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living and learning for a viable future:
the power of adult learning

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Harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future

Belém Framework for Action

Preamble

1. We, the 156 Member States of UNESCO, representatives of civil society organizations, social partners, United Nations agencies, intergovernmental agencies and the private sector, have gathered in Belém do Pará in Brazil in December 2009 as participants in the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) to take stock of the progress made in adult learning and education since CONFINTEA V. Adult education is recognised as an essential element of the right to education, and we need to chart a new and urgent course of action to enable all young people and adults to exercise this right.
2. We reiterate the fundamental role of adult learning and education as laid down during the five International Conferences on Adult Education (CONFINTEA I-V) since 1949 and unanimously undertake to take forward, with a sense of urgency and at an accelerated pace, the agenda of adult learning and education.
3. We endorse the definition of adult education, first laid down in the *Nairobi Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* of 1976 and further developed in the *Hamburg Declaration* of 1997, namely, adult education denotes “the entire body of ongoing learning processes, formal or otherwise, whereby people regarded as adults by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, and improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction to meet their own needs and those of their society”.
4. We affirm that literacy is the most significant foundation upon which to build comprehensive, inclusive and integrated lifelong and life-wide learning for all young people and adults. Given the magnitude of the global literacy challenge, we deem it vital that we redouble our efforts to ensure that existing adult literacy goals and priorities, as enshrined in Education for All (EFA), the United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) and the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE), are achieved by all means possible.
5. The education of young people and adults enables individuals, especially women, to cope with multiple social, economic and political crises, and climate change. Therefore, we recognise the key role of adult learning and education in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Education for All (EFA) and the UN agenda for sustainable human, social, economic, cultural and environmental development, including gender equality (CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action)
6. We therefore adopt this **Belém Framework for Action** to guide us in harnessing the power and potential of adult learning and education for a viable future for all.

Towards Lifelong Learning

7. The role of lifelong learning is critical in addressing global educational issues and challenges. Lifelong learning “from cradle to grave” is a philosophy, a conceptual framework and an organising principle of all forms of education, based on inclusive, emancipatory, humanistic and democratic values; it is all-encompassing and integral to the vision of a knowledge-based society. We reaffirm the four pillars of learning as recommended by the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, namely learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together.

8. We recognise that adult learning and education represent a significant component of the lifelong learning process, which embraces a learning continuum ranging from formal to non-formal to informal learning.

Adult learning and education cater to the learning needs of young people, adults and older people. Adult learning and education cover a broad range of content – general issues, vocational matters, family literacy and family education, citizenship and many other areas besides – with priorities depending on the specific needs of individual countries.

9. We are convinced and inspired by the critical role of lifelong learning in addressing global and educational issues and challenges. It is furthermore our conviction that adult learning and education equip people with the necessary knowledge, capabilities, skills, competences and values to exercise and advance their rights and take control of their destinies. Adult learning and education are also an imperative for the achievement of equity and inclusion, for alleviating poverty and for building equitable, tolerant, sustainable and knowledge-based societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

10. While we acknowledge our achievements and progress since CONFINTEA V, we are cognisant of the challenges with which we are still confronted. Recognising that the fulfilment of the right to education for adults and young people is conditioned by considerations of policy, governance, financing, participation, inclusion, equity and quality as outlined in the annexed **Statement of Evidence**, we are determined to pursue the following recommendations. The particular challenges faced by literacy lead us to place recommendations on adult literacy to the fore.

Adult Literacy

11. Literacy is an indispensable foundation that enables young people and adults to engage in learning opportunities at all stages of the learning continuum. The right to literacy is an inherent part of the right to education. It is a prerequisite for the development of personal, social, economic and political empowerment. Literacy is an essential means of building people's capabilities to cope with the evolving challenges and complexities of life, culture, economy and society.

Given the persistence and scale of the literacy challenge, and the concomitant waste of human resources and potential, it is imperative that we redouble efforts to reduce illiteracy by 50 per cent from 2000 levels by 2015 (EFA Goal 4 and other international commitments), with the ultimate goal of preventing and breaking the cycle of low literacy and creating a fully literate world.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) ensuring that all surveys and data collection recognise literacy as a continuum;
- (b) developing a road map with clear goals and deadlines to meet this challenge based on the critical assessments of progress made, obstacles encountered and weaknesses identified;
- (c) mobilising and increasing internal and external resources and expertise to carry out literacy programmes with greater scale, range, coverage and quality to foster

integral and medium-term processes, to ensure that individuals achieve sustainable literacy;

- (d) developing literacy provision that is relevant and adapted to learners' needs and leads to functional and sustainable knowledge, skills and competence of participants empowering them to continue as lifelong learners whose achievement is recognised through appropriate assessment methods and instruments;
- (e) focusing literacy actions on women and highly disadvantaged populations including indigenous peoples and prisoners, with an overall focus on rural populations;
- (f) establishing international indicators and targets for literacy;
- (g) systematically reviewing and reporting progress, amongst others on investment and the adequacy of resources in literacy in each country and at the global level by including a special section in the EFA Global Monitoring Report;
- (h) planning and implementing continuing education, training and skills development beyond the basic literacy skills supported by an enriched literate environment.

