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ORIGINAL PAPER

The role of adult learning and education in the Sustainable Development Goals

Anke Grotlüschen[1] · Alisa Belzer[2] · Markus Ertner[1] · Keiko Yasukawa[3]

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched by the United Nations in 2015, established ambitious targets to be achieved by 2030, including in education. SDG 4, which focuses on ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education and promot[ing] lifelong learning opportunities for all", attracted attention from the adult education sector for the role that adult learning and education (ALE) can play in its realisation, and the potential for the SDGs to boost the visibility and support of ALE. This article reports on a study that explored the role of ALE in lifelong learning in eight case study countries (Australia, Brazil, India, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, South Africa, Thailand and Ukraine). It explores the literature and examines the supports for and challenges of ALE to better understand its potential in helping to realise SDG 4, using a mega-, macro-, meso- and micro-level theoretical framework. Twenty-seven experts in ALE from across the eight countries were interviewed, and data analysis was undertaken using a *grounded theory* approach. The findings indicate that while SDG 4 was not a strong driver for ALE activities in these countries, initiatives were focused on the same issues targeted by SDG 4. The analysis also points to the unequal policy support given to formal and non-formal ALE activities, and the critical role that ALE networks and associations can play in addressing some of the most ambitious SDG 4 targets.

✉ Anke Grotlüschen
anke.grotlueschen@uni-hamburg.de

Alisa Belzer
alisa.belzer@gse.rutgers.edu

Markus Ertner
markus.ertner@uni-hamburg.de

Keiko Yasukawa
keiko.yasukawa@uts.edu.au

[1] Department of Education, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany

[2] Department of Learning and Teaching, Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

[3] School of International Studies and Education, University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Ultimo, NSW, Australia

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Résumé

Le rôle de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes dans les Objectifs de développement durable – Les Objectifs de développement durables (ODD) lancés par les Nations Unies en 2015 fixent, notamment en matière d'éducation, d'ambitieuses cibles à atteindre d'ici 2030. L'ODD 4, qui vise essentiellement à « garantir une éducation de qualité inclusive et équitable et [à] promouvoir des opportunités d'apprentissage tout au long de la vie pour tous », a attiré l'attention du secteur de l'éducation des adultes sur le rôle que l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes (AEA) peuvent jouer pour atteindre cet objectif et sur la possibilité des ODD d'améliorer la visibilité de l'AEA et le soutien apporté dans ce domaine. Le présent article se penche sur une étude portant sur le rôle de l'AEA dans l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie et s'appuie pour cela sur des études de cas menées dans huit pays (Australie, Brésil, Inde, Jordanie, Kirghizistan, Afrique du Sud, Thaïlande et Ukraine). Il explore la littérature et examine les soutiens à l'apprentissage et à l'éducation des adultes ainsi que les défis qu'ils posent afin de mieux comprendre comment ils peuvent aider à atteindre l'ODD 4 en utilisant un cadre théorique aux méga, macro, méso et microniveaux. Vingt-sept spécialistes de l'AEA des huit pays ont été interviewés et la *théorisation ancrée* a été utilisée pour analyser les données recueillies. Les résultats indiquent que bien que l'ODD 4 n'ait pas été un moteur puissant pour les activités d'AEA menées dans ces pays, des projets y étaient axés sur les problèmes ciblés par cet objectif. L'analyse attire aussi l'attention sur le soutien politique inégal accordé aux activités formelles et non formelles d'AEA et sur le rôle décisif que les réseaux et associations d'AEA peuvent jouer pour se consacrer à certaines des cibles les plus ambitieuses de l'ODD 4.

Introduction

In 2015, the United Nations launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015) as a successor to the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs, UN 2000). Of particular relevance to adult education, SDG 4 seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UN 2015). There is potential to set a strong agenda for adult learning and education (ALE), as it can play a key role in meeting this goal. Given this opportunity, the aim of this article is to deepen understanding of what currently supports and hinders the implementation of ALE. We conceive of ALE broadly, in the spirit of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):

> [T]he term "adult education" denotes the entire body of organised educational processes, ..., whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprentice-

> ship, … it is a sub-division, and an integral part of a global scheme for lifelong education and learning (UNESCO 1976, p. 4).

We explore the role of ALE in lifelong learning in eight case study countries (Australia, Brazil, India, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, South Africa, Thailand and Ukraine). This includes a discussion of the role that SDG 4 plays within these contexts. Although the SDGs are the backdrop of this inquiry, our findings indicate that SDG 4, which could play an important role in boosting the visibility and support of ALE, is not often a determining element in the ALE landscape of each country. We anticipate that our findings will be able to help policymakers and practitioners to more effectively progress towards the goals of ALE in a range of contexts.

