



Financing adult learning and education (ALE) now and in future

Idowu Biao¹

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Abstract

This article submits that while the world continues to view education as a human right, it also persists in depriving an important section of it – namely *adult learning and education* (ALE) – of adequate funding. Located within the lifelong learning domain, which facilitates both the resolution of challenges and adjustment to the vagaries of living throughout a lifetime, ALE is indispensable within the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This article identifies four factors which are currently responsible for the poor funding of ALE. These factors are: (1) the world's obsession with the provision of school education; (2) the lack of adequate instruments to work out ALE's returns on investment; (3) the hope that employers will ultimately supply ALE; and (4) the assumption that an expansion of formal schooling will eventually lead to the establishment of literate societies free of inter-generational crises. Since ALE is generally framed as a broad literacy education project, the author undertakes a review of literacy education costing. This leads him to posit that quality literacy education can be supplied at a unit cost ranging between USD 150 and USD 250 annually within any Global Alliance for Literacy (GAL) country. Finally, the article offers four recommendations to increase ALE funding going forward.

Keywords adult learning and education (ALE) · funding adult learning and education (ALE) · costing regimes · funding models · increasing adult learning and education (ALE) funding

Résumé

Financer l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes (AEA) maintenant et à l'avenir – Cet article allègue que bien que le monde continue de voir en l'éducation un droit humain, il persiste aussi à priver l'un de ses domaines essentiels – l'apprentissage

✉ Idowu Biao
idowubiao2014@gmail.com

¹ Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Abomey-Calavi, Benin

et l'éducation des adultes – d'un financement approprié. Faisant partie de l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie, qui aide à résoudre plus facilement des difficultés et à s'adapter aux caprices auxquels il faut faire face au fil de l'existence, l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes sont indispensables dans le contexte du Programme de développement durable à l'horizon 2030 des Nations Unies et de ses 17 Objectifs de développement durable (ODD). Cet article identifie quatre facteurs actuellement responsables de la maigreur du financement de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes. Ils sont les suivants : (1) l'obsession du monde pour l'offre d'éducation scolaire ; (2) le manque d'instruments adéquats pour travailler avec les retours sur investissement de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes ; (3) l'espoir que les employeurs finiront par proposer des offres d'apprentissage et d'éducation des adultes et (4) la supposition selon laquelle l'expansion de la scolarité formelle finira par mener à la création de sociétés alphabètes ne connaissant pas les crises intergénérationnelles. Étant donné que l'apprentissage et l'éducation des adultes sont généralement définis comme un vaste projet d'alphabétisation, l'auteur dresse un bilan du coût de l'alphabétisation, ce qui le conduit à postuler qu'une alphabétisation de qualité peut être proposée à un coût unitaire entre 150 et 240 USD par an dans n'importe quel pays faisant partie de l'Alliance mondiale pour l'alphabétisation (GAL). Enfin, l'article présente quatre recommandations pour accroître le financement de l'apprentissage et de l'éducation des adultes en allant de l'avant.

Introduction

Adult learning and education (ALE) is a field of educational theory and practice within the domain of lifelong learning. The 2015 Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education (RALE)

takes a comprehensive and systematic approach to ALE, defining three key domains of learning and skills: literacy and basic skills; continuing education and vocational skills; as well as liberal, popular and community education and citizenship skills. It also describes five transversal areas of action: policy; governance; financing; participation, inclusion and equity; and quality (UNESCO and UIL 2016, p. 3).

Surveys conducted at roughly three-year intervals for the *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE)* have confirmed that ALE positively impacts many aspects of beneficiaries' lives. For example, the third report in the series, *GRALE 3*, which focused on “the impact of adult learning and education on health and well-being; employment and the labour market; and social, civic and community life” (UIL 2016) shows that, in those parts of the world where care has been taken to promote ALE, health behaviours have improved, higher life expectancy has been attained and a significant reduction in lifestyle diseases has been recorded (ibid.). ALE has equally been credited with creating a larger pool of more informed employees for employers

to recruit from; and employees themselves have been able to benefit from better pay due to their having acquired improved work skills (ibid.).

