

Working paper

04. 5

# Adult Education and Democracy

*Salma Maoulidi*



# Adult Education and Democracy<sup>1</sup>

Salma Maoulidi <sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

In the first week of September of each year, most countries, at least those that still value learning, mark Adult Learning Week. Internationally, this event was held in Africa in 2004. Archie Mokonane, chairperson of the Gauteng Province Council for Adult Training and Education, explained that South Africa was to host hundreds of delegates from different parts of the world, who represent institutions and activists engaged in promoting learning throughout life.

What is spectacular about this, one may ask? For one, many of us in the developing world seem to have forgotten the importance of learning throughout life, especially when we are adults. Indeed, as parents, we only consider educating our children on the pretext that “it is their time, ours has passed”. As workers, we tend to think that life long learning is only relevant for those who have never been to school, as we already have the certification that proves we ‘qualify’ for the job market.

In most developing nations, a lot of attention is on formal education at the elementary level, forgetting that adults equally need to be educated so that they are better placed to support their children’s learning. The result is debilitating, where people’s learning is confined to specific times and spaces. In our context, this is often within poorly equipped classrooms, without the chance to further that learning beyond the classroom. Thus, instead of bridging the communication gap across generations, the education model being enforced widens this gap. No wonder the ageing population fails to understand what is happening around them, while the youth barely comprehend the nostalgia that the aged have about the important role that old systems and values play in shaping life and society.

Unquestionably, we are a community divided not only by religion, class, political affiliation and ethnicity but also by age. As we experiment with pluralism, we cannot undervalue the role of education in contributing to enlightened and informed citizenry. According to Carol Ano, of the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), education is as an impetus for democracy. Jacob Erle, from the International Academy of Education and Democracy (IAED), relates Adult Education to increasing citizens’ ability to participate in democratic spaces, particularly in politics and governance, either individually or as part of a group e.g. civil society. “This is why”, says Celita Eccher, Secretary General of the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), “it is critical to advocate actively for the right to learn throughout one’s life at national and international levels”.

Nordic countries have long understood the benefits of investing in life long learning. Governments in the region invest highly in Adult Education programmes and their economies and citizens are reaping the benefits. Other than being models of active citizen democracy, they lead in human development indices. Sweden and Norway use adult education as a way to solve development challenges such as unemployment. Both countries are implementing competence

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written for the International Center for Adult Learning (ICAE), and a version of this paper was published earlier in *The African* newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> Salma Maoulidi is a gender activist and executive director of the Sahiba Sisters Foundation. She can be contacted through [smlidi@yahoo.com](mailto:smlidi@yahoo.com)

reforms intended to upgrade skills of the workforce to meet the needs of a fast changing labour market.

Throughout Scandinavia, study circles are part of the Nordic culture, enabling citizens, particularly older citizens, to pursue courses in crafts, culture and academe and hence lead rich and productive lives past official retirement. Folk schools are also widespread for those who have completed their basic education. Tanzania adopted the concept of Folk Schools, with generous support from the Danes, but in the last decade we have witnessed the closure, or neglect, of most Folk Schools.

Folk Schools are in crisis Denmark and this has spilled over to Tanzania, particularly with regards to the withdrawal of funding. Some activists in the region attribute it to the change in government. In Sweden, on the other hand, Folk Schools are thriving, as are study circles, probably, as noted by Ms. Britten Mansson-Wallin Secretary General of the Swedish National Council of Adult Education, because “Adult Education is a way of engaging”.

## **2. How are we engaging with adult learning in Tanzania?**

Article 11 of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania provides for the right to learn and gives the state the duty of ensuring people’s right to work, to self-education and for the social welfare of citizens. According to the article, the right to education includes vocational and other institutions of learning. Article 20 recognizes the right to association, while Article 21 grants every citizen the right to participate in public affairs and the governance of the country. One of the most direct ways citizens can do this is by working and holding office, a right which is recognized under Article 22. Participating in democratic spaces is the only way by which citizen’s can claim their constitutional and legal rights. In this way, the right to learn is central to realizing the goal of social inclusion and extends beyond the concern with cognitive abilities by providing learners with social competencies.

