

# **International Symposium on Lifelong Learning for Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Development: Developing a Research Agenda for the Asia-Pacific**

**Hong Kong Institute of Education**  
**12 - 13 January, 2011**

*Organised by the Hong Kong Institute of Education, in association with  
UNESCO (Paris, Bangkok and Beijing),  
the Asian Development Bank (Manila),  
InWent (Capacity Building International, Germany)  
and the Colombo Plan Staff Training College (Manila)*

## **Background and Rationale of the Symposium on Lifelong Learning**

In the light of the local and global challenges faced by individuals, communities and countries throughout the world, lifelong learning has emerged as one of the keys to improving the quality of life. This is because it is no longer seen as sufficient to have a sound, initial education: one must continue to acquire new knowledge and skills in order to benefit from emerging opportunities brought by advances in science and technology, and to cope with the challenges of life in the modern world.

Research-based evidence confirms that investing in additional education pays off for both individuals and countries, in terms of income, employment, productivity, health and other important benefits. In addition, providing formal and non-formal opportunities to learn throughout life turns out to be a crucial factor in the struggle to eradicate poverty and to educate for sustainable development.

However, adopting the principle of lifelong learning demands a new vision, one that shifts the emphasis from education to learning throughout life, one that breaks the rather rigid mentality that makes it difficult for learners to move from one system to another, and from one level to the next. It requires a move to a more seamless and user-friendly system which recognises the diversity of ways in which individuals acquire new knowledge and skills in what is now commonly called the information age, and the major contributions being made to facilitating learning outside the formal education system.

However, the meaning and significance of lifelong learning as a concept are by no means settled, with many questions needing to be addressed before its full potential can be realised.

This Symposium will provide an opportunity for participants to meet and exchange ideas and experiences with regard to:

1. Reviewing recent and leading policy, practice and research on lifelong learning, with particular reference to effective approaches to poverty alleviation and sustainable development;
2. Discussing current issues, concerns and prospects regarding lifelong learning policy making, practice, research and development, internationally and with particular reference to the Asia-Pacific region;

3. Identifying research and development priorities in lifelong learning from the perspectives of different countries and education development and UN agencies; and exploring possibilities for collaborative activities between partner organizations, including governments and the corporate sector.

The Symposium will take a broad conceptualisation of lifelong learning. It is a term with strong international recognition, identifying a view of education that is recognised by a cluster of different communities of practice, including adult, vocational, continuing professional and community education. The field of lifelong learning complements that of schooling. With changes in the age distribution of populations, and the increasing rate of workplace, social and cultural change, it is an expanding field, especially in the areas of continuing professional education, skills development for employability, vocational and adult education, workplace learning and human resource development.

A key focus of the Symposium is to ascertain and consider the findings and views of policy makers, researchers and practitioners concerning an appropriate research and policy agenda in and for the Asia-Pacific region concerning lifelong learning for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. In doing this one of the purposes is to strengthen the bridges among policy makers, researchers and practitioners in the field of lifelong learning.

The Symposium is organised around a series of panels that are expected to interrogate particular themes and dimensions of LL, and to explore research priorities in respect of these. Most of these issues have been touched upon in the *Background Concept Paper* which will be sent to you shortly and be accessed on line at the Symposium website.

Each panel will commence with a keynote address (30 minutes) followed by short contributions from four discussants (7 minutes each), after which the session will be opened up for discussion by all participants at the Symposium. The following are just some of the ideas that panel members may want to consider in preparing for the Symposium. They should not be seen as an agenda but as initial thoughts on some of the issues that could fall within the boundaries of the different panels.

