 1919 *Final Report* of the Adult Education Committee emphasised the importance of ALE after World War I (Holford et al. 2019) as a form of workers’ political and economic education. In Germany, ALE became a constitutional matter in 1919, with a special paragraph stipulating that “the popular education system, including the adult education centres, shall be promoted by the Reich, the federal states and the municipalities” (Lattke and Ioannidou 2021, p. 58). The need to support ALE in institutions was recognised as a governmental obligation. It seems that there are similarities and differences in historical evolution between Britain and Germany (Field et al. 2016), across Europe, and indeed globally.
For all the wealth of ALE and local learning centres under different names worldwide (Avramovska et al. 2017; Gartenschlaeger 2017), Europe developed a rich tradition of community-based learning, often closely connected to voluntary endeavour at a time of major changes. The general movement was related in time and cause to industrialisation, followed by political democratisation, with the need for new skills, attitudes and conduct in new industrial, technical, economic and social conditions. The kinds and levels of state support to voluntary endeavour varied, but all saw partial devolution to local communities, often with activities and institutions to what today is called citizenship education (Hinzen et al. 2022).

To some extent, Volkshochschulen (vhs) might be called a German version of CLCs (Hinzen 2020). In Germany today, ALE governance includes policy, legislation and financing for the almost 900 vhs which provide services to participants on their doorstep through offering courses, lectures or other activities, which are taken up at an annual level of around 9 million enrolments. Aggregated statistics showing data on institutions, participants, staff, courses, finances etc. have been collected and disseminated through the German Institute for Adult Education (DIE) – Centre for Lifelong Learning of the Leibnitz Society for the past 58 years and are available for further analysis and research (Reichart et al. 2021). Longitudinal studies show changes in content and offerings in terms of of vhs supply and demand, especially at times when socio-political developments require the acquisition of new competencies and skills, attitudes and values in the education and training of adults (Reichart 2018). Access and inclusion are key issues, giving special attention to respective policies and supporting barrier-free opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities; or providing targeted funding for equal chances in health education services (Pfeifer et al. 2021). These are areas of particular concern when monitoring ALE participation and non-participation (Stepanek Lockhart et al. 2021).

North America

The term community learning centres, as well as the acronym CLCs, is also used in North America for initiatives in educational reform. In Canada, the Government of Québec provided support and, in 2012, published a CLC “resource kit” for “holistically planned action for educational and community change”. This was prompted by debates on reforming schools and training centres to better “respond to the particular culture and needs of the communities” they were serving and to “provide services that are accessible to the broader community” (Gouvernement du Québec 2012, pp. 2, 4). The framework for action underlying this resource kit understands the CLC as an institutional arrangement aiming to jointly engage children, youth and adults in developing their community and catering for the needs of the its members. In the United States, a similar debate using the term community learning centres is ongoing and keeps asking how schools can be improved through engagement of the communities they operate in, and also how the communities can benefit from such engagements (Lackney 2000; Jennings 1998; Penuel and McGhee 2010; Parson 2013).
Other world regions

The orientation and understanding of CLCs and related facilities is widened by Hal Lawson and Dolf van Veen (2016) through a variety of international examples. The most recent collection of experiences from more than twenty countries around the globe is by Fernando Reimers and Renato Opertti (2021); it includes a case study from Mexico on “Schools as community learning centers” (Rojas 2021). All of these examples and their findings are relevant to our discussion of community-based ALE through CLCs which have adults as their main participants, but often also provide opportunities for children and youth, including examinations for school leaving qualifications as second-chance opportunities (Lattke and Ioannidou 2021, p. 60).

In sum, and keeping in mind our guiding question about conditions conducive to improved and enlarged ALE development, with particular focus on the role of institutions like CLCs, this literature review so far suggests that the need for wider participation in ALE is situated in a landscape featuring a variety of community-based ALE institutions with diverse backgrounds using different terms, including CLCs. However, while this landscape is bound to offer considerable potential for increasing participation in education, training and learning opportunities among adults so far not participating, there is also a need to search for and understand barriers and hindrances to participation, and identify those conditions which provide more ALE opportunities and make up better institutions. This is where ALE practice-related work and materials are getting increased attention. Examples are the Curriculum globALE (DVV International et al. 2021), tailor-made for the training of adult educators and staff, and the Curriculum institutionALE (Denys 2020), designed for organisational development and ALE system building (Belete 2020).

Furthermore, Richard Desjardins and Alexandra Ioannidou’s study on “some institutional features that promote adult learning participation” (Desjardins and Ioannidou 2020, p. 143) is of interest to us, complemented by this observation, made in GRALE 4:

"On the supply side, it is clear that a strong, universal ALE system is linked to relatively high levels of equality in participation. Within this, there is abundant scope for targeted initiatives that are designed to reach out to underrepresented groups and reduce institutional barriers to participation (UIL 2019, p. 176)."

This is where CLCs and other institutions of community-based ALE could and should strive to play an important role.