Yet, while some progress is being made, and in spite of the fact that education – including ALE – is recognised and accepted as a human right (UN 1948; Gadotti 2011), ALE has remained poorly funded around the world for the past three decades. Between the Jomtien Declaration on Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO 1990), and the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V; UIE 1997), the promise of lifting nine highly populated developing countries¹ out of illiteracy by 2015 could not be fulfilled. Despite the re-endorsement of the EFA project in the Dakar Framework for action (WEF 2000), the Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI) (FTI 2004)² which aimed to reinvigorate the EFA project between 1997 (CONFINTEA V) and 2009 (CONFINTEA VI), turned out not to be helpful to ALE. Not only was the performance of the FTI weak overall (UNESCO 2010, pp. 14–15), funding efforts were geared predominantly towards formal primary education (IIEP 2010, p. 11).

Between *GRALE 1* (UIL 2009) and *GRALE 2* (UIL 2013), some progress was recorded in financing ALE. However, between 2013 and 2019, this earlier reported progress turned out to have been drowned by subsequent poor performance. Almost half (42%) of the countries surveyed in *GRALE 3* reported spending “less than 1% of their public education budgets on ALE” (UIL 2016, p. 13); while 41% of the countries surveyed in *GRALE 4* “reported *no progress since 2015 on ALE spending as a proportion of public spending on education*” (UIL 2019, p. 58; emphasis added).

As we approach CONFINTEA VII, to be held in June 2022, the aim of this article is to examine the funding situation for ALE with a view to highlighting the challenges currently facing the sector and proffering ideas as to how those challenges might be met.

Contextualising ALE financing within the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

This article’s discussion of ALE financing is situated within the framework of the maxims and expectations of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN 2015). The fourth of these Goals (SDG 4) is an overarching education goal with several targets. SDG 4 enjoins all UN Member States to

ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (WEF 2016, p. 20).

Succeeding the second Millennium Development Goal (MDG 2) of the UN’s previous agenda (UN n.d.), which only specified “achiev[ing] universal primary educa-

¹ These nine countries, referred to as “E9”, are: Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. In 2005, the combined sum of their inhabitants represented more than half the world population. For more information on the E9 initiative, see UNESCO (2015).

² Originally launched in 2002, EFA-FTI was renamed “Global Partnership for Education” in 2011.

tion” by 2015 (ibid.), SDG 4 stands today as the universal education goal. Among its ten targets,³ several refer to “women and men” (SDG Target 4.3), “youth and adults” (SDG Target 4.4), and “all learners” (SDG Target 4.7) – thus, ALE is a substantial component of SDG 4. Most importantly, SDG Target 4.6 aims to

ensure that all youth and *a substantial proportion of adults*, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (WEF 2016, p. 46; emphasis added).

SDG 4 does tout literacy education as both a foundational educational block and a minimal skills acquisition process. SDG Targets 4.6 and 4.4 support this view when they aim on the one hand to equip youth and adults with literacy and numeracy and on the other hand to

substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship (SDG Target 4.4, WEF 2016, p. 42).

In recognition of the importance of literacy education within the context of both SDG 4 and ALE, much work has gone into designing a number of funding models for ALE in general, as well as specifically costing the promotion of literacy education in low-income countries. Whereas this article discusses a number of funding models regarding ALE in general, it is worth noting that attempts at costing the delivery of ALE relate more specifically to *literacy* education, which remains central to ALE and displays the longest history of costing among all the components making up ALE (see, for example, Raya 2012; Ravens and Aggio 2005).

But why should ALE be funded at all?

Why fund ALE?

The justification for the funding of ALE must begin from the human rights angle. Although much has occurred in the field of education since 1948, when the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights ascertained that: “Everyone has the right to education” (UN 1948, Article 26), this right has been upheld both as a legal and advocacy instrument to this day, also forming the basis of SDG 4 (UNESCO n.d.).

Beyond the issue of rights, there is abundant evidence of the benefits of ALE on health and well-being, employment and the labour market, and social and civic life (Schuller and Watson 2009; UIL 2016). ALE offers individual learners emotional, social, economic and psychological rewards, many of which reinforce each other, so that it is within a “bundled” state (Manninen et al. 2014) that these rewards serve learners best in keeping them whole, happy and in good mental health. This insight emerged from a study investigating the Benefits of Lifelong Learning (BeLL) in

³ Strictly speaking, SDG 4 comprises seven targets (4.1–4.7) and three “means of implementation” (4.a–4.c); see WEF (2016).

