

The struggle for adult learning and education policy: A Ugandan experience

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Abstract

Historically Adult Learning and Education (ALE) has been marginalised, relative to other forms of education provision like schooling and tertiary education. This is more so in developing countries like Uganda. Given the development challenges in these countries and their commitments to SDGs, the neglect of ALE becomes a problem of equity and social exclusion. One of the key indicators of this neglect in Uganda is the absence of policy for ALE. In this paper, we discuss struggles for ALE policy over time and what all that means for the discipline of ALE and national development agendas. The discussion and analysis is informed by experiences from other African countries. The emergent themes that define the current debate of ALE revolve around the recently enacted Uganda National Adult Literacy Policy. In spite of the noted achievements, there is still vacuum for ALE policy. All of this leads to social exclusion and marginalisation. While findings further show a mixture of hope and resignation, there was also much shifting of blame by different actors. The paper concludes by recommending strong coordination between stakeholders in ALE, informative research and policy briefs by academia and consistent engagement with civil society and government bureaucrats to push through the policy on ALE.

Key words: Adult Learning and Education, policy, SDGs, equity and inclusion

Introduction

Literature stresses the importance of adult learning and education (ALE) in national development and socio-economic transformation (Kweka, 1987; Jinna & Maikano, 2014; UIL, 2010). However, there seems to be a mismatch between the perceived importance of ALE and the real investment and policy formulation of the same (Jinna & Maikano, 2014; Wanyama, 2014). In 1992, the government of Uganda commissioned a white paper on education that aimed at rationalising all forms of education to set the country on course for development. This has since led to policy formulation of all other forms of education apart from ALE.

It's important to note that absence of policy on ALE has hampered not only adult learning in its various forms but lifelong learning (LLL) in general. Uganda still has a large percentage of illiterate population at 26% (Kasaija, 2019), and most government programmes such as wealth creation have continued to post minimal success due absence of robust ALE programmes. Indeed, as Nyerere (1982) emphasises, investment in education of adults posts quicker development results than education of children. Therefore, policy on ALE and commitment to LLL is just a matter of urgency for Uganda.

This paper presents findings from a national study of stakeholders of ALE. In addition to in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), we extensively reviewed about ALE

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and LLL in general. In this paper we argue that the enactment of a policy on ALE is not only essential for adult learning in all forms but also successful implementation of development efforts such as wealth creation, agricultural improvement and health promotion. The paper also discusses the implications of ALE policy gap to education and development in general. We recommend strong coordination between stakeholders in ALE, informative research and policy briefs by academia and consistent engagement with critical partners.

Methodology and ethical issues

This study adopted a qualitative approach and used document review, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to generate data. Content data analysis was used to generate themes both inductively and deductively. The study sought ethical and research clearance from the local institutional review board (IRB) and research clearance from the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) respectively. All ethical standards were duly complied with including the principle of anonymity and confidentiality. Names of all respondents are represented by pseudonyms.

ALE in countries' development agenda

ALE can be said to be all forms of learning for adults and out of school youth outside the formal education systems (Jinna & Maikano, 2014). ALE has been changing in name and form reflecting changing country and global needs and cultures (Jarvis, 2011; Broek et.al, 2010). Some of the terms and concepts that have been used to mean ALE include; adult education, adult learning, adult and continuing education, lifelong education and even lifelong learning (Jarvis, 2011; Jinna & Maikano, 2014; Milana & Holford, 2014; Roumell et.al., 2018). UNESCO has summarised the understanding of ALE as encompassing 'formal, non-formal and informal learning and education for a broad spectrum of the adult population. It covers learning and education across the life course and has a special focus on adults and young people who are marginalized or disadvantaged' (UIL, 2016, p.28). It is however not the focus of this paper to discuss how each of these terms came about, their differences or even the connectedness. There is already good literature about these concepts. Due to the fact that ALE is much shaped by specific national foci and agendas, as this paper unfolds it will be apparent that the struggles for policy in Uganda presents a unique case to the international readership.

There are a number of international declarations and agendas that have described Adult learning and education (ALE) as a human right, while others note that the right to education is inseparable from the right to ALE or adult education (UIL, 2010). However, the most common view as supported by literature is that ALE has long been associated with social economic development (European Commission, 2015; Jinna & Maikano, 2014; Wanyama, 2014). Jarvis (2011, p. 42) notes that 'adult education is at the heart of the global economy'. Therefore, to discuss the struggles associated with ALE policy in Uganda, we need to locate it in the broader global development spectrum. In other words, the question is, why the fuss about ALE policy in Uganda or elsewhere?