We begin by providing a brief overview of responses in the literature to the SDGs in the adult education sector. Following a statement of the main research question and an explanation of our study design, we present our findings thematically in mega, macro, meso and micro levels. We conclude by presenting a *grounded theory* model which emerged from our analysis. This model highlights the important role that (meso-level) ALE organisations and (micro-level) ALE strategies can play during (macro-level) policymaking and in surviving (mega-level) crises. During crises, we found that spontaneous local ALE responses often emerge. Thus, it is not only policymaking actions that determine the potential of ALE; strengthening capacity at both organisational and local levels is also important. Acting on these findings could position ALE to do more to help countries meet the ambitious sustainable development outcomes expressed in SDG 4.

The shifting visibility of ALE

Although ALE leaders would have likely preferred specific mention of "adults" in SDG 4, ALE was included under the "umbrella" of lifelong learning, with mention of adults in four of the SDG 4 aims. This has inadvertently contributed to the invisibility of ALE in this important global declaration of educational goals (Benavot et al. 2022). Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, the reception of SDG 4 by adult education scholars could best be described as mixed. Some see SDG 4 speaking directly to and highlighting the importance of adult education in accomplishing its ambitious agenda. This is reflected in Leona English's cautiously optimistic observation:

> [T]he SDGs … make it clear that quality education for all (Goal 4), including adult education, has a key role in achieving the international benchmarks. Thus, the role of adult education has never been clearer … We might say that, globally, adult education is alive and well on the ground and in the formal, non-formal and informal spheres … It is true that adult education is not named in the SDGs. Yet, adult education remains the "invisible friend" of sustainable development (English 2022, p. 20).

However, ALE being the "invisible friend" is a concern for Violeta Orlović Lovren and Katarina Popović (2018), who note the neglect of adult education in the understanding and implementation of lifelong learning. Their scepticism could also have

been influenced by the exclusion of ALE in the 2000 MDGs, in which the only goal directly related to education was the narrow aspiration to "[a]chieve universal primary education" (UN 2000, online). Moreover, notwithstanding research showing the role of ALE in achieving several MDGs, including the promotion of primary schooling, ALE remained unacknowledged in MDG reports. Some scholars have argued that ALE has likewise been marginalised in the discourse around lifelong learning and in the global policy documents that led to SDG 4 (Benavot 2018; Benavot et al. 2022; ICAE 2020).

In contrast to English's (2022) observation of ALE's invisibility in the SDGs, the specific targets for SDG 4 do indicate that ALE plays a role in its realisation. What is noticeable, however, is that although four targets (SDG Targets 4.3, 4.4, 4.6 and 4.7)[1] mention outcomes for adults, they only focus on quantifiable, vocational and literacy outcomes which are most likely achievable through formal education and training. This raises questions about how the nature and scope of lifelong learning and adult education are understood by scholars and policymakers. For instance, Maren Elfert (2019) argues that in Target 4.6, by aiming only for "a substantial proportion of adults" to achieve literacy and numeracy, SDG 4 has undermined UNESCO's vision for universal literacy. She argues that this, along with a focus on vocational skills, contradicts the democratic and transformative vision of lifelong learning expressed in the groundbreaking Faure report (Faure et al. 1972). In particular, Elfert suggests that

> [in the SDGs, the] humanistic approach [advocated in the Faure report] lost out to the human capital approach, which is more congruent with a market-driven economic system (Elfert 2019, p. 550).

SDG Target 4.7, however, focuses on outcomes that are broader and more ambitious in scope, seeking to ensure

> education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development (UN 2015, p. 19).

Such outcomes are unlikely to be achieved without contributions from informal and non-formal ALE. However, the measurement strategy developed for this set of targets appears to focus on metrics that relate to formal education. For example, the

[1] *SDG Target 4.3:* "By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UN 2015, p. 19). *SDG Target 4.4:* "By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship" (ibid.). *SDG Target 4.6:* "By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy" (ibid.). *SDG Target 4.7:* "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development" (ibid.).

indicator for this target that countries have been reporting on is: "4.7.1 Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development are mainstreamed in student assessment" (UIS 2018, p. 19). Thus, in effect, "these targets align only partially to their stated intent", making the indicators "problematic proxies of SDG 4 targets" (Benavot 2018, p. 8). Monitoring progress towards SDG 4 only through what can be measured in formal education settings may reflect the challenges of developing a monitoring tool that will also be reliable and applicable across non-formal education.

