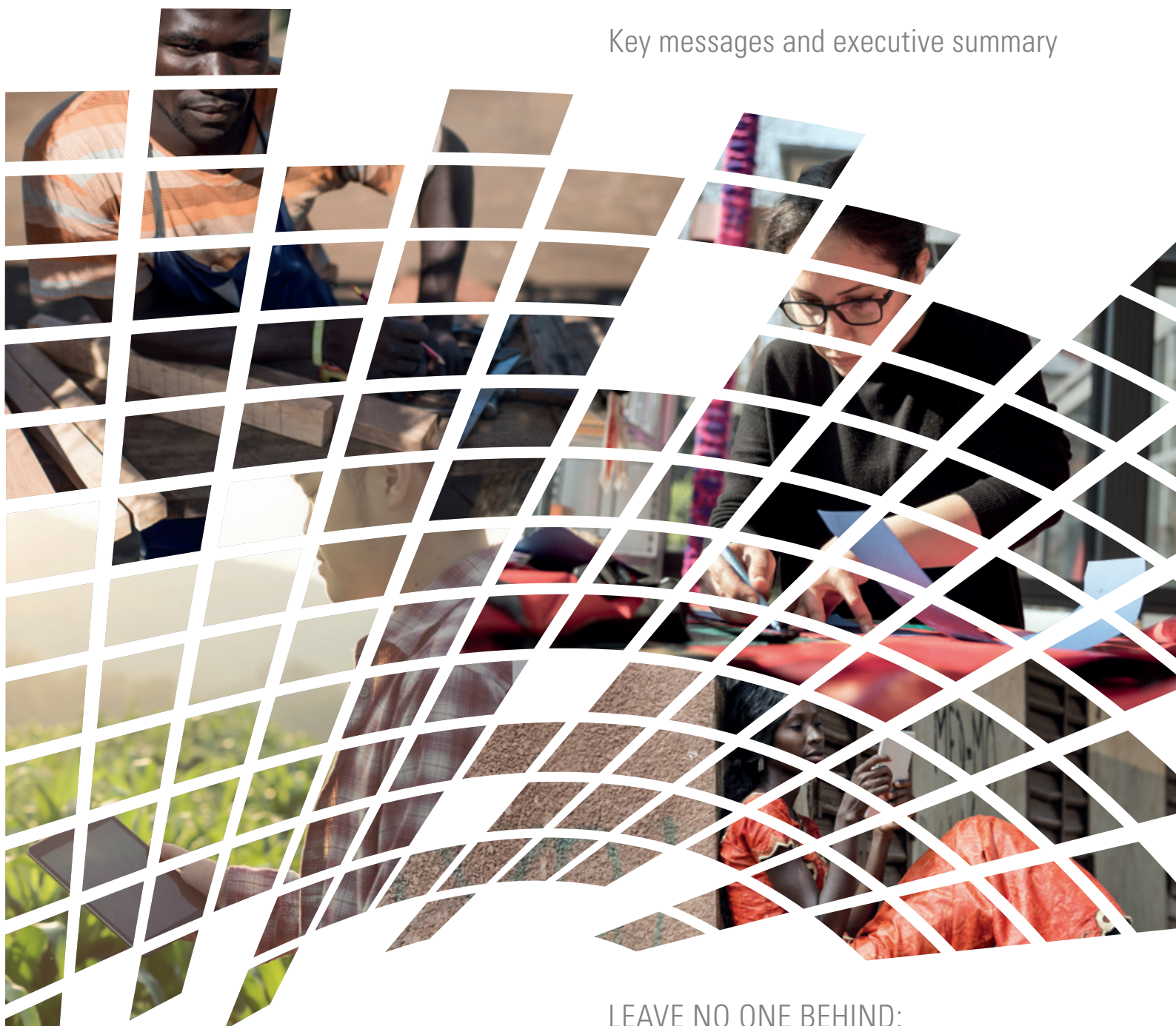


# 4<sup>th</sup> GLOBAL REPORT ON ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION

Key messages and executive summary



LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND:  
PARTICIPATION, EQUITY AND INCLUSION



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



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# FOREWORD

Education is a fundamental human right, a precious public good and an indispensable tool in building peaceful, sustainable and fairer societies.

