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Latin American adult education at a crossroads:
Adult educational policy in the 1990s

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Abstract:

This article examines the main trends in adult education policy in Latin America during the 1990s. During this period, in spite of the commitments made by national governments in Jomtien in 1990 and ratified in Dakar in 2000, adult education in Latin America has been marginalized and neglected, both in terms of public policy and public funding. This paper raises different hypotheses in order to explain this dynamic and the variety of strategies that have been proposed to garner support for the field. Adult education in Latin America is now at a crossroads, and the collective search for its mission, purpose, and identity is as urgent as ever. In discussing the revitalization of adult education in Latin America, the debates undertaken in the region by governmental and non-governmental organizations in the preparation for and in the follow-up to the 1997 Hamburg International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) are described. In the final section, after summarizing the main issues and achievements, the article outlines several challenges for the future.

Introduction

Former President of Tanzania, Julius Nyerere, an adult educator himself, once said that adult education is the Cinderella of government departments (Nyerere 1988). This dictum applies as much to most Latin American countries as it does to Tanzania. Adult education governmental agencies throughout the region are often underfunded, forgotten and marginalized from the education policy realm. Usually relegated to a corner in whatever ministry or secretary they are located, these agencies face the challenges of fulfilling ambitious goals with low budgets, poor facilities, limited support and a labor force of low-paid and unpaid teachers, most without a background in the field. As Garcia Huidobro (1994) noted, adult education in Latin America is a low-status endeavor, a 'poor education for poor people'.

This situation worsened throughout during the nineties. In the post-war history of Latin American adult education, seldom had this sector received so little support at both the national

and the international level as in this decade. Although a myriad of local programs remained in place, the large-scale initiatives and the legitimacy of the field characteristic of the previous four decades practically vanished. Despite their occasional rhetoric of lifelong education, the emphasis of the overall education strategy of bilateral and multilateral organizations, national governments, and donor agencies lay almost exclusively on schools rather than on non-formal education, and on children rather than on youth and adults. Moreover, whereas in the past Latin American adult education (and particularly the popular education movement) was a permanent source of innovation and creativity that inspired programs all over the world, it has been argued that during the nineties the most interesting innovations in the region came from the school system (Stromquist 1997, Unesco 2000, La Belle 2000, R.M. Torres 2000 a, b).

What is particularly ironic about this process is that the near abandonment of the field of adult education in Latin America (and for that matter, worldwide) occurred at the same time that there was a clear mandate to revitalize it. Such a mandate was articulated in the Education for All Conference held in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, and subsequently ignored during most of the decade both by national governments and by international agencies with influence in Latin American education policy. For the field of adult education, the post-Jomtien decade constitutes a sad example of overcommitment and underachievement, which reflects the gap between an expansive rhetoric and a contracting agenda. Indeed, most educational policies for ‘including the excluded’ implemented during the last decade have themselves excluded adult education from the repertoire of potential interventions, and have excluded adults from their policy radar.¹

Although the marginalization of adult education was the result of the overall education strategy - and the corresponding budget allocations -- of most international and national institutions during the 1990s, some signals suggest that adult education could return to the policy agenda in the near future. At the international level, among those signals are the explicit calls for support of adult education raised in the 2000 World Education Forum (Dakar), the current internal discussions within the World Bank to reconsider its policy priorities towards the area, and the increasing interest among policy-makers in the promotion of opportunities for lifelong learning. In Latin America, efforts to revitalize the field of adult education are being carried out by a variety of actors, particularly after the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) held in Hamburg in 1997. These efforts have materialized in a series of follow-up activities to that conference, such as the meetings held in Montevideo, Cochabamba, Patzcuaro, and Santiago de Chile under the auspices of Unesco, and the production of a great number of position papers, research documents and monitoring reports by governmental and non-governmental organizations.

It is against this double dynamic of marginalization and rejuvenation that characterized the Latin American adult education movement of the nineties that this article was written. After outlining the macro-level educational policies that have impacted Latin America during the nineties, we provide an overview of the main issues facing adult education in Latin America and explore some of the reasons for the continuing peripheral status of adult education in policy circles. In the final section, the paper discusses some of the efforts currently carried out by the Latin American adult education community to develop a consensual agenda for the field. These efforts are particularly important in a regional context of increasing income polarization that has 220

million poor (of which 90 million live in extreme poverty), 42 million illiterates and 110 million adults who have not completed primary school.ⁱⁱ

A caveat is necessary at this point. As in any other article that takes Latin America as its subject, it is not possible to capture all of the diversity of the region.ⁱⁱⁱ Latin America is a heterogeneous and diverse region, and we would be remiss in assuming a single, monolithic reality of adult education policies and practices, or a single cultural, political and socio-economic context. At the same time, despite these differences, adult education policies in many Latin American countries are affected by similar international and regional developments inside and outside the field, and hence they can be better understood in light of those developments. Having said that, this type of macro perspective should be complemented with specific case studies and comparative analyses.

Political, social, and economic context

During the 1990s, the Latin American region faced a number of political, social, and economic challenges that affected adult education policies and practices. On the political front, Latin American countries were still experiencing the difficult transition from predominantly authoritarian regimes to formally democratic ones. In the social arena, poverty, unemployment and income inequality were on the rise. Economically, Latin American countries continued to occupy a position of structural dependency in the world system, not only in terms of trade, but also in terms of research and development. Chronic financial dependency is expressed in the repayment of the external debt and related structural adjustment programs. These programs replaced previous redistributive arrangements -- that were part and parcel of the different Latin American expressions of the welfare state -- with a set of neoliberal policies promoting

deregulation, competition, budget cuts, and privatization of public enterprises. They also replaced the previous development strategy of import substitution industrialization and protectionism (based on high tariffs restricting access to domestic markets by foreign imports in favor of domestic production), with a variety of mechanisms of market liberalization. Although there is no consensus as to the real impact of neoliberal policies in Latin America, several studies contend that they have worsened income distribution and have exacted a disproportionately high social cost to the popular classes.^{iv}

Education policy and the Latin American region

During the nineties, the Latin American educational policy agenda was shaped by several overall frameworks initiated and carried out by different agencies. This created a complex and confused situation with overlapping goals and projects. Since 1981, the educational plans for the region were guided by the Proyecto Principal de Educación ('Major Project of Education in Latin America and the Caribbean'), coordinated by UNESCO/OREALC. This project set three goals for the year 2000: universal access to primary schooling, eradication of adult illiteracy, and improvement of the quality and efficiency of education. Many still remember the cynicism among adult education researchers and practitioners in Latin America at that time regarding the proclaimed goal of eradicating adult illiteracy in the region without committing the necessary resources for the task and without addressing the socio-economic roots of illiteracy. This situation was to be repeated for the remaining of the century, declaration after declaration, plan after plan.