Policy

12. Policies and legislative measures for adult education need to be comprehensive, inclusive and integrated within a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective, based on sector-wide and inter-sectoral approaches, covering and linking all components of learning and education.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) developing and implementing fully-costed policies, well-targeted plans and legislation for addressing adult literacy, education for young people and adults, and lifelong learning;
- (b) designing specific and concrete action plans for adult learning and education which are integrated into MDG, EFA and UNLD, as well as other national and regional development plans, and with LIFE activities where those exist;
- (c) ensuring that adult learning and education are included in the "ONE United Nations" initiative;
- (d) establishing appropriate coordination mechanisms, such as monitoring committees involving all stakeholders active in adult learning and education;
- (e) developing or improving structures and mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation of all forms of learning by establishing equivalency frameworks.

Governance

13. Good governance facilitates the implementation of adult learning and education policy in ways which are effective, transparent, accountable and equitable. Representation by and participation of all stakeholders are indispensable in order to guarantee responsiveness to the needs of all learners, in particular the most disadvantaged.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) creating and maintaining mechanisms for the involvement of public authorities at all administrative levels, civil society organisations, social partners, the private sector, community and adult learners' and educators' organisations in the development, implementation and evaluation of adult learning and education policies and programmes;
- (b) undertaking capacity-building measures to support the constructive and informed involvement of civil society organisations, community and adult learners' organisations, as appropriate, in policy and programme development, implementation and evaluation;
- (c) promoting and supporting inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial cooperation;
- (d) fostering transnational cooperation through projects and networks for sharing know-how and innovative practice.

Financing

14. Adult learning and education represent a valuable investment which brings social benefits by creating more democratic, peaceful, inclusive, productive, healthy and sustainable societies. Significant financial investment is essential to ensure the quality provision of adult learning and education.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) accelerating progress towards achieving the CONFINTEA V recommendation to seek investment of at least 6% of GNP in education, and working towards increased investment in adult learning and education;
- (b) expanding existing educational resources and budgets across all government departments to meet the objectives of an integrated adult learning and education strategy;
- (c) considering new, and opening up existing, transnational funding programmes for literacy and adult education, along the lines of the actions taken under the EU Lifelong Learning Programme;
- (d) creating incentives to promote new sources of funding, e.g. from the private sector, NGOs, communities and individuals, without prejudicing the principles of equity and inclusion;
- (e) prioritising investment in lifelong learning for women, rural populations and people with disabilities.

In support of these strategies, we call upon international development partners to:

- (f) meet their commitment to filling the financial gaps that prevent the achievement of all EFA Goals, in particular Goals 3 and 4 (youth and adult learning, adult literacy);
- (g) increase funds and technical support for adult literacy, learning and education, and explore the feasibility of using alternative financing mechanisms, such as debt swap or cancellation;

- (h) require education sector plans submitted to the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) to include credible action on, and investment in, adult literacy.

Participation, inclusion and equity

15. Inclusive education is fundamental to the achievement of human, social and economic development. Equipping all individuals to develop their potential contributes significantly to encouraging them to live together in harmony and with dignity. There can be no exclusion arising from age, gender, ethnicity, migrant status, language, religion, disability, rurality, sexual identity or orientation, poverty, displacement or imprisonment. Combating the cumulative effects of multiple disadvantage is of particular importance. Measures should be taken to enhance motivation and access for all.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) promoting and facilitating more equitable access to, and participation in, adult learning and education by enhancing a culture of learning and by eliminating barriers to participation;
- (b) promoting and supporting more equitable access to, and participation in, adult learning and education through well-designed and targeted guidance and information, as well as activities and programmes such as Adult Learners' Weeks and learning festivals;
- (c) anticipating and responding to identifiable groups entering trajectories of multiple disadvantage, in particular in early adulthood;
- (d) creating multi-purpose community learning spaces and centres and improving access to, and participation in, the full range of adult learning and education programmes for women, taking account of the particular demands of the gender-specific life-course;
- (e) supporting the development of writing and literacy in the various indigenous languages by developing relevant programmes, methods and materials that recognise and value the indigenous cultures, knowledge and methodologies, while adequately developing the teaching of the second language of wider communication;
- (f) supporting financially a systematic focus on disadvantaged groups (for example indigenous peoples, migrants, people with special needs and those living in rural areas) in all educational policies and approaches, which may include programmes that are provided free of charge or subsidised by our governments, with incentives for learning such as bursaries, fee remission and paid study leave;
- (g) providing adult education in prison at all appropriate levels;
- (h) adopting a holistic, integrated approach, including a mechanism to identify stakeholders and the responsibilities of the state in partnership with civil society organisations, labour market stakeholders, learners and educators;
- (i) developing effective educational responses for migrants and refugees as a key focus for development work.