However, the educational challenges we face are complex. They include the rise of inequalities, demographic change and climate change. More seriously, the world is also changing drastically and quickly. If we do not adapt and enhance adults' skills, they will be left behind. This challenge is at the heart of UNESCO's global mandate, as reflected in the Education 2030 Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4. Adult learning and education (ALE), as UNESCO's *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)* very clearly shows, has a crucial role to play in achieving this goal.

While participation in ALE has increased overall since 2015, rates vary considerably and progress has been uneven. I am pleased to note the increased participation of women who, in some countries, now represent the majority of adult learners. However, in many parts of the world, women still have limited access to education and employment opportunities. In poor and rural areas especially, low literacy levels mean that women struggle to engage in learning and participate fully in society. Improving access to education for women and girls has been one of my priorities since taking up my role as Director-General of UNESCO. This is why we launched the *Her education, our future* initiative in July 2019 as part of the G7 Education Ministers Meeting.

Troublingly, in many countries, disadvantaged groups – adults with disabilities, older adults, refugees and migrants, and minority groups – participate less in ALE. In some countries, provision for these groups is regressing. We know less about the participation of these groups than for other sections of society. Yet this information is essential if we are to develop inclusive policies for all.

Looking ahead, the report stresses the need to increase national investment in ALE, reduce participation costs, raise awareness of benefits and improve data collection and monitoring, particularly for disadvantaged groups. In addition, by ensuring that donor countries respect their aid obligations to developing countries, we can make ALE a key lever in empowering and enabling adults, as learners, workers, parents, and active citizens.

Policy-makers, education experts and the wider public will be able to draw useful insights from this comprehensive picture of adult learning and education, viewed through the lens of inclusion and equity. We urge all governments and the international community to join our efforts and take action to ensure that no one – no matter who they are, where they live or what challenges they face – is left behind.



Audrey Azoulay  
UNESCO Director-General

# KEY MESSAGES



3

GOVERNANCE



6

# 1 2

**Progress in participation in adult learning and education is insufficient. Member States and the international community must do more to enhance participation, investing more resources and developing effective policies that draw on best practice around the world, particularly in reaching the least advantaged.**

- Participation in adult learning and education is uneven. Of the 96 countries that reported participation rates based on actual figures, 25% reported participation at between 5% and 10%; 20% at between 20% and 50%; and 15% had participation rates higher than 50%. Almost a third (29%) reported participation rates below 5%.
- Progress in participation is similarly mixed. More than half the countries surveyed reported an increase in ALE participation, while 28% reported no change and 9% reported a decrease.
- In too many cases, marginalized groups do not participate in adult learning and education. The lowest increases in participation reported were for adults with disabilities, older adults and minority groups. In a range of countries, ALE provision has decreased for vulnerable groups such as adults with disabilities and residents living in remote or rural areas.
- While women's participation in ALE is growing, they tend to engage less in programmes for professional development. This constitutes a concern for their participation in the labour market.
- People who find themselves living in poverty or under other restraints such as monotonous, menial or otherwise unengaging work may not be able even to contemplate participating in ALE, and believe they have nothing to gain from studying.
- Sizeable groups in some countries face institutional barriers such as a lack of access to courses and programmes and/or high costs. The extent to which cost is seen as barrier is directly linked to the fees paid for participating in ALE.

**Poor data constitute a major barrier to tackling inequalities in participation in ALE and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups. We need to know more about who is participating and who is not. More investment is needed in the collection and monitoring of data to support evidence-based policies that promote inclusive participation for all.**

- Only 103 of the 152 countries that answered the question (67%) responded that ALE participation rates were based on actual figures.
- Knowledge about participation in ALE, particularly in low-income countries and among disadvantaged and low-participation groups, remains insufficient. More than a third of countries (37%) reported not knowing the ALE participation rates of minority groups, refugees and migrants.
- While the situation is improving, with the data gathered by countries with strong systems for collecting and analysing participation data augmented by the comparative data published by international agencies, coverage is far from complete. In many cases, information on policy, governance, finance, quality and participation is absent or limited.
- While the number of countries taking part in the *GRALE 4* survey increased, survey data for 46 countries remain unavailable.