As of 1990, the educational agenda had also been guided by the goals agreed upon in Jomtien, which partially coincided with the goals of the Proyecto Principal and which also set the accomplishment of these goals for the year 2000. By 1994, a third policy agenda entered the educational landscape. At the Miami Summit convened by US President Clinton, a 'Plan for Universal Access to Education for 2010' was launched that year, and later ratified as the 'Education Initiative' by the Second Summit that was held in Santiago in 1998. This hemispherical initiative (known as the 'Summits of the Americas') adopted goals for the three educational levels, including tertiary education. This effort is headed by the US government, and is coordinated by the governments of Mexico, Argentina and Chile, with the participation of several national, regional and international organizations (e.g. OAS, World Bank, IDB and USAID).

Adult education priorities in the region during the 1990s were affected by these general strategic frameworks, and also by the agenda set for the sector at the fourth and fifth International Conferences of Adult Education (held in Paris 1985 and in Hamburg 1997, respectively). In April 2000, the World Education Forum added another layer to the equation. This conference, a follow-up to Jomtien, was held in Dakar and convened by five international organizations: UNDP (United Nations Development Program), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. In essence, Dakar ratified the goals set in Jomtien, but postponed the deadline to achieve them by the year 2015.^v

The reasons for the co-existence of so many (and often overlapping) strategic plans for the Latin American education sector are not clear. Rosa Maria Torres suggests that they reflect changes in

the role and power of international agencies. Whereas in the early 1980s Unesco was still the international leader in educational expertise, during the 1990s this leadership was displaced by Washington-based agencies, particularly the World Bank and the OAS. Torres contends that what most of these reform initiatives have in common is a top-down enterprise, which is designed, conducted, and evaluated by international and national political and technocratic elites, with little information or encouragement to participate given to citizens, teachers, or education researchers and specialists (R.M. Torres 1999, 2000).

Adult Education in Latin America: the hardships of Cinderella

Latin American adult education faces overwhelming challenges that cannot be separated from larger issues of poverty and inequality. As mentioned above, in spite of continuous efforts, there are still in the region 42 million absolute illiterates. However, the real number is probably higher. In a recent study on literacy in seven Latin American countries^{vi} directed by Isabel Infante, most adults with five years of schooling were unable to respond correctly to a basic preliminary test that would indicate a first level of literacy. The study concluded that a basic command of literacy and numeracy requires at least seven years of schooling, and a fair level of literacy and numeracy (one that allows for a good performance in the workplace) requires approximately 12 years of schooling (Infante 2000). If one accepts the argument (based on the results of this study) that basic literacy requires at least seven years of formal schooling, it follows that the real illiteracy rates in the region are much higher than the official 11.7%.

In any case, regardless of the classification used, both literacy and adult basic education (ABE) programs in the region are not very effective in addressing the educational needs of this

population. In the area of adult basic education, for instance, a large gap exists between actual enrollments and potential demand: in a Unesco study of 13 countries, it was found that the total enrollment in ABE was around three million people. This represents less than 2% of the potential demand, and perhaps less if it is considered that enrollment figures are sometimes exaggerated (Messina 1993). Moreover, dropout rates in ABE fluctuate between 30 and 40%, and are even higher at the lower educational levels. For instance, one longitudinal study showed that only 6% of those who began grade one in 1987 completed grade three in 1989 (Messina 1993). To worsen matters, in addition to low enrollments rates and high dropout rates, enrollments in the region are not growing, and in some cases are decreasing. Graciela Messina (1993) argues that, since this decrease in enrollments cannot be related to a decrease in demand, it can be attributed largely to government policies that are withdrawing support from adult education programs, leading to less funding, reduced personnel, and the closure of adult education centers.

In addition to the external factors pointed out by Messina, low enrollments can also be attributed to the irrelevance, compensatory character, and low quality of many adult basic education programs themselves. A related factor is that most adult education programs provide little attention to the most marginalized groups among the poor. Moreover, the field of adult education in the region is highly fragmented, with a variety of modalities and services operating in isolation from each other or without a common long-term strategy. This low level of coordination is also present among the different levels of government services (municipal, provincial and federal), which results in duplication and waste. It is also noticeable in the scarcity of fruitful relationships between the state and civil society. Not only are these relationships infrequent, but when they do exist, the role of non-governmental organizations is usually reduced to implementing state

policies as sub-contractors, overlooking their potential contribution to improving those policies and their related programs. This policy may reduce costs in the short term, but reduces the quality and effectiveness of the programs because it does not promote some of the main strengths of NGOs, such as their flexibility and their understanding of local contexts (Archer 2000). Other unresolved issues include the haphazard relationship between adult education and the formal education system, and the absence of a system of assessment and recognition of the experience and learning of the adult population.

An additional challenge is the training and working conditions of adult educators. In Latin America, the teaching profession is characterized by a segmented labor market: teachers of the formal system and adult educators operate in two circuits with significant differences of professionalization, certification, social prestige, training, salaries, etc. This segmentation is mirrored within the adult education system, between credentialed teachers on the one hand, and literacy workers and community tutors on the other, many of whom work on a voluntary or semi-voluntary basis. Moreover, there is a scarcity of policies, strategies and programs for the training of adult educators in the region, especially within the new paradigm of learning throughout life advanced in Hamburg and Dakar.