The ALE policy in Uganda: the struggles, the achievements and prospects

The history of adult education as a field of practice and profession in Uganda is well documented, that is from traditional forms of learning to what came to be known as '*modern*' adult education (Atim & Ngaka, 2004; Bananuka, 2014; Openjuru, 2016). Findings of this study indicate that most early practitioners in ALE came to associate with the discipline in a rather unprecedented manner. Some came to associate with the discipline through activism for

independence while others through working with marginalised learners. However, since then the discipline of ALE has continued to grow through training, practice, advocacy and even professionally. Over time, practitioners largely from academia and civil society have been engaging government about the need for a policy to direct the practice of ALE in the country.

Therefore, in the past half a century, there has been a struggle to have a policy for ALE or in a form that recognises adult learning as a major component of education. Some of these efforts are documented (Bananuka, 2014; Obbo, 2004). Government effort to recognise ALE has been traced in a number of documents such as poverty eradication action plan in 2002, plan for modernisation of agriculture, national health policy, national gender policy in 1999, national youth policy in 2001 and others of a kind (Obbo, 2004). Some other efforts have been traced in the Uganda vision 2040 and Uganda National Development Plan (Bananuka, 2014). However, in most of these documents there is no clear mention of ALE, adult education or even literacy.

In this paper, we identify three major breakthroughs towards policy legislation of ALE and other forms of learning for adults albeit inconclusively. These are White paper of education of 1992, National Adult Literacy Investment Plan (NALSIP) of 2002 and Uganda National Adult Literacy Policy (UNALP) of 2015 (Bananuka, 2014; Obbo, 2004; MGLSD, 2015; MoES, 1992). We will only focus on the first and third as NALSIP was merely designed as part of poverty eradication plan and made proposals in investment in literacy for the period of 2002 and 2007 (Obbo, 2004).

Uganda government White paper of Education 1992

One of the major breakthroughs for agitations for ALE policy came in 1992 when a government commissioned committee about the future of education in the country came up with a comprehensive report popularly known as the ‘White paper of education (1992)’. In addition to tackling all areas of education, it specifically laid down a structure and process of how government of Uganda was to tackle the issue of adult education. ALE was noted as one critical component of education and categorised in various forms of non-formal and adult education, basic education for national development, literacy and post-literacy adult education, apprenticeship for youth, continuing and lifelong education and distance education and mass media. Among the many recommendation, was to set up *a National Council for Non-formal and Adult Education and a Directorate of Non-formal and Adult Education within the ministry of Education (MoES, 1992)*. It ought to be noted that these proposals have since been shelved. ALE has since been forgotten as a component of education despite many deserving potential adult learners. As we note later the continued demand for the ratification of proposals of the white paper on education into policy have not yielded much. Although the recently enacted UNALP is a welcome move, it virtually has no bearing to the much anticipated policy on ALE.

The Uganda National Adult Literacy Policy (UNALP) of 2015

In 2015, the government passed the Uganda National Adult Literacy Policy (MGLSD, 2015). The policy recognises neglect of the adult learner despite government commitment to international protocols such as ‘education for all’ (EFA). Although this policy emerged out of initiatives of largely academia and civil society from an engagement of almost 20 years, it seems to have left out the major proposals laid out by the government white paper on education of 1992 and other core aspects of ALE that stakeholders had hoped for. The passing of this policy has since not caused any excitement among ALE stakeholders as they claim it was a sell out by government and seen as a strategy to weaken efforts to position ALE in national development agenda. The passing of the UNALP has since shifted debate from no policy to inadequate and at times wrong policy.

In analysing the struggles for policy for ALE, we hinge our focus on the two documents above. We ask questions as to what went wrong, that is the good and the bad, we try to identify the gaps and mistakes and what ought to be done. We anticipate that other countries struggling with issues policy for ALE can learn from our own experiences. The discussion is informed by five emergent themes, that is; discipline ambiguity, confusion between literacy and ALE, departmental mandates, research gap and lack of activism.

Findings indicate that one of the hindrances to ALE policy is the ambiguity of the discipline, that is, amorphous by its nature making it to understand by government technocrats and politicians (Roumell, et.al., 2018). One of the respondents had this to say:

Most people don't understand adult education. Therefore, the articulation of adult education (AE) as a facilitator of development process is not clear. If they were understanding, we would achieve more. Operation wealth creation (OPWC) is for example an AE intervention, you must teach people how to keep cows. How do we teach these people?

Ambiguity can be seen at two levels, one defining ALE as a distinct discipline from others such as mainstream education and development studies. This is perhaps associated to its broadness and focus. In some interviews especially with politicians, we were reminded that government is already doing a lot in ALE. Some examples cited included universal primary education, non-formal education for children in hard to reach areas and even health promotion and education and agricultural extension. Although such arguments are correct, they do not show how such efforts can be coordinated for better results. Therefore, stakeholders of ALE still have a big task to explain to the public and policy makers about what ALE entails, how it's different from other forms of education and its specific role in development. It ought to be stressed that ALE policy is not meant to benefit a section of the population but rather aims at promotion of public good.