Quality

16. Quality in learning and education is a holistic, multidimensional concept and practice that demands constant attention and continuous development. Fostering a culture of quality in adult learning requires relevant content and modes of delivery, learner-centred needs assessment, the acquisition of multiple competences and knowledge, the professionalisation of educators, the enrichment of learning environments and the empowerment of individuals and communities.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) developing quality criteria for curricula, learning materials and teaching methodologies in adult education programmes, taking account of outcomes and impact measures;
- (b) recognising the diversity and plurality of providers;
- (c) improving training, capacity-building, employment conditions and the professionalisation of adult educators, e.g. through the establishment of partnerships with higher education institutions, teacher associations and civil society organisations;
- (d) elaborating criteria to assess the learning outcomes of adults at various levels;
- (e) putting in place precise quality indicators;
- (f) lending greater support to systematic interdisciplinary research in adult learning and education, complemented by knowledge management systems for the collection, analysis and dissemination of data and good practice.

Monitoring the implementation of the Belém Framework for Action

17. Drawing strength from our collective will to reinvigorate adult learning and education in our countries and internationally, we commit ourselves to the following accountability and monitoring measures. We acknowledge the need for valid and reliable quantitative and qualitative data to inform our policy-making in adult learning and education. Working with our partners to design and implement regular recording and tracking mechanisms at national and international levels is paramount in realising the Belém Framework for Action.

To these ends, we commit ourselves to:

- (a) investing in a process to develop a set of comparable data indicators for literacy as a continuum and for adult education;
- (b) regularly collecting and analysing data and information on participation and progression in adult education programmes, disaggregated by gender and other factors, to evaluate change over time and to share good practice;
- (c) establishing a regular monitoring mechanism to assess the implementation of the commitments to CONFINTEA VI;
- (d) recommending the preparation of a triennial progress report to be submitted to UNESCO;
- (e) initiating regional monitoring mechanisms with clear benchmarks and indicators;

- (f) producing a national progress report for a CONFINTEA VI Mid-Term Review, coinciding with the EFA and MDG timeline of 2015;
- (g) supporting South-South cooperation for the follow-up of MDG and EFA in the areas of adult literacy, adult education and lifelong learning;
- (h) monitoring collaboration in adult education across disciplines and across sectors such as agriculture, health and employment.

To support the follow-up and monitoring at the international level, we call upon UNESCO and its structures:

- (i) to provide support to Member States by designing and developing an open-access knowledge management system to compile data and case studies of good practice, to which Member States themselves will contribute;
- (j) to develop guidelines on all learning outcomes, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, so that these may be recognised and validated;
- (k) to coordinate, through the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning in partnership with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, a monitoring process at the global level to take stock and report periodically on progress in adult learning and education;
- (l) to produce, on this basis, the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) at regular intervals;
- (m) to review and update, by 2012, the *Nairobi Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education* (1976).

ANNEX

Statement of Evidence

Addressing global and educational issues and challenges

1. Adult learning and education play a critical role in responding to contemporary cultural, economic, political and social challenges. Our globalised world has paved the way for many opportunities, among them the possibility of learning from rich and diverse cultures that transcend geographical boundaries. However, widening inequalities have become dominant features of our era. Much of the world's population lives in poverty, with 43.5% subsisting on less than US \$2 a day. The majority of the world's poor lives in rural areas. Demographic imbalances, with burgeoning young populations in the South and ageing populations in the North, are exacerbated by large-scale migration from poor to rich areas – within and between countries – and influxes of significant numbers of displaced people. We are confronted with unequal access to food, water and energy, and ecological degradation threatens our very existence in the long term. Alongside material privation is the all-too-frequently observed poverty of capabilities that prevents effective functioning in society. An unacceptably high number of today's children face the prospect of youth unemployment, while a growing number of socially, economically and politically “detached” young people feel that they have no stake in society.

