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Adult literacy education and the sustainable development goals in four case countries: can't get there from here

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, the field of adult literacy is a site of struggle. On the one hand, most agree that literacy is a critical resource for negotiating one's social and economic life. On the other, public funding for adult literacy programmes is not generally guaranteed or adequate. However, for individuals and communities with limited literacy, issues such as widespread food insecurity, lack of safe water, ongoing conflict and war, historical and systemic legacies of colonisation and the ascendancy of far-right political parties increase their vulnerabilities. While many grassroots adult education programmes aim to address these challenges at the local level, these efforts often struggle to be recognised in policies that provide sustained funding. We analyse this dynamic through the lens of a four-level model of mega-, macro-, meso- and micro-level policy, advocacy, and practice activities in Australia, Brazil, India and South Africa. Doing this is particularly salient against the backdrop of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 which has set targets for adult literacy. The model renders visible barriers that impede progress towards meeting SDG 4 targets in each of these countries. The model also enables comparison across the case descriptions that could be instructive for international as well as local debates about strengthening adult literacy provision.

Introduction

In both the Global North and the Global South, research studies have repeatedly shown that adult literacy provision, especially community-based provision, is linked not only to economic outcomes such as better earnings, but to important personal outcomes such as self-confidence and improved health and social outcomes such as civic participation and contribution to community development (Belete et al., 2022; Nutbeam & Lloyd, 2021; Taylor & Trumpower, 2021) However, adult literacy provision depends on public funding. This makes it vulnerable to ever-changing economic and political conditions. Additionally, global economic and political forces also have an impact. These include global crises, such as the pandemic, war, and climate change, that are especially impactful on marginalised communities around the world. Taken together with national and local conditions, these types of threats can make adult literacy initiatives a low priority for funding. This is despite the important role that adult literacy

programmes can play in helping people develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to build a more sustainable world. And while adult literacy research has a long history, a low priority on adult literacy education also contributes to limited data on approaches to pro-gramme provision, effectiveness, and outcomes of participation.

We aim here to help address this gap through a secondary analysis of data collected for a project that examined the role of adult education and learning within the framework of lifelong learning in eight countries (Grotlüschen et al., 2023). Here, we focus on four of them – Australia, Brazil, India, and South Africa – from which we were able to gather a substantive picture of adult literacy education. We use a four-level model (mega-, macro-, meso-, micro-level) to describe and compare adult literacy policy and provision in each country and analyse how the barriers to effective adult literacy education influence its potential to meet the SDG 4 targets. For instance, some countries apply nation-wide standards that receive substantial criticism as being too narrow, while other countries show how difficult it is to maintain quality literacy provision without such standards. The case descriptions also show fundamental commonalities, e.g. the high vulnerability of programmes to get defunded because of global and national financial challenges or political shifts.

In all, they indicate that the route these countries are on creates a 'can't get here from there' situation in which it seems unlikely they can navigate to the destination laid out by the SDG 4.

Although we have previously used the level model as a 'global' analysis tool, we have not used it to explain particular phenomena in each of the countries until now. Additionally, country compar-isons need a *tertium comparationis*, which in this case is the four-level-model. We see applying it as an approach to answering the following research question: In what ways do current adult literacy education policy and provision, as reflected at the macro-, meso-, and micro-levels in different parts of the world, reflect the potential to meet SDG 4? We understand 'current' as that which is in place since the launch of the SDGs in 2015. SDG 4 calls to 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (United Nations [UN], 2015). Within this overarching goal, Goal 4.6 calls for substantially increasing the number of youth and adults who achieve literacy and numeracy. This goal must also be seen as relevant to achieving other SDGs as acknowledged in Goal 4.7 which calls for the knowledge and skills to 'promote sustainable development ... through education for 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). Although we did not set out to focus on the barriers, our analysis answers the research question primarily through the lens of challenge and tension.

We begin with a theoretical framing by introducing how level models have been used in adult education research and theory. The literature review discusses the connection between sustainable development goals and literacy research. Following a description of our research methods, we present four country case descriptions on literacy policy and provision as well as a cross-case discussion related to SDG 4. Our analysis confirms the GRALE 5 claim, that adult learning and education (ALE) is on the rise, but not for those who need it most (United Nations Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2022). We find that this gap is specifically true for those who need literacy provision.

Theoretical framework: understanding adult literacy education by levels

Adult Learning and Education is often described with the help of level models. These models are common for many paradigms in sociology (Kneer, 2009, p. 27). Generally, a binary distinction between macro- and micro-levels is made, but others add a meso-level (Maines, 1982, pp. 274–275). Meso-level organisations such as professional networks and associations, researchers, and advocacy groups play an important intermediary role by aggregating micro level actor claims and negotiating them with macro level actors (Donges, 2012). Yet, adult education analyses generally neglect the meso-level (Bernhardt & Kaufmann-Kuchta, 2023). With a focus on EU strategies for lifelong

learning, however, Lima and Guimaraes (2011) used a four-level model for international policy analysis, defining the four levels as follows:

> The macro level (concerning, for instance, state intervention), or even what could be called the mega level (international and supranational entities) and the meso level (with a variety of organisations), and finally the micro level (small groups and interaction among individual actors). (p. 12)

Egetenmeyer et al. (2017) continued building on the four-level approach in response to supranational policies. The mega level has not previously been used to account for social and political crises such as climate injustice, the pandemic, or mass migration, war, and border conflicts. We consider these trends as mega-level because they cross political borders, and a range of national government ministries would need to be engaged to address them. Boeren (2017) argued that the level model can be helpful for comparative research. For example, she analysed aspects of Sustainable Development Goal 4 using three levels (2019), indicating that some require action on the micro-level, others on meso- or macro-levels. As discussed below, Maniam et al. (2023) used a level model to analyse literacy campaigns in South Africa and Australia.