Finally, we point to related discourses concerning expectations of CLCs beyond the usual claims. In the context of learning cities or learning regions, for example, Manzoor Ahmed asks: “Are community learning centres the vehicle?” (Ahmed 2014, p. 102). Or in the context of education for sustainable development, where Hideki Yamamoto positions CLCs as a “platform for community-based disaster preparedness” (Yamamoto 2015, p. 32). In a related vein, the dimensions of local solutions to the climate crisis for Indigenous minorities in Malaysia are exemplified by Mazzlida Mat Deli and Ruhizan Muhamad Yasin in their article entitled “Community-based learning center of renewable energy sources for Indigenous education” (Deli and
Such wider perspectives were intensively discussed during an international conference on adult education centres which suggested making use of CLCs as local hubs for the implementation of the SDGs (DVV International 2017). This is close to the late Alan Rogers’ interesting analysis of “Second-generation non-formal education and the sustainable development goals: Operationalising the SDGs through community learning centres” (Rogers 2019), with the first generation of non-formal activities and institutions being situated back in the 1970s (Coombs and Ahmed 1974).

Having concluded our literature review, we now turn our attention to examples of CLCs in Asia and Africa, considering their development in and by communities.

**Experiences and examples from Asia and Africa**

There are several reasons why we focus here on examples and developments from the Asian and African regions more extensively than on other continents. In the case of Asia there is diversity in terms of how long CLCs have been operating for, and in directions and modes of development. The examples from Africa do not have decades of such development; they are part of current policy interventions dating back only a few years, albeit based on previous experiences. It is worth noting that the combined populations of these two continents (around 5.3 billion people; UNFPA 2022) amount to almost three-quarters of the world population (ibid.). Many countries in Asia and Africa have higher numbers of non-literate adults and out-of-school children and youth than those in other world regions. This increases the need for ALE participation in relevant institutions like CLCs, their institutionalisation and professionalisation. While we have to accept that limited data are available for ALE and CLCs globally, data are available for Asia, and in Africa some innovative developments supporting CLCs are grounded in broader approaches to ALE system-building.

**The Asia Pacific region: Viet Nam, Thailand and Japan**

In 1998, the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok started a CLC project as part of its Asia Pacific Programme of Education for All (APPEAL) (UNESCO Bangkok 2001). It was planned as an attempt to reach those “with few opportunities for education”, and based on this definition of a CLC:

> A community learning centre (CLC) is a local place of learning outside the formal education system. Located in both villages and urban areas, it is usually set up and managed by local people in order to provide various learning opportunities for community development and improvement of the quality of life. A CLC doesn’t necessarily require new infrastructure, but can operate from an already existing health centre, temple, mosque or primary school (UNESCO Bangkok 2003, p. 2).

The project spread across many countries in the region, and by 2003 Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Lao PDR, Malaysia,
Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Viet Nam were mentioned as participating (UNESCO Bangkok 2003, p. 3). APPEAL provided a resource kit (UNESCO Bangkok 2006) and followed up with manuals, partner meetings and conferences. Cambodia developed cooperation with a French non-governmental organisation (NGO) and produced their own guide on managing CLC (ACTED 2018).

At a regional meeting of APPEAL held in 2012, a new CLC definition emerged:

A Community Learning Centre (CLC) is a community-level institution to promote human development by providing opportunities for lifelong learning to all people in the community (ACTED 2018, p. 1, referring to UNESCO Bangkok 2013).

The orientation towards lifelong learning for all is growing. The increase in diversity within and between countries ever since the beginning of the APPEAL project can be seen in a collection entitled Community-Based Lifelong Learning and Adult Education: Situations of Community Learning Centres in 7 Asian Countries (UNESCO Bangkok 2016).

The reasons for achievements and success seem to be manifold, including the harmony between programmes and local needs, lifestyles and strong government support. Ai Tam Pham Le provides an interesting case study for Myanmar, where she discusses the contributions of CLCs to personal and community development (Le 2018). In Indonesia, the CLC manages the non-formal education programme (Shantzini et al. 2019), and in Nepal CLCs are seen as supporting lifelong learning and are now part of national education plans (MoE Nepal 2016).

In this article, we present examples from Viet Nam, the country with the highest number of CLCs in Southeast Asia; Thailand, which has diverse CLC organisations; and Japan, with its own pre-CLC kominkan. These three country cases serve to describe some of the circumstantial similarities and differences in which CLC developments emerged and co-existed with other forms of community-based ALE.

**Viet Nam**

Learning is a traditional part of Vietnamese culture. Multiple folk sayings reflect the value of learning: “A stock of gold is worth less than a bag of books”; “An uneducated person is an unpolished pearl”; “Learning is never boring; teaching is never tiring”. Respect for teachers is required, as in “He who teaches you is your master, no matter how much you learn from him”. Learning is a way of life in this country. The history of Viet Nam is adorned with people who, against the odds, overcame difficulty and studied to achieve high levels. One example is Mac Dinh Chi, who studied by himself at night in the faint light of the fireflies he kept in his hand because his family could not afford an oil lamp. As a result of his studies, he became a Zhuàngyuán, the title given to the scholar who achieved the highest score on the highest level of the Imperial examination in ancient Viet Nam.

When the country was reunited after the resistance wars, the Vietnamese government restarted the learning movement, a process initiated in 1945 by Ho Chi Minh,
the first leader of the independent socialist republic of Viet Nam. Literacy classes and complementary education programmes (equivalent to primary education) were organised in schools, religious facilities like Catholic churches, Buddhist pagodas and large private houses. The establishment of two pilot CLCs in 1999 was a new national intervention by the government to adopt “CLC[s] as a delivery system of continuing education at the grassroots” (Okukawa 2009, p. 191), providing not only literacy programmes but also knowledge and skills that would empower learners and boost community development.