2. We face structural shifts in production and labour markets, growing insecurities and anxieties in everyday life, difficulties in achieving mutual understanding, and now a deepening world economic and financial crisis. At the same time, globalisation and the knowledge economy force us to update and adapt our skills and competences to new work environments, forms of social organisation and channels of communication. These issues, and our urgent collective and individual learning demands, question our tenets and assumptions in this area and some aspects of the foundations of our established educational systems and philosophies.

3. In many countries, adult literacy remains a major challenge: 774 million adults (two-thirds of whom are women) lack basic literacy skills, and there is insufficient provision of effective literacy and life-skills programmes. In Europe, almost a third of the workforce has only the equivalent of lower secondary education, whereas two-thirds of new jobs require qualifications at upper secondary level or above. In many countries of the South, the majority of the population does not even attain primary school level. In 2006, some 75 million children (the majority of whom were girls) had either left school early or had never attended school. Nearly half of these children were from sub-Saharan Africa and more than 80% were rural children. The lack of social relevance of educational curricula, the inadequate numbers and, in some cases, the insufficient training of educators, the paucity of innovative materials and methods, and barriers of all kinds undermine the ability of existing educational systems to provide quality learning that can address the disparities in our societies.

4. There have been concerted international efforts to address these challenges. Progress has been made towards achieving the six Education for All (EFA) goals (2000) through government-led cooperation with United Nations agencies, civil society organisations, private providers and donors. Increasing resources for Universal Primary Education were made available through the EFA Fast Track Initiative. The United Nations Literacy Decade (UNLD) (2003-2012) provides support to achieve EFA's literacy goal through worldwide advocacy and awareness-raising. The Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) furnishes a global framework within UNLD to support countries with the greatest literacy needs. Two of the Millennium Development Goals (2000) explicitly address education: achieving universal primary education and gender parity. However, in none of these efforts has there been a designated role for adult learning and education beyond basic literacy and life skills. Encouragingly, the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) sets out a broad mandate in which adult learning and education can play a highly visible role.

5. Adult learning and education are a critical and necessary response to the challenges that confront us. They are a key component of a holistic and comprehensive system of lifelong learning and education which integrates formal, non-formal and informal learning and which addresses, explicitly or implicitly, both youth and adult learners. Ultimately, adult learning and education are about providing learning contexts and processes that are attractive and responsive to the needs of adults as active citizens. They are about developing self-reliant, autonomous individuals, building and rebuilding their lives in complex and rapidly-changing cultures, societies and economies – at work, in the family and in community and social life. The need to move to different kinds of work in the course of a lifetime, the adaptation to new contexts in situations of displacement or migration, the importance of entrepreneurial initiatives and the capacity to sustain improvements in quality of life – these and other socio-economic circumstance all call for continued learning throughout adult life. Adult learning and education not only offer specific competences, but are also a key factor in boosting self-confidence, self-esteem, a settled sense of identity and mutual support.

6. It is estimated today that for every single year that the average level of education of the adult population is raised, there is a corresponding increase of 3.7% in long-term economic growth and a 6% increase in per capita income. Nevertheless, adult learning and education are much more than an item of social spending or financial expenditure. They are an investment in hope for the future.

Progress in adult learning and education since CONFITEA V

7. National reports submitted by 154 Member States in readiness for CONFITEA VI and discussion on effective practice during the regional preparatory conferences have shown some progress and innovation in adult learning and education within a perspective of lifelong learning. Apart from the example of the European Union's ongoing Lifelong Learning Strategy, introduced in the year 2000, and related national policies in Member States, a few Member States in the South have introduced comprehensive adult learning and education policies and legislation, and some have even enshrined adult learning and education in their constitutions. Systematic approaches to adult learning and education, guided by policy frameworks, are being developed, and there have been instances of landmark policy reforms.

8. Literacy plans, programmes and campaigns have been reactivated and accelerated in some Member States. The period 2000-2006 saw an increase in global adult literacy rates from 76% to 84%. Progress was especially marked in the developing countries. Some governments have actively sought to work with civil society to provide non-formal learning opportunities in approaches such as *faire-faire*, with a wide range of content, objectives and target groups. The provision of non-formal education has diversified, covering topics such as human rights, citizenship, democracy, women's empowerment, HIV prevention, health, environmental protection and sustainable development. Advocacy events such as Adult Learners' Weeks and learning festivals, as well as comprehensive movements such as Learning Cities and Learning Regions, are contributing substantially to adult learning and education.