The level model thus has been used in adult education research to analyse both sustainable development goals and literacy programmes. However, we argue that previous analyses using the level model have not captured recent global trends that become visible when a mega-level is inserted into the analysis. The four-level model we apply has emerged from our earlier study (Grotlüschen et al., 2023) in which the findings focused on the important role of meso-level organisations that advocate for adult education, the fundamental impact of mega-level crises on adult education and learning, and the flexible and fast ways that providers and grassroots initiatives find to respond to these crises on the micro-level.The findings show that the four-level-model widens the analytical perspective, especially regarding progress in meeting the sustainable development goals.

Literature review

SDG 4 includes literacy as a lifelong education target (SDG 4.6). The importance of adult learning and education is similarly acknowledged by 142 UN member states (UIL, 2022) as playing a critical role in understanding and addressing the mega level crises faced by many societies across the world The skills needed clearly exceed the basic education level.

Some countries may argue that the literacy target is being addressed through compensatory education for adults lacking the literacy levels achieved at the completion of primary education. Notwithstanding the lack of availability of compensatory education in some countries, this is clearly insufficient for adults to engage in the complex learning and action required to address the SDGs. Being able to use literacy effectively in response to the mega crises, as well as personal and societal challenges impacting one's life, requires the 'basic skills' for decoding texts, but equally if not more importantly, the ability to select, comprehend, analyse and use texts to make meaning of the crisis, and work with others to mitigate their impacts. The need for macro-level initiatives that treat adult literacy learning and education as more than simple basic skills acquisition is also borne out by longitudinal research that has found that to sustain and further develop proficiency that can be achieved in a basic literacy programme, continued engagement in literacy practices following participation is needed (Reder, 2009; Reder et al., 2020).

Reder et al. (2020) argue policies are needed to support lifelong and life-wide engagement in everyday literacy and numeracy practices, lifelong learning, proficiency growth as well as participation in the workplace, community and further education and training. They call attention to the significance of these outcomes to SDG 4. Similarly, Hanemann (2019) and Hanemann and Robinson (2022) argue that holistic, sector-wide, and cross-sectoral reforms of lifelong learning systems are needed. The importance of literacy and numeracy being part of cross-sectoral reforms is also clear from a social practice perspective of literacy and numeracy.

Hanemann (2019) reports that there are several non-formal, small scale literacy pro-grammes that illustrate this approach because they are integrated with 'health, nutrition, income generation and environmental awareness initiatives' (p. 267). However, they are managed by non-government organisations and community learning centres. When lacking the support of both a macro-level policy framework and sustained funding, non-formal programmes are instead often supported by actors at the meso-level. For example, Patrão et al. (2021) report on a Portuguese programme that not only focused on literacy skills for women, but related to SDG targets including 'issues like gender equality, domestic violence, education of girls, racism and discrimination' (p. 229). Kurawa (2021) reports on locally organised community-based adult literacy programmes in Thailand and in Tanzania. In Thailand, the literacy programmes are reported to be achieving sustainable development outcomes such as farmers developing knowledge about organic farming. In contrast, in Tanzania, the programme outcomes are reported to be mainly linked to literacy skills improvement.

Rogers (2019) notes that informal and non-formal adult learning programmes organised by community learning centres can be especially effective as the type of integration that Hanemann calls for because they are 'not just education given in a non-formal manner; . . . [they provide] the freedom to offer learning programmes in any sector (agriculture, health, skill development, the environment, microfinance, poverty relief, cultural practices, personal development, etc.)" (p. 523). Moreover, their penetration into sectors outside education signals the potential role that pro-grammes outside the formal governmental system can have in addressing the broader aims of the SDGs. These examples illustrate that to address SDG aims, the macro level policy actors cannot just be limited to ministries of education; they should be cross-sectoral.

