Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Conference for the CONFINTEA VII

Outcome Document

The Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Conference for the CONFINTEA VII was held virtually on 22 September 2021, with 237 participants across the region attended, including the Ministry of Education officials, NGOs, national and regional education movements, academia, private sector and Adult Learning and Education/Lifelong Learning stakeholders. This Outcome Document was developed based on the discussions and contributions made during the Conference.

Education 2030

1. Regional background, context and characteristics

Asia and the Pacific is home to one-third of the world's population with more than 60% of the world's youth, or around 750 million young people aged 15 to 24 years in total. According to the findings of GRALE III, 456 million adults in Asia-Pacific region remain illiterate.[2] The region possesses various characteristics, backgrounds and differences in terms of geography, population, politics, economics, wealth, ethnicities, languages, culture, etc. **East Asia**'s sub-regional consultation consists of China, Japan, Mongolia and the Republic of Korea. In terms of social development, East Asia has experienced progress in recent decades driven by education-based economic development. East Asia is among countries with the strongest education systems in the Asia and the Pacific region. **Southeast Asia** is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. With a population of over 630 million people. The Southeast Asia education system is rapidly changing, and the region has witnessed further development. However, social disparities, including access to quality education, remain a great challenge.

South Asia is home to 8 countries in the region. The population of South Asia is about 1.7 billion or about one-fourth of the world's population. In addition, South Asia has the highest youth population in the world. The region faces challenges in providing quality education to all young people, and it is home to half the global illiterate population, majority of whom are elderly adults and women. Moreover, the sub-region is severely facing the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which interrupts the learning of millions of children, youth and adults, thus, many of them are out of school. **Central Asia** has experienced industrial modernization and economic diversification. In terms of education, it has near universal literacy, including among adults as well as the universal formal education at the primary and secondary levels. With regards to education policy, there are many reforms at specific levels and subsectors of education rather than a holistic lifelong learning approach. Lastly, **the Pacific** is a region comprising 17 nations, it varies in terms of sizes, geographical features and ethnic diversity. The Pacific is vulnerable because of various issues such as environmental degradation, increased risks of natural disasters and climate change. In all sub-regions, however, COVID-19 continues to drive economic devastation which affects education and particularly adult learning education.

2. Overall status of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) within a lifelong learning (LLL) perspective in the region

In **East Asia**, the adult literacy rate reached 96.83% in 2020[3]. The national ALE policies have already been implemented in Japan, South Korea, Mongolia and other countries. These national policies, sector-wide planning and legislation are the basis to promote LLL and NFE. Multi-stakeholders also participate in developing ALE policy, including inter-ministry collaboration, NGOs/NPOs, CSOs, private sector, universities and training institutions. There are mechanisms and platforms developed in China, Japan, South Korea and Mongolia. These mechanisms from the central government to community-based learning

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[2] "Shedding Light on Adult Learning and Education in the Asia-Pacific," UIL (UIL, September 13, 2017), https://uil.unesco.org/adult-learning-and-education/global-report-grale/shedding-light-adult-learning-and-education-asia.
[3] Adult Literacy Rate, population 15+ years, both sexes, accessed October 28, 2021.

centres have increased capacity development of ALE/NFE personnel. In **Southeast Asia**, the literacy rate between 1990-2016 has increased from 82% to 96%. The female literacy rate has also been improved toward gender equality. Most countries have made great progress in terms of ALE policy since 2018, particularly the development of concrete plans involving more participation from the stakeholders in policy making. ALE as a proportional public education spending has increased since 2018 in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam and Brunei Darussalam. The participation rate of ALE has been increased in 9 countries in particular through TVET. However, the sub-region also faces challenges in sustaining these developments due to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Strong policy focus on LLL is required.

