

MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLE

**Institutionalization and professionalization of adult learning and education (ALE) – a comparative perspective on the ALE Toolbox of DVV International**

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**Introduction**

Adult learning and education (ALE) is a key element of lifelong learning, and the institutionalization and professionalization are of major concern when strengthening ALE (UNESCO 2016). There is growing attention on ALE in attempts to develop lifelong learning systems (Desjardins and Ioannidou 2020). Looking at ALE as a sub-sector of the education system, having a variety of providers and also becoming an academic discipline with ALE teaching and research, is growing (Benavot et al. 2022). All of this is in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) where promoting lifelong learning for all is called for (UN 2015). The role of youth and adult education in the SDGs (Schweighöfer 2019) and ALE in the framework of lifelong learning (Grotlüschen et al. 2023) are therefore of high relevance for policy and practice.

The Marrakech Framework for Action as the outcome document of CONFINTEA VII (UNESCO 2022) has clear statements on “Redesigning systems for ALE” in which institutionalization and professionalization play an important role. Advancing CONFINTEA VII, the Futures of Education initiative of UNESCO (ICFE 2021) had invited the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) for their statement which included “strengthening the institutional structures (like community learning centres, for delivering ALE) and securing the role of ALE staff” as well as “improving in-service and pre-service education, further education, training, capacity building and employment conditions of adult educators” (ICAE 2021, 11)

DVV International as the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association is involved in ALE together with partners in more than 30 countries around the globe for the last 50 years (Hirsch et al. 2019). It is interesting and enlightening to look at the development of DVV International in light of landmark anniversaries and signposts of ALE globally and at examples in countries (Hinzen et al. 2024). A major learning throughout the rich experiences is that ALE needs institutions and places for adults just like children have their kindergarten, pupils their schools, youth their vocational education and training, students their colleges and universities (Belete et al. 2022). This requires solid ALE policies, legislation and financing, and professionalization which include the training and capacity building of staff working in ALE (Avramovska et al. 2023).

## **Context**

A decade back DVV International with its partners started to work on a new set of instruments to develop and strengthen the institutionalization and professionalization of ALE. The experiences from a number of countries led to the idea to develop such instruments globally and at the same time adapt and apply them on local level. This process started in cooperation of DVV International, ICAE and the German Institute for Adult Education – Leibniz Centre for Lifelong Learning (DIE) by developing the Curriculum globALE CG) as a cross-cultural tool for the training of adult educators.

After a period of implementation with partners, and later consultation and revision under the leadership of the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) it is by now recommended by UNESCO as a tool and available through their website and the UNESCDOC digital library (UIL et al. 2021). The official document is in English language. The DVV

International website has some 15 additional language versions, including Arabic, French, Georgian, Lao and Spanish.

Meanwhile, also in the context of strengthening ALE and places for adults to meet and learn, several additional tools have been developed, which has led to open up and fill the ALE Toolbox available on the website of DVV International ([www.dvv-international.de](http://www.dvv-international.de)). These tools include Curriculum institutionALE (CI) for organizational development in ALE institutions, Curriculum managerALE for managers of ALE institutions, Curriculum interculturALE for the training of instructors and trainers for their work with refugees, and a Gender in ALE Toolkit. In addition, there is ALESBA (Adult Learning and Education System Building Approach) as a tool for the development of ALE systems, and most recently the Guidebook sustainabALE for organizational development in line with Education for Sustainable Development.

Another important context is the growing interest globally in the importance of non-state actors or non-governmental organizations (NGO) as civil society partners and service providers of ALE. The theme of the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2021) was on *Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* This report came up with relevant findings like: “Non-governmental and community organizations are the main providers of adult education” (ibid., 183) and “Community learning centres (CLCs) are increasingly recognized as playing an important role in providing education opportunities meeting local communities’ needs” (ibid., 265). Implicitly this calls for strengthening institutionalization and professionalization of ALE services and structures. This is what the ALE Toolbox aims at.