They also illustrate how adult literacy provision varies depending on the level at which it is organised. What is not often addressed systematically in the adult literacy research literature are the dynamics between the micro-, meso- and macro-level actors and the variables that emerge related to their interactions (or lack thereof). Nor does it typically describe how these interactions enable adult literacy provision that can address a wide array of individual, local, and societal needs including those caused by mega-level crises. An exception is Maniam et al. (2023) comparative study of the South African Kha Ri Gude and the Australian 'Yes I can!' literacy campaigns, both modelled on the Cuban *Yo si puedo* (Yes I can) campaign. *Yo si puedo* has been the model in a number of post-colonial contexts including Nicaragua, South Africa, Timor-Leste and Aboriginal communities in Australia (Boughton & Durnan, 2014; Maniam et al., 2023). Maniam et al. (2023) study built on the three-level-model interpretation by Bernhardt and Kaufmann-Kuchta consist-ing of:

> The macro- (legal and financing frameworks), meso- (modes of provision), and micro-level (focusing on the learners' participation and the impact of the learning process). (Maniam et al., 2023, p. 4)

and compared the two literacy campaigns at each of these levels. Although they defined the levels somewhat differently than we do, the authors make clear that the macro-level drivers and supports and the detailed arrangements of the lesson delivery at the micro-level varied, but there was much in common at the meso-level: their approach to recruiting and training local staff, the range of teaching and learning materials used, and the commitment to assessing the participants' literacy attainment against their respective national standards. They conclude that it is the meso-level actors and activities that point to the robustness of the *Yo si puedo* model, even while they are each contextualised in local needs at the micro-levels and contrasting macro-level infrastructures.

In conclusion, the literature suggests while the literacy target in SDG 4 leaves little direction for informing programmes and policies, there are adult literacy initiatives that are having both an impact on 'skills acquisition' and the broader social wellbeing of communities. The study by Maniam et al. (2023) provides an example of the benefits of levels-based analysis of literacy programmes, particularly when it is used in a comparative study.

Methods and data

The eight countries – Australia, Brazil, India, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Thailand, South Africa – selected in the primary policy study (Grotlüschen et al., 2023) aimed for diversity along a number of dimensions, including location, colonial history and exploitation experienced, and representation of at least one countries' indigenous peoples. Most are in the global south. Data collection, conducted in 2022, consisted of focus groups and one-on-one qualitative interviews conducted on Zoom. They were recorded and then transcribed for a deductive qualitative analysis. The participants were practitioners, scholars, representatives from ministries or assessment bodies, and associations or networks who were identified as experts on adult education and learning. The informants reported on different aspects of ALE, e.g. laws or policies on Education, Technical and Vocational education, and policies or laws specific to adult education (Grotlüschen et al., 2023, pp. 59–71). We did not ask them specifically about adult literacy provision. While several countries have literacy strategies (Author 2, Author 1, 2022), these are typically campaigns with limited timeframes rather than legal or stable frameworks for sustained literacy provision. When the informants discussed campaigns, we integrated their policy description into the level model

For this secondary analysis, we selected the countries where the focus group informants reported on literacy provision: Australia, Brazil, India, and South Africa. All countries have large populations, and all have a colonial legacy that fundamentally affected local knowledges as well as notions of adult learning and education. Analytic categories for this secondary analysis utilised the level model which allowed for new insights regarding literacy provision. All quotes and background information were compared and organised according to the levels and then condensed in a table that contains the main insights across countries and levels, and in relationship to SDG 4.

Limitations lie in the informants' knowledge about literacy provision in their countries as well as in their specific perspectives on this provision. Moreover, the aim of the primary analysis was ALE, so neither the interviewers or the interviewees intended to fully explore the different facets of literacy provision in the countries. As adult literacy was not the main focus, interviewers provided information on literacy provision only as part of the broader topic. Thus, as needed, background information from secondary sources was consulted to construct the case descriptions. As the informants reported on provision, but not on programmes or campaigns, we find that our data complement the earlier and current studies on mass literacy campaigns (Boughton, 2023; Hanemann, 2015; authors of this special issue about campaigns in Brazil; Maniam et al., 2023).

Findings

Given our interpretation of SDG 4 as a supra-national document that requires all countries to effectively support adult literacy education provision as a way to help reach its targets, it is helpful to analyse the current context using the levels approach. To that end, we begin with brief case descriptions of the four focal countries organised by the four levels, compare them, and then discuss emerging themes which point both to what supports and challenges the potential of adult literacy education to effectively function as a key lever in reaching the targets of SDG 4.

Australia

Mega-level

Although Australia is a high-income country, it is faced with mega-level crises both particular to Australia and shared with other nations. Climate change and global competition for skilled labour are influences shared globally, while the historical disadvantages experienced by the First Nations peoples are specific to Australia. The latter, persistent injustices due to the country's colonial history, is acknowledged in the Closing the Gap Partnership Agreement (Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations & Council of Australian Governments, 2019), an

agreement between the Commonwealth and state governments, to improve a range of socio-economic outcomes.

Macro level

Since 2012, adult literacy and numeracy has been conceptualised in national policy as components of 'foundation skills', which is defined as a combination of English language, literacy, numeracy, and employability skills (Standing Committee on Tertiary Education Skills and Employment, 2012). This has been observed as part of an increasingly human capital focused trend starting in the 1990s, reflecting the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) definitional frameworks used in their international adult skills surveys (Yasukawa & Black, 2016). Commonwealth and state and territory government funded adult literacy and numeracy programmes are now largely employment-focused as a result of this policy. Foundation skills programmes, moreover, are regulated by the authority for vocational education and training (VET). Accredited programmes must be based on curricula which prescribe the outcomes and performance criteria. This has accelerated the decline of learner-centred adult literacy and numeracy programmes where curricula are developed by teachers in response to learners' needs and goals. In turn, this has meant that teachers in adult literacy programmes struggle to integrate instruction focused on broader social needs and goals that had been part of what many adult literacy and numeracy programmes did in the past (Osmond, 2021).