Even though there has been improvement in school enrollment in **South Asia**, more than 50 percent of children live in learning poverty.[4] The impact from the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the education of children and adolescents across South Asia. In terms of adult literacy rate, South Asia reached 74.31% in 2020. Although remarkable progress has been made regarding ALE, there are numerous issues that persist. The adult literacy rate in **Central Asia** is near-universal, reaching 99.81% in 2020. The education at the primary and secondary levels is near-universal as well. Central Asia has adopted ALE and LLL policies. Central Asia recently shows noticeable developments in ALE. Even though the region has successfully transformed itself by upgrading and improving education quality, developing holistic ALE and LLL policy is still necessary. In **the Pacific**, ALE is the base of education for most Pacific nations but still has not been widely recognised. There is a strong need for a dialogue and information regarding ALE, as well as adequate funding. In New Zealand, the government funds ALE, while other nations do not allocate funding specifically to ALE. There is a report that ALE funding has been reduced in Australia.

3. Achievements and challenges

In **East Asia**, all four countries China, Japan, Mongolia and Republic of Korea have strong policies and an overall framework with LLL. However, some countries did not have a specific policy for ALE. Planning and implementation was under capacity and there was a limited budget given to ALE. Although East Asia has achieved a high enrollment rate in primary and secondary education, there is still a significant number of adult disadvantaged populations including people who have disabilities and people who live in rural areas who have no access to quality education. **Southeast Asian** countries reported lack of ALE policies, adequate budget and capacity building of ALE personnel toward digitalization are main challenges. Many community learning centres (CLCs)/ALE centres faced difficulties in operation with less coordination of partners, resulting in lower awareness and participation in ALE. Despite these obstacles, the governments and stakeholders made efforts in building learning cities, engaging youth in LLL programmes, developing Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning (for example, the Malaysian Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning or APEL), and establishing SkillsPlus Funding to assist job seekers to upskill and reskill in Brunei Darussalam.

In **South Asia**, challenges remain, regarding ALE in different aspects such as lack of finance in literacy initiatives, lack of community mobilizing and absence of permanent staff. Furthermore, there are also other issues such as many areas are inaccessible to quality education, outdated practices of teaching, lack of personnel and issue of gender disparity. In South Asia, many countries except India, Pakistan and Bangladesh do not have their own literacy policy. Nevertheless, many countries in the region have developed promising innovations. In **Central Asia**, there remain challenges regarding ALE in different

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[4] According to The World Bank, the definition of Learning Poverty is being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10.
"Learning Poverty," World Bank, accessed October 28, 2021,
https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/learning-poverty.

contexts such as lack of policy implementation, lack of integration between formal education system and non-formal/informal modalities, lack of RVA and lack of data on adult and non-formal education. The sub-region also needs to strengthen the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and needs to address the issues of internet access as it can be very expensive in some countries in Central Asia. Despite the obstacles, Central Asia has been implementing promising innovation in ALE. The sub-region has adopted LLL concepts in order to ensure access to formal, non-formal and informal learning. Lastly, the sub-region has also established concrete steps towards recognition of qualifications, introduction of competency-based education. Many challenges remain in the **Pacific** including the needs for greater investment on ALE, increased access to ICT due to high costs of connectivity, as well as equitably access to ALE programmes for diverse groups in remote areas and island nations. However, positive developments were reported on family and traditional education, online learning and businesses, increased number of free courses, and ALE programme delivery by faith-based organisations.

4. Changes in ALE due to the pandemic (positive and negative sides)

In **East Asia**, at the beginning of the pandemic, there were many ALE programmes and activities at learning centres that had to be canceled or postponed. Some governments issue guidelines to cope with the pandemic situation to provide preventive measures for organizing activities. It depends on the availability of internet connection and learning resources. There is also an issue with not enough funding has been given to ALE during the pandemic. Nevertheless, there are some positive developments in various online and TV programmes. East Asia sub-regional consultations also had many discussions about closure and opening of schools and learning centres. In **Southeast Asia,** the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced the number of adult learners by 11% in Thailand and by 50% in the Philippines[5]. The ALE programmes have been disrupted or slowly implemented. On the positive side, in the case of Thailand, ALE has been digitally transformed with more online content developed and special budget allocated for CLCs to be equipped with internet access for online learning. Moreover, local governments have been provided information to adults on health, social services and other lifesaving information through mobile messages and social media.