Currently, approximately 11,000 CLCs form the most extensive network of non-formal education institutions in Viet Nam, reaching nearly all communes and wards of the country, providing local learning activities for people ranging from literacy to post-literacy, from income-generation to leisure skills and knowledge, practical knowledge of civil laws, legitimate actions and legal processes. In 2018, there was a total enrolment of 20 million participants in these CLCs according to capacity-building material circulated internally by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET Viet Nam 2018). The success of the CLC operation is largely due to the principle “of the people, by the people and for the people” (MOLISA Viet Nam 2018; MOET Viet Nam 2018), under the guidance and with the support of the government through policies. A sense of shared ownership thus encourages local people to engage in CLC activities.

Vietnamese CLCs are autonomous, while receiving professional guidance from the district Bureau of Education and Training (MOET Viet Nam 2008), and administrative management of the government at all levels. In each community, the head of the local People’s Committee is also the Director of the CLC (MOET Viet Nam 2008a, 2014), which gives the centre an advantage: easy alignment of CLC programmes and activities with central Government direction (Pham et al. 2015). The practical value of this was demonstrated during the first outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020: following directives of the central Government, local governments implemented control measures, raised people’s awareness of the disease, and gave advice on disease prevention. In their dual role as head of the local authority and leader of the CLC, these leaders organised appropriate CLC activities in cooperation with mass organisations like Viet Nam Women’s Union and the Youth Communist Union.

CLCs have strong legal status in Viet Nam, provided for in the Laws on Education in 2005 and 2019 (National Assembly of Viet Nam 2005, 2019); in MOET Decision 09/2008/BGDDT (revised in 2010, and again in 2014; MOET Viet Nam 2014) on organisation and operation of CLCs in communes, wards and towns; and in Ministry of Finance Circular No.96/2008/TT-BTC on financial support for CLCs from the national budget (MOF Viet Nam 2008). Clear directions from the central Government ensure uniformity in management (Khau and Tong 2021).

Thailand

The first community learning centre in Thailand was the 1982 Hill Area Education and Community Development Centre, an improved version of the village reading centres initiated by the Department of Non-Formal Education (DNFE) in 1972,
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where newspapers were provided to “promote reading habits and reinforce reading skills for neo-literates” (Leowarin 2010).

According to Suwithida Charungkaittikul of the Department of Lifelong Education of the University of Chulalongkorn, 9,524 CLCs spanned the country in 2018, reaching all rural corners. Thai CLCs are located in a variety of physical entities: district administration offices, schools, community halls, local elderly people’s private houses, factories and temples. Buddhism is the dominant religion in Thailand, followed by around 95% of the population (ARDA 2021). The approximately 40,000 Thai Buddhist pagodas (MoE Thailand 2017) serve more than religious purposes. They are learning sites because Thai tradition requires that boys come and live in pagodas for an average time of three months before the age of 20, to learn to read and write, and to understand ethics and Buddhist history and philosophy. Thus, the pagodas are “the centre of all kinds of community activities, including learning” (Sungsri 2018, p. 214). Today they also host CLCs providing learning to all people, regardless of gender.

Operating on the same principle “of the people, by the people, and for the people” as in Viet Nam, Thai CLCs have transformed non-formal education provision from “bureaucracy-oriented to community-based approaches” (Leowarin 2010). They have a strong base in the National Education Act (RTG 1999) and are especially supported by the Non-formal and Informal Education Promotion Act (RTG 2008), which paves the path to decentralisation of education by institutionalising CLCs.

Two philosophical approaches have had great influence on adult education, and thus on CLC programmes in Thailand. *Khit-pen*, essentially conceived and introduced by Dr Kowit Vorapipatana, former head of government-led ALE, literally means having full ability to think (Sungsri and Mellor 1984; Nopakun 1985 cited in Ratana-Ubol et al. 2021). It was initially applied to functional literacy programmes. The Sufficiency Economy of His Majesty the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej, promoting a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence for balance and ability to cope appropriately with critical challenges, has given rise to a growing number of community learning centres called sub-district non-formal and informal education centres that teach local people a way of life that sufficiently and sustainably relies on natural resources.

Traditions, religious norms and philosophical bases blended into a strong foundation and strong government support have given Thai CLCs the characteristic they have today: diversity in location, but uniformity in purpose.

**Japan**

The Japanese *kominkan*, a distinctive learning centre phenomenon which sprang up post-World War II, was not a child of UNESCO’s APPEAL project, but shares purposes and functions with its CLCs.

War-torn Japan needed to “build back better” – this slogan aptly applies to the period. Article XXVI in Japan’s new constitution stated that “All people shall have the right to receive an equal education correspondent to their ability, as provided by law” (Prime Minister of Japan 1946). With this Constitution, the notion of democracy and a process of decentralisation were introduced into Japanese people’s lives.
In 1946, the Ministry of Education issued a plan for the establishment of *kominkan* [public citizens’ halls], in every prefecture. The purpose of *kominkan* is to facilitate social education, self-improvement and community development through a variety of learning activities initiated and implemented by local people themselves, and through social interaction including meetings between the community and local government.