These challenges will be difficult to overcome as long as adult education continues to be the Cinderella of government planning offices. Whether the policy responsibility for adult basic education lies within ministries of education or within other ministries and departments (usually those with a mandate to work with poor communities), it has not yet been taken seriously by policy-makers. Indeed, paragraph 37 of the Dakar Declaration laments the fact that ‘the

education of adults remains isolated, often at the periphery of national education systems and budgets'. Likewise, Oxenham and Aoki (2000: 25) contend that the responsibility of adult education programs 'seems to be isolated from or on the margins of broader educational policy making, as though adult basic education were not an authentic or permanent component of a total education system'. Thus, they claim that policy on adult basic education seems narrowly conceived and limited to a relatively short term.

Evidence for this claim of marginality can be found in education budgets. Few countries, if any, allocate more than one or two per cent of their educational expenditures to adult education (Schmelkes 1994: 10, Oxenham and Aoki 2000: 25). The fact that adult education budgets did not increase during the nineties is somewhat surprising, because the 'Education for All' agenda set in Jomtien in 1990 explicitly included adult education as part of the overall strategy. This situation raises a pertinent question: What happened with adult education during the nineties?

The contraction of the EFA agenda: 'Education for All' or 'Except for Adults'?

As mentioned above, the education policy agenda of the nineties was greatly shaped by the 1990 World Conference on Education for All. The Jomtien meeting, as it is usually known, was organized by an influential group of international agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA and the World Bank) and was attended by 155 government delegations and 125 non-governmental organizations from around the world. In Jomtien, government representatives signed a declaration and a framework for action in which they made a commitment to ensure quality basic education for children, youth and adults. These commitments were expressed in six goals to be achieved in the year 2000: expansion of early childhood care, universal access to

basic education, improvements in learning achievement, reduction of adult illiteracy in half, expansion of basic education and training for youth and adults (linking it to health, employment and productivity), and use of media and other communication technologies to promote better living and sustainable development.

However, when the Jomtien declaration was translated into actual policies and programs by national educational agencies, it lost most of its comprehensive, inclusive, innovative and progressive potential. As 'Education' was interpreted solely as school, and 'All' was interpreted only as children (especially children at risk), out-of-school youth and adults were ignored. For Rosa Maria Torres (2000), an acute observer of the post-Jomtien developments, the original concepts, guiding principles and targets of EFA 'shrank' during the nineties, as the policies and programs enacted by most countries were a downscaling of the original proposal. According to her, in their misguided interpretation of the original formulation of the Jomtien proposal, national governments not only limited their policies and programs to children and schools, but also changed the original focus on quality of learning and processes to an emphasis on assessing school performance and on standardized testing.

Along the same vein, a document issued by the Latin American office of Unesco maintains that during the 1990s adult education was left out of the official declarations about the educational reform inspired by the Jomtien Conference. The document points out that, at least in Latin America, the reading of Jomtien's EFA has excluded youth and adults as well as non-formal pedagogical practices and the diversity of out-of-school educational environments such as the family, community and the workplace (Unesco 2000: 12, 26). Thomas La Belle (2000), who has

been studying Latin American adult education since the 1970s, also agrees that during the nineties the notion that adult education could play a key role in development strategies was abandoned by international and national policy makers. These assessments are confirmed by recent World Bank documents acknowledging that adult education has gradually vanished from the priorities of international lending agencies (World Bank 2000a, b).

For this reason, when the Latin American education community submitted a statement for the Dakar Forum in April 2000, one of the recommended policies was to recuperate the original spirit of Education for All in its 'expanded vision of basic education'. This means 'an education capable of satisfying basic education needs of all (children, youth and adults), both within and outside the school system and throughout life' (Latapi et al. 2000: 5). However, not much attention was paid to this and other similar requests by policy-makers in Dakar. It is in this context that Maria Lourdes Almazan-Khan, after attending the Dakar Conference as part of the delegation of the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE), asked if EFA, rather than 'Education for All', in reality stands for 'Except for Adults'. Almazan-Khan (2000) raised this question not only around issues of implementation of the Jomtien agenda, but also around the Dakar policy strategy, which was intended to rectify the mistakes of the last ten years. She reported that the commitments emanating from Dakar were not significantly informed by the philosophy of lifelong learning. Instead, they were constrained to a highly compartmentalized, 'functionalist' and reductionist view of education, with an emphasis on primary schooling.^{vii}

Factors undermining support for adult education in Latin America

Why have the goals set in Jomtien in 1990 been unfulfilled in Latin America? Rosa Maria Torres (2000: 52) enumerates some of the most recurrent arguments:

‘Arguments already put forward include financial setbacks, structural adjustment processes, foreign debt, natural and social catastrophes, technical and human constraints, change of government and discontinuities of policies, co-ordination problems at all levels, weak public information and communication strategies, lack of participation and consultation, low levels of involvement and motivation of teachers and other change agents, false expectations regarding mass media and modern technologies’.

In particular, we are interested in exploring why the field of adult education was relegated to the margins in terms of education policies and budgets during the last decade. Why were the original goals of EFA, which included adult education, forgotten by the national governments? What were the reasons for the gap between the Jomtien proposal and the national responses? As a hypothesis, the marginalization of adult education in the region can be explained by the combination of six related factors: 1) breadth and diversity of the field; 2) fragmentation of the field in autonomous and isolated areas; 3) low social relevance and low quality programs; 4) limited correspondence with the model of economic accumulation and political domination; 5) withdrawal of support by international agencies; and 6) unrealistic goals and local bureaucracies. Some of these factors stem from the internal dynamics of adult education in the region, and some relate to the impact of external dynamics on the field.