South Asia has been immensely affected by the COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic has caused numerous problems such as lack of digital teaching material, increased drop-out rate, early marriage and discontinuation of learning and withdrawal of funding. Moreover, the COVID-19 has created issues such as closure of community centres, lack of internet and shortening of programmes. Women have no access to digital technology, exacerbating gender inequalities in literacy and adult education. **Central Asia** has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic which had an impact on ALE participation, provision and policies. The pandemic has created several challenges such as low availability of quality digital content especially in local languages, low availability of ICT infrastructure and connectivity affected the access and quality of learning. Furthermore, there is also an issue of lacking digital skills including media and information literacy and new skills for returning migrant workers. Nevertheless, Central Asia has online and offline learning and training activities in NFE for youth and adults which are implemented by CSOs on an ad hoc basis. There has been a high percentage of NFE, and informal learning opportunities lost in the **Pacific** during the pandemic, although some nations have remained COVID-19 free. Education has shifted to online in Fiji, while in some countries, for example, Cook Island and Niue, some schools/courses fees were removed, and free courses were offered. In New Zealand, ALE has played an important role in the pandemic recovery plans.

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[5] Ministry of Education, Thailand and Department of Education, Philippines. Meeting Report of the Southeast Asia Sub-Regional Consultation for CONFINTEA VII, April 2021.

5. Key themes and related priorities for ALE policy and practice

Key priorities in **East Asia** are the emphasis of the NQF on ALE and institutionalization of ALE mechanisms. At the sub-regional level, there is a need to ensure participation of disadvantaged populations in literacy, equivalency programmes and continuing education. TVET and recurrent education is also important to cope with socioeconomic changes and globalization for individual, institutional and industry development. Moreover, there is a need to emphasize on digitalization of ALE for skill development including ICT use under COVID-19 and use by elderly citizens. Lastly, focus on upgrading skills and capacity of ALE educators is also crucial. In **Southeast Asia**, key priorities are the harmonization of formal, non-formal and informal education, promotion of entrepreneurship programmes, quality blended strategies for ALE and effective digital transformation of ALE with strong accreditation/ micro-credentials/qualification framework. Regular meetings on ALE innovations, regional partnership and technical support from Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are required.

South Asian countries focus on funding, infrastructure and digitalization. In terms of funding, the sub-region emphasized on increasing funding for Adult Literacy programmes that target women and establishing flexible programmes that do not hamper income earning for participants. Regarding infrastructure, South Asia needs to overcome geographical barriers to reach out to distant regions, addressing gender barriers in ALE and develop local capacities to counter the lack of educational devices. In relation to digitalization, the region needs to develop digital skills along with formal reading and writing and increase access to digital learning materials through library, radio, etc. There are several key priorities for the future of ALE in **Central Asia**. For instance, ALE should absorb the full meaning of LLL across all areas such as legal framework expansion and creation of coordination structures. The sub-region needs to ensure increased mechanisms and sources of funding for ALE including government funding. Moreover, the sub-region has to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation as well as data collection in the field of ALE. Lastly, Central Asia has to promote the knowledge platforms and sharing of the best practices in ALE between countries and sub-region. In **the Pacific**, the political will should be elevated to raise the profile and funding of ALE and integrate ALE across sectors in-country to address priority issues such as COVID-19 and climate change. At the sub-regional level, there is a need to develop the plan noting the region's diversity. The role of NGOs should be clearly stated in the policy, while collaboration with universities and donors should also be strengthened. Family and intergenerational learning should be promoted to preserve language, knowledge, and culture.

6. The way forward in achieving SDG4 and recommendations toward an inclusive and equitable ALE as a fundamental right

6.1. ALE policy and financing for continuing delivery of ALE

Governments and education policymakers develop and implement gender-responsive, comprehensive and robust policies promoting ALE within an LLL framework and specify concrete gender-responsive budget plans and ALE programmes with clear targets. It is important to leverage structural support to embed ALE as a sub-sector of the education system. The public education system should adequately and

sustainably invest in non-formal and informal ways of delivery of quality ALE programmes while ensuring accessibility of formal ALE. Governments and the international community should seriously commit to and undertake tax justice measures to generate the necessary resources for education and ALE, following agreement in the Incheon Framework for Action for SDG4 in 2015. ALE policies are implemented with strong regulatory and monitoring mechanisms at the national and local levels. The capacities and leadership of NFE and local governments are to be strengthened to ensure continuing equity and quality delivery of ALE including during emergency situations such as natural disasters, epidemics and conflicts. As many countries in Asia and the Pacific devote less than one percent of the national education budget to ALE, it is highly recommended that governments increase financing of ALE especially for the disadvantaged youth and adults to participate in recovery efforts and sustainability during the pandemic and beyond. ALE/LLL Governing or Consultation Bodies at the national and regional levels could also be established.