*Kominkan* suited the lifestyle of most Japanese people at the time. “Until the mid-1950s it [Japanese society] was essentially a rural society”, featuring a strong relationship manifested in the fact that “communities were structured into groups – the *gonin gumi* – and … the most important social value was the subordination of the individual to the group” (Thomas 1985, p. 81). *Kominkan* had a strong legal base in the 1947 Fundamental Law of Education (MEXT Japan 1947), and the Social Education Law of 1949 (MEXT Japan 1949). *Kominkan* quickly emerged as a tool for community empowerment, and became the backbone of social education. The number of *kominkan* soared from 3,534 in 1947 to 20,268 in 1950 (National Kominkan Association 2014) and peaked at 36,406 in 1955 (Arai and Tokiwa-Fuse 2013). Though the number is lower now, at 14,281 in 2018, according to the National Social Education Survey (Oyasu 2021, p. 98), for several social and administrative reasons, *kominkan* have retained their status as community-based learning sites that promote lifelong learning and a learning society at local levels.

Many factors contributed to the success and extensive network of *kominkan* in the 1950s. Among the most important was the legality of *kominkan* as entities established under and for purposes set out clearly in the Fundamental Law of Education in 1947, and the Social Education Law of 1949 (MEXT Japan 1947, 1949), and subsequently, “the national government […] standards for establishing and managing Kominkan and […] financial subsidies for their construction” (MEXT Japan 2008). Secondly, *kominkan* met the genuine needs of society in the post-war era when people felt an urge to acquire new values, new skills to improve their own lives, and new knowledge to rebuild the country. This process of democratisation and decentralisation also gave a strong boost to people’s spirit, as they understood that they were actually managing their own learning; and that learning benefited their own lives in addition to building community integrity.

Collaborative learning in a general sense doubtlessly began when humans came to live together in groups, a primitive form of community. It was in living and learning from one another that Indigenous wisdom accumulated, based on which community systems developed. Today, CLCs exemplify the same correlation between individual members’ learning and holistic community advancement. In this sense, *kominkan* are a good example of best practice.

### Research initiative on CLCs in Asia

In 2013, a Regional Follow-up Meeting to the Sixth International Conferences of Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) for the Asia and Pacific region suggested conducting country-based research in the context of the wider benefits of CLCs (UIL 2013). This was initiated by the National Institute for Lifelong Education (NILE) of the Republic of Korea, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) and the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok (ibid.). All six countries which joined the
project had already worked together within the APPEAL initiative on CLCs. Not least to enable comparability, research in each of these countries (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and Viet Nam) was based on a joint design and questionnaire, and results were compiled in a synthesis report (Duke and Hinzen 2016). Despite the diversity of countries in terms of their history and their political, economic and cultural history and present situation, the synthesis report contained implications and proposals which are important here:

**Policy, legislation and financing.** The findings suggest that to create a system of CLCs adequate in quantity and quality throughout the country, support is needed similar to what is available through the formal education system to schools, universities and vocational training. The necessary policies and legislation related to CLCs must have a sound financial basis, in this sense no different from that for formal education. […]

**Assessments, monitoring and evaluation.** Learning and training assessments at local level should produce data relevant to the construction, planning and development of programmes, curricula and activities. These need to be guided by forms of continuous monitoring and regular participatory evaluation involving CLC learners and facilitators. All of this, including monitoring and evaluation, are professional support services to help local CLCs to improve (Duke and Hinzen 2016, p. 28).

In the next section, we turn to Africa, where CLCs are still evolving. While focusing to some extent on Ethiopia and Uganda, where some research into CLCs has already been conducted, we do not present the two countries separately. Rather, they serve as examples of what is, as mentioned earlier, part of current policy interventions in a larger number of African countries.

**The African region**

The concept and practice of community-based ALE and CLCs in East Africa, as in many other parts of Africa, have evolved over time. The folk development colleges of Tanzania which started in the 1970s as part of international cooperation with Sweden and their folk high schools, are a special case, but interesting since they continue to be supported by government funding today (Rogers 2019). Local experiences of community learning are also found in Kenya, where CLCs have been brought into sustainable development efforts (Nafukho 2019); and in Lesotho CLCs are being tested as providers of ICT services for the community (Lekoko 2020). In South Africa there are attempts to combine CLCs with efforts to improve popular and community education (von Kotze 2019). A more general literature review of CLCs in selected African countries (Hinzen 2021) found that they are places where not only youth and adults, but also children and the elderly can access a variety of learning and education opportunities as well as other services (like community libraries, vocational training or internet access) provided by local government sector offices, often implemented with the involvement of civil society organisations (Hinzen 2021).
Ethiopia and Uganda

Ethiopia took action in 2016 after a delegation visited Morocco to learn more about CLCs. The Moroccan concept and design were adapted to the Ethiopian context and ten pilot CLCs were set up in five regional states (Belete 2020). As the benefits for the community and service providers started to emerge, other countries like Uganda and Tanzania became interested, and exposure visits were arranged for key government officials and NGO experts. Uganda has since set up nine CLCs across four pilot districts (Jjuuko 2021) including, as in Ethiopia, plans for upscaling within and rolling out to more districts. The interest from communities, different government sector offices and other ALE stakeholders has exceeded expectations. Therefore it is worth investigating the rationale for setting up CLCs in the region; the services and modalities to offer the services; the involvement of stakeholders from both the demand and supply side; steps to start and operationalise CLCs; and considerations for the sustainability and institutionalisation of CLCs within an ALE system. The concept of CLCs in the region is still evolving, and new pathways for ALE are being considered, so in the next section, we also look at what is currently planned for future consideration.

Why is there a need for CLCs in Africa?