Europe, where learners engaged in organised non-formal, non-vocational, voluntary adult education were interviewed. Jyri Manninen et al. found that

participants typically report bundles of benefits and establish various relationships among the benefits when describing their experiences. This finding opens up *new research questions* that were not envisaged in the initial research framework (Manninen et al. 2014, p. 62; emphasis in original).

Yet, in order to justify the funding of ALE, a certain level of “unbundling”, i.e. categorisation of the benefits experienced by learners needs to be undertaken. What learners who go through ALE’s portals seek is the acquisition of the skills it advertises in RALE’s “three domains of learning”, namely, (1) literacy and basic skills;; (2) professional training; and (3) citizenship knowledge and attitude (UNESCO and UIL 2016, p. 3). Literacy is a skill that enables a person to read both “the word and the world” (Freire and Macedo 1987). Professional training equips citizens with both survival and employment capabilities. Skills acquired through citizenship education enable individuals to fulfil their responsibilities to society and to live within their rights and privileges. The acquisition of these various skills constitutes a process of personal and societal empowerment and as suggested above, these types of empowerment are all facilitated through ALE.

Furthermore, ALE has the potential to influence a society’s economy positively. Since World War II, research studies investigating the relationship between gross national product (GNP) and literacy rates across many countries of the world have concluded that there is a positive correlation between GNP and societies’ rates of literacy (Naudé 2004; Coulombe et al. 2004), i.e. improving literacy rates resulted in better GNP. The promotion of literacy education thus constitutes an important investment in human capital (Wagner 1990).

These benefits together constitute the promises of well-funded ALE. However, the reality we must reckon with in the run-up to CONFINTEA VII is that our inability, unwillingness or refusal to adequately finance ALE portends social, economic and political dangers. In technologically advanced nation states, these dangers might include a rise in xenophobic sentiments and attacks among a restive citizenry who do not comprehend the merits of a controlled and humane immigration system in relation to the long-term survival of their country. Within developing nation states, these dangers could manifest in the forms of widespread terrorism and banditry organised by populations that have felt left behind in the governance of the state, distribution of national welfare packages and means of survival.

Challenges facing ALE financing

At least four factors account for the current poor state of ALE funding.

Prioritisation of formal schooling

The first factor is that over time, both technologically advanced and developing societies have prioritised school education and have therefore financed it generously. For example, in member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) where the share of education funding within public expenditure lies between 11% and 17%, the annual school funding of one learner aged between 6 and 15 years could gobble up between USD 6,000 and USD 10,000 (OECD 2017, p. 32). Additionally, in some countries there are various legal frameworks in place which permit the solicitation of funds for school learning from a multiplicity of sources within society, including from statutory bodies and from special tax funds (OECD 2017; 2019a). In developing countries where the percentage of education funding to public expenditure is lower than in OECD countries (World Bank 2019, p. 6), annual school funding of one basic education learner may range between USD 2,000 and USD 5,000.

By contrast, in the case of non-formal literacy education, annual costs of delivery are reckoned in terms of minimal amounts (e.g. USD 50–USD 150) (Ravens and Aggio 2005, p. 14). While it is understood that large education budgets do not necessarily lead to quality and/or sizeable educational achievement, it stands to reason that a bare minimum level of funding is needed if to achieve any meaningful progress at all. Non-formal literacy learning continues to struggle for this minimum level of funding. While specific numbers are scarce, there is evidence that in many countries, not more than 1% of the national education budget is devoted to literacy programmes (UNESCO 2005, p. 234).

Lack of tools to assess returns on investment

The second factor accounting for the current poor state of ALE funding relates to the fact that, in professional terms, ALE lacks the required monitoring and measurement tools to accurately assess its own rate of returns on investment in promoting literacy (UIL and PASCAL Observatory 2020; Volkman 2020).

High-quality data on adult skills and competencies enables evidence-based policy-making ... While collective efforts have led to gradual progress with respect to increasing literacy rates, there is still a lack of data on literacy in many countries (UIL 2021a, para. 4).