6.2. Equitably focusing on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged youth and adults across countries
As ALE should be transformative for all and the state's responsibility, ALE's budget and its programmes are to be equitably allocated, and targeted to the most disadvantaged youth and adults who might be women, migrant, refugee, senior, with disabilities, in poverty, unemployed, ethnic minority, stateless or facing other challenges. It is recommended to ensure higher ALE priorities for the disadvantaged youth and adults to achieve SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Thus, all dimensions of equity and voices of young people and adults should be taken into account to ensure that every youth and adult receives the support they need, with respect for the diversity and indigenous/local culture, knowledge and languages. Informed decision-making should be part of the lifelong learning process. Development partners including Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait are strongly encouraged to increase and improve their Official Development Assistance for vulnerable youth and adults/regions through ALE programmes such as multilingual literacy, skills education for decent work to ensure matching skills, health education, climate change education and other ALE programmes designed towards sustained recovery and resiliency.

6.3. Supporting the disadvantaged youth and adults through digital literacy, mitigating the digital divide, and complementing with other low tech and no-tech learning programmes
Digital transformation has been accelerated in all sectors including education under the pandemic. It has been 10 years since Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) were launched and online learning, blended learning and learning applications became popular among youth and adults who have good access to the internet. However, disadvantaged youth and adults mentioned above are totally left behind in the last decades. It is indispensable that the public and private service providers of ALE support them to obtain not only the hardware with internet connection but also good digital skills and skills for employment and lifelong learning purposes, including how to operate, search, learn and create through media literacy and skills toward digital citizenship such as cyber security and online learning. At the same time, governments could systematically use radio, TV, bulletins, CLCs, libraries and blended learning approach with other low-tech and no-tech modes to deliver quality adult literacy and education programmes in a systematic and sustained manner to reach out to youth and adults in marginalised communities. Historically and up to the present, the Asia-Pacific region has the highest population of adult illiterates, majority of whom are women.

6.4. Diversified contents for learners with various needs through ICT and changed roles of learning facilitators and the service providers of ALE
There are billions of learning contents such as tutorial videos on knowledge and skills, lectures, and books on the internet. Many of them were produced by the public sectors, private sectors, experts, and professionals and individuals. Roles of adult learning facilitators are to introduce learning contents on the internet to learners or blend the contents and courses with existing programmes and courses at their learning centres. Relevant Open Education Resources (OERs) for ALE should be promoted within the context of the region. It is also important for adult facilitators to connect learners who have similar needs

and interests. Learners will benefit more from project/activity-based learning for the issues and problems they face daily. It is further important that this field is not left to for-profit private providers of education technology alone, but government responsibility should ensure regulatory safeguards and that the pre-existing divides between those who have access to digital devices and the internet and those who do not will not continue to widen. The governments should also develop ICT competency framework, andragogy and training programmes for adult learning facilitators.

6.5. Promoting Global Citizenship Education (GCED)/Education for Democracy and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) for youth and adults through ALE

Democratic participation of youth and adults including vulnerable groups such as refugees and migrants in the community and society is essential for social and economic development of the society and individual prosperities. GCED and ESD through ALE promotes awareness and actions among youth and adults on community and global issues such as climate change, public health, respect for diversity, gender equality, peacebuilding and sustained recovery. Youth and adults will also learn political and practical aspects of citizenship, as well as their rights and duties within the broader human rights framework. The public education systems should implement accessible ALE programmes on GCED and ESD through formal, non-formal and informal education. For example, in the Philippines, self-learning modules for citizen engagement in the Alternative Learning System programme were developed. Other stakeholders such as church groups, CSOs and the private sector also organised learning programmes on environmental management and Disaster Risk Reduction and Management.