## 3

**Progress in ALE policy and governance is encouraging but it is by no means enough, with some countries continuing to lag behind.**

- Two-thirds of countries report progress in adult learning and education policy since 2015.
- However, nearly 30% of countries reported no change in ALE policy since 2015 (44 countries), including nearly half of responses from Asia and the Pacific (47% or 17 countries in this region). Progress in relation to implementing new legislation appears weak among these countries, putting them at risk of failing to profit from the multiple benefits of ALE as outlined in *GRALE 3*.
- 3% of countries reported regression in ALE policy since 2015, numbering five in total.
- The lowest level of progress in ALE policy was reported in recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning, with 66% of countries reporting progress.
- Three-quarters of countries reported improvements in governance. Governance structures that help to implement these policies increasingly include effective coordination mechanisms and build on strong and fair partnerships between an increasing number of actors. Progress in governance was also most notable in low-income countries.
- Member States must do more to target the groups facing the greatest barriers to participation, including through targeted language provision and recognition, validation and accreditation of previous learning, formal and non-formal. Forty-eight countries reported that they did not know the participation rates of groups such as migrants and refugees, while over a quarter reported that they may be poorly prepared to cope with significant demographic change.

## 4

**Funding for adult learning and education is inadequate. More investment is required, as well as more targeting of those hardest to reach.**

- Less than a third of countries (28%) reported that ALE spending had increased as a proportion of the education budget since 2015, with 17% reporting a decrease and 41% reporting no progress (this despite 57% of countries in *GRALE 3* mentioning a planned increase in funding).
- Low-income countries were more likely to report a decrease than an increase. Focusing investment on the least-advantaged adults in society has yet to become widespread as a strategy for widening participation in ALE.
- 19% of countries reported spending less than 0.5% of the education budget on ALE and a further 14% reported spending less than 1%. This confirms that ALE remains underfunded.

# 5

## **5. Quality is improving but this is not evenly spread across the all fields of learning. ALE for active citizenship, in particular, requires more attention and increased investment.**

- Three-quarters of countries reported progress in ALE quality since 2015. This included developments in curricula, assessment, teaching methods and improved employment conditions. However, improvements have not been evenly spread. While countries reported significant progress in the quality of literacy and basic skills and continuing training and professional development, progress in citizenship education was negligible. Only 2% of 111 countries reported progress in developing quality criteria for curricula in citizenship education, for example.
- The survey found very low participation in ALE for citizenship education, despite its important role in promoting and protecting freedom, equality, democracy, human rights, tolerance and solidarity.

# 6

## **6. Deep and persistent inequalities still exist in ALE participation and key target groups are not being reached. Member States should focus their resources on addressing these inequalities.**

- Globally, between and within countries, there remain deep and persistent inequalities in ALE participation, with many vulnerable groups excluded and seemingly off the radar of policy-makers. Migrants and refugees, older adults, adults with disabilities, those living in rural areas, and adults with low prior educational attainment are among the groups facing the greatest barriers to participation in ALE.
- In some countries, socio-economic inequalities in ALE participation are much lower than in the past. Participation by women has risen in many countries, to the extent that, in some, women are now a majority of adult learners.
- Despite these improvements, however, in some parts of the world women have no access to education. Low levels of literacy, particularly among women living in rural areas, mean that they have little chance of gaining employment or becoming full participants in their societies.
- One major barrier to participation in ALE is the lack of literacy and language courses for migrants and refugees, who also face challenges in having their skills and competencies recognized and validated. More attention should be given to the development of appropriate language courses and mechanisms for the recognition of skills and qualifications.
- Where there has been recent growth, much of it is fuelled by a significant increase in employer-supported ALE. This expansion is in response to changes in the nature of work and the perceived competences required by the workforce. Thus, what happens in the world of work is of crucial importance in determining who has access to adult learning and education.

## INTRODUCTION

## PARTICIPATION IN ALE MATTERS

Leave no one behind. That was the resounding message of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It enjoined Member States to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' through SDG 4, and stressed the interconnected nature of the goals. The SDGs must, it argued, be addressed in a sensitively holistic way if they are to fulfil their potential to transform the lives of the most vulnerable and excluded people on the planet.

Adult learning and education (ALE) has a crucial role to play in this, supporting the achievement of not only SDG 4 but also a range of other goals, including those on climate change, poverty, health and well-being, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, and sustainable cities and communities. The message of this report, the fourth *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE 4)*, is that, while this potential is widely recognized, ALE remains low on the agenda of most Member States—participation is patchy, progress inadequate and investment insufficient. Unless we change direction, we will, quite simply, not meet the stretching targets of SDG 4. And if we do not achieve the goal on education, the other SDGs will be put in jeopardy.

