

Lifelong Learning in a Learning Society: Are Community Learning Centres the Vehicle?

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Abstract

This chapter provides a historical perspective on the evolving concepts of lifelong learning and the learning society and makes the case for the community learning centre as a potential institutional vehicle for the promotion of adult and lifelong learning. It highlights the pertinence of lifelong learning/learning society in the post-2015 Development Agenda discourse. Arguments in favour of the community learning centre as a vehicle for lifelong learning/learning society are illustrated using the example of Bangladesh and drawing on parallels and contrasts with China and India. Finally, lessons derived from a recent review of the Asia-Pacific region are evaluated with respect to the development of strategic actions intended to offer adult and lifelong learning within and through community learning centres.

[O]nly an over-all, lifelong education can produce the kind of complete man the need for whom is increasing with the continually more stringent constraints tearing the individual asunder. We should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life—'learn to be'.¹

1 Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society—A Historical Perspective

'Lifelong education' and 'the learning society' were the key takeaways of the 1972 report of the Faure Commission. The former was seen as the keystone

1 Excerpt from letter of Edgar Faure, Chairman of the International Commission on the Development of Education, to René Maheu, Director-General of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in regard to the presentation of the report of the Commission, *Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow*, 18 May 1972, vi.

of education policy, the latter a strategy to involve society as a whole as a participant and actor in education (Faure et al., 1972). How have the two related ideas, innate in learning as a social function, evolved with the institutionalisation of education? Have they gained new relevance in the globalised world of knowledge economies and information societies? Do they call for creating or re-inventing an institutional mechanism distinct from, yet complementary to, traditional formal educational institutions? This chapter explores these questions. As stated by the Faure report, 'If learning involves all of one's life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of 'educational systems' until we reach the stage of a learning society' (Faure et al., 1972, xxxiii).

In the 1970s, at about the time of the Faure Commission report, the three-fold typology of education—formal, non-formal and informal—gained currency. Recognising that 'education is obviously a continuing process, spanning the years from earliest infancy through adulthood and necessarily involving a great variety of methods and sources', Coombs and Ahmed distinguished between the three modes of education as 'analytically useful, and generally in accord with current realities'. They went on to argue that 'the need now is to visualise the various educational activities as potential components of a coherent and flexible overall learning system that must be steadily strengthened, diversified and linked more closely to the needs and processes of national development'. They underscored the emerging consensus that nations should strive to build 'lifelong learning systems', offering every individual diverse learning opportunities throughout her or his lifetime (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974, 9).

This theme was picked up again, two decades later, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century in its report *Learning—The Treasure Within*:

The concept of learning throughout life is the key that gives access to the twenty-first century. It goes beyond the traditional distinction between initial and continuing education. It links up with another concept often put forward, that of the learning society, in which everything affords an opportunity of learning and fulfilling one's potential [...]. In short, 'learning throughout life' must take advantage of all the opportunities offered by society. (Delors et al., 1996, 38)

The Belem Framework for Action, announced at the 6th International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI), affirmed that 'lifelong