

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### East Mediterranean Cooperation in Adult Education

*Reflections on the two-day international conference, 'Exploring Possibilities of International Cooperation in the field of Adult Education in the Eastern Mediterranean Region,' Ayia Napa, Cyprus, 24-25 May 2002.*

**I**ssues concerning adult education in a number of countries in the Mediterranean, and particularly Eastern Mediterranean countries, were presented and discussed during a two-day conference, organized by the IIZ-DVV (Institute for International Cooperation, German Adult Education Association) and the Cyprus Adult Education Association (CAEA). The two convenors were Klitos Symeonides from the CAEA and Michael Samlowski from the IIZ-DVV. The conference was held at the tourist resort of Ayia Napa (originally a small fishing village) in Cyprus's Famagusta area. The venue was the Hall of Ayia Napa's magnificent medieval monastery, a monastery, dedicated to Our Lady of the Forests, that contains a partly underground 16<sup>th</sup> century church and has a very old Sycamore tree (believed to be 600 years old) rooted in front of its south gate.

It should be stated at the outset that Bulgaria (two representatives) and Malta (two representatives), two of the countries invited to and represented at this meeting, do not strictly belong to the 'Eastern Mediterranean' area. The other non-Eastern Mediterranean country, represented at the conference, was, of course, Germany, but then its national adult education association, a very visible and progressive player in international adult education, sponsored the event. The other participating countries were Albania (two representatives), Egypt (two representatives), Greece (one representative), Israel (two representatives), the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYRM – one representative), Yugoslavia (a representative from Serbia and a representative from Montenegro) and, of course, the host country, Cyprus. Among the speakers from the host country was Dr Petros Kareklas, Permanent Secretary of Cyprus's Ministry of Education and Culture, who officially opened the conference with a short speech in which he, among other things, affirmed his country's commitment to lifelong learning and to the fostering of international cooperation in this broad area.

To my knowledge, this was one of only a few initiatives of its kind – a meeting on adult education in the Mediterranean – to be held in this part of the world. One other initiative that immediately comes to mind is the 1984 Malta international conference, 'Lifelong Education Initiatives in the Mediterranean' that resulted in the publication *Lifelong Education and Participation* (Wain, 1985), a rare

collection of papers on adult education, and lifelong education more generally, in the Mediterranean. Gathering people from different parts of this conflict-ridden region is not a straightforward task, as a number of readers of this journal would have discovered on various occasions. The holding of this conference in the divided island that is contemporary Cyprus also rendered the situation concerning country representation problematic. Evidence of this was provided by Michael Samlowski of the IIZ-DVV who disclosed, in his opening speech, that the Turkish persons, from the Ministry of Education, who were invited to this meeting, were not granted leave of absence. Situations such as these continue to drive home the point that attempts to bring participants from the different states of the Mediterranean together for any initiative are fraught with problems. Various initiatives in the past have indicated that the presence of X in any forum would automatically mean the withdrawal of Y.

The presence of Israel, Yugoslavia and Cyprus at this conference underlined the pertinence of the theme 'Adult Education in a Crisis situation' for seminars/conferences and other projects concerning adult education in the Mediterranean. Dov Friedlander, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Israeli Adult Education Association, proposed this as a key theme for any future gathering of adult educators from the region. This struck me as one of the most important points to be made at the Ayia Napa conference, a conference that consisted, for the most part, of presentations describing the adult education situation in each of the participating countries. In the majority of cases, the presentations took the form of 'country reviews'. Many of the presentations emphasised the need to develop appropriate organizational structures for adult education in the country concerned. The Cyprus presentation, by Klitos Symeonides, indicated that 'the political instability [in Cyprus] of the last quarter of a century has contributed to the lack of a comprehensive and coherent policy [for adult education] and to the absence of a structure which would allow existing provision to be looked at as a whole and co-ordinated appropriately' (Symeonides, 2002). The point regarding the need to develop appropriate structures for adult education was most pronounced in the presentations by representatives of Eastern European countries. In countries such as Yugoslavia, a country that once (in its older form) enjoyed a strong tradition in the field (see for instance Soljan, Golubovic and Krajnc, 1985), these structures are now virtually non-existent. There is the problem of recognizing Adult Education as a legitimate area of educational provision that warrants an appropriate organisational structure. In Serbia, for instance, 'Adult education', according to Snezana Medic (2002), Director of the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy, University of Belgrade, 'is not treated as a strategically significant economic and social development factor.' In a number of countries, such as the host country, Cyprus (the bulk of adult education provision has traditionally been

administered by the Ministry of Education ('s Primary Education sector) and the FYRM (adult education falls under secondary education), adult education is simply an 'add on.' It is an appendage to the formal structure of education, a structure that primarily caters for schooling. One wonders whether this reflects the situation in most of the world's southern and Eastern European states where the major concern is with formal schooling, the one sector that continues to attract the bulk of the funds provided by foreign donor agencies. Once again, Snezana Medic (2002) stresses this point with respect to Serbia by stating that, in her country, education is being equated with schooling: 'the state has desisted from the provision of systemic solutions to adult education and has greatly diverted its interest from this field, focusing its concerns solely on schools, i.e. on formal education. Education and learning in adult life is treated as a personal interest.'