Meso level

An example of meso-level influences can be seen in practitioner and researcher advocacy which contributed to the establishment of a Commonwealth government 'Inquiry into Adult Literacy and its Importance', which included an investigation of:

> The effect that literacy and numeracy skills have on an individual's labour force participation and wages; [and]

> Links between literacy and social outcomes such as health, poverty, ability to care for other family members and participation in civic life. (Parliament of Australia, 2021)

This effort grew, in part, out of concern that policy instruments governing foundation skills fall under the regulation of the VET sector with its rigid and complex framework which limits the scope for more locally controlled, place-based, and culturally appropriate programmes that are designed to meet the distinctive literacy and numeracy needs of adults, particularly in First Nations communities. Although the report of the inquiry has, to date, not directly led to any final policy action, possibly due to a change in government soon after its release, it recommended

> That, by March 2023, the Australian Government establish a sustainable, ongoing funding model for the Literacy for Life Foundation to deliver Yes, I Can! campaigns in more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. (Parliament of Australia, 2022, p. xxxv)

The recommendation highlights the important role played by the meso-level Literacy for Life Foundation (LfLF), a First Nations controlled charity, in addressing adult literacy needs among First Nations communities. That the Inquiry appeared to have taken special note of the campaign may be a reflection of the strong partnerships (e.g. with researchers and corporate sponsors) that LfLF had built to strengthen its advocacy.

Micro-level

The *Yes, I can!* programme is an example of a micro-level effort which was first introduced in a remote Aboriginal community in 2012 and has now run in 16 remote and regional communities, graduating over 303 participants (Literacy for Life Foundation, n.d.). As a focus group informant explained,

> It came out of a kind of a steering group made up of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders . . . and a lot of people from the health sector who . . . identified a gap, . . . in English literacy rates . . . And then, because

some people on that group had had experience in Timor Leste with the delivery or implementation of a nationwide adult literacy campaign, it was kind of mooted to trial a similar approach in Australian Aboriginal communities.

While not accredited within the national VET regulatory framework as most other publicly funded adult literacy programmes are, it has had some government funding over time. In receiving such funding, however, it has experienced regulatory requirements such as the need to assess learners using a standardised tool. This has created a tension as a focus group informant explained:

It's an uneasy mix. . . . Because . . . you've got to fight even harder to demonstrate that what you're doing has rigour and validity when you're non-accredited grassroots community based . . .

We also . . . fight our corner, which is . . . adult learning as a human right. . . . [The learners] want to read to their grandkids, they want it [for] whatever purpose they're there for. (Focus group informant)

Another key difference between the nationally accredited programmes and this programme is that it is not simply about individual skill acquisition.

It's also meant to be a population level intervention. . . . It's about staying in a community until . . . a critical mass of . . . people have come through. (Focus group informant)

The programme contextualises resources used globally in the *Yo si puedo* programmes to suit the local community contexts: 'it's the pedagogy of contingency, . . ., you're meeting people where they are' (see also Boughton & Williamson, 2019).

Despite its clear success in mobilising communities, which other earlier attempts failed to do, and setting up the LfLF to coordinate the programmes nationally and disseminating research-based evidence of impact (e.g. Boughton & Durnan, 2014; Boughton et al., 2013), major challenges remain regarding secure funding and the 'what next' for those who complete the *Yes I can!* programme:

Where people leave us, they're still only really at the top end of level one of the Australian core skills framework. There needs to be more acknowledgement and resourcing in that space to be able to get people to continue on in further education. (Focus group informant)

Conclusion

Yes, I can! illustrates the struggles faced in addressing the lifewide adult literacy needs of communities when there is an absence of a broad national policy. However, it is a powerful example of a locally-controlled (meso-level) programme emerging as a result of academics and First Nations activists (meso-level) working in partnership with a local sponsor and international adult literacy movements to effect change. In this instance, the change is firmly linked to several SDGs affecting First Nations communities, and therefore the nation as a whole.

Brazil

Mega-level

By landmass, Brazil is the largest country in South America with the seventh largest population in the world and the ninth largest Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2023, World Bank Group, 2024). However, it suffers from environmental degradation and biodiversity loss due to deforestation and climate change. Since becoming independent of Portuguese colonial rule in the late 19th century, Brazil has experienced political instability, including several periods of military dictatorship. However, there have been peaceful transfers of power since the 1990s.

Macro level

Adult literacy levels in Brazil are skewed by racial and regional inequality and age (Henriques & Ireland, 2007; Ivenicki & Markowitsch, 2023). Literacy rates are variously described as slowly

declining (Ribeiro & G, n.d.) or stagnant (Gadotti, 2011). Literacy policy is often described as discontinuous, insufficient, and receiving 'peripheral attention' (Mello & Braga, 2018, p. 3) from the government in terms of funding, infrastructure, and teacher training, especially in rural areas. Much of the scholarship on Brazilian adult literacy education makes reference to Freire's ideas about literacy learning as a political act aimed at increasing criticality and equality, but finds that this ideology is infrequently implemented and co-exists with traditional schooling or neo-liberal, human capital development models (Bartlett, 2007; Henriques & Ireland, 2007; Ivenicki & Markowitsch, 2023).