1. Breadth and diversity of the field

The mission and the boundaries of the field are not clear, to the extent that many providers of adult education (governmental or not) do not identify themselves as adult educators. This is the case, for instance, among professionals who work in areas such as health promotion, legal education, and agricultural extension, who tend to identify themselves more as health

professionals, lawyers, or agronomists than as adult educators. Indeed, there is debate as to whether adult education constitutes an independent and professional field. Unlike in other fields (consider, for instance, medicine, or formal school teaching), there is an absence of professional colleges regulating the entrance to the profession and enforcing codes of professional conduct to their members, there is no standardized training (in fact, very little is known about the training of adult educators in the region), there are no systems linking training to certification, and so on. At the same time, because of the diversity of the field, adult education programs are diffused through a multiplicity of ministries and secretaries (which results in lack of coordination and duplication of results), and in a variety of private institutions, unions, popular organizations, and non-governmental organizations. This lack of coordinated effort and the great variety of spaces of intervention (compare, to continue with the previous example, with the identification of doctors and teachers with hospitals and schools) generate a dispersion of efforts, weakness in advancing collective pressure, and difficulties in generating consensual policies for the sector.

2. Fragmentation of the field in autonomous and isolated areas

Even those who consider themselves adult educators, and who work within the government apparatus (usually within ministries of education), tend to work in separation and isolation from each other, within areas of specialization such as adult basic education, literacy, community development, environmental education, technical-vocational education, and so on. In short, there is little coordination (let alone integration) among adult education actors within the state, and even less between them and those adult educators who work outside the state.

3. Low social relevance and low quality programs

Government-run adult education programs, particularly adult basic education programs, tend to have low social credibility, as large sectors of the community does not perceive them as useful or necessary besides the potential use of the diploma for entry into the labor market. Working with poorly paid and poorly trained teachers and volunteers, ^{viii} with low emphasis on quality and low interest in evaluating results, this type of adult education is perceived as second class education for second class citizens.

4. Limited correspondence with the model of economic accumulation and political domination

The marginal role that Latin American adult education has had in public policy formation has also been attributed to its low correspondence with the model of capitalist accumulation and its little utility for the model of political domination. In this regard, Carlos A. Torres (1990: 33) pointed out that the clientele of adult education is socially fragmented, politically disorganized, and economically insignificant in Latin American societies. Applying the concepts of segmented labour market theory, Torres contends that the Latin American economic development strategy has focused on enhancing the productivity of the primary sector of the labour market (with stable, high-skilled, and relatively well-paid jobs). Hence, little attention has been paid to adult education and training for the secondary sector (with unstable, low-wage, and unskilled jobs), in which most of the potential clientele of adult education programs work. This economic marginality is correlated with political weakness to demand educational services. On occasions, however, the need for state political legitimation has led some governments to support large-scale adult education programs. Since budget allocations within education tends to favor those groups that are more willing and capable of exercising political pressure and of articulating the social and economic importance at a particular level, adult education usually tends to be

marginalized at the time of deciding allocations. This was particularly true during the nineties, in a context of fiscal austerity and budget cuts.

5. Withdrawal of support by international agencies

Against the background outlined above, a decision was taken by some influential international agencies to sideline youth and adult educational policies. One of the most surprising cases was Unesco, a traditional supporter of literacy and adult education during previous decades (Jones 1988, R.M. Torres 2000). To provide a rationale for this decision, which had important implications for program funding, two main arguments were typically advanced. The first is that, in a context of financial constraints, choices and priorities have to be made, as it is impossible to provide adequate funding for both children and adult education. Given that children constitute the future generation, it is more appropriate to invest the scarce resources available in children than in adults. In the words of R. M. Torres (2000: 27), 'whereby children have to compete financially with the education of their parents, adult education lost out'. The second argument is based on the claim that adult education programs, particularly literacy campaigns, have a poor track record.

This belief has become common sense in many policy circles, although it has not been supported by a critical mass of evidence derived from scientific research on cost-effectiveness; rather, it is largely the product of anecdotal information and opinions (R.M. Torres 2000). The claim is based on only one study (Abadzi, 1994) that contended that adult literacy campaigns conducted during the previous 30 years had an effectiveness rate of just 13 per cent. While this study may be correct, more research is needed into the costs and benefits of literacy programs before advancing the universal claim that all adult education programs are inefficient and wasteful

(World Bank 1995: 90). In any case, even if past and current adult education programs were found inefficient, it is not clear why the best solution is to cancel them altogether instead of seeking the best strategies to improve them.

6. Unrealistic goals and traditional local bureaucracies

The original goals of EFA on adult education were not only abandoned by international agencies, but also by the very governments that committed to them in 1990. Two main reasons have been advanced to explain the gap between the Jomtien proposal and the national responses. One reason is that local bureaucrats did not understand the philosophy and the implications of the proposal, and were unable to translate it into innovative policies and programs (R.M.Torres 2000). The other argument is that the overly unrealistic goals of the declaration made it condemned to failure from the beginning. For instance, the targets of universalizing primary education and reducing adult illiteracy by half in one decade set in Jomtien were seen as unattainable in local adult education circles because they were not tied to resources, capacity building, and redistributive social policies. Since this type of declaration falls within the realm of 'soft law', governmental fulfillment of these commitments constitutes more a moral than a legal responsibility. Based on the experience of previous world declarations and agendas, many actors and observers suggested immediately after Jomtien that the proclamation of these goals were mere rhetorical exercises. In retrospect, their skepticism was well-founded.

The return of AE to the policy table? Incipient developments

In spite of the setback suffered during the nineties, some recent developments at the international level and at the regional level suggest that adult education may soon be returning to the table of

educational policy-making. Here we describe three of these developments: the internal discussions within international agencies about the appropriateness of abandoning the field; the International Conference held in Hamburg (CONFINTEA V); and the role of the Latin American adult education community in the follow-up to CONFINTEA V.

International agencies

International agencies are in a particularly powerful position regarding whether adult education will become a viable component of educational policy or not. Internal discussions within these organizations, notably the World Bank, point out that the matter is still unsettled. For example, in a study on the effects, benefits, efficiency and cost of adult education programmes conducted with the purpose of informing World Bank policy on this area, Oxenham and Aoki (2000) suggest two policy options: either to accept the available evaluations as sufficient for policy changes, or to seek more information.