Citing a UNESCO statement from 2018, Alan Rogers explains that, unlike formal education and training programmes, non-formal ALE is highly diverse, locally contextualised and distinguished by

> the freedom to offer learning programmes in any sector … in innovative formats to any person … without requiring prior educational experience (Rogers 2019, p. 523).

The flexibility to adapt to unique localised needs and conditions both gives strength to non-formal education and makes it a difficult sector to monitor using a standardised metric (Belete et al. 2022). However, Lalage Brown (2000) cites a number of successful popular education initiatives that demonstrate the effectiveness of this sector. The initiatives were linked to "grassroots" community development and community education efforts mobilising learning and activism towards alleviating poverty and improving the environment, hygiene and health. Brown's findings are supported by other case studies of non-formal ALE initiatives around sustainability outcomes in communities (see for example, Calderón-Villarreal et al. 2023; Kerrigan et al. 2023). These education projects are clearly aligned with the ambitions of SDG Target 4.7, and relate to the aims of "human rights, citizenship and social inclusion" (Rogers 2019, p. 549). However, Rogers argues that, by definition, locating non-formal ALE activities such as these within a ministry or department of education could constrain their effectiveness. He fears that they would be subject to standardisation, thus detracting from their responsive and flexible approach. Rather, Elfert (2019) argues, non-formal ALE requires a transformative vision, which Rogers (2019) suggests would not be realised through the state. And herein lies a dilemma: without being part of overall educational governance, non-formal ALE activities will likely remain "marginal to all other education sub-sectors" (Belete et al. 2022, p. 281).

The literature suggests that in order to promote understanding of the role ALE can play in achievement of the SDGs, research must look beneath and beyond formal targets, indicators and policies to initiatives unfolding on the ground, led by community organisations and educators through non-formal ALE activities. While there is a clear need for ALE in advancing the intentions of the SDGs (Benavot 2018), much work is needed to reconcile bottom-up and top-down policymaking approaches to lead to appropriate governance and funding of the ALE sector, particularly in non-formal education (Belete et al. 2022).

Finally, the theoretical perspective we applied in our study builds on earlier discussions in the literature on mega, macro, meso and micro levels of ALE (Boeren 2019; Egetenmeyer et al. 2017). Sociological approaches explain the relationship

between the *micro* level (individuals, or in the case of ALE, local activities) and the *macro* level (governments, ministries, political systems) (see Schimank 2001). For our analysis, we concentrated on *meso*-level (organisational) theories. We did not view the meso level as simply connecting the micro and macro; rather, we saw meso-level organisations as creating a bridge and playing an important in-between role. The meso level also aggregates responses from the micro level and then negotiates with macro-level institutions (see Donges 2011, Quandt and Scheufele 2011). For the purpose of our analysis, levels comprised the following:

- *mega level:* supra-national crises and general national political context and policy culture (e.g. the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, nationalism and populism);
- *macro level:* educational policy (e.g. educational law, decrees, policy, funding, campaigns, national initiatives and programmes);
- *meso level:* organisations (e.g. associations, networks, coordinating bodies); and
- *micro level:* ALE activities (e.g. education and training programmes and projects, courses, workshops).

Methodology

As discussed above, the literature notes some scepticism about the role ALE can play in realising SDG 4 due to the ways in which this goal is monitored. However, it also shows that the areas to which SDG 4 is intended to contribute depend on ALE – in particular, community-based non-formal adult education. Given the importance of ALE, the main research question (RQ) that guided our study was:

> *RQ: What are the supports and challenges that influence the implementation of adult learning and education (ALE) with regard to the aims of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Education)?*

This analysis was part of a larger study conducted on behalf of DVV International[2] to analyse the role of ALE in lifelong learning in a range of economies. With the help of DVV International staff, four countries with DVV International offices were chosen. Four other countries were added to increase variation among the sample. Twenty-seven experts (11 scholars, 6 practitioners from ALE or assessment centres, 5 representatives of ALE associations, 3 network representatives and 2 policymakers) were identified by DVV International in countries where they have offices, while in other countries, the research team's professional networks were key in identifying

[2] The study "Adult Learning and Education within the Framework of Lifelong Learning" was initiated by DVV International with funds from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). Eight focus group interviews were analysed to find systematic answers to the question of what supports and hinders the implementation of ALE (Grotlüschen et al. 2023). DVV International is the Institute for International Cooperation of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband e.V. (DVV), the German Adult Education Association.

expert informants. Ethics approval for our study was obtained from University of Technology Sydney (approval number ETH22-7235).