The Brazilian education system is highly decentralised; the federal government is responsible only for coordination, evaluation, and promoting equity. Although the right to education at any age is enshrined in the most recent constitution (1988), decisions about whether and how to offer adult literacy education are often based on the ideologies of the political party in control (Bartlett, 2007) and this impacts provision at the local level. Because state and municipal governments are responsible for implementing adult literacy education at the local level, investment in adult literacy education is highly variable. Locales that offer programming must follow national curriculum guidelines, which basically mirror children's schooling, but have some flexibility and a degree of autonomy. In addition to the adult formal compensatory education system offered through publicly funded programmes, there are some other non-formal, civil society providers often working in partnerships (Ribeiro & G, n.d.).

In 2003, Literate Brazil, a national literacy programme, was launched with federal funds and continued on, relatively well funded, for over 10 years. It was an example of macro-level policy that emerged from an early 2000s growth in support for and commitment to eradicating illiteracy. It focused on the mechanics of learning to read at a very basic level but without articulation to the compensatory education system or broader purposes for literacy. Described as underfunded, it depended largely on poorly trained volunteers. It was eventually imperilled by a recession and a change in government following a presidential impeachment. While this has not greatly affected the formal adult compensatory education system, since then, funding for the programme has dropped precipitously, and non-formal education has also experienced disinvestment. The Secretariat for adult education was abolished, and adult education was moved to a much lower level of the education ministry with only a few staff remaining. Along with this divestment, Mello et al. (2021) argue that adult education policy has turned away from its equity and inclusion focus. With the 2022 presidential election, an informant asserts that 'Democracy won . . . and with it the hope for better days, with [youth and adult education (EJA) policies that are] socially just and economically sustainable'. However, with a relatively newly elected president, it is unclear if and how literacy policy will change.

Meso-level

Forums of Adult and Youth Education are an example of a meso-level network of practitioners and scholars. First established in preparation for the Hamburg CONFINTEA in 1997, each state has its own self-organised forum, and some are far more active than others. Their activities include discussing proposed policy, offering practitioner training, mobilising in preparation for CONFINTEAs, and holding national conferences and regional meetings. Although years ago, they actively communicated with macro-level officials, their influence has waned. Henriques and Ireland (2007) and Bartlett (2007) gave several other descriptions of meso-level networks that were active during the first Lula presidency (2003–2011). These include the Brazilian Network to Support Literacy Action which was an 'aggressive and vocal watchdog of federal, state and local policy regarding youth and adult education policy' (Bartlett, 2007, p. 156). Other organisations continue to promote popular education nationally. For example, there has been collaboration to develop the national EJA curriculum and professional development provision. According

to our informant, meso-level organisations in Brazil, overall, are less active now than they have been.

Micro-level

The informant described a micro-level programme begun in 1990 that was a partnership between the building trade union and his university. At times, the project had some international and national support, but resources were always a challenge. This learner-centred programme started with a focus on literacy. It was located at the building site (where the workers lived) and used highly supervised university students as teachers. They soon realised that workers had many other educational needs and interests which they also addressed. For example, they offered art workshops, cultural activities, and a library. The programme lasted for 28 years and had tremendous success. Some participants went on to complete primary education, others completed secondary education, and a few went to university; they also assumed positions of leadership within the trade union.

The landless movement has also functioned at the micro-level by establishing their own school system for children and providing literacy and compensatory education for adults. Additionally, there have been some micro-level efforts to articulate school education with professional qualifications.

Conclusion

Brazil has a long but inconsistent history of adult literacy education policy and provision. It has often been treated from a policy perspective as a lever for increasing equity but is susceptible to weakening and divergent purposes due to economic and political changes that suggest a lack of ongoing macro-level commitment. A school-like and human capital approach has limited the quality of educational opportunity, especially for the most marginalised. Mega-level political and economic conditions have played a sometimes bolstering role as when Forums were created to prepare for the CONFINTEA conference and a degrading role as inequality increases due to climate injustice, the pandemic, and political unrest.

India

Mega-level

India, a middle-income country, is the second most populous in the world (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation Institute for Statistics UNESCO UIS, 2022) where 122 different languages are spoken (Shah, 2018, p. 1). Since 2014, the country has been governed by the Hindu-nationalist party. Deeply affected by the financial crisis in 2008, the COVID pandemic, and climate catastrophes such as landslides and floods, the focus group interviewees argued passionately that the intensity of crises in India explains a rise of populist policies and investment in populist propaganda. This led to funding reductions in adult literacy provision. According to Ernest (2022), the Hindu-Nationalist Party (BJP) has turned the government into a non-democratic regime including significant discrimination against Muslims (Amnesty International, n.d.; Ernest, 2022, p. 16).