In sum, the Tanzanian Constitution envisages an active citizenry. One of the ways this constitutional intent can be put into practice is by creating an environment for broader and meaningful citizens’ participation. Promoting the right to learn is thus critical. Whereas the Tanzanian Government has committed itself to a number of regional and international treaties and several policies are in place to guarantee every citizen the right to learn, as we mark Adult Learning Week, this is an opportune moment to ask how far the Government has met its obligations.

Indeed, the policy framework is in place to support Adult learning. In fact, the Education Policy includes Adult Education as part of non-formal education and training. It also provides that “Continuing education shall be an integral part of the education system”. Further, it states that “Universal Adult Literacy shall be accessible to all adults. Basic literacy, post literacy and functional literacy programmes shall constitute essential components of the educational system”. The Education Act directs all educational institutions in Tanzania to be designated ‘Centers for Adult Learning’. However, we are yet to establish how far this has been realized.

The Institute of Adult Education, working under the Ministry of Education and Culture, is tasked to design, develop and make available and monitor the curricula for literacy, post literacy and functional literacy programmes. These functional literacy programmes are to be designed and developed in response to the socio-economic needs of neo-literates. In this respect, national literacy tests are to be conducted every three years to improve national literacy levels. Moreover, the Ministry responsible for teacher education is to train a cadre of Adult Education teachers and tutors.

When this proviso was implemented with some seriousness, Tanzania achieved one of the highest literacy levels, not only in the continent, but also in the world. This is no longer the case, with increasing levels of children and young people leaving school functionally illiterate. The bulk of the illiterate population remains those who never had the fortune to attend school; or those who studied under systems that are not part of our colonial educational legacy. The continued presence of an uneducated or poorly educated class is a liability, not only for development, but to the notion of social inclusion and active citizenship.

### **3. Making life long learning a priority in Tanzania**

Consequently, while there are favourable policies in place to facilitate adult learning, there is a larger discrepancy between policy statements and actual practice. Currently, the impetus, in terms of policy and budgetary allocation, is in the formal education sector. Also, there appears to be little coordination between the institutions that provide Adult Education services, thus limiting the possibility of mainstreaming Adult Education in development programmes. The little that is being done in the guise of non-formal education is largely experimental and focuses on the seven to nineteen year olds, to the exclusion of adults.

Moreover, there is poor collaboration between national and district structures and government and non-governmental institutions that provide Adult Education programmes. There is also far too little attention paid to how the provision of these programmes is to become a development imperative. Adult Education is consistently left out of official education reporting, even among education networks, even though it is acknowledged as part of the education system. Meanwhile, alternative channels for non-formal/informal education are under-developed, including the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), trade schools, traditional institutions and local governance structures.

Increasingly, there is now wide recognition that gender is a cross cutting issue. However, gender is still perceived in a fragmented manner, emphasizing the numerical gains, with little assessment of the impact that interventions have had on existing structures and attitudes. The same seems to be the case for adult education. Clearly, there is a need for skills at integrating Adult Education concerns into development plans and for initiatives to make Adult Education a key consideration in development monitoring. In particular, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the gaps that exist between knowledge and practice. It is therefore difficult to gauge the role that continuing education is playing in increasing people's increased awareness and participation, since the only variables measured in most data relate to primary and post primary school education, not informal and non formal education.

Thus, while Tanzania has high proportions of adults who know about HIV/AIDS, the reality is that the life skills necessary to enable the population to fight this menace are appalling. According to the Tanzania Reproductive and Child Health Survey (TRCHS) of 1999, only 4% of women use condoms, while a 2003 African Youth Alliance (AYA) study puts the figure at less than 1%, suggesting that female youths are not only engaging in unprotected sex at an early age but also at risk of unwanted pregnancies and STIs/HIV/AIDS. The disconnection between HIV knowledge and safe sex practices makes Adult Education more than relevant for the wider population. Further, it may explain the gap between macro economic performance and widespread household poverty.

