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Second-generation non-formal education and the sustainable development goals: operationalising the SDGs through community learning centres

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ABSTRACT
This paper argues that Non-formal Education (NFE) has seen a remarkable revival of interest across both developing countries and the more highly developed countries. Among the factors causing this revival is the search for alternative educations to meet the needs of different groups in society. But in the process, NFE has been relocated – not so much as ‘outside’ formal educational institutions but as a different kind of learning programme within a continuum of lifelong learning covering formal, non-formal and informal learning. It argues that the adult learning targets contained in every one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) cannot be met by formal learning programmes alone and require a much expanded non-formal education programme. To deliver this, the paper suggests that the current movement for community learning centres (CLCs) can provide a base for operationalising NFE for the SDGs. It takes a case study, the Folk Development Colleges of Tanzania, as an example of the kind of national system for NFE which can be built. It ends by looking at current redefinitions of NFE and at where such an NFE system might fit into the governmental architecture of educational planning.

KEYWORDS
Non-formal education; adult education; alternative educational systems; sustainable development goals; community learning centres; Folk Development Colleges; Tanzania

The near death of NFE

In the late 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, when I was writing my book on NFE (Rogers, 2004), I was often asked why I was writing about NFE when the concept had passed its ‘use-by date’. I was told that NFE was irrelevant to the current period as it focussed almost exclusively on the so-called ‘developing countries’ and in any case had been overtaken by the more fashionable discourses of ‘continuing education’ and especially ‘lifelong education/learning’. The pressure for regarding learning and education as forming one lifelong continuum is very strong – and with it the disappearance of NFE. My book would be a non-starter.

It is important at this point to remember that we are talking about the discourses of NFE, not the practice of NFE. There has always been a great deal of NFE, well before Coombs and Ahmed in the 1970s labelled it and, by analysing its nature, taught us to recognise it for what it is (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974); and there will continue to be much NFE long after we have stopped talking about it. What is at issue here is the recognition that a number of educational practices have special characteristics which lead them to being labelled as ‘non-formal’.

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The revival of NFE

But discussions of NFE did not in fact die the death; although in 2007 ‘the falling into disuse of the term [“non-formal”] in policy and administrative discourse’ was felt by some (Aitchison, 2007, n. p.), the tide had by then already turned. The discourse of NFE not only survived but has in recent years shown a quite remarkable resilience. In many places, not just in developing countries, educationalists and policymakers are talking about NFE, and with it comes a recognition of its essential characteristics: as UNESCO wrote in 2018:

In contrast to the standardized system of formal education and vocational training, non-formal literacy and skills learning manifests high diversity, little standardization, few comparable results, and outcomes that differ by location and by individual learner. (UNESCO, 2018)

UNESCO has of course taken the lead (e.g. Yasunaga, 2014) but in brief, almost every major educational journal has published at least one significant item on NFE since 2000 – for example, Compare: Brown (2015a); Journal of Science Education and Technology (Eshach, 2007); International Review of Education (Mayombe & Lombard, 2016), and (White & Lorenzi, 2016); Cambridge Journal of Education (Romi & Schmida, 2009); International Journal of Lifelong Education (Thoidis & Pnevmatikos, 2014) etc. Virtually every educational encyclopedia (of which there are many) has a substantial section on NFE, among the most recent being the Oxford Research Encyclopedias (2018).

While the concern for NFE continues with many so-called developing countries (GPE, 2018; Hoppers, 2006; Ouane, 2006) like S Africa (Aitchison, 2007; Mayombe, 2017) and Pakistan (Asia Development Bank, 2004), it is the EU and especially its Youth wing which has produced the most elaborate papers on NFE in recent years (Council of Europe, 2018; EPALE, 2018; European Union, 2018; EYP 2014a; EYP, 2014b). Following the lead of IIEP (1991), most international agencies such as UNESCO, UNEVOC (2010), ILO (n.d.), WHO (2010), FAO (El Sawi, 1996) and World Bank (2003) see in NFE a useful tool for their work. Many countries have produced their own policy papers on NFE, from UK (Vorhous, 2003) to California (Russell 2001), Brazil (Dib, 1988) and Vilnius (Skirmantiene, 2013).