6.6. Recognition, Validation, Accreditation and Equivalency under the National Qualifications Framework

While appreciating the diversified learning contents available on the internet, which could be shorter and lighter, the public service provider of ALE is encouraged to continue and expand to deliver the structured learning contents such as literacy programmes, equivalency basic education programmes (alternative educational programmes equivalent to existing formal basic education), and technical vocational skills. It is fundamental that these programmes are officially recognised, validated and certified with set standards so that learners can continuously pursue their further studies and learning. In the last decade, a national qualification framework has been developed in a number of countries in Asia and the Pacific, but practical implementation remains to be strengthened. ALE programmes are to be implemented in close connection with the national qualification framework, and prior learning as well as partial qualifications/certificates to be recognised. It is also recommended that the public service providers of ALE centrally or locally accumulate and maintain the database of credits and certificates of ALE learners through technologies for transparency and validity. Countries put in place a system of recognition for the varied ALE programmes being delivered by CSOs who mostly cater to marginalised communities. This will enable their learners who finished the CSO ALE programmes to get their knowledge and competencies accredited, thereby providing a pathway for decent work or further learning. It is also important to recognise traditional knowledge/local wisdoms and integrate them into TVET and community learning programmes. Women and artisans have much knowledge to offer such as in weaving, crafts making, canoe building, and construction of disaster-resilient houses.

6.7. Increasing youth and adult participation in ALE programmes by fostering a growth mindset for lifelong learning

Due to the many challenging situations they confront, poverty, disabilities, family backgrounds, social and cultural stigmas and discrimination, and other adverse conditions, many adults and youth are thwarted in their abilities to access learning opportunities throughout their lives that could help them better their conditions and realize their full potential. In Asia and Pacific, more than half of adults do not have opportunities to continue their education up to tertiary levels due to the socio-economic status of their families and where they were born. Poor quality foundational education has also served to stunt curiosity, creativity, and the learning aspirations of many. It is highly recommended that measures are taken, including effective advocacy and communication, to encourage and inspire all adults and youth to

participate actively in learning pursuits according to their interests, passion and life purposes. . To this end, CLCs can serve as a platform to reach people and motivate them to participate. An engagement of all stakeholders and an ecosystem of support such as daycare centres, mentoring/advising, job placement, financial assistance, and family/intergenerational learning opportunities need to be established to sustain the participation of adults, especially of marginalised women, in adult learning and education programmes. Then, ALE becomes an ongoing, joyful, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons.

6.8. Effective partnership and collaboration among all stakeholders to promote ALE

Effective and institutionalised collaboration among all stakeholders, including public sectors, private sectors, universities, NGOs, CSOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), open societies, religious institutions, international organisations and others have been essential to promote ALE while ALE has been less prioritised and budgeted by the public service providers for long. Effective partnership and institutionalised collaborations are required at the national level and they are more important at the community level for concrete actions. CLCs have been very successful in some Asian countries like Japan as Komin kan, the Republic of Korea as Lifelong Education centres, Thailand and Indonesia, especially if they are anchored in a national system or network. One of the most key success factors of these learning centres is effective partnership and collaborations at their community level to promote ownership and sustainability of the ALE programmes. Learning cities can be established with the support of the government together with all stakeholders.

6.9. Effective advocacy with clear evidence to promote ALE

Strong government commitment to ALE advocacy and building of disaggregated data to inform ALE policy, financing and programmes are essential. Further, governments need to strengthen data gathering and analysis around the positive impacts of ALE to society, economy, and individual health and social cohesion to provide strong empirical data and evidence to advocate for ALE effectively. The notion of literacy should be extended, beyond reading and writing. There should be equal weighting of social cohesion measures of ALE with those of economic drivers. It is highly recommended that impact studies, research and evaluations of ALE programmes are conducted and analyzed to effectively promote ALE in our region. All knowledge and experiences are to be accumulated and widely disseminated to policy makers and all stakeholders and learners through regional, sub-regional and national networks.