

Adult education

PODCAST 1

When we think about education, we usually associate it with the formal education of children, adolescents and young people. Although they are the main beneficiaries of education under international human rights law, adults are also recognized holders of these rights. The right to education, like all other human rights, is universal and belongs to everyone, regardless of age.

According to international law, the goals of education include "the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity" and "enabling all persons to participate effectively in a free society". These goals (and other goals of education under international law) cannot be achieved through education aimed exclusively at children. The right to education therefore recognises the importance of education as a lifelong process. The early years are considered to be the foundation of lifelong learning, where each level of education provides the basis for further education throughout a person's life.

Adult education and learning is an integral part of the right to education and lifelong learning and includes "all forms of education and learning aimed at ensuring the participation of all adults in their societies and in the world of work". It means the whole set of learning processes, formal, non-formal and informal, through which people considered adults in the society in which they live develop and enrich their opportunities to live and work, both in their own interest and in the interest of their communities, organizations and associations" (UNESCO Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education).


Adults can (re)take up learning for a number of reasons, including:

- replace lost or neglected primary and/or secondary education
- develop basic educational skills such as literacy and numeracy
- develop new professional skills and expertise to adapt to changing labour market conditions or change careers, or to further their professional development
- continue learning for personal development and leisure
- participate fully in society and democratic processes

In addition to the benefits of the above, adult education benefits the individual by:

- playing an instrumental role in the exercise of other human rights, such as the right to work, the right to health and cultural participation, and in the conduct of public affairs
- empowering economically and socially marginalized adults to understand, challenge and transform, through critical awareness, the sources of their marginalization, including lifting themselves out of poverty
- building the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in society
- facilitating active citizenship

Moreover, adult education and learning have wider economic, social, political and cultural benefits, as particularly recognised in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which sets out a number of adult education targets and to which all countries have committed themselves.



However, despite the commitment of states to adult education, efforts to implement and make real the right to education for youth, young people and adults have been neglected. This lack of full implementation of adult education exacerbates historical marginalization, as adult education is most likely to benefit those who have not completed primary and/or secondary education.

Currently, adult education, especially non-formal education, including literacy programs, is generally the most underfunded level of education, with few countries spending the recommended 3% of their national education budget on adult literacy programs. As a result, adult education and learning is not in principle free and has to be borne by the individual, which is a barrier to access to adult education or a financial burden for already marginalised adults who have to pay access to education that they were previously denied.

A fundamental element of the right to education is that it is accessible to all, which is why primary and lower secondary education is generally free of charge in most countries. The same principle applies to adult education and learning. For adults, however, this is not the case because, in addition to the state, there are market providers (everything from yoga and cooking classes to computer programming will be offered by private providers), companies train and develop their staff, community organizations create learning opportunities for their members, and the network offers a range of free and paid educational programs. A key responsibility of states is to establish legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure access to adult education and learning opportunities, especially for people from marginalised groups. Moreover, states have obligations under international human rights law with regard to certain forms of adult education and learning.



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