The redefinition of NFE

However, in the process, NFE has been repositioned. Instead of being ‘outside’ of formal education and in most ways its direct opposite, it is now located on a continuum of ‘learning’, somewhere between formal learning on one side and informal learning on the other side (UNESCO, 2006). And the boundaries between the three ‘sectors’ are seen to be very blurred rather than distinct (EYP 2014, drawing on Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcom, 2003; Carter, 1996). In a recent study, it was noted that ‘non-formal interventions drew on both formal and informal learning processes, and it was unhelpful to characterise non-formal learning as a discrete category between the two’ (Robinson-Pant, 2016, p. 122). There is however still a consciousness that NFE is a distinct kind of educational provision and that it has ‘lesser standing than formal schooling’. To give but one example, a survey of NFE in seven countries reported:

Budgets for lifelong learning outside formal education are extremely limited in all the seven selected countries. Countries tend to place much higher emphasis on primary, secondary and higher education; … over 99.5% of the education budget is invested in the formal education sector in S Korea … in Nepal, the budget for all forms of NFE is between 1 and 3% of education budget. (UNESCO, 2016a, pp. 28–29, 33)

We have then a second-generation NFE – something rather different from the first articulation of NFE as any educational provision outside the formal system. Instead, we are looking at educational provision which shows particular non-formal characteristics, distinct from formal education on the one hand and informal education on the other hand. But this brings its own issues, one of which is the recognition, validation and accreditation of non-formal education which continues to be a preoccupation of many educational agencies (Council of Europe Resolution, 2003 (8); Council of Europe, 2012; EU Resolution
Some causes for this resurgent interest in NFE

There are of course many and complex reasons for the widespread-renewed interest in NFE, but two in particular seem important.

First, the challenge from lifelong education was transmuted when the discourse changed to lifelong learning; for in analysing learning, non-formal learning was discovered alongside formal and informal learning. The EC and UNESCO definitions say it all:

**Formal learning**: Formal learning occurs as a result of experiences in an education or training institution, with structured learning objectives, learning time and support which leads to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.

**Non formal learning**: Non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. It is, however, structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.

**Informal learning**: Informal learning results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional. (UNESCO, 2009a, p. 27)

It is significant that some recent publications especially in the policy area and in the area of recognition, validation and accreditation (e.g. CEDEFOP, 2016; Singh, 2009; Vorhous, 2003) use the term ‘non-formal learning’ rather than ‘non-formal education’ (see, for example, Eshach, 2007). But since non-formal learning in the above architecture of learning is seen as being planned and purposeful provision, it is to my mind the same as non-formal education.

Anyone talking about ‘lifelong learning’ today will be faced with the concept of non-formal learning and the practices that go with the concept.

The search for alternative educations

The second influence on the discourse of NFE is the search for different forms of education. Throughout the world, country after country, conscious at long last that a one-size-fits-all education system cannot meet the needs of increasingly complex and fluid societies are seeking for alternative educational systems (AES), in particular for sections of society which are ‘hard to reach’: for example, pastoral and itinerant communities, migrant and displaced populations (the term ‘supplementary education’ (Davies, Dierkes, & Aurini, 2013) is less acceptable as it places priority on the formal system of education).

Now I wish to make it clear I am not talking about alternative schools as promoted by non-governmental organisations, commercial bodies and parental movements. I am talking about government-planned systems to meet the needs of specific sections of the national community which are not met by the standardised national system. And I am aware that interest in ‘the planning of the diversified educational field’ has been of long-standing (e.g. Carr-Hill, 1988); the Faure Report spoke of different types of education (Faure, 1973): ‘A mix of program offerings is required due to the demographically diverse population … there is no one marketing strategy or campaign that could reach such a diverse population’ (Adams-Rogers, 1997). But it has recently taken on a new urgency (ADEA Botswana, 1999; Aron, 2006; Atkins, Bullis, & Todis, 2005; Baxter & Bethke, 2009; Marshall et al., 2014; Mills & McGregor, 2018; Thompson, 2001). In 2008, OECD produced a report on The Contribution of Alternative Education (Sliwka, 2008), and several countries have taken it up systematically, establishing government machinery to promote
alternative programmes of education at various levels. To take one example, in South Sudan, there is a Department of Alternative Education inside the Ministry of Education,

The AES [Alternative Education System] approach is aimed at improving access to basic education, to enhance life skills and basic occupational skill training to primary school students, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), demobilised soldiers, and other non-traditional learners. It is considered by many to be a keystone of South Sudan’s re-building process. It includes seven programmes targeted at different groups with support from the Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI) and a number of international development partners. (South Sudan, n. d.)