Macro-level

In ancient India, the idea of 'learning as long as you live' built on very early spiritual ideas (Mandal, 2019). British colonisation devalued adult learning, but lifelong learning, including adult literacy and non-formal education, became highly relevant in the pre-independence period and spread widely after 1947 as part of an overall nation building process (Mandal, 2019). However, economic restructuring since the 1990s changed the focus from literacy and adult education for a wide variety of purposes to a narrow economic understanding of lifelong learning. Mandal (2019) argues that a neo-liberal agenda was reinforced by supranational bodies, continuing the understanding of lifelong learning that British colonisation brought to India.

Data from 1981 to 2011 show literacy rates increasing (although data may be unreliable). While the Hindu-nationalist government funded literacy programmes between 2014 and 2018 through the Literate India programme, this recently ended. Mandal (2019) reports that, 'central funding to literacy programmes was initially reduced and then discontinued in 2018, without the launch of any replacements' (p. 322). The decline in literacy provision was reflected in many ways by the informants:

> When I was a kid, 15 years back, literacy programs were running in different states. But now I do not see . . . even development projects work on a different agenda. Literacy is not a thing recently.

This has the biggest impact on the most vulnerable parts of the population – Dalit, women, and religious and ethnic minorities. They were unable to enrol in primary education, live in poverty, and face food insecurity. Although India reformed laws on women's rights in 2006 and 2013, inequalities remain substantial regarding both sexual violence and equal access to education.[1] This is exacerbated by funding cuts to adult literacy education.

Meso-level

Meso-level organisations have a strong tradition in India and they are often interconnected with international organisations. A closer look shows that the power of the meso level lies in their structure as member associations with elected boards and legitimised leaders. For example, in India they were invited by the governments to advise on the development of new ALE policies. Even if their advice is later ignored, their active and consistent input and their advocacy in the policy making process may establish their legitimacy in speaking up when policies affect their members' concerns.

India has no national qualifications framework for languages, literacy, or numeracy. Experts suggest that this contributes to inadequate literacy provision (if there is provision at all) and to local certificates that are inconsistently issued, often with a very low standard for completion. An expert explained,

> The literacy standard in Germany is being able to read a prescription, but in India if you [can] sign [your name] you get a certificate. [The] Literacy standard is not related to a qualification framework, that is why, when they sign, they get a certification.

Whether there are standards or not, clearly, being literate is more than being able to simply sign your name. However, meso-level organisations have been weakened in the current political context and there is little advocacy taking place to promote a more robust vision for adult literacy education.

Micro-level

In India where the typical activities of meso-level organisations are weakened by political conditions, grassroots movements have stepped in. For example, self-help groups, womens' savings clubs, women's movements and circles seem to organise with little or no funding under extremely difficult conditions. For example, even with the lowest literacy skills, women have been able to organise savings clubs. However, literacy skills are seen as a key for advancing other kinds of learning as illustrated by an expert:

> We had focus group discussions with a self-help group [of women], it was on financial and digital literacy, whether they want to learn or not. They were willing to learn, but they were afraid [to do so], because they were not literate. Initially they want basic literacy so they can do more.

Unfortunately, in many earlier cases, local providers take the funding but do not deliver appropriate training. Experts feel this is exacerbated by there being no qualifications framework.

Conclusion

India's adult literacy programme has fallen victim to the current political context. There is no nationally funded provision for the lowest skilled and most vulnerable due to caste, gender, and/or other kinds of social marginalisation. Even when adult literacy education was available, it often did little more than help adults learn to sign their names. Now those who need it most depend on grass roots efforts which suffer from inadequate resources and disparate goals. Mandal (2019) suggests, however, that adult education and literacy provision will stay alive at the periphery, in order to cope with 'The burden of illiteracy, the power of voting democracy and the compulsion of populist strategies' (p. 328).

South Africa

Mega-level

South Africa has been heavily affected by a water crisis since 2018 as a result of climate injustice, an energy crisis, and the pandemic. The focus group experts also reported lootings and riots which were triggered by the incarceration of the former president in 2021 and fuelled by extreme inequality. Unemployment affects both skilled and unskilled adults. The pandemic led to lockdowns of educational programmes as well as business and services which in turn led to increased poverty, hunger, protest, vandalism, theft, and unemployment. The violence is rooted in the establishment of townships that were built under the Apartheid regime 'to forcibly uproot those classified as African, Coloured or Indian from cities and established neighbourhoods, and resettle them' (Daniels, 2020, p. 367). They are an ongoing expression of colonialism in South Africa. Apartheid limited generations of African, Coloured and Indian populations' right to education and is the root of ongoing inequality.

Macro-level

South Africa launched a mass literacy campaign (Kha Ri Gude/Let us learn) in 2008, that was planned to last five years (Hanemann, 2015, p. 69). Parallel educational policies and practices, including adult literacy education, in South Africa are structured around qualification frameworks.

> In the mid-1990s, the South African government [introduced] a number of policies that prepared the way for adult basic education (ABET) to become part of the formal educational system, and to attain its official status as a formally recognised qualification pathway. In 2013, the government's redistributive response to this pathway's past marginalisation was to incorporate AET in the national qualifications framework (NQF) as a system parallel to basic education for children. (Daniels, 2020, p. 1)

One of the experts explained that the government's aims in providing 'formal qualifications, [was to] get them into the formal labour market'. However, several experts claim that unemployment rates, especially for youth, are rising constantly and that literacy and basic education do not lead to labour market entry anymore.