9. There have been some convincing signs and increased recognition among Member States of the benefits of gender-sensitive provision in adult learning and education, particularly with respect to women. Information and communications technologies and open and distance learning are being embraced and are slowly responding to the specific needs of learners who, until very recently, have been excluded. Mother-tongue learning is increasingly being addressed in national policies in multilingual and multicultural contexts, although only a few have implemented comprehensive policies.

10. Systems of information, documentation, monitoring and evaluation for adult learning and education programmes have been introduced. Effective instruments and systems of recognition, validation and accreditation of learning are gradually being put in place, including quality assurance bodies and procedures. Creating synergies between formal, non-formal and informal learning and education has proven to yield better results for both individual learners and education systems as existing resources and competencies are more effectively used.

11. Adult learning flourishes when states implement decisive initiatives in alliance with key civil society institutions, the corporate sector and workers' associations. Public-private partnerships are gaining currency, and South-South and triangular cooperation are yielding tangible results in forging a new form of adult learning for sustainable development, peace and democracy. Regional and supranational bodies and agencies play crucial and transformative roles, influencing and complementing states.

Challenges for adult learning and education

12. Despite this progress, the national reports and the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) produced for CONFINTEA VI show new social and educational challenges that have emerged alongside existing problems, some of which have worsened in the interim, nationally, regionally and globally. Crucially, the expectation that we would rebuild and reinforce adult learning and education in the wake of CONFINTEA V has not been met.

13. The role and place of adult learning and education in lifelong learning continue to be underplayed. At the same time, policy domains outside of education have failed to recognise and integrate the distinctive contributions that adult learning and education can offer for broader economic, social and human development. The field of adult learning and education remains fragmented. Advocacy efforts are dissipated across a number of fronts, and political credibility is diluted precisely because the very disparate nature of adult learning and education prevents their close identification with any one social policy arena. The frequent absence of adult education from the agendas of government agencies is matched by scant inter-ministerial cooperation, weak organisational structures and poor links between education (formal and non-formal) and other sectors. With regard to the recognition and accreditation of learning, both in-country mechanisms and international efforts place undue emphasis on formally accredited skills and competences, seldom including non-formal, informal and experiential learning. The gap between policy and implementation widens when policy development is undertaken in isolation, without external participation or input (from the field and institutes of higher education) and other organisations of youth and adult educators.

14. Not enough far-sighted and adequate financial planning has been established to enable adult learning and education to make telling contributions to our future. Furthermore, the current and growing trend of decentralisation in decision-making is not always matched by adequate financial allocations at all levels, or by an appropriate delegation of budgetary authority. Adult learning and education have not figured strongly in the aid strategies of international donors and have not been subject to ongoing efforts in donor coordination and harmonisation. Debt relief has not, so far, markedly benefited adult learning and education.

15. Although we are witnessing an increasing variety of adult learning and education programmes, the primary focus of such provision is now on vocational and professional education and training. More integrated approaches to adult learning and education to address development in all its aspects (economic, sustainable, community and personal) are missing. Gender mainstreaming initiatives have not always led to more relevant programmes for greater participation by women. Similarly, adult learning and education programmes are rarely responsive to indigenous people, rural populations and migrants. The diversity of learners, in terms of age, gender, cultural background, economic status, unique needs – including disabilities – and language, is not reflected in programme content and practices. Few countries have consistent multilingual policies promoting mother tongues, yet this is often crucial for creating a literate environment, especially for indigenous and/or minority languages.

16. At best referred to only in the broadest terms, adult learning and education feature sparingly in many international education agendas and recommendations, and are often viewed as a synonym for basic literacy acquisition. Yet literacy is indisputably of immense consequence, and the persistently vast scale of the literacy challenge presents an indictment of the inadequate adoption of the measures and initiatives launched in recent years. Consistently high illiteracy rates

question whether enough has been done politically and financially by governments and international agencies.

17. The lack of professionalisation and training opportunities for educators has had a detrimental impact on the quality of adult learning and education provision, as has the impoverished fabric of the learning environment, in terms of equipment, materials and curricula. Only rarely are needs assessment and research conducted on a systematic basis in the planning process to determine appropriate content, pedagogy, mode of delivery and supporting infrastructure. Nor are monitoring, evaluation and feedback mechanisms a consistent feature of the quality landscape in adult learning and education. Where they do exist, their levels of sophistication are subject to the tension of balancing quality against quantity of provision.

18. This **Statement of Evidence** provides the underpinning rationale for the recommendations and strategies as outlined above in the **Belém Framework for Action**.