If the first option is chosen, the signal for policy would be that the Bank should explicitly raise the priority of adult/youth basic education with literacy within its overall strategy for education and encourage affected member countries to do the same. The Bank would need to move from being simply willing to consider lending for the sub-sector to actively offering to assist its member governments mobilize the necessary additional resources. Oxenham and Aoki (2000) argue that programs of adult basic education are cost-effective, because people who participate in them accrue significant beneficial changes in attitude and behavior. Among other things, participants in literacy programs:

1. show enhanced confidence and autonomy within their families and in their communities

2. are more likely than non-literates to send and keep their children in school and monitor their progress
3. alter their health and nutritional practices to the benefit of their families
4. are more likely to be influenced in reducing their norms on family size
5. augment their production and incomes through using the information provided through the program or accessing information elsewhere
6. participate more strongly in community and political affairs
7. show better understanding of messages disseminated by radio, as well as by printed media
8. develop new and productive social relations through their learning groups
9. retain their skills in literacy and use them to expand their satisfactions in daily life. (Oxenham and Aoki 2000:6)

In their introduction, Oxenham and Aoki (2000:2) suggest that 'if the Education Sector Board judges the evidence sufficient for World Bank to attach to adult/youth basic education a priority similar to that for universal primary education for the attainment of Education for All by 2010, it should establish guidelines for strategies'. Among the strategies they proposed are the following:

- a) to link adult basic education into the main system of accreditation and continuous self-development;
- b) to articulate the sector with other interests, such as agricultural and health extension, or cooperative groups;
- c) to relate literacy and numeracy to life, work, social issues and development programs;
- d) to promote coordination among all national and international agencies (governmental, voluntary, private, community-based, etc.) dealing with the poor;
- e) to replace standardized 'nation wide' approaches and materials with a more diversified curriculum;
- f) to support adult educators with technical, moral and material support;
- g) to relate children's education, especially those from poor families, with the education of their parents; and
- h) to promote lifelong learning through literate environments and adult basic education (Oxenham and Aoki 2000: 38).

These eight proposed strategies would resonate well among people involved in adult education throughout the world. Hopefully, decision-makers will consider them in the near future. At the same time, as it is suggested in strategy g) above, there is increasing awareness that pitting children's education and adult education against each other is unproductive and assumes a false contradiction. Indeed, the literature on the topic strongly indicates that the education of children and that of their parents are mutually supportive, and that the cultural capital of the parents has a powerful impact on their children's school achievement. Thus, the dichotomy between children's education and adult education that prevailed during the 1990s ignores that children's learnings are highly conditioned by the levels of literacy and schooling of their parents. The fact that investments in adult education and literacy are investments in the education of entire families has been already acknowledged by article 6 of the EFA declaration, by the Mid-Decade Meeting of the EFA Forum, known as the Amman Affirmation (1996), and by Unesco (2000: 41). To what extent this acknowledgment is going to be translated into real commitments is still to be seen.

Catalyzing state and civil society around an adult education agenda: CONFINTEA V

In the summer of 1997, more than 1,500 delegates from over 130 countries convened in Hamburg, Germany to analyze the situation of adult education and to formulate the guidelines for policy and action for the first decade of the 21st century. The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (known as CONFINTEA V), held 14-18 July, marked a radical shift with respect to the four previous International Conferences on Adult Education (Elsinore 1949, Montreal 1960, Tokyo 1972, Paris 1985) in at least two respects. First, there was a strong presence of organized civil society in the deliberation process. Whereas the previous conferences

congregated almost exclusively governmental representatives, CONFINTEA V was open to delegates from non-governmental organizations as well: of the 1,507 participants, 478 were NGO representatives. This nurtured new relationships between governmental and non-governmental actors, strengthened the awareness about the connections between adult education, social development and democracy, and helped to promote commitments towards environmental sustainability and gender equity. Secondly, the agenda for CONFINTEA V was not an isolated event, but just a moment in a process that started before and continues still. Indeed, the Hamburg agenda was built from regional preparatory meetings (the main Latin American preparatory meeting was held in Brasilia in January 1997) and its commitments are being followed up in each region through a variety of mechanisms. This is due largely to the existence of information communication technologies (ICTs) that were not available at the time of the previous conference, as well as to the growing awareness that the principles and commitments advanced in international conferences should translate in real policies and programs.^{ix}

CONFINTEA V produced two key policy statements: The Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning and The Agenda for the Future. The Declaration consists of 27 principles, which include declaring adult education a right and endorsing the concept of learning throughout life.

In the Declaration, adult education is understood in broad terms:

‘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. Adult learning encompasses both formal and continuing education, non-formal learning and the spectrum of informal and incidental learning available in a multicultural learning society, where theory- and practice-based approaches are recognized’.

Consistent with the approach of the Delors Report published the previous year, this definition of adult education puts the emphasis on the learning undertaken by adults rather than on the provision of educational services by agencies and teachers. At the same time, the Declaration acknowledges a variety of agents in adult education provision, recognition and accreditation: all ministries (and not only ministries of education, which implies the need of inter-ministerial co-operation), employers, unions, non-governmental and community organizations, indigenous peoples, and women's groups.

In another part of the Declaration (principle #3), the role of adult education in creating a society committed to social justice and general well-being is underscored:

‘Adult education ...is a key to the twenty-first century. It is both a consequence of active citizenship and a condition for full participation in society. It is a powerful concept for fostering ecologically sustainable development, for promoting democracy, justice, gender equity, and scientific, social and economic development, and for building a world in which violent conflict is replaced by dialogue and a culture of peace based on justice’.