ALE services are usually offered through learner groups who gather and meet within or close to their communities on a regular basis with a facilitator or trainer for adult literacy classes, different forms of skills training and extension services. While this serves the purpose of bringing ALE closer to its users, it also has limitations, especially in rural communities. In Africa, ALE trainers and facilitators have to travel long distances and cannot always reach all communities in need. Serving everyone requires more staff and more funding. Another limitation concerns the types of services offered, because equipment and materials necessary for certain types of training are not always readily available. To make provision effective, a place is needed where different ALE services can be offered as a one-stop service, and communities of all age groups can gather to conduct their own affairs. In rural African communities, such infrastructure is often poor or lacking. CLCs have the potential to fulfil the needs and interest of ALE service users and providers.

What do CLCs offer in Ethiopia and Uganda?

In Ethiopia and Uganda, CLCs have evolved as spaces that offer not only ALE services, but different forms of learning and education opportunities within the spectrum of lifelong learning. In the early days of setting up CLCs in Ethiopia, a need was identified for a place within the CLCs where mothers could leave their children while attending classes. This evolved in many CLCs into full-scale early childhood development (ECD) centres, where preschool-aged children are cared for and can start learning. Urban CLCs in Addis Ababa found that this is also a source of income for the CLC, providing affordable day care for mothers who could not otherwise afford it. The CLCs are government-funded, and the mothers pay a small amount. In
Uganda, school-going children attend additional support classes at CLCs. Youth and adults have a variety of services to choose from, based on the concept and definition of ALE in both countries. Integrated adult literacy classes combine literacy and numeracy with livelihood skills training, business skills training, life skills, etc.

Establishing libraries at each CLC, with books for all age groups, strengthens the skills of neo-literates, but also provides a resource centre for all ages, encouraging reading groups. One CLC in Ethiopia constructed an outdoor garden reading room as a quiet space for these activities. Youth enjoy sport and entertainment activities, and many youth clubs have been formed. In Ethiopia, the training offered by CLCs with support to engage in savings and loan schemes has assisted many youths to start a business and engage in farming. This has contributed to changing their minds about emigrating to other countries for their livelihood. Older adults have found a space to escape loneliness, enjoy discussions with their peers, have elder council meetings and engage with other age groups. The CLCs have thus also become a place for intergenerational learning. Beyond training and learning opportunities, CLCs also provide a service delivery point. CLCs in Uganda have schedules where different sector office experts are available on scheduled days with advice and services for individuals and small groups. Health sector offices in both countries have special days for vaccinations of children, health awareness-raising, and instructions on COVID-19 and other diseases. Paralegal services are offered, and local mediation of conflict within the community. CLCs have also started facilitating market days, where trainees can promote and sell their products.

The outbreak of COVID-19 required and prompted adaptation. Ethiopia produced a series of 20 radio programmes on business skills training. This also provided virtual outreach to a bigger CLC target group and promoted existing CLCs and the services they offer. As CLCs evolved into one-stop service centres, assessment of services became a new concern, and CLCs in Uganda started using community scorecards to assess services and have interface meetings between users and providers. Local government offices and politicians alike began to view CLCs as places where good local and integrated governance can be promoted (Republic of Uganda 2018).

Who is involved?

Stakeholder involvement should be viewed from both demand and supply sides of service delivery. The different categories of service users from the demand side are highlighted above. Their involvement goes beyond the use of services: CLC management committees are elected and formed with community members acting as a board, and regularly engaging with local government service providers to discuss the types and quality of service, sustainability and finances of their CLC. These committees are provided with training to fulfil their roles. Service providers in Ethiopia and Uganda are mostly local government sector offices, some partnering with NGOs who use the CLC facilities as places to provide services and contribute resources. The sector office experts and managers have formed cross-sectoral technical committees who jointly plan, budget, implement and monitor service provision through regular meetings, promoting horizontal and intersectoral integration. These committees are
mirrored at higher governance levels, thereby promoting vertical integration through the spheres of governance.

**How is the CLC policy intervention implemented?**

The establishment and management of CLCs take place in two phases: the first one is an establishment phase which takes care of orienting stakeholders and community members, conducting a situation analysis and needs assessment, training both the CLC management committee and the sector experts, and forming the necessary cross-sectoral committees across levels of governance. It involves selecting a space where the CLC will be established and appointing and training a CLC coordinator from one of the government sector offices. With few exceptions, all CLCs in Ethiopia and Uganda have been established in existing buildings donated by local government, with sufficient land for demonstration sites and sports facilities. Renovation costs have been shared by government and NGOs. The operational second phase starts the process of delivering different services and putting systems in place for monitoring and managing the CLC.

**Sustainability**

To ensure permanence of CLCs and the sustainability of their services, it is crucial for CLCs to be institutionalised. The East Africa region uses the Adult Learning and Education System Building Approach (ALESBA) to build sustainable ALE systems across five phases (Belete 2020). CLCs are at the nexus of service delivery, and provide an entry point to build a system for service delivery from the ground up. ALESBA’s conceptual framework considers four elements, each of which has five system building blocks (ibid.). The elements and building blocks ensure attention to an enabling environment for implementing CLCs nationally: embedding them into national policies, strategies and qualifications frameworks, as well as the necessary institutional arrangements across sectors of governance, and making space for non-state actors such as universities and NGOs to play a role.