This lack of data is not unconnected with the dearth of efficient literacy assessment instruments. While a relatively simple tool might be sufficient for measuring the skills of reading, writing and numeracy among formal education learners, a more complex instrument is needed to measure the same skills among adult learners. This is because young learners learn to read, write and enumerate for the sake of doing these things, while adult learners learn and apply these same skills within the context of a wide range of socio-economic and environmental meanings related to their own daily activities and existence. Hence, experts speak of *functional literacy* (UIL 2020; Wagner 1990), and the assessment of this type of literacy among non-formal

learners is carried out within the context of its functionality. Consequently, unlike the compulsory segment of education (formal basic education), which has benefited from about sixty years of research aimed at determining the rates of return within its various aspects including school literacy (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018), the area of non-formal literacy is still struggling to come up with reliable assessment instruments. Progress in adult education is difficult to measure given the lack of specificity of what counts as “relevant skills” in SDG 4 (Benavot and Stepanek Lockhart 2016, p. 5). Another challenge is the disparity between the goals and the much narrower indicators used to measure them (Unterhalter 2019; King 2017). More research is urgently needed here – which will only be possible with proper funding.

Overestimation of employers’ attention to their employees’ learning needs

The third prominent reason contributing to keeping ALE in the financing shadows is the belief that employers will ultimately attend to the learning needs of their employees, taking them through programmes of training and retraining with a view to improving both their general knowledge and specific skills. Again, there is a lack of data which might provide even an approximate picture of the extent to which employers provide the “continuing education and vocational skills” mentioned in RALE (UNESCO and UIL 2016, p. 3) or the “relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship” mentioned in SDG Target 4.4 (WEF 2016, p. 42).

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is “the official source of internationally-comparable education data and the custodian agency for SDG 4 data” (UIS 2018, p. 6). Globally, according to UIS reports, only about 20% of countries tend to keep regular records of those of their youth and adults who undergo formal and non-formal education and training in a given period of 12 months (SDG Indicator 4.3.1; UIS 2018, p. 29). Disaggregated by world regions, the picture becomes even less defined: while the percentage of countries with data available is 68% for Europe and North America, it is only 17% for Eastern and South-eastern Asia, 13% for Northern Africa and Western Asia, 12% for Oceania, 2% for Latin America and the Caribbean, and 0% each for sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Southern Asia (ibid.).

While the proportions of youth and adults participating in formal and non-formal education and training in a 12-month period amount to a little more than 50% (UIS 2018, p. 30), these same segments of society that possess skills in ICTs throughout the world make up a paltry 21% (ibid., p.32). Yet, ICTs constitute a distinct set of indispensable skills in the 21st century.

Pooled together, these statistics suggest that, globally, less than 50% of youth and adults may be undergoing both general and critical education and training in any given year. The absence of records in many countries of persons benefiting from education and training, coupled with the odds that less than half of the world’s youth and adults undergo training in any year, suggest that it is unrealistic to expect the combined training efforts of employers to supply both the levels of training and the funding needed to establish ALE at the level needed to empower all youth and adults to their full potential.

Assumption that the expansion of formal schooling will eventually lead to the establishment of literate societies

Fourth, in addition to the aforementioned unrealistic expectations of employers' contribution to ALE there is the hope that over time, the number of adults who may not have benefited from formal schooling will shrink as their generation dies out and that they will be succeeded by a high population of youth equipped with literacy and basic skills. This would resolve inter-generational crises that may have resulted from the creation of societies inhabited by informed youth and less informed adults.

However, it is not that simple, since social issues and human affairs are somewhat more complex. For example, in her "Framework towards successful literacy campaigns and programmes", Ulrike Hanemann proposes three concentric zones (*enabling environment, supporting structures and teaching-learning process*) of at least ten features each around the learner at the centre (Hanemann 2015, p. 14). This suggests that the literacy acquisition process, far from being a linear activity, is a dialectical one, involving periodical reviews of the concentric zones for effectiveness and constant renewal of their features.

In addition to this complexity, the concept of literacy has changed over time to reflect social, economic and environmental challenges to which human societies are prone. Its meaning has shifted from reading, writing and numeracy skills that an individual either possesses or not to a continuum and a contextual social practice (Street 1984). More recently, literacy has taken on a much broader meaning, for example in terms of "digital literacy" (UNESCO 2021), assisting 21st-century citizens in addressing complex social, environmental and economic issues. An important and indispensable instrument such as the provision of all youth and adults with ALE's wide range of literacy skills therefore needs adequate and viable financing. This constitutes an investment in the protection of humanity against the kind of assaults (the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, wars etc.) we are currently experiencing.