In terms of the impact on the adult education community, this type of statement constitutes a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it makes clear that in order to be relevant, adult education should contribute to social development and to the construction of a better world. On the other hand, it generates unrealistic expectations about the potential of adult education alone to cure all social problems, which usually leads to frustration and cynicism. Indeed, educational inequalities originate in factors external to the educational systems, and are part and parcel of social inequalities. Moreover, the educational provision (formal or non-formal) for the Latin American poor (children as well as adults) is pauperized, and hence reinforces those preexisting

inequalities (Muñoz Izquierdo and Ulloa 1992, Rivero 1999, Youngman 2000). Thus, in terms of policy formulation and implementation for the short term, it may be more pertinent to call for quality adult education than to expect from it so many unattainable goals, especially in light of its available resources.

The second document, entitled Agenda for the Future, encompasses a great number of ambitious commitments organized around ten main themes:

- 1) adult learning and democracy
- 2) improving the conditions and quality of adult learning
- 3) ensuring the universal right to literacy and basic education
- 4) adult learning, gender equality and equity, and the empowerment of women
- 5) adult learning and the changing world of work
- 6) adult learning in relation to environment, health, and population
- 7) adult learning, culture, media, and new information technologies
- 8) adult learning for all: the rights and aspirations of different groups
- 9) the economics of adult learning
- 10) enhancing international co-operation and solidarity

The commitments made in the Agenda for the Future are certainly important guidelines for policy development and are being disseminated widely among adult education communities in many countries. However, it is still questionable to what extent they are going to be honored by those who signed them.^x

In spite of their limitations, both the Declaration and the Agenda for the Future constitute reference frameworks for the adult education communities in each region of the world. They can, for instance, use them as sources to reconceptualize the meaning and purpose of adult education in their region, adapt the strategies developed in Hamburg to the realities of their region, or put emphasis on the implementation of certain commitments that are considered priorities. In Latin

America, this work is already being actively undertaken by a network of governmental and non-governmental actors. The next section describes key initiatives in this regard.

The Latin American adult education community and the follow-up to CONFINTEA V

For Latin America, the Hamburg Conference came at a time when it was most needed. By 1997, it had become evident that the EFA goals for adult education set in Jomtien in 1990 had been almost abandoned. By and large, Latin American adult education was left out of the processes of educational reform that took place during the nineties, and even from the official discourse on these processes. Hamburg, then, provided a propitious occasion to ignite a process of collective reflection about the adult education agenda for the region and to establish new styles of cooperation between government and non-governmental agencies.

Latin American participation in CONFINTEA V began before Hamburg through a variety of preparatory meetings, especially the one held in Brasilia in early 1997. In this meeting, which was the departure point for a process that would continue beyond Hamburg, debates around the different locations and actors of Latin American adult education opened the path to serious rethinking. Among other things, it was recognized that the name that characterized the field for many years, Adult Education, was no longer an adequate category to reflect its reality. To better reflect the very high participation of youth in the programs, it was proposed to start using the term 'Education of Youth and Adults' (in Spanish, Educación de Jóvenes y Adultos, or EDJA). In many respects the change of name makes sense, because there is not enough awareness about the specific issues concerning young people, who constitute the majority of users of adult education services in the region. Participants in Brasilia raised criticisms of the 'economicista' approach

that, focusing only on cost-benefit analysis, is providing the rationale for current educational policy. In response, adult educators called for the incorporation of approaches that include social well-being, equity and active citizenship as part of the equation.

The Latin American follow-up to CONFINTEA V was coordinated by a consortium of four institutions: UNESCO, CEAAL (Consejo de Educación de Adultos de América Latina, an umbrella organization of over two hundred NGOs that operate within the framework of popular education), CREFAL (Centro Regional de Alfabetización y Educación de Adultos para América Latina y el Caribe) and INEA (Instituto Nacional para la Educación de Adultos). The process consisted of a series of national meetings, three subregional meetings, and a regional meeting. The national meetings had the purpose of discussing the applicability of CONFINTEA V recommendations to the local context, but also of developing follow-up activities and indicators. Incidentally, these national meetings opened new spaces for dialogue and cooperation between governmental and non-governmental organizations. The debates and the proposals from the national meetings were carried over to the three subregional meetings held at the end of 1998 and beginning of 1999: Montevideo (Mercosur countries and Chile); Cochabamba (Andean countries); and Pátzcuaro (countries of the Gulf of Mexico as well Spanish and French-speaking Caribbean countries).^{xi} Subsequently, a regional meeting with participation of the three subregions was held in Santiago de Chile in August 2000.

Participants in these meetings included international agencies (UNESCO, CREFAL), national governments, and non-governmental organizations, as well as a significant number of planners, researchers, academics and adult educators. In some meetings there were also representatives

from groups as varied as teacher unions (e.g. CTERA), women's networks (e.g. REPEN), regional international organizations (e.g. OAS), and international adult education think tanks (e.g. the Hamburg-based Unesco Institute for Education). Such a diversity of participants allowed for a multiplicity of perspectives, generated rich debates, and allowed for the open confrontation of different adult education projects for the region. This made it sometimes difficult to achieve consensus. However, while this long and intense process of deliberation demanded a special effort of organization, understanding and systematization, it was worth it. Although the road to agreement was longer than it would have been with a more homogeneous group, this strategy was certainly more democratic and inclusive, and provided new spaces for inter-institutional work around adult education. Moreover, the Latin American experience has become a model for other regions to emulate in their post-CONFINTEA tasks.^{xii}

Since the initial meetings, it became clear that the Agenda for the Future drafted in Hamburg had to be adapted to the realities and the demands of the Latin American context. Hence, seven main guiding themes were selected for the region from the ten themes raised in CONFINTEA V:

- 1) Literacy and adult basic education;
- 2) Education and work;
- 3) Education, citizen participation and human rights;
- 4) Education with peasants and indigenous peoples;
- 5) Youth education;
- 6) Education and gender; and
- 7) Education and sustainable local development.