Myanmar also has a government department devoted to Alternative Education Systems (Myanmar 2018). Honduras is experimenting with Alternative Education (Marshall et al., 2014), Sierra Leone has the ‘Bettah Tumara’ programme (Labouchere & Singleton, 2017) and Jamaica its APSE programme (Jamaica, 2018). In part, these draw on insights into indigenous learning systems such as the African ubuntu learning (Assie-Lumumba 2017). Often such developments are the result of a partnership with local communities, NGOs and other voluntary bodies. Many are seeing in these AESs a form of NFE. The discourse of NFE no longer sounds strange even to educational administrators.

**Sustainable Development Goals**

So much for the current position: what about the future?

The new player on the ground is the passing of the Sustainable Development Goals. The acceptance and growing consensus on the SDGs are contributing to the revived interest in NFE – for these SDGs do not apply exclusively to developing countries but apply to every country.

And – given support – these SDGs could come to dominate educational discussions into the future. It is of course possible that these will have as minimal effects as the Millennium Development Goals had; indeed, unless those concerned with adult, alternative and non-formal education play a significant role in monitoring the SDGs, that is likely to happen. It may be that many of the countries who have signed up to the SDGs will pay only lip service to them and continue in their own ways, arguing, as before, that the lack of resources prevent them from doing more. But the SDGs have placed a powerful weapon in the hands of all those concerned for alternative education to monitor and challenge the providing agencies, government and nongovernment, about the provision of effective quality NFE at both youth and adult level.

For all of the SDGs contain explicitly or implicitly one or more educational targets (for a discussion of this, see UppSem, 2016):

Each of the 17 goals has a set of targets and each set has at least one target that deals with or implies learning, training, educating or at the very least raising awareness for one or more groups of adults. Goals 3 [health], 5 [women], 8 [economy], 9 [infrastructure], 12 [consumption] and 13 [climate] especially include targets that imply substantial learning for ranges of adults -and organised, programmatic learning at that. (pers comm. John Oxenham, formerly World Bank)

To give a few examples:

**Goal 3 (Health)** has the following:

3.7 By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education . . .

**Goal 5 (Gender and Women’s Rights)** has two relevant goals and one target:

5.5 Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights . . .
5.a Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.

Goal 8 (Economic Development and Skills Development) has four relevant goals:

8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, …

8.4 Improve progressively, through 2030, global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, …

8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training

Goals 9, 12 and 13 dealing with infrastructure, environment and climate change, respectively, also have relevant goals and targets:

target 9.c Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020

12.8 By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature

13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning

The SDGs and NFE

These and all the other goals and targets can only be achieved through a substantial programme of education for adults; they cannot be achieved through the formal school system alone. The government and non-government agencies involved in each SDG area will need to provide learning programmes or more realistically find partners for such provision; the goals call for all educational agencies, government and non-governmental, and all other relevant bodies including the commercial sector, to provide such educational opportunities. And such (adult) provision will by its nature be non-formal – not only outside the formal system of schooling but also providing non-standardised, flexible, contextualised and participatory learning programmes. Here, it may be suggested, is an agenda for NFE for the future. The NFE of the future will be a series of partnerships between government, NGOs and private enterprise.

And (as we have noticed above) the SDG targets have given educationalists powerful tools by which they can hold these agencies to account. If the SDGs fail to fulfil their potential, it will be the fault of educational practitioners for not challenging all these agencies about the practices needed to bring about the desired socio-economic and cultural changes aimed at through both formal and non-formal education. Regular reviews nationally and locally will be needed and will now be possible to ensure progress is made towards achieving these SDG targets.

Operationalising NFE for the SDGs

How then can these learning goals and targets be operationalised in ways which afford the greatest co-operation between governments, NGOs and commercial interests? This, I suggest, is the immediate challenge for everyone, whether in the context of international development programmes or in more highly industrialised and post-industrial societies.

