

Shaping the “New Normal” – The role of Adult Learning and Education in coping with the corona pandemic

Societies around the globe have been hit hard by the coronavirus (COVID-19). People are being affected in their daily lives and are concerned about the consequences for their health, jobs and well-being. Among those hit hardest are millions of poor people losing their income, women affected by gender-based violence and migrants suffering from growing xenophobia. In nearly all countries across the world, providers of youth and adult education have been forced to temporarily close their doors, with dramatic consequences for the sustainability of these institutions, their employees, and, not least, the learners. At the same time, adult learning and education (ALE) can contribute to mitigate the consequences of the crisis, offer badly needed education and training and support social action to shape the “new normal”.

DVV International, as the only development partner focusing on ALE, suggests concepts on how ALE can contribute to managing the crisis by offering social and educational services, especially to vulnerable groups. At the same time, we urge governments and international actors to provide ALE providers – public, private and civil society organizations – and their staff with the necessary resources to deal with this situation and ensure a sustainable future for the ALE sector.

Using the potential of ALE to combat the crisis

ALE is a sub-sector of the education system with a combination of characteristics which are of particular value in the current situation. ALE provision is strictly demand-driven, flexible, mostly non-formal and action-oriented. Based on this, ALE providers and projects have the potential to support people in many ways by offering e.g. support to parents in arranging home-schooling or by combatting fake news on the nature of the virus by providing reliable health education to all segments of the population.

Develop new offers

All across the world, face-to-face learning activities are restricted or have come to a complete halt. As a consequence, many participants lack the possibility to participate in essential learning opportunities. In this situation, the quick development of virtual learning opportunities plays a key role. This requires investment in digital access, capacity building, especially for teachers, and the development of new ALE programmes and approaches.

Ensure the sustainable future of ALE

For many, if not all ALE providers, this is an existential crisis. With income possibilities dropping (e.g. participant fees, at least temporary termination of project funds), ALE providers and a very high number of freelance teaching staff are facing existential economic challenges. It is the role of the public and governments worldwide to ensure the survival of the ALE sector. Like in other sectors of the education system, direct financial support is needed!

Provide spaces and opportunities to work on the “world we want”

The pandemic has shone a spotlight on several challenges our societies are facing: the lack of resilience in many communities, the impact of social divisions, the threat of climate change, the risks of globalization – just to name a few. ALE can provide spaces for youth and adults to reflect on solutions and equip them to contribute to positive transformation.

Governments, development partners and international agencies can do a lot to support ALE:

- Join partners and networks in their efforts to advocate for an understanding of education as a public good. ALE should be recognized and funded as an integral part of the education system.
- Support ALE providers in their efforts to develop new, demand-oriented digital learning opportunities and ensure that all learners will have the opportunity to use them. Digital access for all should become a public good like water or electricity.
- Provide flexible, tailor-made funding schemes for protecting the institutional substance and key staff of essential ALE providers and networks.

DVV International views its role as supporting its partners to cope in the best possible way with the impact of the corona crisis and to develop formats for essential ALE services as a response to this crisis. The institute will continue to be present in more than 30 countries and use its expertise in adapting ALE structures and services in line with new demands. The coronavirus is a global crisis, and we should ensure that the response to it will be truly global and targeted towards a “new, sustainable normal,” where ALE is recognized in all its dimensions.