An interview protocol was developed in consultation with DVV International staff to address the research questions, and interviews were conducted and recorded via videoconference with experts in each country. The data were collected between August and November 2022. In five of the eight countries, it was possible to organise group interviews; individual interviews were conducted in the other three.[3] In each instance, participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form to sign before their interview began.

We used the *constant comparative* method, which is part of the *grounded theory* approach, to obtain and analyse data (Strauss and Corbin 1996). For the first step, which was deductive, we followed an interview protocol to ask about supportive and hindering aspects in the macro and meso levels of ALE. However, the interview process also revealed that micro-level activities often directly addressed mega-level challenges. Therefore, we decided to examine the mega and micro perspectives inductively. Analytic categories were built and refined using the qualitative data analysis software MaxQDA and validated in several research team meetings. The first discussion involved the international team of all four authors of this article. We decided not to report country cases but instead to build categories across countries. The two German authors then met to discuss the list of categories. Categories which only appeared for one country were moved to a different section of the analysis, called "country specifics" (not reported in this article). All four authors then organised the remaining categories according to macro, meso and micro levels and discussed whether or not to add a mega level. As global crises (such as the COVID-19 pandemic) make an impact across borders, we agreed to move related aspects to a new category called "mega level".

The German authors then developed a causal model from the final list of categories (see Figure 1, which will be elaborated on below). This model was first discussed in a larger German team of seven researchers, who all belonged to their university's department of lifelong learning. This led to a clearer description of the model as a representation of the policymaking processes that answer the study's main research question. The international team of four authors then refined the model. The model shows the interplay of the four levels in advocating for ALE; it does not represent top-down policy processes. It is also relevant for ALE in the twenty-first century, when cross-border developments are more influential than in the previous century.

It is important to note that our analysis was built on a synthesis of the expert informants' views of the historical and current state of ALE, and the primary drivers of ALE policy and practice in their respective countries. A limitation of this study

[3] For the Australian study, five expert informants were interviewed. Three of the five were interviewed as a group and the remaining two, who were unable to join the group interview, were interviewed individually. For Brazil, one expert was interviewed and one provided a written response to the interview questions. In Jordan, two experts were interviewed together. For the Thailand study, two experts were interviewed individually.

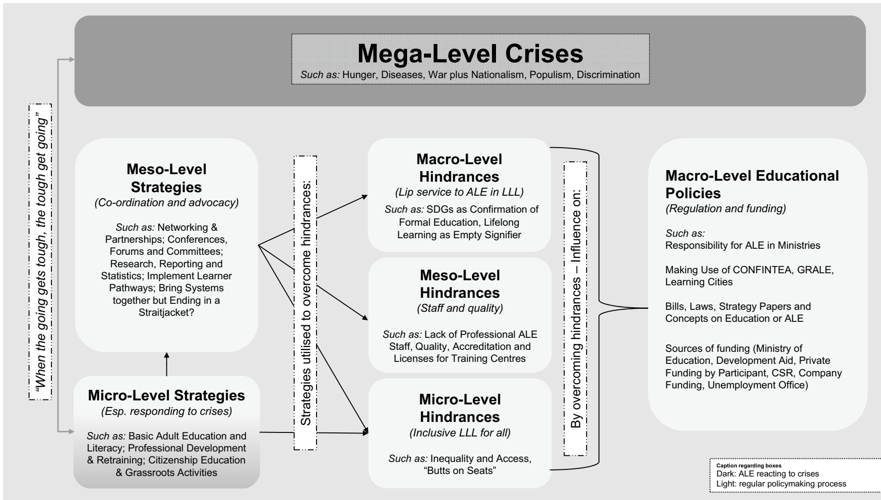

Figure 1 Model of ALE policymaking and practice: The contribution of micro and meso strategies to macro-level policymaking and surviving mega-level crises *Notes:* CONFINTEA = Conférence internationale sur l'éducation des adultes (International Conference on Adult Education); GRALE = Global Report on Adult Learning and Education; CSR = corporate social responsibility. The examples within the level boxes refer to the categories that were developed via the qualitative data analysis. Some category names are quotes from interviewees. *Source:* The authors

is that the number of experts consulted in each country was small and their perspectives were of course shaped by their gender, race, positionality and professional histories in ALE. Thus, we recognise that our understanding of ALE in each country is necessarily partial.

Findings: ALE implementation by level

In this section, we discuss our analysis of and the interplay between mega-level challenges and macro-, meso- and micro-level ALE development in the countries that were included in our study.