There will of course be many ideas about how best to facilitate this partnership between government and non-government in the provision of learning opportunities to achieve the SDGs. It can be argued that to operationalise those SDG-NFE targets requires some national (i.e. government-
supported) provision (system?) of learning facilities but in association with the appropriate NGO agencies. Without the commitment, experience and expertise of relevant NGOs, government efforts will be much less effective, but without government involvement, there will not be full coverage of the whole country; NGO efforts are necessarily patchy.

**Community learning centres and NFE**

The recent interest in and growing experience of community learning centres, both among governments and (in the development context) donors may point to one way forward. Indeed, it may be no coincidence that the interest in CLCs has grown in tandem with the renewed discourse of NFE.

In 2009, during a regional conference on gender education in Bangkok, attention was drawn to CLCs:

> Community learning centres are local places of learning outside the formal education system. Located in both village and urban areas, they are usually set up and managed by local people and for local people, and their focus on lifelong learning often makes them a central component of community development. They may offer diverse learning opportunities, but all share a common goal: helping people to improve their quality of life through education and skills development. (UNESCO, 2009b, italics inserted)

This interest is particularly strong in South and East Asia. In 2014, Ahmed wrote a paper, ‘Lifelong learning in a learning society: are community learning centres the vehicle?’ (Ahmed, 2014). In 2015, Vollman studied CLCs in Bangladesh (Vollman, 2015), and in 2016, UNESCO Bangkok reported on a major survey of CLCs undertaken in seven Asian countries (UNESCO, 2016a), and has followed this up with publications, including one on the roles of CLCs as facilitators of lifelong learning, and a portal site on CLCs (http://clcpedia.net). In 2017, Myanmar and Nepal have taken up the baton (Ai Tam Pham Le, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). This led UIL to issue its policy briefing paper 8, *Community-Based Learning for Social Development* (UIL, 2017), and Yorozu (from UIL) her review published by ASPBAE *CLCs: towards inclusive lifelong learning for all* (Yorozu, 2018).

But the movement (for such it is) is much wider, not just in Asia but also in Africa and Europe. Namibia in 2006 report on their Community and Learning Development Centres (CLDCs) (Namibia, 2006, see also, 2018). At the Fifth Adult Education and Development Conference at Tbilisi hosted by DVV in 2017, the key theme was ‘Adult Education Centres as a Key to Development’, and it is clear from the reported debates that the participants saw AECs as the equivalent of CLCs: ‘AEC/CLCs provide competencies, knowledge and skills for adults, even in later life’ (DVV Tbilisi, 2017). The conference saw these as ‘institutions primarily owned and run by communities. Communities should involve themselves through accountability structures, such as boards and committees that meet regularly and play an oversight and monitoring role.’ (ibid).

Whether provided by government, civil society or private interests, they will ‘act as local hubs to promote and implement the SDGs, bridging between global and local, providing learning exchanges and ‘new digital avenues combined with institutional back-up, convenient meeting places and pathways of blended learning’. For this, they will ‘depend on qualified, well-trained full- and part-time staff, and the engagement of volunteers for administration and teaching. Pre- and in-service training, including e-learning, should be given highest priority.’

Much more research is needed on AEC/CLCs to produce robust data and provide evidence on the real accomplishments of adult education within lifelong learning, highlighting the wider benefits for individuals, communities and society in general . . . Governmental stakeholders and academic institutions should support the sustainability and professionalization of AEC/CLCs through training, organizational development, research, funding, M&E [monitoring and evaluation] frameworks and regulations that can be managed by the community. (DVV Tbilisi, 2017)

CLCs have been advocated not only in the context of international development but also in the West – for example, to provide a half-way house for immigrants into the formal education system (Wong, 2018).
The possibility of using such CLCs for the promotion of the SDGs was noticed by the DVV consultation. UIL launched a new research series in 2015 with *Communities in Action: lifelong learning for sustainable development* (Noguchi, Guevara, & Yorozu, 2015), and the *International Review of Education* in 2017 had a special issue on *Non-formal and community learning for sustainable development* (IRE, 2017). Such centres can provide a suitable platform for the programme of many agencies, government, NGO and private, to work towards the fulfilment of the SDG goals and targets.

The link between these CLCs and NFE is also clear – for although CLCs are often provided by or at least substantially supported by government, they lie outside the formal structures of educational provision, and are on occasion seen as a bridge into the formal system. *IRE* saw them as NFE, and Thailand, speaking of CLCs, claimed to have some 8000 non-formal education centres (UNESCO, 2016a).