### **Panel Session1: Lifelong Learning and Poverty Reduction**

This panel might want to examine the multiple and sometimes contradictory relationships between the different types of education and learning and the reduction of poverty. From one angle, there is a literature on the ‘returns’ to formal and non-formal education that would claim substantial individual and social returns to education. However, these calculations seldom take account of the quality of schooling. Yet in many, if not most countries, as the *Background Concept Paper* highlights, the poor receive the worst quality schooling and the poorest teachers and facilities. It is doubtful if rate of return analysis can be simply applied to all populations without disaggregation. On the other hand, with regard to skills development for employability, the poorest young people in most societies simply do not access formal TVET; they do not have the level of basic education or the qualifications to do so. Nor do they find it easy to access informal apprenticeships, as these require payment and certain levels of education. So the poorest young people and older cohorts who have missed out are dependent on second-chance education and training opportunities. This is hugely underfunded in most countries. For this session, we have special guest Mr. Sanjit ‘Bunker’ Roy. More information on Mr. Roy will be provided later.

*How might lifelong learning contribute effectively to the reduction of poverty? Would it imply renewed attention to quality and relevance across the spectrum? Would it depend on enabling economic environments? Should it go hand in hand with integrated service delivery across sectors? Would it depend on greater state investment in institutions and programmes that could provide skills development, TVET, and second-chance education and training for all?*

## **Panel Session 2: Lifelong Learning – meanings, challenges and opportunities**

This panel may want to explore the long-standing contrast between conceptualising, or re-conceptualising, all the main levels of formal education from a lifelong learning perspective, as in the *Background Concept Paper*, on the one hand, and thinking of lifelong learning as a whole battery of additional and continuing education and training beyond the formal system of education or training, on the other. Thus LL would cover all forms of in-service training, training on the job, enterprise-based training, as well as all types of individual education and training, extra-mural, home-based, or on-line. The challenge to view the formal education system as a site of lifelong learning is likely to contrast with the provision of education or training, on the one side, and the issue of learning, on the other. Within this panel it may also be important to note the history and sources of the development of LL as a mainstream concept today, and the tendency to continue to locate it in the world of adult education, since anything termed ‘lifelong’ is often marked as post-compulsory, post-initial education.

*What exactly do we mean by lifelong learning? What do we want to prioritise in its conceptualisation if we wish to be focused on poverty reduction and sustainable development? What are we specifying as distinctive about it, or different to earlier or other conceptualisations of the term?*

*What might be the areas of further conceptual clarification that any LL Task Force or Commission might be charged with?*

## **Panel Session 3: Skills Development for Employability (TVET) and Lifelong Learning**

This panel might want to bear in mind the exclusion from formal TVET of the poorest young people in society, as was mentioned above. It will also be important for the panel to bear in mind that in many, if not most, poorer countries, the great majority of young people acquire their skills outside the formal sector, in informal apprenticeships, in the household, or as casual labour in small firms. The implications of lifelong learning approaches for the large informal or unorganised sector are likely to be very different from LL for the small formal sector of the economy. In rapidly expanding economies, there may be little difficulty in formally skilled young people acquiring work. But it cannot be simply assumed that fast-growing economies are pro-poor. Nor may they be pro-sustainable development. Indeed they may be just the opposite. As the *Background Concept Paper* makes clear, governance and politics will matter when it comes to inconvenient truths about climate change or about inequality and inequity in society.

*What might be the research challenges connected to reorienting TVET, both formal and informal, towards sustainable development and poverty reduction? Beyond the valuable examples drawn from UNESCO in the Background Concept Paper, what are the insights into and priorities for TVET associated with other development partners present in the Symposium, as well as economies that have made TVET a national priority?*

#### **Panel Session 4: Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development**

For this second major theme of the Symposium, the panel might wish to explore, in the fifth year since the launch of the United Nations Decade of Education Sustainable Development (DESD) and the sixth year since the Bonn Declaration on ESD, what have been the achievements to date, according to UNESCO and to particular Member States in the Asia-Pacific, that may become exemplars of commitment to action. But beyond a review of the action plans for ESD, there are wider issues to be examined in this key sub-theme. What does LL for Sustainable Development add to the call for ESD? What might be the illustrations of this wider compass? And what are the limits to the role of either LL or education in an area where, as the *Background Concept Paper* affirms, actions on climate change, global warming and sustainable development lie substantially in the political domain. Even here, however, there is a role for popular advocacy and lobbying, and amongst the poorest members of society, campaigns for political awareness education on issues that will most likely affect these communities first of all.