Mega level: crisis and conflict

Mega-level challenges were present in all eight countries. These challenges included climate change and pandemic lockdowns which caused food and water insecurity, along with bush fires (in Brazil and Australia), the return of outgoing migrants (Kyrgyzstan) and incoming refugees (Jordan), the Russian war against Ukraine, nationalist regimes (Brazil, India), increasing violence (India, South Africa) and the historical legacy of colonisation (Australia, India, South Africa).

Efforts to address the learning needs of adults can grind to a halt due to low economic capacity or political will shaped by larger external crises. In the most dramatic

example of this, Ukrainian experts in our study explained that the Russian war has hindered ALE funding and infrastructure. They also reported that many adult educators were fighting on the battlefield, while others had died or left the country. In Brazil, one expert noted that they were "back on the hunger map … and the economic model and the EJA [youth and adult education] curricula are unsustainable". In contrast, South Africa provided one example of a mega-level challenge giving rise to new ALE opportunities. In that country, COVID-19 lockdowns contributed to increasing poverty, hunger, civil unrest and unemployment. However, at the same time, informal learning opportunities emerged "as part of autonomous spaces where people are beginning to act, starting to do lifemaking things [like] community gardens … and peacemaking attempts".

It is clear that events at the mega level can create both hindrances and opportunities for the provision of ALE. In some cases, they are the impetus for new activities at the local level or for new policies, funding and laws at the macro level. The experts' responses in our study with regard to mega-level crises and conflict seem especially aligned with SDG Target 4.7 (which focuses on education for sustainable development). Although governments are not always in a position to step up during circumstances like these, our examples illustrate the important role that ALE could play in realising this goal during calmer and more stable times.

Macro level: misunderstood and invisible

The macro level includes policies, laws and national structures which govern and shape ALE. Not surprisingly, in our study there was considerable variation across countries with regard to how ALE is organised and what services are provided; furthermore, several countries' educational policies were in flux. Despite the variation in how ALE is organised and administered at the macro level, there were several commonalities across the cases. In general, we found that ALE often faced poor understanding, invisibility, underfunding, fragmentation or poor coordination and articulation across sectors, and an overly narrow focus.

Many experts described the positioning of ALE in education ministries as buried within bureaucratic structures, struggling for visibility or "really not on the radar" (Australia). A Kyrgyzstan expert stated that "there is not any department for [the ALE] sector in [the ministry of education]." Significant underfunding was described by informants in almost every country. This may be caused, at least in part, by a lack of political will due to not understanding the purposes of ALE. In Jordan, an expert said, "The concept of adult education is missing", and in India we were told that "the nature of the economy [where there is a lack of skilled jobs that could incentivise participation in training] brings into question why ALE/LLL [lifelong learning] is needed". Not surprisingly, given its reported positioning at the macro level, experts from most countries said that the ALE workforce was undervalued, undertrained and underpaid. Thus, even when there is an ALE policy in place, there may be inadequate funds to properly support it.

Consistent with the reported low status or nearly invisible positioning of ALE at the macro level, its provision in many countries was described as fragmented and

uncoordinated. Government coordination of an ALE system was not mentioned in India or Ukraine, where larger challenges were the focus of discussion. However, both Jordan and Australia described the lack of an umbrella structure which could pull disparate elements of ALE into a coherent framework. Furthermore, in Brazil and Australia, coherence was described as lacking because individual states are expected to play an important role in ALE provision, meaning that adult learners experience variation in localised policy, programming and quality.

ALE coordination programmes, credentials and frameworks were also found to be rarely aligned across systems within countries. This makes it difficult for learners to transition across academic levels, from education to training, from non-formal to formal programmes, and from training to work. In addition, where there is interest in ALE, informants explained that the sector is often too narrow to meet the broad spectrum of adult needs and interests. This narrowness tended to limit government-sponsored programmes either in literacy education, formal qualifications or vocational skills training in the countries, but rarely in all three or in non-formal education. While different experts desired and sought broader ALE opportunities in varying ways, there was agreement that non-formal education opportunities were undervalued and especially underfunded.

The status of ALE at the macro level in the case study countries suggests that it is poorly positioned to play a leading role in realising SDG 4 in spite of its potential to do so. This is due to it playing a secondary and/or misunderstood role in lifelong learning, leaving it underfunded, with a poorly trained workforce and a narrow agenda which is often not well coordinated or systematised. Even when ALE is relatively well organised and supported, it is underutilised in terms of its potential to meet the broad array of adult learning needs. It requires better understanding in terms of the broad role it could play in improving outcomes at individual and societal levels.