The report argues that achieving SDG 4, and realizing its cross-cutting contribution to the other 16 goals, demands a much more integrated and comprehensive approach to education, with adult learning and education at its heart. *GRALE 3*, published in 2016, showed that adult learning and education produces significant benefits across a range of policy areas. Countries reported a positive impact on health and well-being, employment and the labour market, and social, civic and

community life. *GRALE 4*, while reinforcing the message that the benefits of participation in ALE are substantial, shows that they remain unevenly distributed.

Not everyone has the same opportunity to access and benefit from adult learning and education. Not everyone has the same chance to get a decent job, develop their competences and capabilities, improve their lives or contribute to the communities in which they live and work. If things continue as they are—and, without a significant sea change in political opinion, there is every chance they will—the benefits of adult learning will continue to coalesce around the better off and most advantaged in society, reinforcing and even intensifying existing inequalities, rather than helping the least advantaged individuals and communities.

The climate crisis, technological change, shifts in demography, population displacement and changing patterns of consumption and production, combined with the growing complexity and uncertainty of modern life and work, demand a population that is adaptable, resilient and sensitized to learning, and a system of lifelong learning that both fosters and embodies these qualities by providing opportunities for adults to learn throughout life. We need to increase and widen participation in ALE, particularly for the least advantaged, investing more and doing more to raise demand, while improving data on what works and who is missing.



# GRALE 4: An overview

## Monitoring progress in ALE

*GRALE 4* monitors whether countries are putting their Belém Framework for Action (BFA) commitments into practice. Adopted at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), the BFA outlined a strategic programme for the global development and strengthening of adult literacy and adult education within the perspective of lifelong learning, in which ALE plays the principal role. It set out recommendations for countries to regularly collect and analyse data on the participation of adults in learning activities, including progression, and it asked the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), in cooperation with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), to coordinate the global process of monitoring implementation of these recommendations. The BFA highlights five action areas – policy; governance; financing; quality; and participation, inclusion and equity – which provide the overarching structure for the report, alongside the areas of learning defined in the 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE): (i) literacy and basic skills; (ii) continuing education and professional development (vocational skills); and (iii) liberal, popular and community education

*GRALE 4* is organized into two parts. The first part tracks country progress in adult learning and education against the 2009 Belém Framework for Action, on the basis of the *GRALE* survey to which 159 countries responded; the second offers a detailed thematic analysis of participation, drawing on the survey findings, but also a wide range of other relevant sources.

The survey revealed that two-thirds of countries reported global progress in ALE policy since 2015, while 30% reported no change, with progress seeming particularly weak in Asia and the Pacific. Five countries (3%) reported regression, including four so-called ‘fragile’ states. Three-quarters of countries reported improvements in governance, with 50% also reporting progress in stakeholder participation. However, only 28% of countries reported that ALE spending as a proportion of public education had increased since 2015, with 17% reporting a decrease and 41% reporting no progress. Low-income states were the most likely to report a decline in public spending on ALE (35%). More positively, 75% of countries reported major improvements in ALE quality since 2015, with the highest rates of progress reported in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa.

Progress in participation in ALE was uneven, the survey indicated. More than half of countries (57%) reported an increase in ALE participation rates, with 28% reporting no change and 9% reporting a decrease. However, only 103 of 152 countries (67%) responded that ALE participation rates were based on actual figures. More than a third (37%) reported not knowing the ALE participation rates of minority groups, migrants and refugees. Among those countries that reported ALE participation rates based on actual figures, 25% reported

participation at between 5% and 10%; 20% at 20–50%; and 15% had participation rates higher than 50%. Around 29% reported participation rates below 5%. In a range of countries, ALE provision had decreased for vulnerable groups such as adults with disabilities and residents in remote or rural areas.

The thematic part of the report bears out and amplifies two of the main messages of the report: first, that disadvantaged, vulnerable and excluded populations tend to do by far the worst when it comes to participation in ALE; and, second, that we simply do not know enough about participation, particularly in low-income countries and for marginalized and excluded groups. Data on ALE participation in most countries outside the European Union and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) sphere are typically limited and sketchy at best, though there are notable exceptions. This impedes efforts to improve participation rates, and to understand who is not participating and why—both essential undertakings in achieving SDG 4 and advancing towards the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## **A MIXED PICTURE ON POLICY**

The survey highlights significant progress in ALE policy since 2015 in two-thirds of the 147 countries (66%) that responded to this question. Nearly 30% of respondents reported no change in ALE policies (44 countries). Globally, five countries (3%) reported regression in ALE policies, including four so-called ‘fragile states’. The greatest global progress was seen in increased stakeholder involvement (86% of the 147 countries reported progress in this field).