Other countries of the Mediterranean seem to have a concrete and well-developed adult education structure in place. Christos Doukas (2002) indicated that Greece has such an organisational structure. The General Secretary for Adult Education supervises 'the Institute for Continuing Adult Education' and 'Second Chance Schools, Regional Committees for Adult Education, Multi-centres for Adults, a National Center for Professional Training and a Resource and Documentation Centre.' The idea of having one comprehensive and coordinating organizational structure for adult education is difficult to realize in any context given that there are usually many players involved in this amorphous field. These include commercial entities, NGOs (In the joint Malta presentation, David Caruana, of GEM Foundation, highlighted some of the issues they face) and different ministries, not to mention Mosques and Churches in countries characterized by a dominant belief system. One is ever so likely to come across a 'dispersed' organisational model for adult education.

There is also a contrast between Mediterranean countries with respect to the degree of importance attached to adult education research/teaching programmes within universities. Universities in Yugoslavia and Slovenia, and other countries that formed part of the old Yugoslavia, have had strong research programmes in adult education. Scholars such as Dusan Savicevic (University of Belgrade) and Ana Krajnc (University of Ljubljana) are well known in the international adult education literature. The Malta presentation highlighted the existence of an adult education programme, involving diploma and Master degree courses, as well as undergraduate course units, within the University of Malta's Faculty of Education. In contrast, other Universities do not include adult education among their teaching/research programmes. University of Cyprus Council member, Panayiotis Mallis, for instance, indicated, at the conference, that Adult Education does not, as yet, feature in the programme of studies within the Department of Education at the host country's relatively new university (the University of Cyprus was

founded in 1989). It would be interesting, however, to monitor future university developments in Cyprus given the possibility, mentioned in Panayiotis Mallis's talk, of the setting up of an open learning university institution and that, as Klitos Symeonides pointed out, a decision has been taken to establish the University of Applied Sciences (Symeonides, 2002). Will some of the private institutions, currently seeking accreditation, start providing degree programmes in this field?

The lip service accorded adult education in many countries of this region naturally results in a lack of adequate funds available for this sector. It is not only countries of the South and Eastern Europe who suffer from lack of adequate state funds for adult education but several other countries, including the traditionally much more endowed countries of the North. In his very revealing presentation on Germany, Michael Samlowski indicated how adult education, in this country, is characterized by a reduction of State funds that is leading adult education agencies to resort for support to the supranational state that is the European Union. The EU, through its Socrates and Leonardo programmes, and the European Social Fund, is now becoming the main provider of funds for those who are fortunate enough to have their proposals selected. The one positive aspect of this situation is that agencies are encouraged to engage in international cooperation in order to obtain EU funding, and this is very much the case with agencies engaged in, for instance, Grundtvig's centralised and decentralised actions. I wonder whether those who are not successful with their proposals for EU funding might have to resort to corporate assistance with the danger that adult education, once an important feature of a genuinely democratic public sphere, increasingly becomes yet another arena of commodification and corporate encroachment in these stringent Neo-liberal times.

While on the subject of Neo-liberalism, the presentation by Genci Bushi, from Albania's National Employment Service, served to remind us that vocational education is very much on the agenda in societies in transition from planned to market economies. In situations such as these, and through the promptings of such institutions as the World Bank and the IMF, adult education begins to assume a very narrow form. The euphemism of 'Human Resource Development' (read: human capital) gains the ascendancy in this context at the expense of concerns with social justice, with adult learners being conceived of solely in two-dimensional terms, namely producers and consumers, rather than social actors with a role to play in a genuinely participatory democracy. In this situation, adult education becomes an important vehicle for the transmission and inculcation of the Neo-liberal ideology, losing its concern for the broader dimensions of citizenship. Quite revealing was the presentation by Margarita Nikolovska from the FYRM in which she reminded us of the existence of a network of workers' universities in the old Yugoslavia, of which her country formed part. She stated,

however, that the concern nowadays is no longer with adult education in its broader sense but with training and retraining, in a country where the rate of unemployment stands at 36%.