The establishment of CLCs in Ethiopia and Uganda has exceeded the expectations of both service users and providers. As the practice continues to evolve, more services are added to the CLC spectrum. The provision of computer and other forms of digital training, including radio programmes, is currently in preparation. Governments have scaled up CLCs with their own funds in different districts, and included further roll-out in plans and budgets for the coming years. Advocacy around CLCs should continue to ensure sustainability and inclusion for permanent service delivery within these ALE systems. Ideally, the experience from and success of these projects should be rolled out to other parts of the continent.

**Research initiative on CLCs in Africa**

Within the broader interest in lifelong learning and the institute’s thematic priority of Africa, UIL analysed case studies from Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Rwanda and the United Republic of Tanzania a few years ago, and identified a diversity of commu-
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In 2021, a new research initiative was launched to provide deeper insight into the potential role for community-based ALE and CLCs (Owusu-Boampong 2021). A short survey comprising 12 questions was prepared to obtain comparable data on the status of CLCs in African countries. It was sent out to 35 African UNESCO Member States, using the channel established by UIL for requesting national reports from countries for the *Fifth Global report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE 5; UIL 2022). The 24 responses received by UIL provide substantial information on related legal frameworks, policies, strategies and guiding documents to support the operation of CLCs in African countries, and a variety of forms at different stages of institutionalisation in about 15 countries. Programmes in CLCs mainly include literacy, vocational and income-generation activities. Target groups are adults, women and youth, with an emphasis on disadvantaged groups and hard-to-reach communities (Owusu-Boampong 2021).

In terms of outcomes of CLC activities, the following were reported: creating a reading culture in the community; empowering communities economically; complementing formal education; providing recreational facilities; participation in community development; creating awareness in health and hygiene; promoting girls’ education; facilitating skills development for citizenship and entrepreneurship; and enabling inter-generational learning (ibid.). Respondents considered the integration of additional services (such as basic health services) in CLCs as having the effect of increasing the effectiveness and sustainability of CLCs, embodying an infrastructure that provides access to communities which often feel deprived or left behind (ibid.). Further findings in the questionnaire include:

- Nine out of 24 participating countries reported that CLCs are specifically mentioned in their national ALE or NFE policies.
- Half of the participating countries identified their Ministry of Education as the main entity or stakeholder responsible for coordinating CLCs in their country, followed by NGOs and local communities.
- The majority of CLC programmes focus on the provision of basic education, and only two countries mention offering equivalency programmes; while four countries provide certification.
- The provision of training and access to ICT was reported by 14 countries (ibid.).

Twenty countries reported a marked interest in receiving national capacity development in the form of CLC development guidelines, as well as expressing an interest in participating in peer exchange and sharing experiences among African countries (ibid.).

Also part of the research initiative at UIL was a review of documents available on community-based ALE in Africa (Hinzen 2021), and two of the recommendations emerging from that are the following:

- Governments in Africa should strengthen community-based ALE and CLC in their policies, legislation and financing from the education budget, and additionally within the inter-sectoral programmes of rural or community development,
health and social services. CLCs should be integrated into international funding agendas. […]

- More robust data on CLC are needed through regular collection of statistics on national, regional and global level in respect to providers, programmes and participants that could be used to inform future planning and development. GEM [the Global Education Monitoring Report] and GRALE, together with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics should get involved (ibid., pp. 38, 39).

Monitoring progress and negotiating strategies for action

The research initiatives in both the Asia Pacific and the Africa regions contribute to generating grassroots data which feed into global monitoring and reporting efforts, reflecting the status quo and highlighting areas in particular need of action.

GEM 2021/2022: non-state actors in education

Among the most prominent global monitoring reports on education more generally is UNESCO’s *Global Education Monitoring Report* (GEM), which began monitoring the seven SDG 4 Targets (4.1–4.7) and three “means of implementation” (4.a–4.c) in 2016 (UNESCO 2016a), a somewhat challenging endeavour (Benavot and Stepanek Lockhart 2016). The latest GEM report (UNESCO 2021), includes relevant information on CLCs. In particular, its chapter on “Technical, vocational, tertiary and adult education” features a dedicated section stating that “Community learning centres have proliferated in many countries”:

Embracing an intersectoral approach to education beyond formal schooling, CLCs can act as learning, information dissemination and networking hubs. … The establishment and management of CLCs has been bolstered by local and national government authorities and non-state actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have supported community engagement with financial and human resources. … CLCs are characterized by broad-spectrum learning provision that adapts to local needs” (ibid., pp. 259–260).

The report was well informed through a background paper on *Non-state actors in non-formal youth and adult education* (Hanemann 2021). Her findings relate to trends in the provision, financing and governance of ALE. Unsurprisingly, a key concern is “that many countries lack effective monitoring and evaluation systems including robust data on ALE. Moreover, this is also the case due to the multiplicity of non-state actors in this field” (Hanemann 2021, p. 15). She concludes with a set of recommendations. Two of them are relevant to the particular focus of our article on conditions conducive to ALE for lifelong learning and the potential role of CLCs and other community-based ALE institutions:
Governments should create an enabling legal, financial and political environment to make use of the full transformative and innovative potential of non-state actors in ALE. Non-state actors are usually well-placed to address situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to engagement and persistence in learning, in particular those related to socio-cultural and gender issues. Such an enabling environment can best be achieved within collaborative efforts involving public and non-public partnerships (Hanemann 2021, p. 109; emphasis added).

Community participation and ownership must become a central goal of ALE programmes as it not only ensures the relevance and sustainability of programmes but also contributes to social cohesion. Therefore, the role of state and non-state ALE providers should increasingly become that of facilitator and assistance provider to help communities build strong local democratic governance of their programmes (ibid.; emphasis added).