Another noted hindrance to ALE policy in the country was confusion between literacy and ALE. This challenge is not limited to Uganda and is often sighted in other countries. Stakeholders have since struggled to convince the government of Uganda that literacy is not ALE or perhaps literacy is only part of broader ALE. It's not surprising that government has since settled for UNALP instead of a comprehensive policy of ALE proposed by the white paper of education in 1992. When asked about the existence ALE policy in Uganda, this respondent noted:

I don't think we have a policy on ALE but rather a policy on literacy. The concept of adult education disappeared and they narrowed down the focus to adult literacy. And I think the part on adult education was left out and we don't know why, but I think may be government officials equate literacy to ALE. They can't distinguish the difference.

The struggle for a policy on ALE has indeed grappled with the issue of literacy. As such any milestone for literacy has been used to curtail agitation for a policy for ALE. The issue has been made worse by the fact that Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) has not made efforts to articulate that education is not complete without ALE. The vision for the framers of the white paper on education seem to have fallen by the way-side. While the nation would be celebrating UNALP, stakeholders have developed cold feet against the policy. The biggest reservation stakeholders have with UNALP is that it has reduced a big critical field of education, that is ALE to literacy. This has therefore killed off all challenges that ALE is meant to address for a big percentage of society. They further argue that UNALP denies literacy the support of expertise, structures, rightful forums and opportunities of growth.

The other noted challenge to ALE policy was the issue of mandates, that is whose mandate? The discussion of ALE policy in Uganda has come to be associated with the question of mandate, that is which government department or ministry is best suited to take care of interests of adult learners? The contention has been mainly between MoES and Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). On this issue some respondents argued:

I am of the view that anything to do with literacy and education be moved to the ministry of education and Sports (MoES), and let them realise that a department of adult education within the MoES and getting a vote for it would be easy ...

and another respondent argued;

... so ALE should be based in MoES, you would have a directorate, they would think education ... If put ALE in MGLSD, they would only think of community development. But you need ALE in finance, energy, industry, labour, agriculture and so on. Somebody from MGLSD cannot go to talk about ALE or education in those ministries (Kanze).

Accordingly, stakeholders do not deny the fact that MGLSD has a stake in the delivery of literacy in whatever form. However, they contend that MGLSD should rather come in as supporting agency and not a mandated one. They note that literacy should be enlisted to support community development efforts and not the other way round. In addition to supporting development efforts, literacy should be part of a synergy for education interventions broadly. Literacy classes ought to provide a chance for adult learners to link with educational opportunities in addition to solving their life challenges. This is supported by Jarvis when he notes that ‘... adult education policies and practices should develop considerable similarities, not only in terminology but also in curriculum structure and delivery (Jarvis, 2011, p. 48). However, interviews with technocrats from MoES and MGLSD downplayed a conflict over mandates. In any case there was expression of ignorance of MoES’ mandate over ALE as one official noted;

Adult learning is one of those and given that within our education system we don’t have any component for that, so it remains under MGLSD. I think my interaction with stakeholders has not yet brought up adult learning as an area that should be a focus by the education sector (Yawe).

Such an answer from a senior technocrat from MoES negates Uganda government’s commitment to national and international agendas on education for all. On why most sister countries such as Rwanda and Tanzania have ALE under MoES, another official from MoES argues that perhaps such countries have a big bulk of illiterates unlike Uganda. Therefore, the much hyped fight or conflict between MoES and MGLSD over control over ALE seemed to be mere illusion. Technocrats from MoES seemed to be unaware of the recommendations of the Education White paper of 1992 on ALE, and therefore not zealous to have them implemented. The delay to enact a comprehensive policy on ALE turned out to be a question of lack of coordination between government departments. It also points to failure of stakeholders particularly academia and civil society to cause a dialogue with government at multi-sectoral level.

Findings also indicated that the absence of policy was due to lack of activism for the discipline of adult learning and education. It is largely agreed that ALE remains a marginalised field in education and development in general (Obbo, 2004). Therefore, making a case for ALE requires a cadre of committed individuals to market and make a case for it. Various voices point to this reality: one respondent said; *We need to get to the level of activism and that is*

where we haven't got. As we said, we have remained within universities. We have not properly ... we tried to get into NGOs but the support was not sufficient... as a result, we haven't made sufficient impact and another respondent added; *'Well there was nobody to take it through, maybe there was no activists. Sometimes you need activists to push policy through.* These views are supported by (Birkland, 2007p.63) when he notes that; 'Even when an issue gains attention, groups must fight to ensure that their depiction of the issue remains in the forefront and that their preferred approaches to the problem are those that are most actively considered'.