The evolution of ALE funding

In a historical sense, one of the first global efforts at funding ALE, in particular literacy, occurred in the early 1970s through the UNESCO Experimental World Literacy Programme (EWLP). The EWLP was a literacy programme that targeted farming communities in eleven countries of the world including seven (Algeria, Ethiopia, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Sudan and the United Republic of Tanzania) in Africa, two (Iran and Syrian Arab Republic) in the Middle East, one (Ecuador) in South America, and one (India) in Asia (Gillette 1987; UNDP 1976). The main goal of the "functional literacy" approach employed by the EWLP was to gauge the relationship between literacy and development through a demonstration of the economic and social returns on literacy (Bataille 1976).

The EWLP also provided a modest, albeit inconclusive understanding of the level of funding required by literacy programmes. Political and ideological reasons arising from the prevailing Cold War and colonial conditions of the time have been read into the results generated by the EWLP. The main funder, the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP), considered the results of the EWLP disappointing because the programme supposedly did not show conclusively enough the connection between literacy and economic development. Against this background, some scholars have interpreted the demise of the EWLP as a casualty of the Cold War and American dominance (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012; Elfert 2019). Despite UNESCO's efforts, the lack of attention to literacy continued with the global Education For All (EFA) initiative in the 1990s. Although EFA was meant to be a global effort to promote basic education in low-income countries, it focused on the expansion of primary schooling, and the bulk of the funds managed by the EFA Fast Track Initiative (EFA-FTI), mentioned earlier, was used to fund formal primary education in 35 countries, with little input into ALE (Elfert 2019). Indications that some EFA funds were employed to promote adult literacy were found only in Burkina Faso and Benin (Archer 2010).

Existing global data on 21st-century-ALE funding are gathered (through a survey developed in consultation with UIS) and reported at roughly 3-year intervals by the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong learning (UIL). UIL's four global reports (*GRALE 1*, 2, 3 and 4; UIL 2009, 2013, 2016, 2019) currently stand as the most comprehensive data collection on ALE. *GRALE 5* (UIL 2022) is currently nearing publication. UIL's efforts in generating data on ALE financing are complemented by a few regionally (e.g. European) and nationally financed study reports on ALE and lifelong learning (Williams et al. 2010). Taken together, these reports supply the state of the art in the realm of ALE funding in the world.

According to UNESCO's fourth global report (*GRALE 4*), 41% of the sampled countries did not make any improvement on their 2015 ALE financing (UIL 2019). Yet, the level of ALE financing was low enough in 2015 to motivate the third global report (*GRALE 3*) to recommend three significant improvements in ALE funding going forward: (1) prioritising investment in literacy and basic skills and in continuing ALE; (2) fostering inter-ministerial coordination between policy areas; and (3) making the allocation and use of resources transparent to reflect priorities (UIL 2016, p. 151).

In the fourth global report (*GRALE 4*), less than a third of respondent countries (28%) reported that ALE spending had increased as a proportion of the education budget since 2015. Substantially more (41%) said there has been no progress since 2015, while 17% reported that spending had decreased since 2015 (UIL 2019, p. 58). A further 14% (21 countries) "indicated not knowing whether there has been a change in ALE spending over the past three years" (UIL 2019, p. 52). In other words, almost three-quarters (72%) of the countries surveyed were unable to report making any progress in upscaling ALE financing; indeed, some had actually reduced funding for ALE since 2015.

In 2021, the German Adult Education Association (DVV)'s institute for international cooperation, DVV International, published two studies which investigated ALE funding (Popovic 2021 and Duke et al. 2021). Neither of these studies were envisaged as presenting global coverage. However, the joint regional spread of their sampled countries (e.g. from Africa, the Arab region, Asia-Pacific, Europe, North America and Latin America) does encourage the making of some global inferences. Apart from showing that historically, ALE funding has been low around the world, the various summaries of data in the two studies (Popovic 2021 and Duke et al. 2021)

indicate that the ratio of funding of ALE compared to formal schooling has hovered around 1 to 10 (*ibid.*).

In spite of the general poor performance within ALE financing, some nation states have been trying out a variety of ALE funding models and costing regimes aimed at shoring up a more significant flow of funds into the sector.