**GRALE 4: leave no one behind**

Focusing on ALE more specifically are the Global Reports on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) already mentioned in the introduction. In line with UIL’s mandate initiated in 2009 (UIL 2010), they are prepared at three-year intervals. GRALE 4, monitoring the wider aspects of participation, equity and inclusion includes a chapter where certain institutional, situational and dispositional barriers to wider participation are analysed, and CLCs as a potential institutional infrastructure are discussed.

While ... CLCs may look somewhat different across countries and regions, their success is a result of the active involvement by the community, whose members act as learners, instructors, and managers, and the community has ownership of the site (UIL 2019, p. 165).

The report throws the net wider than the CLCs of today, by looking at community-based ALE institutions from their historical beginnings in Europe and later in Latin America. The section concludes with an important statement in the context of the role of the state in supporting the conditions under which ALE institutions can operate well:

For ALE to function as an instrument for the promotion of democracy and in the struggle against inequality, two conditions have to be fulfilled: first, the state has to be ready to provide public funding to popular/liberal adult education institutions; and, second, while the state may set the overall purposes for funding popular/liberal adult institutions, they are given freedom in how to reach their goals (UIL 2019, p. 166).
Conference outcomes: commitments, declarations and frameworks

Progress in increasing participation in ALE (which of course includes the use of CLCs) is also reviewed at 12-year intervals during the UNESCO-led series of International Conferences of Adult Education (CONFINTEAs), resulting in outcome declarations and frameworks, such as the one adopted by participants of CONFINTEA VI, held in Belém, Brazil, in 2009. The relevance of the Belém Framework for Action (BFA) (UIL 2010) to CLCs is reflected in its call for “creating multi-purpose community learning spaces and centres” (ibid., p. 8).

The World Education Forum (WEF) is another conference series involving UNESCO, the World Bank and other international organisations operating in the field of education. Preceding the final ratification of the United Nations Education 2030 Agenda, the WEF session held in Incheon in the Republic of Korea in May 2015 resulted in a declaration “towards inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning for all” (WEF 2016). Its relevance to CLCs is reflected in its “indicative strategy” which strives to make learning spaces and environments for non-formal and adult learning and education widely available, including networks of community learning centres and spaces and provision for access to IT resources as essential elements of lifelong learning (ibid., p. 52; emphasis added).

In September 2015, the 2030 Agenda was ratified during the UN Sustainable Development Summit held in New York, USA (UN 2015; Boeren 2019). Another important document, adopted in November 2015 by the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, is the 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE) (UNESCO & UIL 2016). Its relevance to CLCs is its call for creating or strengthening appropriate institutional structures, like community learning centres, for delivering adult learning and education and encouraging adults to use these as hubs for individual learning as well as community development (ibid., p. 11; emphasis added).

Finally, the Recommendation Concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (RTVET), also adopted in November 2015, is relevant to CLCs because it notes a growing consideration of work-based learning and TVET in other settings including community-based distance and online [learning] (UNESCO 2016b, p. 10; emphasis added).

These declarations, frameworks and recommendations are collaborative outcome documents jointly drafted by UNESCO Member States, international organisations, public and private sectors, etc., ideally in consultation with civil society and other actors and stakeholders. Many of them call for improvement of data collection and the provision of appropriate monitoring and evaluation services.
In the run-up to CONFINTEA VII, to be held in Marrakech, Morocco, in June 2022, the drafting of the Marrakech Framework for Action (MFA) is already being prepared by way of an online consultation. As we are writing this article, the current draft includes the following section:

*Redesigning systems for ALE:* We commit to strengthening ALE at the local level, as a strategic dimension for planning, design and implementation for learning programmes, and for supporting and (co-)funding training and learning initiatives such as community learning centres. We recognize the diversity of learning spaces, such as those in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education institutions, libraries, museums, workplaces, public spaces, art and cultural institutions, sport and recreation, peer groups, family and others. This means reinforcing the role of sub-national governments in promoting lifelong learning for all at the local level by, for example, pursuing learning city development, as well as fostering the involvement of local stakeholders, including learners (CONFINTEA VII online consultation, accessed 29 March 2022).

It is encouraging that members of the ALE community and beyond now have the opportunity to comment on all aspects of the MFA, which will be an important document for the next twelve years. Based on best practice examples, future policy recommendations could be enriched. The ways in which CLCs and other forms of community-based ALE institutions are taken up in different UNESCO Member States through governments and civil society actors (CCNGO 2021), towards frameworks for action (Noguchi et al. 2015) has so far been uneven; the forms they take, and the management arrangements, are diverse and mainly “work in progress”.

We hope to contribute to this work by suggesting a few recommendations of our own in the next section.

**Recommendations**

Based on our discussion of examples and experiences from countries in the Asian and African regions and their deeper analysis, in this section, we put forward some recommendations of our own towards creating conditions conducive to having more and better ALE for lifelong learning, and integrating a role for CLCs and other community-based ALE institutions:

- Rethink and redesign educational governance and the education system to take full account of all sub-sectors from a lifelong learning perspective, and include all areas of formal, non-formal and informal education.
- Acknowledge ALE as a sub-system of the education system, in a similar way that formal schooling, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) are acknowledged. This will require including different entry points and communication messages in advocacy strategies.
Set up a comprehensive ALE system, including all system-building blocks and elements, such as an enabling environment, management processes, institutional arrangements and technical processes.