It may well be then that one major strand of NFE in the future will specifically be aimed at the fulfilment of the SDG targets for social, economic and cultural development as well as personal development, drawing together into a strong and continuing partnership government agencies, NGOs, private sector interests and local communities; and one effective basis for this work would be found in the growing national networks of CLCs. Here may be found all the elements for the adult learning tasks needed to fulfil the SDG goals and targets.

**A case study: the Folk Development Colleges of Tanzania**

Such networks of government-supported institutions of non-formal learning exist today, notably the Folk High Schools of Scandinavia. But one very relevant example of CLCs being used for socio-economic development along the lines of the SDGs is provided by the Folk Development Colleges (FDCs) of Tanzania. These are very close to the kind of national network of CLCs suggested here for the promotion of NFE for the achievement of the SDG goals and targets (for a more detailed analysis of the FDCs, see FDC report, 2017; Rogers, 2019).

The FDCs are a relatively small national group of adult education institutions. Fifty-five in all but with national coverage, they were founded in the 1970s on the model of Swedish Folk High Schools but with their title changed to indicate their commitment to national developmental goals. Initially, they were funded in large part by donor agencies, especially the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) which made them largely independent of government. Since 1997 when Sida funding ended, the FDCs have been forced to rely on student fees rather than ministerial budgets – which gives them considerable freedom but limited resources. Within their limits, they fulfil the three main strands of non-formal education – adult education, community development in its widest sense (including cultural development) and vocational training. While this history has isolated them from the three main sectors of government with which they have affinities, adult education, vocational training and community development, it and their distinctive title have at the same time given them both an internal coherence and freedom to work in their own ways in their own localities to achieve national development goals (see FDC report, 2017).

This separation of the FDCs from the formal systems of education is recognised nationally. In 2011, reviewing the whole of the national education frameworks, the government of Tanzania reported:

… the education system is organized into four subsectors:

(i) Basic Education, that comprises pre-primary, primary, secondary, teacher training, and adult education and nonformal education (AE/NFE);

(ii) Folk Education;

(iii) Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); and

(iv) Higher Education (University and non-university). (GoT, Educational Sector Analysis 2011, p. 78)
To identify this small sector of 55 FDCs as a separate subsector is remarkable – but then as we shall see the FDCs are themselves unusual; they can claim to be institutions for NFE.

For each FDC is free to adapt to its own locality – although they show a tendency to rely on government guidelines. The key element and the most distinctive feature is that they are open to anyone to attend – there is no prior level of competency needed. Each FDC provides one or two year, largely residential, vocational courses leading either to a college certificate or a nationally recognised certificate issued by the Tanzanian Vocational Education and Training Authority (VETA). More importantly, each FDC houses short courses ranging from one-day events to three months. Some of these are provided by the FDC, others by other agencies using the site, staff and/or facilities. Some short courses are held on campus, others out in the community. Thirdly, every FDC has an outreach (and inreach) programme, going out into the local community and opening its resources to individuals and small groups from the local community. Finally, every FDC has some projects – which could be demonstrations of learning and development programmes; the main aims of these are to provide the students with practical work and to offer demonstrations to the local community – and incidentally to earn something to help the FDC finances, what may be called ‘Learning and Earning Projects’.

But the sector goes beyond this – much further. And it is here that we see how they have started to be mobilised towards achieving some of the SD Goals and targets.

First, the FDCs have created their own NGO – the Karibu Tanzania Association which has recently been registered with the government as an NGO (the KT Organization). KTO links every one of the FDCs together, helps them with issues relating to donor funding and projects and initiates activities across the sector. In this respect, with KTO assistance, they have launched new initiatives in some or all of the FDCs. Thus, many of them run pre-school creches. During the election time, the FDCs ran a public citizenship programme to promote voting but above all to encourage peace and reduce violent disturbances which have characterised former elections. Thirdly, noticing that school-age girls who become pregnant were denied access to their school studies, many of the FDCs opened their doors to such girls to continue their studies – resulting in a national campaign which secured legislation forbidding the exclusion of pregnant girls from schools. And in the promotion of gender awareness, the FDCs with help from KTO have launched a national programme of women’s football in association with the Tanzanian Football Association (FDC report, 2017).