Manifestly, the government needs to reconsider its priorities. The bulk of budgetary expenditure is presently going into infrastructure - buildings, roads and equipment. In past years, Adult Education was not emphasized as a development priority, nor as a cross cutting issue that provides the impetus for development. While the Government is committed to the Millennium

Development Goals (MDGs) and, accordingly, has incorporated most of the MDGs into its Poverty Reduction Strategy, the fact remains that these goals focus more on primary education than on Adult Education. Very little is channeled towards strengthening the skills and resources needed to support mainstreaming of Adult Education, including literacy and skill development. This raises key concerns as to the ability of the Tanzanian Government to ensure Education for All by 2015. Hence, the absence of due consideration about the very policies that are meant to improve citizen participation and enlightenment seems to undermine the goal of achieving Universal Adult Education.

I believe that sufficient structures exist under the current policy framework to enable an effective programme of Adult Education, and its related activities, to take place. This, however, requires policy makers and bureaucrats as well as development practitioners to engage differently with the concept of life long learning. For example, most policies now include areas of citizen participation in implementation plans. For example, the Water Policy requires citizens in water committees, set up at local levels, to be imparted with technical skills in maintaining water pumps or water sources. Also, the link is made with related knowledge, such as on health, since most childhood deaths are caused by waterborne diseases. Likewise, the Transport Policy recognizes the role of citizens in contributing to and maintaining roads. In both instances, communities are expected to manage funds that are assigned for these purposes, something that requires more than basic numeracy skills.

In effect, most policies that are in place, sectoral and otherwise, afford opportunities under which communities can learn together, in a relevant and holistic manner, in ways that are far more advanced and democratic than traditional adult education classes, which confine themselves to basic literacy and numeracy skills. In the same breath, the nation stands to gain from the wide array of experiences and knowledge in place. But how conscious are relevant ministries about this connection? How many ministries, departments and local governments actually invest in these democratic spaces to promote citizen participation both in their projects and in how they approach their work?

To have meaning, democracy must cease to be a fad of the political elite. It has to be entrenched as part of a people's culture and consciousness. As a key principle in nation building it is reaffirmed in the preamble, and in Article 3 (1), of the Constitution of the United Republic of Tanzania. To actualize the concept the Government must provide, in addition to the political and economic legal frameworks, an enabling environment for learning via the production, distribution and availability of instructional and learning materials, equipment and libraries for adult and continuing education. Equally pertinent is the need for a high level of investment in this area.

There is an opportunity for civil society and concerned citizens to emphasize the centrality of Adult Education to development in their advocacy by making sure that learning throughout life remains a national development priority. The only way of achieving this is through making the Government accountable to meeting the goal for Education for All.

# HakiElimu

HakiElimu works to realize equity, quality, human rights and democracy in education by facilitating communities to transform schools and influence policy making, stimulating imaginative public dialogue and organizing for change, conducting critical research, policy analysis and advocacy and collaborating with partners to advance common interests and social justice.

## The Working Paper Series

HakiElimu has established the Working Paper Series in order to reproduce meaningful analyses in an accessible format. The Series is expected to contribute to public knowledge and debate on education and democracy issues.

The working papers include reports and papers written by staff and members of HakiElimu, along with partner individuals and organizations. Some have been written specifically for the series, whereas others are reproductions of previous work. Most of the papers are works in progress and not meant to be definitive.

The views expressed herein are of the author(s), and do not necessarily represent those of HakiElimu or any other organization. Correspondence related to specific papers should be directed to the respective author(s) directly; wherever possible their address is indicated in the footnotes on page 1 of the paper.

Papers may also be downloaded from [www.hakielimu.org](http://www.hakielimu.org). They may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes by written permission of both HakiElimu and the respective author(s).

Our aim is to publish short, concise papers preferably of about six to twelve pages. However, papers of up to twenty pages in length will also be considered. Submissions are highly welcome. They should be provided to us in electronic format and addressed below:



HakiElimu Working papers  
PO Box 79401 • Dar es Salaam • Tanzania  
Tel. (255 22) 2151852 / 3 • Fax (255 22) 2152449  
[info@hakielimu.org](mailto:info@hakielimu.org) • [www.hakielimu.org](http://www.hakielimu.org)