Models of funding ALE

There are currently six main models of ALE funding in use around the world. They include the public sector, private sector, blended, aid, voluntary and personal funding models (Duke et al. 2021; Popovic 2021; Williams et al. 2010). The *public sector* funding model is driven by state actors such as governments at various levels of authority within a national polity. The *private sector* model refers to the participation of the business sector. The *blended sector* model speaks to the public-private involvement in the financing of ALE, while the *aid* or Official Development Assistance (ODA) model of funding relies on donations that usually come from international development partners. The *voluntary* model is one that involves individuals or communities as actors on the platform of ALE funding in a benevolent manner, whereas the *personal* model of ALE financing addresses the participation of individuals in funding their own or others' ALE.

Within the developed world (e.g. Europe), employers (i.e. the private sector) are contributing the largest share of ALE funding – around 65.1–77% (Popovic 2021, p. 43, citing EUROSTAT 2020 and OECD 2019b). Private individuals' share of ALE funding is around 24.7%, while governments pay only 22.1% (*ibid.*). Thus, public authorities provide less than a quarter of ALE funding, while employers contribute almost three-quarters (up to 77%). This scenario suggests that, within the developed world, the promotion of ALE is mainly driven by the neoliberal notion that the acquisition of literacy and other skills primarily leads to a more valuable workforce, which is conducive to economic gains. By contrast, in the developing world, education including ALE is viewed as public good, which the government is expected to support, taking a leading role, even if resources for promoting ALE are limited to 1% of its education budget.

Thus, while the world does not lack models for financing ALE, what is in short supply is an effective strategy for dramatically increasing the availability of funds for the promotion of ALE. Only two of the six models (the business and blended ones) have led to increased funding of ALE in the past few years (Popovic 2021). Yet, simply relying on the good performance of these two ALE funding models would not solve the challenge of financial aridity within ALE. Moreover, the hopes that have been so far invested into the funding support expected from the aid or ODA model have not yielded the desired result, as

[a]id for education, which accounts for 12 per cent of total education expenditure in low-income countries and 2 per cent in lower-middle-income countries, tends to be directed at children's education (UN 2020, p. 14).

ALE funding salvation cannot therefore be found within ODA and the world must begin to shift its gaze towards the domestic mobilisation of funds for ALE as a new strategy. This suggestion has already been greeted by some amount of opposition, since

the invitation to do more domestic resource mobilisation adds to the already big challenges developing countries are facing ... One example is Oxfam's estimation that "corporate tax dodging costs poor countries at least US\$100 billion every year. This is enough money to provide an education for 124 million children and prevent the deaths of almost eight million mothers, babies and children a year" (Popovic 2021 p. 64, citing Oxfam n.d.).

Highly populated countries with low adult literacy rates will be particularly impacted by past systemic failings in the area of tax collection unless they start re-organising themselves at the home front. In any case, much of the domestic mobilisation of funds needed for ALE can be obtained from tweaking the manner in which domestic tax collection has been managed in the past (Archer 2020). A minimum 20% tax-to-GDP ratio is thought to be capable of leading not only to the achievement of the goal of adequately funding ALE but also to securing other essentials such as the supply of water, health and other public services (ibid.).

However, some factors must be controlled before this tweaking can be effective. These factors include aggressive debt servicing, austere economic measures and public sector containment such as low inflation targets, deficit targets and the freezing or cutting of public sector wage bills. If left uncontrolled, these harsh measures have the potential of hurting both national economies and national psyches within developing countries (Archer 2020).

Costing ALE

In 2016, the Global Alliance for Literacy (GAL) was launched to address challenges to promoting literacy around the world. The Alliance currently comprises 20 countries with an adult literacy rate below 50% and the nine most highly populated countries in the world (E9) "which are home to 67% of the global population of youth and adults who lack basic literacy and numeracy" (UIL 2021b, p. 3). By 2019, it was reckoned that the 29 GAL countries would be needing more than USD 17 billion if they are to attain universal functional literacy and numeracy skills by 2030 (ibid., p. 8). This translates to a literacy education unit cost of between USD 150 and USD 200 per annum, all inflationary trends having been taken into account. Previously, it has been estimated that the annual unit cost of literacy education could fall between USD 50 and USD 100 (ActionAid International 2005) or it could be USD 100 (Carr-Hill and Roberts 2007). The unit cost of literacy education has indeed been computed to fall between USD 100 and USD 200 within a two-year period or between USD 150 and USD 300 during a three-year period (Ravens and Aggio 2005). The same unit cost of literacy education has been estimated to range between USD 175 and USD 200 during a 5-year period (Raya 2012).