As can be seen, the FDCs thus have many of the conditions of CLCs. They are hubs for adult learning in the local community. It is true that most of the students on the long vocational courses are straight from school, but the FDCs are still open to anyone to enrol without prior qualifications. The short courses, which may be seen as the core of their work for national development, and the outreach and learning projects, are all with adults. They are free to meet the aspirations of their local communities and flexible in making such arrangements. They are a remarkable instance of the co-operation of government and NGO: the role of KTO is essential for the integrity of the whole sector. In them, global and local meet: they provide a platform in many parts of the country for those government and non-government bodies promoting the SDGs to reach parts of the country otherwise unreachable. To give one example, an internationally funded skills development programme called Skills for Oil and Gas Africa (SOGA) is using several FDCs for their training programmes, contributing to the SDGs on economic development and skills training. On the basis of local needs, encouraging such agencies to use their sites (and meet the costs involved) will not only contribute to the SDGs in Tanzania but will also help with FDCs’ finances. They do not (yet) have adequate local community control of their facilities and programmes – the board which each FDC has is dominated by local government agencies; and the overall programme – apart from the initiatives of KTO – is largely determined by the full-time staff and their government department. But community involvement, which in some FDCs is very strong, will surely grow as the short course programme with an SDG agenda expands.

In view of this identification of the roles of the FDCs as very similar to the roles of CLCs, there may be a case for changing their title from ‘colleges’ to ‘centres’. All the other institutions they have been
compared with are Centres: Adult Education Centres, Vocational Training Centres, Community Development Centres – and now Community Learning Centres. Folk Development Centres would more surely indicate their developmental purposes providing non-formal education to the local community; it would perhaps preserve them from becoming more formalised, more standardised.

The final challenge for NFE

But there are of course serious issues to be faced – not just by the FDCs but by NFE as a whole. The FDCs form a very small sector – only 55 centres, although the current government, having noted their success, say they intend to increase the number. And their claim to an adequate share of the national budget is a very small voice among much louder claimants. It is here that lies a major problem – not just for the FDCs but for all CLCs. The experience of the FDCs since 1976 reveals the issue (for a discussion of this, see Rogers, 2019). The FDCs do not fit into the neat portfolios of the current ministries, that is why they are seen as a sub-sector within education. And that is why they have been moved from department to department – at first the President’s office, then the Ministry of Education, then the Ministry of Community Development and now back to the Ministry of Education under its vocational education and training department.

This exemplifies a general issue relating to NFE and more particularly to CLCs. If they are located under a Ministry of Education, there will be a tendency to standardise them across the country like schools. If they come under a Ministry of Community Development, their educational role may be diminished. If they come under vocational training (for example, Ministry of Labour), their instrumental work will be emphasised against their socio-cultural development roles. The independence for CLCs to fulfil cross-sectoral work cannot be over-emphasised.

Unless and until the real nature of NFE is recognised by government, there will be a tendency to see it as ‘education’. But NFE is not just education given in a non-formal manner; it is the freedom to offer learning programmes in any sector (agriculture, health, skill development, the environment, microfinance, poverty relief, cultural practices, personal development, etc.) in innovative formats to any person in local communities without requiring prior educational experience. As we noticed above, compared with formal education and vocational training, NFE is characterised by “high diversity, little standardization, few comparable results, and outcomes that differ by location and by individual learner” (UNESCO, 2018).

This is of course not the whole picture of NFE – it is much wider than this. It reaches into many other areas of life like religion and leisure activities (music and sport, for example). But NFE is the tool by which governments and international and local NGOs can in partnership contribute to the fulfilment of the SDG goals and learning targets across all sectors. NFE cannot be tied to one sector alone., and in this respect will create a problem for governments in locating it in any one Ministry or budget line. It needs cross-sectoral hubs, centres with staff and resources, to serve as platforms for such government and non-government agencies. This is why one strand of the future of NFE lies with the development of national networks of CLCs with an agenda drawn from the SDG goals and targets.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Alan Rogers is an adult educator of many years’ experience of training adult educators in many different countries; he is the author of a number of books and articles on adult learning and teaching adults, especially adult literacy learning in the context of international development programmes. He currently holds Visiting Professorships at the Universities of East Anglia and Nottingham.
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