*What does the United Nations campaign for ESD have to report at this crucial five-year juncture of the Decade for Sustainable Development? What can the specifically LL perspective bring to the national and international movements on sustainable development? What can be learnt within the Asia-Pacific of where political decisions have promoted alternatives to unsustainable development?*

#### **Panel Session 5: New Technologies in Lifelong Learning**

The new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are arguably inseparable from some of the promise and potential of lifelong learning. This particular panel may want to illustrate from approaches in the region (e.g. Singapore) what it implies for continuing access and learning opportunities if and once ICTs-for-All become part of the ordinary landscape of adult life. Of course what is possible in a rich city state is very different from the realities of situations, both urban and rural, where the MDGs are far from being fulfilled. But the ideas widespread in the region about states becoming education hubs should by no means be restricted to the internationalisation of universities. Progressive ICT policies are crucial to the new demographics of continuing learning and working (see below, and the *Background Concept Paper*).

*How might information and communications technologies contribute to the provision of lifelong learning for all, especially for the poor?*

*What are the research priorities in new technologies in LL? What are the costs of national and international access to communication throughout life?*

#### **Panel Session 6: The Shifting Demographics of Lifelong Learning for Youth and Adults**

The panel here may want to examine in what ways a core value of lifelong learning – the desire to continue to learn whether at 6, 60, or 80 – alters dramatically traditional approaches to education and training at different stages. The demographic dividend which countries such as India are hoping to profit from relates directly to the need to up-skill the vast majority of young people who have had no formal or even non-formal training. At the other end of the life cycle, there should be little need for a special politics of LL for older members of the

workforce and for the elderly, if the principle of continuing to want to learn has been embedded in earlier years, and if the appropriate structures are in place to accommodate and support this. In this sense, as expressed in the *Background Concept Paper*, early childhood care and development and adult and continuing education are part of a continuum. At a time when, finally, retirement ages are being questioned and substantially altered, the core values of LL should support continuing work, education and learning. But how does this movement look in countries where the bulk of work is in the informal economy, which doesn't have retirement ages or social security anyway?

*What are the examples in the region where structures are in place that directly support the assumptions surrounding the continuing desire to learn? What research needs to be undertaken that may illustrate and provide evidence of the value of lifelong learning and working, including of community and social work? And of new approaches to barefoot professionals continuing to work with the poorer groups in society?*

### **Panel Session 7: Research and Funding for Lifelong Learning – Development Partner Perspectives**

Here, with the presence on the panel of a number of major international agencies, there is an opportunity to hear at first hand more about how LL is currently positioned within development agencies active in the Asia-Pacific region. Against a long-standing tradition of providing grants or loans for the categories of basic education, TVET and higher education, have agencies accommodated any patterns of support for LL? Does LL fall within their concepts of sector-wide approaches to education? Or does it still get associated with adult literacy and second-chance education? At the national level, where have there been instances in the region where development partners are complementing major national initiatives in support of lifelong learning? There will also be Ministers of Education from Cambodia, the Maldives and other countries in the region to provide their perspectives on these matters.

*What are the current structures supporting LL amongst development partners, and what new structures may the Symposium be proposing to encourage, in order to change the current systems of support? How might these initiatives complement other agency-supported actions such as CONFINTEA VI < [www.unesco.org/en/confinteavi/](http://www.unesco.org/en/confinteavi/) >, and the recent International Forum on LL <sup>(Note)</sup> organised by UNESCO's Institute for LL (UIL) in Shanghai?*

Note: The website of the International Forum on LL is at  
< <http://www.unesco.org/en/education/dynamic-content-single-view/news/unesco-international-forum-on-lifelong-learning-shanghai-world-expo-2010/back/9195/cHash/ac54fa5585/> >