These estimates have been arrived at by defining a number of parameters, including (1) a single concept of “literacy”; (2) the number of hours of instruction required by a learner to attain basic literacy; (3) the number of courses one instructor can deliver per annum; (4) the learner group size; (5) gender considerations; and (6) the ingredients of life skills within the concept of basic literacy. Older costing studies are mostly based on a literacy concept which views *literacy* as the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short simple statement on one’s everyday life (UNESCO 1958, 2009; Wagner 1990) and *functional literacy* as a person’s ability to “engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his [or her] group and community” (UNESCO 1978, p. 18). The concept of literacy has, however, assumed a more complex dimension in the 21st century, embracing all aspects of life and changing with human circumstances. Moreover, literacy in the 21st century is conceived as

a *continuum* of functional literacy and numeracy skills acquired throughout a lifetime rather than the literate/illiterate dichotomy (UNESCO 2021b, p. 9; emphasis added).

Considering that in practice, more than one type of ALE are usually combined and run simultaneously (e.g. basic and entrepreneurial), it is not unreasonable to estimate that a citizen of any GAL country may be equipped with literacy skills at an annual unit cost ranging between USD 150 and USD 250 within the next decade (assuming near-constant inflationary trends). Consequently, while the continuum concept of literacy is being packaged for future costing purposes, literacy training may introduce some transformative changes (through a combination of ALE types) with a view to addressing 21st-century challenges. While this process is not a permanent solution to increasing ALE funding, it yields more learning from relatively small amounts of funding. What, then, is the future of ALE financing beyond its current level?

Recommendations: how to increase ALE funding going forward

Global consensus regarding the indispensability of ALE is firmly established, and indeed reflected in SDG 4 (“lifelong learning opportunities for all”, and especially in SDG Target 4.6 (“a substantial proportion of adults”). The fact that local, regional and global efforts are needed to make financial resources available for ALE activities is equally evident. What is lacking at the moment, however, is an adequate level of financial support for the promotion of ALE in many parts of the world. An increased level of funding is needed for ALE in order to (1) increase the absolute number of beneficiaries of ALE; (2) improve the quality of ALE delivery; and (3) sustain the lifelong learning perspective of ALE. The following suggestions are designed to improve the current level of ALE funding.

Business and blended funding models: a “double-edged sword”

As stated earlier, the business and blended models of funding ALE are currently touted as the most promising in increasing ALE funding. However, blended financing is not the “silver bullet” it was presented to be, but rather a “double-edged sword” (Popovic 2021, p. 52, citing Meeks 2018). Research into public-private partnerships suggests that these partnerships often represent “a disguised form of public borrowing” (Draxler 2020, p. 165, referring to Hall 2015), and that the net financial contributions to education by the private sector remain low (Draxler 2020, p. 166). Critics have pointed to the risk that business and blended models have the potential to undermine education as a public good and human right, exclude the most marginalised populations and impact on the quality of provision through cost-cutting practices (Popovic 2021; Nordtveit 2004). However, public-private partnerships have also yielded positive effects, such as giving “small civil society access to decent financing” (ibid., 2004, p. 19). Despite the shortcomings, the private sector should be mobilised to increase investment in ALE, and the potential of blended models needs to be further explored and could be enhanced by, for example, increasing the capacity of governments to fix market failures (ibid.).

Domestic sourcing of funds for the promotion of ALE

The third model currently being called for as a way of mobilising more funds for ALE is domestic funding (Archer 2020). Encouragement to mobilise domestic funds represents a call for self-help in relation to increased literacy funding (Rothman 2008). Paulo Freire’s (1970) principle of *conscientisation* – the development of a critical understanding of one’s social reality through reflection and action – has the potential for promoting the appreciation of the value and necessity for literacy. This principle may be useful for demonstrating the utility and indispensability of literacy to learners and whole populations, raising their consciousness with regard to the practical, social, economic and environmental advantages of literacy. A demonstration of how literacy may save life and increase human worth would prove the necessity of this vital skill to life and living especially in the 21st century.