The fact that in all meetings the debates were organized around these seven themes ensured a high degree of consistency throughout the process. Although each meeting had its specificities, the general tone was marked by a critical stance to neoliberal policies and to the abandonment of adult education by policy-makers. Likewise, in all meetings there were calls to ground adult

education in the tradition and principles of popular education. Although this is not entirely surprising given the high participation of non-governmental organizations in these events, it is interesting to note that this approach is returning to center stage in the region after a period of relative impasse. As the report of the three subregional meetings remarks,

'Throughout this process the importance of the tradition of popular education in the education of youth and adults was reaffirmed, and a critical perspective of the neoliberal model and the educational reforms that gave priority to the education of the new generations and relegated to a second level the education for youth and adults was taken'. (Messina 1999: 16; translation is ours).

Although the three subregional meetings shared this common framework, each one was characterized by specific debates, priorities and proposals. For example, among the main issues emerging from Montevideo were the need to develop specific public policies for adult and youth education that are oriented towards the most marginalized sectors and that promote social justice and equity while celebrating cultural diversity. There was also a stress on the need to systematize experiences, to professionalize adult educators through in-service training and salary improvements, and to create permanent forums to debate adult education policy at the national and regional levels. In Cochabamba discussions addressed the new relationships between the state and civil society, and on the need to build together a political agenda for adult education. There was also an emphasis on strengthening gender perspectives in adult education (understanding gender as a political category), on focusing on issues of justice and peace, and on producing good quality research on the field. Moreover, participants at this meeting called for the development of indicators to assess the fulfillment of commitments made by governments, but also to critically evaluate areas of progress and difficulty in adult education. In Patzcuaro, the need to better integrate adult education internally and externally was stressed. The former refers to the integration of the different fields of adult education (e.g. gender, education and work, local

development) among themselves. The latter refers to the integration of adult education policies and programs with social policies oriented towards poverty alleviation and social inclusion, on the one hand, and with educational reforms, on the other. To bring adult education back to the political and educational agenda of the region, participants at the Patzcuaro meeting decided to organize a meeting of education ministers to discuss the role of adult education in the overall education policy. Another issue of concern was the development of strategies for the training of adult educators, an area in particularly bad shape.

In Santiago, the last meeting of the decade, there was a general recapitulation of the issues raised in the subregional meetings, and a discussion about the most appropriate strategies to face the current challenges. Adult education was again understood as a political and social endeavour, and its mission was linked once again to the equalization of opportunities and to social justice. It was recognized that a new relationship between civil society and the state is slowly being forged in the region, and that adult education can both contribute to and benefit from it. In this meeting, the main goal of the sector was defined as ‘to develop youth and adults as autonomous citizens, able to participate and organize collectively, critically and creatively in local spaces and in broader contexts, to engage in self-initiated tasks in the face of changes, and to live together in solidarity’ (Unesco et al. 2000b: 6).

What is becoming increasingly clear from these regional meetings is that the adult education movement in Latin America is in urgent need of continuing to broaden the dialogue already underway, and to work collectively in the definition of goals, strategies and evaluation mechanisms. In addition, the education of adult educators, the collaboration between academic-

based and practice-based research, and the dissemination of that research to decision-makers are particularly important policy issues for the short term.

Summary and conclusions

In this article, we used the Cinderella story to refer to the present situation of Latin American adult education in two senses. First, in the meaning conveyed by Nyerere, to describe the marginal status of adult education in the education world. In spite of the efforts carried out by adult education agencies in the region during the last decade, and in spite of the high expectations derived from the Jomtien Declaration, the field has been marginalized from national and international educational institutions, which have concentrated most of their resources and pedagogical innovations in the school system. Secondly, and less literally, we appealed to the Cinderella metaphor to illustrate the active process undertaken by the Latin American adult education movement to redefine its identity, its agenda and its priorities. Although this process brings about unavoidable identity conflicts, we are confident that, like in the Cinderella story, the missing shoe will appear in due time. For that to happen, however, it is important to collectively reflect over the successes and failures of the past and to undertake creative prospective analysis of future trends.

While many of the factors leading to the marginalization of adult education lie outside the field, without a serious and honest self-reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of adult education programs and practices undertaken by its actors will help to recover the missing shoe. Fortunately, important efforts have been developed by the Latin American adult education community in the last few years to reconceptualize its mission and strategies. The preparatory

activities for the Fifth International Adult Education Conference (CONFINTEA V), and the follow-up activities and debates undertaken during the last three years (materialized in the Montevideo, Cochabamba, Patzcuaro, and Santiago meetings, and in a variety of position papers and research documents) clearly reveal that the adult education movement in the region is full of energy and eagerness.

However, supporters of Latin American adult education are trapped in a vicious circle. International agencies and national governments are reluctant to support this sector due to its alleged poor performance, but such a poor performance can only be drastically improved with supportive policies and financial commitments. To break this circle, changes have to occur at both levels simultaneously. Policy-makers have to critically review their ideas around the potential of adult education in the light of the available evidence discussed in this article. At the same time, the adult education community must engage in a deep soul-searching philosophical exercise about the purpose of the field and in a pedagogical discussion about the best ways to ensure quality, relevance and equity in our programs.

In the post-CONFINTEA meetings, the Latin American adult education community has started this exercise with passion and methodological rigor. One of the issues that appeared several times in those discussions was the need to clarify the boundaries of the field. The dynamics of the discussions suggest that the Latin American adult education movement is experiencing a momentary identity crisis that is pulling it in the two opposite directions of expansion and contraction. Some adult educators argue that, in order to gain relevance and overcome its current crisis, adult education should expand beyond its traditional activities and programs, and make

clear connections with the main issues that affect the lives of youth and adults in the region. This means actively engaging with issues related to human rights, poverty, the environment, gender, ethnicity, democracy, citizenship, employment, rural development, unions, migration, violence, local governance, health, consumers' rights, indigenous autonomy, peace, and the like. Other adult educators counter-argue that this type of agenda puts excessive demands on the field, and inevitably leads to dispersion and frustration. In their view, the solution to the crisis lies in concentrating its scarce resources on the few areas in which there is a history of accumulated expertise, such as literacy, adult basic education and vocational training, and doing these things with efficiency and quality. Only this, they argue, will build confidence in the field among internal and external constituencies.