Acknowledge and promote the reality that ALE, like any education sub-system, needs a place and infrastructure where it can be delivered. CLCs and other community-based institutions can be developed as cornerstones to local infrastructure because they:

- offer a one-stop shop for a variety of ALE services to all target groups on the lifelong learning continuum and across sectors;
- can therefore improve access to ALE service delivery and increase participation, including those too often excluded;
- can reduce costs in ALE and other service delivery modalities for local governments because the costs for operating the CLC can be shared across sectors; and
- provide opportunities for other stakeholders such as NGOs, universities and the private sector to use CLCs as a platform for engagement and cooperation.

Make CLCs part of the institutional arrangements of the national ALE implementation structure across all spheres of governance. Furthermore, cross-sectoral coordination structures should be put in place, including community representation and participation.

Strike a balance between community needs and interests and national policies and priorities: although the communities’ needs and interests should be the main driver of the types of services to be delivered at CLCs, a balance should be struck with government priorities as elaborated in national and local development plans. This will ensure political and financial will and commitment towards CLCs.

Collect all data and information in the provision and practice of CLCs. These data should be documented, recorded and used. They should feed into an ALE monitoring system as part of the overall education statistics to provide an evidence base for further advocacy for strengthening ALE and CLCs.

Conclusions

The research question we set out in the introduction of this article was: What conditions are conducive to having more and better ALE for lifelong learning – and which roles can CLCs and other community-based ALE institutions play? Throughout this article, we have considered information and related discourses at national and global levels. In each of the sections we contemplated findings from relevant literature, and more in-depth research on experiences and examples from the Asia-Pacific and African regions as well as insights related to interventions at the global level.

We found that CLCs and community-based ALE are operating in many parts of the world and are diverse in many ways, including their nature and stages of institutionalisation and professionalisation, and the ways in which they are integrated, or
not, in overall educational governance. What seems to be similar all over the world is that ALE and thereby CLCs remain marginal to all the other education sub-sectors. Therefore, CLCs are in dire need of better recognition, services and support. Unless support is substantially increased, especially in terms of financing the commitment to lifelong learning for all (Archer 2015; Duke et al. 2021), one can hardly imagine any of the necessary changes occurring. ALE is grossly underfunded in almost all national education budgets, and too often neglected in policies and related legislation. In too many countries, ALE is underrepresented in data collection, and the work of CLCs and other community-based learning institutions does not even find its way into systems of educational statistics. This makes monitoring efforts nationally and subsequently globally more than difficult. The provocative saying applies: “You measure what you treasure.”

However, despite all the deficiencies which have been identified, many examples and experiences show that with improved conditions for ALE and CLCs, these can come closer to what they aspire to reach. This includes an enabling environment with policies and legislation; an overarching structure for educational governance; an adult learning system with related institutions, professionalisation for all working in the sector; as well as organisational developments for CLCs and other institutions. In addition, the current pandemic has shown the need to reflect more on new forms of blended learning and digital modes, and demonstrated their consequences for learners and their institutions.

CLCs have become a convenient catch-all for locally provided and at least partly determined and managed opportunities for institutionalised forms of ALE, and for informal meeting and learning in local community settings. In this article, we show that there are distinctive CLCs as well as other community-based ALE institutions which differ in many of their features, but also have much in common. What is crucial here is a better understanding of how policymaking can combine bottom-up and top-down approaches within decentralisation efforts. The questions remain whether global- and national-level policies are working against local-level bottom-up practices of diverse local communities, or whether there might be possibilities in both directions, emerging from constructive evolution allied to applied learning and better practice.

GRALE 4 closes with the following statement:

This report has argued that a focus on participation in ALE is key to achieving the SDGs. This must mean reviewing policies in the light of the evidence on participation, and investing in sustainable provision that is accessible to learners from all backgrounds, as well as systematically supporting demand among those who have been the most excluded in the past. This will enable ALE to play its full, and wholly essential, part in achieving the SDGs (UIL 2019, p. 177; emphases added).

Current socio-political and ecological malaise requires more locally based community understanding. Many changes and developments in ALE and lifelong learning are needed at this time of interlocking critical social, political, technological, cultural and ecological change, with a climate crisis and the incipient “great extinction”. The
ambitious SDGs, with their goals and targets for change by 2030, seriously underestimate the centrality of ALE to coping with change, and the latent reach and wider scope of ALE within lifelong learning, as a test of what is and is not sustainable in the longer term.

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Community Learning Centres (CLCs) for Adult Learning and Education…

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Khau Huu Phuoc already had 22 years’ experience in teacher training and curriculum design at Ho Chi Minh University of Education, Vietnam, before he transferred to the Regional Centre for Lifelong Learning (SEAMEO CELLL). As Manager of Research and Training at the Centre, he has conducted workshops and seminars aiming to promote understanding of lifelong learning and adult education, and sharing of related good practices for master trainers and teachers of non-formal education from the region. From 2016 to 2018, he coordinated the eleven Southeast Asian countries in the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)’s regional project “Towards a Lifelong Learning Agenda for Southeast Asia”. Most recently, he developed the Curriculum for Managers of Adult Education Centres for international use by DVV International. He has contributed as a speaker to various events organised by the Asia South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPB), UNESCO Bangkok, DVV International, and has written articles for DVV International and the Friends of PASCAL International Member Association (PIMA).

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