### **Research question**

The examples of countries where these instruments have been used have grown and several studies have shown interesting findings for comparative analysis of similarities and differences in implementation.

In the context of this presentation, CG for the professionalization of adult educators and CI for strengthening adult learning institutions are of special interest. Experiences from a variety of countries are used to discuss findings from a comparative perspective. The research design follows experiences and reflections that have earlier been made through the International Society for Comparative Adult Education (ISCAE) (Reischmann 2024). The overarching research question is: What are

important factors that must be considered when implementing global tools on the local level?

### **Curriculum globALE in practice**

CG is a modular and competency-based framework curriculum for the training of adult educators. It includes five modules: scientific and political foundations of adult education, adult learning and adult teaching, communication and group dynamics in adult learning and education, methods of adult learning and education as well as a unit on planning, organization and evaluation. It is used by DVV International since 2012 as a basis to creating qualification systems for adult educators in many countries.

CG was introduced in Palestine in 2014 - carefully aligning its key elements with the local context. This process required not only the translation of the framework into Arabic but also the modification of terms and descriptions to ensure they resonated with the common understanding of the Palestinian community. This adaptation engaged a diverse range of stakeholders from the ALE sector in Palestine. A pivotal element in the successful localization and implementation of CG was the strategic partnership with Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem, an institution with substantial expertise in both formal and non-formal adult education. By training selected university staff to serve as master trainers, DVV International played a significant role in advancing the professionalization of the ALE sector. Furthermore, Dar al-Kalima University integrated CG as a core component of its master's program in management of cultural institutions.

ALE in Palestine is predominantly associated with literacy programs aimed at older adults. Consequently, the implementation of CG required explanatory efforts to help partner organizations and training participants understand and embrace the holistic concept of ALE. To broaden perspectives on ALE and provide practical insights, an international expert with extensive experience in conducting CG trainings was invited to train the first cohort of facilitators. This initiative significantly enriched the local understanding of ALE by incorporating global best practices. Despite strong initial support from politics until early 2022, the Ministry of Education's interest has waned, posing substantial challenges to the institutionalization of CG in Palestine. Moreover, the political and security situation in Palestine has also impacted the implementation of CG. Movement restrictions across the

country have hindered the smooth execution of the program, adding another layer of complexity to the process.

When starting its work with CG in Kyrgyzstan in 2019, DVV International conducted a comprehensive study to assess the existing qualification system for adult educators and to establish which gaps were there to bridge.

From the start, graduates from CG courses in Uzbekistan were involved as advisors and master trainers. To ensure sustainability beyond the engagement of DVV International, a partner institution was identified, which would be able and was willing to provide trainings along CG also in the future: the Kyrgyz State University named after I. Arabaev. It was then decided to translate the curriculum both into Russian and Kyrgyz – a difficult exercise, because some terms and concepts had no proper equivalent in the Kyrgyz language. The curriculum was then operationalized and adjusted to local needs. This included defining the exact content, methods, duration, session plans but also development of supporting material (including online resources) in Russian and Kyrgyz. In the first cycle of training implemented in 2019/2020 with 14 participants international trainers teamed up with local trainers to ease knowledge transfer and make sure the training inputs were well adjusted to the needs, interests and previous competences of the participants.

Participants were selected in a competitive way to reach out to the most motivated adult educators who would use and promote the new concepts and techniques. Part of the training are practical phases, where participants can include newly gained skills and competences into their regular work and document the sessions on film or other media to be shared and discussed with their peers. In 2021 and 2023 two more training cycles were implemented with altogether 35 participants, now with substantial support from trainers of the first cohort. The joint trainings created a lively community of practitioners.