Meso level: networks, partnerships and non-governmental organisations

Associations of all kinds hold an intermediate position in ALE. They consist of individuals who are connected to the implementation of programmes (micro level) and who form groups that interact with larger organisations and policymakers (macro level). The data in our study indicate that meso-level actors include professional networks, university faculty members and staff in international organisations. In many of the case study countries, their main ALE association is also connected with international organisations. These associations advocate for ALE by raising its visibility and calling for better funding; consulting on and participating in policymaking; providing professional development; improving support, programme access and quality; and implementing innovative initiatives and models that are sometimes taken up by government entities. Individuals from meso-level organisations may also attend international conferences, organise regional associations and networks, and leverage arguments launched by supra-national associations like UNESCO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for advocacy purposes.

During peaceful times, in countries with democratically elected regimes, meso-level efforts are a common way to influence macro-level policies. Being connected to, and between, both the micro and macro levels endows the meso level with power. In situations of conflict and power struggle, because meso-level organisations usually have an elected leadership which legitimises them to act on their members' behalf, their work is a collective expression of political will. Associations negotiate power relations where the dominant macro-level bodies assert and seek to maintain their power; thus, meso-level bodies try to improve the position of their members and partners.

In several of the countries in our study, meso-level organisations had been invited to participate in drafting ALE policy. In India, even though their policy consultation was later ignored, meso-level engagement and advocacy in the policymaking process may help establish their legitimacy over time. As part of their involvement, the Ukrainian ALE association had forwarded a small group of specialists with a document for parliament which explicitly stated the necessity of implementing education for adults – this was viewed as crucial to informing ALE policy development. This kind of dialogue enabled by conferences was also reported in Brazil. Other types of advocacy consisted of committees and advisory groups. In Jordan, meso-level entities organised a conference on adult education, and a policy paper was developed to contribute to a national framework. A similar process was under way in Kyrgyzstan, with a working group consisting of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and some associations, but not government bodies, "pushing" together with the civil sector to develop a new ALE policy. Although meso-level efforts on behalf of ALE are not always successful, even when they fail they "plant seeds" which may eventually lead to putting ALE in a better position to support the realisation of the SDGs.

In our study, we found that the SDGs did feature in the work of some ALE associations. These entities were attempting to advise their governments, with the help of civil society organisations, to put more emphasis on ALE using SDG 4. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, SDG 4 was discussed in a higher-level forum two years ago, and it was a first when the policy government body and civil society prepared and discussed some related issues. To conclude this subsection, meso-level networks, partnerships and conference gatherings can be essential for ALE advocacy. Just as the meso level can strengthen the visibility of SDG 4 in its work, drawing on ideas promoted by SDG 4 can also strengthen the efforts of meso-level actors.

Micro level: lifelong learning and inclusion

The experts described several examples of micro-level activities, often the result of grassroots activism and partnerships, which illustrate the value and benefits of ALE. While some ALE efforts are state-funded, others are no-budget grassroots initiatives. Funding can also come from non-education sectors, international donors or NGOs. ALE activities can be initiated in higher education, workers' movements or corporate social responsibility programmes. They fall along a continuum of formality and address a wide variety of needs and injustices. Examples include when food insecurity is answered by urban gardening initiatives, or catastrophic labour markets with a

non-profit "solidarity economy" that builds on voluntarily exchanging services and goods within a community. In South Africa, expert informants said that learning networks and women's learning circles have addressed pressing issues of poverty, the impact of COVID-19, natural disasters, crime and substance abuse. In India, experts described self-help groups for women with low literacy skills and groups that build awareness about the country's 2013 gender equity law – these activities help adults to come together in the face of extreme challenge and danger. The community approach can also help to develop solutions and re-establish social norms.

Micro-level activities like these do not always wait for the policymaking process, especially when there are needs which require immediate responses. Under these circumstances, "so much incidental learning goes on" (Australia) in non-accredited, informal learning spaces outside of government educational frameworks. The data indicate that ALE takes place irrespective of whether governments support it or not, and sometimes because of, and in spite of, mega-level challenges. That micro-level activities are flexible and responsive, community-centred and needs-driven makes them an important site of SDG 4 realisation. However, micro-level ALE cannot act alone; it needs funding, infrastructure and articulation with other systems. While experts described a few grassroots micro-level activities which evolved into wider movements, such as a men's health programme and a literacy campaign for Aboriginal adults being replicated and adapted in multiple communities (Australia), they require significant coordination and negotiation efforts between local communities and non-governmental/charity organisations. Finally, to increase the scale and impact of micro-level activities, they must be well represented at the meso level and supported at the macro level.