Another substantial challenge is the large number of languages (11 official and several vernacular) spoken in South Africa, leading to discussions about what languages should be used for education. Colonial languages like English and Afrikaans are widespread and support career prospects, but they also re-enact imperialism and cultural colonisation.

Meso-level

An example of the meso level in action can be seen in that the National Qualifications Framework is applied by both governmental and corporate in-house training programmes. However, the latter were closed due to the lockdown: 'We have seen this particular [...] sector taking a huge knock. When it came to the COVID ... ... factories decided to shut

down. We had [Adult Basic Education for] workers literally stopping'. After the pandemic, this sector did was badly hit. despite functioning under the National Qualifications Framework which had, from a policy perspective, previously provided some stability. A second example was described by university experts who feel strongly that they can connect higher education with adult basic education by sending teacher education programme students into

> An Adult Education environment … However, the link is limited … because [the university students] oftentimes have no clue as to the challenges in adult basic education even though (…) many of them work with children who come from homes with an illiteracy challenge.

This is contextualised within a system where teacher education students prefer to teach in their own communities, thus keeping segregation informally in place, even decades after the fall of the Apartheid regime.

Micro-level

Schooling terminology as well as the national qualifications framework influence the micro-level discussion of literacy. As one expert argued, 'Let's have a qualification that [is equivalent to school grade nine to give] some kind of dignity [in] being able to assist their children'. By linking to the national framework and formal school system, this quote illustrates both the school-based way of thinking about adult literacy education, and the very clear notion that literacy leads to dignity. In other words, it should be for more than entering the labour market or receiving a certificate. Earlier research on adult literacy provision indicates that participants report their own emancipatory processes via adult literacy education even under the reductionist national qualifications framework (Daniels, 2020). Other scholars advocate for a less technical and vocational skills orientation because this does not lead to jobs in times of high unemployment (Baatjes, 2018). South African research on the role that Adult Basic Education can play for the empowerment of women that had no access to school education confirms this (Daniels, 1996).

Conclusion

South Africa's educational policies aimed at overcoming inequalities in the first post-apartheid decades included massive investment in adult literacy programmes like Kha Ri Gude (Hanemann 2015). However, more recent policies focus on technical and vocational education for young adults, even though (youth) unemployment is high and rising. Adult literacy provision tends to be reduced to programmes for youth and young adults (Daniels, 2020).

Discussion of findings, limitations, implications

The table below summarises the case descriptions. The comparison makes clear that at each level, adult literacy is hindered in its potential to address SDG 4. When using the levels to analyse adult literacy provision three topics emerge as key to the challenge literacy provision faces: policy focus, funding, and access. It is important to also note the effect of the mega-level on adult literacy education. Both increasing the need and limiting opportunity, mega-level crises have put communities at risk, thrown governments into chaos, and made it increasingly difficult to prioritise adult literacy education.

Policy focus

SDG 4.6 focuses on raising the literacy level of youth and adults. UNESCO defines literacy as a complex set of skills that are defined relative to use within specific social contexts rather than as a specific set and level of skills:

> Literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills. (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation UNESCO, 2024)

Clearly, literacy for 'job-specific skills' is a part of the purpose for skill development, but this definition suggests a wider set of purposes. Yet, in policies across the four countries, adult literacy education tends to be viewed as human capital development, a lever of economic growth, and generally replicates school frameworks to accomplish this.

While some efforts to enact a fuller, more complex view of literacy for lifewide purposes do sometimes become temporarily embedded in macro-level policies, are advocated for at the meso level, and enacted at the micro level, programmes that take up this approach to adult literacy education are vulnerable to changes in political ideologies and economic down-turns and are far more likely to experience budget cuts. In other words, when the chips are down, a workforce development focus and a school replacement model is what tends to prevail. This is not likely to provide an adult population that can achieve the goal of 'gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity' (SDG 4.7).

Funding

Repeatedly, we see adult literacy provision funding at the national level as precarious. Always the poor 'stepchild' to education for children, there are multiple examples of limited funding being further cut back due to economic issues or shifting ideology and policy commitment due to changes in governments. Even when there are funds to support adult literacy provision, experts report that adult educators are paid less and trained less (often they are volunteers who receive no pay and limited training) than their primary and secondary educator counterparts. Programmes do not often have money to pay for their own spaces dedicated specifically to educating adults. Instead, they may be meeting in borrowed spaces in which they can easily be pushed aside when other uses are prioritised. Basic curricular infrastructure may also be missing. In Australia, there is no national policy that would trigger sustained funding for a comprehensive approach to adult literacy education.

Yet, when funding is available it can create a tension. On the one hand it meets the needs of learners and provides a broad, life wide approach to literacy skill development. On the other hand, it must respond to narrow qualifications and accountability systems that detract from the programme capacity to provide a learner-centred approach. While meso level stakeholders may play a key role in advocating for funding as well as learner-centred, lifewide literacy skill development, and micro level programmes may find ways to step up to fill the need when national governments defund programmes or limit the need for literacy skills to very nominal reading and reading (e.g. being able to produce a signature) or narrow purposes, these efforts are also precarious due to their own funding constraints.