Similar cases were studied in Tajikistan and Cambodia. In order to ensure government approval and consensus among the stakeholders from the start, in both countries a working group including representatives from ministries, universities and adult education centres was established to advise on and to accompany the implementation of CG. The contextualization in Tajikistan and Cambodia was described as particularly challenging, since some terms did not exist in the national languages and had to be invented in Tajik and Khmer. There was also a certain reservation against some of the teaching techniques CG suggests,

which were considered too playful and too interactive to be embraced by the participating trainers. However, introducing CG was very successful: In Tajikistan the Academy of Public Administration is in process of qualifying adult educators independently, while the Royal University of Phnom Penh also has all the expertise to provide contextualized trainings and licenses in ALE.

### **Curriculum institution ALE in practice**

Core elements of CI were developed in 2014, while the curriculum was officially published in 2020. In various countries it serves as a navigator to strengthen the essential functions of adult learning centres: providing education, offering orientation and career guidance as well as encouraging participation in the community based on a set of basic capacities for adult learning centres. These include embedding ALE in the vision and strategy, conducting regular needs assessments as a basis for program development, reaching out to the community, attracting qualified trainers, engaging in networking, providing a motivating learning environment and ensuring sufficient and accurate funding. CI suggests a set of key performance indicators, which – adjusted to the specific context – allow assessing the current capacity of adult education centres, setting objectives and monitoring progress.

To effectively use CI for strengthening adult education centres in Palestine, it was essential to contextualize the curriculum to reflect the local realities. This was done in collaboration with Dar al-Kalima University, the same partner institution with which DVV International previously collaborated on the CG. Through a series of workshops, DVV International, together with Dar al-Kalima University and the partnering adult education centres, agreed to maintain the core content and structure of the CI while adapting some tools to better suit the local context. As a result, seven specific tools were developed to assess the needs for organizational development. It became necessary to prioritize and develop a capacity development program based on these priorities. DVV International then implemented this program and met various challenges along the way, such as a lack of time, budget, and personnel, as well as resistance to change from stakeholders.

Additionally, there were issues related to insufficient support to the partners from their higher leadership, such as the municipality or the Ministry of Education. In response, DVV International came up with approaches tailored to accommodate the partners' different levels of openness and availability of resources. The limited financial and human

resources of the partner centres impose constraints on what could realistically be overcome in the organizational capacity development process. For instance, although partners recognized the benefits of performance management tools, they are often understaffed. Beyond assessing needs and capacities, the CI and the accompanying key performance indicators (KPIs) were utilized in the selection of partner centres.

In a highly hierarchical and mostly state-driven country like Laos, it was key to form a strategic partnership with the government to get access to adult education centres. Although there was general governmental approval of using CI for professionalizing adult learning centres, the team encountered a certain resistance to systematic changes in the centres. Used to being told what to do rather than to conduct assessments and invent tailor-made solutions to problems identified, senior staff was open to new knowledge and techniques but was hesitant to apply them in their institutions. Accordingly, they felt more comfortable with attending classical management-related training than with individual consulting and follow-up that was applied in most other countries to foster change in adult education centres. It also turned out, that changing management styles is difficult in a financially weak and fully state-run environment, where there is yet limited knowledge and understanding of management skills and techniques.

In Jordan, DVV International undertook the development of a locally adapted set of KPIs for adult education centres through a highly participatory process, designed to foster a sense of ownership and commitment among the partners. These KPIs cover the main organizational development fields pertinent to adult education centres in Jordan. Currently, DVV International Jordan is in the process of revising these KPIs, with the assistance of an international organizational development expert, to ensure that partner organizations can apply them easily. During this phase, a tool will be created to assess the level of organizational development, accompanied by a guideline for managers on the effective use of the tool. This will empower the centres “to track progress, set benchmarks, and work towards continuous improvement” (Cretu 2023). The developed KPIs also played a crucial role in the selection of new partner centres.

## Comparative findings

A comparison of the cases described above brings to light several factors, which must be considered when implementing these global tools on the local level.