Developing concrete and specific plans in ALE was the second key area where positive global progress was made (reported by 82% of countries). The lowest progress in disaggregated categories of ALE was in recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of non-formal and informal learning, with just 66% of countries reporting progress.

Low-income countries had the highest global rates of progress in involving stakeholders, developing plans, and implementing

legislation and RVA of non-formal and informal learning, while the upper middle income group reported weaker progress across all categories.

Higher rates of global progress were reported in two of the RALE fields of learning: (1) literacy and basic skills and (2) continuing education and professional development (vocational skills). The third RALE field of learning, liberal, popular and community education (active citizenship education), had a global rate of 5% or under across disaggregated categories of ALE. Increasing literacy levels and promoting employability are the main policy goals of countries in relation to ALE. Citizenship education receives limited attention in ALE policy development.

## **PROMISING SIGNS IN ALE GOVERNANCE**

Three-quarters of countries (103 out of 137 that responded) reported improvement in ALE governance since 2015. Regionally, the Arab States reported the most improvement in ALE governance at 89%, followed by sub-Saharan Africa. In terms of income group, low-income countries reported the most improvement at 89%.

Half of countries responding (151) reported progress in ALE stakeholder participation. Those in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean had the highest rates of increase. Examples of stakeholder participation include organizing programmes, councils or adult learning centres, and collaboration between government and other key providers, educators and adult learners.

Progress in developing effective monitoring and evaluation systems since 2015 was reported in 46 out of 152 countries (30%) that responded. The greatest progress by region was achieved in the Arab States (10 out of 18 countries).

Progress in strengthening cooperation with civil society was reported by 40% of countries (60 out of 149 respondents), including about half in sub-Saharan Africa (18 of 32), the Arab States (9 out of 18), and in Latin America and the Caribbean (12 out of 25).

Less than half of countries (43% or 65 out of 150) reported progress in inter-sectoral coordination and 41% (61 of 148) reported progress in inter-ministerial coordination, but only 25% (37 out of 149) of countries reported progress in transnational cooperation.

ALE has become more decentralized in every third country (50 out of 150). At the same time, 45% of countries (68 out of 150) indicated that they had not decentralized much since 2015.

### **ALE FUNDING IS INADEQUATE AND PROGRESS SLOW**

Globally, 41% (61 of the 149 countries responding) reported no progress in ALE spending as a proportion of public education spending since 2015 (despite 57% of countries in *GRALE 3* mentioning a planned increase in funding). Less than a third (28% or 42 countries) indicated that ALE spending as a proportion of public education spending increased, while 17% (25 countries) said that spending had decreased since 2015.

Over the last 10 years, ALE spending has continued to decrease, not only in the low-income countries but also in lower middle income and high-income countries. Such decreases are likely to hit socially disadvantaged adults, such as those with disabilities or minority groups, the hardest.

Almost one in five (19%) of countries reported allocating less than 0.5% of education spending on ALE and a further 14% reported spending less than 1%. In total, 19% of countries reported allocating more than 4% of their education budgets on ALE.

Only 107 out of 149 countries provided information on the proportion of public spending on education currently allocated to ALE; 38 countries lacked the data to provide this information.

Countries indicated that their highest priority for ALE financing was for adults disadvantaged due to lack of education and skills (45% of responding countries), followed closely by unemployed adults (44% of countries), residents of remote or rural areas (44% of countries) and women (38% of countries). Although no group was

dramatically under-prioritized, older adults received 'not much' priority by 34% of countries responding.

When asked whether minority groups were prioritized for ALE financing, 32% of respondents answered 'I don't know'; while 28% of countries reported not knowing if migrants and refugees were a priority for government financing of ALE.

### **UNEVEN PROGRESS ON ALE QUALITY**

Overall, 75% of countries (107) reported making major improvements to ALE quality. Regionally, Latin America and the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa reported the highest rates of progress in ALE quality, at 88% and 86%, respectively.

Three-quarters of countries (113 out of 150 countries or 75%) reported great progress in developing criteria for curricula, with most countries in Central and Eastern Europe reporting positive developments.

Only the North American and European countries recorded more progress in assessment than in curricula; in other regions, it was reversed. This indicates a characteristic of North American and European approaches to ALE that is different from the approaches taken in other continents.