According to the logic of this debate, the field of adult education appears to be in a catch-22 situation. In order to be more effective and attract more people, literacy and adult basic education programs have to become more relevant to the lives of the learners and their communities. However, the achievement of higher relevance usually implies a diversification of programs, contents and methods, which in turns creates dispersion and reduces effectiveness and quality.

In our view, a strategy to rebuild the field of adult education in Latin America must go beyond the straightjacket of choosing between breadth and depth. The practical choice is not between broad expansion and rigorous contraction. It is between a superficial expansion that spreads the field too thin and ends inevitably in self-exhaustion, dispersion and paralysis, and a well-thought out, creative and collaborative intersectoral expansion that articulates quality and relevant efforts carried out by adult educators in governmental and non-governmental institutions with efforts

carried out in other areas. More importantly, this collaborative strategy must actively involve the adults and youth themselves in the definition of goals and strategies. As it was mentioned in the Santiago meeting in reference to indigenous education, the task is not anymore to promote an adult education for the indigenous peoples, but to develop with them an inclusive education movement. The transition from the 'for' to the 'with' mentality is an important step for a field traditionally characterized by top-down approaches, compensatory logics and deficit theories.

A related challenge for the Latin American adult education movement is to continue monitoring the progress of the Dakar commitments, and to put pressure on those who exercise power at the national and international level to provide the adequate means for the fulfillment of those commitments. Adult education alone cannot solve all the social problems, and not even all the problems faced by the 150 million Latin American youth and adults who have never accessed or have been pushed out from school. However, in connection with other actors and initiatives, it can offer a significant contribution to a more sustainable, just and equitable development. In the past, adult education in Latin America has developed innovative and creative approaches that have inspired people and programs throughout the world. Today, when it is evident that 'more of the same' is not enough and that the old educational paradigms are not working, Latin America is showing signs of once again becoming a fresh source of original thinking and practice in adult education.

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ⁱ An example of this situation can be found in a recent policy document in which the World Bank outlines its educational strategy and lending policies for Latin America and the Caribbean. In the section on priorities, the WB claims that the overarching goal for Latin America and the Caribbean "is to raise the

Region's human capital, especially that of the poor" (World Bank 2000:11). Such statement can raise the hopes of Latin American adult educators for a few seconds, but such optimism would probably evaporate after reading the following paragraphs, in which the Bank describes its six strategic priorities to achieve this goal. Throughout them, there is an absence of references to adult education and non-formal education. Even the discussion of the first priority, which calls for 'including the excluded by, whenever possible, targeting interventions to the poor', makes no allusions to the potential role of adult education programs. There are references to a variety of interventions such as early childhood programs, school feeding, school health programs, improvement of quality of learning and school attendance through financial incentives to poor families, or the expansion of opportunities for secondary and tertiary education through income-contingent scholarships. The other five priorities deal with the quality of teaching and school revitalization, secondary education, decentralization of education ministries, tertiary education reform and educational innovations, especially in the use of education technology.

² It is pertinent to note that in the period 1980-2000 the illiteracy rates in the region (for people aged 15 and older) decreased from 20.3% to 11.7%; in absolute terms, the number of illiterates only decreased from 44 to 42 million people.

ⁱⁱⁱ Extremes in the region include, for example, population from 166 million (Brazil) to 2.8 (Panama) million; infant mortality from 7 (Cuba) to 71 (Haiti); income distribution (Gini index) from 60 (Brazil) to 47 (Costa Rica); adult literacy rates (females) that range from 2 (Uruguay) to 54 (Haiti); and net secondary enrollment rates from 36 (El Salvador) to 85 (Chile).

^{iv} See, for instance, Rosenzvaig 1997, Morley 1994, Berry 1998, Ocampo 1998, Loser and Guerguil 2000, Rivero 1999. These authors argue that after a decade of structural adjustment medicine, poverty levels and income distribution in Latin America are still worse than before the crisis of the 1980s. For the case of Mexico, Veltmeyer et al. (1997: 139-40, 162) show that privatization has intensified the concentration of wealth without increasing economic efficiency through competition. At the same time, unemployment increased (300,000 to 1 million jobs lost), the real value of wages decreased from 35% to 50%, and poverty increased.

^v Interestingly, the draft text of Dakar eliminated any reference to adult literacy, but was reinstated after pressure from NGOs and other social actors.

^{vi} The seven countries were Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay and Venezuela. The sample included more than thousand adults (ages ranged from 15 to 54 years of age) in urban areas.

^{vii} Although the Framework for Action made references to the concept of lifelong learning, Almazan-Khan reports that in general terms the dominant discourse in Dakar understood adult education only in terms of literacy or skills training.

^{viii} The training of adult educators in Latin America is currently a black box. There is still little accurate information about who trains adult educators in the region, the methods and contents used, their impact, the profile of the educators of adult educators, and the like. Anecdotal information suggests that that pre-service and in-service training of adult educators in the region is still less than adequate.

^{ix} During the conference, a special event was organized to pay tribute to two late Latin American adult educators who deeply influenced the contemporary theory and practice of literacy and adult education: Dame Nita Barrow from Barbados and Paulo Freire from Brazil.

^x Just to provide an example of these difficulties, commitment #57 states that 'within UNESCO, the UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE) in Hamburg should be strengthened in order to become an international reference centre for adult and continuing education'. At the time of writing this article, we learned that the German government is withdrawing its support for the Institute. This development prompts a basic reflection. If Unesco itself, the main organizer of the Hamburg Conference and its follow-up, and one of the world leaders in the field of adult education, cannot ensure the fulfillment of this specific commitment, how realistic is it to expect that national governments are going to do it for all the myriad of commitments included in the Agenda?

^{xi} The Patzcuaro forum provided a space for the participation of two countries that seldom attend these type of subregional meetings: Belize and Haiti.

^{xii} For instance, in the International CONFINTEA V follow-up Forum held in Manila at the end of 1999, both the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE) and the Unesco Institute for Education explicitly pointed out that the strategy developed by Latin America to follow up the Hamburg commitments constituted an example for other regions.