Contextualization and operationalization are a key challenge requiring substantial knowledge of the local context and a clear vision of all involved stakeholders. Contextualization encompasses several spheres:

- Especially in the work with CG, translation of terms and concepts into local languages was hard and time-consuming but absolutely worthwhile, because in some countries, now for the first time, there are resources available on ALE.
- Closely linked to language is the challenge to localize the – mostly – western ALE and management concepts and terminology. Two aspects seem to be crucial: First, the localization should recognize local traditions and experiences and use them as a starting point for the capacity building. Secondly, space should be provided to share and clarify the theoretical background of the methods and approaches used.
- Another challenge is the integration of the curricula or qualification systems into the national ALE architecture. This affects the vision of ALE just as much as the institutional set-up, management processes, recognition, validation and accreditation of specific services and competences. Experiences show that liaising with key stakeholders from the start is essential.
- Moreover, the curricula must be adjusted to the specific needs and constraints of the target groups such as previous knowledge, skills and experience, availability or lack of resources, staff continuity, influence and power within and beyond institutions etc. To overcome these challenges, cooperation with stakeholders spanning from planning to evaluation has proven to be effective.

The curricula just set frameworks. Each office together with partners have to develop them further, create more supporting materials like additional modules, assessment tools, background documents (e.g. in form of an online library), videos and podcasts.

Especially CG impacts on a change of thinking about the learning objectives and process and contributes to personal development.

Most of the participants of CG trainings (especially women) expressed, that they gained relevant skills and feel more self-assured in planning and offering education. They reported to put more emphasis on critical thinking, debate joint decision-making in their courses. On a similar note,

it could be observed that organisational development based on CI leads to more interaction of adult education centres with the community, higher recognition of their work, a better understanding of their role in the ALE system and in many cases even engagement in lobbying and advocacy for ALE.

The curricula are so far focused on face-to-face learning, which most participants prefer to online-sessions. However, blended learning formats should be explored further as an effective and cost-efficient way to reach out to more participants and institutions and to help them become proficient in a digitalised world.

A key factor to success of both curricula is their focus on practice – requesting each participant to include newly gained skills and competences into their regular work and share this experience with their peers.

The selection of participants and partner organizations has become more strategic, structured and competitive to foster change. It is recommended to select participants and institutions from various backgrounds, rural and urban adult education centres, universities, vocational training and government. This creates the chance for a wider outreach and inspires the learning process.

Resistance to change is an issue, which is addressed most prominently in CI: It recommends a number of steps to identify goals and design the development process together with the partner organizations and foresees joint monitoring and evaluation. All these steps enhance organizational change and are considered as important as capacity development in the form of trainings, coaching, peer-to-peer exchange etc. The participatory approach, involving key stakeholders already in the conception, planning, monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes, has proven to be particularly effective and sustainable – creating openness and readiness for ongoing professionalization.

Working on the curricula has boosted exchange and cooperation between offices, partner organizations and individual trainers and education managers. Since the curricula provide a common framework and experience, colleagues and partners are more likely to exchange and consult each other, which enhances networking and creating communities of practice.

## Conclusions

The comparative perspective on the research question has provided a number of findings in respect to communalities, similarities and differences when applying CG and CI in a variety of countries and contexts.

Looking at the country studies from Asia, it is obvious that preconditions are extremely diverse and substantial adaptation and contextualization of the curricula was needed in every case. The studies conclude that the success-factor of the curricula is their adaptability and flexibility. The key challenge, thus, lies in contextualizing the curricula and designing locally viable pathways to improve ALE by qualifying adult educators and strengthening adult education institutions.

The better organizational development of adult learning centres and the qualification of adult educators are embedded in the local ALE system, the more sustainability and impact they have on adult education systems. In general, the piloting has provided evidence that DVV International's initiative to develop outcome-based global curricula for ALE is realistic and successful. The curricula serve as "backbones" and guidelines to offer structured capacity development efforts and help to reach consensus among colleagues and with partners about the desired outcomes and the pathway to manage change.