The final theme describing challenge to ALE policy is what we termed as the 'research gap'. It emerged from the study that Uganda is low on research and publications in the field ALE. This, respondents argued has always incapacitated them whenever they want to make a case for ALE policy. One respondent observed:

... I think we can really enter ... we can actually influence policy. there is that of writing position papers and making a case for the role of ALE in national development. But that also won't be possible unless we do research in the field and get evidence.

The above observation is supported by literature that; 'The choice of adult learning policy reforms must be based upon solid evidence highlighting the most effective practices and interventions (European Commission, 2015, p.4). According to this study, the above five reasons explain why the push for ALE policy in Uganda has not borne fruits.

Implications from the struggle for ALE policy in Uganda

This paper's focus was informed by a number of assumptions 1) that ALE is very critical in countries' socioeconomic transformation 2) there is presumed neglect of ALE and yet a sizeable population in Uganda are in critical need of adult learning 3) Policy is vital in marshalling resources and support for issues of national importance 4) in spite of its relevance, ALE is ambiguous and often times not well understood by government technocrats and politicians. In this section we point to the implications arising out of Uganda's experience with the struggles for ALE policy development for other countries.

The case of Uganda speaks of a struggle for ALE policy that most countries share. In most countries, ALE is practiced as an appendage to some form of education such as Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Some countries have taken concrete steps towards policy legislation of ALE as a driver to socioeconomic transformation. Namibia for example has even enshrined ALE its national constitution to the extent that the ministry of education can by law take 1% of a company's pay roll to support ALE (UIL, 2010). The few countries that have taken concrete steps in ALE policy legislation usually owe it to some form of contextual pressure. In the sub-Saharan Africa, the example of South Africa and Rwanda present a very good case (Government of Rwanda (2014). The drive to adopt the policy on ALE in South Africa followed a long painful struggle against apartheid which left majority black people without basic education and skills (Aitchison, 2003; Walters, 2009). Equally Rwanda had gone through a painful experience of genocide that led to the death of about a million people. Rwanda has since been going through a period of rebuilding their society in terms knowledge and skills. Wanyama (2014, p. 164) notes that 'an effectual policy should be backed up by legislation so as to ensure its full implementation and enable the concrete actions taken to bear fruit'. As Wanyama (2014) further argues actual translation of policy and legislation into action requires political will and effective partnerships. Countries seeking to enact or ratify ALE policies ought to clearly link it to their history, socioeconomic needs and development agenda. Only then will the drive make sense not only to government but entire populations.

There is need to celebrate every achievement that contributes to learning of those considered socially excluded including adults. This should be the case in point with UNALP in Uganda. As the local Luganda saying goes *'enyama entono okayana ng'eri munkwawa'* meaning that 'for even a little piece of meat, you should complain when its already in under your armpit. Therefore, in spite of the limitations of UNALP in addressing issues of ALE and adult education in all forms, it can be a good stepping ground for greater engagement. This is at least an indication that government and other stakeholders are conscious of the need for education of sorts for the adult population. We can then later deal with issues of form and structures. Countries ought to look at the bigger picture, that is availing learning spaces for adults rather than being pre-occupied with form and who is doing what.

ALE as a discipline and field of practice is broad and therefore requires a multi-sectoral approach (Okech, 2004; Roumell, et.al, 2018). Without negating the principal of mandates by appropriate government departments, there is need for a collaboration between ministries, academia and civil society. Literature review and the documents analysed showed that in most countries, ministries of education are mandated with ALE. This is also in line with education white paper recommendations of 1992. There was noted willingness particularly between MoES and MGLSD to join hands in collaboration with other ministries and stakeholders in the promotion of ALE. Government bodies should work to promote harmony in ALE policy development and eventual delivery of adult learning.

Conclusion

When we set to investigate the struggles of in ALE policy in Uganda, we were interested in efforts aimed at better practices and environment for adult learning. As we interacted with stakeholders, one of the emergent findings was *'us against them'* where the *us* represented those that associate with adult learning as a field of practice and profession while *them* represented largely those in government. It looked as though ALE policy is being hampered by *'them'*. However, as we have noted from literature and experiences elsewhere, policy and good investment in ALE benefits all socially and economically. We therefore conclude by saying that even though national understanding of ALE is inadequate, those aligned to it professionally ought to invest in sensitisation of government and other stakeholders to have ALE policy in place for coordinated development agenda.

The paper has demonstrated that the Ugandan government as a matter of urgency based on its commitment of SDGs ought to focus ALE as a critical component of education and a major driver to socioeconomic transformation. This will only be possible by enacting a policy of ALE supported by other legislations and political will. Uganda is not short of examples. Although some sister states in the region still lack concrete policy framework, they have put in place conducive structures for ALE including giving it good space in relevant ministries.

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