Discussion

The SDGs in ALE and vice versa

Against the backdrop of climate injustice, widespread hunger, war, political extremism and systemic discrimination, realisation of the SDGs within the stated timeframe (2030) is at best aspirational. Some scholarly statements on SDG 4 imply that ALE does not belong there; thus, it could easily become an even poorer "stepchild" of educational policies than it has been (Benavot et al. 2022). In our study, reference to the SDGs in ALE was present in most countries, but many experts signalled that they are often simply given "lip service" without truly guiding adult education at the macro level.

The SDGs have become a standard or norm representing a set of goals which are difficult to refute; however, they have not necessarily been facilitated by ALE policy in significant ways nor translated into substantive action. For example, an Australian expert described the SDGs as having normative power which is devoid of actual on-the-ground meaning: "You'd be hard-pressed to find a minister or a senior policy person who'd, … advocate for anything inconsistent with [SDG 4], but whether they're actively promoting that in relation to adults is another thing entirely". Similarly, government bodies in other countries have met with international associations

to deliberate on progress on the SDGs, but an expert from Jordan said that while these bodies understand what is expected of them, the discussions may be primarily paying lip service. And while the SDGs feature in some aspects of the education sector in Brazil, an expert stated: "I think it's very much just a ticking of boxes, not a real desire to contribute to achieving the agenda."

Even when the SDGs are integrated with policy, a broader commitment to ALE is often lacking. An expert from Kyrgyzstan reported: "We have a lot of discussion … on SDG 4, and you know SDG 4 [is] the focus for the ministry of education, but they pay more attention for school education, for pre-school education, because it is obligatory for the ministry of education". Additionally, when ALE is included, it is often very narrowly defined. In Thailand, for example, the SDGs were reported to be part of the fabric of key education policies. An expert noted that the Thai government takes a holistic view of SDG 4 – that is, to address the education of people across their lifespan. But they also said that less emphasis is placed on promoting a full range of lifelong learning activities because formal education has dominated despite a stated commitment to non-formal and informal education.

"When the going gets tough": a grounded theory model of ALE policymaking and practice

The findings section above described the status of ALE in eight case study countries in answer to our main research question. Further analysis suggested a conceptual model of how the different levels of actors interact with and shape ALE provision. This is relevant to understanding how ALE could support the realisation of SDG 4, and how SDG 4 could strengthen the role of ALE in a range of country contexts. The grounded theory model of ALE policymaking and practice we designed is presented in Figure 1. Although not an overarching political analysis, the model builds strongly on sociological theory. It presents three key messages on ALE:

1. The light-shaded areas in the model point to the normal policymaking process and highlight the relevance of meso-level associations. These groups identify their members' positions and communicate and negotiate for them with the macro-level bodies who have and award resources.
2. The dark-shaded box in the model shows that ALE responds to local issues, quickly adapting to mega-level crises and catastrophes. While ALE cannot solve these supra-national crises and should not let the macro level off the hook, it can help to overcome problems on the ground, is flexible and fast, and indicates the many ways in which activism and self-organisation can respond to disaster and aggression.
3. The examples of implementation and non-implementation of ALE activities on the different levels show a dilemma between funding and autonomy: The more informal, autonomous, flexible and responsive an ALE activity is, the more precarious the funding will be; vice versa, the more regulated and sufficient the programme funding is, the more control is applied by the funding authorities/bodies.

The grounded theory model suggests that as long as governance is stable and flexible, regular advocacy structures can be effective, although they do not always succeed. In times of crisis, stakeholders at the micro and meso levels do not always need to wait for macro systems to work well; instead, they can step up and provide ALE activities to help affected communities help themselves.

Conclusion

The study presented in this article sought to identify the supports and challenges that influence the implementation of ALE with regard to the aims of SDG 4. The findings indicate that ALE activities in all eight participating countries were engaging with issues which align with SDG 4 targets. Most obvious in most countries were the skills targets, including literacy and numeracy, outlined in SDG Targets 4.3–4.6 (UN 2015, p. 19). These were supported by vocationally oriented formal education provision and policymaking. It was the non-formal ALE activities, generally sitting outside policy frameworks, which the expert informants expressed most concern and frustration about. However, these ALE activities were also directing their efforts to align with some of the broadest aims of SDG 4, particularly as expressed in SDG Target 4.7 (UN 2015, p. 19), such as sustainable development and lifestyles, human rights, gender equality and promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, to address mega-level problems such as climate injustice and right-wing populism.