Of 147 countries responding, 72% made 'much progress' on developing teaching methodologies and 65% on developing learning materials since 2015. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa reported the greatest progress in the areas of teaching methodologies and learning materials.

More than half (52% of countries) reported improving pre-service training for ALE educators, while 70% reported improving in-service training, and 58% reported improving employment conditions.

While countries reported significant progress in the quality of literacy and basic skills and continuing education and professional development, progress in citizenship education was negligible. Only 2% of 111 countries reported progress in developing quality criteria for curricula in citizenship education, for example.

## **WE NEED TO DO MUCH BETTER ON PARTICIPATION**

Over half of countries (57% of 152 respondents) reported an (estimated) increase in overall participation rates in ALE provision, 28% reported no change, and 9% (13 countries) reported a decrease. Ten countries (7%) reported not knowing if there was a change in ALE participation.

The majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa reported an increase in ALE participation since 2015 (72%, corresponding to 22 out of 32 respondents). The lowest increase was in North America and Western Europe (8 out of 21 countries). Low-income countries reported the largest increase in ALE participation (73%), trailed by lower and upper middle-income countries (61% and 62%).

Only 103 of 152 countries, or 67%, responded that ALE participation rates were based on actual figures. Of the 96 countries that reported participation rates based on actual figures, 25% reported participation at between 5% and 10%; 20% at between 20% and 50%; and 15% had participation rates higher than 50%. Almost a third (29%) reported participation rates below 5%.

In response to questions about participation among specified groups, the largest increase in participation was reported as being among women (in 59% of 139 countries), followed by unemployed adults (54% of 134 countries). Countries reported the lowest changes in participation for adults with disabilities (36% of 135 countries), older adults (35% of 134) and minority groups (34% of 131).

ALE participation rates of minority groups, migrants and refugees were reported 'unknown' by 37% of countries. Over a quarter of countries reported that they did not know whether participation among or provision for older adults had changed since 2015.

Fields with the most increase in participation since 2015 are literacy and basic skills and continuing education and professional development, indicated in 57% of 136 responses. For citizenship education, 36% of 132 countries reported increases in participation, while 36% reported no change

in participation in this field. More than a quarter (27% of 132 countries) responded not knowing whether participation in citizenship education has changed since 2015.

## **WE DO NOT KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT PARTICIPATION**

While the last decade has seen improvements in the collection of information on participation in ALE, challenges remain which have profound consequences for countries' ability to monitor progress towards achieving the SDGs. Only two-thirds of the responding countries provided actual figures on participation rates and it is clear that many countries lack the administrative capacity and economic resources for a monitoring infrastructure, while even high-income countries fall short of providing detailed information on participation for all three RALE learning domains.

Knowledge about participation in ALE remains insufficient, particularly in low-income countries and among disadvantaged and low-participation groups. More than a third of countries (37%) reported not knowing the ALE participation rates of minority groups, and refugees and migrants.

Although the situation is improving, with the data gathered by countries with strong systems for collecting and analysing participation data augmented by the comparative data published by international agencies, coverage is far from complete. In many cases information on policy, governance, finance, quality and participation is absent or limited.

## **EMPLOYER-SPONSORED ALE IS REDEFINING THE LANDSCAPE**

*GRALE 4* pays particular attention to how employer support is reshaping the landscape of ALE, especially in higher-income countries. In Sweden, for example, employer-sponsored activities engaged only 5.5% of the adult population in 1975. According to PIAAC data, the comparable figure had reached 58% by 2012. Other countries reporting significant increases included Chile and Poland.



The rapid increase in employer-supported learning activities sends a strong message to policy-makers: increasingly, public policy in adult learning and education directly affects a shrinking proportion of the field, with employers playing a larger role. This does diminish the important role played by public policy, not least in addressing market failures. It is clear, though, that the world of work is an important determinant of who has access to adult learning and education (and who does not).

### **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION MUST IMPROVE**

While women's participation in ALE is growing, in some parts of the world girls and women still have no access to education; consequently, their low literacy skills leave them with few opportunities to find employment and engage with civil society. Where they do have access to education, they tend to engage less in programmes for professional development, which constitutes a concern for their participation in the labour market.

Women's unequal participation in ALE comes with economic and social costs. It is estimated, for example, that were women in the United Arab Emirates and Egypt to participate in the labour force to the same extent as men, the countries' GDPs would rise by 12% and 34%, respectively. Strengthening women's education acts as a building block for securing other rights. To assist in this process, there is a need for more ALE interventions that strengthen women's capacity to be involved in and shape the society in which they live.