Access

Clearly, narrow policies and limited and precarious funding have an impact on access to literacy education for all adults, but our case description indicates these conditions disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. In Brazil, for example, literacy skill level is unevenly distributed, skewed by race, rurality, and age. In Australia, the First Nations people continue to face disadvantages shaped by colonialism and racism. In India, the caste system and gender inequality lead to extreme marginalisation and poverty. In each of the four countries, marginalised populations represent untapped resources that, if given the opportunity, could be a significant

Table 1. Country comparison by levels.

	Mega	Macro	Meso	Micro
Australia	• Climate change and global competition for skilled labour • Historical disadvantages experienced by First Nation people	• No national lifelong learning policy • Adult literacy efforts mainly focused on human capital development • Inconsistent state level efforts.	• Adult educator and researcher advocacy argued for sustainable and ongoing funding for the Literacy for Life Foundation to provide Yes, I can! literacy campaigns	• Yes, I can programme, in 16 First Nations communities. • Funding from monies raised by the First Nations controlled Literacy for Life Foundation and some national government support
Brazil	• Environmental degradation, crime, corruption, and extreme income inequality and differential educational outcomes.	• Robust adult literacy education based on Freirean popular education model began in the 1950s • Education at any age as a constitutional right since 1988, but only a compensatory option is guaranteed. • Decentralised and inconsistently implemented adult literacy	• Some non-formal AE providers including trade unions and other civil society entities. • Forums of Adult and Youth Education organised by state. to prepare for CONFITEAs, but with less active and visible policy advisory role than in the past.	• Landless movement established its own school system which includes adult literacy education. • Examples of long established partnerships between trade union and universities to provide adult literacy programmes in workplaces
India	• Diminished democracy and multiculturalism and extreme discrimination against Muslims. Financial crisis, COVID, several climate catastrophes, and violent political unrest.	• Adult literacy education funding recently discontinued	• Meso-level organisations strong and internationally connected, are muted in the current government. • Advocacy for a set of standards or frameworks for literacy provision ignored by providers.	• Grassroots and social movements, advocates, and activists keep adult education alive but with no government funding
South Africa	• Water and energy crises, political unrest and violence, extreme inequality and unemployment. • Increased poverty, hunger, protests, and crime as a result of pandemic lockdowns.	• A National Qualifications Framework and testing system defines adult basic and literacy education provision.	• Individual academics' initiatives to send students to communities to provide basic education • In-house literacy programmes offered by companies have discontinued post pandemic	• ABE at the local programme level organised around a curriculum framework based on school qualifications.

Table 1. (Continued).

	Mega	Macro	Meso	Micro
Relevance for SDG 4	• Adult literacy education unequally available depending on race, gender, religion, indigeneity etc. • Its provision threatened by natural disaster and political and economic instability	• Existence of a national adult literacy education policy inconsistent. • Existing national policies often it is narrowly defined around traditional school frameworks or human capital development. • National policies susceptible to political and economic instability	• Existence, strength and effectiveness of meso-level entities highly inconsistent. • Meso-level important levers for service provision, policy advocacy, and professional learning but easily muted by mega and macro level conditions.	• Promising examples of micro-level programming that address local community and learner needs • Precarity of funding limits potential

asset in meeting the SDG targets. However, they experience unmet need due to limited access to educational opportunity.

Table 1 Country Comparison by Levels

Each level, often interacting with other levels, impacts and limits the opportunity for adult literacy education to contribute to meeting SDG 4 goals.

Conclusion

Our four-level analysis helps us see that adult literacy education provision in its current state as illustrated by the four cases described is not well positioned to support SDG 4 effectively making it impossible to 'get there from here'. To map a more feasible route, our findings support the conclusions of Hanemann and Robinson (2022) regarding the importance of cross-sectoral, lifewide efforts. There seems to be consensus among the experts from the four case countries that literacy should be defined as more than mere reading and writing using school-like models and definitely more than being able to write one's name, and its purposes are broader than preparing a workforce. Rather, to meet the imperative of SDG 4, adult literacy education needs sustained policy commitment based on the UNESCO definition of literacy, robust and sustained funding, a trained and well-paid workforce, and equitable access to classes for all who are in need. Without that, given the key role education plays, we are likely to find ourselves a long way down the road to a sustainable world.

The study illuminates the ways in which adult literacy provision is enabled or hindered in each of the four countries. It confirms the general findings about adult learning and education that were made in our larger study that meso level actors are crucial to bridging the micro- and macro-levels to strengthen the way that adult literacy provision is supported nationally (Grotlüschen et al., 2024). They can also play a role in promoting the SDGs as part of the macro level discourse by undertaking evaluations of the programmes and the range of outcomes that are afforded by them. However, the availability of meso-level actors who have the skills and resources to undertake this bridging work is varied and cannot be assumed. The specific enablers of and barriers to meso-level actors are an area for more focused further research.

Note

1. 'In 2018, 18.4% of women aged 15–49 years reported that they had been subject to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months' https://data.unwomen.org/country/india.

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