At the micro level, there were examples of grassroots ALE activities playing a critical role in supporting the SDGs through initiatives such as improving the health of vulnerable groups, promoting urban gardening to achieve food security and addressing historical and systemic racial and/or gender-based discrimination. At this level, ALE activities are not able to solve mega-level problems, but they can respond to the local impact of these challenges within a community. Often, a meso-level structure is required to recognise the value and responsiveness of ALE at the micro level and to advocate and raise support and funding for programmes. An Australian expert summarised this situation aptly when she said:

> "The sector has always really been able to be creative with the way in which they manage their funding … I think in some ways, they do it so well that the government thinks they don't need to fund them for it … I also think that adult community education will continue to be around, and we need it. Because it is strong, because it sits in community for community and it understands its own community. So that it's the first one, hopefully, that the government should go to."

This echoes an observation made by Rogers (2019) in his advocacy for the community-based non-formal ALE sector: the state cannot always be relied upon to support local ALE needs and initiatives.

The immense flexibility and local control of community-based non-formal ALE, sometimes coordinated by existing networks, is one of its most important advantages. What is most challenging, however, is the precariousness of funding to sustain this work. Our findings indicate that meso-level ALE organisations are active

and robust in many countries and they are critical in bringing macro-level support to scaling up micro-level activities to address and respond to underlying systemic issues. Unfortunately, the literature (e.g. Rogers 2019) suggests that ALE policies have shifted so far away from a transformative vision encompassing values of democracy, solidarity and humanism that meso-level activities which advocate for human rights-based ALE may continue to be frustrated, with or without the mandate of the SDGs.

In sum, ALE actively supports the aims of the SDGs, as expressed in SDG Target 4.7 (UN 2015, p. 19) – that is, to offer quality and inclusive education for all age groups in order to achieve broader social, economic and environmental goals. Many ALE efforts and achievements, however, cannot be captured in official progress reports due to the lack of, or narrowly defined, indicators adopted for monitoring purposes. While the monitoring system is set at the global level, the SDGs could be used to strengthen the position of ALE nationally, supported by the meso level acting as a bridge between the micro and macro levels, thus helping to make ALE more visible and broad-based in its purposes. It is also important to consider Rogers' (2019) caution that ALE activities need to interact not only with education policies but also with a wide range of social and environmental policies. Conversely, the meso level could also help to realise the SDGs by making them part of the macro-level discourse around ALE. Acting on these findings could help policymakers and practitioners to more effectively support and progress both ALE and the SDGs.

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Anke Grotlüschen is a Professor for Lifelong Learning at the University of Hamburg. Her research is focused on adult education, literacy and lifelong learning. She has been responsible for the nationwide Level-One Surveys since 2010. Launched by the Educational Minister, the former President of the German Bundestag and the President of the Educational Ministers of the Laender, the first survey (LEO 2010) revealed that 7.5 million Germans (14.5%) have low literacy proficiency. The most recent survey, LEO 2018, shows a significant decrease in low literate adults, down to 6.2 million (12.1% of the population aged 18–64). Dr Grotlüschen's advice for policymakers at all levels strongly influenced the German National Strategy for Adult Literacy and Basic Education (2011) as well as the current Decade for Literacy and Basic Education (2016–2026) with its focus on digital, financial, health and civic education.

Alisa Belzer is a Professor at the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education and programme coordinator for the online EdM in Adult and Continuing Education. She co-edits *Adult Literacy Education: The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*. Widely published in peer-reviewed journals and edited books, the research topics Alisa investigates include adult literacy education policy, professional development and adult learner experiences. Funded by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, she is currently developing a mobile app for adult developing readers called URead. She also co-edited (with Brian Dashew) a textbook on adult learning, *Understanding the Adult Learner: Perspectives and Practices* (Stylus 2023).

Markus Ertner studied Mechanical Engineering (BEng) at Georg-Simon-Ohm-Hochschule Nuremberg and Adult Education (MA) at Otto Friedrich-University of Bamberg. He is currently a research assistant in the Department of Lifelong Learning at the University of Hamburg (UHH) and working on his doctoral thesis on the role of adult education for the democratic process in Spain.

Keiko Yasukawa is an adult education researcher and teacher educator at the University of Technology Sydney. Keiko's research and teaching focuses on adult literacy and numeracy, and she is particularly interested in the tensions between policy, pedagogy and practice. Her most recent book is *Numeracy as Social Practice: Global and Local Perspectives* (Routledge, 2018), co-edited with Alan Rogers, Kara Jackson and Brian Street. Keiko has also taken leadership roles in adult literacy and numeracy professional associations, and is currently the president of the New South Wales Adult Literacy and Numeracy Council (NSWALNC).