### **FOR SOME GROUPS, ALE PARTICIPATION IS STALLING OR IN DECLINE**

In too many cases, marginalized groups do not participate in ALE. The lowest reported increases in participation were for adults with disabilities, older adults and minority groups, with ALE provision for some vulnerable groups, such as adults with disabilities and people living in rural areas, in decline in some countries.

Limited access to education and skills makes it hard for both migrants and refugees to compete for employment. However, we know too little about their participation. Almost half of the countries that took part in the survey either did not answer the question regarding migrant and refugee participation or stated that they did not know. Many countries lack the appropriate data to develop policies on ALE directed towards migrants and refugees.

### **BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION**

Poverty and economic inequalities remain important situational factors driving exclusion in ALE, alongside national or regional culture and traditions, which can also work to reduce the learning opportunities of some groups. Poverty and wealth distribution across different sub-populations is an issue in rich countries as well as in the developing world.

Despite the growth of open and distance learning, physical access to ALE provision remains a barrier to access in many countries, whether of low-, high- or medium-income level. Proximity to ALE is a real issue in isolated rural areas. Sizeable groups in some countries face institutional barriers such as lack of access to courses and/or high costs. The extent to which cost is seen as a barrier is directly linked to the fees paid for participating in ALE.

People living in poverty or under other restraints such as such as monotonous or menial work may not be able to even contemplate participating in adult learning and education, and believe they have nothing to gain from studying. For many people, a precondition of enrolling on a course or programme is that they believe studying will have a positive impact on their life prospects and identity.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Overcoming the situational, institutional and dispositional barriers to ALE participation is a daunting task. Nevertheless, governments can access a range of tools to increase and widen participation. These include:

- interventions in provision to make ALE more accessible and widely available;
- focused investment, particularly on the least advantaged;
- interventions to raise demand, such as stimulating interest through celebrating success stories in festivals and media;
- reducing the costs of participation, particularly for poorer members of society;
- financial incentives to reduce cost barriers;
- non-financial incentives, such as voucher schemes, paid leave and opportunities for career development;
- ensuring effective information, advice and guidance for all learners, throughout their lives;
- countrywide strategies to ensure learners have access to ICTs and the skills to fully exploit them.

Addressing inequalities in participation is critical to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the sustainability agenda more generally. It will require a sea change in approach from Member States, and the concerted support of the international community, to make this happen. Above all, we need:

- better data, particularly for low-income countries and marginalized or vulnerable groups, such as migrants and refugees;
- increased investment in ALE, from governments, employers and individuals, and the targeting of those whose needs are greatest;
- donor countries to live up to their aid obligations to developing countries and rebalance their funding of education to support the education of adults as well as children;
- a better understanding of what works, particularly when it comes to vulnerable and excluded groups;
- recognition that investment in adult learning and education has social and civic benefits, as well as economic ones,

and greater acknowledgement of the role of citizenship education in tackling the broader social issues that shape participation in ALE;

- an integrated, inter-sectoral and inter-ministerial approach to governance to enable Member States to realize the wider benefits of adult education to the greatest extent possible, with resources allocated accordingly.

## A CALL TO ACTION

Opportunities to engage in ALE are shockingly unequal. Some groups in society have access to a multitude of learning opportunities throughout life, while others have very little prospect of engaging in ALE. And while a full understanding of the complexity of the learning situation of vulnerable and excluded groups is made more difficult by the paucity of reliable data, it is nonetheless evident that these groups are disproportionately excluded from benefitting from ALE. Addressing these inequities requires better data, increased investment and a better understanding of what works, supported by international, regional and national efforts to raise awareness, with a focus on excluded groups and those that are least likely to engage in learning, and on national and regional variations.

We hope this report will be a wake-up call. We are at a tipping point in terms of our achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. We are not on track but we are still within time. If we change direction now, with political will, smart policies and investment to match, we can realize the potential of adult learning and education, both for SDG 4 and for the other 16 SDGs. But if we fail to make the required step change now, the chances of our achieving SDG 4 and the other Sustainable Development Goals will diminish. This, in short, is our challenge to Member States, to the international policy-making community and to stakeholders across sectors: Put adult learning and education at the centre of your efforts to achieve sustainable economies and societies and recognize its key role in developing integrated, holistic solutions to the problems we face. At this moment in time, nothing less will do.





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