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## **Institutionalization and professionalization of adult learning and education (ALE) - a comparative perspective on the ALE Toolbox of DVV International**

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**Abstract.** Lifelong learning has become the leading paradigm for a holistic view on education. Adult learning and education (ALE) is an important component of lifelong learning – most people are adults globally, and they are adults for the longest time in life. ALE is seen as a human right. There are many global recommendations, especially from UN specialised organisations like UNESCO and ILO that support this understanding. ALE quality and access call for professionalization and institutionalization. DVV International and its partners have taken this call serious and developed the ALE Toolbox that is filled by a number of instruments to support the training of adult educators, the capacity building for organizational development, the approaches towards intercultural challenges, gender perspectives and ALE system building. The article looks at some of these instruments through a comparative lens of implementation in a number of different countries. Findings and recommendations show the way for further improvements.

**Key words:** Training of adult educators; organizational development; global recommendations; local action; lifelong learning

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## **Institutionnalisation et professionnalisation de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes (ALE) - une perspective comparative de la boîte à outils ALE de la DVV International**

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**Résumé.** L'apprentissage tout au long de la vie est devenu le principal paradigme d'une vision holistique de l'éducation. L'éducation et la formation des adultes (EFA) est une composante importante de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie - la plupart des gens sont des adultes dans le monde, et ils le sont le plus longtemps dans leur vie. L'éducation et la formation des adultes sont considérées comme un droit de l'homme. De nombreuses recommandations mondiales, émanant notamment d'organisations spécialisées des Nations unies telles que l'UNESCO et l'OIT, vont dans ce sens. La qualité et l'accès à l'éducation et à la formation des adultes nécessitent une professionnalisation et une

institutionnalisation. La DVV International et ses partenaires ont pris cet appel au sérieux et ont développé la boîte à outils de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes, qui comprend un certain nombre d'instruments destinés à soutenir la formation des éducateurs d'adultes, le renforcement des capacités pour le développement organisationnel, les approches des défis interculturels, les perspectives de genre et la création de systèmes d'apprentissage et d'éducation des adultes. L'article examine certains de ces instruments sous l'angle comparatif de leur mise en œuvre dans un certain nombre de pays. Les conclusions et les recommandations montrent la voie à suivre pour de nouvelles améliorations.

**Mots clés:** Formation des éducateurs d'adultes ; développement organisationnel ; recommandations globales ; action locale ; apprentissage tout au long de la vie

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### **Institucionalización y profesionalización del aprendizaje y la educación de adultos (AEA) - una perspectiva comparativa de la caja de herramientas de AEA de DVV International**

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**Resumen.** El aprendizaje permanente se ha convertido en el principal paradigma de una visión holística de la educación. El aprendizaje y la educación de adultos (AEA) es un componente importante del aprendizaje permanente: la mayoría de las personas son adultas en todo el mundo, y lo son durante el periodo más largo de su vida. El AEA se considera un derecho humano. Hay muchas recomendaciones mundiales, especialmente de organizaciones especializadas de la ONU como la UNESCO y la OIT, que apoyan esta idea. La calidad y el acceso al AEA exigen profesionalización e institucionalización. DVV International y sus socios se han tomado en serio este llamamiento y han desarrollado la caja de herramientas de AEA, que contiene una serie de instrumentos para apoyar la formación de educadores de adultos, el desarrollo de capacidades para el desarrollo organizativo, los enfoques de los retos interculturales, las perspectivas de género y la creación de sistemas de AEA. El artículo examina algunos de estos instrumentos a través de una lente comparativa de la aplicación en una serie de países diferentes. Los resultados y las recomendaciones muestran el camino para futuras mejoras.

**Palabras clave:** Formación de educadores de adultos; desarrollo organizativo; recomendaciones globales; acción local;

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