Consequently, once this point has been reached through reflection and action, these populations would be highly motivated towards participating in all efforts aimed at increasing literacy funding at the domestic level. Both self-help strategies and Freire’s principle of conscientisation have been employed to arouse consciousness and motivate populations to achieve spectacular feats in a number of real-life situations (Rothman 2008; Freire 1970; Matasci 2016). As a result of their motivational nature, both self-help strategies and the conscientisation principle have the potential of not only generating multiple approaches to sourcing funds internally, they equally hold the possibility of maintaining internal fund mobilisation in a sustainable manner. However, in order for more domestic funding to be realistically mobilised, tax to GDP ratios would need to be increased by 5%. Such an increase “would enable most countries to double their spending on education [and other essential services] over the next five years” (Archer 2020, para. 3). Given major challenges to achieving such an increase, such as the burden of debt servicing, David Archer (2020) formulates four

goals that would need to be achieved to secure greater domestic funding. Although he refers to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), which focuses on formal education, these are relevant for ALE funding as well:

- Increasing the share of budgets spent on education
- Increasing the size of government revenue overall (tax, debt, austerity, etc.)
- Increasing the sensitivity of allocations – driven by a focus on equity
- Increasing the scrutiny of spending in practice (Archer 2020, para. 6).

Restructuring ALE budget allocation among national ministries of education

Further opportunities for increasing ALE funding might also open up through revisiting the manner in which nation states' ministries of education operate. Current practice within national borders is that the existing ministries of education, of which there are many (e.g. Ministry of Pre-primary and Primary Education, Ministry of Secondary and Vocational Education and Ministry of Tertiary Education) take possession of their annual budgets and *lock them for their own needs*. In other words, they use these budgets exclusively for their own activities. Even where some funds are not needed and are therefore not used up in a year, these funds are either kept in the respective ministries or returned to central coffers, depending on the respective country's legal vigour concerning unused budgeted funds. The introduction of two innovative practices may facilitate more effective use of available funds. First, all education-related ministries in the state should include an ALE unit. Second, in addition to having a budget for ALE, these same ministries should be allowed to release funds not used in their other areas to the ALE arena. An interesting model in this regard is the Integrated Functional Adult Education (IFAE) programme in Ethiopia. The financing and implementation of the programme has been rendered more sustainable through an integration strategy that involves regional bodies and ministries that signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Ministry of Education, strengthened by the development of an adult education master plan and the establishment of a national Adult Education Board (Popovic 2021, p. 72)

Conclusion

As the world prepares for CONFINTEA VII in 2022, the number of GAL countries still stands at 29 members. About 42% of countries worldwide continue to allocate abysmally low financial resources (less than 1% of their public education budgets) to ALE, and about half of the countries in the world have done nothing to move the needle past the last low level of resources they spent on ALE in 2015 (UIL 2019, p. 58). Yet, it has been recommended that about 3% of nations' education budget should be invested in literacy (UIL 2021b, p. 8). All of the unmet targets regarding ALE funding suggest that ALE remains in dire straits even as *GRALE 5* is being prepared (Elfert 2019; UIL 2020, 2022).

The already dismal situation of ALE funding was further underlined in UIL's estimation that an additional USD 17 billion in funding would be required to reach near universal literacy in the 29 GAL countries (UIL 2021b, c), thereby substantially scaling up the total cost that will be needed going forward. GAL countries are "home to 67% of the global population of youth and adults who lack basic literacy and numeracy" (UIL 2021b, p. 33), and all the hard work around mobilising financial resource for ALE all these years aims to reduce low literacy by half by 2030. While clear challenges persist in achieving this goal, there is some hope for the adoption of all or some of the suggestions made here, which will be crucial for success. It will also be instrumental that international agencies and stakeholders such as the Global Partnership for Education that have up to now focused on formal education, increase their commitment to ALE.

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Idowu Biao is professor of Lifelong Learning. He currently runs Global Challenges Research Fund projects at the Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Benin. Professor Biao trained as teacher, adult educationist and journalist in both Nigeria and the United Kingdom, after an initial training in French-speaking Benin. Important positions of responsibility held include: Head of Department and Acting Dean in many universities across Africa; Deputy Director and Acting Director, Institute of Extra-Mural Studies, National University of Lesotho; and Chair, College Portal of the University of Calabar, Nigeria. Professor Biao speaks English and French and writes in both languages. His latest article, "Benin: Governance, lifelong learning and development", was published on 8 March 2021 in the *Journal of Adult & Continuing Education* (<https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971421999411>).