While some presentations underlined the vocational aspect of adult education, others continued to remind us that, in certain contexts, some of the most basic forms of adult education continue to be of great relevance. It is a well-known fact that, for many countries of the Mediterranean, especially those along the basin's southern rim, the acquisition of literacy skills, specifically functional literacy skills, remains one of the great challenges. The presentation by the two representatives from Egypt, especially Vashdev Assandase, from Caritas, continued to confirm this view. While countries such as Egypt continue to grapple with literacy in its most basic forms, others such as Greece deal with the issue in its wider contexts, focusing on literacy at the workplace as well as in its personal and social aspects. The concern in Greece, in keeping with the EU's Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, is on *multiliteracies*, and specifically basic literacy and numeracy, digital literacy, science literacy, media literacy, historic literacy, environmental literacy, literacy for the workplace and cultural literacy (Doukas, 2002).

The large percentage of people who are functionally illiterate, to be found in the Southern areas of the Mediterranean, has implications for adult education programmes devised in response to the strong migratory movements, from South to North, that characterize the present historical conjuncture, as a result of which the Mediterranean has been called the 'new Rio Grande' (Richter Malabotta, 2002). A number of people who seek employment in Europe's southern states are functionally illiterate in the official language of their country of origin and in the language of the receiving country. One of the challenges for adult educators in the receiving countries is to explore meaningful adult literacy strategies that take account of this reality.

The great challenge for adult educators in the Mediterranean is to devise different strategies that take account of the ever-increasing multi-ethnic nature of the societies in which they live in a manner that renders the programmes empowering for the different ethnic groups involved (Mayo, 2001). These strategies would hopefully result in programmes that conceive of incoming ethnic groups not as deficits but as consisting of people with cultural attributes that can continue to enrich the society in which they have chosen or, in some cases, have been forced to live. The theme of multi-ethnicity was broached by Michael Samlowski and was given prominence by the Israeli representatives who indicated that it was a constant feature of education in Israel since the inception of the Jewish state in 1948, given that this state became the new abode of persons coming from different parts of the world, bringing with them different cultures. Reference was

made to the more recent projects targeting Ethiopian immigrants, projects that involved the preparation of Ethiopian teachers with an important role to play in an adult education programme that was meant to valorise the culture of the incoming group of citizens/learners. In 2000, this project earned the Division of Adult Education, in the Israeli Ministry of Education (represented at the conference by Sarah Rubinstein), a Unesco commendation. It is imperative, in situations such as these, that members of the incoming group are allowed to act as both teachers and learners, having much to offer to, as well as to receive from, the other ethnic groups within the receiving country.

The workshops allowed participants to explore possibilities for further cooperation at the bilateral and larger international levels. Quite instructive was the framework in which these discussions took place through which each participant was urged to focus on (a) what strengths he/she can bring to a possible cooperative network and (b) what benefits he/she can derive from it. One of the ideas floated around was to create a Mediterranean network in adult education. Cyprus' commitment to this initiative was quite strong throughout the conference and Klitos Symeonides was entrusted, by the participants, with the task of coordinating the initial effort in this regard. I would personally regard the development of such a network as a consummation devoutly to be wished, although one ought to act with tact in this regard given the various conflicts in the region that can easily undermine even the most genuine of attempts to develop such an initiative. Michael Samlowski pointed out, at the start of the conference, that there seems to be little significant participation by Mediterranean Southern states in European politics and the politics of the European Association for the Education of Adults for that matter.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that Mediterranean countries require fora much more tailored to their needs, with agendas that derive from the region itself. This is one of the reasons that must have spurred on the Editor of this journal to help develop a Mediterranean educational research network whose tangible manifestations to date include the successful Selmun Seminars and the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* itself. These initiatives can serve to inspire the development of a genuinely Mediterranean network in adult education, a network that would be most inclusive comprising countries and individuals from both the region's Northern and Southern parts. Limiting such a network to the southern states of Europe would not render it truly Mediterranean. The presence of Arab states is crucial. One should also be careful not to develop such a proposed network in such a way that it becomes simply an appendage of some larger European adult education entity. One must be wary not to reproduce, through this type of 'soft politics', the kind of colonial relations that have bedevilled the countries of this region for so long. It should be a network that is

Mediterranean in the most inclusive sense of the word. Here the challenges are enormous, not least of which being that of tapping into sources of funding that would allow participants from the Northern and Southern parts of the region to travel and come together. This is no small challenge! Institutions in many parts of the South are not as well endowed as those in the North, and so a great amount of perseverance and imagination is required in pursuing this idea and the funding that would make its realisation possible.

The idea of an inclusive Mediterranean network would also entail doing away with the false dichotomy that has characterised such adult education networks elsewhere, especially in Europe and North America, where we find associations, conferences and networks intended exclusively for either practitioners or researchers. I recommend that no such dichotomy should characterise the kind of network augured by the Cyprus conference, a conference characterised by some noticeable absences (for instance, there was only one Arab country represented) but which had the merit of having brought people from universities, ministries and NGOs together, in one medieval hall, to discuss the challenges facing adult education in their respective countries and in the Mediterranean region in general.

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